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Early Childhood Educational and Care Institutions as Learning Organizations

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ABSTRACT: Official documents state that all Early Childhood Educational and Care Institutions in Norway should aspire to become learning organizations. In this paper, we analyze governance models in Early Childhood Educational and Care Institutions and look at how leaders interpret and act on this new mission to become learning organizations. We find that there are significant differences in the way managers interpret the concept of a learning organization, and that managers are relatively unclear as to how to utilize this approach when developing pedagogical work. Although managers have developed practices that largely incorporate the key aspects of those of a learning organization they do not necessarily recognize these as part of building deliberate and conscious organizational strategy.

Keywords: *Learning organization, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), leadership, organizational practice*

Introduction — From Quantity to Quality

In recent years, the Norwegian Early Childhood Educational and Care (ECEC) sector has undergone major changes. An increase in the need for delivery of services and an expansion of the number of ECEC institutions, combined with a shortage of competent

staff, has been key challenges in the sector. The rise in number of ECEC institutions has also been coupled with a stronger emphasis on quality of services (Windsvold & Gulbrandsen, 2009; Vassenden et. al., 2001, Gulbrandsen & Eliassen, 2013). A policy objective has been to ensure that all children have an equal daycare quality (Government Report No. 41 20082009 - Quality in ECEC instiions), and an important means of achieving this quality is through continuous learning and skill development.

A number of government reports and other sources indicate that staff competence is key to improving the quality of Norwegian ECEC institutions (Borg, Kristiansen & Backe--Hansen, 2008; Government report. No. 41 2008-2009; Hessen Schei & Kviststad 2012; Sollien, 2011; Vassenden, Thygesen, Bayer, Alvestadholmen & Abrahamsen, 2011; Windsvold & Gulbrandsen 2009; Moser, Pettersvold, Jansen & Dudas, 2006). The revised national curriculum for the ECEC sector (2011, p. 22) also states, that "Quality development in ECEC institutions involve a constant development of staff competence". Based on a review of the documents in this area there seems to be a consensus among politicians and professionals that staff is a key factor for quality development in ECEC institutions' practice and content. If one wish to influence the quality of day care services a first step is to examine the organization's goals and strategies, what do we want out of the ECEC institutions? Based on this, we can then identify the need for expertise, design various useful strategies, and develop and mobilize expertise. This will in turn provide learning both at the individual and organizational level, which will lead to changes in the practice and quality of ECEC institutions (Gotvassli, 2013).

Learning at the organizational level is emphasized in the national curriculum from 2006 and 2011. Through this plan, the term ECEC institutions as learning organizations is introduced into the sector.

> *As an important educational institution in society ECEC institutions must be in a process of change and development. The ECEC should be a learning organization prepared to meet new demands and challenges. Quality development in ECEC institutions involves continuous development of staff.*
>
> > *(Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.16)*

In Government Report. No. 24 (2012 - 2013) *Tomorrow's ECEC* the importance of being a learning organization is restated (p. 62):

> *As an important educational institution in society the ECEC should be a learning organization with a knowledge- based management.*

Despite the emphasis put on developing ECEC institutions into learning organizations, the national curriculum and other documents do not clarify the concept of what it means for the ECEC institution to become a learning organization. It is interesting to note that although the concept of a learning ECEC is held up as an important concept, the concept is not defined, elaborated upon, nor explained. Policy simply states that the ECEC *must* be a learning organization. This means that those who work in these organizations, to a large extent, must themselves interpret the concept and identify practice and working methods that promote the development of the ECEC institution as a learning organization. This new challenge raises two important questions:

1. How do managers in ECEC institutions interpret the concept of a learning organization, and how do they characterize ECEC institutions as learning organizations?

2. How can ECEC institutions evolve to become learning organizations?

In this paper we give an overview of key historical and philosophical discussions of knowledge development—outlining different epistemological understandings of knowledge, what knowledge is and how knowledge can be developed in organizations. We explore the link between knowledge development and the concept of the learning organization, and look at how managers in ECEC institutions understand the concept of a learning organization, and how they work to translate policy recommendations into practice in ECEC institutions.

The learning organization and knowledge development - different approaches

Early on Peter Drucker (1959) and Edith Penrose (1959) pointed to the importance of knowledge as an important factor for organizational competitiveness. The concept of the learning organization, however, was not actively in use until the end of the 1980s (Pedler et al. 1991).

Eventually, knowledge management, learning organizations, and other related concepts were adopted and used by both organizational theorists and practitioners (Irgens and Wennes, 2011). The core of the field must be regarded as interest for knowledge in organizations; how knowledge is perceived, how knowledge can be identified, developed, managed, stored and shared. Apart from this common core, there is a wide range of different views on how knowledge can be developed in organizations and on

how to develop practices which are in line with those of learning organizations. An important foundation for creating a learning organization is related to the view of knowledge and knowledge development in organizations. An important point is that if we are to create a learning ECEC, we must examine different views on what knowledge is and how we develop knowledge in ECEC institutions as organizations.

In order to understand the concept of the learning organization it is important to focus on the nature of knowledge. The debate about the nature of knowledge has its roots in philosophical and historical traditions (Brubacher, 1966, pp. 98-134). The epistemological debate has been between rationalism on the one hand and pragmatism on the other hand. Pragmatism represents a view of knowledge that emphasizes practice–based knowledge—the acquisition of knowledge through induction and experience. Another term for the distinction between these two different perspectives is knowledge development through rational processes—the rational perspective—versus knowledge developed through social and cultural processes—the sociocultural perspective. Some have also outline a 'third way' of thinking of knowledge production (Elkjær, 2004)—focusing on intuition and emotions as a source of knowledge and knowledge development. As such we can speak of three different approaches to knowledge production: the rational perspective, the socio- cultural perspective, and emphasis on learning through intuition and emotion (Gotvassli, 2007).

The rational perspective

The rational perspective is based on understanding knowledge in *a rational perspective* or *structural perspective*. Knowledge is something individuals and organizations possess, and it can be identified, processed and disseminated to others. The theories of Garrat (1990) and Pedler (1997) emphasize the development of management and information systems to promote knowledge storage and knowledge sharing. Central to this thinking is the use knowledge bases for storage and subsequent sharing of knowledge in organizations.

This approach is often seen in traditional methods of human resource development, in lectures, instructions, plans, checklists and other formal and structured methods of knowledge development. A typical procedure may be a day course on the topic of how to encourage friendships among children, where you would go through various theoretical contributions on the topic and conclude with a presentation on how to establish a structured way to facilitate working with this issue in the ECEC.

The sociocultural perspective

The *socio-cultural* or *process-oriented* perspective sees knowledge development in organizations not only as the mental processes of individuals, but also as participation in social situations related to practical work in the organization. This thinking is developed further in theories of learning in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Practice communities are the building block of social learning systems where skills are developed and stored. Such social systems are characterized by joint initiatives, mutual engagement and shared repertoire of actions, concepts, stories and discussions. Communities develop as a result of an exchange of expertise and personal experiences in an environment characterized by a shared commitment to developing practice. As such, the process of knowledge development will be dynamic as it is negotiated. These views recur in contributions from Argyris and Schon (1978). Important are concepts such as, knowledge through action and the use of reflection in developing work practices, knowledge development through reflection-based communities, and the use of experiential learning.

Research on ECEC institutions (Gotvassli, 2006) and other professions (Filstad, 2010) shows that a lot of informal learning takes place in reflection-based communities. Informal learning seems to be characterized by the following:

1. Each employee works on tasks and develops knowledge about how to solve concrete tasks
2. Colleagues observe their colleagues while performing tasks
3. Colleagues discuss, comment, and talk a lot with each other about how various tasks can be solved
4. Employees performing the tasks together

Formal learning often takes place outside of the social context, and the challenge is to integrate formal learning with the exercise of practical work and informal learning.
Making a connection between formal and informal learning is dependent on the individual employee finding formal knowledge relevant and applicable to solving concrete tasks and challenges in the workplace.

The socio- cultural understanding of knowledge and knowledge development focuses on organizational forms of expertise such as experiential learning, skills training and mentoring connected to the work of the ECEC. If we return to the example of development of knowledge on the theme of children's friendships, common procedures could be the use of practical stories as the bases of reflection among members of the staff group. What have we experienced? Which experiences have been good, and which

have been less so? How do we develop pedagogical practice based on the positive experiences we have generated in our ECEC?

Intuition and emotion

The third perspective emphasizes *personal experience through the use of intuition and emotions* as a basis for learning and development (Finemann, 2003; Elkjær 2004). Aristotle refers to this knowledge form as *phronesis* or *practical wisdom* (Gustavsson, 2000). Løvli (2009) says that these are wise actions that go beyond the learning of skills and theoretical knowledge, they involve creating something here and now from our personal, and often tacit, knowledge, our experiences, intuition, improvisation, and through the exercise of discretion. Hessen Schei and Kvistad (2012) find this practical wisdom at work among ECEC teachers in community-practice-based networks: to share and reflect, based on different perspectives, helping each other to see their own practice and ECEC in new ways.

A discussion of the importance of intuition and emotions in different contexts in the ECEC is also important here. Intuition implies a thought process that ends up providing an answer, a solution or an idea, without considerable effort or of awareness of the process behind (Kirkebøen, 2012). A discussion on the development of practical wisdom also includes our ability to *mentalize*, that is, our ability to imagine other people's mentality through models of the brain (Arnulf, 2012).This makes us capable of organizing and planning with others - both adults and children - in the ECEC. Working with different kinds of stories, also referred to as narratives, is an important part of the process of *mentalizing*—using different types of documentation of pedagogical activity in the ECEC when developing *practical* wisdom.

In the Table 1 below, we have summarized the three different epistemological positions and perspectives on knowledge development in ECEC institutions — based on framework of understanding, view of knowledge, and the methods and procedures for developing knowledge belonging to the different perspectives.

As presented here, it the different epistemological positions represent three distinctly different perspectives (and knowledge development processes) which are quite independent of each other. We can however imagine that it is possible to develop a productive interplay where a researcher can consciously choose the most fitting categories among the different perspectives depending on which kind of knowledge they wish to develop. The question is whether one can form productive interchanges

between the different types of knowledge, and how one can develop a more dynamic and situation-oriented model for developing learning in ECEC institutions?

TABLE 1 Different epistemological positions and perspectives on knowledge development (Gotvassli, 2013)

	The rational perspective	The sociocultural perspective	Intuition and emotion
Understanding Frame	Possession of individuals Can be described and mapped	Embedded in social practice. Negotiated in practice	Tactfulness and the exercise of discretion. Intuition, improvisation, and emotion
Key concepts	Episteme Explicit knowledge Knowledge claims	Techne Often tacit knowledge Skill-based knowledge	Phronesis Practical wisdom
Views on knowledge	Functionalist Knowledge can be identified, assessed and distributed to others.	Knowledge as part of practical skills Important to share in practice communities	Importance of sharing and reflection Intuition and mentalizing
Key theoretical contributions	Knowledge Management Management and Information Systems	The Knowledge Spiral: Nonaka & Takeuchi Practice communities: Wenger, Lave and Wenger	The reflective practitioner : Schön The Phenomenology of the Body, the living body : Merleau - Ponty The reflective practitioner Expert Intuition : Kahnemann
Methods and procedures for knowledge	Theories, methods and practices. Lectures, instruction, traditional courses and training forms	Skills training, work sharing knowledge related to the field of practice, guidance, learning in teams and, learning based on shared experience.	Working in networks including practical stories. Reflection in practice. Action learning methods. Long-term and procedural measures over time. Motivational strategies with a focus on intuition

Although to the learning organization are many, we see that they also share some crucial assumptions. First, they all agree that organizational learning is different from individual learning. Second, it is typical that in a learning organization we see a change in mental attitude — a rearrangement of mental maps — on how challenges in the

internal and external environment are perceived and interpreted. This change in attitude is collective and permeates the organization.

The learning organization and knowledge development - summarized

A number of different concepts and theories attempt to explain the development of the learning organization (Filstad, 2010), and the majority of these are related to learning as embedded in everyday practice and in the workings of the organization. Our research questions focus on understanding what characterizes work in learning organizations. More specifically we look at how managers view managerial practice in ECEC institutions, and whether they experience their practices as characteristic of learning organizations. We also examine and discuss how ECEC institutions can evolve into learning types of organizations.

An example of integrating different views on the development of a learning organization is Peter Senge's work, particularly his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* (1990). In this book, Senge provides us with a particularly potent definition of what a learning organization is:

> *Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create 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 how to learn together .*

> *(Senge, 1990, p 3)*

While Argyris & Schön (1978) can be criticized for promoting a reactive view of learning and development—describing correction of behavior as a result of experience, Senge (1990) presents us with a more proactive view on organizations and learning. Senge argues that the organization must be managed through *creative tension* and not through unilateral problem solving. Creative tension is the gap between the organization's vision/objectives and reality. The proactive attitude is reflected in an approach that is based on a will to create a desired future for both individuals and the organization. Investigating the underlying causes to the difference between vision and reality is the strongest driver in what Senge refers to as *generative learning*. Senge builds on the work of Argyris and Schön on double circuit learning, but argues that the triggering factors for organizational learning are different than the ones identified by Argyris and Schön. Argyris and Schön describe one of the main triggers as finding solutions to problems

that arise while Senge argues that simply the desire to create an attractive future –a vision—can be a driving force in organizational learning (Senge, 1990).

Senge describes the development of the learning organization through work with five *disciplines*. He uses the term discipline to describe subject areas, knowledge and skills that must be developed and mastered. The five disciplines are: Personal mastery, Shared vision, Mental models, Learning in teams, and System Thinking. While traditional learning theory focuses on past experience and the here-and-now, *personal mastery* focuses on mastering a desired future situation. That means learning ECEC institutions work with future visions, goals and emphasizing what is needed to meet long-term goals. *Shared vision* is the collection of the aspirations of groups at the organizational level. Individual and value-based objectives form a common understanding of the goals of the collective. Senge describes the development of a shared vision as a process that is based on vertical communication and bottom- up processes. *Mental models* are representations of the fundamental conceptions of the organization. This discipline's mission is to bring forward ideas that are often unconscious and not articulated, but they govern behavior. Ideas must be highlighted, discussed and subjected to critical evaluation. One example of such basic ideas may be educational principles. The fourth discipline is *learning in teams*. Much learning in organizations consists of what we might call instruction. Some have more information than others and they instruct, providing others with the right answers. Learning in teams, however, is based on dialogue and exploration of a range of possible answers and solutions. This means that much learning in ECEC institutions take the form of collective reflection-based processes related to the staff's practical experiences. At last, *System Thinking*, or the holistic approach, is required in order for the disciplines to not represent single actions, unrelated to each other, with no overall direction.

One goal of our research is to look at how managers work and to what extent they incorporate these kinds of disciplinary forms of thinking into their managerial practice. We are interested in understanding how managers interpret and incorporate different kinds of subject areas, and which kinds of knowledge and skills they see as important to developing the ECEC as an organization that is susceptible to change and flexible in its approach to learning.

Method and sample

Our sample consists of 10 interviews with managers of ECEC institutions from two municipalities in Nord-Trøndelag, Norway—one relatively large urban municipality and one smaller rural municipality. In the sample there are 6 public and 4 private ECEC institutions . The size of the ECEC varies from ca. 20 children up to about 100 children.

In this paper, we rely primary rely on this interview data to highlight when discussing management and knowledge development practices the ECEC. The interviews were part of a larger study on the role of management in the ECEC as part of the research project *Management for Learning*: *Challenges in ECEC institutions in Norway*. The project focuses on the following key questions: *How are the ECEC institutions increased responsibility for children's learning addressed by different forms of governance and management of the ECEC sector?*

The interviews were conducted based on a semi- structured interview guide that addressed different themes regarding management practices in the ECEC.
The interviews ranged from approximately 1 hour to just over 1 ½ hours. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. This gave a total of a data base of about 400 pages. The interviews were coded using NviVO—a software program for analysis of qualitative data. The analysis was based on a stepwise- deductive induction approach, going from raw data to concepts or theories (Tjora 2010). During the coding and analysis, we tried not to be focused on confirming or refute theoretical models or assumptions. The purpose of the study is not to achieve results that are statistically representative, but rather to analyze data from a field that has not been explored and, if possible, develop concepts and theories that can be explored further in more elaborate studies which can address statistical significance.

ECEC institutions as a learning organizations — different perceptions

The concept of ECEC institutios as learning organizations has been used in a number of policy documents, plans and textbooks in the ECEC sector since it was introduced into the national curriculum in 2006. As a result, we would expect that managers in the sector had developed a shared understanding of the term and that this understanding has translated into some new form of practice in the ECEC. Based on the responses from our respondents, we do not see that this is the case. When asked to define the term learning organization, or to reflect on the ECEC institution as a learning organization,

our respondents did not appear to have a shared understanding of the term and we got fairly evasive and vague answers. Typical statements here are the following:

> *I do not know if we have - if we have somehow not mentioned much about that , no - just in terms of - the governing meetings and stuff that we 've - we have not … directly defined what it is - no.*
>
> *(Respondent 9)*

This may indicate a poor understanding among the managers of ECEC institutions   of the concept of a learning organization. However, it does not mean that the managers in their practical running of the ECEC do not have developed practices that actively promote the ECEC as a learning organization. If we analyze the answers from respondents we find a number of different patterns that tell us more about how their think of knowledge development and management in the ECEC. We have chosen to categorize the responses into the following main categories:

1. Expressions which are associated with a type of scholarly learning—learning activities that are highly structured and targeted. These activities are geared towards learning in children. Many of our respondents are highly critical of this way of viewing knowledge transfer and learning in the ECEC.
2. Expression which are related to organizational learning and knowledge development among the staff in the ECEC. Knowledge transfer mainly happens through highly structured courses or other instructional training.
3. Expression of the concept linked to a comprehensive view on learning in children based on the child's perspective and a strong integration of care, play and scholarly learning.
4. Some also highlight the use of reflection, educational documentation and the use of networks as instruments to promote organizational learning and staff development in the ECEC.

This categorization provides the following basis (Fig. 1) for discussion of knowledge development and management based on the 10 interviews we have analyzed.

ECEC Institutions as Learning Organizations

Children's learning outcomes

The teacher

Concrete activities, training, testing skills and outcomes

The Integrator

Care, play and learning, focus on holistic learning

Formal learning, structured

Informal learning, flexible

The Consultant

Formal activities, training, courses

The Process Director

Informal learning, reflection, experience-based learning, network groups

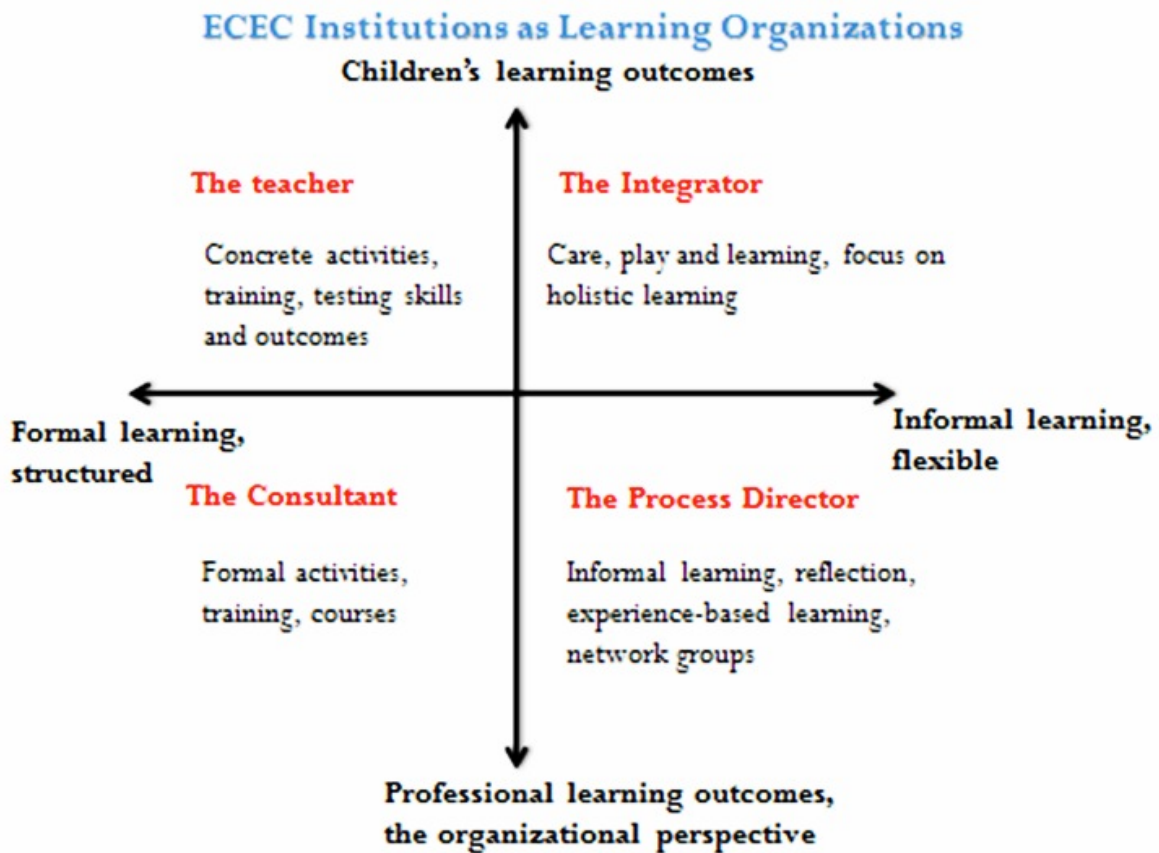Professional learning outcomes, the organizational perspective

FIGURE 1   Conceptualizations of the concept: ECEC institutions as Learning Organizations. Gotvassli and Vannebo (2013)

The vertical dimension indicates various understandings of the concept of the ECEC as a learning organization. Here we distinguish between those that primarily view learning as based on children's learning, and those who understand the concept as describing the importance of staff development and organizational learning in the ECEC, and those who emphasize the importance of learning as a practice- based communal activity. The horizontal dimension refers to the various methods and practices that are currently used to promote learning and knowledge development in the ECEC.

There is a clear distinction between those who emphasize activities that are organized and of a relatively formal character, and those of informal and procedural character. Based on this, we have categorized the different managerial types based on the various forms of organizing knowledge development in the ECEC and their understandings of the concept of the ECEC institution as a learning organization. We will now go through

these various managerial types and illustrate these with examples from our empirical material.

In quadrant 1, we find *the teacher*. This management role focuses on how the ECEC should be more like the school and on the importance of specific and directed learning activities and tasks. It is also important to be able to demonstrate what kids actually learn and that this learning is documented. In our material, we find very little of this kind of attitude. On the contrary, most of our respondents expressed both a strong skepticism and a clear rejection of what they deem as a "scholarly" attitude. The skepticism towards this attitude is clearly expressed here:

> *When 6 -year-olds entered school, it was of course very obvious that they focused on play, and so it went - the first framework plan (2006) - OK - but then came the next framework plan (2011) and it was very … the ancient learning (way of doing things) - to sit quiet, 'sit like that' … We were afraid that we would become a ECEC where children of 4 years of age and would have to sit still and just be learning facts.*

> *(Respondent 1)*

Others also express clearly that the term ECEC as learning organizations should not be associated with the school, and to the extent that it should be structured and scheduled the children's need should be at the center of activities:

> *I interpret it as we are NOT to be a school, however, we should not be afraid to teach. I think that's important—the way we work - if you think about how we have chosen to interpret it …. But at the same time, the perspective we are working with requires that we - the adults—are very structured and planned, but on the children's terms.*

> *(Respondent 2)*

Many also express a great skepticism about the use of tests and measurements of learning goals and skills in the ECEC.

> *What I might be most wary of, is the test culture. The fact that kids will be measured and tested on knowledge and skills, and that is the goal in itself, to conduct testing. And it clashes with my view on humanity, simply. I am concerned that people should be allowed to develop as they are, and not necessarily in relation to others—or that they will fit into the charts—measuring devices are a tool that some smart person has developed (for themselves) …*

> *(Respondent 5)*

In quadrant 2, the focus is on organizational learning—or staff development—through various types of training courses, meetings, of a formal and structured character. *The training consultant* will work to develop the staff competence in relation to the subjects and topics that are important in the ECEC. Although in our study we find few of these types of statements the following statement stand as an example of how managers partially connects the development of a learning organization with formal staff development:

> *And we hear that a lot – There are courses we attend under the auspices of the municipality. And we think that is very important—it's very important and a good learning experience to be a part of these (types of courses).*

> *(Respondent 8)*

A great number of the managers are also skeptical of the benefits of these kinds of courses and other formal training, and highlight the importance of collective learning processes.

> *I think that it is important the kids and the parents, our clients, note that we have been involved in staff development, so it is not enough that we send one or two to courses—that will not do anything with our practice . We all have to have been there and got the knowledge—as the kids they meet the assistant or the skilled worker who works next to them on the floor to them, and the knowledge we have gained, it should be evident (in those interactions) ... They are to - through it 'little meeting' (interaction in play)—how that child is understood, how that child treated—it is there, that is where quality happens...*

> *(Respondent 6)*

In quadrant 3, we find the category managers who are most strongly represented in our material. We have chosen the name this type the *integrator*. The reason for this name is that the managers are very clear that it is through the children's perspective that the relative understanding of the concept of learning, and that it is a holistic approach to learning that should guide knowledge development. Many refer to the national curriculum's emphasis on viewing care, play and learning as a whole, how these three basic elements of learning must be integrated. We have many examples of this attitude, the one below illustrates clearly how many think of their role as a manager in these terms:

> *I've focused on that we should not make this into something big and scary, but rather that we will build on the idea that the most important thing is that the kids learn through the experiences they make, that they learn as they experience.... So then the job for us adults is to make sure that kids get the experiences which will help them develop - develop and learn new skills, gain more knowledge..... The most important has to be the care that is essential, and play. Play is the most important thing for the kids—and at the same time, then*

it is natural learning all the way. But perhaps (learning is) more casual then, you might say, than ... formal.

(Respondent 7)

The emphasis on holistic learning is also viewed in direct contrast to a learning approach which emphasizes structure and factual learning.

I say that learning—it is not that you sort - this is not learning that you can say that this one is red and this one is purple—this is not the kind of learning I think of when you say a learning organization. You are supposed to learn – be learning - to constantly develop, in order to be a decent human being.

(Respondent 10)

In quadrant 4 the major focus is on the organization and on staff development, as well as the use of various venues for learning. Concepts such as experiential learning, the use of different forms of reflection, networking groups, and the development of tacit knowledge is typical of this managerial type as *the process director* is more a facilitator, a mentor and a guide rather than someone who structures learning in a particular way . One example of this view we find in the following statement:

A learning organization. Well ... It is an organization that is constantly developing....Together—not just through me governing, I need to bring others with me and they get to move the process on. I think that the whole organization, that all the staff here from assistant to pedagogical leader and manager, we are together applying the knowledge

(Respondent 3)

The use of reflection groups and sharing experiences is highlighted by many managers as ways one can work to promote organizational learning and knowledge development in ECEC institutions .

We have worked a lot with reflection, and I think - that - when you take a real look at it you become aware of the tacit knowledge: Why do we do what we do? What do we have here? Simply ... practice stories, when someone presents these, and we reflect, discuss them: what really happens then, what do you think about that (situation)?

(Respondent 4)

Learning is when we change behavior - that we actually do things differently than we did before. We did a lot in a project (they have been working on in this particular ECEC) when we were looking at quality in our relational processes. We made practice stories, and we watched each other, we gave each other feedback. And it was this way that we managed to see those little examples of

how we actually did things a little differently than we had done before …
through those little practical stories, through small examples.

(Respondent 7)

Concluding discussion

In summary, we find some distinct patterns in our material. First, a lot of the managers have relatively vague and imprecise understandings of the term ECEC institutions as learning organizations. Their answers are tentative and elusive. Since the term ECEC institutions as learning organizations is central to policy—and to documents and textbooks concerning policy development in the ECEC—it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the concept is perceived of in this way. On the other hand, neither the national curriculum nor the ECEC act elaborates on or defines the concept as it pertains to ECEC institutions. In policy documents the concept is primarily linked to organizational development and staff's competence, rather than to children's learning. The National Curriculum (2006, 2011) states clearly that: *The ECEC institution should be a learning organization that it is prepared to meet the new demands and challenges. Quality development in ECEC institutions implies a constant focus on developing staff competence.*

Another pattern we find is that the respondents primarily associate ECEC institutions as learning organizations with children's learning. Many clearly reject that which is perceived of as a scholarly approach to learning. The concept of learning is according to Alvestad (2010) relating to the school and the subjects we teach in schools. This association to scholarly activities means that learning often is associated with the teaching of structured material, in adult-initiated situations, with a focus on explicit knowledge. We see that this is also a prominent point of view in our material. The fear among many is that learning in the ECEC should become synonymous with the use of specific training activities, surveys and measurement of learning goals. As a contrast, many highlight the ECEC institution's uniqueness as an educational institution with a holistic emphasis on learning which implies a tight integration of the cornerstones of ECEC institutions' core activities: care, play and learning. The children's interests and needs must be at the center and learning should be connected to daily activities rather than being structured as separate themes and separated into formal situations. The managers are clear defenders of this tradition which emphasizes a holistic—and relatively anti-scholarly—approach to ECEC institutions . Despite the fact that the politicians have focused on the importance of developing the ECEC as part of the larger

educational system and on ECEC institutions as a crucial learning arena, it appears that the managers of ECEC institutions are rather skeptical of this ambition.

We now see an increasing pressure on the ECEC to implement more structured educational activities and clearer learning objectives. We also see a stronger emphasis on mapping and testing of learning outcomes in ECEC institutions   (Johansson, 2010; Pramling, 2010). The Allocation Committee (NOU 2009: 10) expressed this as follows:

> *ECEC curriculum contains no specific learning goals or requirements for their children to participate in learning activities that are planned and led by adults ... The absence of a requirement that all children participate in daily learning activities led by adults can be problematic because it can help to increase social differences.*

> *(NOU 2009: 10, p 142)*

Respondents in our study do not seem to share this concern about the absence of specific learning objectives and a lack of staff oversight. Vatne (2012) also concludes this, pointing out that despite political signals that the curriculum of the ECEC must become more structured and academic; the staff in ECEC institutions is relatively immune to these. Staff in ECEC institutions still advocate for what they describe as the ECEC institutions   'uniqueness'—an integrative approach which focuses on care, play, and learning. Vatne (2012: XX) writes:

> *One viewpoint is that the ECEC staff is able to combine the demands of an increasingly knowledge-intensive society with the ideal of a holistic view of learning and development of the daily work of the ECEC.*

Such an explanation is not supported by Østrem. al (2009) who shows that a majority of the preschool teachers argue they are mostly concerned with learning in ECEC institutions , as a result of the new policy directions on the national curriculum. Another explanation for why so many staff in ECEC institutions defends this idea of the ECEC institutions unique approach to learning is that the road from political signals to the design of plans and frameworks which will translate into new or adjusted practice in ECEC is a long one. Research on the effects of policy recommendation regarding curriculum in schools shows that there can be a considerable gap between the political, administrative and the operational level (Vatne, 2012, pp. 4-5), and our results seem to confirm this.

A third type of response from the respondents is that which is closest to what much of the organizational literature portrays as characteristic of a learning organization: organizational members' individual and collective learning, and socio-cultural understanding of what promotes this learning. Säljö (2006) relates the concept of

learning to the ability to take in experiences, knowledge and skills and to use these when facing of situations in the future. Learning happens in our daily interactions with other people and with the environment, and is thus related to working with ECEC curriculum, care, play and learning. Many also highlight the understanding of knowledge as tacit, as a kind of knowledge that is extremely important in ECEC institutions, but which can be challenging to identify and share with others.

A final category of responses are those that look at development of the ECEC institution as a learning organization as primarily consisting of initiating a number of formal courses for staff. The tradition of attending training courses as a mean of staff development has been strong in this sector (Gotvassli, 2013) and represents an attitude that says that learning best takes place by relying on individuals with important resources that can import the knowledge we need into our organization. Although many support this activity, many are also questioning the benefits of such practices claiming that these practices are resource intensive and do not ensure the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, nor that the knowledge acquired translates into changes in practice.

Looking back at the overview of the different conceptions of knowledge and knowledge development in organizations, most of the managers we interviewed apply a socio -cultural understanding to knowledge development, where knowledge is primarily produced through participating in practice-based work in the ECEC. Keywords such as reflection, learning from each other, processes, sharing, and professional networks are frequently mentioned by the managers in our sample. This is not surprising considering the strong tradition we have in Norwegian ECEC institutions on focusing on holistic learning, coupled with a pronounced resistance to scholarly approaches.

Research also shows that although many assistants and pedagogical leaders say they have noticed an increased focus on learning activities in kindergarten in recent years, this has had a very limited impact on this basic vision of learning and teaching in the ECEC (Vatne, 2012). The vision of, and the daily workings of, the ECEC is still greatly influenced by the desire for a strong integration of care, play and learning based on children's needs, interests and individual preferences. This requires staff that actively observes, care about, and take your interest in the child.

This traditional understanding of learning that we see in our data challenges the idea the ECEC as a learning organization in a couple of ways. First, this resistance to scholarly approaches, and defense of the traditional and holistic view of learning, makes it difficult for the organization to engage in what Senge (1990) calls 'generative learning'—learning at different levels. This traditional view is rather an example of

'adaptive learning' consisting of simple adaptations based on existing mental models in the organization. Senge argues that generative learning requires reframing—that is, a change in beliefs and actions, and the idea that staff is critical of their own assumptions as well as in their interpretation of processes of change. Organizational learning also implies that there should be changes in actual behavior (Fiol & Lyles 1985). A resistant culture could also stand in the way of development of a learning organization and prevent what many point to as essential for the development of reflexive practices—having various kinds of information sharing in place as well as a culture that is open to experimentation, trial and error.

Our study focuses on how pedagogical work in kindergartens is understood and on how we can work to promote new understandings of both pedagogical work and organizational learning. One study of preschool teachers and primary school teachers' descriptions of teaching and learning in ECEC institutions show that staff uses the metaphor of *exploration* to describe their approach to pedagogical work (Berge, 2012). This metaphor highlights internal processes and the child's interest, as well as their desire and motivation for learning. In this context the educator is an active and engaged participant in the learning process—searching for new knowledge with their children and being dedicated to encourage children's interest in learning. Pramling (2010, p. 159) also emphasizes this dynamic between the child and the educator when she writes that: "Children's learning implies understanding and making meaning from various elements of their surroundings". This focus on exploration is one which illustrates how even if ECEC institutions s are operating with a traditional concept of learning, they have in fact put practices into place which are socio-cultural in character and characteristic of learning organizations. Senge argues that learning organizations put emphasis on reflexive practice and this example illustrates that, although not identified as such, much of the work that is done in ECEC institutions   has this particular focus.

A second question we raise in this paper was how ECEC institutions can evolve to become learning organizations. We see that although the understanding of the concept of the learning organization, and ideas about developing the ECEC institution as a learning organization, are unclear and inconsistent, we still see that *the practice* in many ECEC institutions indicate that they have developed practices which closely resemble those of learning organizations. This is achieved by working with collective learning processes and socio-cultural understandings of learning. Although the managers in our sample provide no explicit references to theories or models of learning organizations in their developed practice it is not difficult to see that part of what they have implemented resembles what Senge refers to in his five disciplines.

First, many focus on the need for common goals and visions, as well as the need to work in teams to develop the ECEC as an organization, and they emphasize the importance of collective reflection and learning based on experience.

> *A learning organization - you create a work environment - a learning environment, if you want to call it learning - or development environment, where you can grow and prosper and become a child who feels comfortable in with their surroundings.*

> *(Respondent 10)*

> *So we have (group) reflection meetings –every other week at least.*

> *(Respondent 1)*

Looking at the statements we also see some evidence of the importance of *personal mastery, shared vision* and *learning in teams.* Senge argues that while traditional learning theory focuses on past experience and the here-and-now, personal mastery focuses on mastering a desired future situation. That means learning ECEC institutions   work with future visions, goals and emphasizing what is needed to meet long-term goals. Learning in teams is based on dialogue and exploration of a range of possible answers and solutions. This kind of team work often help shape and ground shared visions as team work often take the form of collective reflection-based processes related to the staff's practical experiences. Senge describes this development of a shared vision as a process that is based on vertical communication and bottom- up processes. The statement from one of the managers below illustrates how ECEC institutions   focus on these kinds of learning practices:

> *Two things are important. It's very much about the awareness in relation to what we are working on—for example with this project of Tomorrow's ECEC, that we are in a group that now every time something happens (we think) that we must, we need to get involved in this,   we must do something .*

> *(Respondent 5)*

As a reminder, mental models are representations of the fundamental conceptions of the organization. This discipline's mission is to bring forward ideas that are often unconscious and not articulated, but that still govern behavior. Ideas must be highlighted, discussed and subjected to critical evaluation. One example of such basic ideas is educational principles. We can say that there is a strong *mental model* regarding the ECEC institutions   activities and managers emphasize a holistic view of learning. They also share a strong opposition to structured and academically oriented approaches to learning at the same time as they emphasize learning as the integration of care, play, and learning.

It seems that although many managers integrate all of the above in the daily workings of the ECEC, few see this in the context of *system thinking*—as a holistic approach of doing what a learning organization does. Senge argues that in order for the disciplines to not represent single actions, unrelated to each other, with no overall direction, it is necessary that organizational members see learning as an activity which connects all these activities to a common approach—a systemic approach. Developing a learning organization is one such systemic approach. Although ECEC institutions have developed practices which represent those of a learning organization, few see these as examples of a new organizational approach—of learning at the organizational level. Rather they see these practices as linked to a shared vision of strengthen the core values of ECEC institutions in Norway—learning through the integration of care, play, and learning.

Our sample included ECEC institutions from both rural and urban municipalities, and the ECEC institutions   we studies varied according to both size and whether they were publicly or privately owned. Our findings did not reveal any particular pattern depending on these variables. It is however quite likely that such variation exists, but that we did not capture variation because we were investigating a relatively small sample size of ECEC institutions. Our findings do suggest that the existence of such patterns should be explored further in future studies using larger sample sizes including ECEC institutions which vary according to location, size, and private/public ownership.

Conclusion

One of our goals in this paper was to gain more insight into how managers in ECEC understand the concept of a learning organization, and to examine how they work towards the political ambition of making the ECEC institution a learning organization. As we have seen, despite the fact that many operate with relatively unclear and elusive concept of what it means for the ECEC institution to be a learning organization, many have developed practices that emphasize organizational learning: They do so by focusing on socio -cultural factors and learning as taking place in everyday practice stemming primarily from the interests and needs of the child. It is a little surprisingly, however, that when being asked to define what it means to be a learning organization, rather than thinking of organizational learning, so many managers highlight children's learning—and the curricular focus on care, play and learning. Both the national curriculum and literature in the field emphasizes staff's learning, collective learning, and organizational development as important in changing practice and creating learning organizations. The fact that the practitioners in the field operate with an understanding

of the concept which rarely recognizes organizational learning, or the organizational perspective, could present a real challenge to implement policy in this sector. Our findings indicate that we need more research in this area to fully understand the role of managers in encouraging learning practices among staff in ECEC institutions, which prominent practices of knowledge development exist in ECEC institutions, and what factors are important in reshaping the ECEC institution as a learning organization.

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