

# Preschool teachers and caregivers' lack of repositioning in response to changed responsibilities in policy documents

Journal of Early Childhood Research  
2021, Vol. 19(3) 323–336  
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DOI: 10.1177/1476718X20969742  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr



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## Abstract

Preschool teachers and caregivers have a close working relationship as part of a working team to benefit the children in Swedish preschools. In 2011, a new educational reform was introduced according to which preschools became a school form in their own right within the overall educational system in Sweden. The objective of the policy was to strengthen the profession of preschool teachers by affording them clearer responsibility over the quality of educational practices and curriculum work. It also entailed a division of labour between the preschool teachers and caregivers in the working team. The current study explored how Swedish preschool teachers and caregivers positioned themselves in response to these changes in responsibility. In this qualitative study, data were collected from 17 preschool teachers and caregivers via an open-ended questionnaire. Preschool teachers and caregivers viewed themselves as having equal responsibility in the working team. Specifically, preschool teachers upgraded the competence and position of caregivers while downgrading their own professional competence and position. Caregivers downgraded the profession and position of preschool teachers and upgraded their own competence and position to be equal to that of preschool teachers.

## Keywords

caregivers, leadership, positioning, preschool, preschool teacher

## Introduction

In 2011, an educational reform was introduced in Sweden that made preschools as a separate form within the overall educational system. The profession of Swedish preschool teachers was strengthened by the Swedish Educational Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the introduction of a revised curriculum (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010). The policy documents gave preschool teachers

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clearer and enhanced responsibilities over the quality of educational practices and the work carried out in line with the curriculum in recognition of their academic backgrounds and competence.

In addition, the organisational structure of the preschool work team, comprising preschool teachers and caregivers, was changed from a flat organisational structure in which both professional bodies within the work team were jointly responsible for educational practices to a more hierarchical structure that positioned preschool teachers as superiors within the team (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010). This change entailed a division of labour between the two occupations in the work team (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010, 2016, 2018), it was a discursive change to the structure of responsibility over preschool practices (Eriksson, 2015). Therefore, common work team responsibilities, which had been in place since the 1970s (SOU, 1972:26), were divided between the preschool teachers and caregivers (Eriksson, 2015). The division of labour was further clarified in a new preschool curriculum, which came into force on 1 July 2019 (Swedish National Board of Education, 2018). The policy changes in curriculum and those in the educational act involved amendments to the traditional way that the two occupational categories in the work team organised their work, and, therefore, to the relationship between preschool teachers and caregivers.

Prior research has indicated that challenges may arise when preschool teachers are granted a superior position in the working team (Eriksson, 2014; Gotvassli, 2006; Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008; Karila and Kinos, 2012; Steinnes and Haug, 2013). This seems to be rooted in the previous flat organisational structure where preschool teachers and caregivers had equal responsibility (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010) where distribution of tasks and responsibilities among the preschool work team was based on principle of fair distribution rather than formal education, knowledge and competence (Aasen, 2010; Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008; Rood, 2006). Questions are raised as to how policy changes are received and implemented in preschool practices. It is important to consider how preschool teachers position themselves in relation to caregivers and vice versa. Thus, the aim of this article is to analyse how preschool teachers and caregivers in Swedish preschools position themselves in response to policy changes governing the responsibilities of preschool teachers and caregivers in the work team.

## **The Swedish preschool context**

Typically, 84% of all Swedish children between the ages of one and five are enrolled in preschool (Swedish National Board of Education, 2017). Each preschool unit is organised with the principal occupying the top leadership position (SFS, 2010:800; Swedish National Board of Education, 2018) and the preschool teachers and caregivers work closely together in a work team. Caregivers require an upper secondary school-level education, and preschool teachers must have a university-level education. Preschool teachers must have a national preschool teacher certification to be permanently employed. To be allowed to teach, both certification and preschool teacher education are required (SFS, 2010:800).

Preschool is the first stage in the Swedish educational system. This system is governed by a national curriculum, which states the societal and educational intentions for preschool children and their development (Swedish National Board of Education, 2016), as well as by the Educational Act (SFS, 2010:800). The first Swedish preschool curriculum came into force in 1998 and focused on work teams who were responsible for children's care and learning; the profession of preschool teacher was not mentioned (Swedish National Board of Education, 1998). This curriculum underwent several revisions. In the revised curriculum of 2010, the specific responsibilities and division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers were clarified (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010). For example, the statement 'work team shall' in the 1998 curriculum was

replaced with the ‘preschool teacher is responsible for’ and ‘work team shall’ in the 2010 curriculum. Prior to the revision, regardless of their educational backgrounds, the work team members had joint responsibility for the implementation of educational practices; after the revision, the preschool teachers were responsible for educational work quality. Eriksson (2015) argued that the ideology changed from a democratic view of responsibility to an understanding that responsibility is built on professional education, which, in turn, is based on theoretical knowledge.

In 2011, the curriculum became more knowledge oriented, and learning became more central. For example, it clarified that preschool teachers were responsible for implementing activities to stimulate and challenge children’s development and learning, and it further set goals to strive for in language, mathematics, science and technology (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010). As a new official school form within the Swedish education system, the focus of preschools adjusted from a care-oriented approach to an educational one (Eidevald and Engdahl, 2018). Changes to the curriculum and the educational act introduced new concepts to preschool practices, such as education and teaching, and defined the mission of preschool teachers (Eidevald and Engdahl, 2018; SFS, 2010:800). Teaching was introduced as a new concept in the Educational Act of 2010 (SFS, 2010:800), requiring preschool teachers to lead goal-oriented processes to fulfil the goals of the curriculum (SFS, 2010:800). As a concept, teaching did not exist in the curriculum until it was revised 9 years later on 1 July 2019 (Swedish National Board of Education, 2018).

## Prior research

There is a global interest in developing the leadership of preschool teachers as this significantly influences the quality of preschool practice (Heikka et al., 2018; Melhuish et al., 2006; Nuttall et al., 2018; Sammons et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2010). Prior research has indicated that curriculum reforms and political pressure are scarcely found in practical work (Cuban, 1993) because tradition and culture influence the practical level, more so than political decisions (Hopmann, 2013). The professionalisation of preschool teachers in Sweden is developed using a top-down approach where policy documents, through a division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers, constitute professional preschool teachers (cf. Sims et al., 2015).

A challenge to the professional role of preschool teachers is that the work includes many tasks that were traditionally performed by people without a preschool teacher education, such as caregivers (Steinnes, 2007, 2010). Both preschool teachers and caregivers have high levels of confidence in their skills (Steinnes, 2014), and the distribution of tasks and responsibilities among the preschool work team is based on a principle of fair distribution and a belief that the value of everyone’s contribution is equal, rather than on formal education, knowledge and competence (Aasen, 2010; Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008; Rodd, 2006). Preschool teachers and caregivers still have equal responsibility with regard to preschool practices, work side by side and value qualities that are not dependent on formal education (Steinnes and Haug, 2013). There is also a culture of preschool teachers and caregivers contending that they do the same work (Eriksson, 2014; Heikka et al., 2018).

Thus, prior research has reported that the division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers is weak (Steinnes and Haug, 2013) even though it is essential to achieving the desired outcomes (Nuttall et al., 2018). Cultural norms tend to influence the division of labour in preschools; for example, there is an expectation by principals that the staff members should resolve any problems themselves, while the staff expect that the principal to provide the solution (Nuttall et al., 2018). In addition, the position of preschool teachers as leaders has been emphasised, and expectations of the leadership and responsibilities of preschool teachers in the working team have been described as unclear and limited (Heikka et al., 2018). The leadership of preschool

teachers is considered important for the enactment of pedagogical responsibilities in preschool (Waniganayake, 2015).

Karila and Kinos (2012) emphasise that there exists a sensitiveness in the work team to discuss responsibility changes and division of labour among preschool staff with different roles, competence and qualification levels when it often leads to conflicts. This finding was supported in a 2016 review of the educational assignments of preschools by the Swedish school inspectorate, which focused on clarification of the responsibilities of preschool teachers (Swedish National Agency for Inspection, 2016). The lack of a clear division of labour within the preschool work teams was identified and was attributed to different causes, such as sensitivity and resistance among members of the work team. The school inspectorate also reported extensive uncertainty within the working team with regard to clarification of their responsibilities. There was also no clear division of labour between the preschool teachers and the caregivers in the work team.

Staff competence is vital to ensuring the quality of preschool education (Peeters and Vandebroek, 2011; Rydland and Aukrust, 2009; Sammons et al., 2008). A competent staff supports the learning of children, and preschool educational content is influenced by the staff's qualifications and competence (Andersson, 2008; Rydland and Aukrust, 2009). Preschool teachers prioritise personal relationships and loyalty to caregivers in the workplace in order to claim their professional skills and competence (Gotvassli, 2006, Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008). In addition, research has shown that preschool teachers distribute responsibilities equally between themselves and caregivers; low labour division means that all staff take part in all assignments regardless of their educational level or competence (Ekström, 2007; cf. Steinnes and Haug, 2013). This implies that democratic leadership is more common than knowledge- and professional-based leadership among preschool teachers, and the division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers is typically based on the principle of fair distribution and valuing individuals equally, rather than on educational backgrounds and competence levels (cf. Aasen, 2010; Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008; Rodd, 2006).

A limited division of labour has also been reflected in the governance of principals who make no distinctions between preschool teachers and caregivers in terms of competence development and teaching (Öqvist and Cervantes, 2018). In research, limitations to the division of labour in preschools were explained in terms of the traditional organisation of the working team, which had a strong practical structure and was characterised by the low professional competence of preschool teachers (Steinnes and Haug, 2013), as well as a strong focus on care-related issues and the development of children's social skills (Ekström, 2007; Jonsson et al., 2017; Rubinstein Reich et al., 2017). However, based on their educational backgrounds, preschool teachers should have more knowledge of theoretical perspectives and teaching than caregivers (Eriksson, 2014).

The change from a flat organisational structure to a hierarchal division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers reflects a long-standing debate. Understanding and accepting different roles in order to be an effective team seems to be a common challenge in education (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Ratcliff et al., 2011; Riggs and Mueller, 2001; Takala, 2007). Therefore, it is important to clearly define and communicate roles and responsibilities. There is a longstanding global debate as to whether a flat organisational structure is more effective than a hierarchal organisational structure (Claver-Cortés et al., 2007; Cummings and Cross, 2003).

## **Theoretical framework**

The current study objective was to evaluate how Swedish preschool teachers and caregivers positioned themselves in response to changes in responsibility owing to revisions to Swedish educational policy. The research built on the positioning theory, according to which individuals position

themselves in relation to others in institutional and structural contexts, construct and reconstruct themselves and change their positions (Chandler, 2003). The social process of positioning means that individuals or groups must adapt by moving away from or trying to retain a position (Chandler, 2003). The positioning theory enables an active change in position within an ongoing conversation and always involves an agent doing the positioning and a positioned individual to whom a special quality is attributed (Baert, 2012). In the present context, preschool teachers and caregivers constantly position themselves, as well as each other, through interactions (cf. Davies and Harré, 1999; Harré and Langenhove, 1999; Langenhove and Harré, 1999).

Positioning is defined by rights, duties and the obligation to speak and how these are expressed; it is also dependent on social forces (Baert, 2012; Rex and Schiller, 2009). Baert (2012: p. 310) defined positioning as ‘the process by which certain characteristics are attributed to an individual or group or some other entity’. The current study focused on the new responsibilities outlined in the policy document regarding the division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers.

Langenhove and Harré (1999) argued that positioning varies based on (1) different capacities for self-positioning and positioning others, (2) the willingness and intention to position and be positioned and (3) differences in the power required to reach certain positions. Langenhove and Harré (1999) further posited that positioning can be understood as polarity in a conversation. Dominant actors in the conversation also force others into specific positions.

Positioning and agency are closely connected (Kayi-Aydar, 2014). Positioning involves an agent and a positioned party; the agent and the positioned party can be an individual or a group (Baert, 2012). Agency is defined as ‘the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world’ (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013: 63) and is connected to conditions in the social context. Agency can be described from three perspectives: (1) what an individual has done, what an individual is doing and what he or she will do, (2) what an individual is encouraged, permitted or allowed to do and (3) what an individual is capable of doing temperamentally and physically. An individual can gain or lose the ability and right to speak or act through positional moves (Harré and Slocum, 2003). In addition, even if an individual is within a certain position that makes it possible to act, he or she may choose not to act by actively resisting certain positionings (Davies, 2000; Kayi-Aydar, 2014). The construction of a person involves positioning and cooperation between agency and the institutional context, where agency has significance and must be understood in relation to a specific social context (Chandler, 2003). When using this perspective, the agency is shaped within and dependent on the social context (Kayi-Aydar, 2014). The ability to achieve agency depends on and varies within different contexts, which are based on environmental conditions (Kayi-Aydar, 2014; Priestley et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, culture, structure and agency influence social reproduction and the transformation of policy changes, curriculum construction and educational changes (Priestley, 2011). Mediating policies reflect the skills, values and attitudes towards the policy and how social interaction follows the transformation from policy to practice (Osborn et al., 1997). In the present context, the strong tradition of a flat organisational structure in which preschool teachers and caregivers assumed equal responsibility for preschool practices was challenged by the new responsibilities outlined in the policy documents and influenced how these two groups repositioned themselves and each other.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants and data collection*

The present study applied a qualitative research design, and an open-ended questionnaire was used to capture preschool teachers’ and caregivers’ descriptions of how they positioned themselves in

relation to the division of labour delineated in the policy documents. Seventeen respondents answered the questionnaire (10 preschool teachers and seven caregivers) from two different preschools in a community in Sweden. The preschool teachers and caregivers worked together in working teams. Preschool A comprised two working teams (two preschool teachers and one caregiver); Preschool B consisted of three working teams (two preschool teachers and one or two caregivers).

The open-ended questionnaire facilitated insight into the experiences of preschool teachers and caregivers in terms of how they positioned themselves in relation to changes to the responsibilities conferred on preschool teachers and caregivers by the policy change. The most important benefits of this data collection method were that it allowed the respondents to share their motivations, mention concerns that were not anticipated by the authors or that the authors knew nothing about and capture nuances in their descriptions of opportunities and challenges with regard to changes in the policy documents (cf. Hellevik, 1984). The open-ended questions permitted the respondents to provide in-depth, lengthy free-form responses (Bryman, 2004; Hellevik, 1984) to two main research questions: (1) What opportunities have you identified in the new policy documents? and (2) What challenges have you identified in the new policy documents? The questionnaire was distributed as a group questionnaire at a common meeting (i.e. each staff member completed the questionnaire individually while together in the same room) (Hellevik, 1984). The questionnaire was manually distributed to each preschool. Staff members were informed about the nature of the study. They were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Assurances were given that their identities would be safeguarded as their names and those of the preschools would remain anonymous. The participants provided oral formal consent to participate in the study. They were continually appraised of the research requirements and provided with basic instructions. The staff were asked to indicate their occupational category at the top of the questionnaire and placed their responses in an enclosed envelope, which they sealed before submitting it. This data collection approach ensured that there was no loss of respondents.

### *Data analysis*

Analysis of a text refers to a review of its structure and scrutiny of its content, which was achieved in the current study through content analysis (McKee, 2003; Stemler, 2001). Content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as a means of communication and pays attention to the content and contextual meaning of the text (Krippendorff, 2004; McTavish and Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990). It is primarily used to identify patterns in communication and involves the systematic reading of texts to identify interesting and meaningful patterns (Hodder, 2000). The aim of the present analysis was to identify themes and patterns (Bryman, 2004; McKee, 2003) that related to how preschool teachers and caregivers positioned themselves in response to a change in educational policy that impacted their roles and responsibilities.

Content analysis was performed using the steps proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Weber (1990). Firstly, for the coding, the data were manually transcribed into a Microsoft® Word® document. Secondly, the authors read through the material several times and marked the sections where the preschool teachers and caregivers described opportunities and challenges. The data were sorted according to each question and marked according to the relevant occupation category. Thirdly, organising phrases, words and units with similar meanings were used to identify patterns among the different content categories (Weber, 1990). Lastly, using repeated feedback from the theoretical framework and empirical patterns (Creswell, 2007), the patterns were grouped into more abstract themes in accordance with the recommendation of Stemler (2001) and analysed using the theoretical perspective (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2007).

Two overarching positioning dimensions were identified regarding how the respondents positioned themselves and each other: (1) preschool teachers' lack of reconstruction of their position and (2) caregivers upgrading of their position and downgrading of the preschool teachers' position. Quotes from the respondents' narratives were used to illustrate this. An attempt was made to ensure construct validity in this way (Gibbert et al., 2008). Consistency was identified across the entire data set, which suggests that the preschool teachers and caregivers shared the same perspectives. There were no deviation from the overall perception.

## Results

### *Preschool teachers' lack of reconstruction of their position*

The preschool teachers positively welcomed their new responsibilities and reviewed the related division of labour in the working team as a consequence. They believed that the changes would elevate the status of their profession, emphasise the importance and value of education and competence, and bring clarity to the role and function of preschool teachers. However, they encountered challenges taking on their new responsibility within the working team as the preschool teachers and caregivers continued to perform the same tasks and have equal responsibility in practice, which meant a lack of division of labour in preschools despite the policy changes. A preschool teacher expressed that preschool teachers found it difficult to effectively separate the two occupational categories because preschool teachers and caregivers performed the same tasks: "There are difficulties [implementing the] division of labour: "the preschool teacher should [ . . .]," "the work team should [ . . .]." How [can] we properly distinguish between the two occupational categories [because] at present we all do the same things[?]"

The result indicated that preschool teachers' new responsibilities and the division of labour stated in the policy documents were not implemented in practice. There was an uncertainty about how to interpret and implement the division of labour outlined in the curriculum between preschool teachers and caregivers within the working team. A preschool teacher explained that the caregivers became upset when the issue of the division of labour was broached within the work team because the latter believed that they were as competent as preschool teachers and had always done the same work in the past. Instead of reconstructing current position and making positional moves, the preschool teachers continued to maintain their position as equal caregivers.

This lack of reconstruction is closely associated with the traditional lack of division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers. The result indicate a fear to take on a leadership role in the work team as it was assumed that this might lead to the loss of a well-working team. A preschool teacher express: "[The fear of] losing a welded working team . . . can give a feeling of "we" and "them" – preschool teachers against caregiver[s], [our subordinates]". Instead of moving away from current position to a more hierarchical structure in which preschool teachers were positioned above caregivers, the preschool teachers held very strongly to the traditional way of organising the work equally within the working team. The result indicate that it exist a inconvenience working in a hierarchical organisation in which they perceived themselves to be superior to the caregivers, although this was a requirement that needed to be effected by preschool teachers to increase the gap between the two occupational categories but which they anticipated would create conflict.

It was also emphasised that the new responsibilities related to promoting children's learning and development will lead to more administrative assignments, such as conducting development talks with custodians, planning and evaluating teaching and ensuring the systematic quality of the work in the preschools. A redistribution of the planning time allotted to preschool teachers and caregivers (previously equal) was needed to accomplish these tasks. However, concerns were raised that

the demand for more planning time would lead to conflict in the working team. Thus, to avoid conflict, they elected to continue with the status quo, even though it affected their ability to complete tasks related to children's learning and development. Personal relationships with and loyalty to caregivers over the opportunity to develop their own professional skills, were valued.

### *Caregivers upgrading their position and downgrading of the preschool teachers' position*

The result indicate that caregivers were critical of the preschool teachers' new responsibilities and the changes in the division of labour. They suggested modulating the division of labour and preserving the traditional system of equal responsibility between preschool teachers and caregivers. Four skills were equated with the education and experience of preschool teachers: (1) willingness to learn from each other, (2) openness to pedagogical conversations, (3) support of each other and (4) the ability to complement and use each other's strengths. Caregiver Caroline express:

There are [opportunities] in . . . preschools if you're only willing to learn, work [harder] and improve as a pedagogue in a working team that is willing to work together educationally. We have to support each other, [recognise] our strengths [and] be open [to] pedagogical conversations.

The term 'pedagogue' was often used by caregivers to refer to both caregivers and preschool teachers. As such, it served as a unifying term for those who work with preschool children, regardless of their educational background. Caregivers' use of the term indicated that they did not separate the two occupational categories but considered them to be equal. As pedagogues, they believed that they were equal to preschool teachers and held onto the traditional democratic and equality-oriented organisational structure whereby they worked alongside preschool teachers, sharing equal responsibility within the work team. This meant that, in practice, there was no clear boundary between the occupational categories and the work carried out. From this perspective, regardless of their education level, caregivers positioned themselves as equal to preschool teachers and upgraded their own position as caregivers while simultaneously downgrading the position of preschool teachers, the profession and the importance of education.

The result indicate that caregivers' upgrading of their position was rooted in the loss of responsibility and fear of losing assignments and their status in the working team. They were anxious about which assignments they would be considered competent to perform. The policy changes were experienced by the caregivers as a downgrading of their competence and education, which was compared to an abusive act. Caregiver Charlotte express:

[. . . it] feels like we [caregivers] can't do anything [other] than change [nappies] and [wipe] dry runny noses, when, in fact, during [our] education, we . . . had [the] planning and implementation of activities [in] the schedule! That we, in the work team, become more divided [. . .] [means that we are] not 'we' anymore; rather [we are] 'us' and 'them'. Actually, it feels like an abusive act [. . .], which we then have to work against [for the benefit of] . . . the children and their families.

The caregivers were concerned that their prior responsibilities and opportunities to share their knowledge, skills and opinions about pedagogy in preschool practices would disappear. It was questioned why preschool teachers should have superior responsibilities and act as leaders in the working team. It was expressed a concern that the change would take away the joy of going to work and suggested that the working team would be more divided, with caregivers limited to care-related tasks, such as changing nappies and wiping children's runny noses, while preschools teachers focused on learning.

The caregivers believed that teaching was a concept that was introduced in preschool in support of the idea that children learn through teaching. The implementation of teaching in preschools as per the policy documents were experienced as a downgrade of caregivers' competence and as a promotion of the division of labour in the working team. A wonder was raised whether caregivers would be needed in preschools since preschools were becoming increasingly similar to schools where learning and teaching constituted the core. Focus on care, warmth and safety was mentioned as the most meaningful focus in preschools; therefore, it was argued that preschools should be managed according to this perspective and that equal responsibilities should be afforded to preschool teachers and caregivers. A caregiver express: 'Will we remain in this [preschool] organisation [which is becoming] more and more similar to . . . "school"? [If] we should compare ourselves with the "school world," where will care, warmth, security come in?'

By arguing the importance of care and underplaying teaching and learning, their position was justified as being equal to that of preschool teachers. They were critical of the idea that preschool was being made to be more like school, which they associated with teaching. The caregivers attempted to defend the importance of care over learning and development and to justify that there was no need for the division of labour. They lean on the policy documents that not delineate a clear division of labour in relation to care of children between caregivers and preschool teachers. This inclusion of equal responsibility in the policy documents in relation to care might constitute a defence of the caregivers' position.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to analyse how preschool teachers and caregivers in Swedish preschools positioned themselves in response to changes to the responsibilities of preschool teachers and caregivers in the working team. Until 2011, preschool teachers and caregivers had equal responsibility and an equal position in the working team in terms of preschool practice. The policy change meant that preschool teachers and caregivers had to reconstruct themselves and adapt to their new positions by moving away from their current position or trying to maintain (cf. Chandler, 2003). Both occupational categories needed to reposition themselves in response to the new responsibilities conferred on preschool teachers. Drawing on the positioning theory (Beart, 2012; Harré and Langenhove, 1999; Langenhove and Harré, 1999), the present study indicated that significant difficulties were encountered with regard to adaption to the new positions mandated in the policy documents. Two examples of polarity, an upgrade–downgrade position and passive–active agency, were identified in this research.

In the current study, preschool teachers and caregivers were aware of their positions as two different occupational categories with different assignments as stated in the policy document. However, despite this, they positioned themselves as carrying out an equal amount of the same work (cf. Eriksson, 2014; Steinnes and Haug, 2013), which indicated that the move away from their previous position of equal responsibility in the working team was challenging. In the conversation between preschool teachers and caregivers, equal positioning was reflected in the polarity of the *upgraded* and *downgraded positions* (cf. Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Both preschool teachers and caregivers downgraded the new role of preschool teachers. Preschool teachers did so due to fear of conflict likely to arise from separating the working team and owing to their insecurity as leader of the work team. Although the preschool teachers identified several opportunities with their new position, such as an elevation in professional status, greater recognition of the importance of their competence and education, and greater clarity regarding their position as preschool teachers, they nevertheless chose not to reposition themselves. An interpretation of this is that, even though the preschool teachers were afforded the opportunity to reposition themselves in line with the

policy document, their agency indicated passivity in relation to stepping forward and making a positional move. According to Davies (2000) and Kayi-Aydar (2014), an individual may be well positioned to act; however, he or she may choose not to act by resisting certain positioning. The passive agency of preschool teachers can be interpreted as an agentic action or a rejection of the construction of the preschool teachers' position outlined in the policy documents. As a consequence of passive agency (i.e. not taking on the leadership of the work team) and the positioning of the caregivers as equals, the latter's position was upgraded. This finding was in line with that of prior research in which personal relationships and loyalty to caregivers were considered to be of greater importance than educational background, competence and profession to preschool teachers (cf. Aasen, 2010; Eriksson, 2014; Gustafsson and Mellgren, 2008; Rodd, 2006; Steinnes and Haug, 2013).

Caregivers downgraded the preschool teachers' position and profession while upgrading their own competence in all areas by stating that the common competence of the work teams was what was important and by underplaying the importance of preschool teachers' competence based on their education qualifications. The caregivers' use of the term 'pedagogue' can be viewed as problematic as it avoids the acknowledgement of different occupational categories and responsibilities. The term masks invisible differences in educational background and competence. This finding is in line with that of prior research (Eriksson, 2014; Heikka et al., 2018) that elucidated it as a consequence of historical cultural norms where equal responsibility among preschool teachers and caregivers underpinned preschool practice prior to 2011. In line with the suggestion by Harré and Slocum (2003), active agency can be explained as a consequence of caregivers' traditional role and duties. That is, they have an active agency according to which they claim their own competence to be equal to that of preschool teachers to avoid the downgrading of their own occupational category. This positional move forward towards equal positioning was built on fear that their own occupational category would be diminished, with responsibility for less qualified work, such as changing nappies and wiping the streaming noses of children, and not being allowed to plan the children's activities.

Overall, due to the strength of the traditional flat organisational structure, there is a lack of repositioning among preschool teachers and caregivers. Preschool teachers upgraded the competence and position of caregivers and downgraded their own competence and position. Caregivers downgraded preschool teachers' profession and position and upgraded their own competence and position to be equal to that of the preschool teachers. Both the preschool teachers and caregivers experienced difficulties moving from their traditional position to the new position stated in the policy documents. They found it challenging to adapt to a more hierarchical structure of 'us' and 'them' where preschool teachers were responsible for leading the work teams. This meant that the division of labour stated in the policy document was difficult to fulfil. This finding is in line with that of prior research where it was demonstrated that the absence of the division of labour negatively impacted the quality of education and opportunities for children's learning and development in preschool (cf. Andersson, 2008; Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2011; Rydland and Aukrust, 2009; Sammons et al., 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Preschool is the first stage in the educational system and lays the foundations for children's development and learning. Therefore, it is important that preschool teachers take on the increased responsibility outlined in the curriculum (Swedish National Board of Education, 2018) and Educational Act (SFS, 2010:800) and are given the prerequisites to do so by the principal. Preschool teachers are the policy implementers and they have an important role as policy translators,

especially how they understand the policy but also how they engage with their clearer and enhanced responsibilities over the quality of educational practices and the work carried out in line with the curriculum. The primary conclusion of this study was that a lack of repositioning occurred among preschool teachers and caregivers in response to a Swedish educational policy change that impacted their positions and responsibilities. The educational act require, since 2010, preschool teacher certification in order to manage preschool teachers' assignments (SFS, 2010:800), which means that caregivers do not have the educational qualifications required to manage the same assignments as preschool teachers. Moreover, several revisions of the curriculum clarify division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers based on educational qualifications (Swedish National Board of Education, 2010, 2016, 2018). Therefore, a lack of repositioning will affect the quality of preschool practices and children's opportunities for learning and development; thus, preschool teachers' competence and leadership is necessary.

The Swedish government, local authorities and preschool principals must create opportunities and support for preschool teachers to take on their new leadership roles and new responsibilities so that they can make the necessary related positional movement. Otherwise, there is a risk that the top-down approach to professionalisation will have minimal influence on the profession of preschool teachers. Preschool teachers and caregivers will continue to maintain the flat organisational structure, the equal division of labour and responsibilities, as well as their current positions based on historical forces, norms and traditions. It is important to refer to the two occupational categories as separate, to make a distinction between 'preschool teachers' and 'caregivers' and not to use the term 'pedagogue' otherwise it will be equated with both preschool teachers and caregivers.

## Funding

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

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