

CHAPTER 7

Team Leadership and Diversity in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care

Cecilie Thun

Oslo Metropolitan University

Abstract

This chapter presents a theoretical discussion of team leadership and the balance between sameness and difference. It draws upon and extends existing literature on team leadership in general, and team leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Norway in particular. In this chapter, I ask: How does the theory on team leadership handle the balance between sameness and difference in a diverse ECEC context?

To help answer this question, the chapter presents an analytical framework in which to discuss dilemmas of team leadership and diversity. Furthermore, it uses insights from literature on diversity management and discusses dilemmas of difference and sameness in organisations. The chapter highlights two shortcomings in mainstream literature on team leadership: leadership and diversity, and power and conflict in organisational culture. Moreover, the ambition is to contribute to theoretical advancement by introducing an intersectional

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approach to the theoretical framework for research on leadership in ECEC in diverse societies.

Keywords: team leadership, diversity management, intersectionality, Norwegian early childhood education and care

Introduction and Background

Norway is an increasingly diverse society, and ECEC institutions are becoming more culturally diverse. In 1970, immigrants accounted for less than 1.5 per cent of the population, whereas in 2021 there were 14.8 per cent immigrants and 3.7 per cent Norwegian-born to immigrant parents in the population (Statistics Norway, 2021). Increased cultural complexity in the population requires more diversity in employees' experience, competencies, and resources (Drange, 2014, p. 1).¹ At the same time, growing attention is being paid to leadership and management in ECEC.² The latest White Paper on ECEC in Norway emphasises the importance of leadership at different levels in the ECEC institutions—provider level, director level, and pedagogical leader level—for quality in ECEC (Meld. St. 6 (2019–2020)). Team organising has become increasingly common in Norwegian ECEC (Lundestad, 2021), and team leadership is viewed as a way of enhancing professionalism and leadership in ECEC (Aasen, 2010, 2018; Gottvassli, 2019). However, there is a lack of studies dealing with diversity management in ECEC institutions, and this chapter aims to close this gap by introducing a multidimensional theoretical perspective on team leadership.

The literature that discusses team leadership in relation to diversity describes it as a double-edged sword (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Hjertø, 2000; Bang, 2008). On the one hand, interdisciplinary competencies as well as diversity in gender, age, ethnicity, education, and work background can be positive because team members complement each other with different views and perspectives. Hence, a diverse team may come up with new and creative ideas. On the other hand, a diverse team may lead to less cohesion and poorer communication and coordination, which in turn may lead to poorer cooperation and a lack of results (Bang, 2008). Thus, the balance between sameness and difference in a team is central to creating effective teams.

In this chapter, I ask: How does the theory on team leadership handle the balance between sameness and difference in a diverse ECEC context?

In order to help answer the main research question, I will present some analytical questions that are drawn from the theoretical debate about diversity management (Holvino & Kamp, 2009) and a theoretical model with four approaches to leadership of diverse working groups (Sandal et al., 2013). The approach is mainly theoretical; I will elaborate on these analytical questions and discuss theoretical dilemmas concerning team leadership and issues of diversity in theory on team leadership in general and team literature in the Norwegian ECEC context in particular.

Firstly, I will present the Norwegian ECEC context, literature on team leadership in ECEC institutions, and literature on diversity management. Secondly, I will outline an analytical framework and use the proposed questions to discuss dilemmas of team leadership and diversity in ECEC institutions in a Norwegian context. Thirdly, I will discuss two shortcomings in mainstream literature on team leadership: leadership and diversity, and power and conflict in the organisational culture. Finally, I will introduce an intersectional perspective to supplement the literature on ECEC leadership in diverse societies.

The Norwegian ECEC Context

In Norway, approximately 40 per cent of employees in ECEC institutions hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.³ ECEC institutions are staffed by pedagogical leaders who are trained kindergarten teachers or who hold comparable qualifications and by assistants without pedagogical training (or who have four-year vocational training at upper secondary level as childcare and youth workers) (Organisation for European Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2015, p. 62). Leadership structures and leadership roles in Norwegian ECEC institutions have been unclear because of a traditionally flat structure in which pedagogical tasks and responsibilities are performed according to the principle of job rotation, not professional competency or formal position (Aasen, 2018; Gotvassli, 2019). Hence, the kindergarten teacher's professional competency has been rendered invisible. In recent years, ECEC institutions have become larger and are organised more hierarchically (Larsen & Slåtten, 2020), but the culture of not emphasising professional pedagogical competency still prevails (Aasen, 2010, p. 294). Pedagogical leaders may face the dilemma of identifying more closely with their co-workers (with-

out pedagogical training) than with their profession, which may impair pedagogical quality (Aasen, 2010, p. 296). Eik et al. (2015) support this claim and show that ECEC directors and pedagogical leaders do not use professional language because of the traditionally flat structure.

Team Leadership

In their much-cited 1993 article, Katzenbach and Smith define a team as ‘a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable’ (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 45). Aasen (2010, 2018) has written about team leadership in a Norwegian ECEC context, and she defines team leadership as ‘a professional and relational activity that takes place in interaction with others where the intention is to contribute to the achievement of goals through others’ (Aasen, 2010, p. 300, my translation). Team leadership is viewed as an opportunity to highlight pedagogical competencies and to use the team’s complementary competencies (Aasen, 2010). An important leadership task is to map and take full advantage of the different competencies of team members by coordinating and using them adequately.

The literature on team leadership in Norwegian ECEC focuses on team organising as inclusive and democratic, and as a way of enhancing professionalism and leadership in ECEC (Aasen, 2010, 2018; Gottvassli, 2019). The emphasis on leadership and the value of professional knowledge has been important in the Norwegian ECEC context because of its traditionally flat structure, which has led to unclear leadership structures and roles. Hence, the literature on team leadership has been a valuable contribution to ECEC. However, the demographic changes in Norwegian society that are leading to a more diverse workforce call for a more nuanced view of difference. In literature on team leadership, diversity is mainly concentrated on differences in competencies, not on other dimensions of difference such as gender, ethnicity, or culture. There is, however, a vast literature on diversity management, and I will turn to that below.

Diversity Management

Diversity management (DM) can be described as a ‘strategy aimed to get excluded minorities better represented in employment’ (Wrench, 2007). Usually, it refers to ethnic minorities and immigrants and addresses cultural diversity, but it can also include other categories of difference, such as gender and ethnicity (Drange, 2014, p. 3). In the United States, diversity management became part of the organisation and management discourse in the late 1980s, and crossed over to Europe almost 10 years later, arriving in Scandinavia around the turn of the millennium. The introduction of DM was related to neoliberalism, and the business case for DM articulated increasing competitiveness, efficiency, and economic gain as a reason for greater diversity (Holvino & Kamp, 2009). In the Scandinavian countries, with their relatively limited experience of immigration, DM has primarily been conceived of as ‘a means to integrate ethnic minorities in the labour market’ (Holvino & Kamp, 2009, p. 396).

Diversity management is viewed as a positive approach that includes more than just anti-discrimination; organisations must be proactive and must create equal opportunities for all employees (Drange, 2014, p. 3). In a review of diversity management literature in the Norwegian context, Drange (2014) finds an emphasis on respect and tolerance, as well as on flexibility and openness to new perspectives. In addition, the literature on diversity management reflects a wish to develop a new, inclusive organisational culture. Brenna and Solheim (2018) define diversity management as ‘the leader’s ability to construct a common identity and a strong, inclusive culture by starting with the commonalities and acknowledge the differences as a strength’ (Brenna & Solheim, 2018, p. 187, my translation). Moreover, diversity management is about recognising cultural differences, valuing people’s differences, and making practical allowances for such differences. It is seen as an inclusive policy that encompasses the interests of all employees, not just those of excluded or underrepresented groups.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

In the following, I will outline an analytical framework in which to discuss team leadership and diversity in Norwegian ECEC institutions. In order to help answer the main research question—How does the

theory on team leadership handle the balance between sameness and difference in a diverse ECEC context?—I will present some analytical questions below. These questions are sub-questions and operationalisations of the overall research question. My approach is to use insights from the theoretical debate about diversity management (Holvino & Kamp, 2009) and the conceptual framework on leadership applied by Sandal et al. (2013). Existing theory can be used as ‘a coat’—a high-level theory—or a ‘spotlight’ (Collins & Stockton 2018, p. 4). I will utilise the latter approach and propose some analytical questions that can shed light on the theoretical literature on team leadership.

My method is to elaborate on these analytical questions and discuss theoretical dilemmas concerning team leadership and issues of diversity in theory on team leadership in general and team literature in the Norwegian ECEC context in particular. The analytical questions are applied in order to identify strengths and weaknesses (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p. 5).

How is Diversity Legitimised in the Organisation?

What kinds of differences are valued? Milliken & Martins (1996, p. 404) differentiate between observable diversity (such as race, ethnic background, age, and gender) and non-observable diversity (such as education, technical skills, functional background, tenure in the organisation, socioeconomic background, personality characteristics, and value types). They claim that differences between people that are visible are particularly likely to evoke responses that are directly influenced by biases, prejudices, or stereotypes.

What kind of leadership style? Sandal et al. (2013) differentiate between four leadership styles: assimilating leadership, segregated leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and diversity leadership/management. Assimilating leadership entails a low degree of awareness about cultural differences, and the leader expects employees to adjust to the dominant culture. In addition, the assimilating leader prioritises professional background and work experience over cultural background and life experience (Drange, 2014, p. 13). The leader who practises segregated leadership is aware of cultural differences among their employees but does not facilitate cross-cultural interactions. The aim is to avoid potential conflicts in cultural meetings that can impair effectiveness in the organisation. The laissez-faire leader is passive, absent,

and evasive, and the result is the same as for assimilating leadership. The leader who practises diversity management is aware of different cultural backgrounds and facilitates interaction between different employees. This leader values different perspectives and experiences, as well as different competencies.

What Is the View of Power and Conflict in the Organisation?

Individual differences or group differences? A focus on individual differences may individualise inequality (Holvino & Kamp, 2009). The literature on diversity management has been criticised for its lack of a power perspective, as well as for its focus on individuals. The view that we are all different, and that all individuals are unique, however, can lead to a risk of losing structural power differences at group level (Drange, 2014, p. 4).

Focus on harmony or conflict? The double-edged sword discussed in the literature on team leadership and diversity (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Hjertø, 2000; Bang, 2008) emphasises different views and perspectives in diverse teams as positive contributions to new and creative ideas. However, a diverse team may lead to less cohesion and poorer communication and coordination, which in turn may lead to poorer cooperation and a lack of results (Bang, 2008). One might argue that diversity and conflicting views are fine as long as they 'enrich' the organisation, but not if they challenge the status quo. Diversity is regarded as a resource, but managers have the power to define what the problematic sides are, thus 'implying that some elements of diversity will be welcomed and others not' (Holvino & Kamp, 2009, p. 399). The consequence may be that existing privileges and power relations will be maintained (ibid.).

Findings and Discussion

Leadership and Diversity

Team leadership is viewed as an opportunity to highlight pedagogical competencies and to use the team's complementary competencies (Aasen, 2010, 2018; Gottvassli, 2019). An important leadership task is to map and take full advantage of the different competencies of team members by coordinating and using them adequately. Team organ-

ising focuses on differences in competencies, and the goal is to take advantage of complementary competencies in the team in order to reach common goals and contribute to better quality in ECEC institutions. Only the leader—with formal professional knowledge—can lead the work of implementation and evaluation. Co-influence, as opposed to co-determination, is important in teamwork, and all team members have competencies that will benefit the team (Aasen, 2010).

In the literature on team leadership in ECEC institutions, the focus is not on observable diversity, but rather on professional qualifications and roles in the organisation. Thus, cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity driven by demographic changes in Norwegian society are not emphasised. The theoretical concept of team leadership in an ECEC context—with a focus on differences in competencies—seems to be closest to the assimilating leadership style, because differences in cultural background, etc. are underplayed (Sandal et al., 2013). The assimilating leader prioritises professional background and work experience over cultural background and life experience. Hence, assimilating leadership entails a low degree of awareness about cultural differences, and the leader expects employees to adjust to the dominant culture (*ibid.*). This is in line with previous research on Norwegian leaders in other sectors, which indicates that Norwegian leaders have an ‘assimilating’ leadership in which cultural differences are seldom addressed (Drange, 2014, p. 60). The results indicate that leaders in Norway highlight professional competency, and that other differences between the employees are a lesser issue (*ibid.*).

The focus on sameness and on the blind spot regarding demographic differences may be understood in a wider Norwegian (and Scandinavian) context. The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad has described the Norwegian principle of equality as ‘sameness’. Gullestad (2006) points to a central value concept *likhet*, meaning, ‘likeness’, ‘similarity’, ‘identity’, or ‘sameness’. *Likhet* is the most common translation of ‘equality’, implying that social actors must consider themselves as more or less the same in order to feel of equal value. This logic often leads to an interaction style in which commonalities are emphasised while differences are played down. Other studies also confirm the notion of ‘Norwegianness’ as a narrow term (Thun, 2013), and the same is found in relation to a narrow conception of ‘Danishness’ (Holvino & Kamp, 2009).

To grapple with this blind spot concerning sameness, insights from the literature on diversity management can be useful. However, as pointed out by Holvino and Kamp (2009), diversity management, with its focus on difference, can be difficult to apply to a context where 'equality is equated with sameness' (Holvino & Kamp, 2009, p. 397). Accordingly, insights from diversity management can help us gain an awareness about blind spots, but they do not provide the whole answer. Furthermore, diversity management literature also has to handle dilemmas of sameness–difference and of power and conflict (Holvino & Kamp, 2009).

Power and Conflict

The literature on team leadership in the ECEC context places emphasis on the leader's task of coordinating different competencies (Aasen, 2018; Gottvassli, 2019). The emphasis is on a team's complementary competencies, and the team leader is responsible for mapping and coordinating each team member's competencies and for using these different competencies to benefit the team. However, a focus on individual competencies in ECEC institutions may obscure biases, prejudices, or stereotypes at group level and risk reproducing gendered stereotypes as well as cultural stereotypes in the organisational culture. In addition, one can argue that differences in ECEC teams are positive if different perspectives and competencies can complement each other, but that too much diversity may lead to conflict and impede common goals. The underlying assumption is that too much diversity will damage a common organisational culture (Holvino & Kamp, 2009).

According to Adler, Forbes, and Willmott (2007), research on teamwork views diversity in the workforce as a factor that can help or hinder effective teamwork, and if it impedes it, research should address how the problem can be solved.

This blind spot concerning power and conflict in organisational culture can be linked to a functionalist bias in mainstream team management literature.⁴ Functionalism is defined as a 'theoretical approach that explains social phenomena in terms of what purpose ("function") they serve' (Vivanco, 2018). According to Sułkowski (2010), functionalism in management leads to the separation of a set of complementary organisational functions, supporting the activity of the whole organisation. The organisation member has a 'function'—a specific activity

in the activities of the whole. Moreover, harmony is the ideal, and the issue of power is undertheorised within this perspective.

In the literature on team leadership in ECEC, there is not an explicit functionalist perspective. However, the legacy of mainstream team literature may imply an undertheorising of issues such as power and conflict.

Shortcomings

The analysis and discussion regarding the balance between sameness and difference above reveals some theoretical shortcomings concerning team leadership and diversity, and power and conflict in organisational culture. Team leadership has been imported from the business context, and one can argue that the conceptual framework has been adopted without reviewing the critical discussions about the literature on teamwork, for instance from a gender perspective (e.g. Metcalfe & Linstead, 2003), a class perspective (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998), and more generally from critical management studies (e.g. Adler et al., 2007). In the following, I will explore the concept of intersectionality as a means to grapple with multiple differences and power differences in organisations.

Difference, Diversity, and Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical approach that addresses the heterogeneity within identity categories and gives us an opportunity to understand the complex reality of multiple differences and inequalities in management and organisations (Dennissen et al., 2018). The concept of intersectionality has not been much developed in studies of organisations. However, according to Hearn and Louvrier (2015), it ‘challenges any simple approach to, or prescription of, promoting “diversity”’ (Hearn & Louvrier, 2015, p. 63). Intersectionality can be defined as the interaction between multiple categories of difference (Davis, 2008), and an intersectional perspective views gender, ethnicity, class, and other categories of difference as intersecting. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term ‘intersectionality’, arguing that the oppression of and discrimination against black women cannot be understood by considering gender or race/racialisation alone; the two are intersecting.

An intersectional approach explores how categories of difference are intertwined and mutually constitutive, and how a power perspective is essential (Davis, 2008). In the Scandinavian context, an intersectional approach has been applied in order to explore intersecting social categories and power differences from a constructionist view (Gullikstad, 2013). Categories are seen as dynamic and changeable, not predetermined and stable. Moreover, the analytic approach recognises the power differences in minoritising and majoritising processes (Staunæs, 2003). Thus, an intersectional approach to management and diversity might seek to avoid constructing generalisations about groups such as women or ethnic minorities. Consequently, an intersectional diversity programme would highlight not only gender but also intersections with age, ethnicity, and other differences (Hearn & Louvrier, 2015).

An intersectional perspective can address social categories of difference and inequality because it sees differences as intimately related to existing power relationships in society (Hearn & Louvrier, 2015, p. 64). Accordingly, insights from theories on intersectionality can help us explore issues related to power and conflict and to the difference–sameness dilemma by addressing how differences simultaneously interact in specific contexts, and the connections between individual identities and structural inequalities (Holvino & Kamp, 2009, p. 398). ECEC institutions are not isolated entities; broader societal structures, such as race, class, gender, and other categories of difference play a role in structuring social interactions within the organisation. An intersectional approach can address multiple levels of difference—individual, group, organisational, and societal—and how each of these is embedded in broader contexts from which it derives meaning (Holvino & Kamp, 2009).

Implication

The findings in this chapter point to some theoretical ‘blind spots’ in the literature on team leadership. Consequently, I have introduced an intersectional approach as a contribution to the theoretical framework for research on leadership in ECEC institutions. This relatively new theoretical perspective in leadership and organisations research may contribute to exploring possibilities for and obstacles to creating inclusive team leadership and inclusive organisational cultures in diverse Norwegian ECEC institutions.

Conclusion

The emphasis on leadership and the value of professional knowledge has been important in the Norwegian ECEC context because of its traditionally flat structure, which has led to unclear leadership structures and roles. The literature on team leadership has been a valuable contribution to ECEC. However, the demographic changes in Norwegian society that are leading to a more diverse workforce call for a more nuanced view of difference. The analysis in this chapter regarding how theory on team leadership might handle the balance between sameness and difference suggests shortcomings concerning team leadership and diversity and power and conflict in organisational culture. I have outlined an intersectional approach to differences as a way to address some shortcomings related to diversity and intersecting aspects of inequality. The aim of this chapter has been to build on previous literature on team leadership in ECEC as well as to develop a theoretical approach that allows for more critical analysis. It is hoped that this contribution will create a space for extending the existing literature on leadership in ECEC.

Notes

- 1 Kindergarten teachers with immigrant background account for 8.9 per cent and assistants with an immigrant background for 19.7 per cent (Statistics Norway, 2019).
- 2 Leadership is related to establishing direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring them, whereas management is mainly about planning, budgeting, organising, staffing, controlling, and problem-solving. These concepts can also be used synonymously (Kotter, 1990, pp. 3–6). This chapter refers to different theoretical traditions and will use these concepts interchangeably.
- 3 <https://web.archive.org/web/20220705091735/https://www.bufdir.no/Statistikk-og-analyse/oppvekst/Barnehage-og-skole/Ansatte-i-barnehage-skole/>
- 4 Sułkowski (2010, p. 110) differentiates between two main paradigms in management epistemology: the functional–systemic perspective and the symbolic–interpretative perspective.

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