CHAPTER

13

The freedom to choose and the legitimacy to lead

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ABSTRACT

Through reforms based on "New Public Management", the role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) directors has become more visible. Their goals are set by the government through policy documents, but the directors are given a large degree of freedom to choose how these goals are achieved within the current financial and legal frameworks. One such goal is to make Early Childhood Centres (ECCs) good learning environments for children. The directors have authority to choose the means that they find appropriate for their organisation, the small community, but the goals and limits are defined by actors outside the ECCs in the large community. How do directors act on their opportunities to exercise leadership in making their ECCs good learning environments for children considering the tension between the large and the small community?

Keywords: Leadership, management, governance

ABSTRAKT

Gjennom reformer basert på «New Public Management» har barnehagestyrerne fått tydeligere lederrolle hvor målene er satt av staten gjennom politiske dokumenter, men de er gitt en stor grad av frihet til å velge hvordan disse målene nås innenfor de gjeldende økonomiske og juridiske rammer. Et slikt mål er å gjøre barnehagene til gode læringsmiljøer for barn. Styrerne har myndighet til velge de midler som de finner hensiktsmessig å tilpasse sin organisasjon, det lille fellesskapet, men mål og rammer er definert av aktører utenfor barnehagen, det store fellesskapet. Hvordan opplever styrerne mulighetene til å utøve ledelse av barnehagen som læringsarena for barn i spenningsfeltet mellom det store og det lille fellesskapet?

Keywords: Leadership, management, governance

ABSTRAKTI

Uudistuksissa, jotka pohjautuvat "New Public Management" ajatteluun, varhaiskasvatuksen johtajien rooli on tullut enemmän näkyväksi. Hallitus asettaa poliittisten dokumenttien kautta heille tavoitteita, mutta johtajille on annettu laaja vapaus valita, miten nämä tavoitteet saavutetaan nykyisissä taloudellisissa ja lakien määrittämissä raameissa. Yksi näistä tavoitteista on tehdä päiväkodit hyviksi oppimisympäristöiksi lapsille. Johtajilla on oikeus valita keinot, joita he pitävät tarkoituksenmukaisina organisaatiolleen, pienelle yhteisölleen, mutta tavoitteet ja rajoitukset on määritelty ulkopuolisten toimijoiden, laajemman yhteisön, taholta. Kuinka johtajat toteuttavat mahdollisuuksiaan ja johtajuuttaan tehdessään päiväkodistaan hyvän oppimisympäristön lapsille huomioon ottaen jännitteen laajan ja pienen yhteisön välillä?

Keywords: johtajuus, managament, hallinto

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INTRODUCTION

With the implementation of the new Local Government Act in 1992, reform efforts began in many Norwegian municipalities with a focus on the management of the public sector. The reforms were linked to new forms of governance and were followed by reforms in the organisation of municipalities. These reforms were rooted in the New Public Management (NPM) discourse (Hansen, 2011; Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Barzelay & Jacobsen, 2009). NPM is a collective term used to integrate several principles regarding how the public sector should be managed and reformed using the business sector as a model. Since the mid-1980s, NPM has been the dominant doctrine for reforms of the public sector in Norway (Børhaug, 2013). This has significance for public policy in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Norway, and particularly interesting is the public-private partnership in ECEC provision (Hasan, 2007; Haug, 2014). In the Norwegian context 47% of the providers are public and 53% are private, and all ECEC services are integrated under one ministry, The Ministry of Education and Research.

Key elements of NPM are a strong belief in professional management, competition in a market, increased use of indirect control rather than direct authority and an increased focus on citizens and consumers (Øgård, 2014). The focus on leadership is partly reflected in the decentralisation of power and authority. In this context, NPM requires delegation from the top administrative level in a municipality to individual managers in municipal units or businesses. In addition, leader functions at the unit level should be made visible, and leaders should have increased maneuverability to accomplish their goals. As much as possible, decisions should be made at the level where the municipal services are provided.

Another important element of NPM is indirect control, where the formulation of objectives and quality measurements are key concepts. As a management tool, this structure encourages management by objectives or performance management and business planning and control systems where there is a clear top-down hierarchy of decision-making with a corresponding bottom-up reporting structure. The governance structure spans multiple levels (Helgøy & Aars 2008; Øgård 2014). An example is the national *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*. The objectives for content and the process goals for tasks at each professional level in each ECC are determined at the national level. At the local level, municipalities can provide guidance regarding what should be prioritised among the many goals that the Framework Plan addresses. Such guidance can also include overall objectives that apply to both private and public ECCs. Feedback to leaders at the various levels is provided through control systems such as reporting systems, quality assurance systems, and educational documentation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A selection of literature relevant to the theoretical model presented in this chapter is discussed in the following three sub sections:

a) The large and the small communities

Governance guidance coming into an ECEC setting from the outside must be translated and transformed into purposeful action by the ECCs. An ECC's governance uses structures for organising, formal decisions, etc., that are often enshrined in the ECCs operational and annual plans.

Such plans constitute each ECC's internal management documents. Klausen (2001) described organisations as small communities that are participants in a larger community, the outside society. If we use this perspective, the ECC is the small community, and the municipality is part of the large community. In the large community, there are also other stakeholders who have clear expectations of the ECCs, and some of these stakeholders have requirements that the director of each ECC must adhere to and in some cases report to. This framework is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1: The large and the small communities

In the large community, there is usually a different governance and management logic than that used within each ECC, the small community, which can create tension between the communities due to cross-pressures and dilemmas that can be difficult for a leader to manage (Klausen, 2001, p 241). In the small community, the director must exercise leadership to select and implement the means that will be used to achieve the governance objectives set from the outside, in the large community.

As a leader, the director is responsible for selecting the measures that he or she considers the most appropriate based on their expected effectiveness and the director's access to resources. In relation to ECCs as a learning arena, the *Framework Plan* distinguishes between formal and informal learning situations and establishes educational responsibility for both. However, the *Framework Plan* provides little guidance beyond noting the various disciplines that the ECCs' activities must address. The individual director of each ECC decides which discipline to focus on at a particular time and how learning should take place.

The ECCs face a challenge regarding the understanding of the concept of learning. With the *Framework Plan* of 2006 and the contemporary transfer of ECEC governance from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research, the focus on learning became much clearer, as did expectations for ECCs to be effective learning environments for children. For the ECCs, this was something new, not that children were expected to learn, but the increased focus on these processes in the ECCs. From this perspective, it became natural to expect the ECCs to adopt known models of learning and learning activities for children because such models

are found in schools where there is a long tradition of learning and teaching. However, the ECCs were reluctant to make such changes, and they struggled to preserve their uniqueness and to not simply transfer school pedagogy into the ECCs. In response to this tension between schools and ECCs, providers of courses, learning packages and test programs for the ECEC setting have gradually begun to emerge.

These learning packages are offered from various providers in the large community, such as nonprofit organisations, educational institutions and more commercial operators. The scope of these packages varies widely, from relatively simple tools to comprehensive programs that run over a long period and require staff certification. In response, an ongoing debate has emerged among politicians and professionals regarding the usefulness of such programs for children, parents and society.

b) Translation of ideas

It is in this context that directors must select the methods to be used in each ECC, and each program must be sorted, selected and adapted. Which target areas should be prioritised? What competencies are needed? What is it most important for children to learn? How should this be taught? Which providers of educational programs should be selected? How can new ideas be adapted to already existing local conditions and practices?

These choices require competence to sort out what is important for each ECC among the large number of ideas and available knowledge, as well as how these ideas might be used in each organisation. Røvik (2007) called this process *translation*. A key aspect of this theoretical approach is that ideas that are transferred between organisations must be translated from the context in which they originated to the reality in which they are intended. An idea to be implemented must first be transformed based on what already exists in an organisation. This translation requires solid knowledge of the context it is translated from, but most important is knowledge of the context it is to be translated to. In our case, for example, ideas about learning and learning processes based on existing knowledge from schools must be translated into the ECEC context. In this regard, the director must take the role of translator and translate new ideas in the context of the ECC's needs.

c) Classification competence and configuration competence

Two crucial types of competence are needed to provide a good translation: *classification competence* and *configuration competence* (Røvik, 2007, p. 329).

Classification competence means that the translator has thorough knowledge of the organisation and the practice field where the ideas will be implemented. An existing organisation already has its own practices, procedures, structures, values and attitudes. These elements will affect the organisation's ability to affect change and meet new challenges. With this knowledge, the translator can determine the types of ideas that the organisation may need and what its resources should be used on. When these choices are made, it is equally important to adapt the new ideas to the organisation in which they are being implemented. It is not enough to have knowledge about the organisation to make the right choices; the translator must also have competence in how the new ideas can best be adapted to the existing context so they can succeed. This required insight into the process is what Røvik calls configuration competence. These two types of competencies are vital for today's leaders to make the right choices among the large number of ideas and offers that are available. This theoretical perspective will be used in the analysis to address the following issue: How do directors act on their opportunities to exercise leadership of ECCs as learning environments for children given the tension between the large community and the small community?

METHODOLOGY

The data on which this article is based have both a qualitative design and a quantitative design. The qualitative data were collected from a selection of 16 directors from three municipalities of different sizes and is drawn strategically in cooperation with the ECEC administration in these municipalities. The intention was to obtain the most correct distribution of ECCs by ownership and size. The data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews with a flexible yet detailed interview guide. The interviews were recorded for later transcription. The average time for each interview was approximately 1 1/2 hours. After transcribing, each interview comprised approximately 30–33 pages of text, for a total of approximately 500 pages. The textual data were coded and analysed using the computer program NVivo.

The participants in the study consisted of 14 women and two men. They were all qualified ECEC teachers, and apart from two, all have higher management qualifications or qualifications in various educational themes. On average, it has been more than 21 years since the participants graduated as ECEC teachers. The participants have extensive experience in the field, but their time as directors in their current ECCs varies from four months to 32 years, with some interruptions. Consequently there are relatively large differences in the

length of time that the participants have been leaders in the ECCs where they were employed at the time of interview. The size of each director's staff and the number of children at each ECC demonstrates the degree of control of each director. In the smallest ECC, there were nine children at the time of interview, while the largest centre had 300 children. The range for the number of staff positions was between three and 63.

The quantitative part of the study was a survey conducted in 2013 of a statistically representative sample of 1,310 directors, drawn from total of 5,155 throughout Norway. The sample was drawn from the e-mail addresses of all directors in Norway. Open ECCs and family day care centres were not included because they were not considered relevant to the research study. The sample is representative by sex, the distribution between private and public ECCs, the size of the ECCs and the level of education of the directors.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings and analysis is divided into three sub sections:

a) Management by objectives from authorities and owners creates space for maneuverability in leadership

The findings suggest that the tension between the large and small communities creates a space for management that the directors can and do use. This space for maneuverability can be considered a result of the governance provided by the authorities and owners. Through governance documents, primarily *the Framework Plan*, the authorities have become clearer on the stated goals and the management by objectives in the ECEC field. Regarding ECCs as learning arenas, the directors in the sample expressed the view that they perceive the owners to be primarily concerned with fulfilling the authorities' defined goals. It does not seem that the directors think that the owners or authorities try to influence how these goals are to be achieved or what learning processes should take place in the ECCs. At the governmental level, the established guidelines of the *Framework Plan* stipulate that these questions should be solved at the local level in each ECC.

When viewed from an NPM perspective, this approach is also logical because the governance takes place through the formulation of goals and the establishment of a framework, but the choice of means and the management of the processes take place at the local level. There were several quite clear statements in the interviews that this process actually occurs in the ECCs. When asked whether the owner provides guidelines on how the learning processes

are performed, one municipal director answered, "Well – no other guidelines than to follow what is in The Kindergarten Act." Another municipal director stated, "… that I keep within the legal framework and use the money that I have been assigned." A private director said, "Very, very little. It is possible that is the way we are organised, but the owner has little … almost no influence."

Other directors stated that the owners do not influence the management of the educational content directly but indirectly by defining priority areas and focus areas through management agreements for municipal directors or municipal quality programs that apply to private ECCs that are not included in the municipal director agreements. A private director put it this way:

> Not directly – no. But they [the owner] do it indirectly, since we have a quality program in our municipality, which the owners in a way have been involved in the making of … It is not a governance document, we can choose to be part of it or not – so I do not experience that they do it to me directly, but they do it indirectly by putting some topics on the agenda.

The findings indicate a general perception that, in the directors' experience, they have a great deal of freedom to exert leadership of the ECCs as learning arenas and that there appeared to be no difference between municipal and private owners. A municipal director said, "We have great freedom as leaders in our municipality now, I think…" A director in a private chain said, "And they [the owners] are never checking … I feel they give me some confidence." This freedom and confidence to make their own choices based on the provided framework and goals creates space for maneuverability for each director to exert leadership in their own ECC, the small community. Figure 1 provides a visual model of what occurs. In the large community, there are several stakeholders with orders and expectations for the ECCs as learning environments for children. Other findings from this project identify the authorities, parents and owners as important stakeholders for the directors (Moen and Granrusten, 2014). The parents are important because they are the customers in the ECEC market who ultimately choose the ECC for their children.

b) The space for maneuverability is utilised by the directors

The data show that the directors of both private and municipal ECCs find that they have space for maneuverability that provides them the opportunity to make choices, and the directors believe that they have the skills required to make these choices. Many directors in the interviews said that they consider it their job to make the choices necessary to achieve the goals of the

ECCs as learning arenas, as defined by the outside community. This part of the management function is very important, and when asked whether they have the legitimacy in their staff to make these choices, many of the directors answered yes. One director said, "Yes, I would say that I have. This is a part of the management decisions, to obtain information in relation to … to decide how things should be done, in a way…"

One interpretation is that the directors perceive an expectation of both the authorities and the owners about their responsibility for exercising and that they have the necessary freedom and confidence to do so. Within the ECCs, the directors also find that the staff are confident that they will choose the right means to achieve the given goals. Given this space for maneuverability, there are many choices to be made. Interpretations, understandings and formulations of the goals must be elaborated, and the right means to achieve these goals must be chosen.

With the increased focus on ECCs as learning arenas, a market has developed for course providers for the skill development of the staff. Some providers offer complete educational programs or "educational learning packages" for use in ECCs. These offers of new ideas mostly come to the director as the general manager of the ECC, and the director must therefore function as a filter or as the person who chooses the programs to consider.

c) Translation

We utilised Røvik's (2007) theory of translation as an approach in this study. The directors' choices require expertise to determine what is appropriate and important from the large amount of ideas and knowledge available concerning ECEC in the large community. Røvik called this ability *classification competence*. Such expertise is important for a director to choose what may be useful in their ECC or to opt out of, as one director said:

> But there are many expectations and requirements. So to opt out – and I'm not thinking of deselecting forever, but in a way to focus and keep direction … is a bit of my job. But clearly, to choose … we discuss in our leadership team, and in a way clarify further.

This director noted two factors that were also mentioned by several other directors. First, the choice of means for an ECC as a learning arena must relate to the choices made previously to "keep the direction", and second is the importance of anchoring such selections in an ECC's management team. Such selections are strategic choices that will have long-term consequences.

Several directors emphasised that the choices they make and any options they have are presented to the management team or the teachers for discussion before they go out to the entire staff as final decisions. Another director was quite clear on the strategic perspective in her statements in addition to describing why it is important to make these selections:

> For there are some things which in a way could be something we can use in the present, but other things can be something that we should focus on a little ahead, if you think [about the] long-term plan and things that are up ahead. For I believe that in an organisation, there is so much information, and one must in a way choose which information or what things we should work with at any given time.

The findings indicate that in the directors' experience, they have space to maneuver to manage their ECCs to create a good learning arena for children, and they believe that they have the expertise required to exert this leadership. They have confidence from both their owners and the authorities in the large community, and they also have the confidence of their own staff in the small community. Several directors were quite clear on this aspect. One informant responded with short "yes" answers to the questions on this topic:

> R: Do you as a leader experience that it's your job to ... sort out, to pick from the flow of information what is interesting for you, or what is appropriate for you, as you put it earlier?

> I: Yes, I do.

> R: Do you experience that you have acceptance from your staff in making these selections?

> I: Yes.

Equally important as choosing what may be good for an organisation is how such ideas or knowledge can be processed or adapted in an ECC. This aspect is what Røvik (2007) called *configuration competence*. Regarding this matter, the directors said that they believed they have the required competence, but such activities are performed in collaboration with the staff, primarily the teachers.

The findings from the interviews are also supported by the findings from the survey. Using exploratory questions about the use of complete educational programs or "educational learning packages" in the ECCs, and the answers pointed in the same direction as the informants in the interviews. The survey did not specifically ask whether the director makes these choices, but to what

extent the ECC had adopted such packages. However, because many directors answered the questionnaire, and it is their responsibility to implement such processes, it may be a reasonable interpretation that these are the directors' decisions. Figure 2 shows that approximately two-thirds of the ECCs use such packages to some extent, while slightly less than one-fourth use them to only a small extent. Only 10.8% of the informants stated that their ECC uses such packages to a large extent. It is not known why one package is selected and another is not, but such decisions are made, and the directors are assumed to be central to them.

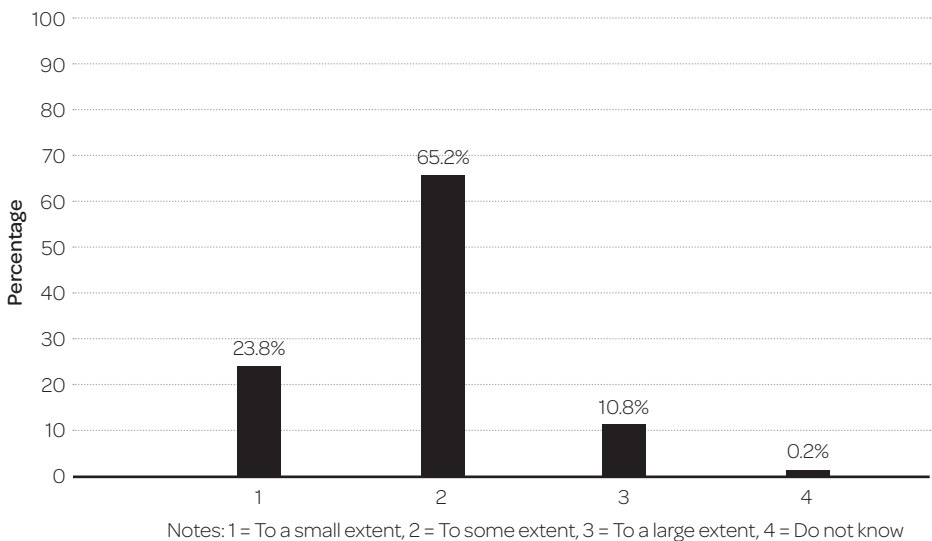Notes: 1 = To a small extent, 2 = To some extent, 3 = To a large extent, 4 = Do not know

Figure 2: To what extent does your ECC use educational programs/"packages" from other providers in your work on the learning environment for children?

One interpretation of this result is that the directors make choices and are selective regarding the means they wish to use to develop their ECC as learning environment for children. In the interviews, the directors were quite clear that these decisions are part of their functions as a leader and that they have the confidence of their stakeholders in both the small and large communities to make these choices. They also made it clear that they are competent to do so by virtue of their education and their leadership. Choices are made based on strategic considerations and conducted in consultation with the management teams of the ECCs. The figures from the survey can be interpreted such that this also occurs on a larger scale all over the country. Beyond looking at the extent of the use of educational packages in ECCs, it is also interesting to

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see how they are used and how they are implemented in the ECCs' learning processes. Figure 3 shows the directors' responses regarding how their ECCs use these packages, if they use them the way they are designed, or whether the packages are adapted to the ECC's needs. Figure 3 reveals that only 2.4% of the respondents use the programs the way they were designed, while 96% of the ECCs adapt the programs to varying degrees. As many as 28.7% of the respondents said that they use only the ideas from the packages and prepare the rest themselves.

Notes: 1 = Use them without modification,
2 = Make some changes to fit into our centre,
3 = Use ideas from the packages but prepare the rest ourselves,
4 = Adaptation and use of such packages varies considerably,
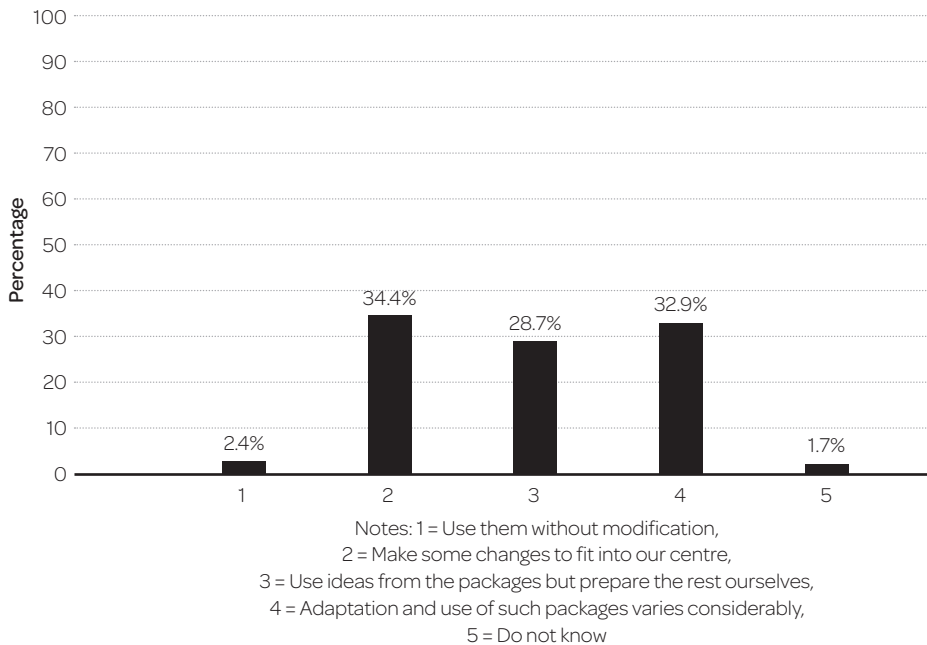5 = Do not know

Figure 3: How do you use these educational programs/"packages"?

This result clearly confirms that considerable adaptation takes place that might be described as the *configuration of ideas*. When choices are made, the directors said in our interviews that it is their job to adapt the means to the ECCs to fit what they already do and to reflect the long-term goals that the directors set with their staff. An interpretation of the figures from the survey is that 96% of the directors say that this actually occurs.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown how some directors find that they have a certain space for maneuverability to perform their leadership role in an ECC to create an appropriate learning environment for children. It has been argued that leadership in the small community, the ECC, has changed along with the developments in the ECEC sector in view of the NPM reforms. Through governance documents, primarily the Framework Plan, authorities at the national level have provided more detailed guidelines for ECCs to create a suitable learning environment for children. Formulated process goals have been designed for what children should do in ECCs and what staff must be able to do to conduct these activities. The focus on the ECCs as a learning environment has increased because of more stakeholders outside the ECCs, and the directors see authorities, owners and parents as key actors.

Using a modified model of the large community and the small community (Klausen, 2001), the study illustrated how directors experience the tension between stakeholder expectations in the large community and their leadership in the small community that there is space for maneuverability in creating a suitable learning environment for children in ECCs. The directors are expected to provide an appropriate learning environment for children in their ECCs, and the process goals must be fulfilled. These goals are set by the authorities and the owners in the large community, but the directors experience considerable freedom to choose the means to achieve these goals in the small community.

Impulses and ideas for how the ECCs can act as learning environments are also developed in the large community. There are significant guidelines that the directors must adhere to and offers that they must make and make choices about. The directors' responsibility as a leader of an ECC is to ensure that their staff have the competence to fulfill their required tasks and that they will provide a good learning environment for children. The directors stated quite clearly in the interviews that this task is a very important part of their management functions and that they are provided with the requisite confidence and freedom from the authorities and owners to perform such functions. This approach is logical from an NPM perspective and as expressed in the Framework Plan.

The directors also find that they have the confidence of their own staff. Similarly, they find that they are competent to perform the adaptions needed to create an optimal ECC. The analysis also showed that the directors

perceived it to be important to make such adaptations from a strategic perspective in collaboration with the rest of their staff. By using concepts from translational theory (Røvik, 2007), the analysis showed that the directors are perceived to have both classification competence and configuration competence, and they consider it perfectly legitimate to use these competencies to select ideas to use in their own organisations and to customise the way they fit in their own context.

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