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Interpretations of the imperative to innovate in the frontline of the public sector

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Abstract

This study contributes to the literature on public innovation by investigating how the imperative to innovate is interpreted and enacted on the frontlines. By constructing a case based on interviews with 20 first-line managers in the childcare sector, this study examines how these frontline managers interpret the innovation imperative and how they enact it by efforts to engage employees in the translation of innovation into practice. Three methods to engage staff in translating innovation into practice are identified: interpretation and adaptation of new ideas; experimentation in practice; and collegial reflection processes. The study draws on translation theory to understand how frontline organizations utilize innovation activities during everyday operations in order to integrate new ideas into existing practices. This is important for advancing our knowledge about the implications of the normative framing of innovation in public service organizations.

Keywords

everyday innovation, public service innovation, innovation imperative, translation theory, Scandinavian institutionalism

Introduction

Since the 1980s, policy makers have argued that the public sector should be innovative. Initially, this inclination was spawned by a New Public Management belief that the public sector could increase efficiency and reduce costs if it adopted management principles from the private sector. Today, the agenda for public innovation is about increasing public value on multiple bottom lines, including the quality of public service and democratic values such as citizen involvement (Hartley 2005). In public policy, ‘innovation’ holds positive connotations and the term has been found to be used almost synonymously with ‘improvement’ (Osborne & Brown 2011). Consequently, an imperative to innovate has emerged in the public sector, which ethically obliges public sector managers to seek innovative solutions to the problems they face (Jordan 2014). In her conceptual paper, Jordan (2014, p. 86) defines the innovation imperative as ‘the implicit or explicit belief that public servants must engage in innovation or entrepreneurial activity to be considered as doing good’. However, studies have found that the innovation imperative may be interpreted quite differently at various

levels of government (Palm et al. 2015) and Jordan (2014) argues that we have yet to learn how the normative concept of innovation is perceived on the frontlines.

In the private sector, the innovation imperative is dramatically headlined by the proverb ‘Innovate or Die’, and while public organizations are usually not threatened by bankruptcy, the innovation imperative imposes an equally powerful urgency on the public sector, as nearly any wicked problem of today is framed as an innovation problem (Pfothenhauer et al. 2019). The framing of policy problems as innovation problems implies that solutions require innovation competences and that public managers must ask themselves if their organizations are sufficiently geared toward innovation. As innovation is promoted at all levels of government (Borins 2001), those who study the top levels argue that we need missions and powerful alliances (Mazzucato 2017; Sørensen & Torfing 2019), whereas those who study the frontlines claim that big problems call for (many) small solutions (Fuglsang & Sørensen 2011; Lippke & Wegener 2014; Pedersen 2020). To learn how the innovation imperative permeates not only policy papers and government strategies, but also the daily management of public organizations, this study turns its focus to the frontline of public services and poses the research question *How do frontline managers interpret and enact the innovation imperative?*

In order to answer this question, a case study is constructed consisting of data compiled through interviews with frontline managers in the childcare sector across 20 Danish local governments. Frontline managers in public service organizations typically share the same educational background as the staff and hold titles such as ‘first-line manager’, ‘team manager’ or ‘section leader’. They are an integral part of operations and some frontline managers spend up to a third of their time ‘on the floor’. Their role is important because they are on the one hand responsible for the quality of service and wellbeing of the staff in their organization, and on the other hand subject to the wider municipal organization, administration, and policy. In the public hierarchy, they are placed below the middle managers and serve as first line supervisors to the staff (Wooldridge et al. 2008). Unlike the roles of, for example, middle managers and top managers, the role of frontline managers tends to be overlooked in innovation research, because analysts that apply a top-down perspective include them in the studied group of professionals, whereas those that apply a bottom-up or ‘street-level’ perspective view them as part of the management (Hupe & Keiser 2019).

The study utilizes the concept of translation as it has developed in Scandinavian institutionalism (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008; Waldorff 2013). A central argument brought forth by these scholars is that adopting actors negotiate the meaning of innovations and edit new ideas to make them fit in the new organizational context. Thereby innovations are re-invented when they are integrated into the practices of a new organization. The concept of translation brings valuable insights to the micro-dynamics of public innovation, by illuminating how ideas are brought into organizations and are transformed from abstract concepts into everyday practices. A contribution to this body of research is made by theorizing about how frontline managers work to engage their staff in translation processes by constructing opportunities for reflection, experimentation, and collegial debates.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the concept of the innovation imperative in the public sector is described as well as what innovation activities on the public frontlines may consist of. Secondly, the concept of translation is outlined to explain how innovation is carried out in practice. Thirdly, the case and methodology of the study are described. Fourthly, an analysis of the frontline managers’ interpretation of the innovation imperative in public childcare is conducted, followed by an analysis of how they work to stimulate the

translation of ideas into daily practice. Finally, the implications of everyday innovation and translation theory are discussed, and conclusions drawn.

The imperative to innovate on the frontlines

The following section conveys how the innovation imperative is understood in this study, and proceeds to outline the state of the art of studies focusing on innovation in the context of everyday operations in public service organizations. Innovation has been called a ‘magic concept’ with positive connotations (Pollitt & Hupe 2011) that is usually used to describe an improvement made within the organization (Osborne & Brown 2011). Quantitative studies measure very high levels of innovation activity in both public and the private organizations (Bugge et al. 2011), which, if nothing else, suggests that organizations have certainly learned to describe their efforts to improve performance as innovation. In classic economic theory, ‘innovation’ was an analytical category primarily used to describe product inventions and financial success, but now, in a public sector context, ‘innovation’ has become a framing tool which is used to position all types of policy issues (Pfothenhauer et al. 2019). In a conceptual paper, Jordan (2014, p. 75) argues that the public sector is influenced by an innovation imperative, which conveys an ethical obligation for public organizations to innovate in order to counter the challenges they may face. She explains how the imperative implies that ‘innovation’ is considered a path towards doing good, whereas anything impeding innovation is branded conservative, fearful, or even evil. However, while framing activities as innovation may have the mobilizing effect of a magic concept, there is a risk that when problems are framed as innovation problems, other, more appropriate, framings are prevented. Accordingly, the inner logic of the innovation imperative assumes that if societies are unable to solve their grand challenges, it is because of a lack of innovation (Pfothenhauer et al. 2019). Jordan calls for empirical studies of how this imperative is perceived by public managers engaged in tangible innovation activities on the frontlines, which this study proceeds to provide.

It is generally accepted that an innovation is something that is not necessarily new to the world, but is new to the adopting organization (Rogers 2003). It has been 20 years since Borins (2001) found that innovation takes place at all levels of the public sector. Scholars who study innovation on the frontline apply related terms, accentuating different aspects of the phenomenon. For instance, *bricolage* refers to ad hoc innovation where staff members combine whatever resources they find available to them in new ways to solve a problem they face (Fuglsang & Sørensen 2011). *Employee-driven innovation* focuses on the agency of individual employees to transcend their formal job description and independently solve issues they encounter (Wihlman et al. 2015). Finally, *everyday innovation* emphasizes the interpretation of local problems in the context of everyday routines (Pedersen 2020). Common in these perspectives is an acknowledgement of small, gradual, but purposeful changes introduced to the core services of public service professions.

Lippke and Wegener (2014) argue that as the frontlines constitute the operations of the public sector, innovation activities therefore must balance maintaining stability and pushing the boundaries of existing professional norms and practices. These innovation processes often consist of numerous micro-actions deeply embedded in daily operations, intended to enhance the quality of the service delivered (Thøgersen 2022). Therefore, individual innovation activities may seem almost invisible to outside observers, but nonetheless, changes made to the practices of professional service providers have a direct impact on the services granted the citizens served (Lippke & Wegener 2014). The ambition to improve everyday practices by introducing new ideas and innovations is in essence a matter of integrating the

new with the old, which is basically the mechanism unveiled by the concept of translation (Pedersen 2016), which will be presented in the following section.

Summing up, the innovation imperative means that public managers are morally obligated to pursue innovation when faced with societal challenges. Everyday innovation targets the daily practice of professionals and implies that many small actions of improvement combined can have immense results (Kickert & van der Meer 2011; Wihlman et al. 2015). In the following section, the concept of translation will be introduced to explain how innovative ideas are pulled into organizations, and how they are transformed into practice.

Translation of Everyday Innovation

The concept of translation applied in this study has developed within Scandinavian institutionalism and conveys the dynamics at work when ideas travel into organizations, and when they materialize into practice (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996). The concept of translation is suitable for studies of everyday innovation, because both rely heavily on sensemaking (Weick 1995) to remain sensitive to organizational context while explaining the central role of adopters. Instead of focusing on the intentions of inventors, policy makers or other senders of ideas, analyses of translation processes rest on examinations of the interpretation and negotiations among those actors who are influenced by the problems and solutions addressed by an innovation or idea (Waldorff 2013).

Two functions of translation are particularly relevant to this study. The first has to do with the travel of ideas. Ideas tend to travel by trodden paths (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008), which means that actors often seek the same sources of inspiration and thus that the same ideas autonomously appear in numerous organizations at roughly the same time (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). However, a central point in translation theory is that ideas never remain the same when they are translated from one organizational context to another. They are 'edited', which means that some parts are emphasized, while others are moderated or omitted (Sahlin-Andersson 1996). 'To set something in a new place is to construct it anew', Czarniawska and Sevón famously wrote (2005, p. 8). So even though an innovation or an idea may carry the same label, when it is spreading across organizations, it will not be identical in the way it is interpreted and operationalized. The editing of innovation takes place, when actors interpret, negotiate and enact the meaning of it (Sahlin-Andersson 1996; Waldorff 2013), and thereby gradually transform abstract, novel ideas, into local, shared taken-for-granted perceptions.

The second important function of translation has to do with the materialization of ideas into practice. This aspect links thinking and doing, and again, proves how well-matched translation theory and everyday innovation are. Enactments not only include verbal articulation in negotiations, but also the physical manifestation of professional practice. In the case of childcare, for instance, if an adult kneels to level the height difference between a child and the adult, this can be interpreted as a symbolic action to level out the power balance in a conversation. Likewise, the opposite, to remain standing while speaking, may be interpreted as an enforcement of authority. These practices reflect a pedagogical paradigm and just like verbal statements, colleagues and managers will interpret the physical manifestations as expressions of a certain position in the negotiation of professional norms in an organization. A central notion from translation theory is that abstract ideas manifest themselves in verbal articulations and physical practices as they are adopted by actors (Czarniawska & Sevón 2005), and thus, for an innovation to be implemented in an organization, more and more actors must talk the talk and walk the walk of the new idea.

Finally, an important outcome of integrating translation theory and everyday innovation, is the theoretical assumption that everyday innovations can eventually accumulate as more and more actors translate the new idea into their practice (Kickert & van der Meer 2011). When the translation process is reversed, and actors render their concrete practices abstract or symbolic in order to decontextualize them and allow others to interpret them (Czarniawska & Sevón 2005) the accumulation of many small changes may over time reform the norms and practices of a profession.

Summarizing, translation theory has provided a valuable vocabulary to describe how actors adjust ideas to make them fit in their local contexts, and how they transform abstract ideas into concrete practices through interpretation and enactment. This dual function makes the theory ideal for studies of everyday innovation because both are concerned with the agency of individual actors while remaining sensitive to the organizational context. The practical concreteness of innovation processes enables a valuable contribution to translation theory because it illuminates the mundane puzzle of everyday organizing: how frontline professionals find time and energy to perform this reflexive work in the routines of everyday life. In her seminal chapter, Sahlin-Andersson (1996, p. 92) questions if local actors are ever able to control translation processes, and while this study does not claim to answer that question conclusively, it will convey some of the measures frontline managers take to guide the translation of innovations in their organizations.

Case and Methodology

The empirical foundation of this paper is an exploratory case study (Yin 2018) of public frontline managers in childcare designed to answer the research question of how the imperative to innovate is interpreted and enacted on the frontlines of the public sector. To build a case study, the object of observation needs scoping, and the childcare sector was selected to sample frontline managers working under roughly the same economic, regulatory and professional conditions. While there are obvious professional differences between public sub-sectors, they share common conditions of being 'politically governed.' Public childcare in Denmark makes a good case for studying perceptions of public innovation on the frontlines because it constitutes one of the major public service areas governed by the municipalities. Like so many other public service sectors, childcare faces continuous budgetary restraints, a growing number of citizens to serve, as well as increasingly complex challenges. Parents are free to choose which facility in their municipality to sign their children up to, which creates some level of competition between organizations – which is not the case with, for example, police departments or job centres. Unlike, for example, home helpers, the staff in childcare facilities spend their workday in the same building, and frontline managers thus interact with employees, children, parents, and other stakeholders on a daily basis. Each organization is relatively small, usually between 10 and 25 employees, but they are part of a larger municipal organization, with several management layers above them, including district managers, centre chiefs, and municipal directors.

To ensure contextual variation (Seawright & Gerring 2008), informants were recruited from across the regions of the country, with the same gender division as the total population (80% female) and variation in age and tenure. An overview of informants is enclosed in Appendix 1. However, these variables did not display any significance in the analysis of the data, but most likely served to increase the robustness of the study.

The purpose of the study was to gain an 'authentic' understanding of the participants experiences, which is a common goal in qualitative studies (Seale & Silverman 1997). To meet that end, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 frontline

managers in public childcare, thereby allowing the interviews to develop in accordance with the participants accounts (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2020). After 20 interviews, the responses appeared repetitive and predictable, and thus the topic was deemed saturated.

The interview guide is enclosed in Appendix 2. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes plus a 30-minute tour of the facility. All interviews were taped and fully transcribed in NVivo, which served to ensure descriptive validity (Huberman & Miles 2002; Seale & Silverman 1997). Before and during interviews, archival data in the shape of professional newsletters from relevant interest organizations, official reports from the sector, media coverage of current debates on public childcare, and oral and written dissemination about the new legislation targeted the sector were collected. In addition to this, observations were conducted at three relevant conferences targeting childcare professionals and four pedagogical consultants from different local governments were interviewed. These inputs were used as background information alongside the archival data.

Analytical strategy

To answer the research question, the analytical strategy reflects the double function of translation as it is applied in Scandinavian institutionalism. As explained in the theory section, the concept of translation illuminates the editing of ideas as they are interpreted by adopters, and the manifestation of ideas into material practice. Thus, the first part of the analysis investigates how the innovation imperative is interpreted by frontline managers in relation their core task, while the second focus on how they work to facilitate the translation of innovations into everyday practices. Given the study's focus on managers' perceptions, the focus of the analysis is on the themes of the stories that managers tell (Riessman 2008). Thus, the interviews were analysed thematically to search for patterns in managers' perceptions across the multiple sites of the case (Braun & Clarke 2012). Inspired by Braun & Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis, the data analysis proceed as follows: 1) After transcribing all interviews in NVivo, the full body of data was read as a compilation to provide a basic overview of the content. 2) An initial coding was carried out, marking various major themes, for example, their profession, public bureaucracy – and their interpretation of innovation. 3) Focusing on their interpretation of innovation, the managers' accounts of innovation in relation to their work was refined and divided into a number of subthemes, which systematically highlighted what had made them innovate, what they would target with their innovation and what they were hoping to accomplish. Table 1 shows an example of the coding process from quote, to subtheme. to main theme.

Table 1. Example of the coding process for the interpretation of the innovation imperative.

Main theme	Subthemes	Examples of illustrative quotes
Interpretation of the innovation imperative	Causes for innovation	[New building] <i>We all agreed when we were working on the plan for the new building that this was to be our philosophy. Some employees said: 'I don't know it very well, but it sounds sensible,' or 'I think it's exciting.'</i>
	Types of innovation	[Pedagogical approach] <i>We've been working with 'A playful approach to routines' which is about how we, as adults, can do things differently in routine situations [...] from when they arrive in the morning until they're picked up in the afternoon.</i>
	Purpose of innovation	[Better use of time] <i>We no longer talk on the phone all the time. Virtually no one calls any more since we got the new system. I've been a pedagogue for many years and the phone could ring 15–20 times in a morning with messages left as notes or whatever.</i>

The managers' narratives about their innovation journey would often include all three sub-themes, and the causes for innovation referred to by managers were likely something out of their control, whereas the purpose of the innovation, indicated what they hoped to gain from the innovation: A happened, so we did B, to get C.

4) The second part of the analysis dug deeper into the practical ways and means applied by managers to engage staff in translating innovation into daily practice. 5) Then the codes in the second section of the analysis were grouped by similarity in to three overall categories, as exemplified in Table 2 and finally 6) power quotes (Pratt 2008) were selected to present the findings as a consistent narrative.

Table 2. Example of the coding process for the methods applied by managers to facilitate the staff's translation of innovation into everyday practices.

Main theme	Subthemes	Examples of illustrative quotes
Enactment of the innovation imperative	Interpretation and adaptation of new ideas	<i>It's not like we need to do exactly what another facility has done. I mean, we make adjustments based on the children we have.</i>
	Experimentation in practice	<i>We have a model where they describe what they want to do with the kids, what they want to teach them and the signs they wish to observe. [...] and in the end, we evaluate how it went.</i>
	Collegial reflection processes	<i>When we start to have some common professional terms and common professional opinions, we get a shared vocabulary for the things we want and the things we do.</i>

Some of the interviewed managers work systematically with all three methods, whereas others do so occasionally. The analysis will elaborate how each method gives rise to reflection and negotiation among the staff and with the manager, and thus, disclose how managers work to stimulate the translation of an abstract ideas into an integrated part of the existing practice.

Analysis

The focus of the analysis is on the managers' perceptions of working with innovation in childcare, and thus not on the content of the innovations themselves. A complete list of the innovations referred to in the interviews is enclosed in Appendix 3. As the appendix shows, the innovations are closely linked to the core task of childcare, and often concern, for example, new ways to collaborate with parents, new teaching activities for the children, or new ways of organizing children or staff.

The analysis consists of two sections. The first section concerns how frontline managers in public childcare interpret the innovation imperative and make it relevant by linking it closely to their core task. The second section then conveys how managers explain their work to engage staff in everyday innovation in order to translate abstract, new ideas into concrete practices. A pattern of three methods is identified across the sites in the case: 1) interpretation and adaptation of new ideas; 2) experimentation in practice; 3) collegial reflection processes.

The Innovation Imperative in Public Childcare

From the archival data that serves as a background for the interviews, the requirement to 'be innovative' was found in municipal strategies, in job postings and in curricula for professional training of public servants. Moreover, a call to develop 'innovation competence' has been included in the learning objectives in the new national legislation on childcare for

0–6-year-olds (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018), as part of the curricula of pedagogical bachelor students (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2017) and is offered as an elective for the public management diploma education in various Danish university colleges targeting professionals from, for example, primary schools, childcare, healthcare, and so on.

The interviewed frontline managers articulate the innovation imperative when they argue for innovation and change in their organizations. One manager argues that innovative capability is a necessity to confront the continuously changing conditions of the organization:

This is how our world is supposed to look like, because we constantly get new children who change. Now, we have this group of three-year-olds, who look like this, but we'll get a new group of three-year-olds, who have other needs [...] and we have to be ready to create the learning environments that provides that group with learning. [...] We have to always be alert and have the courage to move with the children.

The manager argues that the organization should innovate to continue to meet the changing needs of the children in order to fulfil the organization's core purpose. This flexible stance may seem like a blatant position, but another manager explained how not so long ago, the norm was that children were the ones expected to learn to comply with the rules and norms of the childcare facility rather than the other way around.

The innovation imperative celebrates certain qualities in staff members, as reflected in the following excerpt: 'The first time I came back from a holiday and saw that they'd changed some of the learning environments, I was like: "YES!" Finally, we've reached a point, where they don't need to have everything approved by me.' This quote illustrates an appreciation of innovation competence in the staff and acclaims initiative, creativity and professional self-confidence. When managers are influenced by the innovation imperative in their reasoning, it entails a preference towards staff members who are easy to ignite or excite about new ideas. A fourth manager describes her staff's response to the introduction of digital toys: 'The people who are already somehow brave or curious have been really easy to turn on to this and to get started working with the digital toys.' In this excerpt, being prepared to try out the digital artefacts and follow the manager's strategy is equated with bravery, suggesting that hesitation towards it can be attributed to general personal qualities rather than a specific professional assessment of the suggested innovation.

In addition to this, the innovation imperative also has the effect of delegitimizing resistance to change. One manager describes a somewhat reluctant acceptance of a new reporting tool for the children's assessments:

... they felt like it wasn't comprehensive enough. They felt like they ... weren't touching all the bases. That's true. It doesn't. But then, there's the option to add notes. So that's what we do. We add notes, and then there's also the option of talking about it amongst ourselves. But sometimes, it's just easier to go on doing what you've always been doing, right?

This quote illustrates how the manager recognizes that a negotiation between different concerns is taking place and she skilfully contrasts the professional interests of the staff and the innovation imperative. Consequently, the manager reasons quickly from understanding the professionals' good intentions, to delegitimizing their hesitation by assessing that they prefer the easier option of the status quo.

Summing up, the public managers enunciate the imperative to innovate in their local context when they argue for the introduction of changes. The managers' interpretation of the imperative to innovate in public childcare carries with it a positive attitude towards new ideas as well as an embedded logic that activates certain norms, where employees are expected to be flexible, curious and accept new challenges. This is important because the normative emphasis on innovation competence influences the relationship between front-line managers and employees and the perception of what it means to be a good childcare professional. With the innovation imperative, it is considered virtuous to seek professional development, find new solutions and be willing to change, while the motivations for hesitation or resistance is questioned.

How do frontline managers work to engage employees in translating ideas into practice?

The following analysis is based on accounts from Danish childcare managers, who describe three methods by which they enact the innovation imperative during everyday operations with efforts to stimulate the staff's translation of innovation into their professional practice: by interpreting and adapting new ideas; by experimentation in practice; and through collegial reflection processes.

Interpretation and adaptation of new ideas

The following examples show how new ideas are interpreted and adapted so that they make sense in the local context. As the examples will show, this interpretation is a social activity, which takes place in a continuous conversation, where the meaning of the innovation in relation to the existing practices of the organization is negotiated among staff members.

One of the ways the service professions have been changing relates to increased documentation of activities, which has led to the invention of numerous local evaluation schemes. One manager explicitly refers to her role as translator when a staff member was feeling insecure about how to use a new evaluation tool, which included a foreign concept of 'data collection':

My job will often be to read some of these dry texts and translate them to fit in with their practice. [...] She was getting stressed about it, so I said: 'May I make a suggestion? I just overheard you carrying out the language assessment for all the three-year-olds and you noticed that you didn't have enough rhymes and chants in your day, so now, you want to work more on that. That's totally what data collection is all about.' And she said: 'Really? Is that all?'

In the excerpt, the manager explains how she works to link theory and practice through coaching in everyday situations by highlighting positive examples as they take place. Other managerial tools may spur negotiations of the object of evaluation:

It might have involved a bit of a linear thinking [...] to spot children who'll have trouble reading later on and stuff like that. It's not so much about what the child is good at. [...] but it gives the staff a reason to sit one to one with the child. They say that they discover things that they otherwise wouldn't have noticed.

The quote reflects that the assessment tools inserted into practice are not neutral, but have implications for the practice and thus, need to be interpreted and edited to fit the practice of the individual professional. The manager explains how she supports the translation of the

tool, by emphasizing the value that may be created with the use of the new tool, although it may be different from the original intention. Professionals who feel the tool is too linear may invent additional indicators to support their analysis of the children or downplay some of the conclusions produced by the tool, that they find to be less relevant, thereby translating it into a local version that fits their professional concerns.

Introducing digital artefacts as pedagogical tools is a new idea that has been diffused to several organizations. It is controversial and requires more than a purchase. The professional norms legitimizing the use of digital artefacts draw a distinction between entertainment and learning. As one manager explicates: 'It's also because there's some learning in it, you might say. It's not entertainment.' Similarly, another manager draws a distinction between active and passive use: 'Digitization can be an excellent pedagogical tool, but it can also be the opposite. Also, it can be difficult sometimes to get staff on board with this, because it can easily become a mere tool for breaks.' This account illustrates the potential pitfalls of misused or misunderstood digital tools and shows the balancing necessary. It would go against professional values to just let the kids play with an iPad or watch an endless stream of YouTube videos. However, iPads have been purchased in most facilities for multiple purposes and so the profession must develop norms and practices for good and bad utilization. Moreover, the excerpt illustrates how the technology can be edited into a pedagogical tool for learning. This editing involves leaving out some properties of the artefact, while exploring others in order to obtain goals that are considered legitimate in the profession.

Experimentation in practice

A method for encouraging bottom-up innovation that is often emphasized in the innovation literature is the use of micro-experiments. The managers explain how they enact the innovation imperative by orchestrating experiments during everyday routines where the professionals are encouraged to pick a focus and practice doing something new. Because these micro-experiments may affect the rest of the team and might involve stepping out of the comfort zone to do something new, and because a lot is gained from sharing experiences, one manager argues that experimentation requires an open and supportive environment: 'It's about testing because it's something we haven't done before. So, it's about experimenting and it's okay if we're at different stages, but it's also cool if someone figured out how to work really well on this with the kids, and then share it, right?' The introduction of an innovation may disrupt the professionals in their practice and spur reflections about the pedagogical content of the activities carried out with the children. This manager emphasizes how she encourages individual experimentation as a way of acknowledging individual staff member's different ways of working and different levels of familiarity with the innovation.

When trying to involve parents more, another manager describes how the pedagogues tried out different techniques for increasing engagement:

So, they'd just be standing outside in the hallway, when they were dropping off the kids and we're working on inviting them in to see what the kids have been doing. That's a process we spend a lot of time on. Saying: 'Come in and see. Wouldn't you like to join us?' Things like that. So, it's been developing slowly – in some of the projects, those were the things we experimented with and that worked at the time. Then, it faded out, but the mindset remained. [...] We had meetings every three months. The evening meetings were where we evaluated and talked about what would be exciting and the next steps.

This quote illustrates the temporary nature of experimenting but also reveals the technicalities of developing new practices in service delivery. When these micro-actions are framed as experiments or an innovation project, it enables increased reflexive consciousness during the experiments and evaluation and a collective point of reference among colleagues. While experimenting, staff members are articulating their interpretation of the idea through their enactments in practice, which can then be interpreted by colleagues. Thus, encouraging gradual testing and adjustment of a new practice is an essential part of the managers' enactment of the innovation imperative and the organization's translation of innovation into practice.

Although the structure of teams will often be considered a task for management, it can be influenced by employee initiatives. One manager explains how his employees brought about their new structure:

The idea of re-organizing the groups in the house actually wasn't something I thought of. It was actually some of the others who thought it made sense and then we worked with it for a while with some of the pedagogues. Then it grew, so to speak. Somehow. Then, at some point, we thought: okay, we're going to do it.

In this example, the decision to organize the children in a new way was informed by a gradual increase of employee initiatives to work in age-divided groups. This example illustrates how managers are not the only actors, who may work to stimulate innovation in organizations. Sometimes informal leaders among the staff can cultivate the adoption of new ideas and work to enrol support for it from peers and the manager, who enact the innovation imperative by responding to employees' initiatives for change.

Collegial reflection processes

The professionals in public childcare usually work in teams and have shared experiences about their specific children, parents, and other stakeholders. Some frontline managers enact the innovation imperative by encouraging collective reflexive practices to stimulate consciousness and diffuse new ideas among colleagues.

In one organization, the manager describes how she had recently taken over the leadership of a facility that was performing poorly in nearly every parameter. She found the staff were suffering from 'low professional self-esteem', and she identified a need to work systematically on the professional foundation, by applying structures and norms that were not new to her, but which were lacking within the organization: 'The first thing we did was focus on the learning environment. How do you compose yourself with the kids? How do you talk to the kids? You know the basic: you don't yell at the kids or scream at the kids.' The method she elected to use to implement a change in the general philosophy of work was the creation of templates for practice accounts that were to be shared in section meetings. At each meeting, each pedagogue had to bring a written account of a practice experience to share. The manager and colleagues then provided feedback and discussed the practice accounts. 'What I'm hoping for is that once you begin to understand the mechanisms in what's actually happening, you'll begin to act differently.' This example demonstrates how some everyday innovations involve introducing practices that will be familiar to other organizations but are nonetheless new to the organization in question. This simple innovation of a template for sharing practice accounts, served as a concrete enactment of the innovation imperative through the design of a material artifact designed to invite participation. Thus, by increasing the reflexive awareness of taken-for-granted practices, the innovation also

enabled a gradual editing of these practices, which illuminates how everyday innovation alters the context it is inserted into.

The importance of paying attention to both the individual and the organizational level in everyday innovation is emphasized by one manager, who explains how she worked to engage the staff with an ambition to include nature and science as a general theme in the organization:

Some were on their own, others were in teams of two or three based on their own interest. [...] They'd choose something that they could see the point in doing. Take ownership of. That makes sense. Some went to the woods to see what spontaneous play would emerge. Some sowed herbs and watched them grow, then dried them and tasted them. [...] Some looked at decomposition processes.

In the example, the organization-wide plan was to change the pedagogical profile of the facility by introducing science and nature into the activities offered. The manager invited each pedagogue to decide for themselves how they would introduce more science teaching in their practice. Interestingly, when the staff evaluated the process, they discovered advantages in developing ideas in small teams, rather than experimenting alone, because those that experimented on their own were missing the dialogue with co-workers.

The analysis identified three methods in which frontline managers enact the innovation imperative by working to engage staff in translating everyday innovation into practice during everyday activities. This is important because it demonstrates how the normative emphasis on innovation in childcare impacts upon not only the talk, but also the behaviour of frontline managers. The innovations share a common bi-product of increasing reflexive consciousness among the professionals by using the innovation process as an occasion to explicate taken-for-granted practice and assess it in relation to a new idea.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how the innovation imperative is interpreted and enacted by frontline managers. The article began with a reference to the slogan of the innovation imperative in the private sector, 'Innovate or Die'. While public organizations are less likely to actually die, if they do not innovate, the study has shown that managers certainly feel that they must continuously innovate to keep up with the changing demands of their surroundings.

By constructing a case based on in-depth interviews with 20 frontline managers from the Danish public childcare sector, the study found that the frontline managers were indeed influenced by the normative doctrine of the imperative to innovate, and that they interpreted this imperative in close relation to their core task. The innovation activities they were engaged in targeted the professional practice of the organization and were carried out during operations. For instance, the innovations referred to included new ways of evaluating children's development, collaborating with parents, or new teaching activities involving science or digitization. When advocating an innovation, managers enacting the innovation imperative would echo the ethical obligation to seek innovative ideas in the face of everyday problems, which is central to the inner logic of the imperative (Jordan 2014). In doing so, they would express appreciation of the staff's curiosity, creativity, and readiness to try out new things, whereas the motives for hesitation or resistance would be deemed suspicious or unprofessional. Prior studies suggested that the innovation imperative may be interpreted differently at different levels of government (Palm et al. 2015), and that empirical studies are lacking an account of how the public frontlines in particular may be influenced by the

innovation imperative (Jordan 2014). The findings of this study contribute to this research interest by showing how the innovation imperative is rendered concrete on the frontlines.

Moreover, the analysis found the managers to enact the innovation imperative, not only verbally, but also by working to engage their staff in everyday innovation. Specifically, three methods were applied by the managers to engage staff in translating innovations into their existing practices: through interpretation and adaptation of new ideas, by experimentation in practice, and through collegial reflection processes. Some managers used these methods systematically, to continuously introduce new things and develop the professional practice of the organization, whereas others only did so occasionally.

Prior studies of micro-interactions in organizations, have shown how actors negotiate and edit the meaning of innovations in translations processes (Vossen & van Gestel 2019; Waldorff 2013), but there is a gap in our knowledge about how frontline managers work to facilitate such negotiations during everyday operations. Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) raise the question of whether it is even possible to manage translation processes. While there is, of course, no guarantees that managers' efforts to stimulate engagement will bear fruit in the long haul, the study's discovery of three simple methods applied by managers to guide the translation process suggests that they certainly made an effort to do so.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, informants were recruited from one group of actors, namely Danish frontline managers in childcare, and thus the findings may not be directly transferrable to other organizational contexts. Moreover, the case study was constructed based on interviews with managers, which means that the perceptions of employees, children or other actors were not included. Finally, future studies might add to the findings of this study by applying ethnographic methods to observe how the focus is maintained over time, when organizations intend to translate ideas into practice and examine if the methods vary depending on the scope of the innovation.

Conclusion

The research question posed for this case study was *How do frontline managers interpret and enact the innovation imperative?* The question was answered with a case study based on 20 in depth interviews with frontline managers from the Danish public childcare sector.

The study found that the innovation imperative did in fact emerge in the case as a normative assumption that innovation is good and something one should pursue. The interviewed frontline managers expressed appreciation of newness and implicitly connected their staff's willingness to change with the value of their professional qualities. They celebrated staff who would support or initiate innovation, whereas hesitation, doubt, and resistance to change was met with suspicion and sometimes impatience. The innovation imperative thus influenced managers' perception of 'good' employees as people who are not only qualified professionals, but also willing to act as change agents. The study showed that frontline managers interpret innovation as developing the quality of the core task of the organization, and with that positive connotation of innovation, arguing against innovation is like stating that one does not want the children to receive better childcare, which would be immoral.

Finally, the study found the managers to be enacting the innovation imperative through three methods of working to facilitate innovation: by interpretation and adaptation of new ideas, granting professionals the freedom to experiment during practice and through collegial reflection processes. The managers applied these methods during everyday activities and ongoing conversations with staff. The finding of these three methods of working with the translation of innovative ideas into practice contributes to translation theory by demonstrating how everyday innovation processes are utilized as practical occasions for translating abstract ideas into concrete practice, ignited by the innovation imperative.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Informants – variance and recruitment

	Region	Gender	Management Tenure	Date	Recruitment source
Manager 1	Capital	Female	Senior	11.12.18	Conference
Manager 2	Capital	Female	Senior	9.1.19	Conference
Manager 3	North	Female	Senior	18.1.19	Conference
Manager 4	North	Male	Senior	18.1.19	Conference
Manager 5	Capital	Female	Senior	19.2.19	Newsletter
Manager 6	Capital	Female	Junior	7.3.19	Conference
Manager 7	Capital	Female	Senior	1.4.19	Web search
Manager 8	South	Male	Senior	2.4.19	Conference
Manager 9	South	Female	Junior	25.4.19	Conference
Manager 10	Zealand	Female	Junior	30.4.19	Local paper
Manager 11	Capital	Female	Junior	4.6.19	Local paper
Manager 12	Capital	Female	Junior	27.6.19	Web search
Manager 13	Capital	Female	Junior	7.8.19	Web search
Manager 14	Capital	Female	Junior	21.8.19	Web search
Manager 15	Zealand	Female	Junior	28.8.19	Web search
Manager 16	Zealand	Female	Senior	29.8.19	Web search
Manager 17	South	Female	Junior	11.9.19	Web search
Manager 18	South	Female	Senior	30.9.19	Web search
Manager 19	Capital	Male	Junior	8.10.19	Web search
Manager 20	Zealand	Male	Senior	7.11.19	Web search

Appendix 2

	Overall question	Interview questions
A	What is innovation in childcare?	Think of the latest innovation process you went through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was that about? (Type, purpose, recipients) • Was it characteristic for the changes you introduce or was it a one-off event? • Did something surprise you about the process?
B	Where do you get inspiration and ideas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did the latest idea come from? How was it initiated? Who came along underway? • Do you participate in professional networks? Do your staff? Which? • What about informal and private networks? What do they mean? • How much space does decisions from "above" in the municipality of by the state take up? • Is it your experience that some ideas are invite more inspiration from outside the organization than others?
C	Do you actively share your experiences with others?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal and informal networks? • How easy do you think it would be for others to adopt your latest innovation?
D	What role does different actors play?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the parents' roles? • What are the employees' roles? • What are the children's roles? • What are the local politicians' roles? • What are others similar organizations' roles?
E	When is your organization ready to innovate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What conditions should be fulfilled before you find that the time is right to introduce a new idea? • Would you say that this organization is generally willing to take risks or experiment? • What might the challenges be related to these changes or new ideas?
F	What does the future look like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have something in the pipeline? • What will you pay extra attention to, next time you have to introduce something new?

Appendix 3

Everyday innovations referred to in interviews are summarized below.

Innovation	Result	Value
Manager's coaching on focus areas*	Reflection on individual practice	Relationship formation and perspective on children
'Growth model' – and other template-based reflection tools*	Reflection on individual practice	Identification of challenges and potentials for children
Collegial dialogue on focus-areas*	Reflection on children's perspectives and input	Inclusion of children's perspectives on planning and togetherness
Training and courses*	Knowledge about e.g. language stimulation	Improved opportunities for language stimulation for children
Individual experimentation model	Pushing personal boundaries, increased reflection on practice, new solutions tested	Variation of responsiveness, tailored solutions, inclusion of children's perspectives
New organization of children by age*	New group formations to support relationships	Better options for activities targeted children's interests and level of development
Digital toys*	Content focus on science skills and experimentation. Continuous training of staff	Focus on learning process rather than outcome in activities
Home-day care suitcase*	Conversations about home life and day care life	Improved communication between family and day care
Job swap	coaching and feedback, fresh eyes on practice, reflection	Increased collaboration between adjacent facilities, more homogenous service levels
2-year plan	Continuous professional development, staff take turns leading projects across the organization, creative competition	Continuous renewal of content, high level of creativity, shared practice, increased quality of content
Discontinuation of all annual events with parents*	more staff-hours for daily activities with children	improved adult-child ratio
Organizing children in smaller groups	calmer routine situations like meals	better opportunities for interaction between children and with adult
Action learning in routines*	Video documentation of practice and joint reflection	better collaboration between staff, fewer conflicts with children
Increased parent involvement with special focus on vulnerable families	Inviting parents to share their language for use in play and practical activities. Increased parents' guidance for children in vulnerable positions.	Acknowledging bi-lingual identities of children. Viewing multiple languages as a resource rather than a barrier. A holistic/family-oriented approach to support of vulnerable children
Inclusion of children's perspectives*	Reflection focus on children's resources, and adaptation of learning environments to match the individual child	Releasing children's heterogeneous potential, improving the child's interaction with adults and other children
Basic professional structure*	Formalized division of labour and structure of routines	Fewer conflicts between staff and with children, more efficient use of time
Skills for difficult conversations	Better collaboration with parents, earlier identification of children in vulnerable positions	Earlier intervention for children in vulnerable positions and better collaboration with parents.
Playful approach to routines	Adults turn nappy changes, meals, and putting on outdoor wear into playful events	Children's interests are acknowledged and supported in social engagement with adults and other children

Innovation	Result	Value
Toy library	Toys are collected, so there is enough items for a good game, and placed in a library, where the groups can take turns checking out toys for play	Better overview of toys/games, fewer conflicts during play, better playtime
Dialogue tool for parent-pedagogue meetings*	Parents and staff reflect and share child's status on a number of topics	Better conversations and joint effort on topics of concern
New pedagogical philosophy*	New approach to observing, engaging and conversing with children	Fewer conflicts with children, increased focus on children's resources

*Innovations found in more than one facility.