

CHAPTER 4

Leadership in Norwegian Municipal Early Childhood Education Care Centres

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Abstract

This chapter is based on a qualitative interview survey among directors of Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres. The research question is as follows: What expectations, possibilities, and challenges do ECEC directors perceive in their cooperation with their immediate superiors, and how does this cooperation affect the autonomy and freedom of action of directors' leadership role? The main findings of the survey are that directors have regular contact with their immediate superiors in the municipal leadership and management hierarchy, as well as when a need arises. The contact takes place in the form of meetings with other directors and individual contact by phone and email. At these meetings, information is provided, matters of a legal and administrative nature are discussed, and there are discussions about the implementation of pedagogical guidelines from the municipality. The individual cooperation between the director and their immediate superior largely focuses on individual cases relating

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to children and parents, personnel matters, or pedagogical issues. The directors find this cooperation important and regard their immediate superior as a source of support. Five out of six interviewees have a superior who is a trained kindergarten teacher. They want their superior to provide pedagogical advice and be a discussion partner in pedagogical matters. They are mostly satisfied with the cooperation, but find that their superiors have little time to set aside for pedagogical follow-up work. Although the superior has overriding pedagogical responsibility for the ECEC centres, the directors themselves perceive that they have pedagogical authority and freedom of action and autonomy, and that their superior trusts them.

Keywords: leadership, early childhood education and care centres, directors, owner

Introduction

The Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) states that directors have day-to-day responsibility for pedagogical, personnel, and administrative matters at early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres. It also states that good pedagogical and administrative leadership requires good cooperation with the ECEC owner. The owner has overall responsibility for ensuring that the ECEC centre is run in accordance with current statutes, rules, and regulations (cf. Section 7 first paragraph of the Kindergarten Act).

One of the challenges when studying cooperation between directors and what the Framework Plan refers to as the owner is to define who the owner is. ECEC centres in Norway are either owned by the municipality or privately owned (just over half the ECEC centres are privately owned). In formal terms, the owners of the municipal ECEC centres are the politicians elected to the municipal councils. In practice, however, the directors have little contact with these politicians, at least in large municipalities. Most directors have a superior at middle management level in the municipal leadership and management hierarchy. In this survey, the directors refer to these superiors when asked who they think of as the person who represents the ECEC owner. Five out of six interviewees have a superior at this level who has both personnel responsibility for the interviewee in question and pedagogical and administrative responsibility for the ECEC centres in the munic-

ipality—or city district in the case of large municipalities. The sixth director's superior does not have pedagogical responsibility.

There is great variation between Norwegian municipalities as regards organisation in this context, who the director's immediate superior is, and whether this superior has personnel, administrative, and pedagogical responsibility. Regardless of where in the hierarchy the director's immediate superior is placed, it can be said that they represent what the Framework Plan refers to as the owner. In the past, the municipality as owner was not very involved in the pedagogical management of ECEC centres. Today, many directors experience a high level of owner involvement in both pedagogical and administrative matters (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019).

One interesting question is whether owner involvement, here seen through the relationship between the director and their superior in the municipality, affects the professional autonomy of the director and the individual ECEC centre. More knowledge is needed about, among other things, what cooperation between the director and their immediate superior entails. Does the director find that they are able to maintain their autonomy internally in the ECEC centre, despite the owner being more involved? Is the director's freedom of action regarding professional judgement and autonomy curtailed? Do directors generally want their immediate superior to relieve them in their pedagogical supervision of the ECEC centre? How do the directors want this cooperation to work? Do they think it is important that their immediate superior is a trained kindergarten teacher? These questions are discussed in this chapter.

The research question is: What expectations, possibilities, and challenges do ECEC directors perceive in their cooperation with their immediate superiors at the municipal level, and how does this cooperation affect the autonomy and freedom of action of directors' leadership role?

Since there is a great deal of variation in who represents the owner and what their titles are, I have chosen to refer to this role as the director's 'immediate superior'. The survey is limited to directors of municipal ECEC centres. It is intended to form the basis for a larger survey that will also include private ECEC centres.

Theory

Forms of Organisation of ECEC Centres

Leadership is exercised in an organisation—a system of structures. This system impacts leadership (Larsen & Slåtten, 2020). Organisational structures can affect the director's cooperation with their immediate superior and the framework within which they exercise autonomy and freedom of action.

Organisational structures concern the division of tasks, among other things. The division and delegation of responsibility and power of decision impact the framework for leadership, autonomy, and freedom of action. Whether the ECEC centre has a flat or a hierarchical structure can have a bearing on the director's pedagogical leadership (Larsen & Slåtten, 2014). The ECEC centre is also part of a larger organisation that includes the ownership level. The director is one of several actors in the chain of governance—from the national level to the individual ECEC centre. As the leader of their entity, the director has a position at the top of the hierarchy. At the same time, however, the director also holds a position at the bottom of a leadership hierarchy where state governance is at the top level, the owner is at the middle level, and the director is at the bottom level. Considering the development this sector is undergoing, there is a need for analysis of ECEC centres as part of a larger organisation.

Leadership

Leadership can be understood in different ways, and a traditional understanding is that leadership is the process of influencing others (Yukl, 2013). More recent definitions of leadership point to leadership as practice-oriented interactions and processes. In such cases, leadership is regarded as a function focusing on personnel, and where the collective is more important than the individual (Kirkhaug, 2019). Many definitions include the notion that leadership is about influence, cooperation, and interaction. Relationships are thereby an essential part of understanding what leadership is. Leadership is also exercised within a structural framework, i.e. an organisation. In summary, we could say that leadership is about being able to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute to an efficient organisation through interaction and cooperation.

Some leadership literature distinguishes between leadership and management. Whereas leadership is often regarded as influencing through actions, management is regarded as impacting employees' behaviour through impersonal systems. To emphasise how leadership differs from management, we can say that leadership is about 'the more personal part of a manager's job where the manager uses him/herself to exert influence through, e.g. social relationships, decisions in individual cases, direct communication with employees and professional supervision, or by being a front figure and role model' (Døving et al., 2016, p. 38).

In leadership literature, a distinction is drawn between the individualistic perspective and the distributed perspective. A distributed perspective on leadership expands the individualistic perspective to include the activities of several people. Distributed leadership is often referred to as a form of cooperative leadership. Theories on distributed leadership are especially interesting when studying leadership at several levels in organisations. Distributed leadership can be exercised internally in the ECEC centre between directors and pedagogical leaders, but it can also be leadership that the directors and their immediate leaders perform together. The OECD report *Leadership for 21st century learning* (OECD, 2013) emphasises the benefits of a more distributed leadership practice. The report argues that the leadership of the future is innovative and cooperative. The report states that changing structures and introducing a joint leadership practice that can link the activities of leaders and middle managers in learning systems is the most efficient leadership practice. This is described as 'learning leadership'. The term 'learning professional communities' is relevant in this context and refers to leadership groups' common learning when exercising leadership (Paulsen, 2019). Theories on distributed leadership are useful as a means of studying leadership cooperation between directors and their immediate leaders.

The Director's Professional Judgement, Freedom of Action, and Pedagogical Autonomy

We can say that there are three characteristics of professionalism in professional practice: a) it is based on a distinct theoretical and methodological knowledge base acquired through higher education, b) the practitioners have freedom of action to exercise professional judge-

ment, and c) they have special responsibility through their social mandate (Molander & Terum, 2008). Thus, these criteria must be met for an ECEC director to be professional in their professional practice, and it is particularly interesting in this survey to consider freedom of action to exercise professional judgement. According to Freidson (2001), the exercise of professional judgement is at the core of professional work.

Brante (2014) refers to four conditions for professionals' exercise of professional judgement: legitimacy, trust, authority, and autonomy. A director can exercise judgement because of the legitimacy of their position, trust from their surroundings, professional and formal authority, and autonomy, for example, to make pedagogical decisions.

As such, autonomy is linked to the director's freedom of action; a director has freedom of action with a high or low degree of autonomy. Autonomy can thereby be understood as the possibility to make independent choices of action. Examples of important choices of action for a director include what methods to use in the planning, documentation, and assessment of pedagogical activities, and which considerations should be given most weight in a decision-making situation.

We can also envisage that autonomy exists in a group. Traditionally, ECEC centres have a flat structure and culture, where autonomy primarily rests with the centre's management team, and not with the director (Helgøy et al., 2010; Larsen & Slåtten, 2014; Larsen, 2019; Løvgren, 2012; Slåtten, 2019; Smeby, 2011; Steinnes & Haug, 2013). Furthermore, autonomy can be part of the professional fellowship that exists between all the directors in a municipality or city district, together with their superior in the municipality. Distributed leadership, group leadership, and professional learning communities can be viewed as means of spreading autonomy, including to levels above the ECEC centre. Autonomy can manifest itself to varying degrees at different levels and within a jurisdiction, i.e. in the professional domain required by the profession and for which the profession is responsible (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001).

With a higher degree of owner involvement, it is interesting to discover whether the director retains their pedagogical autonomy or whether the immediate superior at the level above curtails the individual director's freedom of action and autonomy. According to the report *The kindergarten teaching profession – present and future* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), there is a tendency for the owner level to be incorporated into the leadership hierarchy, at least in big ECEC

centres. It is pointed out in the report that it is not kindergarten teachers who hold these positions in many cases. This will probably affect the content of the cooperation and the directors' wishes regarding how close pedagogical cooperation should be.

Methods

The sample consisted of six interviewees, all directors of municipal ECEC centres, in three municipalities. The directors were selected on the basis of geographical distribution. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes and took place in the director's office, and audio recordings were used.

The validity of qualitative studies is about credibility, verifiability, and transfer value (Grønmo, 2016). In this survey, it has been an objective to ensure this validity to the highest extent possible. Among other things, internal validity is about having basic data to underpin our conclusions, whereas external validity is about whether our findings have transfer value, i.e. whether the findings can tell us something about social contexts beyond the context studied (Krumsvik, 2013). The interviewees were given an opportunity to speak freely and discuss matters they themselves regard as important. This meant that more experiences and points of view were elucidated. Follow-up questions were also asked. This strengthens the internal validity. It is difficult to assess external validity, as there are few interviewees. The data basis is small, and the situation was affected by the 'lockdown' of Norway in March 2020 because of the coronavirus situation. This survey therefore has limited generalisability, but it can provide a picture of what directors think and feel about their cooperation with their owner.

The empirical findings presented must be based on data about actual circumstances, and must rely as little as possible on the researcher's discretionary judgement (Grønmo, 2016). In this survey, reliability is strengthened through open questions and follow-up questions in the interviews.

The interviews have been accurately transcribed, and the texts have been read several times. This resulted in a better overall and more nuanced impression of the data material. A manual content analysis with classification and coding was also carried out. The coding involved using descriptive codes and discussion codes in the analysis.

The data are also presented in a matrix in order to recognise patterns more easily.

About the Interviewees

All interviewees worked as directors with responsibility for one ECEC centre. They were between 39 and 52 years of age. [Table 4.1](#) provides more information about the interviewees.

Table 4.1: The interviewees: Directors in ECEC centres.

Characteristic	Inter- viewee 1	Inter- viewee 2	Inter- viewee 3	Inter- viewee 4	Inter- viewee 5	Inter- viewee 6
Total number of years as a kindergarten teacher	8	22	24	22	25	10
Number of years as a director	8	10	11	12	13	0.5
Further education	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Number of children in the ECEC centre	99	63	89	99	197	54
Number of kindergarten teachers	10	7	10	11	19	6
Number of skilled workers/ assistants	12	8	11	12	32	6
Geography	Oslo	Oslo	Oslo	Eastern Norway	Eastern Norway	Oslo
Assistant director	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

About the Director’s Immediate Superior

All the interviews began by clarifying who the director’s immediate superior was. They have different job descriptions and areas of responsibility. The forms of organisation and structure varied between the different city districts in Oslo, and between municipalities. Some information is provided in [Table 4.2](#) about each of the interviewees’ superiors.

Table 4.2: The interviewees’ immediate superiors.

Characteristic	Inter- viewee 1	Inter- viewee 2	Inter- viewee 3	Inter- viewee 4	Inter- viewee 5	Inter- viewee 6
Responsible for how many ECEC centres	22	17	10	27	22	31
Is a trained kindergarten teacher	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Has pedagogical leadership responsibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Results

Clear Expectations of Themselves

The directors highlight many of the same factors. However, how much weight they give to these factors differs somewhat. They all mention their important role vis-à-vis their staff. Four interviewees (1, 4, 5, 6) are concerned with their responsibility for ensuring that their staff have an opportunity to develop professionally, participate in decisions, and work together as a team:

It is my responsibility to see each person, and that people work well in teams. I do not have to make decisions alone. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate. (Interviewee no. 1)

Several interviewees (1, 3, 5) say that it is important to work to promote the ECEC’s centre’s mandate. Two interviewees (2, 4) highlight that it is important to run a high-quality ECEC centre:

Of course, to run a high-quality kindergarten, with good results on all surveys, children develop optimally, and a satisfied staff who get to develop professionally. (Interviewee no. 2)

Two say that the children are what matter most and that this means that they must work with the adults.

*Regular Meetings with the Immediate Superior and Contact
when a Need Arises*

The directors meet their immediate superior regularly at meetings in which other directors also participate. Such meetings are called directors' meetings and are held every other week, once a month, or every six weeks. The directors also have performance appraisal interviews with their immediate superior, and some have what they refer to as leadership discussions. All directors have contact with their superior by phone and email. They find that there is a low threshold for getting in touch, and that they can phone or email to pass on information, ask questions, have discussions, and receive advice.

*Need for Contact and Cooperation on Pedagogical, Personnel
and Administrative Matters*

At the directors' meetings, the superior provides information, matters of a legal and administrative nature are discussed, and there are discussions about the implementation of municipal guidelines. The directors are often divided into smaller groups to discuss these matters. Pedagogical issues are rarely discussed.

The reasons why the directors contact their superior vary somewhat. Several (2, 3, 5, 6) mention that they need to discuss complaints from parents, personnel matters, and individual children. These often involve legal issues. Pursuant to the Kindergarten Act, the owner has overriding legal responsibility, which may be the reason for this:

Yes, we often have contact, because we often have meetings. Then I have contact with him if there are parental complaints, personnel matters or incidents related to children. Really about everything. So he is very concerned that we should have a very low threshold if something happens then. So we have a lot of contact. (Interviewee no. 2)

All but one (6) underline that they need to discuss pedagogical issues with their superior. They want the superior to be available and to act as a discussion partner in pedagogical matters. The directors point out that their superiors expect them to be independent and that they are shown trust, but they nevertheless want to be able to discuss pedagogical matters with their immediate superior.

Interviewee no. 5 says that it is important to have a superior with whom to discuss pedagogical matters. She says that her superior worked as a director for a long time, that she is close to the field of practice, and that she knows the situation on the ground. She stresses that this is very important:

They are closer to practice, so they understand reality better. It is very, very important. (Interviewee no. 5)

All of the five interviewees whose superiors have been kindergarten teachers emphasise the importance of this.

Not Much Time—too Little Room for Pedagogical Aspects

Interviewee no. 3 says that she wishes she had more room for the pedagogical aspects and for professional development, and that her superior could get everyone to pull in the same pedagogical direction. She finds that the pedagogical aspects of her job get drowned in financial and administrative tasks. Several directors raised this issue. Interviewee no. 2 says that their superior is very busy. He does not always answer enquiries, and this can be frustrating. He also tends to provide information a bit late.

Mostly Good Cooperation with Immediate Superiors

All the interviewees describe their immediate superiors and their cooperation with them in positive terms. Three interviewees (1, 2, 4) say that their superior is a pedagogically capable person and that they cooperate very well. They regard their superior as someone who supports them, which is a crucial part of a demanding job. Interviewees no. 3 and 5 say that it works fine, but that the superior does not have much time:

Based on the prerequisites and everything they have to do, I think it works very well. (Interviewee no. 5)

Interviewee no. 6, whose superior does not have a background as a kindergarten teacher and who is responsible for very many ECEC centres, is also satisfied. He finds that he is given support, trust, and recognition, and that it is easy to reach out to his superior. He especially needs contact in connection with individual cases and legal issues. He is pleased that his superior does not have pedagogical responsibility for the ECEC centres; he emphasises that this responsibility should rest with the director.

Different Experience of Clear Expectations

Whether the superior has communicated expectations to the directors varies. Four interviewees (1, 2, 4, 6) answer that their superior is clear in this regard:

Yes, I experienced that. He is clear that we must have good financial management and the kindergarten must have good quality. (Interviewee no. 2)

Interviewee no. 6 has a clear perception of what is expected of him, and he has had a discussion about expectations with his leader. These expectations are also communicated through performance appraisal interviews and follow-up meetings. The two others are more uncertain. Interviewee no. 3 says that the superior 'sort of does this'. Interviewee no. 5 says that not much has perhaps been said, and that she primarily uses her management contract and job description as guidance. She also refers to the Framework Plan, and, based on these documents, she believes that what is expected of her is not unclear.

Expectations of Efficiency, Budget Control, and Quality

Three areas in particular are mentioned when the directors talk about their superiors' expectations. The ECEC centre must be run efficiently (interviewee no. 1); it must ensure quality for children and parents (interviewee no. 4); and it must stay within the budget (interviewee no. 3). One of the interviewees says that his superior is clear that he must exercise good financial management, that the ECEC centre must be of a good quality, and that he must have a strong presence at the centre.

The Directors Also Have Clear Expectations of Their Immediate Superior

Interviewee no. 1 says that he expects his superior to come prepared to meetings, to treat the directors equally, and to be clear about his expectations. Interviewee no. 4 states that she expects her superior to trust that she knows how to do her job, and to support her when she needs it. She is used to working independently, and she likes that, but sometimes—for example in personnel cases—she thinks it's important to keep her superior informed. She wants her opinion on how she intends to deal with the matter, so that she can be certain her thinking is correct—someone with whom she can think out loud.

Interviewee no. 5 says that her superior gives feedback on what works well, but also on what needs to be dealt with. She expects him to support her and to help improve the pedagogical work, and that they will discuss things. She also expects that her voice and the voices of the group leaders are heard. She says:

That he gives me feedback on what works well, but also what one must address. And that he supports. So that he supported and helped to lift the academic, I expect. (Interviewee no. 5)

Interviewee no. 6 says that he expects the superior to be available when he needs her, for her to see him and his work, and that she is responsive and gets to grips with any problems he encounters.

Discussion

The directors in this survey are clear about their expectations of themselves and their role. They are concerned with their personnel responsibility and with ensuring that the staff have an opportunity to develop professionally, participate in decisions, and work together as a team. Thus, the directors demonstrate a leadership view we recognise from recent definitions of the term, i.e. leadership is seen as interactions and processes, where the focus is on personnel development and where the collective is more important than the individual (Kirkhaug, 2019). They also emphasise the pedagogical aspects of their leadership role and point out that it is important to promote the mandate of ECEC centres and the children's welfare. This may indicate that they are concerned with the aspects of leadership that are different from those with which

management are concerned. Some are concerned with maintaining a high and clear profile, which can also be interpreted as meaning that they are more concerned with leadership than with management, since being a role model and providing feedback are important aspects of leadership.

The directors' immediate superiors also exercise leadership. The directors in this survey focus on the pedagogical aspects: they want superiors with whom they can discuss pedagogical issues. In their opinion, their superiors at the owner level should focus on pedagogical follow-up of the directors and help them to do a good pedagogical job. That is interesting, since it also seems to be important to them to have autonomy. These directors seem to want to have superiors who support them in pedagogical issues, while they also want to retain their autonomy.

In the definition of leadership presented above, it was stated that 'leadership is about being able to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute to an efficient organisation through interaction and cooperation'. It seems that the directors want—and to some extent have—superiors who lead in accordance with this interpretation of leadership. They want more time to be devoted to pedagogical discussions at directors' meetings, and they want frequent contact about pedagogical issues through individual contact. However, several of them point out that their superiors have limited time. It is very important that those above the directors in the leadership hierarchy are available and approachable. This is also important as a trust-building practice model on the part of the superior, who is in an asymmetrical position (Paulsen, 2019).

The directors' leadership style and cooperation with their superiors can be viewed from a professional practice perspective. The theoretical part of this chapter referred to four conditions for professionals' exercise of professional judgement: legitimacy, trust, authority, and autonomy (Brante, 2014). Through the directors' expectations of themselves, we observe that this is something they are concerned with. The interviewees also point out that they have professional autonomy, that their superiors trust them, and that they have legitimacy and professional authority.

At the same time, they are clear that they need to cooperate with their superior on pedagogical issues. In fact, it is pedagogical leadership that they highlight as the primary issue they need to discuss with

their superior. This gives cause to ask whether this indicates that the directors have less autonomy in their exercise of pedagogical leadership, or whether the role of director has become so extensive that many feel a need for more support in this work. The report *The kindergarten teaching profession – present and future* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) points out that the directors' role as knowledge managers is stronger than before. This responsibility demands the capacity and competence to exercise pedagogical leadership. The need for more support in the pedagogical leadership context could be related to this.

One of the directors has a superior who is not a trained kindergarten teacher and who does not have pedagogical responsibility. Many directors in Norway currently find themselves in the same situation. There are also many directors whose superiors are not trained kindergarten teachers, but who nevertheless have pedagogical responsibility. It would be very interesting to learn more about this. What characterises cooperation in these relationships, and how do the directors perceive this cooperation?

The leadership responsibility certainly is extensive. ECEC centres traditionally delegate leadership tasks, and with more kindergarten teachers it may be possible to delegate even more tasks. At the same time, increasing demands on ECEC centres from several quarters will increase the pressure and expectations faced by directors. This was also evident in the interview material. The directors pointed out that they need superiors in the municipality who can help them with their pedagogical leadership. ECEC centres are undergoing organisational changes that will impact the exercise of leadership. Such specialised leadership structures raise new questions about leadership processes. How should leadership responsibility be divided between the owner and the director, and between the director and the pedagogical leader? Distributed leadership—as explained above—can be seen as a form of leadership that the directors welcome, where leadership is a matter of cooperation, and perhaps this is necessary, given how the sector is currently developing.

Conclusion

One of the objectives of this survey was to start building knowledge about directors' cooperation with their immediate superiors, or, more specifically, to identify what this cooperation entails, what they want

it to entail, and the impact of that cooperation on the autonomy and freedom of action of directors. The directors are mainly satisfied with their cooperation with their superior. They have regular contact and can contact their superior when a need arises. With the exception of one, all believe that being able to discuss pedagogical issues with their superior is the most important thing. The introduction of a pedagogical leadership level can be seen as an increasing degree of owner involvement, since the directors' immediate superior in the municipality represents the ECEC owner. There is reason to ask how this will influence the overall leadership of ECEC centres and the directors' pedagogical autonomy and freedom of action. Based on this survey, pedagogical leadership seems to be split between several levels, but the directors nevertheless feel that they have retained their freedom of action and autonomy.

In recent years, the Norwegian kindergarten sector has developed more complex leadership structures. This development is likely to continue, and we will probably see even more variation in leadership and management in the sector going forward. More research is necessary also regarding the relationship between directors and their immediate superiors in private ECEC centres.

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