Understanding long-term thinking as a management strategy to support sustainable quality development: perspectives from education

Anna Mårtensson
*KKI, Mittuniversitetet Fakulteten for naturvetenskap teknik och medier,
Sundsvall, Sweden*
Kristen Snyder
Mittuniversitetet Fakulteten for humanvetenskap, Ostersund, Sweden
Pernilla Ingelsson
Department of Quality Technology and Management, KMT, Östersund, Sweden, and
Ingela Bäckström
*Department of Communication, Quality Management and Information Systems,
Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of long-term thinking in a non-business context to gain deeper insights into bridging the gap between the theory of long-term thinking and its application as a management strategy.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore the concept of long-thinking further in a non-business setting, a grounded theory study was conducted with preschool leaders in a municipality in Sweden to examine how the leaders describe, define and apply the concept of long-term thinking in their schools. Interviews with school leaders, both written and oral, were used for data collection.

Findings – This study illustrates that the concept of long-term thinking can be twofold. First, the description can be as an anchor that reflects a mission. Second, the description can be a steering mechanism that guides decision-making. The findings also reinforce the importance of organisations developing an organisational culture that connect their vision and goals with the values and needs of their customers.

Research limitations/implications – This study was carried out in a single organisation and shows a snapshot of the organisation's status at the time the data were collected. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable to all organisational settings; rather the findings may be transferable to other settings.

Practical implications – The results can be used to help identify areas where preschools in a municipal context can engage with sustainable quality development in order to build systems that support work with quality in a more structured way.

Since acceptance of this article, the following author(s) have updated their affiliation(s): Anna Mårtensson, Kristen Snyder, and Pernilla Ingelsson are at the Department of Communication, Quality Management and Information Systems, Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden.

Originality/value – Long-term thinking is seen, within both theory and organisations, as necessary to achieve success in terms of sustainable development and quality, and this study contributes with knowledge about the current gap between theories of long-term thinking and practice in organisations.

Keywords Long-term thinking, Preschool, Quality, Sustainability, Management, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In accordance with the UN Agenda 2030 and UN Sustainability Development Goals (United Nations, 2017), it is important for us as a society to understand the need for long-term thinking and systems thinking to make decisions in line with the three aspects of sustainable development: the environment, society and the economy. Sustainability, as a concept and framework for life and work, means fostering a mindset that emphasises the importance of long-term thinking and planning to ensure that decisions made today by individuals, businesses and nations account for the needs of and impact future societies (Lowe Steffen *et al.*, 2019). In business, working with long-term thinking is often translated into strategic planning (Aras and Crowther, 2010) in which short-term steps are outlined to achieve long-term goals. As research demonstrates, applying long-term thinking as a management strategy may not be as simple as aligning goals and strategic planning. It requires an organisational culture in which the values and behaviours also reflect long-term thinking.

This raises questions about how to understand long-term thinking as a management strategy given the complex challenges for many organisations in balancing goals and planning with culture. This can be further complicated in complex organisational settings, such as governmental agencies, in which goals are determined by both government policy and political agendas, as well as customer needs. Exploring the application of long-term thinking in settings other than traditional business is thus of interest and the focus of this article.

The concept of long-term thinking is central to quality management and sustainable development theory, albeit often as a silent element rather than a clearly articulated praxis in organisations (Mårtensson *et al.*, 2019). Speculation as to why long-term thinking is less visible as a leadership strategy includes variations in definitions, a lack of systems within the organisation's culture to support long-term activities (Dale *et al.*, 1997; Plenert, 1996) and financial incentives (Barnett *et al.*, 2017). Arnheiter and Greenland (2008) also found that organisational systems often support short-term thinking based on individual goals, which undermines the organisation's viability. Helping leaders develop the knowledge and capacity to apply long-term thinking can contribute to the global agenda on sustainable development since sustainability is driven by the premise of long-term thinking (Chirico and Nystrom, 2019).

One institutional context that requires leaders to integrate short-term decisions with long-term thinking is education (Snyder *et al.*, 2008). As a long-term goal, schools have the mandate to ensure quality education for all (Skolverket, 2019) and prepare young people with skills and competencies for living and working in society (Skolverket, 2019; Snyder, 2014). The United Nations argues that obtaining a quality education is the foundation for improving people's lives and achieving sustainable development in society (United Nations, 2017). The policy mandate for school leaders around the world to design and deliver quality education that meets the sustainability challenges of the 21st century (Snyder, 2015, 2019) creates both an expectation and demand that short-term goals be balanced with long-term planning.

Since Agenda 2030 was declared, some nations worldwide, such as Finland and Sweden, have begun to integrate international sustainability goals into the educational agenda (Halinen, 2017; Snyder, 2019). We suggest that education can thus be described as a complex institutional setting in which educators are challenged to balance external policy and political agenda with the daily and long-term needs of children and youth. The question for school leaders is "how" they will interpret and design action plans to meet the strategic goals and

mandates that balance short-term goals with long-term planning. Within this context, we aim to explore the phenomenon of long-term thinking as a leadership strategy in more detail.

This article aims to explore the concept of long-term thinking in a non-business context to gain deeper insights into bridging the gap between the theory of long-term thinking and its application as a management strategy. The study is based on a grounded theory methodology and examines how school leaders in preschools in Sweden describe and define the concept of long-term thinking, and how they apply it in their specific role in working with quality development.

Background

Deming (1986) states that there are two kinds of problems that can occur in organisations: problems of today and problems of tomorrow. This view, articulated in 1986, is reflected in many of the definitions of sustainable development, reinforcing the important connection between quality management and sustainability. His words remind us that developing sustainable quality in organisations remains a contemporary challenge.

According to Aras and Crowther (2010), sustainability in organisations can be twofold: the first interpretation is to initiate an organisation's future intention (staying in the market over time), and the second is seen as a synonym to sustainable development. The most common interpretation is that sustainability is linked to sustainable development, and it has progressed to become a competitive advantage and a prerequisite for business to perform excellently (Aras and Crowther, 2010). Aras and Crowther (2010) continue, arguing that being sustainable as an organisation means that a short-term approach is contradictory; still, both long-term and short-term performance are possible and must be considered in the sustainability context. This perspective can be important for leaders to develop management strategies using long-term thinking to achieve sustainable quality development.

In the field of quality management, a paradigm shift is underway that integrates sustainability as a central element in what it means for businesses to achieve high-quality outcomes (see, for instance, Fundin et al., 2021; Siva et al., 2016). The traditional mindset of quality being defined by products and services for customers has expanded to include an awareness that the decisions businesses make today about their work, suppliers, products and services impact a broad stakeholder base, including society (Deleryd and Fundin, 2020; van Kemenade and Hardjono, 2019). From this perspective, quality in business is defined, in part, by the degree to which business decisions align with the future needs of society, thereby integrating quality management and sustainable development.

This development in quality management is in line with the UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, which calls for leaders to re-examine internal practices to align systems of work with values that promote sustainable development in organisations and society (Cole, 2003; Hawkins and James, 2018; Mårtensson et al., 2019). When long-term thinking is integrated with an organisation's culture (Martin, 1992; Schein, 2004), it influences its ability to manage change and achieve expected results (Mårtensson et al., 2019). Martin (1992) describes organisational culture according to the alignment of purpose and vision with the actions of workers. Accordingly, cultures can be described as integrated, in which all behaviours and actions are working toward a common goal and agenda. A differentiated culture arises when sub-groups intentionally work against the common direction and build counter-cultures. A fragmented culture reflects a lack of alignment that is the result of a lack of clarity about the goals and vision of the organisation (Martin, 1992).

According to Schein (2004), there are three levels of culture that exist within organisations: Artefacts, Espoused Values and Underlying Assumptions. The first level reflects the 'artefacts', that which can be observed on the surface, e.g. language, products, clothing, stories told about the company and organisation charts. These can be easily discerned but are hard to decipher. Underlying the artefacts, on the second level, are 'espoused values', e.g. strategies, goals and philosophies. The third level is 'underlying assumptions', which reflect unconscious and taken-

for-granted behaviours, which tend to be very hard to change (Schein, 2004). Changing the culture requires an understanding of how the underlying assumptions (behaviours) support or negate the espoused values and artefacts. Based on Schein's (2004) model of organisational culture, there is therefore a need for leaders to link the espoused values with underlying assumptions to develop quality cultures based on long-term thinking.

However, as studies show, there is often a missing link between rhetoric and action (Ingelsson and Mårtensson, 2014; Snyder et al., 2017). For example, clearly, articulated mission statements are not always supported by cultural behaviours. This suggests there is a gap between company policies and cultural behaviours, which may be one of the reasons long-term thinking as a leadership strategy is often perceived to be silent. Barnett et al. (2017) identified similar patterns in a multi-study of numerous industries, including energy, finance, hospitality/hotels, mining, pharmaceuticals and retail. Here leaders recognised the importance of long-term thinking but had difficulty implementing it in the culture (Barnett et al., 2017).

Part of the reason for missing links between theory and practice may lie in the vast differences in terminology between policy documents and an organisation's culture. Terms such as "long-term thinking," "long-term planning," and "long-term strategies" are found in different contexts. One question for leaders is how these terms are used and understood to communicate clarity of purpose and direction when supporting quality management initiatives. For example, "long-term thinking" is said to be the consequence of processes that support action and results derived from integrating short-term perspectives and future needs (Barnett et al., 2017). "Long-term planning" is the formulation of strategies to meet future needs (Barnett et al., 2017). According to Pinedo (2004), "thinking" is also influenced by an organisation's vision and "planning," which plot the path from present to future. Actions and decisions not only have linear effects in organisations, but are also interconnected and provide synergies that reach far beyond today's actions. Managers are required to have the skills of systems thinking to manage the complexity of synergies that will influence cross system boundaries and an organisation long term (Senge and Sterman, 1991).

The need for a systems-wide, systematic approach to leading sustainable quality development is reinforced by Snyder et al. (2017), who found that a culture of short-term thinking and fire-fighting dominated manufacturing companies in their study of value-based leadership. Leaders were keenly aware of the need for proactive leadership, categorised by long-term thinking, yet found themselves drowning in the role of fire-fighter. The transformation toward sustainable practices began when leaders developed strategic practices and systems to align work processes with values and long-term goals. Moreover, Snyder et al. (2018) found that when leaders began to connect structure, culture and identity, workers were more adaptive and responsive to change; a finding that is also supported by Dahlgaard and Park Dahlgaard (2006) in their work about generating high-performance quality organisations. What is becoming evident from current research on sustainable quality management is the need to rethink how organisations can connect structures with culture and identity to build an energy system that is both stable and continuously responsive to internal and external customer needs (Fundin et al., 2021; Snyder et al., 2008; Snyder and Snyder, 2021). To support this, it will be important for leaders to recognise the role of long-term thinking and planning as a key ingredient to developing sustainable quality in organisations and society.

Addressing long-term thinking
Perspectives on long-term thinking vary, and it is, perhaps, this variation that contributes to a gap between organisational knowledge of long-term thinking and its application. Time is one of the identified components of long-term thinking, for example, that a business will exist for a long period of time (Aras and Crowther, 2010; Mirvis et al., 2010). A common time interval for a business' long-term strategies and plans is five to ten years (Lee and Dale, 1998). The relationship between policy and operational practice is a second component. Dale et al. (1997)

identified inconsistencies in many organisations in which systems that support long-term activities were articulated by policy but missing in reality. Plenert (1996) also found that employee and customer goals need to have a long-term orientation if the organisation is to keep quality in focus.

According to Salegna and Farzaneh (1996), long-term planning in the context of quality management is about businesses setting goals based on strategies and plans that prioritise the long-term survival of the business. Jonker (2000) adds that the long-term strategies and plans that characterise quality management are also required to promote stability in the community and deliver value to customers. Dahlgaard and Park Dahlgaard (1999) moreover state that the idea of having long-term relationships with suppliers, customers and society is a basic prerequisite of quality.

Despite theory supporting the need to integrate long-term thinking with both sustainable development and quality management, many organisations struggle to adhere to long-term goals, strategies and plans. Barnett *et al.* (2017) identified a number of barriers to long-term thinking in organisations: (1) short-termism; (2) a lack of organisational skills, resources, structure, support; (3) poor leadership experience and skills; (4) a variety of market and future uncertainties; (5) prevailing organisational culture that is resistant to change; and (6) uncertainty over the future of the business based on social/political changes or legislation/ regulation. Fusso (2013) highlights the importance and opportunity for leaders in the private sector to actively move beyond short-term planning often guided by economic planning models and transactional relationships. Instead, a balance needs to be created between regulatory policy, market demands (aka customer needs) and long-term value creation to support a culture that promotes sustainable practices.

Leading schools focussing on sustainable quality

In 2017, the United Nations declared that the Agenda 2030 should include quality in education as a critical arena in which to develop human skills and capacities to contribute to a sustainable future. In Sweden, national policies define the strategic direction that frames what schools need to focus on in the short- and long term to address sustainable development and quality in education.

> Education should be undertaken in democratic forms and lay the foundation for a growing interest and responsibility among children for active participation in civic life and for sustainable development – not only economic, but also social and environmental. Both long-term and global future perspectives should be made explicit in education. (Skolverket, 2019, pp. 5). Further, Education in the preschool should lay the foundations for life-long learning. It should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children. Education should be based on a holistic approach to children and the needs of children, in which care, development and learning form a whole. In cooperation with the home, the preschool should promote the development of children to become active, creative, competent and responsible people and members of society. (Skolverket, 2019, pp. 7)

Research on high-performing schools demonstrates that leaders can succeed in developing sustainable quality in education (Snyder *et al.*, 2008). Factors that enhance the development of high-performing school environments are for instance support and a shared vision among leaders and adaptive planning and problem-solving (Nehring and O'Brien, 2012; Snyder, 1997). Hallinger (2011) expands the meaning of shared vision of goals and argues that they should be linked to core values within the school's leadership team and the school community. On the other hand, factors that counteract high-performing school environments are a lack of meeting colleagues, too many projects ongoing at the same time, tensions among colleagues that hinder collaboration, and overly general business objectives (Nehring and O'Brien, 2012).

Leithwood *et al.* (2020) describe the significant link between school leadership and the results delivered within the school through the leaders' impact on the quality of teaching and

learning, as well as success in investments in school improvements. Schools in many of the larger developed nations have a common mission: to ensure that employees work in line with sustainability and deliver knowledge about sustainable development, as well as work systematically with quality management – they always have a present effect in a long-term perspective. Studies also demonstrate that while their mandate is clear, school leaders still face challenges balancing short-term realities with long-term goals (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). A silo mentality, as opposed to a systems view of schooling, is identified as one of the critical reasons for this (Norqvist and Ärlestig, 2021).

Nehring and O'Brien (2012), and others (Snyder *et al.*, 2008), suggest that a strong system with both top-down and bottom-up, between leaders and employees, is needed to promote both excellence and equity in students learning. In the top-down segment, the leadership should provide "a system-wide vision for improvement, support for capacity building and accountability" (Nehring and O'Brien, 2012, p. 455). Thus, instead of clear guidelines, prepared matrices and details, more communication is needed regarding long-term visions, frames and interpretations of directives and research in relation to the local context (Norqvist and Ärlestig, 2021).

Håkansson (2016) identifies that in their systematic work with quality preschool leaders, they see themselves as existing between external demands and control, i.e. local governmental strategies and state-controlled curriculum, and internal demands and needs, i.e. employees' daily work. Preschool leaders express that they have the ability to adapt work on quality to local contexts, but they struggle to find time for systemic quality work and find that staff at preschools have a hard time understanding the connection between systematic quality work and their daily work (Håkansson, 2016). Håkansson's findings are in line with previously mentioned studies of businesses (see Barnett *et al.*, 2017; Mårtensson *et al.*, 2019) that indicate one of the obstacles to moving toward long-term thinking is the gap between organisational policies and practice.

Methodology

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project (2019–2022) to examine quality in public preschools from a quality management perspective (Ingelsson *et al.*, 2022). The project was a collaboration between a university and a municipality in central Sweden, with the purpose to enhance the quality of preschools. The project aimed to strengthen principals' ability to work systematically with quality development. The context for this project provided opportunities to collect data specifically related to the understanding, perception and application of long-term thinking in their work as heads of schools.

Findings reported in this article are based on a grounded theory methodology (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to examine how preschool leaders in a municipality in Sweden describe and define the concept of long-term thinking, and how they apply it in their specific role in working with quality development. The method was found suitable since the studied phenomenon belongs in a social and complex context in which relations and boundaries are often unclear. Moreover, existing theories may not be sufficient to explain the phenomenon based on the uniqueness of the context (Patton, 2002). The method is also suitable since the studied phenomenon takes place during a transformation based on new curriculum directives at the national level.

Twenty-one principals and the assistant superintendent for early-childhood education in the municipality participated. The school leaders were responsible for 49 preschools, including approximately 600 co-workers and 3,000 children. The preschools were under the auspices of the municipality and guided by the Swedish national curriculum. The national curriculum serves as a policy framework that is translated into operational activities by school leaders at the municipal level.

The level of leadership experience among the respondents in this study varied from two to three years to over 20 years. Not all of the respondents had participated in the national principal training programme at the time of this study. The majority of respondents were female, and all were responsible for a minimum of three schools located in different parts of the municipality. As a group, the respondents met regularly in a leadership capacity to discuss strategic plans that would be operationalised at the school level.

Data collection
Data were collected through oral and written interviews with school leaders at different levels in the municipality. The interviews aimed to examine how school leaders define and describe long-term thinking as a concept and in practice. Written interviews were conducted with the principals of the preschools using the project's written portfolio. The portfolio was an individual document in which the principals wrote reflections on different subjects in response to probing questions. The portfolio related to this study on long-term thinking included three prompts: (1) Describe what long-term thinking means to you as a principal, (2) Describe the conditions for you to work with long-term thinking and (3) Reflect on how you work with long-term thinking.

The principals were informed in advance that their responses would be included in a research study of long-term thinking, in addition to the project on quality. Respondents were given the option to decline to participate and were guaranteed anonymity. In total, 11 of the 21 principals responded to the questions on long-term thinking. One interview was conducted orally with the assistant superintendent of the pre-school leaders, since they were not part of the project's portfolio process. The interview was conducted and recorded using the digital platform Microsoft Teams and transcribed verbatim. The recording was then shared with the respondent who validated and approved the use of content.

Data analysis
Data from the interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) that included open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The data were analysed by two researchers following the three levels of coding in grounded theory in the open coding phase. Each researcher highlighted sentences and words that they considered relevant to the purpose of the study. The words and sentences were then sorted into categories (open coding). During the axial coding phase, the two researchers met to discuss the material at an overall level, identifying patterns that led to new categories for use in a new round of analysis (axial coding). In the final phases, results from the axial coding were first combined by one of the researchers and then verified by the second researcher. Any discrepancies between the two researchers' findings were further analysed by revisiting the original data based on a constant comparative approach until the data were fully saturated for the final phase of selective coding.

Ethical considerations
The name of the municipality is not given in this paper, but there is an awareness of the fact that it may be possible to identify the municipality since the project is based on publicly accessible information. All participants were informed at the beginning of the project that data would be collected and the researchers continuously made the respondents aware when specific data were being collected. The respondents have also been informed that data will be presented anonymously. The respondents could choose not to participate and were informed that they could withdraw their consent within a given number of months of the data being collected. None of the respondents withdrew their consent, however, and all collected data were used.

Results

The qualitative data sought to gain insights into how school leaders define and describe long-term thinking as a concept and in practice in their daily work in schools. Findings from the definitions of "long-term thinking" are presented, followed by a deeper exploration and analysis of how school leaders described their work with long-term thinking based on grounded theory. In keeping with the grounded theory analysis, aspects of defining "long-term thinking" can also be found in the respondents' descriptions of its use in practice.

Definitions of "long-term thinking"

Respondents' definitions of "long-term thinking" varied in terms of both scope and focus. Some defined it in relation to activities, goals and processes, for example:

> . . . long-term thinking is what we started with the child surveys we carry out, which then led to work that links together everything from children, educators, management, administration, committee.

This definition indicates a perspective of long-term thinking as more than a value; it is an approach to planning that integrates actions and activities with stakeholder needs and goals. This perspective was shared by others respondents, for example:

> . . . long-term thinking is about foresight and good planning ahead with realistic goals, both short-term goals and long-term goals. But it is also about holding on and persevering, i.e. sustainability.

In this description, we can identify similar elements related to the interdependence of goals and planning, as well as the importance of a common element that serves as a connector and anchor. Similarly, another respondent shared:

> For me, the long-term perspective is about being able to keep "a common thread" through the business plan, child health meetings, equal treatment work, employee interviews. A clarity that indicates our direction; I think I see our vision as enjoyable, secure, rich in learning and the like. It is important for both children and employees.

The breadth and scope of these descriptions of long-term thinking indicate a systems orientation to leadership, one in which goals serve as a focal point and common ground to anchor activities.

Other respondents defined long-term thinking in terms of time and perseverance, for example, "To work with something for a long time. To hold on and persevere." Another respondent stated:

> For me, the long-term perspective is that what we work on must take time, that it will not just be quick happenings, keep going. That everyone has the opportunity to process what we are to work with.

For these respondents, long-term thinking involved allowing time for things to happen and developing a sense of buy-in and participation. This was articulated more clearly by a respondent who stated:

> . . . sometimes I can share information, give people time to think, then we meet and talk about it and then we give more time for reflection. After a while, the staff begin to share ideas for development. This is important for them to have a sense of buy-in.

Describing long-term thinking in practice

Through a deeper analysis, a fragmented picture of long-term thinking as a leadership strategy emerged. In the analysis, two main categorical themes of long-term thinking were identified: Reactive and Proactive, as illustrated in Figure 1. Additionally, a third theme was identified that spanned both of the main themes, yet with different intentions. This is referred to as the mediating variable: "Hold on and Preserve."

Grounded theory categories to explore the phenomenon of long-term thinking as a management strategy in preschools
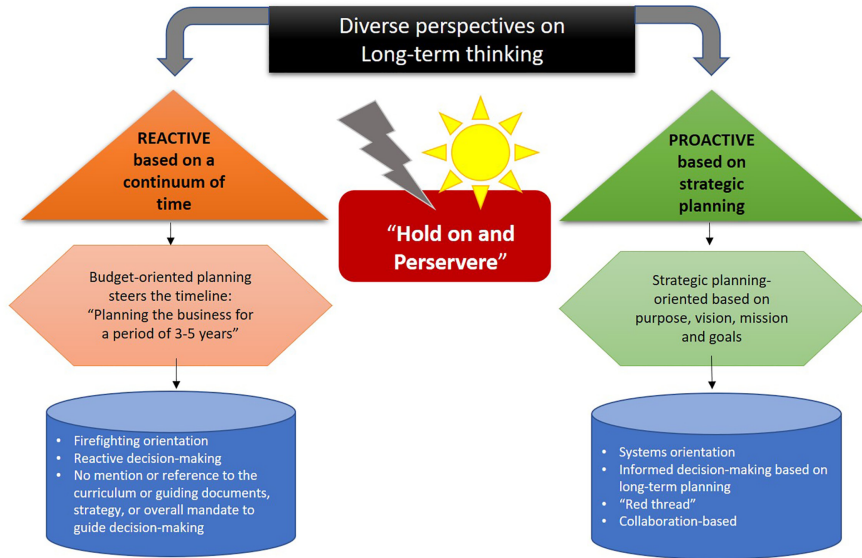
Source(s): Figure by author

As depicted in Figure 1, long-term thinking was described by some in terms of reactive leadership, which was strongly characterised by time being the defining variable. Behaviour and processes in this category included a firefighting orientation to development, reactive decision-making and an absence of references to steering or policy documents. The proactive application of long-term thinking contained elements of a systems orientation to leading and development. Decision-making was based on the information outlined in steering and policy documents and connected to the broader goals and vision they set out. Strategic planning was articulated as both an approach and process that drove quality improvements.

The mediating category, "Hold on and preserve," was identified in almost all the interview responses, albeit with different meanings and intentions. Some respondents used the phrase to indicate a characteristic of the Reactive approach to long-term thinking, while others used it to characterise the spirit of the Proactive perspective. In Figure 1, two different symbols are used to reflect this difference in purpose. The lightning bolt symbol indicates a sense of "waiting to exhale," and the sun indicates a sense of strength to go the extra mile. Using Figure 1 as a guide, the findings are presented based on the Reactive perspective, followed by the Proactive perspective and then provide an examination of the fragmented nature of the responses as illustrated by the phases "Hold on and persevere."

Reactive: things take time
The left side of Figure 1 illustrates perspectives of long-term thinking associated with the more Reactive view. Definitions offered in this category reflect a focus on the amount of time that is given to an activity or event within an organisation as a way to describe long-term thinking. For example, one leader described long-term thinking as "when there are conditions in the organisation that let things take time" and when there is "no rush to get things finished

quickly." One of the strengths of this perspective, highlighted by several respondents, was the opportunity for staff to have time to engage. As one school leader stated:

> . . . sometimes I can share information, give people time to think, then we meet and talk about it, and then we give more time for reflection. After a while staff begin to share ideas for development. This is important for them to have a sense of buy-in.

This perspective on long-term thinking reflects the importance of working on a single issue or subject over a long period of time. It does not reflect any strategic element of long-term thinking, suggesting that there is perhaps an important distinction to be made between long-term thinking as a strategy and allowing time for things to happen.

Reactive: long-term planning is steered by budget

Several respondents indicated a strong focus on budget planning as a part of long-term thinking and goal setting. For example, one respondent stated:

> I would say that this means that in planning, one takes aim far into the future. And far, I would say, is at least three, three to five years.

Others highlighted the three-to-five-year time frame as a component of long-term thinking. For example, "we usually say that change takes time, at least three years, so we have to hope that we can get that kind of time." However, these respondents did not give an indication that planning was based on a long-term strategic plan in relation to the curriculum goals or national policy documents, rather their planning was determined by an economic framework within which they needed to identify costs over a longer period of time.

Reactive: we are firefighters

When describing the conditions that exist for school leaders in working with long-term strategies, several indicated that they were less than optimal, straining their ability to lead with a long-term strategic orientation. For example, one respondent shared that, "there are too many questions on the agenda for us to work with a long-term strategy". Others expressed that the mission and goals for school leaders were unclear, and that there were no clear definitions of expressions used.

Among these same respondents, no evidence in their responses indicated that they worked with strategic planning or goal setting. They did indicate tendencies toward being frustrated with their work situation, however, and did not perceive it to be sustainable. For example, one respondent expressed that "there are no anchor points in our work or short- or long-term goals." Another respondent shared:

> . . . it is getting harder to work with long-term strategies that I have developed as a leader because we are steered by directives from the central administration about what we should work with, which takes all our working time, and then some.

According to another respondent, the number of directives even influences teachers in preschool, increasing stress at all levels.

When examining what lies beneath the responses in the Reactive category more closely, the evidence became clear that the concept is complex, interactive and purposeful. Some respondents indicated, for example, that long-term thinking requires a common anchor against which to set goals, both short- and long term. This response suggests a reflective capacity to understand not only what long-term thinking is, but also that it is more than just time. Another respondent wrote that "long-term thinking is created through delegation, professional knowledge, and an interest in innovation and development". This response indicates a perspective that long-term thinking also requires an inner drive toward a greater purpose and that it is not merely about time.

Proactive: the red thread connects us to where we are going
The categories on the right side of Figure 1 indicate that some respondents understand and apply long-term thinking as a leadership strategy. Those who reflected this perspective indicated a different orientation to leadership, one that is proactive, strategic, planning oriented, applied within a systems perspective and guided by values, vision and goals.

Descriptions of applying long-term thinking included the importance of connecting the vision, strategy and goals. For example, as one respondent stated, "long-term thinking means that we have an articulated goal far in the distance that drives our work forward." Others described working with long-term thinking as a way to maintain "the red thread" connecting the work of the organisation to a common goal and vision, for example:

> . . . it is important to connect the work plans with the quality management work, with the parent-teacher meetings, with our work with equality and equity and with the staff.

In some cases, this was further explained by respondents who indicated that as a leader it is their responsibility to have knowledge of different activities within the organisation and explain them to employees in a way that is easy to understand.

Proactive: strategic planning oriented
The descriptions of long-term thinking also included a focus on processes that were connected to goals and shared decision-making and carried out in collaboration through teams and shared dialogue. This is reflected in the following quote by a respondent and was echoed by others:

> Working long term is about having an approach where we can work in a process-oriented way toward our goals over time. Where I, as principal, make reasonable demands on my co-workers so that it becomes manageable and doable. The processes I use to ensure that we are on the right path include staff development meetings, evening meetings, workplace meetings and competence development days on which we reflect and analyse together what we are doing and establish focus, goals, tempo and direction for our work.

Proactive: our main goal is a long-term one—to prepare the future generation
Among some of the respondents, the presence of a greater mandate to prepare young people for life in a society that lies at the heart of what it means to work from a long-term perspective could be identified. To quote one respondent:

> I often remind my staff that it is for the benefit of our children that we do what we do. I always think that the decisions we make need to be in the best interest of the children, otherwise it's not worth it.

This same respondent also shared that they are guided by customer orientation and that for them "children are our customers." Another respondent shared this same perspective and indicated the multiple layers of working from a long-term perspective, culminating in the greater mandate of developing children for society.

Among several of the respondents, the presence of systems thinking was also identified. One person shared that, "Long-term thinking is about having the ability to identify and integrate short-term foci in a bigger, more long-term perspective, and thereby give them meaning". A systems perspective was also reflected in comments about the interdependency between school and society: "As educators we have a responsibility to take care of children so that their parent can work in society".

Mediating variable: hold on and persevere
In Figure 1, a third categorical element is included to suggest that the different perspectives on long-term thinking are perhaps best described as fragmented. One expression

that dominated the majority of responses was the Swedish phrase, "Hold on and persevere: go the distance". It was difficult to interpret this expression since it was often interwoven with descriptions that highlighted a culture of firefighting. For others, it was used as a way to express the importance of engaging staff in long-term planning. For others, it appeared to reflect an element of needing to muster the strength to withstand time. Some of the comments communicated a sense of potentially being overwhelmed by the myriad of activities that were dictated by mandates outside their control.

Other respondents used the expression "hold on and persevere" to frame the importance of engaging workers in decision-making, connecting different activities to create a red thread and sense of alignment toward a common direction, and building a sense of a common vision and goals. One respondent wrote that "long-term thinking is created by delegating to staff; through their engagement, tolerance and persistence is developed." Several respondents who expressed a more proactive use and understanding of the term "long-term thinking" reinforced this view of valuing co-worker engagement.

Analysis and discussion

Exploring the application of long-term thinking in settings other than that of traditional business was the focus of this article, leading to the development of new understandings concerning how to link theory to practice. Studying long-term thinking in schools using a grounded theory study, provides new insights into the complexities of understanding and applying long-term thinking as a management strategy to support sustainable quality development. In this discussion, we point to new insights as well as continued challenges.

The results from this study indicate a lack of consensus among school leaders[1] about what long-term thinking is, how it is defined and how it is used as a strategic tool and process to support sustainable quality development. Only a few of the leaders in this study indicated an awareness of the relationship between long-term thinking and a broader view of quality, including an expanded view on customers and decision making as suggested in Deleryd and Fundin (2020) and van Kemenade and Hardjono (2019). This has implications for meeting the UN sustainability goals that are grounded in a need to think and plan for the long term (United Nations, 2017). If leaders are not clear about what is meant by long-term thinking, then applying it as a strategic management goal will be challenging. Further, achieving stability in the community and delivering value to customers (Jonker, 2000) may be compromised.

Categorising long-term thinking as both a reactive and proactive strategy reflects a fragmented view in the organisation. This duality in the culture is important to understanding how to create the conditions for the successful use of long-term thinking as a management strategy in order to achieve sustainable quality development. The word "fragmented" is chosen as opposed to "divided" as a descriptor since the responses did not indicate that leaders had a strong working definition of the term. This can be seen in relation to Martin's (1992) theory of organisational work culture, in which fragmented cultures can emerge from a lack of clarity over purpose, process and routines and how these relate to a vision.

This fragmented view was further identified by a lack of clarity about internal processes and systems to support the broader goals and vision. While evidence of long-term thinking as a concept appeared to be grounded in systematic processes including shared decision-making, goal and vision orientation, as well as a value basis, the picture remained incomplete. The culture of the organisation, as characterised by a firefighting reactive work environment, limited the degree to which long-term thinking served as a leadership strategy. This is counter to what Snyder et al. (2008) argues is necessary for leaders in education to integrate short-term decisions with long-term thinking.

Furthermore, the processes for budget planning and resource allocation did not appear to be grounded in the broader goals and vision of the school. This finding is shared by other

studies in which a lack of systems orientation and connection between budget, planning and culture were also identified (Dale *et al.*, 1997; Plenert, 1996). Long-term thinking in this study was described within a reactive organisational culture, characterised by annual rather than long-term budget planning. Some leaders indicated a continual need to address changes in policy directives, which typically came without any change in resources, particularly time. It is evident that two key elements for managing long-term planning are missing from the school context: budget and resources. In this sense, budgets become an end in themselves instead of a means to achieve organisational goals. This suggests that part of the gap between theory and practice lies in the connection between budget planning and the goals and vision of an organisation, a finding that is in line with previous research from other business sectors described in, for instance, Barnett *et al.* (2017) and Fusso (2013).

The fragmented picture of long-term thinking found in the Reactive and Proactive descriptors indicates that the case site lacks a systems orientation necessary for sustainable quality development in schools. This finding is in line with Arnheiter and Greenland (2008), who found that organisational systems that support short-term thinking undermine the organisations' viability. There was little evidence of comprehensive communication about the long-term vision, frameworks and interpretations of directives and research in relation to the local context, factors that Norqvist and Ärlestig (2021) identify as necessary in school organisations.

Based on Schein's (2004) model, values identified as underlying assumptions are often silent, whereas espoused values are visible and articulated within the organisation's culture. Using Schein's (2004) model of organisational culture, it is suggested that long-term thinking, as a concept, can be described as both an anchor and a steering mechanism, which are found at different levels of the organisation's culture. According to Schein's model, the underlying assumptions are a source of values within an organisation that is often silent. They shape beliefs and perceptions but are not typically articulated. As an anchor, long-term thinking was described by almost all respondents as a behaviour of "hold on and persevere". There were also comments about the importance of leaders creating conditions for dialogue and reflection in order to support long-term thinking. While the respondents did not connect the term "long-term thinking", it was clear from their comments that a basic underlying assumption and espoused value of long-term thinking was creating a culture of participation.

Despite the clearly articulated mandate for educators to engage in long-term thinking and sustainable quality development, the political steering mechanisms in the Swedish pre-schools created continuous tension for leaders in this research case to balance short-term directives with long-term goals. The results indicated a lack of common systems and structures to support the school leaders in long-term thinking in their daily work. School leaders are essential to establishing the conditions for quality in education, and in the end that means children's academic outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Snyder *et al.*, 2008).

The lack of systems and structures to support long-term thinking may be due to several factors. The fragmented view of long-term thinking and how is it applied in the case site reinforces such a lack of understanding. Had the concept and its application been clear, evidence would have been more visible to link the quality practices of long-term planning with values, goals and the needs of children and society, both now and in the future. This finding is not new, however; Snyder *et al.* (2008) reflects on a continued need to establish systems thinking approach in education. Similarly, other studies in business point to a similar need (Fusso, 2013; Mårtensson *et al.*, 2019; Snyder *et al.*, 2018).

Overall, this study supports evidence of a gap between the theory and practice of long-term thinking, reinforcing the findings from previous research (Barnett *et al.*, 2017; Dale *et al.*, 1997). The choice to examine long-term thinking in a non-business context provides further evidence that applying long-term thinking in organisations to support sustainable quality development requires greater awareness of a systems perspective within organisations.

A shift from short-term planning and acting to long-term thinking among school leaders is required (Lowe Steffen *et al.*, 2019), but it will take time. This study also identified a culture of firefighting that reduced opportunities for developing a culture that allows time for continuous improvement. This highlights perhaps one of the main challenges for leaders today, no matter the context—namely, balancing short-term and long-term thinking.

Conclusion

In this study, the concept of long-term thinking and its application in the context of education has been explored. The focus on education provided a non-business context in which to potentially gain new insights into how long-term thinking can be used as a management strategy to support sustainable quality development. Long-term thinking has been identified as a necessary function and strategy for all types of organisations to achieve sustainable development. Hence, this paper is intended for readers in all industries, especially those leading in complex organisations.

The data from this study show a snapshot of the status of a school organisation at the time the data were collected. The suggestion based on the findings is that long-term thinking as a management strategy is twofold. First, it can be described as an anchor, and second a steering mechanism. In case context of this study, long-term thinking served as an anchor to prepare children and youth with the skills for living and working in a future society. As a steering mechanism, long-term thinking helped to guide the development of concrete processes, methods and behaviours toward this future vision. The anchor function of long-term thinking creates a stable force in an organisation whereas the steering mechanisms enable leaders to be responsive to changing conditions. Knowing how to steer the organisation over time is supported by the stability of the organisational anchors.

To bridge the gap between the theory of long-term thinking and its application as a management strategy in practice, this study illustrates the importance for organisations to develop support systems and structures at all levels in the organisation that connect their vision and goals with the values and needs of their customers. The fragmented view reflected by school leaders in this study is perhaps understandable given the complex nature of educational systems today. The reality is that the practice of leadership in complex systems requires a balance between short-term goals, which are often reactive and long-term planning, which is proactive. Applying long-term thinking as a management strategy may require more from leaders to develop language and behaviours to integrate short-term and long-term thinking. In complex systems such as education, it is not enough for a policy document to articulate sustainable development and quality as goals. Leaders need to give meaning to these concepts in practice and place them within a broader plan of action based on long-term thinking.

Note

1. School leaders is used as concept since the study includes the levels of both principal and assistant superintendent.

References

Aras, G. and Crowther, D. (2010), "Sustaining business excellence", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 21 No. 5, pp. 565-576, doi: 10.1080/14783363.2010.481527.

Arnheiter, E.D. and Greenland, J.E. (2008), "Looking for root cause: a comparative analysis", *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 18-30, doi: 10.1108/09544780810842875.

Barnett, T., Bowes, M.J., White, J. and Zaib, A. (2017), "Long-term thinking in organizations", *SAGE Publications*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 109-128.

Chirico, J.M. and Nystrom, A.M. (2019), "The living company: a systems approach", in Lowe Steffen, S., Rezmovitz, J., Trevenna, S. and Rappaport, S. (Eds), *Evolving Leadership for Collective Wellbeing*, Emerald Publishing, United Kingdom, pp. 221-235.

Cole, R.E. (2003), "From continuous improvement to continuous innovation", in Conti, T., Kondo, Y. and Watson, G. (Eds), *Quality into the 21st Century- Perspectives on Quality, Competitiveness & Sustained Performance*, ASQ: A Quality Press, Milwaukee, pp. 119-134.

Corbin, J.M. and Strauss, A. (1990), "Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria", *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 3-21, doi: 10.1007/BF00988593.

Dahlgaard, J.J. and Park Dahlgaard, S.M. (1999), "Integrating business excellence and innovation management: developing a culture for innovation, creativity and learning", *Total Quality Manamgement*, Vol. 10 Nos 4-5, pp. 465-472.

Dahlgaard, J.J. and Park Dahlgaard, S.M. (2006), "Lean production, six sigma quality, TQM and company culture", *The TQM Magazine*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 263-281.

Dale, B.G., Boaden, R.J., Wilcox, M. and Mcquater, R.E. (1997), "Total quality management sustaining audit tool: description and use", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 8 No. 6, pp. 395-408.

Deleryd, M. and Fundin, A. (2020), "Towards societal satisfaction in a fifth generation of quality – the sustainability model", *Total Quality Management and Business Excellence*. doi: 10.1080/14783363.2020.1864214.

Deming, E.W. (1986), *Out of the Crisis*, MIT, Center for Advanced Educational Services, Cambridge, MA.

Fundin, A., Backström, T. and Johansson, P.E. (2021), "Exploring the emergent quality management paradigm", *Total Quality Management and Business Excellence*, Vol. 32 Nos 5-6, pp. 476-488, doi: 10.1080/14783363.2019.1591946.

Fusso, N. (2013), "A systems thinking review for solving short-termism", *Management Research Review*, Vol. 36 No. 8, pp. 805-822.

Håkansson, J. (2016), "Organising and leading systematic quality work in the preschool – preschool managers' perspectives", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 292-310.

Halinen, I. (2017), "The conceptualization of competencies related to sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles", in *UNESCO: International Bureau of Education Series, Current and Critical Issues in Curriculum, Learning and Assessment*, No. 8.

Hallinger, P. (2011), "Leadership for learning: lessons from 40 years of empirical research", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 49 No. 2, pp. 125-142.

Hawkins, M. and James, C. (2018), "Developing a perspective on schools as complex, evolving, loosely linking systems", *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 46 No. 5, pp. 729-748.

Ingelsson, P. and Mårtensson, A. (2014), "Measuring the importance and practices of Lean values", *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 15, pp. 463-474.

Ingelsson, P., Bäckström, I., Mårtensson, A. and Snyder, K. (2022), "Developing quality in preschools – collecting baseline data through a strength based approach", in Silva Gomes, J.F. and Meguid, S.A. (Eds), *Proceedings M2D2022 - 9th International Conference on Mechanics and Materials in Design*, Funchal/Portugal, 26-30 June 2022, pp. 927-934.

Jonker, J. (2000), "Organizations as responsible contributors to society: linking quality, sustainability and accountability", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 11 Nos 4-6, pp. 741-746.

Lee, R.G. and Dale, B.G. (1998), "Policy deployment: an examination of the theory", *International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management*, Vol. 15 No. 5, pp. 520-540.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2020), "Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 5-22, doi: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077.

Lowe Steffen, S., Rezmovitz, J., Trevenna, S. and Rappaport, S. (2019), *Evolving Leadership for Collective Wellbeing*, Emerald Publishing, United Kingdom.

Mårtensson, A., Snyder, K. and Ingelsson, P. (2019), "Interlinking lean and sustainability: how ready are leaders?", *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 136-149.

Martin, J. (1992), *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Mirvis, P., Googins, B. and Kinnicutt, S. (2010), "Vision, mission, values: guideposts to sustainability", *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 316-324.

Nehring, J. and O'Brien, E. (2012), "Strong agents and weak systems: university support for school level improvement", *Journal of Educational Change*, Vol. 13, pp. 449-485.

Norqvist, L. and Ärlestig, H. (2021), "Systems thinking in school organizations – perspectives from various leadership levels", *Systems Thinking in School Organizations*, Vol. 59 No. 1, pp. 77-93.

Patton, M.Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed., SAGE Publications, United States of America, Thousand Oaks.

Pinedo, V. (2004), *Tsunami: Building Organizations Capable of Prospering in Tidal Waves*, iUniverse, United States of America.

Plenert, G. (1996), "Manufacturing management in a borderless organisation", *Intenational Journal Advanced Manufacturing Technology*, Vol. 12, pp. 1-4, doi: 10.1007/BF01178956.

Salegna, G. and Farzaneh, F. (1996), "An integrative approach for selecting a TQM/BPR implementation plan", *International Journal of Quality Science*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 6-23.

Schein, E. (2004), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Senge, P. and Sterman, J. (1991), "Systems thinking and organizational learning: acting locally and thinking globally in the organization of the future", *European Journal of Operational Research*, Vol. 59, pp. 137-150.

Siva, V., Gremyr, I., Bergquist, B., Garvare, R., Zobel, T. and Isaksson, R. (2016), "The support of Quality Management to sustainable development: a literature review", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 138 Part 2, pp.148-157, doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.01.020.

Skolverket (2019), "Curriculum for the preschool, SKOLFS 2018", available at: https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/styrdokument/2019/curriculum-for-the-preschool-lpfo-18?id=4049 (accessed 5 May 2021).

Snyder, K.M. (1997), *A Construct Validation and Reliability Estimation of the Education Quality Benchmark System*, Bell and Howell Company, Diss. Ann Arbor, 1997 (UMI Dissertation Series).

Snyder, K.M. (2014), "Concept maps, voice thread, and visual images: helping educators spawn divergent thinking and dialogic learning", in Schaletzsky, L. and Beaudry, J. (Eds), *Cases on Teaching Critical Thinking through Visual Representation Strategies*, IGI Global, Hershey, PA.

Snyder, K. (2015), "Engaged leaders develop schools as quality organisations", *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, Vol. 7 Nos 2-3, pp. 217-229, doi: 10.1108/IJQSS-03-2015-0027.

Snyder, K.J. (2019), "Preparing globally competent students: the K-12 Challenge", in James, W.B. and Cobangulu, C. (Eds), *Advances in Global Education and Research*, USF M3 Publishing, Vol. 3, pp. 136-149, doi: 10.5038/9781732127548.

Snyder, K.J. and Snyder, K.M. (2021), "Building sustainable systems for schooling in turbulent times: big ideas from the sciences", in Glanz, J. (Ed.), *Crisis and Pandemic Leadership: Implications for meeting the needs of students, teachers and parents*, Rowman and Littlefield, United Kingdom.

Snyder, K.J., Acker-Hocevar, M. and Snyder, K.M. (2008), *Living on the Edge of Chaos: Leading Schools into the Global Age*, 2nd ed., ASQ, WI, Milwaukee.

Snyder, K., Hedlund, C., Ingelsson, P. and Bäckström, I. (2017), "Storytelling : a co-creative process to support value-based leadership", *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, Vol. 9 Nos 3-4, pp. 484-497.

Snyder, K., Ingelsson, P. and Bäckström, I. (2018), "Using design thinking to support value-based leadership for sustainable quality development", *Business Process Management Journal*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 1289-1301, doi: 10.1108/BPMJ-02-2018-0045.

United Nations (2017), "Resolution adopted by the general assembly on 20 December 2017", General Assembly (Ed.), 72/222, pp. 1-5, available at: https://undocs.org/A/72/420/Add.7 (accessed 3 March 2021).

van Kemenade, E. and Hardjono, T.W. (2019), "Twenty-first century total quality management: the emergence paradigm", *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 150-166, doi: 10.1108/TQM-04-2018-0045.

Corresponding author
Anna Mårtensson can be contacted at: anna.martensson@miun.se