



Leadership for Developing Consensus of Perspectives on Children's Learning in Early Childhood Centers

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ABSTRACT: During the last few years, the staff in Norwegian Early Childhood Centers (ECCs) have been exposed to increased pressures for improving children's learning. This increased demand requires increasing consciousness among staff about perspectives on children's learning. On this basis, the following question was raised: How do ECC directors work to promote consensus among staff of perspectives on children's learning? The theoretical framework to answer this question was based on different perspectives on learning by children and staff. Further, it addressed 'direct and indirect leadership' and 'pedagogical leadership'. The research has a qualitative design, and data were collected by semi-structured interviews with 16 directors of ECCs. Results from these interviews show that half of the directors have worked to promote consensus of perspectives on children's learning among staff in an explicit way, while others have used indirect methods. One director had not worked with this learning concept. The directors have been working to promote consensus among staff in many ways by exercising direct and indirect pedagogical leadership. Many directors found this work time-consuming.

Keywords: *Perspectives on learning, direct and indirect leadership, early childhood leadership, pedagogical leadership*

Introduction

Over the past few years, Early Childhood Centers (ECCs) in Norway have received increased attention as learning arenas for children. The concept of learning has become

more apparent in the *Kindergarten Act* and in the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* (Framework Plan) (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011; 2012). Several documents from Norwegian national authorities have claimed that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the “first voluntary step” or “the foundation” of the educational system and that the learning environments for children in ECCs should be strengthened (e.g., Meld. St. 24 (2012-2013)¹; Meld. St. 19 (2015-2016)). Increased emphasis on learning is not only a Norwegian trend; the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has previously raised questions about whether there is a general “schoolification” going on in the ECEC-field (OECD, 2006, p. 62).

According to the whitepaper Meld. St. 19 (2015-2016) focusing on the content of the Norwegian ECCs, the staff should work more systematically to improve children’s learning. Further, it has been noted and clearly pronounced what type of knowledge the political authorities see as important for children to acquire (Nygård & Heggvold, 2016). Various tools and applications have been developed to support the staff when working with children’s learning. Simultaneously, it is emphasized that the centers are portrayed as arenas for well-being, security and overall development.

Directors and other staff in ECCs perceive that the expectations for children’s learning have increased (Moen, 2016; Vatne 2012; Østrem et al., 2009). The staff must relate to the various considerations which, in some cases, may appear as crossing and in conflict with various professional beliefs about what and how children should learn (Nygård & Heggvold, 2016). In this context, it is useful to have a heightened awareness of learning and to develop some consensus of perspectives on learning among staff.

Key issue and research questions

As the head of the organization, the ECC director has an overriding responsibility to ensure that staff has a high awareness and that they are well equipped to work with children's learning in the center. A part of this work might involve encouraging staff to develop shared perspectives on children’s learning as a foundation for their work. The results from a nationwide survey in the project “Management for learning – Challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care in Norway” (2012-2017)² – indicated that most ECC directors think they have worked hard to achieve shared perspectives on children’s learning. These results do not say anything about how these directors have worked to

¹ Meld. St. is a whitepaper from the Norwegian Government to the Parliament.

² This data from the survey is analyzed by the author of this paper.

promote consensus among staff of perspectives on children's learning. Within this background, the main focus and corresponding research questions raised in this study were:

How do ECC directors work towards achieving consensus among staff about their perspectives on children's learning?

1. *How explicitly do the directors work to promote consensus among staff about their perspectives on children's learning?*
2. *How do the directors lead and organize the processes of this work?*
3. *What do they perceive as especially challenging in this work?*

ECCs in a Norwegian context

To elucidate the key issue and research questions, it is necessary to further examine ECCs in a Norwegian context. In Norway, ECCs are defined as pedagogical establishments in the *Kindergarten Act, section 2*. According to section 1, ECCs should, "in collaboration and close understanding with the home, safeguard the children's needs for care and play and promote learning and formation³ as a basis for an all-round development" (Norwegian Ministry of Education & Research, 2012).

In 2015, forty-seven percent of the centers in Norway were owned by municipalities, while the rest are owned by private actors (Statistics Norway, 2016). Nevertheless, all centers are financed by municipalities and are regulated by the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan. Accordingly, directors of municipal or private centers must, to a large extent, relate to similar public governing, but the directors of the private centers must also relate to their special owners.

The Kindergarten Act (section 17) requires that all centers should have proper administrative and pedagogical leadership. Further, the directors must be trained as early childhood teachers or have other university college education that gives them pedagogical expertise and qualifies them to work with children (Norwegian Ministry of Education & Research, 2012). This expertise might be a prerequisite for being able to exercise pedagogical leadership in the centers, and pedagogical expertise should be a key factor in the relationship (Mordal, 2014).

³ Formation is "danning" in Norwegian and "Bildung" in German.

Directors are leading centers with a staff consisting of both pedagogical leaders and skilled or unskilled assistants. 'Pedagogical leader' is a job title for teachers leading a group of children and assistants working with this group. According to national regulations there shall be at least one pedagogical leader per 14 to 18 children when the children are three years old, and one pedagogical leader per 7 to 9 children for those below three years⁴.

Although 'pedagogical leader' is a job title for teachers in ECCs, the center director is the pedagogical head of the center. Directors may be heads of ECCs of different sizes. The smallest centers have less than ten children, and the position of the director is often combined with that of the pedagogical leader (teacher). Moreover, a director may be the head of a large center with two or three houses and up to a few hundred of children. In such large centers, there are often assistant directors working full-time in addition to the director (Moen & Granrusten; 2013; Vassenden et al., 2011).

In recent years, centers have been organized in different ways, and on some occasions, there might be more than one pedagogical leader for each group of children (Granrusten & Moen, 2009; Moen & Granrusten, 2013). Compared to other Nordic countries, the proportion of assistants with Early Childhood qualifications in Norwegian ECCs is low, and this has been perceived as a possible threat to ECEC quality in the country (Engel, Barnett, Anders & Taguma, 2015; OECD, 2001; 2006; 2012). Among other things, this perception may involve challenges for the level of professionalism of the work. Some researchers have highlighted that the learning culture of Norwegian ECCs to a large extent seems to build on the shared knowledge of lay people and traditional ideas rooted in common sense (Mørkeseth, 2012). The pedagogical leaders (teachers) are then expected to reduce their professional knowledge and language to the competence level of the unskilled assistants instead of sharing their pedagogical expertise to raise the level of professional understanding in the team. This communication is done using everyday language by all staff.

Theoretical framework

This section of the paper will present the theoretical framework of the research and is divided into four sub-sections: perspectives on children's learning; direct and indirect leadership; pedagogical leadership; and different perspectives on staff learning.

⁴ FOR-2005-12-16-1507. Forskrift om pedagogisk bemanning

Perspectives on children's learning

Views and perspectives on children's learning are theories and principles about what and how children learn or should learn in ECEC. These theories and principles are also related to values and overall perspectives on children. The perspectives on learning in the Framework Plan and other external governing documents give, to a large extent, *frames* that must be understood and interpreted to provide direction for the work (Østrem et al, 2009, Vatne, 2012). Views on learning in the Framework Plan might be analyzed in relation to values and theoretical perspectives on children's learning giving premises to the pedagogical work in the centers.

According to James, Jenks and Prout (1998, p. 207), children might be regarded as "beings" and "becomings". As human beings, they are active, participating actors in their own lives. They are subjects that are formed in interaction with the environment. In becoming whoever they want to be, they are, to a larger extent, looked upon as objects to be influenced, shaped and changed. The main focus is on what children should be in the future. These two perspectives on children are connected with different theories of learning. In addition, they might lead to practical questions that could be explored by the staff, such as "To what extent should the staff be involved in children's learning and how should they be involved?".

Nygård and Heggvold (2016) state that traditionally, learning has been divided into three main directions: positivistic-, constructivist and socio-cultural traditions. The last tradition is probably the most widespread among staff in Norwegian ECCs. Brostöm, Johansson, Sandberg and Frøkjær (2014) found many similarities among teachers' views on children's learning in ECCs in Denmark and Sweden. The teachers, to a large extent, emphasized that learning is connected to social interaction and is a result of children's initiative and active involvement. According to the researchers, this supports earlier assumptions about the coherence of Nordic beliefs of ECEC.

It is possible to outline different views, perspectives and principles of children's learning in ECCs from all three learning traditions mentioned above and to see them in relation to values and perspectives on children. There are also other ways of classifying such learning traditions (see, e.g., Lillemyr, 2016) and to some extent, it should be possible to pick up some ideas from different traditions. The main issue in this article is not what traditions the directors and staff are building on, but how they have been working to promote consensus about the perspectives on children's learning.

Direct and indirect leadership

This research analyzed the directors' leadership of the staff to promote a consensus of perspectives on children's learning. In other words, the focus is on the head leader of the ECC and her or his leadership in developing a consensus. Although there are many definitions of leadership, it is largely agreed that leadership is a special behavior that people exhibit with intent to influence other people's attitudes, thinking and behavior (Yukl, 2013). Leadership can be more or less explicit, depending on how clearly, consciously and openly the individuals are leading. Directors may work more or less explicitly to promote consensus of perspectives on children's learning.

Leaders may influence their staff through direct and indirect leadership. According to Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013), direct leadership includes all forms of direct interaction and communication between leaders and employees. The communication and interaction may take place face to face at meetings or other arenas or more distantly through, e.g., email or mobile telephone. Indirect leadership encompasses various ways that leaders can influence employees without direct interaction. This communication may happen when leaders are leading through other leaders at a lower level in the organization or when they are organizing work or making plans, rules or routines. Moen and Granrusten (2013) found that directors of large centers, to a large extent, were working through leaders at lower levels to influence staff work. It was not possible to meet all staff face to face daily when their centers consisted of buildings at different locations within the same municipality.

Pedagogical leadership

The concept of pedagogical leadership as a leadership function in ECC has a long tradition in Norway. In the beginning, it was limited to leadership of professional core activities related to children and parents in the centers (Gotvassli, 1990). Such core activities include safeguarding children's needs for care and play and promoting children's learning and formation in close cooperation with the parents.

Later Wadel (1997) defined pedagogical leadership as a form of leadership that takes place in organizations with different types of core activities and that is not specifically related to ECCs or other parts of the education field. According to Wadel, pedagogical leadership is about initiating and leading reflection and learning processes in an

organization. The “members reflect on their own practice and learn from the self-knowledge such reflections give”⁵ (Wadel, 1997, p. 46).

Today, it is common in Norway to understand pedagogical leadership as a function that both attends to leadership of professional core activities related to children and parents and to leadership of staff’ reflections and learning (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2010; Moen & Granrusten, 2013). This duality appears to be closely aligned with Heikka and Waniganayake’s (2011) understanding of pedagogical leadership in ECCs. In this study the concept of pedagogical leadership will be combined with the concepts of direct and indirect leadership. These combinations will thus be referred to as *direct and indirect pedagogical leadership*.

Perspectives on staff learning

Processes to promote consensus among staff of perspectives on children’s learning are assumed to require collective processes of reflection and learning among staff. Such collective processes are probably important if the perspectives and principles for children’s learning are going to be shared and work as commitments for staff’ practice. Inspired by Senge (1990), Klev and Levin (2009, pp. 149-154) have launched four leadership tasks that they consider central when leading a “learning organization”. Two of those tasks are about creating frames and facilitating dialogue that challenge and develop action theories. The phrases “creating frames” and “learning arenas” are important to conduct this work. According to Klev and Levin, leadership for development and change has a basic requirement for creating arenas for learning and development. All organizations contain more or less formalized arenas that are arenas for learning. Leadership enactment also denotes an understanding about how different arenas might be learning arenas.

The second task that Klev and Levin (2009) highlight is that leaders need to engage in dialogue with employees, challenging their action theories (mental models) and their thinking. These tasks can be connected to Argyris and Schön (1978) and their notions of action theories. Argyris and Schön state that human action is based on theories of action that can be differentiated into “espoused theories” and “theories-in-use”. While espoused theories are reported as a basis for actions, theories-in-use are inferred from how people actually act. There might be discrepancies between theories-in-use and espoused theories. This discrepancy may happen in challenging situations that require rapid

⁵ Translated by the author of the article.

intervention. One must adhere at once, and there is little time to reflect on whether the decisions made are correct or not according to espoused theories.

Learning related to actions can take place at different levels. Single loop-learning, according to Argyris (2000), is suitable in relation to routine and repetitive tasks. By single-loop learning, questions are raised about 'how' something can be better. This questioning may lead to learning by correction. Another possibility is to question the governing variables and aims and to subject them to critical exploration as the basis for double-loop learning. The question that is raised is 'why' something is done. A leader who will promote double-loop learning among employees must therefore ensure that they are stimulated and challenged deeply because this is probably necessary in processes where the staff is developing consensus of perspectives on children's learning.

Methodology

This study was part of a larger research project on "Management for learning – Challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care in Norway" (2012-2017) and was funded by the Research Council of Norway. The design was qualitative with semi-structured interviews. The research project was approved by the Data Protection Official for Research and was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research complied by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (The Research Council of Norway, 2016). In this paper, the study is described in three subsections: the participants, the interviews and the methodological assessments.

The participants

The sample consisted of sixteen directors of ECCs in three Norwegian municipalities that were partners in the main research project. Two of the municipalities (A, B) were quite large in the Norwegian context (> 170 000 inhabitants each), while the third (C) was relatively small (< 7000 inhabitants). The participating directors were drawn strategically in collaboration with municipal administrations to ensure variety of ownership and size of the centers.

TABLE 1 Directors (D) of ECCs by number of children and ownership of the ECC and municipality.

Number of children in the ECC	Municipality A		Municipality B		Municipality C		N
	Municipal ECC	Private ECC	Municipal ECC	Private ECC	Municipal ECC	Private ECC	
< 45		D7	D15	D11		D4	4
45 – 79	D1, D8	D5	D12	D14	D3	D9	7
> 79	D2	D6	D13	D16	D10		5
Study participants	3	3	3	3	2	2	16

Table 1 gives a brief overview of the number of participants and shows the size of their centers by ownership and municipalities. Eight directors were employed in municipal centers, and eight were employed in private ones, which were similar to the distribution of centers by ownership in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2016). There were four directors from four small centers (< 45 children), seven from moderate-sized ones (45-79 children), and five were directors of large centers (> 80 children). The number of children provided information about the directors' breadth of control and indicated differences in the size of staff at each center. Staff members varied between three to sixty-three and the number of buildings or houses were between one and three.

Fourteen directors were women and two were men. All had early childhood teacher education qualifications, and fourteen had also participated in continuing education. They were educated as early childhood teachers from twelve to forty years ago. The participants have extensive experience in the field, but their time as directors of their current center varied between four months to thirty-two years.

The interviews

Individual interviews with the directors were conducted in 2013. They were based on a semi-structured interview guide that addressed different themes about leadership and children's learning in ECCs. Leadership and perspectives on children's learning was one of eight themes in the guide. Under this theme, there were seven questions and some keywords of special relevance to this study. The interview guide was used in a flexible way, and the directors told stories about their leadership for developing common perspectives on children's learning.

The transcribed material was analyzed by NVivo software for analysis of the qualitative data. The data were coded and analyzed at several stages to produce main themes for this part of the research. At the first step, all materials about leadership work to promote development for consensus of perspectives on children's learning were sorted out as one

large theme or ‘node’ according to NVivo. Then, the analysis of the interviews was based on a stepwise-deductive-induction approach (SDI) (Tjora, 2012). As explained by Tjora (2012, p. 175) a model where an upward process is perceived as inductive, meaning that one is working from data to categories, themes and concepts and theories were developed. Using downward backlinks, the researcher also can control the analysis from a more theoretical to an empirical level. Initially, coding was very similar to the concrete content of the text. This similarity provided the basis for categories that were merged into fewer main themes. These themes were checked against empirical data, which often provided the basis for change and adjustments of categories and themes.

Some of the results will be presented as quotes that were translated from Norwegian into English. The researcher has interpreted the meaning of expressions during the translation process to find a good English equivalent. During the translation process, some words and phrases were discussed with Norwegian colleagues in the same research field. This contributed to strengthening the validity of the translations.

Some methodological assessments

A general limitation of the study was that it only contains information from the directors’ point of view. It may happen that some directors portray their own practice excessively positively compared to others. Such a tendency was stated in a study conducted by Moen and Mørreaunet (2014). Although the sample was not representative of the population of all centers in Norway and the results cannot be generalized, the breadth of the sample indicates that the results are recognizable among many directors in Norway.

Results

This section of the paper presents results from the interviews with the directors and is divided in three sub-sections to explain the findings against the three research questions this study set out to address.

Working with staff to achieve consensus

Results from the interviews show that some directors have been working distinctly and explicitly with perspectives on children’s learning among the staff (D1, D3, D7, D12, D13, D14, D15, and D16). These directors have a high awareness of the concept of learning and respond immediately with “yes” to the question of whether they have dealt with this subject with their staff. The directors have included the concept of learning on staff

agendas, and some directors have been working with this concept through a variety of processes. One of the directors explained:

Learning is one of the concepts that we have discussed: "What does learning mean for us? What are good learning processes? How can we create good learning processes? How should the rooms look to promote good learning processes?" Etc. etc. So, we have worked a lot with this. We've discussed our perspectives on learning – what perspective do we have on learning in relation to children? ... There has been a long series of courses about values, perspectives on children, on many different subjects related to Early Childhood Education and Care. That is where we began, in a way. We have then been working with ourselves and ended up with a common perspective and view on learning. (Director 13)

This director has worked with perspectives on children's learning in a very clear, explicit and conscious way. As a support, the staff have been following relevant courses organized by the municipality, the owner of the center. The center ended up having some shared perspectives on children's learning that were embodied in the plan system and in its vision:

It is very evident. It is written down both in our long-term plan and annual plan. We have a vision called "We discover the world together", and this contains a great deal. It says something about that – we do things together.... This vision is the basis for everything we do. We have a very explicit view of learning. (Director 13)

There were also other directors who have worked in a clear and explicit way, who explained that they have incorporated shared perspectives on learning in their annual plan, long-term plan, vision, website profiles, etc. (D1, D3, D14, D15). Some highlighted that they were very careful with what they write in the annual plan and long-term plan because these should be linked to practice.

Other directors were more uncertain about their work in developing a consensus of perspectives on children's learning. Some hesitated and may at first answer "no" or "no – we have not been working so much with that" (D10). After follow-up questions and rethinking, however, they might nevertheless come to a conclusion that they have been working on it. Some explained that they recently got started on a process to increase the awareness of learning. Other directors used the term "basic view" (e.g., D7, D10) rather than "perspectives on learning". Some noted that even though they did not have an expressed shared view on learning, the staff have a consciousness when working with children. They might have discussions that lead to increased consciousness but not always to consensus. There was only one director who was quite clear in not having discussed the concept of learning in the staff group at all (D6).

Leading and organizing processes to develop perspectives on learning

Many of the directors who were working explicitly to develop perspectives of children's learning were trying to inspire and induce the work in different ways. These directors mentioned that they gathered information about new requirements, plans, ideas and possibilities from *outside* the centers. The Framework Plan was mentioned as especially important, as this director stated: "*We have come to a shared view on learning on the background of the Framework Plan. It's our governing document number one*" (D15). Another director said that she always returned to the framework plan when her staff were working with projects. She explained that they found the "*key words and are then trying to define them and develop a shared understanding ...*" (D14).

Other external sources that were mentioned as supports and inspiration were professional literature, courses, networks, study-trips, visitors and cooperation with universities or university colleges. One director stated that they were challenged by an external artist working with the children to make ice sculptures during winter:

Our perspectives on learning were challenged then. He challenged the staff's perspectives on learning, and it turns out in a way that we, as staff – we underestimated the kids.... They (the staff) do not necessarily have to agree, but to open up to new ways of thinking. This challenge has in a way created a precedent for how we have winter-projects now. (Director 16)

Some directors mentioned that the assistant directors and pedagogical leaders were also good monitors of new ideas and knowledge because they read professional journals and literature. The pedagogical leaders may also bring information to the directors about what was going on with their groups *inside* the centers. This may happen in particular during meetings with the entire group of pedagogical leaders.

Some directors explained that they were trying to empower the staff to raise critical questions with each other and to promote their working intensely. The directors themselves, to varying degrees, observed the staff and the children in everyday life. One director of a mid-sized center had, similar to other directors of small- and some mid-sized centers, face-to-face contact with staff daily:

Yes, I am also looking and observing. I am walking around to the departments (groups) and I am in the departments – every day. So, I'm also among them, and I take part and influence when I'm there. Yes.... So presence is almost the same as the alpha and omega – it is most important. (Director 9)

Such observations might give rise to feedback and challenging questions about staff' perspectives on learning and other pedagogical issues. Nevertheless, some directors were quite clear that they were mainly focusing positively, trying to engage with the staff when

exerting good practice. “I cannot go around saying in the departments (groups): “You are not allowed to do that! You’re not allowed to!” one of them (D16) pointed out.

Some of the directors in small and medium-sized centers were very aware that their closeness to staff and children was an advantage in their efforts to develop common perspectives on children’s learning (e.g., D1). When they were present in person, they had an enhanced possibility to observe and to engage immediately if needed. Some of the directors in the largest centers (e.g., D10) described that their observations and participation with staff and children in everyday life were very limited.

During the interviews, some directors communicated thoroughly about how they were organizing their work to develop common perspectives on children’s learning. One director of a large center, who has been working to promote perspectives on learning in a very systematically and explicit way, stated the following:

We are dealing with it (perspectives on learning) during the planning processes. It is me at the top, and in a way, I have to put things into practice, right? I must disseminate the information to the employees. Then, we work in different processes. We work with something in the leadership group.... We might begin there. Then, we involve the rest of the staff, at staff meetings and days for planning.... Here we might have some lectures in the first place. I myself or someone external may do this lecturing. The assistant director or the pedagogical leaders may also do this. It depends on the subject or other things. Then, we go down to a smaller level, working in teams of staff. There are five such teams in the center.... Afterwards the process is taken back to the leadership team – and we rework a little there.... Back again, and on again. The processes are in a way like this all the time. (Director 13)

It was evident from this account that the director and the staff worked with the concept of learning in several arenas, in large and smaller groups. In some of the other large centers, there were even more levels than mentioned above. The efforts to develop a consensus of perspectives on children’s learning often took place in the planning processes. Some (e.g., D12, D13) explained that they see themselves as promoters in such processes and revealed that they must hold the focus, continue their efforts, and motivate staff.

Even though more directors described processes that begin from the top, at the same time, they also described ideas and subjects deriving from other members of staff. Such ideas and subjects may become the basis of developing processes. Many directors were very aware that the entire staff must participate in the processes at different meetings.

Some directors explained that expressed perspectives on learning in the annual plan can be interpreted quite differently among the staff in the center. One of them explained that

she looks upon herself as a salesman of the messages of the annual plan at the meetings but that she realized that there were many subsections between herself and her assistants: *"I have played the 'whispering game', and I know that something may happen to the message during the trip around the table"* (D10). This director, who leads a very large center, could capture different understandings during staff meetings but only occasionally went out among groups to see what was happening "on the floor".

Some of the directors explained that they were ensuring that practice were in accordance with acceptable principles.

So my – my role is, among other things to see that the frames are being held and explain to the employees what is inside and what is outside (acceptable practice). What we should not be doing too. For example, I'm very careful that we do not bring in much commercial stuff in the center... They are not allowed to sit and watch movies here, just as a pastime, for example, and so on. (Director 16)

This director clearly demanded that the practice must be justified or be in accordance with pedagogical principles.

Perceived challenges of promoting consensus

Several directors described that it was challenging to develop a consensus of perspectives on children's learning. Many highlighted the time-consuming "nature" of these processes. This duration of time was linked to a large gap in the expertise in the staff group between those who were educated as early childhood teachers and those who were unskilled. Other directors associated time-consuming processes to instability in staff, such as this director: *"Yes, the development has been slow. Often we have gone many steps back as well... In the center, there are lots of people, lots of different people. Someone gets sick, someone takes a leave and some comes back"* (D1).

Another director mentioned that it can take a long time to internalize common perspectives on learning so that they were manifested into practical action. She put it this way:

I know we are not stronger than the weakest link. So, we will go many rounds before we get on. And we can sit around a table and agree that it is important that we include everyone or that it is important that we focus on numbers or something like this. Then, everyday life arrives, and in the hustle and bustle, "the spinal reflex is switched on". The first, second and third principles of behavior that we have agreed upon as undesirable ways of meeting children, are arriving in action. (Director 10)

This director, leading a large center, was a bit unsure if they had worked with perspectives on learning in the beginning. After some reflection, she concluded that they had.

Although several directors described the process of developing consensus of perspectives on learning as “demanding,” they may, at the same time, state that it was rewarding:

Yes, it is positive but demanding. It was difficult to go into those processes because it demanded something of THEM too, about their innermost values. So, they had a way to go into themselves and think about their values; what do I think about this? What does it mean to me? They were in a way – I would not call it pressed, but I use the word pressure anyway – because they had in a way to front something of their innermost selves. And we were very honest with each other and talked about what we shall do in our center. (Director 13)

This director described processes where, to a large extent, she had been close to the staff. She emphasized that they were not making decisions that they could not vouch for in practical work.

Some directors stated that it was difficult to provide feedback, both laudatory and challenging, related to what they have agreed upon. Then, “*it is easy to get wooly*” (D10). Since many were largely dependent on the pedagogical leaders to develop, pursue and realize the consequences of common perspectives on learning, some directors emphasized that they also wanted their pedagogical leaders to be clear.

Other directors were afraid to be too domineering. One of them found it challenging to keep herself in the background for a while and let staff describe their understandings first:

And so the challenge then is to be able to keep one’s mouth shut for a little while, at least for me, and not translate at once because I have occasionally understood it, without perhaps having understood it. I want – I want to have such a discussion in advance what – what do we understand by this, where are we going? (Director 1)

Discussion

The main question of this study was: How do ECC directors work in order to promote consensus among staff of perspectives on children’s learning? Based on the results analyzed, the discussion of this problem was divided into three subsections in this article.

Various degrees of how explicitly the directors work

The results revealed diversity in how explicitly directors have been working to promote consensus in the perspectives about children's learning, but there was only one director who clearly stated that he had not been working with this at all. The results also reflect that the processes to promote such consensus have been included in pedagogical leadership by most directors, even though they were performing leadership in diverse ways.

In what way have some of those directors, who worked most explicitly, moved towards consensus? Some explicitly put the concept of learning on the agenda and explored it openly together with staff in different ways. Then, they might have ended up with explicit perspectives on children's learning in the plans and other profile documents based on consensus amongst staff. To create effective links between theory and practice, some have been very restrictive in what has been written. Based on the concepts of Argyris and Schön (1978), this cautious approach can be interpreted as an intension of consistency between espoused theories and theories in-use. This caution may also be interpreted as thoroughness and integrity.

Some directors have been drawing inspiration from external sources, such as series of relevant courses offered by the municipality. Other sources for professional input and inspiration may come from inside the center. It can be an important task for the directors to see and grasp such sources in the processes of developing perspectives about children's learning among staff.

Certain directors who less clearly set perspectives on children's learning on the agenda have not concluded with any explicit consensus in their staff. The reasons for this could be that some were still in the process of obtaining a consensus. Nevertheless, the staff might, in some cases, have some unexpressed consensus of the perspectives on children's learning. Further, they may individually or in smaller groups have clear and expressed perspectives on children's learning. One may also raise the question as to what extent 50 or 60 employees should or can agree in large centers? When some centers have ended up with an explicit vision this may still provide expansive space for professional discretion.

Direct and indirect pedagogical leadership to promote consensus

The directors are leading and organizing processes to promote consensus of perspectives on children's learning in different formal and informal arenas. The findings in this study showed that indirect pedagogical leadership by "creating frames" was an important task for many directors when they were trying to promote development of consensus among their staff (cf. Klev & Levin, 2009). They were executing indirect pedagogical leadership

by making formal structures that were organized and identified as arenas for staff learning. Within these frames, it was possible to exploit values and perspectives on children's learning by sharing experiences and knowledge and by having dialogues and reflections. Such collective processes were necessary when developing shared understandings and terms as a foundation of consensus.

In large centers, there seem to be a need for quite complex structures to both involve the staff in smaller groups (teams) and the staff as a whole. This structure may promote broad participation and reflection adapted to the peculiarities of different groups. It also seems appropriate to put learning perspectives on the agenda in connection with the planning processes; this connection may link such perspectives to planned practice.

Directors execute both direct and indirect pedagogical leadership in learning arenas. Some execute direct pedagogical leadership by participating in learning arenas facilitating dialogue that challenge and develop values and perspectives on children's learning (cf. Klev & Levin, 2009). On some occasions, they executed direct pedagogical leadership in collaboration with a team of assistant directors and/or pedagogical leaders with the intension of influencing the rest of the staff by indirect pedagogical leadership. Some directors in this study were working hard to empower the pedagogical leaders to become more challenging and explicit as leaders. Such mediating leadership required confidence in the pedagogical leaders and vice versa, and may open avenues of communication. The results in the study revealed that pedagogical leaders shared information about their groups with other leaders at the leadership meetings.

Other learning situations for the staff might be more informal and spontaneous. Some directors in small centers have a blended position as both director and pedagogical leader (teacher) of a group. They have great opportunities to exercise direct pedagogical leadership in informal situations. These directors can influence the staff reflection and learning by challenging them in practical action and providing feedback in situations of every-day practice. Such feedback and challenges can work as a basis for learning and development of practices consistent with "espoused theories" about children's learning (cf. Argyris & Schön, 1978). In mid-sized centers and in some large centers with one location, directors also can be leaders directly and "close-on" during parts of the day. They can, for example, routinely visit each group once a day. This presupposes that it was possible to prioritize this, for example by delegating other tasks to the assistant directors.

To promote consensus involves time-consuming activities

Some directors perceived that it was challenging to decide to what extent they should get involved and influence the staff in certain processes when they were working to develop perspectives on children's learning. The directors resolved this task in different ways.

Time-consuming activities were highlighted as an important challenge in many ways that are further elaborated and discussed next.

Firstly, this time duration emerged through large differences in expertise in the staff. Some centers had a fairly large proportion of unskilled employees with weak academic qualifications as a foundation for developing perspectives on children's learning (e.g. Engel et al., 2015). This limited knowledge can make reflections based on theoretical perspectives challenging. Secondly, the unstable presence of some employees due to parental leave, sickness, termination and startup of employment may also limit progress, requiring visibility and information of earlier work and further development.

A third factor was that it was time-consuming to arrive *at meaningful shared perspectives* that were also governing practice. In accordance with certain results, these processes may require that staff be challenged at their innermost values and perspectives on children's learning that may lead to double-loop learning (cf. Argyris, 2000). One of the directors used the medical metaphor "spinal reflex" to express the idea that old patterns of behavior easily returned when staff were in busy situations demanding quick action. Development of consistency between what Argyris and Schön (1978) call "espoused theories" and "theories in-use", may require observation and feedback from others and self-awareness from the individual.

It could be questioned whether it was worthwhile to promote consensus of perspectives on children's learning if it was so time-consuming. Since a significant numbers of the staff were not professionally skilled, it was particularly necessary to promote dialogue and reflections of perspectives on children's learning to promote awareness, shared language and quality in work. Children's *learning* was one of the key concepts in the mission statement of the ECEC (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012). As long as children and staff groups were changing, knowledge about children's learning was developing, political signals were changing, and intentions to improve quality were present, perspectives on children's learning also must develop and change. Many of the directors seem to have high awareness of this by working hard to promote consensus of children's learning despite these challenges.

Conclusion

Most directors in this study were performing pedagogical leadership by promoting consensus of perspectives on children's learning among staff. There were differences in how explicitly they worked and to what extent they were performing direct and indirect pedagogical leadership in informal and formal situations. Even though this work can be quite challenging, some directors have worked hard to eventually end up with some

explicit shared perspectives of children's learning among staff. Insofar as "learning" is one of the key concepts of the purpose of ECEC according to the Kindergarten Act, and pressure for improving children's learning is increasing, there is need for further research on how directors and other staff are meeting this.

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