Expectations of external stakeholders and external leadership of early childhood centres

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ABSTRACT

The key question addressed by this chapter is how directors of public Early Childhood Centres exert external leadership on the basis of the expectations of external stakeholders regarding the centres as places of learning. The main theoretical basis is a political perspective on organisation and leadership, including a stakeholder model. Furthermore, theories about leadership functions and cross-pressure among leaders are included. Interviews with three directors show that they perceive owners and the parents as the main stakeholders, but their expectations of learning are not clear. The parents' expectations influence the way the directors profile the centres, and this may have consequences for children's learning. Conflicting expectations lead to cross-pressures, and these are classified as ethical, logical and moral dilemmas. The directors experience fewer opportunities for external influence than they perceive the directors of non-public centres to have because of their own loyalty to the municipality as an owner and employer.

Keywords: External stakeholders, external leadership, place for learning, Early Childhood Centre

ABSTRAKT

Hovedspørsmålet i dette kapittelet er hvordan styrere i offentlige barnehager utøver utadrettet ledelse på grunnlag av forventninger fra eksterne interessenter til barnehagene som arenaer for læring. Det viktigste teoretiske grunnlaget er et politisk perspektiv på organisasjon og ledelse, inkludert en interessentmodell. Videre er teorier om ledelsesfunksjoner og krysspress blant ledere av velferdsinstitusjoner inkludert. Intervjuer med tre styrere viser at de oppfatter eiere og foreldrene som de viktigste interessentene, men deres forventninger til læring er ikke klare.

Foreldrenes forventninger påvirker måten styrerne profilerer barnehagene på, og dette kan få konsekvenser for barns læring. Motstridende forventninger fører til krysspress, og disse er klassifisert som etiske, logiske og moralske dilemmaer. Styrerne opplever at de har færre muligheter for utadrettet påvirkning enn det de oppfatter at styrerne av private barnehager har på grunn av egen lojalitet til kommunen som eier og arbeidsgiver.

ABSTRAKTI

Tämän kappaleen pääkysymys on, kuinka kunnallisten päiväkotien johtajat käyttävät ulkoista johtajuuttaan siihen, millaisia odotuksia ulkopuolisilla yhteistyötahoilla on päiväkoteihin oppimisen paikkoina. Teoreettisena perustana on poliittinen näkökulma organisaatioihin ja johtajuuteen mukaan lukien yhteistyötahojen malli. Tämän lisäksi teoriat johtajuuden käytänteistä ja johtajien ristipaineet ovat mukana tarkastelussa. Kolmen johtajan haastattelut osoittavat, että he pitävät omistajia ja vanhempia tärkeimpinä yhteistyötahoina mutta näiden odotukset oppimisesta eivät ole selvillä. Vanhempien odotukset vaikuttavat siihen, miten johtajat profiloivat päiväkotiaan ja tällä voi olla vaikutuksia lasten oppimiseen. Oletukset konflikteista johtavat ristipaineisiin ja nämä nähdään eettisinä ja moraalisina pulmina. Johtajat kokevat vähäisempiä mahdollisuuksia ulkopuolisiin tahoihin vaikuttamiseen kuin ei-julkisen sektorin päiväkodeissa, koska he kokevat lojaaliutta kuntaa kohtaan, joka on omistaja ja työnantaja.

Keywords: Ulkoiset yhteistyötahot, ulkoinen johtajuus, oppimisen paikka, päiväkoti

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INTRODUCTION

Directors of Early Childhood Centres (ECCs) are responsible for both the internal processes in the centres and the relations to the environments. It is important for directors to lead internal processes related to staff, pedagogical issues and administration. On the other hand it is also important to perform externally oriented duties like securing necessary resources, building good relationships with the parents and to implement the decisions of the national government and the owners.

In recent years, the directors of ECCs in Norway appear to be participating more outside the centres than some decades ago (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2010). This may reflect several changes in the field. Among these are full coverage, increased expectations from the central government and new organisational models in many centres (Moen & Granrusten, 2013). As the field has increased and become a significant part of the Norwegian welfare state, different external stakeholders have become more eager to define the content and quality of ECCs (Gotvassli, 2006). Some of these expectations are related to the centres as places of learning for children. The holistic perspective on

learning[1] in the Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens (ECCs) where learning is closely integrated with care, play and formation[2] (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012), is to be continued. Different national White Papers[3] and the framework plan note that the pedagogy of the Early Education and Care (ECEC) field is unique. It is simultaneously claimed that the field must be viewed in relation to school. This claim may give rise to some tension because the practical meaning of it is not quite clear.

In recent years, the central governments have emphasised that the ECEC field should be the first volunteer step into the educational system and that the learning component should be strengthened.[4] It is well documented that the staff in ECCs have experienced the increased pressure about learning from the central government during recent years (Vatne, 2012). These increased expectations of learning may be observed by other stakeholders and may influence their expectations of the centres. The expectations of different stakeholders may be consistent or conflicting and must be adhered to by the directors of ECCs.

On this basis, this chapter will focus on the expectations of external stakeholders regarding ECCs as places of learning and the external leadership of ECC directors in a Norwegian municipality. The main question is: How may directors exert external leadership on the basis of the expectations of external stakeholders regarding public ECCs as places of learning? To be more specific, we have operationalised the following sub-questions:

1. What expectations may directors experience from the most significant external stakeholders regarding public ECCs as places of learning?

2. How do the directors emphasise expectations from the most significant stakeholders in their practice of external leadership?

3. How do they address cross-pressure and dilemmas following different expectations?

Although the external leadership of directors in Norwegian ECCs has, to some degree, been explored in other research studies, it has not been linked to the expectations of different external stakeholders of ECCs and possible dilemmas so broadly until this study.[5] The primary emphasis is on the direc-

1   For a deeper explanation see: e.g., Lillemyr (2013).
2   The Norwegian concept is «danning» and origins from the German term "Buildung".
3   e.g., White paper no. 24 (2012–2013).
4   e.g., ibid., White paper no. 41 (2008–2009).
5   This article builds on the master thesis of L. S. Flormælen (2013). K.H. Moen has been the main supervisor.

tors' relationship with the environments, external leadership and dilemmas rather than ECCs as places of learning. The theoretical framework is largely rooted in the field organisation and leadership.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because the focus is on expectations from different external stakeholders and the way the directors emphasise them in their external leadership, a political perspective on organisation and leadership may be an appropriate theoretical perspective. This section will start with a closer look at the political perspective and the stakeholder model before looking at the concepts of external leadership as a function and cross-pressure of leaders of welfare institutions.

A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP

The key aspects of the political perspective are power, conflict, competition and organisational policies. According to this perspective, an ECC may be viewed as an organisation consisting of a coalition of actors or groups of actors of stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2008). They bring different contributions to the organisation and expect different rewards in return. If the stakeholders do not get what they want in return, they may withdraw from the organisation (Busch, Vanebo & Dehlin, 2010). However, the costs and uncertainty associated with withdrawing from an ECC might impact on stabilisation. Thus the owner, parents and staff will not necessarily withdraw every time something does not meet their expectations.

Skybakmoen & Behrens (2010) constructed a model of significant stakeholders of ECCs in Norway, which is illustrated in Figure 1. This model is also relevant to this research about the expectations of external stakeholders regarding ECCs as places of learning, although it is not exhaustive and does not distinguish between internal and external stakeholders. Typical external stakeholders may be the national government, the administration and politicians in the municipality, unions, parents and other public services. However, whom the directors look upon as external stakeholders is not necessarily uniquely given. Ownership may be viewed as internal or external depending on perspectives, for example, whether the perspective is the ECC as an organisation or the municipality as an organisation. In the latter case, the politicians and administration of the municipality may be considered internal owners.

An important task for directors, according to this perspective, is to have an awareness of stakeholders. In this context, the directors, as heads of the ECC,

must have a conscious awareness of the external stakeholders, who have expectations of the ECC as places of learning. Directors must look outside their organisation and be able to participate in several arenas. One important task for the directors will be to address and balance expectations that might be in conflict.
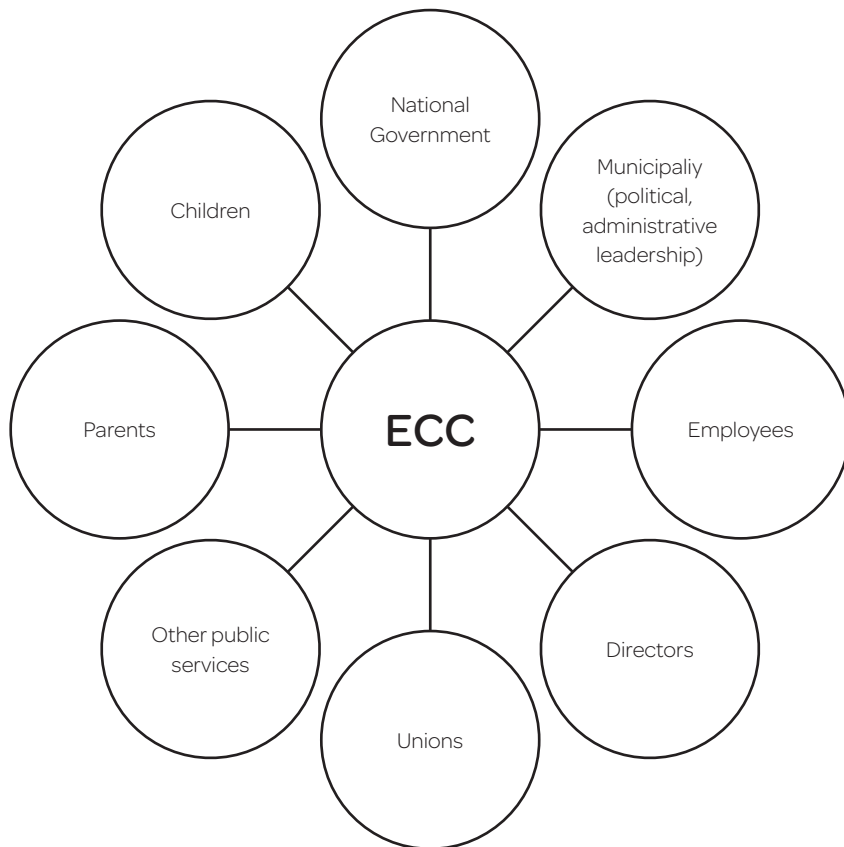

Figure 1: A model of stakeholders related to ECCs (Skybakmoen & Behrens, 2010, p. 234).[6]

EXTERNAL LEADERSHIP AS A LEADERSHIP FUNCTION

The concept of external leadership focuses on leadership in relation to environments of ECCs. Some aspects of external leadership have long been discussed in the literature about leadership of ECCs (for example, Moen, 1996; Rodd, 1998 pp. 162–179). Until a few years ago, external leadership was studied little in Norwegian research of ECCs. There were primarily only scattered case studies that covered the issue. The concept of "external leadership" related to ECCs in a Norwegian context was introduced by Børhaug and

6   Translated from Norwegian to English by Flormælen & Moen.

Lotsberg in 2010 with a functional orientation. The basic idea behind the term "leadership functions" is to imagine leadership as a set of basic organisational functions that must be managed for the organisation to survive. The formal leader of the organisation is responsible for ensuring that the functions are safeguarded by the leader or by others. The way in which leadership functions are categorised, may vary (see, for example, Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 7).

Gotvassli (1996) distinguished between pedagogical, staff and administrative leadership of directors of ECCs, and Børhaug & Lotsberg (2010) added external leadership as a fourth function of leadership. Based on interviews of directors of both public and private ECCs, the researchers discovered that the directors spent considerable time on the external leadership of ECCs. This finding is aligned with Klausen's (2010) statement about leaders of public organisations; he states that they are not masters of their own houses but leaders of organisations that are owned by the politician on behalf of the people. This role, he continues, leads to a constant strategic challenge and requires that the leaders of public organisations also participate outside their institution, where significant decisions are made.

Børhaug & Lotsberg (2010) identified three significant aspects of external leadership: "negotiations" with private owners and municipalities, "networking" to ensure resources for the ECC and "competitive leadership" as an attempt to survive with the full coverage of the ECEC field. According to a political perspective on organisations and the stakeholder model, negotiations might be viewed as a strategy to balance different expectations and demands. For the directors in our study, it may be important to be aware of the political discussions in the municipal organisation related to the content and learning in the ECCs and to take part in negotiations where decisions are made. This involvement may also be a part of their networking to ensure sufficient resources. Competitive leadership might be viewed as a response to the parents being more powerful stakeholders in the field because of their position. According to Børhaug and Lotsberg (2010), competitive leadership is characterised by strategies such as the presentation and highlighting of the ECC, competition in terms of content and quality and measures to promote a closer relationship between the parents and the ECC (ibid.).

CROSS PRESSURE AND DILEMMAS

Klausen (2001) uses the terms "small and large community" to describe the interaction between the public and welfare institutions on the one hand and between the municipal organisation and the surrounding community

or society. This term does also make sense in this study. The external stake-holders then belong to the large community, while the ECC is the small community. The directors may serve as links between the small and large communitiy and will participate in both communities. According to Klausen, different expectations from small and large communities may lead to cross-pressure and dilemmas for the leaders of the institutions. Based on Klausen, Møller (2009) made a list of three types of dilemmas which directors of Danish public ECCs may face: logical, ethical and moral dilemmas. These dilemmas may also be relevant in a Norwegian context. The logical dilemma is related to the choice to understand oneself as a leader versus a colleague. The next dilemma, which is ethical, is regarding the choice between a professional management orientation and a leadership orientation based on the ECEC profession. At last, the moral dilemma is regarding the choice between representing the entire management system in the municipality and simply being a leader of the ECC. This dilemma is relevant in relation to external leadership.

METHODOLOGY

The study has a qualitative exploratory design, including interviews with three directors of public ECCs in one Norwegian municipality with several private owned centres (75%). The three directors have worked in the ECEC field from seven to 21 years and lead centres of different sizes (15–70 children). One director has a combined position of both leading an ECC and working as a teacher at the same centre. Another had, at an earlier stage, led a private ECC in the municipality. The municipality is a mid-sized municipality in Norway with between 10,000–20,000 inhabitants. In accordance with the Norwegian system, the municipality is led by politicians elected by the people.

The directors were first interviewed in a focus group and were later interviewed individually. Both types of interviews were semi-structured and based on interview guides. The intention of the focus group interview was to discuss various concepts for use in the individual interviews. The individual interviews gave better opportunities to go into more depth and elicit individual differences and nuances.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The transcribed material was coded and analysed at several stages to detect main themes. The study was conducted according to ethical guidelines for research. One of the researchers is a director of a public ECC, and it is taken into consideration

that this role may influence the participant's interpretations. However, emphasis is on the voice of the directors when presenting the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the analysis of the interviews, three main categories were identified that were common for all directors: "expectations", "options of influence" and "cross pressure". The results are presented under each of the three categories when attempting to answer the research questions. To put these findings in context, we find it necessary to show an overview of the municipality's administrative organisation in relation to public ECCs.
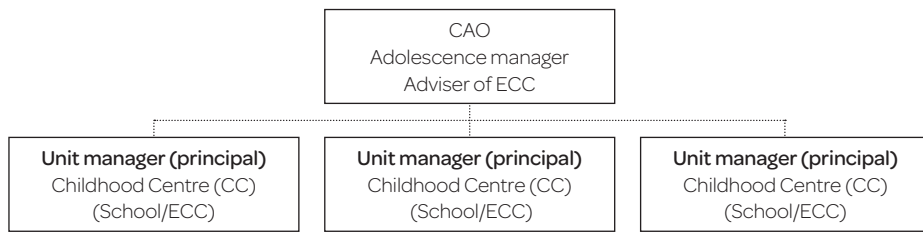

Figure 2: Main levels of management in the municipal administrative organisation related to ECCs.

Figure 2 shows that the administrative management structure consists of two main levels; the chief administrative officer (CAO) and several unit managers. There is also an adolescence manager with an adviser of ECEC, but this manager belongs to the management team of the chief administrative officer and is not a separate level of management in the hierarchical pattern.

Each public ECC has been merged with the closest public school and operates in units called Childhood Centres (CCs). The top formal leader of each CC is a unit manager. The unit managers are also the principals of the schools in the CCs but, according to the directors of ECCs, they have little competence related to ECEC. The directors have the same titles as before the merge, but they are no longer visible in the management structure of the municipality. Compared to the principals and leaders of other types of institutions, they have been degraded and have lost some of their formal power.

EXPECTATIONS

During the focus group interview, the stakeholder model (Skybakmoen & Behrens, 2010) was used as the basis for discussion. The directors listed the following three stakeholders as the most significant in relation to the learning

component of the ECCs: the owner, the parents and the employees in the ECCs. To ensure the subsistence and development of the organisation, the directors must have a relationship with these three stakeholders (Busch, Vanebo & Dehlin, 2010). The participants did not distinguish between internal and external stakeholders during the interview.
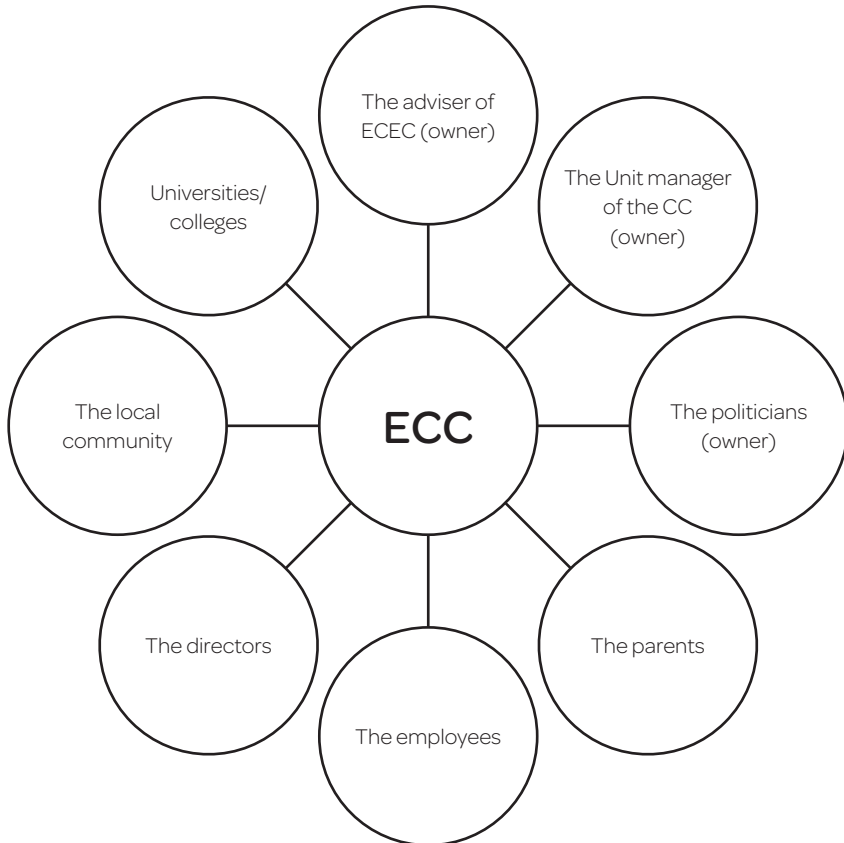
Figure 3: The stakeholder model of the directors. The most significant external stakeholders are highlighted.

Because this research is interested in external stakeholders and the practice of external leadership, the following discussion will focus on the owners and the parents who are the most significant stakeholders, according to the directors. These stakeholders are highlighted in Figure 3. The directors define the owners in different ways: as the unit managers of the CCs, as the adviser of ECEC and as the politicians. One of them comments: "When we are giving feedback to the politicians, they are mainly interested in two things, that is, how we balance the budget and the sick absenteeism of the employees".

In other words, the politicians in this municipality seem to have little concern for children's learning. The directors also say that the unit managers of the CCs, who are their nearest line managers, are rarely involved in the pedagogical development and children's learning in the ECCs. The ECEC adviser of the municipality is involved to a certain degree, but the adviser has no formal authority as a leader in the municipal organisation. During the interviews, it emerged that the directors had trouble knowing who their real supervisor is. To a certain extent, this might be a challenge in all municipalities because they both have political and administrative levels of leadership. In this municipality, the new organisation of CCs with unit managers may contribute to distant and indistinct political and administrative levels for the directors.

All of the directors mention that the parents are one of the most significant stakeholders. In fact, they emphasise the expectations of the parents more than those of the owner. The municipality has full coverage for children in the relevant age group, and the parents have the opportunity to choose an ECC with a program that suits their children. The directors are not quite clear about the expectations from the parents regarding the centres as places of learning for children, but they perceive that the parents expect quality. A later study[7], based on sixteen directors of public and non-public ECCs in three municipalities, shows that parents are concerned about that their children are given attention, make friends and receive care in the ECCs. This indicates that the parents emphasise the learning of social competence in the ECCs (Moen & Granrusten, 2014).

The directors discuss competition among ECCs and say that centres often specialise in different subjects, such as music or nature. To enroll enough children, they find it important to profile the quality of the centre. These are central strategies in competitive leadership (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2010). According to Skybakmoen & Behrens (2010), the stakeholders bring different contributions to the ECCs and receive different rewards in return. The directors in this study say that they must to be able to keep the interest of the parents by offering something else or better than other ECCs can over a longer period. The competition among the centres favors the parents in a municipality with full coverage, and the directors report that they are committed to creating good quality.

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7   A part of the Norwegian project; Management for learning (2012–2016).

INFLUENCE OPTIONS

The political perspective highlights power, conflict, competition and organisational policies (Bolman & Deal, 2008). For the directors in this study, it is important to be aware of the political discussions in the municipality. During the analysis of the interviews, we found several statements that revealed the directors' difficulties with being negotiators, networkers and "political" leaders outside the ECCs. The directors do not participate in meetings with the manager of the adolescence in the administration of the municipality. The unit managers of the CCs are their line managers and are responsible for the political cases in the schools and in the ECCs. One of the directors tells about an important case at her centre. The unit managers of the CC had, by the initiative of the director, promised to discuss the case with the municipal administration, but in the end, he did not do so. The director felt that her case was not important enough for him.

The directors in this study are not a part of the "large community" (Klausen, 2001) and may not be allowed to be if they want to. Although all directors in this study want, because of their professional background, to influence ECEC learning policy in the municipality, the directors have different attitudes regarding participation in the large community. One of them has a defensive attitude, believing she has enough challenges in the small community:

> I feel that I, in my role, I don't want to participate more in the large community. Because I see that…You have to see the limitations in your position. I am only a director of an ECC…I think my leader must push on because she has access to the adolescence manager in the municipal organisation. I do not meet with the adolescence manager.

A more assertive external director sees that the directors might have an important function in the large community. This is reflected in her following statement:

> But I think we must go outwards and participate in the large discussions, in the large community together with the educators, politicians, local community; we must get out of our comfort zone and participate more actively.

This director also says that they have the responsibility to take action. This is view consistent with Klausen (2001), who asserts that it is important to participate where the decisions are made. In this municipality, the structures prevent the directors from this involvement, and they have to be more active on their own initiative to influence decisions. They cannot wait for an invitation.

CROSS PRESSURE AMONG THE DIRECTORS

This category was identified because the directors say they find it difficult to take into account the different expectations of the stakeholders. One of the directors' comments:

> As a director, you are stuck between a rock and a hard place; you have to take care of the interest of the parents and the employees, and then the municipality as an employer, and the politicians, and everything. Sometimes, you have to meet them halfway.

This statement illustrates the pressure the directors experience, and this pressure coincides with an ethical dilemma, where the director is stuck between a professional management orientation and an orientation of leadership based on the ECEC profession (Møller, 2009). Should the directors emphasise the parents' demands of flexibility and service or the children and employees' need for a stable and predictable organisation? There is a constant pressure and a disparity between what they are required to do and what they are actually able to do. One of the directors says:

> They are giving me new tasks all the time, and I am noticing that the way I have to balance everything with the parents, I have worked a lot with that... to meet all the demands from the parents, as a balance to how much I have to pressure the employees, how flexible we have to be.

Later, she says that she is trying to solve this dilemma by showing less flexibility to the parents. She says that she is influenced by the competition between the ECCs and that she has supported her employees to deliver quality work. She says that her ECC has reduced the amount of food offered to the children and reduced the hours of operation.

The following question is related to a logical dilemma (Møller, 2009): Do the directors identify with the leaders or the employees? The directors do not discuss their relationship with employees in this study, but they give the impression that they identify with the employees. This is particularly true for the director of the smallest centre, where she works as both a teacher and a director. These results contrast with the results of another study, which found that directors primarily perceive themselves as leaders (Børhaug, et al., 2011). It is likely that the deviations in discoveries are related to the distinct organisational structure in this municipality. The directors are not defined as leaders in the organisational structure, and some of them find it safe to be stuck in "the small community".

Regarding the third dilemma, the directors report the feeling of being stuck between "a rock and a hard place" in political issues surrounding ECCs. This conflict is what Møller (2009) calls the moral dilemma and is about where the leaders have their loyalty. The directors in our study report that they experience differences between the public and private directors of ECCs. One of them says:

> I can see it, sometimes. The private directors are better... to walk the corridors, to be together with the politicians, while we have to be more loyal. We can be active before the decisions are made, but we have to be more loyal... And we can't be visible afterwards, like the private directors.

This moral dilemma is something that the directors discuss in both the focus group interviews and the individual interviews. There are many private ECCs in this municipality. The directors in this research experience that the private directors have more opportunities for political influence. The directors of private ECCs use media and go directly to politicians with their issues. These findings are similar to the findings of Børhaug et al. (2011), who found that private ECCs have more influence on decisions in the municipalities. Are public directors prevented from involvement because of their employment in the municipalities? May this be a threat to their freedom of speech?

CONCLUSIONS

The main question of this research is how directors exert external leadership on the basis of expectations of external stakeholders regarding public ECCs as places of learning. More specifically, this key question was broken down into three research sub-questions. The first sub-question was as follows: What expectations do directors experience from the most significant external stakeholders regarding public ECCs as places of learning? The analyses of interviews with three directors of public ECCs in one municipality show that they perceive the owners and the parents as the most significant external stakeholders. They are not certain what expectations the parents have regarding the ECC as a place of learning, but believe that the parents expect high quality content. They are uncertain who represents the owner of the ECCs in the municipality, and they perceive that most expectations, regarding the ECCs as places of learning, come from the adviser of ECEC in the municipality administration, and not from the present formal managers or the politicians.

The second sub-question was: How do the directors emphasise expectations from the most significant stakeholders in their practice of external leadership? The directors experience competition between the ECCs in enrolling enough

children and are meeting this challenge with strategies of competitive leadership. They specialise the content in different subjects and find it important to profile the quality of the centre. This specialisation may have consequences for children's learning.

To understand the opportunities for the directors to exercise external leadership in the municipal organisation, it is necessary to apply a structural perspective on organisation and leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The organisational structure of the municipality appears unclear, and this leads to unsure leaders. Are the directors in our study really leaders? They may be leaders of a small community, but they do not have any influence in the municipal organisation in the large community. They want to have influence on the basis of their professional background and shape a policy of learning in ECCs in the municipality, but they have different attitudes toward participation in the large community. To have external influence in the municipal organisation, the directors of the ECCs have to invite themselves into the political and administrative arenas where the decisions are made. It is timely to ask questions regarding why there are such differences in the formal positions among the directors of the ECCs and the principals of the schools.

The last sub-question was: How do they address cross-pressure and dilemmas following different expectations? Conflicting expectations lead to cross-pressure for the directors and to different dilemmas. In this study, the directors experience fewer opportunities for external influence than they perceive the directors of non-public centres to have. Perhaps the directors can benefit from greater competence in the political and administrative organisation. This competence may increase their political resources and their ability to act as political leaders on behalf of the ECCs. If the national government continues to provide leadership education for directors of ECCs, it might contribute to such a competence. There is also need for more research on the external leadership of ECCs. This study has shown that it is important to do conduct further research from a structural perspective on organisation and leadership in the municipalities and overarching to gain deeper insight into the opportunities available for directors to practice external leadership in the large community.

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