

# Distribution of Leadership Functions in Early Childhood Centers in Norway Following Organisational Changes

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## Abstract

Leadership in early childhood centers (ECCs) might be perceived as different functions that must be taken care of. In this article we distinguish between four such functions: Pedagogical, staff, administrative and strategic leadership functions. We focus on how leadership functions are distributed among three formal positions in a sample of large municipal ECCs after an organisational change from three to two administrative levels in a Norwegian municipality. The three formal leadership positions in the ECCs are directors, assistant directors and pedagogical leaders. This study has a qualitative design with a sample of 15 informants that have been interviewed. One aspect of the results is that both directors and pedagogical leaders spent less time on pedagogical leadership functions than before the reorganisation.

## Abstrakt

Ledelse i barnehager kan forstås som ulike funksjoner som må ivaretas. I denne artikkelen skiller vi mellom fire slike funksjoner: Pedagogiske, personalmessige, administrative og strategiske ledelsesfunksjoner. Vi fokuserer på hvordan ledelsesfunksjoner er distribuert mellom tre formelle posisjoner i et utvalg store kommunale barnehager etter en omorganisering fra tre til to administrative nivåer i en norsk kommune. De tre formelle lederstillingene i barnehagene er styrere, fagledere og pedagogiske ledere. Denne studien har et kvalitativt design med et utvalg på 15 informanter som er intervjuet. Ett aspekt ved funnene er at både styrere og pedagogiske ledere bruker mindre tid på pedagogiske ledelsesfunksjoner enn for omorganiseringen.

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## Tiivistelmä

Johtajuus päiväkodeissa ilmenee erilaisina tehtävinä, joista pitää huolehtia. Tässä artikkelissa erotamme neljä tehtävää: pedagogiset, henkilöstöön liittyvät, hallinnolliset ja strategiset johtamistehtävät. Keskitymme siihen, miten johtamistehtävät ovat jakautuneet kolmen muodollisen aseman mukaan laajassa aineistossamme, joka on kerätty kunnallisessa varhaiskasvatusinstituutiokontekstissa organisaatiomuutoksen jälkeen. Organisaatiomuutoksessa norjalaisessa kunnassa siirryttiin kolmesta hallinnollisesta tasosta kahteen. Nämä kolme muodollista johtajuusasmaa varhaiskasvatuskeskuksissa ovat johtajat, apulaisjohtajat sekä pedagogiset johtajat. Tässä laadullisessa tutkimuksessa on haastateltu 15 henkilöä. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin muuan muassa, että uudelleenjärjestelyn seurauksena sekä johtajat että pedagogiset johtajat käyttivät vähemmän aikaa pedagogiseen johtamiseen kuin ennen.

## Introduction

The Norwegian field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has changed radically since the millennium. The political commitment to full coverage has led to both a significant expansion of the number of places for children in early childhood centres (ECCs) and reorganisations in the field<sup>1</sup>. In 2005, the Norwegian Parliament decided by law that the municipalities were obligated to provide ECEC for all children under primary school age. A few years later, in 2009, children aged 1 to 5 years were entitled to a place in an ECC if their parents wanted them to have a place.

Although the number of children in Norway's ECCs has increased and continues to increase, the number of centres has decreased since 2008. One might infer from this that some centres have increased in size, while some smaller centres have been closed or merged into larger units. The merging of centres is similar to the results of reforms in other Nordic countries, such as Finland (Haltonen, 2010; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Ten years ago, an ECC in Norway with 14 or 15 employees and 50 to 55 children might have been described as a very large centre. Each centre usually had its own director and a few departments organised according to specific groups of children. The staff in each department often consisted of 1 pedagogical leader (an early childhood teacher), 2 skilled or unskilled assistants and

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1 At the end of the year 2000, coverage for children aged 1–5 years in early childhood centres in Norway was 62 per cent. It was 90 per cent in 2011 (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2012).

9 to 18 children, depending on the children's age. Such centres still exist, but large centres where a unit director is responsible for more than 50 to 60 employees and 150 to 180 children are increasingly common. According to Vassenden, Thygesen, Bayer, Alvestad and Abrahamsen (2011), 24 per cent of the children in Norwegian ECCs attend centres with 80 children or more. A pedagogical leader may in turn be responsible for a "base", or group of 35 to 40 children and a related staff of 5 or 6 people. A base has a larger group of children than the traditional departments in Norwegian ECCs. That group of children belongs to a fixed area, the base, but some area at the centre is established as a common area for all bases and is designed for different activities. During parts of the day, smaller groups of children from different bases can use these smaller rooms.

In larger centres, there might be pressure to distribute some of the leadership functions that the directors in the ECCs have traditionally performed. In recent years, new positions have emerged in early childhood centres in Norway (Bleken, 2005; Granrusten & Moen, 2009). Børhaug and Lotsberg (2010) indicated the need for more research about organisation and leadership in large ECCs in Norway. We want to discover how leadership functions might be distributed in such ECCs. More precisely, we will try to address the following issue: How are leadership functions distributed among three leadership positions in a sample of large municipal ECCs in Norway?

### *The positions director, assisting director and pedagogical leader*

The Norwegian Kindergarten Act<sup>2</sup> describes two formal positions for teachers in ECCs: the director and the pedagogical leader. The act states that each ECC shall have a director who is a trained early childhood teacher or has a combination of corresponding education at the bachelor level that qualifies him or her to work with children and pedagogical expertise. Pedagogical leaders must be trained early childhood teachers. The

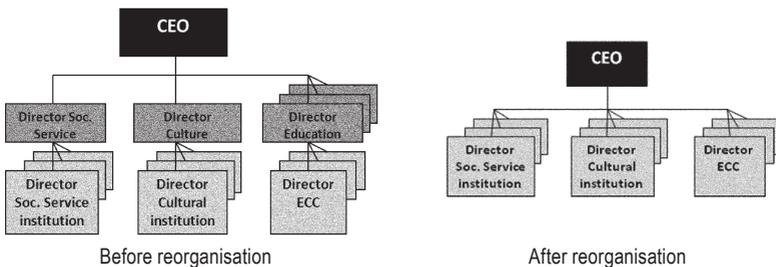
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2 In the English translation of the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of the Kindergartens, the term "Kindergarten" is used. This is a direct translation of the Norwegian term "barnehage". Our experience is that the meaning of "kindergarten" in many countries is significantly different from the Norwegian context. Therefore, we have chosen to use "Early Childhood Centre" as a term in this article.

tasks of these positions are not discussed in the act but are elaborated in the notes to the act and the Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of the Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). This document state, among other things, that ECC directors and pedagogical leaders are particularly responsible for planning, implementing, assessing and developing the ECCs' tasks and content.

The third leadership position in our sample we have chosen to call "assistant director". This is not a translation of the Norwegian title "fagleder", which we have found difficult to meaningfully translate into English. We have chosen the title "assistant director" because this term is the most appropriate description of this role in our sample. Unlike the positions of pedagogical leader and director, the assistant director position is not described in the Kindergarten Act or central regulations. Instead, the position is defined and determined by the director who makes the appointment. The assistant director's tasks and responsibilities may vary from ECC to ECC, depending on agreements in each centre. A large centre may have more than one assistant director (Granrusten & Moen, 2011).

Many small ECCs have probably been merged into larger units as a consequence of reorganisations of the structure of the administrations from three to two levels in many Norwegian municipalities, as shown in figure 1. This reorganisation meant that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in many municipalities exert direct leadership over an increased number of people. An increased range of control for the CEO and an increased need for diverse competencies in each ECC may have driven many municipalities to merge several small ECCs into larger units led by a single director.



**Figure 1. The transition from three to two main levels of leadership in municipality administration**

One result of the merging is that the control range and responsibilities of the directors have increased from a single ECC to a unit consisting of several previously independent ECCs. This is often referred to as a change from one single "house"<sup>3</sup> to several "houses" with a significantly larger number of children and staff. Halttunen (2010) calls such centres in Finland "distributed organisations". Some centres have established management systems with coordinators for each house.

### *New Public Management*

The above-mentioned reorganisation of many ECCs and municipalities in Norway can be anchored in the concept of New Public Management (NPM). Since the 1980s, NPM has been implemented in many countries, although in different forms in different national contexts. Although some recent reforms have moved away from this concept, NPM still plays an important role in administrative practices (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2012). NPM is an overarching term that can include several principles related to how the public sector should be managed and reformed. Some key elements of NPM are a strong belief in professional leadership and management, increased use of indirect control rather than direct authority and increased focus on the citizens as users of welfare services (Øgård, 2005). The weight of leadership is reflected, for example, by decentralising power and authority.

Klausen (2005) divides NPM ideas into two main groups. One emphasises leadership and "cycles of managerialism." This area focuses on stronger leadership, a clear distinction between political and administrative tasks and questions, delegation, service management, personnel management and results. The second area emphasises the market principle of the public sector and competition between the public and private sectors. In the context of our study, the first group of principles is the most relevant.

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3 The term "house" is used for a previously independent ECC that has merged with other ECCs and is now part of a larger unit.

## Structural perspective

As an approach to the organisational changes, we have chosen a structural perspective on organisations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Many Norwegian municipalities have reduced the number of administrative levels from three to two, but within the ECCs, the traditional two-level model with the director on the top and the pedagogical leaders below appears to have become more complicated.

From an organisational perspective, ECCs might be considered independent organisations as well as parts of the municipal organisation (Moen, 2006). Patterns of division of labour and coordination and the distribution of authority are viewed as key aspects of the centre's organisational structure. The way these elements are designed and developed might vary from centre to centre, depending on how the director wants to lead the centre and on the size of the centre unit. In general, it can be argued that larger organisations have more complex structures compared with smaller organisations and that the larger size increases the need for formalisation and procedures (Jakobsen & Thorsvik, 2007). This may also apply to the centres in our study, where several structural factors can affect the way the leaders spend their time. Three factors were identified as important to pedagogical leaders' use of time: 1) new leadership roles and leadership agreements for the directors, 2) the size of the centres and their internal organisation, and 3) the location of the centres. The latter applies when several smaller centres that are not located near each other are merged into larger units (Granrusten & Moen, 2009).

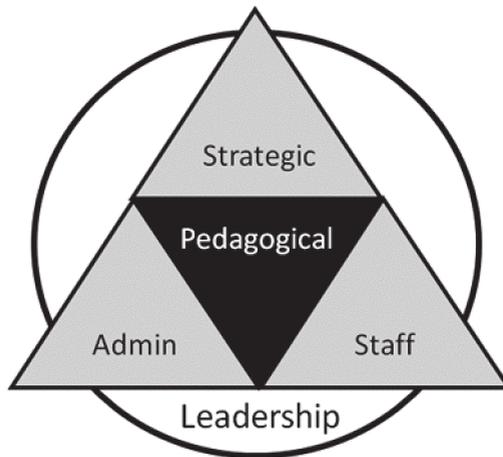
### *Leadership functions*

There are several ways to approach leadership in ECCs. In recent years, there has been a tendency to associate *management* with the more organisational, tangible and visible aspects of day-to-day operations. In contrast, *leadership* has been associated with the symbolic, inspirational, pedagogical and normative functions of a leader (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Jones & Pound, 2008; Strand, 2007). The Norwegian language does not clearly distinguish between management and leadership. We have chosen to use the concept of leadership, but we are aware that leadership functions may also include some management functions.

Our study also focuses on leadership functions. Leadership functions and duties are many and various and have been described in many ways in the literature. Horrigo and Nylehn (2004) are among the authors who note that organisations do not necessarily need leaders but that leadership is needed to accomplish the important tasks in an organisation. Examining leadership in terms of functions implies that different functions can be performed by different people and groups, especially as organisations become increasingly complex. In large organisations, the top leaders often work more overall and in a more long-term, strategic manner compared with leaders in smaller centres (Horrigo & Nylehn, 2004).

Bleken (2005) defines four leadership areas in ECCs that also could be viewed as leadership functions. The four areas are included in figure 2: Strategic, pedagogical, administrative and staff leadership. These functions have specific tasks or sub-functions attached. The figure shows that pedagogical leadership is in the middle because it can be viewed as a core function of leadership. The different areas will overlap to some extent (Moen, 2006).

Pedagogical leadership includes leading to meet the children's care and educational aims and providing guidance and encouraging reflection among the staff related to such work (Gotvassli, 1996; Heikka & Waniganayake,



**Figure 2. Leadership functions in ECCs** (translated from Bleken, 2005, 62)

2011). Børhaug and Lotsberg (2010) claim that a pedagogical leadership sub-function may be to design organisational structures that safeguard pedagogical considerations, important for the leader. Børhaug and Lotsberg (2010) believe that this is more important among directors in large centres than those in small ones and that it allows indirect control of the pedagogy.

Tasks related to the staff leadership function might include recruiting new staff members, motivating and inspiring the staff, solving personal conflicts and facilitating good working and cooperative relationships. Administrative functions might include formulating working plans, hiring temporary staff to cover absenteeism and working with economic and budget matters. Leadership also involves the external dimension because of the need to interact with owners, government agents and other participants. Occasionally, directors are involved in strategic functions that require an ability to balance the multiple demands, expectations and incentives (“rewards”) that different stakeholders bring to the organisation. Strategic functions also require directors to engage in qualitative development and make long-term plans to meet internal and external challenges.

## Methodology and data

Our study has a qualitative exploratory design that included interviews with 15 participants who are part of a larger study. The sample includes five pedagogical leaders, five unit directors and five assistant directors in different public ECCs in one municipality in Norway. The sample was strategically drawn, with an aim to include participants who had worked in ECCs in this municipality since before the reorganisation process started. Furthermore, we sought leaders who worked in large centres, which were defined as those with 80 children or more.

An important criterion for the selection of our sample was that all respondents should have been involved in the reorganisation process in the municipality. The respondents were employed in ECCs before the reorganisation process started. All of the pedagogical leaders held the same position at the same centres throughout the restructuring process. The assistant directors and the unit directors were appointed to their positions because of the restructuring, but have all been employed in municipal centres since before the start of the reorganisation process in 2004. This process

included the municipal reorganisation into two main administrative levels and the merging of public ECCs.

Two of the pedagogical leaders in our study are working in centres that have changed from a departmental organisation to a “base” organisation. These centres have undergone extensive alterations on multiple levels. The pedagogical leaders are leaders for a larger number of children and staff compared with leaders who work in centres with traditional departments. Meanwhile, the informants who worked in the base shared leadership of the base. The three other pedagogical leaders in the study were leaders for one department each in different centres.

All of the participants were interviewed between 2007 and 2009 using interview guides that were prepared separately for each group. The pedagogical leaders were interviewed twice, once in 2007 and again in 2009. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed material was completely read and analysed by two researchers working independently and considering the four functions of pedagogical, staff, administrative and strategic leadership. Quotes from interviews are used as illustrations in the results and discussion sections.

## Results and discussion

In this section, we present the results of our study and discuss our findings related to the distribution of leadership functions in large ECCs among three leadership positions in a sample of municipal ECCs in Norway.

### *Pedagogical leadership*

None of the directors in our study said that pedagogical leadership was their primary focus. Under the new arrangements, this function was largely delegated to the assistant directors or to the pedagogical leaders who work at the operational level of the ECCs. Some of the directors stressed that they have pedagogical responsibility, even if the pedagogical leadership functions are delegated to the assistant directors and pedagogical leaders. Delegation to other leadership groups might be a way of controlling the pedagogical work in the centre. One director has divided the staff into groups related to various disciplines and areas of focus in ECEC and has

delegated pedagogical leadership to these groups regardless of the formal education. Helgøy, Homme and Ludvigsen (2010) published a Norwegian article about this approach. The results of their study indicate that the work in the centre is often allocated according to experience-based knowledge and not just by formal education. One consequence may be that it might be difficult to distinguish between pedagogical work that requires higher education and typical unskilled work. This type of structure is in accordance with the traditional ideal of equality among the staff in Norwegian ECCs but may create situations in which the pedagogical leaders' overall role will be challenged.

The assistant directors did not say that their primary focus was on pedagogical leadership. When asked what type of work accounts for most of their time, none of them said pedagogical leadership or pedagogical work. When asked about the nature of their position, none of them said that pedagogical leadership was the most important part. However, all five assistant directors have established or were working to establish a professional leadership team in the centre unit.

The pedagogical leaders lead the pedagogical work with a group of children and the staff responsible for the children. Some of the pedagogical leaders in the study mentioned that the director did not know the children and parents as well as before because of the large size of the centre, but the pedagogical leaders report to the director when they have concerns about children. Two of the pedagogical leaders emphasised that they were spending less time with the children and more with the staff to establish a common understanding of the way to work with children and provide guidance to the staff. One of the pedagogical leaders said that "sometimes I feel that my time is robbed from the children".

One interpretation of our findings is that pedagogical leadership is largely delegated to the operational level, the pedagogical leaders. The directors will, through the assistant directors, still have a partial overview, which they require to be responsible for the pedagogy of the centre. This structure is in accordance with an NPM model, in which clearer leadership responsibilities entail the professionalization of leadership and the extensive delegation of authority and responsibility (Øgård, 2005).

### *Leadership of staff*

When we asked the directors which of the four functions they spent the most time on, all of them either answered staff leadership or staff and administrative leadership. They experienced an increase in the tasks related to staff leadership after the municipal reorganisation and the merging of the ECCs. For four of the directors, the reorganisation had led to a larger organisation, and the increased focus on staff leadership might be explained by their increased range of control. The fifth director in our study worked in a non-merged ECC but spent an increased amount of time leading the staff. The shifts in focus may also be related to the increased authority and responsibilities of the directors following the administrative reorganisation of the municipal organisation, which reduced the main leadership levels at the municipality. All directors were given more authority and responsibility for their units, including the responsibility to recruit and follow up with the employees.

The assistant directors' descriptions of how they spent their time varied from quite specific to rather diffuse. One said something that was expressed in different ways by others: "No, it is not possible to define the assistant director, you know. I cannot do it ... so actually I'm everywhere, then". Two assistant directors said they spent most of their time on staff affairs, but they had no formal responsibility for the staff. Some led the work of implementing "health, environment and safety" for the children and staff, and some mentioned that they were following up new employees and sickness absenteeism among the staff.

Most of the pedagogical leaders said they spend more time on staff leadership than before. Two of them said they spend most of their time on staff leadership. Being the leader of a base demands more planning and organisation than being the leader at a smaller department does, they said. One pedagogical leader at a base mentioned that she cannot lead by being a role model as much as before because the staff is in separate special rooms together with small groups of children during parts of the day. This requires clearer leadership and better systems. The absence of the director makes the pedagogical leaders feel that they have more responsibility for the staff members than before. Some of them have been delegated such tasks as appraising the assistants.

### *Strategic leadership*

All five directors in our study have a leadership agreement with the CEO of the municipality that provides guidelines and defines goals for the centre's organisation. The directors described agreement as an effective and good tool for leadership and strategic planning. The way the directors organise their units becomes a part of the strategy to achieve the goals. One of the directors describes quite clearly that the staff was strengthened with purchased resources to relieve the administrative tasks. This gave the director the opportunity to use more time for thinking "long time thoughts" about pedagogical fundamentals and strategic planning for the centre. She says: "I spend a lot of time thinking thoroughly about what I want my centre to be in a pedagogical way. I absolutely spend a lot more time on this now than before". She has gone from being the director of a small centre to being the leader of a larger unit. This increased focus on strategic leadership among leaders in large organisations compared with those in smaller organisations concurs with previous findings (Horrigmo & Nylehn, 2004).

Based on the analyses, we understand that this leader's experience is fairly indicative of how the other directors work. Strategic leadership was the only function of the four in Bleken's (2005) model that all directors in the sample handled themselves. The analyses show that the three other functions were delegated in varying degrees to the assistant directors and pedagogical leaders in the unit centres.

### *Administrative leadership*

Two of the five directors say that they spend most of their time on staff and administrative leadership functions. As mentioned above, one director is very clear that she has appointed a person with business expertise, so that she can free herself from many administrative tasks and focus more on strategic leadership.

The assistant directors seem to struggle to differentiate clearly between administrative and staff leadership functions because these functions are partly considered the same area. This may indicate that these functions are not mutually exclusive categories (Moen, 2006). One assistant director is aware that administration takes most of her time, but she says that a secretary could perform that work.

Some of the pedagogical leaders say that they have been given more administrative tasks and emphasise that they should be better about delegating to the assistants:

Now we have decided that we should delegate some of our work down to the assistants... For example, the registration of absenteeism of the employees, that requires taking some time to do. Earlier, there was a secretary at the office doing this, but then it was delegated to us, and now I think that maybe the assistants may be allowed to do it. We, the pedagogical leaders, must become better at delegating tasks if we are to complete all that we should.

The pedagogical leaders also spend more time on documentation in meetings or in writing. One of them says that “the director wants written documentation. There is more need for documentation than before. It’s her way to make sure that things get done. So I use more time on that”.

## General discussion

### *The directors and assistant directors*

The directors in this study say that they spend more time on staff leadership than they did before the municipal reorganisation and the merging of ECCs. They also seem to spend more time on strategic leadership. All of the directors emphasised that they were responsible for all four of the leadership functions, but to a certain degree, some leadership sub-functions were delegated to other staff and performed elsewhere in the ECC organisation. This occurred to a greater extent after the reorganisation and the merging of ECCs than it did in the past.

The results of the interviews provide information about some aspects of the distribution of leadership and the experience of the roles of assistant director and unit director in a sample of ECCs. Our data do not allow us to comment on how common this experience is among ECCs; however, it is possible to identify some traits that can be developed into quantitative indicators that should be used in a larger-scale survey.

Our interpretation is that the operational leadership occurs more or less regardless of how the positions of unit director and assistant director relate to each other in the formal organisational structure. Tasks seem to

be distributed based on the competencies of the unit directors and assistant directors themselves. Structural factors, such as the size and internal localisation of the "houses", seem to affect whether the tasks are distributed in an overlapping or complementary way.

A common feature of our findings is that staff and administrative leadership demand a great deal of work time, both for the unit directors and the assistant directors. Our interpretation is that the assistant director has considerable latitude to act as unit director in many situations. The unit directors and the assistant director state that they delegate the pedagogical tasks to the pedagogical leaders throughout the organisation, either to individuals or to teams of experts.

We previously found that the pedagogical leaders in municipal ECCs use less time for pedagogical leadership today than they did before the municipality reorganised from three to two administrative levels (Granrusten & Moen, 2009). This is to accommodate new tasks that were previously performed by the director or work that became more complicated and time consuming with the new organisation. Based on these findings and what we learned in the present study about unit directors and assistant directors, it is reasonable to question whether less pedagogical leadership is exercised in municipal ECCs now than before, or whether pedagogical leadership is now distributed to staff members other than pedagogical leaders. Such an assumption finds support in Helgøy et al.'s (2010) findings that the ECC assistants' scope of action and responsibility increases with changes in the organisational structure.

### *The pedagogical leaders*

All of the pedagogical leaders in the sample say that they experience increased time spent on tasks that arose after the reorganisation. However, they state that it can be difficult to identify the real causes of the changes in time demands. The pedagogical leaders are sometimes unsure which changes resulted from municipal reorganisation and which were caused by other factors. Among external factors, the informants particularly emphasise the municipalities' strong commitment to full coverage, with a greater developmental pace and the new framework plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens. The requirement for full coverage has, among other results, led to a greater focus on the ECC's profile to ensure that it

stands out in a future landscape where there may be a struggle for parental attention to fill the places in the ECCs. Reorganising into ECCs with several houses that may have previously had different profiles can make it difficult to distinguish between what changes are the development of a general ECC profile and which are the result of the coordination of previously existing profiles.

Several of the pedagogical leaders mention that they have spent much time working with the new curriculum. This may be because of the many new and demanding parts of the curriculum in the framework plan, or it could be because the plan is to be implemented in an organisation that is larger and more complex than the previous one and pedagogical leaders have been delegated more tasks by the unit director. One pedagogical leader says of the curriculum:

I see that there is more responsibility, too, but I feel just as much of the responsibility in relation to such things as the new curriculum .... I feel the responsibility as head of the department; I feel, do we make the right choices? For when there is so much you have to choose, there is automatically something to reject...

This informant stated that she feels a heavy burden of responsibility for the choices she has to make and that she is not as concerned about the time required to fulfil this responsibility. She stated that she experiences more responsibility since the reorganisation because she has to make some choices that she believes the director would have made in the old organisational structure.

Based on interviews with pedagogical leaders, it is possible to identify three main levels of decisions that affect all educational leaders' use of time. These are political-administrative decisions at the national level, political decisions at the municipal level and decisions in each ECC.

It can be difficult to pinpoint exactly which decisions affect changes in time allocation the most. Causality can be combined and complex. It is possible to categorise some overlapping primary reasons for the changes in time allocation.

The situation in Norway is comparable to that of Finland. According to Heikka and Waniganayake (2011), the roles of early childhood teachers in Finland have changed recently as a result of organisational reforms in early childhood organisations run by various municipalities, similar to

what has happened in municipalities in Norway. Questions asked in the Finnish context include the following: Are early childhood teachers actors in pedagogical leadership and decision-making or just implementers of external aims, and can early childhood teachers implement pedagogical leadership in distributed ways? These questions might also be asked in the Norwegian context.

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