



CHAPTER  
15

## The making of a learning organisation in Norwegian early childhood centres

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Berit Irene Vannebo  
Nord-Trøndelag University College

Kjell-Åge Gotvassli  
Queen Maud University College, Norway

Contact: [Kjell.A.Gotvassli@dmmh.no](mailto:Kjell.A.Gotvassli@dmmh.no), [berit.i.vannebo@hint.no](mailto:berit.i.vannebo@hint.no)

### ABSTRACT

Official documents state that all Early Childhood Centres in Norway should aspire to become learning organisations. This chapter looks at how leaders interpret and act on this new mission to become learning organisations. The authors find significant differences in the way managers interpret the concept of a learning organisation, and that managers are relatively unclear as to how to utilise this approach when developing pedagogical work.

Keywords: Learning organisation, Early Childhood Centres, leadership, organisational practice

### ABSTRAKT

Offisielle dokumenter som f. eks rammeplanen sier at barnehagen må utvikle seg til en lærende organisasjon. Dette kapitlet ser på hvordan styreere i barnehagen oppfatter dette og arbeider med å utvikle sin barnehage til en lærende organisasjon. Forfatterne finner tydelige forskjeller mellom styrene hvordan de oppfatter begrepet en lærende organisasjon, og de er ofte uklare i hvordan de skal gripe an arbeidet med å utvikle en lærende barnehage.

### ABSTRAKTI

Virallisten dokumenttien mukaan päiväkotien Norjassa tulisi pyrkiä kehittämään oppiviksi organisaatioiksi. Tässä luvussa tarkastellaan sitä, kuinka johtajat tulkitsevat ja toimivat kohti missiota kehittyä oppivaksi organisaatioiksi. Kirjoittajat havaitsivat merkittäviä erilaisuuksia

siinä, kuinka johtajat tulkitsevat oppivan organisaation käsitettä ja johtajille on melko epäselvää kuinka hyödyntää tämä näkökulma kehitettäessä pedagogiikkaa.

Keywords: Oppiva organisaatio, päiväkoti, johtajuus, organisaation käytänteet



## INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR 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 ECCs, combined with a shortage of competent staff, has been key challenges in the sector. The rise in number of ECCs has also been coupled with a stronger emphasis on the 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 access to quality daycare (Government Report No. 41 20082009 – Quality in ECCs), and an important means of achieving this quality is through continuous learning. Learning as the key factor for development of quality is expressed in many ways. Learning at the organisational level is emphasised in the national curriculum (The Framework Plan) from 2006 and 2011. Through this plan, the term ECEC institutions as learning organisations is introduced into the sector.

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

Despite the emphasis put on developing ECCs into learning organisations, the national curriculum and other documents do not clarify the concept of what it means for the ECCs to become a learning organisation. This means that those who work in these organisations, to a large extent, must themselves interpret the concept and identify practice and working methods that promote the development of the ECCs as a learning organisation. This new challenge raises some important questions:

1. To what extent do managers in ECCs experience a greater focus on learning in the ECCs?
2. How do managers in ECCs interpret the concept of a learning organisation, and how do they characterise ECCs institutions as learning organisations?

This chapter offers an overview of key historical and philosophical discussions about knowledge development – outlining different epistemological understandings of knowledge, what knowledge is and how knowledge can be developed in organisations. The link between knowledge development and the concept of the learning organisation is explored as well as how managers in ECCs understand the concept of a learning organisation, and how they work to translate policy recommendations into practice in ECCs.

## KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

Early on Peter Drucker (1959, 1963) and Edith Penrose (1959) pointed to the importance of knowledge as an important factor for organisational competitiveness. The concept of the learning organisation, however, was not actively in use until the end of the 1980s (Pedler et al., 1997). Eventually, knowledge management, learning organisations, and other related concepts were adopted and used by both organisational theorists and practitioners (Irgens & Wennes, 2011). The core interests about knowledge of the field must be regarded as interest for knowledge in organisations; 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 organisations and on how to develop practices which are in line with those of learning organisations. An important foundation for creating a learning organisation is related to the view of knowledge and knowledge development in organisations. An important point is that if we are to create ECCs as learning organisations, we must examine different views on what knowledge is and how we develop knowledge in ECEC institutions as organisations.

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 emphasises practice-based knowledge, that is, 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 socio-cultural 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, there are three different approaches to knowledge production: the rational perspective, the socio-cultural perspective, and emphasis on learning through emotions and intuition (Gotvassli, 2007).

## THE RATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The *socio-cultural* or *process-oriented* perspective sees knowledge development in organisations not only as the mental processes of individuals, but also as participation in social situations related to practical work in the organisation. This thinking is developed further in theories of learning in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Practice communities are the building blocks of social learning systems where skills are developed and stored. Communities develop as a result of an exchange of expertise and personal experiences in an environment characterised 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 ECEs institutions (Gotvassli, 2006) and other professions (Filstad, 2010) shows that a lot of informal learning takes place in reflection-based communities.

## INTUITION AND EMOTION

The third perspective emphasises *personal experience through the use of intuition and emotions* as a basis for learning and development (Finemann, 2000; Elkjær, 2005). 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. 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 *mentalise*, that is, our ability to imagine other people's mentality through models of the brain (Arnulf, 2012). This makes us capable of organising and planning with others – both adults and children – in the ECC. 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 ECC when developing *practical* wisdom.

Table 1 summarises 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, the different epistemological positions represent three distinctly different perspectives (and knowledge development processes) which are quite independent of each other. However, it may be 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 we want to promote.

	<b>The rational perspective</b>	<b>The socio-cultural perspective</b>	<b>Intuition and emotion</b>
<b>Understanding Frame</b>	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
<b>Key concepts</b>	Episteme Explicit knowledge Knowledge claims	Techne Often tacit knowledge Skill-based knowledge	Phronesis Practical wisdom
<b>Views on knowledge</b>	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
<b>Key theoretical contributions</b>	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
<b>Methods and procedures for knowledge</b>	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

(Gotvassli, 2013).

Table 1. Different epistemological positions and perspectives on knowledge development

## THE LEARNING ORGANISATION AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

A number of different concepts and theories attempt to explain the development of the learning organisation (Filstad, 2010), and the majority of these are related to learning as embedded in everyday practice and in the workings of the organisation. An example of integrating different views on the

development of a learning organisation 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 is a learning organisation:

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 and Schön (1978) can be criticised for promoting a reactive view of learning and development – describing correction of behaviour as a result of experience, Senge (1990) presents us with a more proactive view on organisations and learning. Senge argues that the organisation must be managed through *creative tension* and not through unilateral problem solving. Creative tension is the gap between the organisation'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 organisation.

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

Data were collected from a national representative survey of 1311 ECC managers throughout Norway and from 10 interviews with managers of ECCs from two municipalities in Nord-Trøndelag, Norway – one relatively large urban municipality and one smaller rural municipality. In the sample, there are six public and four private ECCs. The size of the ECCs varies from about 20 children up to about 100 children.

This study is based primarily upon data from a small part of both the survey and the interviews. The interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured interview guide that addressed different themes regarding management practices in the ECCs. The analysis was based on a stepwise-deductive induction approach, going from raw data to concepts or theories (Tjora, 2012). The aim of the analysis was not on confirming or refuting theoretical models or assumptions. The purpose of the study is not to achieve results that are statistically representative, but rather to analyse data from a field that has not been explored and, if possible, develop concepts and theories that can be explored further.

## THE FOCUS ON LEARNING

The first question we examined was this: *In what degree do managers in ECCs experience a greater focus on learning in the ECCs?* This issue was investigated from the survey question:

I find that there has been more focus on the learning aspect because of the introduction of the framework plan (2006).

The respondent's degree of agreement to that statement is presented in Table 2.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Both	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know
0.8 %	0.4 %	8.7 %	39.8 %	49.7 %	0.6 %

Table 2: Degree of agreement

It is evident that the managers feel that there is a strong focus to learning in their own organisation, as about 90% agree or strongly agree with this statement.

## THE ECC AS A LEARNING ORGANISATION

The concept of ECCs as learning organisations has been used in a number of policy documents, plans and textbooks in the sector since it was introduced into the national curriculum in 2006. As a result, it was expected that ECC managers had developed a shared understanding of the term and that this understanding has translated into some new form of practice in the ECCs. Based on the responses from our respondents, we do not see that this is the case. When asked to define the term learning organisation, or to reflect on the ECCs as a learning organisation, the respondents did not appear to have a shared understanding of the term and we got fairly evasive and vague answers. The following is a typical statement:

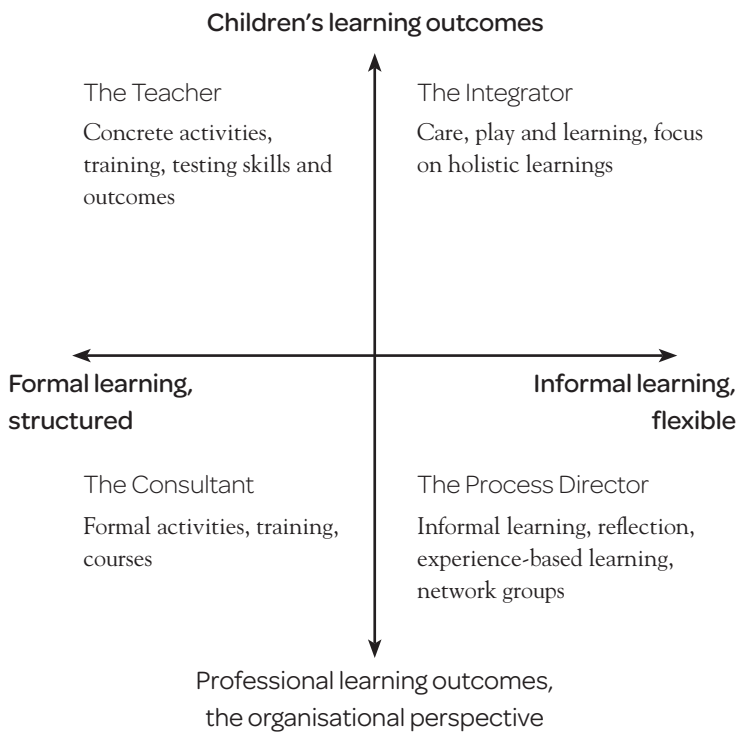
I do not know if we have – if we have somehow not mentioned much about that, no – just in terms of – the governing meetings and stuff that we've – we have not ... directly defined what it is – no. (Respondent 9)

This may indicate a poor understanding among the managers of the concept of a learning organisation. However, it does not mean that the managers in their practical running of the organisation do not have developed practices that actively promote the ECC as a learning organisation. The analysis of responses indicates a number of different patterns that indicate how they think about knowledge development and management in the ECCs. The responses were categorised into the following main categories:



1. Expressions that 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 ECC.
2. Expression that are related to organisational learning and knowledge development among the staff in the ECCs. 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 organisational learning and staff development in the ECC.

This categorisation provides the following basis (see Figure 1) for discussion of knowledge development and management based on the 10 interviews.



Vannebo and Gotvassli (2014, p. 38).

Figure 1. Managerial types

The vertical dimension indicates various understandings of the concept of the ECC as a learning organisation. Here we distinguish 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 organisational learning in the ECC, and those who emphasise 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 ECC.

There is a clear distinction between those who emphasise activities that are organised and are of a relatively formal character, and those of informal and procedural character. Based on this, we have categorised the different managerial types according to the various forms of organising knowledge development in the ECC and their understandings of the concept of the ECCs as a learning organisation. 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 ECCs 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 children actually learn and that this learning is documented. In this material, we find very little evidence of this kind of attitude. On the contrary, most 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 six 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 ECC where children of four years of age and would have to sit still and just be learning facts.

In quadrant 2, the focus is on organisational 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 ECC. Although in this study there are few of these types of statements, the following is an example:

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)

In quadrant 3, there are the category managers who are most strongly represented in our material. This category is called the integrator, the reason being that the managers are very clear that it is through the children's perspective that the relative concept of learning is understood, 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. There are many examples of this attitude:

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... (Respondent 7)

In quadrant 4, the major focus is on the organisation 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:

A learning organisation. Well ... It is an organisation 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 organisation, that all the staff here from assistant to pedagogical leader and manager, we are together applying the knowledge (Respondent 3)

## DISCUSSION

First, it appears that the managers find that there has been more focus on the learning because of the introduction of the *Framework Plan* (2006). They are clearly aware of these requirements formulated in the *Framework Plan* from the Ministry of Education.

A second point is that some distinct patterns can be identified in the data. First, a lot of the managers have relatively vague and imprecise understandings of the term ECCs as learning organisations. Their answers are tentative and elusive. Since the term ECCs as learning organisations is central to policy – and to documents and textbooks concerning policy development in the ECC – it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the concept is perceived of in this way. On the other hand, neither the national curriculum nor the

ECC act elaborates on or defines the concept as it pertains to ECCs. In policy documents the concept is primarily linked to organisational development and staff' competence, rather than to children's learning.

Second, the respondents primarily associate ECCs as learning organisations 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 (2004) related to the school and the subjects we teach in schools. This association with 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 data. The fear among many is that learning in the ECC should become synonymous with the use of specific training activities, surveys and measurement of learning goals. The managers are clear defenders of the tradition that emphasises a holistic – and relatively anti-scholarly approach to ECCs.

We now see an increasing pressure on the ECCs to implement more structured educational activities and clearer learning objectives. We also see a stronger emphasis on mapping and testing of learning outcomes in ECCs (Johansson, 2010; Pramling, 2010). Respondents in this 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 ECCs must become more structured and academic; the staff in ECCs is relatively immune to these.

A third type of pattern in the response that which is closest to what much of the organisational literature portrays as characteristic of a learning organisation: organisational 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. Many also highlight the understanding of knowledge as tacit, as a kind of knowledge that is extremely important in ECCs, but which can be challenging to identify and share with others.

A final pattern looks at development of the ECC as a learning organisation as primarily consisting of initiating a number of formal courses for staff. The tradition of attending training courses as a means 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 organisation. 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 organisations, most of the managers interviewed apply a socio-cultural understanding to knowledge development, where knowledge is primarily produced through participating in practice-based work in the ECC. The managers in this sample frequently mention keywords such as reflection, learning from each other, processes, sharing, and professional networks. This is not surprising considering the strong tradition we have in Norwegian ECCs on focusing on holistic learning, coupled with a pronounced resistance to scholarly approaches.

## CONCLUSION

One of our goals in this study was to gain more insights into how ECEC managers understand the concept of a learning organisation, and to examine how they work towards the political ambition of making the ECCs a learning organisation. Despite the fact that many operate with relatively unclear and elusive concept of what it means for an ECC to be a learning organisation, many have developed practices that emphasise organisational learning. They do so by focusing on socio-cultural factors and learning as taking place in everyday practice, and stemming primarily from the interests and needs of the child.

It is a little surprising, however, that when asked to define what it means to be a learning organisation, rather than thinking of organisational 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 emphasises staff learning, collective learning, and organisational development as important in changing practice and creating learning organisations. The fact that the practitioners in the field operate with an understanding of the concept which rarely recognises organisational learning, or the organisational perspective, could present a real challenge to implement policy in this sector. These findings indicate that more research is needed in this area to fully understand the role of managers in encouraging learning practices among staff in ECCs, which prominent practices of knowledge development exist in ECCs, and what factors are important in reshaping the ECC as a learning organisation.



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