

‘Learning by talking?’ – The role of local line leadership in organisational learning

Authors: Anne Grethe Sønsthagen & Øyvind Glosvik

Affiliation: Høgskulen på Vestlandet (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences)

Contact corresponding author: Anne Grethe Sønsthagen; anne.grethe.sonsthagen@hvl.no

Abstract

Organisational learning is the topic addressed in this qualitative comparative case study. The purpose is to investigate the role of local line leadership in professional development processes. Two kindergartens participating in the Norwegian national in-service programme *Competence for Diversity* were studied. A combination of inductive and deductive analyses led us to introduce two dimensions: *leading contextual interplay*, with proactive and reactive values, and *practice development*, with fragmented and integrated values. One of the kindergartens appeared to have organised the professional development process more productively than the other, and the findings point to a combination of integrating dialogues on practice, and proactive managers as possible keys to understanding kindergartens as learning organisations. The model seems to capture, to some extent, the holistic view of the learning organisation as a structured relationship between individual and collective learning. The managerial role as local line leader stands out as important for understanding learning in this type of organisation.

Keywords

Organisational learning, professional development, learning kindergarten

©2020 Anne Grethe Sønsthagen & Øyvind Glosvik. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), allowing third parties to share their work (copy, distribute, transmit) and to adapt it, under the condition that the authors are given credit, that the work is not used for commercial purposes, and that in the event of reuse or distribution, the terms of this license are made clear.

Citation: Sønsthagen, A. G. & Glosvik, Ø. (2020). ‘Learning by talking?’ – The role of local line leadership in organisational learning. *Forskning og Forandring*, 3(1), 6–27. <https://doi.org/10.23865/fof.v3.2124>

Introduction

This study employs a perspective on organisational learning that addresses the role of local line leadership in professional knowledge development relating to multicultural competence in two Norwegian kindergartens.¹

The kindergartens were participating in the national in-service programme, *Competence for Diversity* (CfD). Through our analysis, it soon became clear that one kindergarten appeared to have implemented more measures conducive to increased productivity in their work with CfD, than the other. Could this be interpreted as a greater ability to engage in collective learning? If so, what was the role of the local line leader in such processes? We decided to study this by formulating four research questions:

1. What are the different conditions for organisational learning in the two kindergartens?
2. How do kindergartens learn to develop practice through a development project?
3. What is the driving force for collective learning processes relating to cultural diversity in kindergartens?
4. What characterises the leadership role in organisational learning?

Recent research on professional development in kindergartens appears to concentrate on the role of leadership and hybrid practices in both the Norwegian and the Nordic context (e.g., Aasen, 2010; Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Heikka, Pitkänieniemi, Kettukangas, & Hyttinen, 2019; Kangas, Venninen, & Ojala, 2016). In an international context, research has typically been conducted on professional development and the role of leadership, teamwork (e.g., Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013), and intercultural competence (e.g., Mascadri, Brownlee, Walker, & Alford, 2017) in kindergartens. One finding in particular from research on schools as learning organisations appears to be consistent across studies, and seems relevant for kindergartens: “the critical importance of learning-focused, transformational, distributive, and supportive leadership styles” (Austin & Harkins, 2008, p. 111).

Mascadri et al. (2017, p. 231) advocate the “need for professional learning that focuses on calibrating educators’ intercultural knowledge, beliefs and practice”. In this study, these concepts and ideas are part of what we refer to as *organisational learning*. The role of local line leadership in calibrating educators’ organisational learning is particularly in focus.

Theoretical background and perspective

There is a vast corpus of literature on collective learning in the organisational context. Our theoretical approach is somewhat eclectic, and influenced both by the inductive

1 Kindergartens in Norway are for children aged 0–5 years, and they are characterised as institutions featuring learning through both indoor and outdoor play in ways that promote children’s development and social competence (The Norwegian Government, 2014).

part of the analysis and a wish to correspond with the literature on collective learning as well as with current research on kindergarten leadership issues. Our perspective is summarised at the end of this section.

Learning organisation or organisational learning?

Are we studying *learning organisations* or *organisational learning*? There are two main traditions in the literature, though some suggest more² (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011; Örtenblad, 2001, 2019). The two concepts overlap, and one can ask “whether the learning organization is part of/included in the organizational learning concept, or if organizational learning is part of/included in the learning organization” (Örtenblad, 2019, p. 6). There are also differences between the two concepts. The learning organisation can be understood as “an ideal type of organization, which has the capacity to learn”, whereas organizational learning is a more academic idea (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011, p. 3).

Edmondson and Moingeon (1998, p. 23) have developed a typology built on two dimensions: (1) *the primary unit of analysis* (organisational or individual level); and (2) *research goals* (descriptive and interventionist). This matrix is used to discuss significant contributions to the discourse on collective learning. Levitt and March’s (1988) research is classified as descriptive, and the organisational level is the learning unit. Organisations are residues of prior learning in the form of routines and procedures from the past. Participation is classified as an interventionist perspective on the organisational level, with Hayes, Weelwright, and Clark (1988) as an example. Nevertheless, it is also natural to think of the literature on organisational development in this category. In the matrix, Peter Senge’s five disciplines (1990) are typed as intervention-oriented on the individual level. Learning is a question of mental models, and such models are continuously questioned and developed in the learning organisation (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998).

We place our study along the second dimension (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998), as a descriptive-oriented study focusing on the individual level at which individuals and groups as collectives can learn and develop (Pedler, Boydell & Burgoyne, 2019). This category may be close to the definition of *knowledge creation*, defined as “the act of making knowledge created by individuals available, amplifying it in social contexts, and selectively connecting it to the existing knowledge in the organization” (Brix, 2017, p. 113).

The concepts called *learning organisation* and *organisational learning* belong to different ontological positions. Levitt and March’s (1988) work has a clear link to logical positivism and behaviourism (Ricucci, 2010, p. 9–11). Thus, organisational learning

2 Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2011) distinguish between four concepts: *learning organisation*, *organisational learning*, *knowledge management*, and *organisational knowledge*. It is the first two concepts which are of interest for this study.

research tends to emphasise the observable, visible, and enduring parts of the organisation, including rules and procedures, structures, and hierarchies as repositories of past learning (Glosvik, 2002; building on Scott, 1995).

Exploration and *exploitation* are described as two strategies for organisations (March, 1991). By exploiting past learning, organisations might develop more productively than by exploring the unknown. The primary argument is that for external knowledge to be absorbed, the right individuals should be reached at the right time (Brix, 2019, p. 342). *Organisational ambidexterity* refers to organisations that can “both explore new opportunities and exploit existing knowledge” (Simsek et al., 2009; Brix, 2019, p. 339).

Emphasising the ability of individuals to learn and change could lead us to overlook the structural conditions created by different organisational settings in the two kindergartens. Moreover, if organisational structures are perceived as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). How, then, do we treat both the individual and the formal dimensions in a particular study, and how do we link them? Several suggestions have been made, but *mental models* are often mentioned (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998; Senge, 1990, 2006). Shared mental models could both bridge the gap and create a holistic picture of the organisation for the individual.

Moilanen (2005, pp. 72–76) does precisely this, and classifies different theories of collective learning that explain the wholeness of an organisation as the mental model individuals have of themselves in the organisational context. Literature that addresses the holistic side also indicates that the combination of the management of systems and the leading of individuals is a driving force in learning organisations. It is neither formal management nor a focus on individuals, but the perception of the *contextual interplay* that is the driving force behind organisational learning. Thus, leadership is understood both as managing systems and leading individuals.

The local line leader and challenges in kindergartens

Peter Senge has had considerable influence on the literature regarding learning organisations, but his ideas concerning three types of leaders in collective learning (Senge, 1996) are not cited as often as his major work on the five disciplines (Senge, 1990, 2006). The types of leaders in learning organisations are: (1) local line leaders, (2) executive leaders, and (3) internal networkers or community builders (Senge, 1996). In our research context, the local line leader is of primary interest. The hierarchy and positions within organisations are also repositories; thus, it is necessary to describe three types of leaders roughly corresponding to different organisational positions. Even if we call a role or a position a mental model, it is still a reality for the organisation’s members. This is an argument for us not to take the difference between *learning organisations* and *organisational learning* too literally.

Local line leaders play a crucial role, namely to sanction “significant practical experiments and to lead through active participation in those experiments” (Senge, 1996,

p. 46). It is necessary to connect new learning capabilities to the organisation's results. If not, it is not possible to assess "whether enhancing learning capabilities is just an intellectually appealing idea", or if it actually makes a difference (Senge, 1996, p. 46).

The kindergarten manager is a typical local line leader, and such managers have been characterised as *hybrid* leaders; that is, leaders in daily life that tend to shift between different leadership styles (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Gronn, 2008). Hybrid leadership involves continually shifting between formal and informal work, or system-level and individual-level work. Tensions between daily life, daily operations, and development in these types of organisations have also been described as something that arises in connection with attempts to find a balance between "daily life leadership and system leadership" (Glosvik, 2019), and "operations versus development" (Irgens, 2010). Bøe (2011) makes the point that the pedagogical and professional content of early childhood education work must inform the approaches used in studies of development in kindergartens. However, where is the balance between relational and instructional leadership strategies in educational organisations (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008)? Everything points to certain dilemmas that kindergarten managers as local line leaders must face as they try to balance informal here-and-now interaction with staff and children and formal, long-term tasks as the managers of a system.

The local line leader and intentions for collective learning

All individuals learn, but how does knowledge scattered among front-line staff emerge as shared mental models? Again, the local line leader's actions as a builder of collective knowledge are central, and the act or acts involved in the building of common knowledge call for active processes with a higher degree of intentionality than mere information sharing (Ottesen, 2009).

Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) are often cited by researchers attempting to explain why learning does not occur in collective settings: some actions, and some ways of asking, discussing, and interpreting are more productive than others. *Common* knowledge is, per definition, something that is found on a collective level. Interpreted in our context, do the local line leaders ask: "where and why", "why not", "what hinders", "in what ways" and "how to know if it succeeded" (Moilanen, 2005, p. 75)? In short, we must look at how the local line leaders communicate and what they communicate.

Summary of the theoretical approach

We do not make a sharp distinction between *organisational learning* and *learning organisations*. We consider them to be part of one field (Pedler, Boydell & Burgoyne, 2019), but note the different approaches and definitions behind these families of ideas (Örtenblad, 2018, p. 150). We are descriptively oriented and emphasise the individual. At the same time, we are also open to the relevance of the formal and group levels. The emphasis is on the local line leaders – as managers of systems and leaders of individuals – as the driving force in learning organisations (Moilanen, 2005; Senge,

1990). The local line leader's role in kindergartens is understood as a *hybrid* (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Gronn, 2008), and dilemmas influencing collective learning capabilities are discussed.

Methods

This is a qualitative multiple-case study analysing data from two kindergartens, here called Forest Town Kindergarten and Coast City Kindergarten, which participated in CfD (Yin, 2018).

Contextualisation

CfD was initiated by Utdanningsdirektoratet (the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training) (2013) and took place over five years throughout Norway. CfD was implemented because research had revealed a lack of multicultural competence. The participating institutions had to define their needs and get started with workplace-based professional development. They received professional support and guidance from higher education professionals (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013).

One condition for the partnership between the municipalities and the universities was that the participating institutions would be willing to participate in research. We chose the two kindergartens that participated in this study for strategic reasons: their participation in CfD and our access to them (Yin, 2018). The data collection process lasted approximately two years.

Data collection methods

This study is part of a larger study that collected data in a number of ways: research-directed process diaries filled out by individual members of the staff; individual interviews; focus group interviews with the same staff; interviews with management; interviews with parents having refugee backgrounds; and observations of informal and formal meetings between staff and parents. To answer the research questions of this article, we considered the individual interviews (n = 10) and focus group interviews (n = 2) with staff and management as the proper data set to analyse. Both the individual and the focus group interviews focused directly on our research topic, offering insight into the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions (Yin, 2018, p. 114). The individual interviews were conducted in 2017, at the end of the CfD, whereas the focus group interviews were conducted a year later, in 2018.

Table 1. Number of participants in interviews

	Assistants	Pedagogical leaders	Focus groups	Management
Forest Town Kindergarten	2	2	4	2
Coast City Kindergarten	1	3	4	1

Ethics and the role of the researcher in the research process

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data has approved this study, and it has followed the National Ethical Guidelines for Research (NESH, 2016). The staff were informed of the study and signed consent forms. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, all names used in this text are fictional, and we have not revealed the location of the kindergartens. The issue of reflexivity has been an essential element in the research process, thus we have reflected critically on ourselves as researchers (Bryman, 2012).

One of the main concerns in the research process was that one of the researchers was also a supervisor in the district, which, among other things, involved giving lectures that staff from both kindergartens attended. Also, other university staff have contributed to lectures and supervision in the kindergartens. The data collection process itself may have caused reactive effects that influenced the responses of the participants (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless, the kindergartens were part of CfD, aiming at the professional development of multicultural competence. Hence, the participants in this study *were meant to be affected*. For this reason, the study can, to a certain extent, be defined as action research, where the researcher and participants “collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis” (Bryman, 2012, p. 397). However, the kindergartens were responsible for diagnosing the problem they wanted to address in the development process, and the study described in this text was developed by the primary researcher and not in cooperation with the kindergartens.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis with a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, we were able to identify, analyse, and report interesting themes in the data set, which helped us interpret different aspects of the research topic while using relevant theory to shed light on the empirical findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Furthermore, meaning condensation, based on phenomenology, underlined the thematic analysis. We used Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009, pp. 205–207) five-step method for shortening formulations. We read through the entire material, case by case, and wrote down immediate reflections, “to get a sense of the whole” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 205). We coded the material and simplified and restated the coded statements in line with our understanding of the participants’ viewpoints. After that, cross-case conclusions were drawn (Yin, 2018).

Moreover, we questioned the statements in keeping with the purpose of the article, before we tied together relevant themes into descriptive statements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We illustrate this condensation process through tables and figures. Through the analysis, elements of individual and collective work, and systematic and unsystematic work became evident.

Results

The kindergartens were situated in two relatively similar municipalities. Representatives from two of the four departments in Forest Town Kindergarten and both departments in Coast City Kindergarten participated in the research study. In Forest Town Kindergarten, 7 of the children (approximately 12%) had refugee backgrounds, whereas 14 of the children (approximately 52%) in Coast City Kindergarten had such backgrounds.

Conditions for development and learning

Several differences characterise the two kindergartens. The manager of Forest Town Kindergarten was new to the job (but had extensive experience as a pedagogical leader), whereas the manager of Coast City Kindergarten had a lot of experience as a manager. Coast City Kindergarten had two pedagogical leaders in each department, whereas Forest Town Kindergarten had one. The municipality where Forest Town Kindergarten is situated spent most of the CfD funding on a project manager at the municipal level. No money was allocated to the kindergarten. One of the pedagogical leaders was assigned the role of project manager within the kindergarten. On the other hand, the municipality where Coast City Kindergarten is situated, allocated funding directly to the kindergarten. This funding enabled them to set up a steering group consisting of the manager and the pedagogical leaders. These structural differences are significant, as they probably explain some of the differences found between the two kindergartens.

Differences that make a difference

In our analysis, Coast City Kindergarten appeared to work more productively with CfD than Forest Town Kindergarten. This impression is reflected in the number of statements classified in the categories *integrated practice*, *fragmented practice*, *active talk*, and *passive talk*. The attitudes of managers and staff to their professional learning processes are the main targets for the active-passive categories. The following statement from the manager in Forest Town Kindergarten illustrates what we refer to as *passive talk*. When asked how they had worked on the project, Silje answered that the staff “had become more conscious that *maybe* one should communicate with them [parents]; that one does not think that it is perfectly fine that one does not talk to them, but that one *may* want to develop it [the communication] better.” (Our emphases). The following example from the manager at Coast City Kindergarten, on the other hand, illustrates more active talk concerning the professional development work. She described her understanding of the project in this way: “For me, it was not a sudden start, and then a sudden ending. Because we had started working on this long before Competence for Diversity came along (...). The funding meant that we could boost it, get more out of it in less time. The money and the lectures will end [when CfD ends], but we will continue the work”.

The integrated–fragmented categories reflect the discourses on practice development. The categories will be further elaborated on in the discussion section.

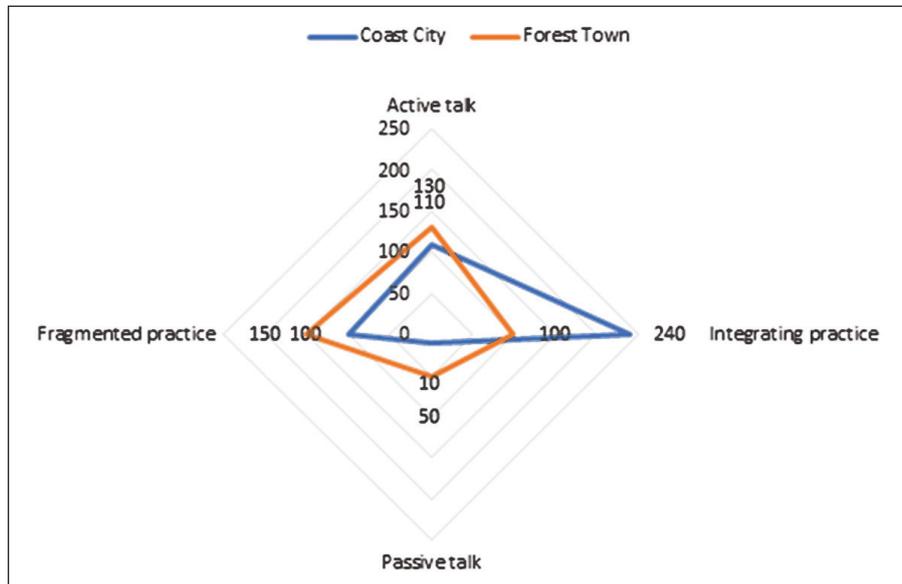


Figure 1. An image of the differences between the two kindergartens

Two differences are striking: there were far more statements about integrating practice in Coast City Kindergarten than in Forest Town Kindergarten, and there was also less passive talk. This led to the introductory remark about more productive work. It may be relevant to ask how sensible it is to quantify qualitative statements, but in this context, it has been done to visualise the observed differences between the two kindergartens. It is, however, an image that needs further elaboration.

Coast City Kindergarten appeared to have an active manager

The manager of Coast City Kindergarten, Sofie, appeared to take an active role in her kindergarten’s work with the project. She used active language, describing clearly how she led the project and how she had planned to spend the funding. She organised a steering group with regular meetings and a study group for the assistants. Moreover, they tried out peer-counselling sessions (which, however, were not successful), and went on a study trip to Poland to reflect on their practices.

The pedagogical leaders also expressed a wish to continue to work on multicultural issues and said that their practice had changed due to CfD. Line said: “I think it is good for us to shift our focus, and we are learning a lot from the processes we are in now”. The kindergarten spent some of its funding on an expert who explained how to symbolise, but not celebrate, different religious holidays. They had struggled with and discussed this issue among the staff. The lectures with the expert were mentioned by several of the staff as one of the essential elements of CfD. Her input had changed

the staff's views on the traditional Christmas celebration, and Johanna (pedagogical leader) noted that this had been challenging. When they linked this to the framework plan for Norwegian kindergartens, she understood the changes from a pedagogical point of view. Trine (pedagogical leader) had, in general, become more aware of how she acted in interactions with both children and parents. A statement from Alex (assistant), also showed a change of attitude: "I now know that it's not a piece of cake [for parents] to come here and glide right into my norms, my ways of doing things, the way I live my life".

Even though the manager appeared quite active, there were elements of passivity among other staff members. The pedagogical leaders said they had too much to do during the workday, something that prevented them from following up on the CfD project as much as they would have liked. Johanna (pedagogical leader) said, "The head wants more than the arms can handle", and Trine (pedagogical leader) admitted that the manager had taken on most of the responsibility concerning CfD.

Towards integrated practice, but also fragmented elements

Sofie emphasised that from the start:

I knew that I had to have people with me. I spent some time getting people on board, making this a priority. (...) I realised straight away that the steering group needed to consist of all the pedagogical leaders (...). We decided on a time [for meetings] each Monday, so that it would not 'run out in the sand' [disappear ... simply fizzle out].

Statements by the staff revealed that they were on board. They talked about working on the project collectively, discussing issues and challenging each other. Johanna (pedagogical leader) said: "It is important to work on an issue over time and then consider what changes need to be made. So that we work properly on it and get different inputs from different people." Alex (assistant) stated that by being better at discussing challenging issues in the staff group, it was easier as an individual to know how to act in practice.

However, it became clear that not all the staff had been included in the design of the project. It was Sofie (manager) and Johanna (pedagogical leader) who made the project plan, and Alex commented: "I do not really feel that I have been involved". Sofie admitted that, generally, they could have been better at knowledge sharing. It was a challenge to organise the workdays for the entire staff so they could work on the project. Even though Sofie organised and directed the study circle for the assistants, it was evident that the pedagogical leaders did not reflect on the knowledge gained by the assistants. Johanna did not know what the study circle discussed. Even though the pedagogical leaders had learned a lot, they still discussed how their complex leadership roles made it difficult to put new learning into practice: "I have a job that is very comprehensive

(...) So there are certainly things I can become better at, but perhaps don't have time for" (Johanna). "I see that what will be challenging is the practice" (Trine).

Organisational learning seemed to happen

Sofie stated that the steering group had been of great importance to her. The CfD project had not been her responsibility alone: "It is not me leading all this on my own; all the pedagogical leaders are involved". She described her role as a facilitator rather than as a motivator. The motivation for change, however, needed to come from the inside, and apply to "things they are enthusiastic about or want to be better at". Johanna reflected on the process they had gone through during the CfD project:

We remind each other of things during the day. When things happen, we try to put them into context and connect them to the theory we are working on (...) And the fact that we have got such an open dialogue in the department, where we push each other (...) I think it is nice that we can put things on the table and challenge each other a little.

This was a story of organisational learning. Several others also stated that by addressing a challenging issue directly (i.e. different religions) and getting a professional angle on it, they were able to change their practice straight away.

Forest Town Kindergarten faced challenges

Pernille, one of the pedagogical leaders, was assigned the role of project manager for CfD in Forest Town Kindergarten. Silje, the manager, wanted Pernille to participate in the interview. The general principle for the division of labour in Forest Town seemed to be a flat organisational structure. The CfD project was organised in the same manner, regardless of formal qualifications or formal positions. It was mainly Pernille and the project leader in the municipality that had worked on the CfD project. Silje explained: "I have not been directly [involved] other than by organising the meetings, staff meetings and such, and I decided when people [external] were allowed to come, and so on". Throughout the interview, Silje relied on Pernille to answer questions related to the project.

The other staff at Forest Town Kindergarten also appeared quite passive, both when talking about their work with the CfD project, and, to a certain extent, their collaboration with parents with refugee backgrounds. Marte (pedagogical leader) said that some of these parents had said they needed information in their own language, or through using pictures and other communicative tools. However, she added: "all these things that we should do ourselves; they take time, they get delayed". One of the assistants, Kari, said that if there were challenges in terms of communication with parents, she sent them to the manager, "so that she can spend time on it, because we can't stand around for very long explaining stuff". The staff and management in

Forest Town Kindergarten had not discussed how they would continue to work with the development of multicultural competence after CfD. Furthermore, the staff said that they wanted more outside lecturers, and that the municipality would have to take more responsibility. It was as if that responsibility was not theirs to take.

The manager at Forest Town Kindergarten seemed quite passive, insofar as she had delegated the project to Pernille. Pernille emphasised that it was important that everyone received the same information, and in the development process she stressed that “for us as leaders, I think it is important that we are positive (...) that we set a good example”. Lena, one of the assistants, exemplified this attitude. It was essential to allocate time to work on the project, and she stated: “If it had been arranged so that we could do it outside of working hours, then I would have been on board, because it is exciting”. She appeared to have the inner motivation, but there was no one to facilitate a learning process.

Fragmented practice with elements of integration

Forest Town Kindergarten did not receive funding directly. It had to use its regular staff meetings for CfD tasks, which caused some friction among staff. As Nina (pedagogical leader) noted, “If it gets too much, they say ‘Oh, do we have to do that tonight as well?’ So, there is a sort of balance to be found here; there are so many other things we have to discuss as well”. Furthermore, Silje and Pernille stated that CfD had taken up too much of their time and too many staff meetings, and it appeared that CfD interfered with their regular practice. Using what we classify as passive language, Silje said: “Perhaps I feel that we could have worked more holistically with it. But it probably has to do with us feeling that there have been so many other things that we have needed to focus on this year”.

The CfD project was designed by Pernille and the project manager at the municipal level, and the design process did not involve the staff nor the manager. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the objectives of the CfD project were neither clearly stated nor understood. Kari, one of the assistants, was quite clear that the leaders should have informed the staff about CfD much earlier. When they received information, “they [the leaders] had already said yes, and we didn’t really know anything until then”. She had not been involved in the planning process and said that she had not increased her multicultural competence. Lena, the other assistant, noted that they were probably a bit negative in the beginning because they felt that other things were just as important at that time.

It was challenging for several of the staff members to differentiate between the kindergarten’s CfD project and the research study of the primary researcher. The assistant, Lena, shared several reflections regarding cultural differences between herself and the parents in her interview. These reflections were not discussed among the staff, however. What the staff discussed mostly concerned the researcher-directed diaries.

In the focus group interviews, the staff shared some of their concerns and challenges one year after CfD, and admitted that they were still uncertain regarding multicultural issues. Marte, one of the pedagogical leaders, stated that they still lacked information and knowledge about the families with refugee backgrounds, and their cultural origins. Nina, the other pedagogical leader, was afraid to do or say anything embarrassing when asking about the parents' backgrounds. Language and culture were acknowledged to be the main challenges to cooperation with parents.

Not much new practice seemed to have been developed; even so, almost the entire staff suggested that professional development processes needed to involve them all. The researcher-directed diaries were used as an example several times as something that was beneficial in the reflection process. In the focus group interviews, it was agreed that they talked more about multicultural issues than before. For instance, Marte (pedagogical leader) said, "We talk much more about these things now than before, naturally. I feel that many of us are interested". Talking together made it easier to ask for help in challenging situations, for instance in communication with parents.

"I don't really know if there is so much more"

In summing up, manager Silje distanced herself from the project by leaning on Pernille's planning:

Otherwise [apart from writing the diaries], I don't really know if there is so much they [the staff] know about what happens in the project. More could have been done, but that depends on what you [turns to Pernille] included in the project plan, and what you emphasised.

The use of regular staff meetings for working with the CfD project caused frustration, illustrated by Pernille's statement: "One sometimes feels that one should have spent time on other kids and not just on talking about those with a second language". In Nina's (pedagogical leader) department, they struggled with a mother who did not enter the department facilities when dropping off her child in the mornings, leading to a lack of communication. This situation was discovered during the first round of diaries and was still the case when the focus group interview was conducted one and a half years later. Kari (assistant) stated in the individual interview that something should have been done earlier; nevertheless, "it is not my job to explain this to her [the mother]". It was the pedagogical leader's responsibility. Kari continued by stating that "I could have said 'You have to talk to her', but I cannot meddle with everything".

Answers to the research questions

The following section sums up our results by addressing our research questions. It is relevant to note that the results illustrate extremes, and that nuances existed in the two kindergartens.

The different conditions for organisational learning in the two kindergartens

Some differences in structural conditions between the two kindergartens were evident. Only seven (12%) of the children had a refugee background in Forest Town Kindergarten, as opposed to fourteen (52%) in Coast City Kindergarten. An organisational learning perspective might suggest that multicultural issues are significantly less relevant for Forest Town Kindergarten and that the CfD project did not need to be given a significant leadership priority. From this perspective, it might be argued that what we are observing is not so much a matter of different leadership roles, as a difference in external challenges. Nevertheless, Barnehaageloven (the Norwegian Kindergarten Act) (2018, §2) states that no kindergarten in Norway may decide *not* to work with multicultural issues, regardless of the number of children they have with different cultural backgrounds. This is especially the case when they are participating in CfD.

Table 2. Different structural conditions

Coast City Kindergarten	Forest Town Kindergarten
Experienced manager	New manager
Funding at the kindergarten level	Funding at the municipal level
52% children with refugee background	12% children with refugee background

Due to structural conditions, including amongst other things more meetings, the staff in Coast City Kindergarten had more opportunities for discussing relevant issues. Was this organisational slack a crucial condition for learning? Our research design does not allow us to analyse this point further, but it is fair to note that if a strict organisational learning perspective had penetrated our study, the answer might have been “yes”.

Learning to develop practice through a development project

In Coast City Kindergarten, organisational learning appeared to depend on prioritising a specific set of clarified objectives. Time and resource allocation seemed important. As these are formal organisational issues under the manager’s domain, they highlight the local line leader role. The understanding and internalisation of the CfD project as something connected to the kindergarten’s general professional practice development process appears to be the key to success. In a less productive learning process, as visible in Forest Town Kindergarten, vague and unclear objectives obscure the project in daily operations. There appears to be less internalisation of the CfD project, and individual learning seems connected mainly to the research study carried out by the primary researcher. By emphasising the intentions of the CfD project, the manager at Coast City Kindergarten made it possible to extend individual learning into collective knowledge building in practice.

Table 3. Differences in the development of practice

Coast City Kindergarten	Forest Town Kindergarten
Prioritising the project	Prioritising daily operations
Clear objectives	Vague and unclear objectives
Internalisation of CfD project	Less internalisation of CfD project
Time and resources allocated	Part of daily operations
Focusing on own CfD project	Focusing on the study of the primary researcher

Driving forces for collective learning

One noticeable driving force for collective learning was visible in Coast City Kindergarten: a willingness to talk about difficult issues and one's own prejudices, and a willingness to be uncomfortable when challenged by colleagues in open discussions. At the same time, the learning process was connected to general development in the kindergarten and a context for continuous problem-solving. External expertise scaffolded learning when combined with discussions about justifications. In Forest Town Kindergarten's learning context, difficult issues tended to be avoided. Staff used common sense to confirm, rather than challenge, each other. Uncomfortable situations were left for the manager to solve. The CfD project was perceived as time-defined and not connected to core operations. Finally, individual learning dominated. A lack of collective learning indicates a less developed sense of belonging to a team. Practice development, as observed in Coast City Kindergarten, seemed to indicate that the staff acted more as a team, rather than as individual members.

Table 4. Differences in the driving forces

Coast City Kindergarten	Forest Town Kindergarten
Willingness to talk about difficult issues	Avoidance of difficult issues
Willingness to be uncomfortable	Not my responsibility
Discussing and challenging each other	Discussing with and confirming each other
Project part of general development	A time-defined project
Relating to theory and framework plan	Common sense
Collective openness to external expertise	Individual openness to external expertise
How to continue the activity	How to end the activity

Leadership role in organisational learning

A productive leadership role for organisational learning seemed evident in Coast City Kindergarten, and it appeared related to responsibility on several levels. The manager as a local line leader was visible as a facilitator, and the staff was at the same time made responsible for tasks and problem-solving. The staff showed a willingness to experiment with different methods for practice development. A less productive leadership role was observed in Forest Town Kindergarten. Problems seemed to be sent to the

manager, who distanced herself from the CfD project by delegating formal responsibility. A flat structure made responsibility an individual issue. Furthermore, less experimenting, and more surface compliance with methods was observed. The line – and the line leader responsibility – was much more visible in Coast City Kindergarten.

Table 5. Differences in the leadership roles

Coast City Kindergarten	Forest Town Kindergarten
Facilitating learning	Solving problems herself
Facilitating learning about responsibility	Leadership through role models
Distributed responsibility	Delegated responsibility
Trying out different working methods	Surface compliance with new approaches
Visible line responsibility	Flat structure
Willingness to take responsibility	Sending problems to the manager

The role of local line leadership in organisational learning

How, then, could the empirical findings be developed further with the help of the theoretical approach?

Fewer dilemmas when sharing and focusing

When trying to further develop an understanding of the role of local line leadership in organisational learning, the concept of hybrid leadership (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Gronn, 2008) seems to be a useful starting point.

There is, however, an ontological challenge here. As observed in the two kindergartens, leadership is not something we can look for in the individual alone; *the leader* as an individual concept becomes too narrow when kindergartens are understood in a collective context. Hybrid leadership must be understood in collective terms, as illustrated by the situation in Coast City Kindergarten. Practice cannot be separated from those who practice, and hybrid leadership implies someone with whom to share responsibility. Sofie distributed leadership, Silje delegated. Sofie shared focus, Silje lost focus. Leadership of organisational learning appears to be a matter of individuals and groups learning and developing collectively (Pedler, Boydell, & Burgoyne, 2019).

One could argue that Coast City Kindergarten as an organisation came close to what is called *organisational ambidexterity*, as it was able both to explore new opportunities and exploit existing knowledge (Brix, 2019, p. 339). Sofie managed a balancing act, as she distributed leadership, allocated resources, and used the CfD project as a tool for organisational learning. Whereas Forest Town Kindergarten did not experience the same momentum in its development, Coast City Kindergarten exploited recent problem-solving activities and kept the focus on changes in daily operations. It explored outside knowledge resources, through external experts, whereas Forest Town Kindergarten was side-tracked by the research project, and neither explored nor exploited knowledge (Brix, 2019; March, 1991).

A contextual interplay behind organisational learning

One of the central topics in the general leadership discourse is the role of content knowledge in leadership, or, in our context, whether the manager should be involved in inclusion and diversity questions, or leave it to the staff or specific roles in the organisation? As we observed, the manager of Coast City Kindergarten was more occupied with the task questions on the agenda, and hence applied a more constructive leadership approach. In a sense, she balanced a concern for people with a concern for professional development (Moilanen, 2005). We ask whether this might be a necessary style for leading organisational learning in kindergartens. It creates a productive learning context for staff members.

A contextual interplay driving organisational learning in Coast City Kindergarten can be exemplified by the statement of Alex, who said that it was easier to act in practice as an individual because they had become better at discussing challenging issues in the staff group. This reflection of the collective was not visible when Kari from Forest Town Kindergarten stated that it was not her job to solve problems belonging to the manager. One of Moilanen's (2005) main points was that a combination of managing systems and leading individuals could be understood as the driving force in learning organisations. The combination of formal leadership and individual perception creates the whole. A collective project that facilitates learning at the organisational level makes sense at the individual level, as illustrated by Alex's statement.

Higher intentions and more penetrating questions

Individual knowledge was developed in both kindergartens. The element of knowledge building at the collective level was, however, a more visible pattern in Coast City Kindergarten: funding allocated at the kindergarten level, all pedagogical leaders formally involved, resources allocated to assistants, the competence of staff and management, a hands-on manager, and a clear idea about how to continue the work are all features that point to a higher degree of intentionality than mere information sharing (Ottesen, 2009). Leadership might be a question of who asks the questions that build common knowledge (Moilanen, 2005, p. 75). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the staff in Coast City Kindergarten met specific demands. The manager appeared to present the project information more in concert, clarifying problems that the staff found to be testable and discussable (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). The nature of the conversations in Coast City Kindergarten seemed productive as they confronted their prejudices and standard procedures.

To sum up: The role of local line leadership for organisational learning

We have found ample evidence that shifting between solo and distributed leadership is a fruitful approach for a manager, but it also seems reasonable to ask whether we should merge this hybrid leadership model with the local line leader type when discussing organisational learning (Gronn, 2008; Senge, 1996). Local line leadership

emerges as a combination of a concern for people and a concern for tasks and content in everyday situations. Thus it might also be described as a hybrid. However, in a practical world, managers like Sofie must say, “Yes, both”. This study implies that the hypothesis stands: the combination of managing systems and leading individuals is a driving force in collective learning (Moilanen, 2005). The act(s) of building common knowledge around practice development seem(s) to demand active processes that reflect a high degree of intentionality at the collective level, something that in effect is achieved by the local line leader over time (Ottesen, 2009; Senge, 1996). The concept of knowledge creation as purposive acts of connecting new ideas to existing knowledge in the organisation might be a useful path for future research (Brix, 2017, p. 113).

To sum up, our findings can be illustrated by the local line leader combining systems and individuals, people and content productivity, and daily operations and development (Glosvik, 2019; Irgens, 2010; Moilanen, 2005; Senge, 1996).

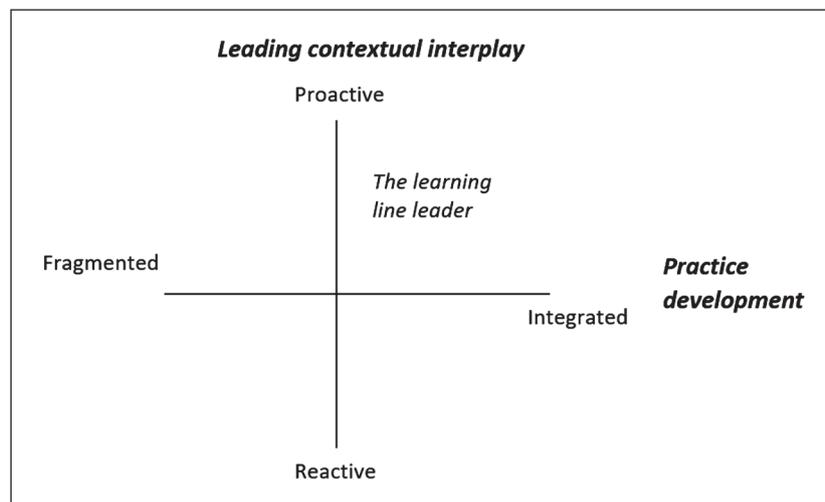


Figure 2. Local line leadership as organisational learning in kindergartens

The act of balancing staff and tasks, systems and individuals, daily operations and development appears to be a very *concrete* challenge in kindergartens rather than an abstract one, and the CfD project was only one of many concrete activities. How then do kindergartens, in general, integrate new tasks with the rest of their activities? We propose two dimensions:

One dimension we call *leading contextual interplay*, and we use the values *proactive* and *reactive* – somebody acts on a specific challenge or a problem and contextualises it in the kindergarten. As we have seen, the manager is essential, but she is not alone. The notion of distributed leadership is a useful one as it indicates a more proactive attitude than mere delegation of project responsibility. This dimension also emphasises the acts of the local line leadership as a driving force, and we note that management for learning in kindergartens is a question of both facilitating learning at an individual level and collective knowledge building.

The second dimension is called *practice development*, with the values *integrated* and *fragmented*. This dimension reflects the tension between the whole and the parts. *The whole* is a development of practice where new ways of working and thinking about diversity and inclusion become integrated into existing activities and are not left as fragments disconnected from the rest. Development is then a question of new connections in existing, daily operations. The role of local line leadership in knowledge creation seems like a promising path for future analysis (Brix, 2017; Senge, 1996).

The observation that integrating talk about practices in the kindergarten much more resulted in more learning, also leads to a hypothesis for the future: that organisational learning in kindergartens depends on language, words, and dialogues. Hence, organisational learning in kindergartens is a question of local line leadership talk.

About the authors

Anne Grethe Sønsthagen is a PhD-candidate in pedagogy, exploring how Norwegian kindergartens can function as an arena of inclusion through the staff's multicultural professional development. Theories on leadership, organisational learning and professional development are addressed, in addition to theories on multicultural education, symbolic power and inclusion.

Øyvind Glosvik is a professor, Dr. Polit in organisational leadership, exploring, among other things, leadership and change in educational systems and first line leadership in health, welfare, and educational institutions. Glosvik is one of Sønsthagen's supervisors.

References

- Aasen, W. (2010). Førskolelæreren som teamleder og samarbeidspartner: Ledelsesdilemmaer i barnehagen. [Preschool teachers as team leaders and collaborators: Management dilemmas in kindergarten.]. *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift*, 94(4), 293–305. Retrieved from <http://www.idunn.no/npt/2010/04/art08>
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1996). *Organisational learning II: Theory, method, and practice*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Austin, M. S., & Harkins, D. A. (2008). Assessing change: Can organizational learning “work” for schools? *The Learning Organization*, 15(2), 105–125. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09696470810852302>
- Barnehageloven [The Norwegian Kindergarten Act] (2018) LOV-2018-06-22-85 from 01.08.2018. Retrieved from <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2005-06-17-64>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

- Brix, J. (2017). Exploring knowledge creation processes as a source of organizational learning: A longitudinal case study of a public innovation project. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 33(2), 113–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2017.05.001>
- Brix, J. (2019). Ambidexterity and organizational learning: Revisiting and reconnecting the literatures. *The Learning Organization*, 26(4), 337–351. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2019-0034>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bøe, M. (2011). Ledelse som reflektert aktivitet og handling i lys av barnehagen som lærende organisasjon. [Leadership as reflected activity and action in light of kindergarten as a learning organization.]. In J. Rhedding-Jones & A. M. Otterstad (Eds.), *Barnehagepedagogiske diskurser*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Bøe, M., & Hognestad, K. (2017). Directing and facilitating distributed pedagogical leadership: Best practices in early childhood education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 20(2), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1059488>
- Easterby-Smith, M., & Lyles, M. (2011). The evolving field of organizational learning and knowledge management. In M. Easterby-Smith & M. Lyles (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational learning and knowledge management* (2nd ed., pp. 1–20).
- Edmondson, A., & Moingeon, B. (1998). From organizational learning to the learning organization. *Management Learning*, 29, 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507698291001>
- Fitzgerald, M., & Theilheimer, R. (2013). Moving toward teamwork through professional development activities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 41(2), 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-012-0515-z>
- Glosvik, Ø. (2002). Om læring på ulike nivå i organisasjoner. [About learning at different levels in organizations.]. *Norsk statsvitenskapelig tidsskrift*, 18(2), 117–141. Retrieved from http://www.idunn.no/nst/2002/02/om_lering_pa_ulike_niva_i_organisasjonar
- Glosvik, Ø. (2019). Mellom kvardag og system: Ein modell om førstelinjeleing i norsk, offentleg tenesteyting og forvaltning? [Between everyday life and system: A model of first-line management in Norwegian, public services and administration?]. In Ø. Helgesen, R. Glavee-Geo, G. Mustafa, E. Nettet, & P. Rice (Eds.), *Fjordantologien. Modeller* [Models.], (pp. 258–277). <https://doi.org/10.18261/9788215034393-2019-12>
- Gronn, P. (2008). The future of distributed leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(2), 141–158. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810863235>
- Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(3), 221–239.
- Hayes, R. H., Wheelwright, S. C., & Clark, K. B. (1988). *Dynamic manufacturing: Creating the learning organization*. London: The Free Press.
- Heikka, J., Pitkäniemi, H., Kettukangas, T., & Hyttinen, T. (2019). Distributed pedagogical leadership and teacher leadership in early childhood education contexts. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1623923>
- Irgens, E. J. (2010). Rom for arbeid: Lederen som konstruktør av den gode skole. [Room for work: The leader as a constructor of the good school.]. In E. M. Skaalvik, E. J. Irgens, & R.-A. Andreassen (Eds.), *Kompetent skoleledelse* [Competent school leadership] (pp. 125–145). Trondheim: Tapir akademisk forlag.

- Kangas, J., Venninen, T., & Ojala, M. (2016). Distributed leadership as administrative practice in Finnish early childhood education and care. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(4), 617–631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214559226>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, 2nd ed.. California: Sage Publications.
- Levitt, B., & March, J. G. (1988). Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14(1), 319–338. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.14.080188.001535>
- March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 2(1), 71–87.
- Mascadri, J., Brownlee, J. L., Walker, S., & Alford, J. (2017). Exploring intercultural competence through the lens of self-authorship. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development*, 37(2), 217–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1174930>
- Moilanen, R. (2005). Diagnosing and measuring learning organizations. *The Learning Organization*, 12(1), 71–89. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09696470510574278>
- NESH. (2016). *Forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, humaniora, juss og teologi. [Research ethics guidelines for social sciences, humanities, law and theology.]*. (4 ed.). Retrieved from https://www.etikkom.no/globalassets/documents/publikasjoner-som-pdf/60125_fek_retningslinjer_nesh_digital.pdf
- Ottesen, E. (2009). Det viktigste er læring. [The most important thing is learning.]. In R. Mikkelsen, & H. Fladmoe (Eds.), *Lektor – adjunkt – lærer. Artikler for studiet i praktisk-pedagogisk utdanning. [Teacher. Articles for the course practical-pedagogical education]* (2nd ed.). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Pedler, M., Boydell, T., & Burgoyne, J. (2019). Learning company: The learning organization according to Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell. In A. Örtenblad (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the learning organization* (pp. 87–103). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Riccucci, N. M. (2010). *Public administration: Traditions of inquiry and philosophies of knowledge*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x08321509>
- Scott, R. W. (1995). *Institutions and organizations. Ideas, interests and identities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization*. London: Century Business.
- Senge, P. (1996). Leading learning organizations: The bold, the powerful, and the invisible. In M. Goldsmith, F. Hesselbein, & R. Bechara (Eds.), *The leader of the future: New visions, strategies, and practices for the next era* (pp. 41–58). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Senge, P. (2006). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization* ([Revised and updated]. ed.). New York: Currency/Doubleday.
- The Norwegian Government. (2014, 25.11.2014). Early childhood education and care. Retrieved from <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/families-and-children/kindergarden/early-childhood-education-and-care-polic/id4,91283/>
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America*. Oxford: Knopf.

- Utdanningsdirektoratet. (2013). Kompetanse for mangfold [Competence for diversity.]. Retrieved from <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/kompetanse-for-mangfold/>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Örtenblad, A. (2001). On differences between organizational learning and learning organization. *The Learning Organization*, 8(3), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09696470110391211>
- Örtenblad, A. (2018). What does “learning organization” mean? *The Learning Organization*, 25(3), 150–158. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2018-0016>
- Örtenblad, A. (2019). Background and introduction. In A. Örtenblad (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the learning organization* (pp. 3–18). Oxford: Oxford University Press.