EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

Opening up communicative spaces for discussion ‘quality practices’ in early childhood education through middle leadership

Karin Rönnerman¹*, Christine Edwards-Groves² and Peter Grootenboer³

¹Department of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; ²School of Education, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia; ³Griffith Institute for Educational Research Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University, Australia

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are often established and organised through collaboration among teachers, with one teacher having the role of facilitator. Such communities are widely recognised as important for facilitating both teacher and student learning. However, less is known about the leadership of teachers, with one teacher having the role of facilitator. Such communities are widely recognised as important

In this paper, we specifically draw on a case study that investigated how one district of a Swedish municipality set up communicative spaces involving all early childhood teachers, who shared experiences about how to document their systematic quality work and discuss issues related to the curriculum (Lpfo-98) revised in 2011. These issues formed the substance of the teachers’ professional discussions during their meetings. Their meetings, as they participated in these practices, provoked a deeper investigation into professional learning, particularly in early childhood settings. The meetings gave rise to the following research questions: (1) what are the practice architectures arranged by middle leaders to create or open up communicative spaces conducive to learning-focused activities; (2) what is it about these spaces that makes them communicative; and (3) what enables and constrains their leadership practices? To address these questions the article begins with a brief introduction to the theoretical and conceptual ideas that underpin research about collaboration and ‘space’ in professional learning. To do this we turn to an outline of the theory of practice architectures

In this paper, we specifically draw on a case study that investigated how one district of a Swedish municipality set up communicative spaces involving all early childhood teachers, who shared experiences about how to document their systematic quality work and discuss issues related to the curriculum (Lpfo-98) revised in 2011. These issues formed the substance of the teachers’ professional discussions during their meetings. Their meetings, as they participated in these practices, provoked a deeper investigation into professional learning, particularly in early childhood settings. The meetings gave rise to the following research questions: (1) what are the practice architectures arranged by middle leaders to create or open up communicative spaces conducive to learning-focused activities; (2) what is it about these spaces that makes them communicative; and (3) what enables and constrains their leadership practices? To address these questions the article begins with a brief introduction to the theoretical and conceptual ideas that underpin research about collaboration and ‘space’ in professional learning. To do this we turn to an outline of the theory of practice architectures
(Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014) as a resource for understanding the intersubjective spaces that individuals who participate in professional learning create while they work together as a collective endeavour to improve, develop and change teaching practices. We introduce this theory as an analytical tool for understanding the concept of communicative space and how space, in practice, requires attention to the semantic, physical activity and social realms. We also draw on Habermasian and Deweyian concepts associated with communication and development and use the Nordic understanding of action research as a formative concept.

First, we provide a brief overview of research concerning collaborating for professional learning. This overview will be followed by a description of the theory of practice architectures and how it enables and constrains communicative space for middle leading. Thereafter the context of the case is presented in a section that also includes how data was collected through participatory observations and field notes from two sites. Finally, findings are presented in the form of three narratives and discussed in relation to the practice architectures that enable and constrain the practices at the site. In the concluding section we consider the importance of viewing communicative spaces not simply as a physical space and that it is also crucial to consider how the intersubjectivity of professional and curriculum development ‘hang together’ in the semantic and social spaces.

Collaborating for professional learning

Research suggests that professional learning needs to be collaborative in order to improve students’ learning (e.g. Fisher, 2013). For instance, Opfer and Pedder (2011) illustrated how professional learning relating to the teachers’ interests, concerns and issues about practice is most effective when it involves collaborative activities with colleagues. With this in mind, investment in specific professional learning programs or in new reform measures often promotes collaborative learning at both the district level and in the classroom. However, it seems that implementation of such programs and reforms alone rarely achieves sustainable change in the educational practices in schools and classrooms. In this vein, research by Edwards-Groves (2013) argues that there is a need for education systems (at the systemic and district levels) to build into their practices a renewed emphasis on creating communicative spaces for teachers as a legitimate educational practice for teacher learning.

The literature also suggests that to change practices in more sustainable ways, teachers’ professional learning needs to stem from participating in activities that address their own questions, and it is more successful if it is supported with some kind of facilitation or coaching (e.g. Kennedy, 2005). Opfer and Pedder (2011) suggest that this system forms the kind of inquiry-based professional learning that is not often taken into account in understanding the effects of professional development. Further to this, Timperley (2011) argues that a focus on student learning and regularly assessing the impact of teaching practices on students are necessary to make appropriate adjustments to teaching. However, this system requires the type of support that simultaneously develops the professional capacity of teachers and even more experienced teachers, so they can contribute to ongoing and sustainable improvements in classrooms, schools and across education systems (Campbell, 2014). Salo and Rönnerman (2013) argue there is more to effective professional learning than simply placing an emphasis on collaborative learning, and it is also critical to create prerequisites and enabling conditions for teachers to work together in ways that open up spaces for developing sustainable practices.

Against this backdrop, professional teacher communities or professional learning communities (PLCs) are emerging as an increasingly prevalent approach for achieving collaboration among teachers. Recent studies show the importance of creating conditions for more systemic change, where the changes to practice are supported by leaders or facilitators (Campbell, 2014; Rönnerman, 2015; Salo & Rönnerman, 2013). This view insists teachers gather and analyse student data as site-based localised evidence for facilitating change (Cordingley, 2014; Timperley, 2011). Added to this recommendation, Edwards-Groves (2013) suggests that in order to sustain and advance education, educational leaders and policy makers must also make moves to validate the importance of participating in collaborative analytical dialogues as a resource for transforming the practices, agency and solidarity of its members.

Much of the literature describing PLCs is primarily related to school-based education, but in our reviews we also see the implications of that research as having strong relevance for early childhood education. In early childhood education in Sweden, there is a focus on the environment in which education takes place. To this end, Cordingley (2014) emphasises the concepts of community and culture as an outcome and prefers to frame the discussion about constructing effective learning environments (rather than focus on student learning). In the Swedish curriculum for early childhood education this shift to focus on effective learning environments is argued to be pivotal for improving students’ learning and development. We argue in this paper that being a leader of professional change requires participating in and knowing the enabling and constraining conditions for practice development. In this endeavour, the role of the middle leader is crucial (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Rönnerman, 2015). The practices of middle leaders have three defining characteristics, which exist as follows:

1. **Positionally**: Middle leaders are structurally and relationally situated ‘between’ the senior management of...
the school and the teaching staff. They are not in a peculiar space of their own, but rather are practising members of both groups.

2. **Philosophically:** Middle leaders orient to praxis in practising their leadership alongside their peers. In this sense they are not the ‘heroic crusaders’ leading from the front, but rather work alongside and in collaboration with their colleagues to do the wise and prudent thing to respond to their own circumstances and needs.

3. **Practically:** Middle leadership is a practice and is understood and developed as a practice. To this end, the focus is on the sayings, doings and relating of leading rather than the characteristics and qualities of middle leaders (Grootenboer et al., 2015, p. 524).

### Practice architectures enabling and constraining communicative spaces

As suggested earlier, it is rare to find studies of how PLCs are organised in *communicative space*. In this article, rather than seeing space as a container-like, singular entity, we turn to the theory of practice architectures. This theory offers an analytical lens to view the multidimensionality of space in practices; that is, when we engage with one another we encounter one another in practices that exist as interconnected dimensions of semantic space, physical space-time and social space. Practice theory offers a way of understanding the sociality of practices and the distinctiveness of the practice architectures that constitute the communicative spaces created by people by participating intersubjectively – by meeting one another and working together. Kemmis et al. (2014) define practice as:

> a form of socially established cooperative activity involving characteristic forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another (relatings). (p. 31)

These three dimensions of practice are enabled and constrained by practice architectures – the cultural-discursive arrangements, the material-economic arrangements and the social-political arrangements, respectively. The arrangements are constituted in three kinds of intersubjective space (or the particular realms in which people encounter one another):

1. **Semantic space,** whereby a shared discourse, language and meanings are shared discursively and mutual understandings are constructed through *sayings*.
2. **Physical space-time,** whereby shared locations in space and time enable interactions through shared activities, resources and work, which are encountered within particular physical set-ups and realised in *doings*.
3. **Social space,** whereby shared encounters afford different ways of relating to one another to produce particular kinds of social relationships, agency and power, realised through *relatings* (Kemmis et al., 2014).

It is the nature of these spaces that was a key focus of the study presented in this article. These spaces are such that people encounter each other as interlocutors, in interaction and in interrelationships (Kemmis et al., 2014) in practices that are locally situated. Understanding the nature of these spaces and how they exist as enmeshed dimensions of a practice is the focus of this paper; understanding this point is pivotal for understanding what a communicative space is and how it leads to learning-focused activity among early childhood teachers.

Alongside practice theory, we also consider Jürgen Habermas’s notions of *communicative action*, *communicative space* and the *public sphere*. At this point, we turn to Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon’s (2014) rendering of the terms:

> Communicative action is what happens when people stop to consider what is happening in their situation, and strive for intersubjective agreement about the language and ideas they use, mutual understanding of one another’s perspectives, and unforced consensus about what to do. Communicative action happens when a group collectively creates a communicative space in which all are free to express their points of view. The group also agrees to be disciplined about being inclusive in order to open up a public sphere. Public spheres are actual networks of communicative action amongst participants who volunteer to participate in changing practices that create a sense of unease – a legitimisation deficit or crisis. Participants construct public spheres to create conditions to open up communicative space in order to engage in communicative action. (Adapted from Kemmis et al., 2014, pp. 34–35)

These views can be traced back to the views of Dewey (1997), who posited a view of *education as communication*, or a view that constitutes a democratic form of life for those encountering one another in their day-to-day actions and interactions. Dewey’s analysis also suggests that meaning-making, knowledge building and communicative action are done through interaction and conversations. Professional knowledge is created in relation to a problem and in a social setting where the different sides of the problem are reflected and each individual’s own assumptions are challenged. Englund (2000) has further described this concept as ‘deliberative conversations’ (p. 6). Such conversations have certain characteristics; for instance a conversation may allow space for different views and arguments, a conversation preferably reflects tolerance and respect for the other, with an emphasis on listening to one another’s argument, and a conversation ideally should have elements of collective agreement. That is to say that the spaces for professional learning necessarily need to create the conditions for democratic intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 35).
This approach can also be connected to Gustavsen (2001), whose research in work science focused on democracy in the workplace through democratic dialogues.

**Action research as a communicative practice**

Action research was established in Sweden and Norway in 1960s within the field of work sciences, and it specifically emerged in the democratic work of small companies where dialogue was considered essential (Gustavsen, 2001). It was based on workers’ increased influence on working conditions and was intended to be a way of working towards a better working life. One such focus was on the significance of small groups for establishing democratic dialogues. Another was on working groups and their dynamic influences on the organisations (Gustavsen, 2001). This reasoning is also found in recent literature in the field of PLCs, where Cordingley (2014) for example talks about teachers’ work-based professional learning. In his work, Gustavsen builds on Habermas and uses the term *communicative space* when discussing dialogues. This practice of dialoguing can be traced back to the study circle as a form and space established within the folk enlightenment in Sweden in the early twentieth century (Rönnerman & Salo, 2014). The purpose of a study circle is to share knowledge collaboratively, not as scientific knowledge imposed from the outside, but rather as a development from the inside. This forms a view that suggests to contemporary educationalists that professional learning, development and action requires creating spaces for communicative action that enable what we describe here as *dialoguing for democracy*. This is a view that opens up an important question for this paper about how dialogues come into being through the practices people encounter when they meet one another in conversations in communicative spaces, the role of leading professional learning and practice development within local sites.

**The case study and the Swedish context**

The case study was carried out in the context of early childhood education in a district in one Swedish municipality. Early childhood education in Sweden is offered to all children from the age of one, and it includes full day care and educational content. Each preschool usually houses three to four different units for children between the ages of 1–5 years; each unit has space for about 20 children, who may be divided into groups (e.g. based on ages such as 1–3 year olds and 3–5 year olds). Each unit has three to four staff members organised as a team, of whom at least two must have a 4-year university early childhood teaching degree. The others have a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification from upper secondary school.

Preschools in Sweden are part of the state educational system and have had their own curriculum since 1998 (Lpfo98). This curriculum was revised in 2011 at the same time as a new education act was passed that placed a stronger emphasis on quality learning and teaching. Quality in preschools is related to fundamental values, tasks and knowledge, expressed as objectives and guidelines in the curriculum, and preschools are assessed on how well they work towards these objectives. The new act and curriculum state that ‘the principal at each preschool is responsible for quality and that this should be achieved in collaboration with the early childhood education teachers’ (SFS, 2010). Preschools are required to work systematically with quality issues to evaluate and improve aspects that are important for students’ learning and development. A recent formal investigation into Swedish preschools made recommendations, and two of the four recommendations highlighted that improving quality must be part of the everyday work of the preschools and that the leadership in relation to quality has to be strengthened (National School Inspectorate, 2012, p. 3). However, while the recommendations foreground student’s learning, teachers’ understanding of these processes received less attention. Furthermore, Sheridan, Williams, and Sandberg (2011) found that documenting students’ learning in preschool is complex and teachers need more competence to be aware of how documentation can offer insights into students’ learning and development.

At this site, the impact of ongoing research and development activities that employed action research processes over a 10-year period were investigated by Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2013) and by Rönnerman and Olin (2013). These studies found that many of the participants have some grounded understandings of the role and value of dialogues and forms of action research for professional learning – two features sympathetic to the concept of communicative spaces.

**Constructing ‘enabling’ communicative spaces for quality work**

An integral part of the practice architectures of the particular case study site were the structures and layers of leadership with the district that enabled and constrained the communicative spaces of the middle leaders in particular ways. There were three distinct groups of practitioners:

- The steering group consisted of the district leader, the development leader for the district, two principals and two early childhood teachers (who were also middle leaders and coordinators). This decision-making group met once a month to discuss and plan the work of the project.

---

1. *Early childhood education* is the internationally used term; however in this article the term preschool is used to specify a school for young children, in the sense that it is used by the Swedish National Agency for Education. [www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak-och-latlast/in-english](http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak-och-latlast/in-english)
• The coordinators planned all the activities for the weekly sessions for the 14 early childhood teachers who were middle leaders in their preschools, and they also organised monthly meetings with all the middle leaders to collaboratively discuss, share and reflect on their practice in their schools.

• The middle leaders facilitated the discussion and reflection with all the early childhood personnel working at their particular preschool site. These meetings were held every Monday for two hours following the planned activities (initially presented by the coordinators). One teacher from each teacher team attended the conversation (eight teachers in total) and after three Mondays all teachers had taken part in a conversation on the same topic with colleagues, facilitated by another colleague – the middle leader. On the fourth Monday of each month all middle leaders met with the coordinators to reflect on and summarise and document their discussions with the teachers. Middle leaders were remunerated for four hours a week for their work.

The work of each of these groups was interrelated, and the practices involved were ecologically arranged, in the sense that the practices of each group formed part of the practice architectures for the practices of the other groups in the project of improving learning and teaching in these preschools. Of particular interest here is the central and strategic role of the middle leaders and how through their leading practices they created (or did not create) communicative spaces that facilitated staff development. This task included paying deliberate attention to the relevant practice architectures, for example the arrangement of material-economic conditions so that each teacher’s schedule accommodated them taking part in the communicative space once a month.

Ann and Britt were middle leaders in their preschools; that is, they both taught and facilitated the learning of their peers. They were also the coordinators for other middle leaders in the district and were part of the steering group. Each weekly teacher session involved the facilitators (e.g. Ann and Britt), the principal and up to eight classroom teachers. Each monthly coordinator evaluation and planning meeting involved the coordinators (Ann and Britt), all the middle leaders in the district and the principal representative. For the purposes of this article we will present one specific example; we will follow Ann in her work as a middle leader and coordinator of middle leaders in the district. Specifically, Ann organised time and space for the conduct of the Monday afternoon session (2 hours); this session was enabled because the steering group changed the material-economic arrangements of the school timetable to enable all early childhood teachers to take part. How the middle leaders (in particular Ann) organised and arranged these activities and practices to create a communicative space (see also Rönnerman, 2008) is the focus of the remainder of this article.

Data collection
Data collection methods for this empirical study were designed to provide insights into the creation of communicative spaces for and by middle leaders. The methodology drew from an ‘interpretivist qualitative research paradigm’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where data formed an in-depth case study of practices. To this end, data were collected through observations of meetings, where the participants were specifically engaged in middle leading practices. Specifically, the lead author was present at these meetings, as a non-participant observer, and at four professional learning events where the two middle leaders (Ann and Britt) were responsible for leading and facilitating their peers. All data were collected on Mondays between May and August 2014.

At these professional learning meetings, the researcher audio-recorded the dialogue and took extensive field notes, but did not take part in the discussions. In this paper we will specifically draw on the recorded participants’ dialogues as observed during the middle leaders’ meetings. Data are presented using Fejes and Thornberg’s (2009) methods for constructing narratives. This system involved an initial close reading of the transcribed data to elicit commonly occurring broad themes that emerged across the corpus; this step was followed up with subsequent closer readings to explore some of the visible features and particularities. These themes were then examined through the theoretical lens of practice architectures as an analytic tool. In particular, a more concentrated reading was undertaken to elicit certain characteristics, features and themes from the dialogues that oriented explicitly to the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that were made visible (in their language, activities and relationships) during the meetings. Multiple readings and subsequent re-analysis became the essence for refining the narratives.

Findings
We provide three short narratives constructed from observations of the teacher professional learning spaces. As the narrative shows, the substance of their dialogues were enabled and constrained by the practice architectures they encountered at their sites (e.g. policy documents, Lp098 curriculum, leadership mandates). We will draw on the theory of practice architectures as a lens to understand how the middle leading practices enabled and constrained the development of language, activities and relationships that constitute the communicative spaces participants were involved in. In this section, we organise
the central texts in chronological order with the purpose of allowing the reader to ‘experience’ the sense of a meeting from beginning to end. These narratives create the structure for entering and understanding the nature of communicative spaces orchestrated through the practices of middle leaders. The teachers’ voices are noted in italics.

**Narrative 1: Middle leader Ann leads early childhood teachers**

Ann began the meeting about documentation (from the National Agency of Education) by contextualising the meeting and recalling what the meeting was focusing on. The principal Caroline sat beside her with her laptop to take notes. Ann turned to the whiteboard and organised the board into two columns: ‘Good at’ and ‘Needs to be developed’. Each teacher had notes in front of them and presented their examples to the group. One teacher stated, ‘We are so good at everyday work but we don’t get it written; it does not show in the documentation’. As they continued, one teacher added, ‘We use different forms of documentation connected to the curriculum. We interview children and get answers showing that they understand, and the children use the iPad and interview each other and connect it to the folder’. Caroline responded to this point, ‘We have evidence and good tools for documentation’. Another teacher followed on, ‘We don’t use the iPad in the same way; we need to improve that in our work’. Ann interrupted and turned to the whole group to clarify, ‘We are changing the concept of “iPad” to “learning pad” to emphasise the learning and interplay among the children’. Ann continued on, ‘What was the key for making it so good? This has to be documented’. During discussions, Ann continually returned to the whiteboard to add keywords raised by teachers; at the same time she kept pulling the discussion back to the task of documentation, through comments such as, ‘What does it mean to document children’s learning?’ Throughout the meeting, Ann also provided positive feedback with such comments, ‘We are all good at different things, we might just define it differently; it is hard and difficult to interpret and understand the meaning of these concepts’. After 2 hours of rigorous discussion (where a number of viewpoints were expressed – for example ‘we don’t have the time’; counterviews were raised – ‘it is hard and difficult to interpret and understand; we have guidelines; what makes it so difficult to use them?’; and consensus was reached in the discussion summaries), Ann concluded the meeting by explaining that the new guidelines for systematic quality work were being reworked to account for their ideas and would be much more connected to their practice in the future.

In this narrative, the middle leader (Ann) met with her teaching colleagues to discuss documenting student learning. Through the discussion, Ann created for the teachers a space for bringing forth their concerns, issues and counterviews about this documentation. Her use of ‘we’ was pivotal in this, as it brought mediation to the tensions between meeting prescribed policy demands, the expectations set down by the curriculum and the lived realities of the group of teachers who had responsibility for the quality in implementing the revised curriculum at their own sites. This mediation led to the development of a space conducive to openess – speaking freely and frankly as they encountered one another in these meetings. This openness, in turn, enabled the development of relationships whereby members of the group were afforded collegial agency to express site-based difficulties. Through the particularity of cultural-discursive arrangements in this space, Ann guided them into the realm of language used by the policy makers and the steering group in the district by representing their expectations and requirements. She did this at the same time as she enacted practices that directly changed the social-political dimensions of their work.

**Narrative 2: Middle leaders Ann and Britt lead all middle leaders at the end of the academic year**

In May, Ann and Britt met the other middle leaders \((n = 12)\) and the principal representative Diana (representing the district principals), who brought along the teacher summaries of their Monday meetings. Their task was to collate these documents to determine patterns across the district. In small groups they summarised a topic, and in exchanges led by Ann addressed any questions, concerns or highlights. The whole group came back together where Ann facilitated the report-back phase, which focused on the commonalities and differences between their analyses in an attempt to ascertain the visible patterns across the district. One teacher expressed it this way, ‘You recognise it; the same thoughts come back from the different groups’. In the discussions, the language used by the quality system was frequently employed and was specifically expressed in terms of the criteria from the National Agency for Education: ‘They are very relative and it depends what you compare them with’. During the meeting various strategies were also discussed for how schools can focus on student learning; points such as, ‘working with one goal at a time and concentrating the documentation on that’ were raised. At one point in a strategic move, Ann brought in the principal, ‘What are the discussions on this subject in the principal group?’ Different forms of documentation were discussed and several methods were suggested; through this, however, the group came back to the same questions: ‘Why are we documenting?’ ‘For what purposes?’ ‘How do we get the students involved?’, ‘We need to know the purpose
of documentation’ The meeting finished with the participating middle leaders reflecting on both their role as middle leaders and on their personal learning. All agreed they were happy doing their job and found it very challenging but at the same time they were learning. They viewed themselves as being ‘in continuous development and they appreciated the responses from their colleagues’. Some emphasised the ‘importance of meeting with other middle leaders as they do now’. One suggested that the meetings create a ‘climate where you dare to talk’, it is ‘a privilege to share thoughts with your colleagues’, it is ‘giving and taking’, and ‘we grow together’. One of them even went as far to say ‘What would the principals do without us? We want development and learning and that is what we are doing’.

It is evident in this second narrative that the middle leaders, Ann and Britt, through distinctive and strategic physical arrangements (whole group and small group discussions) opened up the space for democratic dialogue and reflection focused on their work as suggested by Gustavsen (2001) and Englund (2000). This dialoguing formed distinctive communicative possibilities, as this group were able to speak seriously through ‘deliberative conversations’ with the steering group through the voices of Ann and Britt, in that their ideas and suggestions were not only reported to the director, but shaped policy directions (further illustrated in Narrative 3 below). This narrative also illustrates how in this space there was room for finding common ground in the practices, that is, making meaning (as understood by Dewey, 1997) in and through the language, in and through the actions and activities and in and through the ways that they related to one another. They created a semantic space in which to communicate. Further to this, when they talked about ‘growing together’, ‘giving and taking’ or ‘sharing thoughts and appreciating thoughts with colleagues as being a privilege’, they were directly orienting to the sociality of the space they were co-creating, a key dimension of the communicative space they were participating in.

Narrative 3: Middle leaders Ann and Britt lead other middle leaders at the planning meeting at the beginning of the upcoming semester

The half-day planning meeting took place in city hall; all the middle leaders were present, together with Ann, Britt and the district development leader, Erika. They began the session by introducing the new middle leaders to the group and then proceeded to review the revised local document on ‘systematic quality work’ (first individually, and then collectively). Erika outlined what was new in the revised document, ‘We have a list of contents at the beginning and we refer to literature and the lectures all teachers have been to, and specific words are explained’. Ann asked if the curriculum should specifically be mentioned; all agreed except one participant. Collectively, they agreed to include it in the final version. Erika explained that the document included both the teachers’ and middle leaders’ evaluations and experiences. Ann clarified the point for the others: ‘The documentation is presented in two ways: in files with photos and every day work plans’. Throughout their discussions they addressed issues from the different groups’ perspectives; they discussed issues related to time, clarity of wording in the document, collaboration between teachers, priorities, definitions and concepts, specific timelines and goals, the planning templates, mandatory goals, visual layout and so on. Under Ann’s facilitation, a suggested process for the next series of ‘Pedagogical Mondays’ was negotiated to focus on the newly revised document. This meeting ended with middle leaders reflecting on the meeting content, processes and future directions. Many admitted that ‘it is still unclear, but it will solve itself’. Others suggested, ‘It is exciting to be one step ahead’. Ann summarised the meeting agenda by saying, ‘It is important to give the teachers time to think, read and discuss – listen to their voices’.

This narrative provides some evidence of how the social-political processes of negotiation emerged among the middle leaders as they came to a mutual agreement and unforced consensus, as illustrated by Kemmis et al. (2014). Their practices show the ways in which they created a space to act with confidence and self-belief, as well as agency and solidarity as a group, to problem solve at their own sites. In fact they weredialogue for democracy. In one way, through particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements, or practice architectures, these middle leaders were enabled to cope with the ‘messiness’ of practice and practice change as they moved from prescribed forms of work to innovative and site-responsive practices. Individuals were open to airing concerns, tensions and challenges in dialogue that moved the group, in more democratic ways, towards responding to their own circumstances and local needs. In this process, what was critical for the teachers in this endeavour were the types of communicative spaces made possible by the distinctive language, activities and relationships they drew on, as resources that both shaped and influenced their day-to-day work.

Summarised analyses and discussion

The narratives constructed from participant observations of middle leading in action show how particular dialogic practices are formed through the communicative spaces created by participants. The narratives also show how these spaces were both enabled and constrained by the arrangements of the physical space (e.g. pairs, small groups, whole group) and particular ways of relating that were orchestrated by the middle leaders. These social-political arrangements allowed the teachers to relate to others in a
community of teachers beyond their own immediate site and consequently facilitated a space for democratic action. This space emerged as a communicative space that enabled the possibility for all members to participate in the discussions and contribute their opinions and concerns about the development and implementation of new local documents. This aspect of the practice architectures of the middle leaders’ practices enabled open discussions about the systematic quality work in preschools.

In this section we continue to discuss the leading practices of the middle leaders and in particular how they created and used communicative spaces to facilitate site-based professional development and learning in practice (Kemmis et al., 2014), specifically for the case presented in this article, for professional and curriculum development. This discussion is grounded in the theory of practice architectures. As a first level of analysis, in Table I below, we note and exemplify the practices and practice architectures related to the opening of communicative spaces that were evident in the data.

What is evident from the information presented in Table I is that the practice architectures both enabled and constrained the leading practices of the middle leaders, particularly as they sought to develop and sustain communicative spaces for professional development. To elaborate, we now examine these practices of middle leaders vis-à-vis the possibilities for effective and efficient educational growth in preschools through the development of communicative spaces.

For the teacher participants to come to mutual understandings, our study shows that the middle leader created conditions for keeping the conversational space open (McNiff, 2014). This action created opportunities for participating teachers to understand each other’s perspectives, issues and concerns. It seems to us that sharing the language and discourse of their professional practice created a semantic space where comprehensibility and shared language and understandings were central to their ongoing practice. Added to this, to make communication possible, the middle leaders arranged the physical meeting spaces to enable collaborative analytic dialogues for teachers, district leaders, coordinators and other middle leaders to work together in education activities connected to professional and curriculum development. It was evident that these particular practice architectures, formed in the social space, positioned participants as equal contributors

Table I. Examples of practices and practice architectures from the collected data.

| Practices in opening a communicative space | Practice architectures of the meetings |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| **Examples of sayings (specialized discourses) in the semantic space** | **Examples of cultural-discursive arrangements** |
| The middle leaders used the language and ideas of the curriculum and the guidelines for quality assessment from the National Agency for Education. Through shared language participants came to unforced consensus, mutual understanding and intersubjective agreement (see Narrative 1). They were critical of some concepts about how to understand and use them. They used language appropriate for the task (e.g. goals, documentation, structure, time for reflection). | The particular semantic content (language and specialist discourses) of communicative spaces was used in the Education Act, in the curriculum, in the local guidelines for quality work and specifically in the sheet of criteria for reaching the goals. However it was also present in the language used in the guidelines from the coordinators for middle leaders about how to facilitate groups. |
| **Examples of doings in the activity space** | **Examples of material-economic arrangements** |
| Regular meetings with groups of early childhood teachers and with all middle leaders. Reporting back from one’s own middle leadership context and sharing experiences in groups. Presenting and discussing ways to do documentation in preschools. | Middle leaders created ‘physical set-ups’ that enabled teachers to participate in a range of activities. These material-economic arrangements created conditions for interacting. All the teachers sat around tables with the middle leaders. The principal took notes. All teachers had their documents in front of them to report back from. The middle leaders kept track of the discussion and asked for opinions if no one talked. Participants worked in pairs, small groups and whole groups. |
| **Examples of relating in the social space** | **Examples of social-political arrangements** |
| The teachers and middle leaders related to the curriculum, the Education Act and local guidelines and indirectly to the steering group. The teachers related to the middle leaders and vice versa. Those involved related as a community to explore ideas together and learn from each other. Participants felt ‘free’ to agree and disagree. They related to each other in different ways depending on the purpose and agenda. | The Curriculum and Education Act as well as local guidelines influenced the activities of the groups and were implemented by the decisions made in the steering group. The coordinators suggested how to set up each meeting for the middle leaders when facilitating the groups. For each meeting, it was set in advance what to do and examples of questions to discuss. Each middle leader reported back to the others and to the coordinators, who reported back to the steering group. |
to their professional learning through equitable and respectful relationships. They participated as agentic professionals who collectively (and in solidarity) were able to contest, challenge, agree or disagree, negotiate and come to a consensus regarding the complex issues of quality in preschools. Indeed, the middle leaders created the social-political arrangements for the people to relate to one another in this way. However, it was also clear that the practice architectures at times also limited what was possible in the dialogic space, notable in the ways coordinators conveyed what was to be done and the terms to be used (for example in Narrative 1).

Our research observations in the district of a Swedish municipality led us to focus on the spaces middle leaders opened up; as a particular kind of democratic communicative space that enabled them to facilitate the learning of their colleagues (Gustavsen, 2001). We found that their practices (what they did, what they said and how they related to one another when they met) opened up spaces for new forms of discourse, activities and ways of relating as part of the process of change in schools, to form an understanding of the complexity of practices not often studied. In this, the concept of communicative space cannot be taken to be simply the physical space for the conduct of collaborative professional dialogues (i.e. or the place where something happens, shaped by its material-economic arrangements). Our data show that it is much more than that. A communicative space is constituted through socially established arrangements that create enabling conditions for constellations of practices to be enabled and enacted – in this way it is open; open for members to enter its realm to participate in a shared language, in shared activities and through relationships. In their specific social situations, in the conduct of the work of middle leaders, creating a communicative space encompassed bundles of practices comprised of the following:

1. Cultural-discursive arrangements that existed in the dimension of semantic space; these made possible ways for participants to express themselves in the social medium of language (and symbols) – evident, for example, in the specialist discourse shared with that used in the Education Act.

2. Material-economic arrangements that existed in the dimension of physical set-ups and space-time resources; these made it possible, in the medium of work and activity, for teachers, middle leaders and the steering group to meet – evident, for example, in the physical set-ups of the shared Monday meeting time, the timetable to meet at a local district office, the documents and whiteboard and the grouping arrangements to work in groups.

3. Social-political arrangements that existed in the dimension of sociality, constituted in social space; these made it possible for middle leaders and teachers to connect and challenge one another within the medium of power and solidarity – evident, for example, in the changing roles and ways of relating and the different levels of the organisation or the political entity such as a municipality or nation that mediated the network of those in the practice.

Conclusions

We have endeavoured to show, through the narrative case presented, that understanding the concept of communicative space requires understanding of the three dimensions of space created in practices – semantic, physical space-time and social space. For the middle leaders this involved creating and acting in spaces that were open to communication, open for communication and open through communication. Therefore, understanding space as being communicative (or not) or open (or not) requires understanding the ways in which participants constructed their dialogues to be a democratic intersubjective space where they could meet one another in social interactions. These spaces were formed through interactions constituted in language, activities and relationships. For the space to be genuinely communicative, interactions also need to be open to intersubjective agreement and mutual understanding that enable individuals to come to unforced consensus about the ways to respond prudently to systemic policy implementations or to respond to particular student learning needs (as attested to in the works of Habermas and Kemmis et al., 2014).

For middle leaders who have been shown to be instrumental in this process, this necessitates creating a semantic space that enables teachers to come to mutual understandings in unrestrained or agentic ways about teaching change through the avenues of shared discourse, language and meanings. It asks that the physical space and material objects used simultaneously enable people to ‘genuinely’ work together with one another in particular activities using particular resources to understand and achieve change (to support students’ learning). These physical set-ups need to be conducted at a time and in a place that enables participation. To be truly open for communication, set-ups also need to visibly connect participants in a social realm whereby teachers’ shared encounters enable agency, solidarity and power to come forth as mechanisms for change. We have shown that these three dimensions of communicative space are evident in the practices (espoused and enacted) created by middle leaders. It is their place in the practice of professional development that critically strengthens the development and sustainability of quality in schools and indeed preschools.

References

Campbell, C. (2014). Teacher learning and leadership for system improvement. Paper presented at the symposia “Teacher Competence and the Teaching Profession.” The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and The Wenner-Gren Center, Stockholm, September 10–13.
Cordingley, P. (2014). Effective, pupil focused, professional learning environment in schools: Evidence led contributions from teachers and leaders. Paper presented at the symposia “Teacher Competence and the Teaching Profession.” The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and The Wenner-Gren Center, Stockholm, September 10–13.

Dewey, J. (1997). Demokrati och utbildning [Democracy and Education] (N. Sjödin, Trans.) Göteborg: Daidalos. (Original work: Democracy and Education published 1916).

Edwards-Groves, C. (2015). Creating spaces for critical transformative dialogues: Legitimating discussion groups as professional practice. Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 38(12), 16–34. doi: 10.14221/ajte.2013v38n12.1

Edwards-Groves, C., & Rönnérman, K. (2013). Generating leading practices through professional learning. Professional Development in Education, 39(1), 122–140.

Englund, T. (2000). Deliberativa samtal som värdegrund – historiska perspektiv och aktuella förutsättningar [Deliberative Communication as value]. Stockholm: Skolverket.

Fejes, A., & Thornberg, R. (2009). Kvalitativ forskning och kvalitativ analys [Qualitative research and qualitative analyses]. In A. Fejes & R. Thornberg (Eds.), Handbok i kvalitativ analys [Handbook in qualitative analyses], pp. 16–43. Malmö: Liber.

Fisher, K.B. (2013). Fostering teacher learning communities: A case study of a school-based leadership team’s action research (Doctoral thesis, University of Maryland). Retrieved November 10, 2015, from http://www.Fisher_umd_0117E_14026.pdf

Gustavsen, B. (2001). Theory and practice: The mediating discourse. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), Handbook of action research (pp. 17–25). London: Sage.

Grootenboer, P., Edwards-Groves, C., & Rönnérman, K. (2015). Leading practice development: Voices from the middle. Professional Development in Education, 41(3), 508–526. doi: 10.1080/19415257.2014.924985

Kemmis, S., & Grootenboer, P. (2008). Situating praxis in practice: Practice architectures and the cultural, social and material conditions for practice. In S. Kemmis, & T.J. Smith (Eds.), Enabling praxis: Challenges for education (pp. 37–62). Rotterdam: Sense.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research. Singapore: Springer.

Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., Grootenboer, P., & Bristol, L. (2014). Changing practices, changing education. Singapore: Springer.

Kennedy, A. (2005). Models of continuing professional development (CPD): A framework for analysis. Journal of In-Service Education, 31(2), 35–50.

Lp698 (revised in 2011) Curriculum for preschools. Retrieved November 10, 2015, from http://www.skolverket.se/som-skolverket/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww5.skolverket.se%2Fwtpub%2Fws%2Fskolbok%2Fwp ubext%2Ftryckss%2FRecord%3Fk%3D2704

McNiff, J. (2014). Action research for professional development. Dorset: September Books.

National School Inspectorate. (2012). Förskola, före skola – lärande och bärande. Kvalitetsgranskningssammanlagt rapport No 7 [Preschool. Before school – learning and bearing. Quality report about work in preschools with the enhanced educational mission]. Retrieved from http://www.skolinspektionen.se/

Opfer, V.D., & Pedder, D. (2011). Conceptualizing teacher professional learning. Review of Educational Research, 81(3), 376–407.

Rönnérman, K. (2008). Empowering teachers. Action research in partnership with teachers and a researcher. In K. Rönnérman, E.M. Furu, & P. Salo (Eds.), Nurturing praxis: Action research in partnerships between school and university in a Nordic light (pp. 157–173). Rotterdam: Sense.

Rönnérman, K. (2015). The importance of generating middle leading through action research for collaborative learning. LEARNING Landscapes, 8(2), 33–39.

Rönnérman, K., & Olin, A. (2013). Kvalitetsarbete i förskolan belyst genom tre ledningsnivåer [Quality work in preschool viewed through three layers of leadership]. Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige, 18(3–4), 175–196.

Rönnérman, K., & Salo, P. (2014). Lost in practice. Transforming Nordic educational action research. Rotterdam: Sense.

Salo, P., & Rönnérman, K. (2013). Teachers’ professional development as enabling and constraining dialogue and meaning-making in education for all. Professional Development in Education, 39(4), 596–605.

SFS (2010:800). Skollagen [The Education Act]. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

Sheridan, S., Williams, P., & Sandberg, A. (2012). Systematic Quality Work in Preschool. International Journal of Early Childhood, 45(1), 123–150. doi: 10.1007/s13158-012-0076-8

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Timperley, H. (2011). Using student assessment for professional learning: Focusing on students’ outcomes to identify teachers’ needs. Paper No. 21 May 2011. Retrieved from http://www.skolinspektionen.se/om-skolverket/rapporter/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww5.skolverket.se%2Fwtpub%2Fws%2Fskolbok%2Fwp ubext%2Ftryckss%2FRecord%3Fk%3D2704

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biographies
Karín Rönnérman, PhD, was an early childhood teacher and later a principal for a preschool for 12 years before moving into higher education. She is now a professor in Education at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and a member in the research group Power and Agency in Education (PAGE) at the Department of Education and Special Education at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her main research interests connect to professional learning through action research where collegial learning and middle leading is of special interest in the light of practice theories and critical narratives.

Christine Edwards-Groves, PhD, was a primary school teacher before becoming a literacy consultant working closely with classroom teachers in long term site-based action research projects. She is now a Senior Lecturer (Literacy Studies) and key researcher for the Research Institute Professional Practice Learning and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Sturt University, Australia. She is recipient of an Australian Office for Learning and Teaching citation for program innovation demonstrating commitment to developing quality teaching practices among Bachelor of Education students. Her main research interests include classroom interaction, literacy practices and pedagogies, teacher professional learning and practice theory.

Peter Grootenboer, PhD, was a school teacher and leader for 12 years before moving into the tertiary sector. He received a national Jim Campbell Award for teaching excellence. He is now an Associate Professor in Education at Griffith University, Australia and a member of the Griffith Institute for Educational Research. His research interests include mathematics education, educational leadership, practice/praxis theory, and issues of social justice.

Citation: NordSTEP 2015, 1: 30098 - http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.30098