

## CHAPTER 15

# Owners' Governance of Directors' Mentoring Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care Centres in Norway

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### Abstract

This chapter draws on data from semi-structured lifeworld interviews with seven directors in early childhood education and care centres (ECEC) in Norway with both public and private owners. The research questions for the study are: 1) What kind of role do owners have in directors' mentoring of staff in ECEC centres in Norway? and 2) Does owners' governance influence the quality of mentoring practices? Mentoring is understood as a learning process where the intention is that staff reflect individually and collectively on pedagogical practice. The study shows that directors believe owners see mentoring as important to ensure the quality of the pedagogical work, and that they expect directors to organise mentoring of staff. However, few owners have written guidelines or strategies beyond systems for mentoring of newly qualified early childhood teachers. Owners seem to

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govern more through support and dialogue than through authoritative rules. Owners also offer pedagogical capacity building at meetings for directors at owner level, in the form of mentoring in which the directors themselves participate. Directors are positive towards being given autonomy in mentoring for staff, but they ask for more financial resources and time to do mentoring.

**Keywords:** early childhood education and care centres, director, owner, mentoring of staff, governance, pedagogical leadership, personnel leadership

## Introduction

In a report from an expert group on the early childhood teaching profession in Norway, it is argued that owners of early childhood education and care centres (ECEC) need to be seen as part of the leadership in the organisation (Ministry of Education and Research (MER), 2018, p. 150). While 46 per cent of the around 5800 ECEC centres in Norway are owned by municipalities, 54 per cent are privately owned (MER, 2019, p. 9). In formal terms, the owners of the municipal centres are the politicians elected to the municipal councils. In practice, however, there is often a superior at a middle management level in the municipal leadership and management hierarchy. Depending on the size of the municipality and the number of ECEC centres, there might be more staff at this middle management level. Private owners can vary from one private person owning one or two centres to large commercial owners with more than 200 centres. Some municipal and private owners in Norway have become so large that they can both support and make demands of the pedagogical work to a much greater extent than before (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2016, p. 206).

The directors of Norwegian ECEC centres are heads of the staff (MER, 2019, p. 9). The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergarten (NFP) states that directors have day-to-day responsibility for pedagogical, personnel, and administrative matters (MER, 2017, p. 16). The framework plan also says that good pedagogical and administrative leadership requires good cooperation with the owner, who is made legally responsible for the quality of the pedagogical work (MER, 2017, p. 15). The director should also cooperate with the pedagogical leaders who are at the leadership level under the director, and lead the daily work for a group of children together with col-

leagues (MER, 2019, p. 9). The Norwegian framework plan also states that the ECEC centre is a learning organisation, where staff should reflect on their own values, keep themselves updated on recent literature, and be role models (MER, 2017, p. 15). Mentoring of staff can be seen as a tool for owners and directors in achieving the goal of being a learning organisation (Senge, 2006, p. 3).

Previous research on mentoring in the director's role has to a small extent looked into the owner's role and involvement. While a study by Mørreaunet (2019) examined two directors' mentoring practices when they led mentoring of staff, another Norwegian study examines whether directors' orientation in mentoring with newly qualified teachers in ECEC centres is individually or organisationally oriented (Klages et al., 2020). In a study by Lundestad (2021), directors state that mentoring is a very important part of their leadership practice, as it brings them closer to their staff groups and the situation in the pedagogical work. None of the studies discusses the owner's role.

Internationally, Wong & Waniganayake (2013) unpack the conceptual evolution of mentoring in ECEC as a top-down model to a collegial model and examine findings of research from 2000 to 2012. That examination could not locate peer-reviewed publications on international comparisons of mentoring in early childhood despite extensive research (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013, p. 174). In the chapter, the owner's role in mentoring is not discussed, but government and employer interest in establishing mentoring in early childhood workplaces is said to be driven by the recognition of the benefits of mentoring (p. 174). Nuttall et al. (2018) critique the usefulness of double stimulation—a key concept of Vygotskian analyses of human development—in fostering sustainable leadership practices in early childhood education. The work environment in ECEC is described as a field with high staff turnover, where resources for individual coaching and mentoring are extremely limited (Nuttall et al., 2018, p. 83). Even though the article presents ECEC policies in Australia, and programmes for sector reforms, the owner's role is not discussed. Thornton (2015) discusses the similarities and differences between the concepts of mentoring and coaching in the ECEC field, and states that mentoring has been used in New Zealand to support beginning teachers and in leadership development programmes. Thornton (2015, p. 7) also discusses internal and external mentoring roles, but not the role of the owner.

As there seems to be little research on the owner's role and governance of directors' mentoring practices, a study of seven directors in ECEC centres in Norway with both public and private owners has been conducted to contribute to international comparison.

## Research Questions

The research questions for the study presented in this chapter are: 1) What kind of role do owners have in directors' mentoring of staff in ECEC centres in Norway? and 2) Does owners' governance influence the quality of mentoring practices?

## Theoretical Perspectives

In Norwegian, the word 'veiledning' is used in professional settings, meaning 'leading to find a way'. English-language equivalents could be supervision, mentoring, consultancy, advising etc. (Lauvås & Handal, 2014, p. 47). Although directors have a supervisory function in evaluating the quality of pedagogical work, the main purpose of 'veiledning' is to encourage staff to reflect on their pedagogical practice for developmental purposes. I have therefore chosen the term mentoring, because it implies someone like a director being more competent and/or experienced than the novice (Lauvås & Handal, 2014, p. 66). Another reason is that a mentor's task is to introduce the novice to professional practices and provide support and challenges. Even if not all staff are novices, a central task for directors as leaders is to introduce staff to the aims in the professional practice of the ECEC centre, and to support and challenge staff regarding the quality of their professional practice.

The most dominant tradition in mentoring in Norway has been the action and reflection model (Lauvås & Handal, 1999). With a transition towards social constructivist approaches, the discourse on professional development has been expanded (Klages et al., 2020, p. 104). One example is Gjems (2007), who sees mentoring in professional learning groups from a systemic point of view where humans participate together in learning processes (Ulleberg & Jensen, 2017, p. 60). Gjems defines mentoring as '[a] learning process that takes place between two or more people to create meaning, new understanding and possible alternatives of action in professional contexts' (Gjems,

2007, p. 154). This definition is in accordance with Wong & Waniganayake (2013), who define mentoring as 'a facilitated process involving two or more individuals that have a shared interest in professional learning and development'. Based on such understandings of mentoring, key objectives of directors' mentoring will be professional learning and development that can give meaning and new understandings, and possible alternative actions. Mentoring, understood as such individual and collective learning processes in staff groups, can contribute to ECEC centres being what Senge (2006) defines as a learning organisation:

Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge, 2006, s. 3).

### **Owners' Governance of ECEC Centres**

A large-scale quantitative study from 2009 in Norway shows that owners are heavily involved in the pedagogical work, staff leadership, financial priorities, and external relations (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2016, p. 212) of their centres. There can be different forms of governance from the owner (MER, 2018, p. 168). One form can be 'authoritative rules', where owners supervise closely, request frequent reports, and give instructions and directives. This approach can also include pedagogical package solutions and procedures for quality assurance systems (MER, 2018, p. 168). Another form is more dialogical and negotiative in nature, and can be described as 'encouragement', where the owner is someone to help and understand the director. Another form of governance is 'organisational capacity building', where the owner can be someone who provides arenas for negotiations between owners and directors regarding pedagogical content. Forms of governance can also be 'sanctions and incentives', where owners give financial support to prioritised areas or sanction deviations, or 'pedagogical capacity building', where owners can arrange competence development for staff or provide developmental resources (MER, 2018, p. 168).

The organisational structure in the ECEC field will also have an impact on the individual and collegial autonomy of the professionals (MER, 2019, p. 12). Autonomy in a profession means one is relatively

free in how one performs a task (Molander & Terum, 2008, p. 17). In their performance, professionals are required to use both their formal knowledge and their professional judgement. In Norway, there is a discussion on whether early childhood teachers are losing their autonomy (Greve et al., 2014). Demands from owners, politicians, and society for more standardised tools and more detailed regulations place limits on their autonomy. This can make it more difficult for ECEC teachers to use their professional judgement, both as educators and leaders, and raises the question of whether directors experience autonomy in their mentoring practices.

## Method

The study builds on semi-structured lifeworld interviews with seven directors in various ECEC centres (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 22). Such interviews are used when themes from daily life should be understood from the perspective of the person being interviewed, in this case directors' perspectives on mentoring. The interview guide is designed through themes, which allows the dialogue to be both open and structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 46). There were several themes in the study where this presentation is based on the theme 'Owners and mentoring'. Four questions were included in the theme: 1) Does the owner have views or strategies for mentoring in the ECEC centre? 2) How do you find the owner's involvement in mentoring: too little – adequate – too much? 3) How does the owner facilitate mentoring of the staff in the ECEC centre? 4) Other thoughts on owners and mentoring?

The selection of directors is strategic, with directors of centres in both public and private ownership, and involving both small and large owners (Johannessen, Tufte, & Christoffersen, 2010, p. 106). [Table 15.1](#) presents an overview of the directors and owners in the study:

**Table 15.1:** The informants, the size of the ECEC centre, formal training as director, owner, size of owner.

Category	Director 1	Director 2	Director 3	Director 4	Director 5	Director 6	Director 7
Percentage of full-time position	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Size of ECEC centre	4 units 60 children 1–6 years	4 units 80 children 1–6 years	5 units 88 children 1–6 years	4 units 60 children 1–6 years	5 units 69 children 1–6 years	4 units 63 children 1–6 years	13 units, 198 children, 1–6 years
Formal training as director	Leadership in ECEC (30 ECTS) Supervision (30 ECTS)	None	Leadership in ECEC (30 ECTS) Mentoring (15 ECTS)	Leadership in ECEC (30 ECTS) Master's student	Administration and leadership (ECTS unknown)	Leadership in ECEC (30 ECTS) Children with special needs (30 ECTS)	Leadership in ECEC (30 ECTS)
Owner	Private	Private	Private	Public	Public	Public	Public
How many centres the owner owns	Large (more than 200 centres)	Medium (14 centres)	Small (4 centres)	Medium (19 centres)	Medium (29 centres)	Medium (12 centres)	Medium (22 centres)

## Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

A central question regarding validity is how well, or relevant, the empirical data represents the phenomenon (Johannesen et. al, 2010, p. 69). In the beginning of the interviews, I presented my own background as a former director, educator, and researcher in the ECEC field, something which I found gained the trust of the informants. The directors answered the questions openly and shared their daily experiences and thoughts. This trust in the relationship contributed to a connection between the phenomenon under study and the empirical material that emerged during the interviews. I therefore find the study to be valid. Although the small number of informants is not representative, the study still implies tendencies in owners' role in and governance of directors' mentoring practices. Reliability in qualitative research is about making the process and analysis of the empirical material transparent and explicit to others, so they can judge the quality of the work

(Halkier, 2010, p. 126). Through the description of the design of the study, the process during the interviews and the presentation of the analysis, I have sought to strengthen the reliability. Regarding ethical considerations, an information letter was sent to all participants explaining the aim of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 104). All participants consented voluntarily to being interviewed. The study was ethically approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data [2] (NSD, from 1.01.2022 SIKT).

## **Analysis of the Empirical Material**

I began analysing the empirical material by collating the directors' responses on the theme into one document. I then used a phenomenological approach to analysis where I followed four main steps: 1. main impression and condensation of meaning, 2. codes, categories, and concepts, 3. condensation, and 4. summarisation (Malterud, 2011). I first read through the document and the responses to gain an overall impression of the statements and thoughts of the directors. Next, I coded the text that was relevant for the research questions and identified categories like 'mentoring important', 'systems for mentoring', and 'autonomy positive'. I then reduced the empirical material to develop more abstract concepts and found quotations that could illustrate the condensed meaning. Finally, I tried to summarise the empirical material to find patterns that emerged from the directors' lifeworld (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 232).

## **Results**

In the following section, I will present the results from the study, based on the analysis of the empirical material. The results are organised according to the categories developed during the analysis, with subparagraphs.

### *Mentoring important for owners*

Several of the directors (2, 3, 4, 5, 7) report that their nearest leader, or pedagogical adviser at owner level, sees mentoring as very important. These professionals at owner level have a clear engagement in mentoring, either through formal training or through experience as a mentor

themselves. One way the engagement shows is that several leaders at owner level offer mentoring to directors if they need it:

She is a really experienced mentor, so if I come to her on a Friday afternoon and I am quite frustrated as a leader at the end of the week, she will say 'Okay, now I'll put everything away. Sit down and let's do some mentoring together, let's spend some more time on this.' (Director 4)

As one can see, the owner prioritises mentoring the director regarding challenges in her leadership practice. Another example of an owner who sees mentoring as important is a private owner with more than 200 ECEC centres. This owner has developed a written booklet for their directors on how to become a skilled leader and mentor (Director 1). Still, this is the only owner that a director in the study mentioned who has developed written guidelines for mentoring. There is also only one director who says the owner sees mentoring as so important that a system for mentoring staff has been designed (Director 2). The owner is private and has medium-sized (14) centres. This owner demands that all new pedagogical staff in the organisation should be involved in mentoring in their first two years, even if they have long experience from other ECEC centres.

### *Expectations from Owners to Directors to Establish Systems of Mentoring*

All participants in the study report that they find that the owner expects the director to mentor staff and to develop a system for mentoring. One director says her leader see mentoring as a tool to develop the pedagogical work, and that she expects systems for mentoring developed by the directors (Director 4). The owners' expectations still seem to be more unspoken than clearly articulated. Nearly all the directors (3, 4, 5, 6, 7) say there is no reluctance towards mentoring from the owner, just not a clear strategy and little facilitation for mentoring in the ECEC centres. The directors seem to agree that developing a system for mentoring staff is a part of their responsibility as leader, and do not object to the owners' expectations. One director says she believes that if the owner meant 'something was not good enough, I would have gotten feedback' (Director 6). This implies that owners might 'keep an eye' on the directors, but do not demand any reports on their mentoring of staff.

### *Directors Want Autonomy in Designing Systems for Mentoring*

Several of the directors (2, 6, 7) find it positive that directors are given autonomy in designing their mentoring practices. The reason given is that directors are closest to the centre and the staff and are in the best position to judge where there might be a need for mentoring. One director says she sees it as quite natural that she should be the one to decide how mentoring should be done, as she knows the routines and everyday life in the centre (Director 2). Another director says she believes it is a good thing that the owner allows her to find her own path and solutions regarding mentoring (Director 7). Based on these statements, it seems that directors welcome autonomy in designing the mentoring practice in their own organisation.

### *Dialogue and Support from Owners if Needed*

When asked what the directors think of the owners' involvement in mentoring staff, some of the informants say the answer depends on who one sees as the owner:

The involvement is just fine. But it depends on who you see as the owner. The one at the top is not involved at all in my leadership or mentoring practices. But there is a supervisor at the owner level with whom I regularly discuss my practice as a leader. (Director 6)

As one can see from this response, this dialogue is about various situations in the directors' leadership practices. The director says she finds these conversations with the adviser at the owner level very helpful. Some of the other directors (3, 5) also mention leaders at owner level whom they find to be supportive. One director says that she finds the owner to be a good listener, and that the owner welcomes inputs and ideas from the director (Director 3)—this could be designing a system for mentoring. This director works for a small private owner with four centres, something she believes makes it easy for her to be in a close dialogue with the owner.

### *Mentoring Done at Director Meetings Influences Mentoring in the ECEC Centre*

All the directors say they participate in meetings for directors with the same owner. At some of these director meetings, or in smaller networks, directors do mentoring together. One director says directors for the same owner have organised such meetings, including mentoring, themselves (Director 1). The directors bring forward various cases and choose one of them. The mentoring given at such meetings is seen as very useful by the directors. Some say their own experiences of mentoring in such networks influence their mentoring practices with staff. One director says that experiencing mentoring herself makes her believe that it will also be all right in her team of pedagogical leaders (Director 5). In this way, what is done at director level regarding mentoring is repeated when directors do mentoring with staff in the ECEC centre.

### *Owners Do Little to Facilitate Staff Mentoring*

Most of the directors (1, 4, 5, 6, 7) report that owners do little to facilitate the mentoring of staff:

The owner doesn't facilitate anything! [laughter] (Director 7)

The director says that apart from mentoring newly qualified teachers, it is all up to her to organise mentoring in her own staff group. One director reports that the only way the owner facilitates mentoring is by requiring all staff to be involved in mentoring (Director 2). As a result of this demand, the director can say to staff that 'mentoring is not up for discussion'. By this she means that staff choosing to work in the centre can't protest against being involved in mentoring.

The area where all the owners do facilitate mentoring is for beginning early childhood teachers:

All the newly qualified early childhood teachers who work here have to attend mentoring groups in their first year. It's mandatory, and is currently being revised, so it might be mandatory in their second year as well. (Director 5)

Several of the directors say the owners expect them to organise the staff groups so that the newly qualified teachers can attend group mentor-

ing. The directors can also be contacted by the responsible mentor at owner level if the newly qualified teacher fails to attend the mentoring group. One director says she would have liked mentoring in the staff group to be facilitated by the owner in the same way as for newly qualified teachers (Director 4). This would demand more time and financial resources for substitutes, which the owner doesn't give.

## Discussion

The research questions in this study are: 1) What kind of role do owners have in directors' mentoring of staff in ECEC centres in Norway? and 2) Does owners' governance influence the quality of mentoring practices?

1) *The owners' role:* The study shows that owners in general see mentoring as an important area. This is in accordance with international research showing that governments and employers recognise the benefits of mentoring (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013). The finding implies that owners see mentoring as a way of ensuring the quality of the pedagogical work, and that mentoring can contribute to the ECEC centre being a learning organisation (Senge, 2006). Nonetheless, few owners in the study have written strategies for mentoring staff, and there seems to be no or few requirements for reporting on what kind of mentoring is practised by directors. Staff mentoring seems to be an area where owners trust directors and give them autonomy to develop their own systems for mentoring. If owners had demanded that a system should be developed and reported by directors, they might have had better documentation regarding the demand in the framework plan to be juridically responsible for the quality of the ECEC centre (MER, 2017, p. 15).

As in earlier studies (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2016, p. 214), owners seem to govern more through support and dialogue than through authoritative rules. Several owners govern through 'encouragement' and being available to help and support directors by offering mentoring (MER, 2018, p. 168). Another form of governance could be described as 'pedagogical capacity building', whereby directors enhance their competence in mentoring through participating in mentoring in networks established by owners. The area where owners govern to a greater extent is in mentoring for newly qualified teachers. Here own-

ers govern more through 'incentives and sanctions', as they require directors to organise their staff groups so that newly qualified teachers can participate in group mentoring. This form of governance can be seen in relation to a nationwide agreement in Norway to provide mentoring for newly qualified teachers in both schools and ECEC centres (MER, 2009). Such systems for mentoring of beginning teachers are also established globally (Thornton, 2015).

The directors say that the owners provide few financial resources to facilitate mentoring of staff. The findings from the large-scale quantitative study in Norway from 2009 showed that directors at both public and private owners believed there were not enough resources and that there were too many tasks (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2016, p. 215). This study also shows that directors find that owners do not provide resources for staff mentoring in general, nor do they facilitate or help directors in implementing mentoring. These results are also in accordance with the situation globally, where resources for individual coaching and mentoring are said to be extremely limited (Nutall et al., 2018). This implies that there is a lack of financial resources from owners in the area of mentoring.

2) *The owners' governance and the quality of mentoring practices:* Since staff mentoring seems to be an area where most owners expect and leave it up to directors to design their own mentoring practices, owners do not seem to participate much in leading and governing this area. The directors also seem to be able to choose their own methods of mentoring, and are allowed to make professional judgements on who in their staff groups needs mentoring or not. Unlike other areas in pedagogical leadership, staff mentoring seems to be one where directors have retained their autonomy (Greve et al., 2014). As many directors in Norway have formal competence in leadership, this allowance of autonomy from the owner might lead to high standards of professional judgement from directors (Molander & Terum, 2008).

On the other hand, lack of facilitation from the owner and lack of cooperation in leadership between owners and director might lead to various extents to new actions in the professional work as part of being a learning organisation (Gjems, 2007). It might depend on the director's interest and qualifications in mentoring, or the time available to do mentoring. Studies show that directors take responsibility both internally and externally, and there is much to suggest that direc-

tors are overburdened (MER, 2019, p. 48). Staff mentoring may be one of the tasks that directors do not have enough time to do. Mentoring could be a tool to initiate collective learning processes in the ECEC centre and to bring the centre towards being a learning organisation (Senge, 2006). This may not happen if the actual extent of mentoring done is limited.

As a conclusion to the first research question—What kind of role do owners have in directors' mentoring of staff in ECEC centres in Norway?—the study shows that even if owners see mentoring as important, their involvement is limited. They govern mainly through support, dialogue, and pedagogical capacity building. Regarding the second research question—Does owners' governance influence the quality of mentoring practices?—the study shows that it seems as though owners' governance influences the quality of the mentoring practices to a minor degree. The quality of the mentoring practices depends to a greater extent on the directors' engagement and prioritising of mentoring in their leadership practice, or the time given, in addition to that for other leadership tasks, to establish a system for mentoring. As this study is based on limited qualitative research, larger studies are needed to confirm or disprove the tendencies in the findings. Nevertheless, the study implies that owners may benefit from being more involved in the directors' mentoring practices for the whole staff group, not only for newly qualified early childhood teachers. In this way, the owners would know more of what is needed to develop the mentoring practices, such as financial resources or time for mentoring. The possibilities for higher quality in the pedagogical work and in the ECEC centres as learning organisations would then increase.

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