



Early Childhood Teacher or Leader? Early Childhood Directors' Perceptions of Their Identity

Per Tore Granrusten

*Queen Mauds University College of Early Childhood Education (QMUC)
Trondheim, Norway
e-mail: per.t.granrusten@dmmh.no*

ABSTRACT: This article¹ is part of the project on 'Leadership for Learning: Challenges for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Institutions in Norway', funded by The Research Council of Norway. The publication of the full report on this project is in progress. The data in this article have a qualitative exploratory design, based on in-depth interviews with 16 directors of ECEC centers in three municipalities in Norway. The theoretical basis includes the concepts of collective professional identity and individual professional identity (Jenkins, 2004), the concepts of leadership professional identity and pedagogical professional identity, developed from Møller (2009), and leadership in "the large and the small community" (Klausen, 2001, 2013). The two questions being examined in this article were: 1) Do the directors consider themselves to be Early Childhood (EC) teachers or leaders? and 2) How does the experienced identity influence the performed leadership? The findings indicate that this sample of directors have different understandings of their identity. Some are very clear that they are leaders; others are equally clear that they are primarily EC teachers but employed in leading positions. However, several also express that they are unsure of their identity, and their level of awareness of their identification seems low.

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Introduction

The Norwegian field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has changed radically since the turn of the millennium. The political commitment to full coverage has led to a significant expansion in the number of places for children in early childhood centers (ECCs) and reorganization in the field. In 2005, the Norwegian Parliament issued a 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 attend.

The development in the ECEC field has also increased the focus on EC management and leadership in several areas. The structural changes have been substantial as a result of political commitment first to the quantitative expansion of the capacity of full coverage and then to the qualitative content in ECEC. The major development in the sector has led to a greater number of large ECCs, both private and municipal. The ECC size in terms of the increased number of children and staff is one factor, and the organization structure is another. Newly built ECCs are usually large centers located in the same place, but the merging of several smaller centers into larger units has also been a way to rationalize their creation, primarily in public ECCs (Vassenden, Thygesen, Bayer, Alvestad & Abrahamsen, 2011; Granrusten & Moen, 2009; Moen & Granrusten, 2014). This way of merging centers is similar to the results of reforms in other Nordic countries, such as Finland (Halttunen, 2010; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011).

Directors are under pressure coming from many directions, and the content of this pressure may vary with the ECC size and ownership. In The Kindergarten Act (2005, section 17), the daily leader of an ECC is referred to as the director, but in practice, the title varies. According to the Norwegian National Association of Private Kindergartens (PBL), many private ECCs use the title *general manager* in place of *director*. In many Norwegian municipalities the municipal ECCs have received status as municipal units/businesses, and the director has been given the title *head of unit* or *unit leader*. In the municipal ECCs, both *director* and *unit leader* are used, presumably to distinguish between ECCs that are organized as municipal units/businesses and those that are not. In some municipalities, some ECCs are merged with schools into one municipal unit. In these cases, the school principal is usually the head of the merged unit and the school, and the director is the head of the ECC.

It is reasonable to assume that the identity of leaders will vary in the same way that the role does, but little research has been done to investigate this in Norway. It is interesting to study this partly because different leader identities may influence the way leadership is performed and how the focus on leadership and management is defined (Møller, 2009). The two research questions being addressed in this article were: 1) *Do the directors consider themselves to be EC teachers or leaders?* and 2) *How does the experienced identity influence the performed leadership?*

The director role in transformation

In 1975, the Norwegian legislation determined that the directors and pedagogical leaders serving as heads of departments in ECCs should be educated EC teachers or should have received equivalent pedagogical education. This still applies:

Kindergartens shall have a head teacher who is a trained pre-school teacher or has other college education that gives qualifications for working with children and pedagogical expertise (Kindergarten Act, 2005, section 17).

Pedagogical leaders must be trained preschool teachers.

Other three-year pedagogical programmes at college level with further education in teaching in kindergartens shall be equated with pre-school teacher education (Kindergarten Act, 2005, section 18).

Competence requirements are essentially the same for directors and pedagogical leaders. Directors may have a different type of college education related to helping children acquire knowledge, and they have pedagogical skills, while pedagogical leaders may have a different type of three-year teacher training at the college level and further education in early childhood pedagogy.

It has been, and still is, common for directors mainly to be recruited among pedagogical leaders. Many have been working in this position for many years, and they have their identity rooted in the EC teacher profession. It is a reasonable assumption that their identity as a director in many ways may be considered a given professional identity as a pedagogue.

Requirements and expectations for early childhood leadership

A Norwegian revision of international research on leadership in schools and ECCs (Mordal, 2014) notes that there is not necessarily a correlation between the demands and expectations imposed on leadership in the ECEC sector and the skills and knowledge directors actually have. The identity of the directors is still tied to the practical and pedagogical work being performed, and this will have consequences for both the type of leadership and the leadership role. The Norwegian tradition of the director being *a best among equals* (Mordal, 2014, p. 28) is also found in England, Australia and Iceland (Hard & Jonsdottir, 2013; Preston, 2013; Woodrow, 2008).

The municipal reforms in Norway are conducted with New Public Management (NPM) as a guiding ideology (Børhaug, 2013). This emphasizes a clearer focus on leadership and the transfer of decision-making to levels closer to service production and the users of these services. In the ECEC field, structural changes with changing leadership tasks and responsibilities and duties have increased the demands and expectations for ECC content and tasks (Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2010; Børhaug, 2013; Granrusten & Moen, 2009; 2011).

Since the middle of the 1990s, several educational programs in early childhood leadership have been developed in Norway. The most comprehensive was created in 2010, when The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training recommended directors to enroll in a fully funded regional education program called *The Director Education Program* (Børhaug, 2013). The 30-credit master's-level program is part time for 1½ years and focuses on EC leadership. The goal of this program is to strengthen directors' leadership and to change the loose leadership practice where "everyone participates, but nobody is in charge" (ibid, p. 150).

A Finnish study investigates the rhetoric associated with leadership and the discourse of New Public Management (Hujala, 2004). The author uses Bronfenbrenner micro, meso and macro levels in her analysis of EC leadership. Her contention is that the leadership context defines the leadership culture. Leadership at the macro level is defined by the 'hard' (ibid, p. 64) business concepts, and this rhetoric does not belong to the pedagogic professional language in ECCs. It is in this context, at the macro level, that the leadership culture and associated rhetoric are defined.

The surveyed directors state that they are first taken seriously at the higher administrative levels when they use these business concepts. The directors advise their employees to learn the economic discourse—to understand it but also to use it in communication with public authorities and owners (Hujala, 2004, p. 64). This way of

analyzing leadership has common features with Klausen's (2001, 2013) analysis of leadership in the tension between the large and the small community, where the meso and macro levels are found in the large community, and the micro level is found in the small community. One of Klausen's perspectives is that leadership has different strategies in various arenas in the large and the small community.

Møller (2009) finds, in a study of leaders and leadership roles in public ECCs in Denmark, that there is a clear distinction between what he calls (ibid, p. 14) *subject professionals* leaders (my translation from Danish - *fagprofessionell*), i.e., leaders with a leadership orientation based on their profession, and *leadership professionals* (my translation from Danish - *ledelsesprofessionell*), i.e., leaders with an orientation based on leadership. The study concludes that the pedagogue profession, with its academic and professional norms and beliefs, is still a strong identification basis for leader identity and roles for directors of municipal ECCs in Denmark. However, the study also finds the presence of a general leadership orientation that is based on an understanding of the necessity of interdisciplinary and inter-organizational leadership in ECCs. This is interpreted as a competing *leadership professional* identity among directors.

Theoretical perspectives

Collective profession identity, individual professional identity

Profession is a term with more than one definition (see, for example, Hansbøl & Krejsler, 2004; Molander & Terum, 2008). Common features of the definitions of profession are that it is an occupation based on specialized education and that practitioners are given the right to perform certain specialized tasks. The basis for this right is the recognition of the specialized tasks' importance in society and the confidence that the profession, by virtue of practitioners' expertise, will be able to fulfill tasks of general interest (Molander & Terum, 2008, p. 20). Describing an occupation as a profession also expresses an expectation of being able to describe professionalism with regard to professional conduct and the collective profession identity of the practitioners. Professionalism can be understood as normative expectations of the tasks performed in accordance with standards of good professional practice. These standards can be expressed by both the environment and the profession itself.

Jenkins (2004, p. 80-93) distinguishes between collective identity and personal identity. Collective identity consists of two parts that work together: group identity and category. First, group identity is a product of group members' collective perceptions of their identity and of themselves as a group, an internal definition. Second, is an external collective definition of collective identity, establishing a category. This category contains

relevant external actors who define common features of a group of which they are not members. Together, these two parts constitute collective identity.

Personal identity is what separates individuals' unique self from others and is different from *social identity*, which is the internalization of often stereotypical collective identifications (Jenkins, 2004, p. 89). Heggen (2008) uses the concepts from Jenkins (2004) to describe identity related to profession, which he divides in two major categories, *profession identity* and *professional identity* (ibid, p. 323-324). Profession identity is an example of collective identity, and professional identity is an example of personal identity. In this article, I will use the terms *collective professional identity* and *individual professional identity*.

For EC teachers, *collective professional identity* is not only a product of the perception of the profession within their own occupational group but also influenced by the expectations and perceptions among national and municipal authorities, owners and parents. Using the definition of a profession a defined qualification to practice the occupation through formal education is required. In addition to expertise and training in a profession, education provides socialization into future professional practice. Education often occurs early in a person's life, and when youth and education coincide in time, the entire profession qualification could be considered an important dimension of the individual practitioner's identity formation (Heggen 2008, p. 321).

Individual professional identity is an example of personal individual identity and can be understood as "A more or less conscious perception of *me* as a practitioner, in terms of the type of personal characteristics, values and attitudes, ethical guidelines, or the skill or knowledge that constitute me as a good practitioner" (Heggen, 2008, p. 324). This identity is affected by several factors. Professional identity, *me* as a practitioner, can be considered the sum of identity created through professional socialization of education, the prevailing collective profession identity and the experiences and reflections of each individual in his or her career. This is an identity that is created and changes over time.

Individual professional identity is the identity the individual practitioner experiences having or chooses to have. For directors, it can be argued that the norm is first and foremost a pedagogue and that individual professional identity is congruent with collective professional identity, if not deliberately chosen otherwise. To experience having an individual personal identity as an EC teacher can reasonably be the result of awareness of their leadership role and a conscious choice, but it can also be argued that this might be an unconscious adaptation to an expected position of the established ECEC culture. To identify oneself as a leader, however, is in many ways a violation of the traditional notion of the director's role and can be a conscious choice away from this role and toward something else. This line of reasoning could lead to an assumption that

directors with a professional leadership identity will appear as possibly different leaders with more institution leadership awareness than leaders with identity as EC teacher.

Leadership professional and pedagogical professional

Møller's (2009, p. 14) identity categories *leadership professional* and *subject professional* are useful in the analysis in this article. I have chosen to use the term *leadership professional* but change the term *subject professional* to *pedagogical professional* in this article. Both categories are individual professional identities that the directors themselves experience having or have chosen to have. In particular, two of Møller's findings in Denmark are of interest in this context. First, the profession of EC pedagogues still stands strong as the identification basis for leaders in ECCs, and second, leaders with an interdisciplinary and cross-organizational leader orientation express a greater leadership professional identity (Møller, 2009, p. 315). In this article, this may be an approach primarily for the directors in municipal ECCs.

The large and the small community

These terms are taken from Klausen's model of "the large and the small community" (Klausen, 2001, pp. 238-241, 2013, pp. 49 - 52). Klausen (2001, p. 239) argues that while leaders in the public centres first consider themselves professionals and colleagues and secondly as leaders, it becomes difficult to exercise leadership in other ways than management and professional development. What is needed is that management and leadership are considered a separate concept. He argues that directors in the public sector primarily are profession educated and occasional or incidentally have leader education in addition to the profession education. He calls for the government and unions to strengthen leaders' legitimacy through education, leadership training and interdisciplinary networking in different fields of expertise.

Klausen (2001, p. 241) develops a theoretical model that illustrates that leadership occurs in tension between the small and the large community. Klausen's model, illustrated in Figure 1, is based on an understanding of organizations operating in an active interaction with the environment. In this interaction, each individual organization is *the small community*, while the outside world is *the large community*. In the ECEC context, this becomes the individual ECC and the surrounding environment, which may include the owner, municipality and state but also competitors and parents. In the model, the interdisciplinary leadership teams in municipalities are included as possible arenas for strategic decisions. Klausen (2001, p. 240) argues that the establishment of municipal interdisciplinary leadership teams can contribute to municipal leaders more strongly identify themselves as leaders in the large community. Responsibility for municipal strategic decisions can thus also contribute to developing a leadership professional

identity. This may illustrate the municipal interdisciplinary unit leader groups that many of the municipal directors mentioned in the interviews.

The analysis uses the concepts of collective profession identity and individual professional identity. It analyzes how the identities are linked together (coinciding or differing) and how they vary in regards to ECC size or ownership. In the analysis of the individual professional identity is the term leadership professionals and pedagogical professionals used. The large and the small community and interdisciplinary leadership teams are used as a perspective to investigate how the directors in the sample relate to externally oriented leadership.

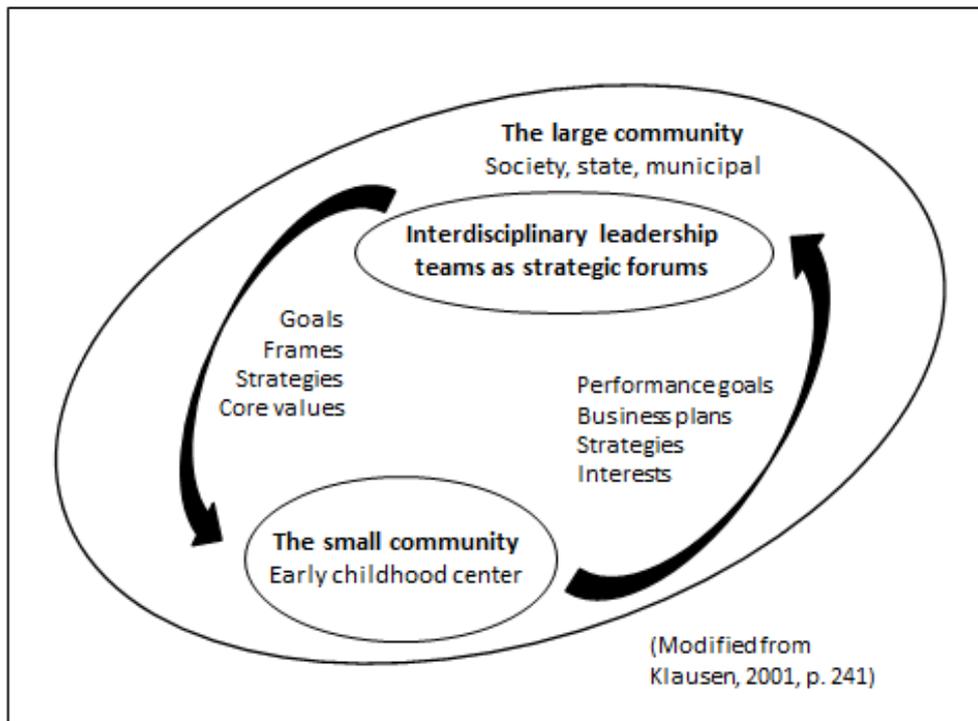


FIGURE 1 Leadership tension between the large and the small community

Methods and sample

The data are from interviews conducted in January and February 2013. The sample consists of 16 directors, 14 women and 2 men, from two large urban municipalities and a small rural municipality. There are 8 public and 8 private ECCs, equally divided between the municipalities.

The ECCs are categorized by three size categories: small centers, with fewer than 45 children, medium centers, with 45-79 children, and large centers, with 80 children or more. The centers are equally distributed in size in relation to ownership. The size varies from 9 to 300 children, and the average is 80 children. The directors' years of experience in the occupation after completing EC teacher education vary from 11 to 40 years, with an average of nearly 25 years. The analysis is performed using the software package NVivo10.

The data were analyzed by a stepwise deductive-inductive method. The statements are coded by *sorting based coding*, where categories describe the different themes the interviews addresses (Tjora, 2012, pp. 175-195). The method used, is similar to what is called *systematic text condensation*, which is described as suitable for descriptive transversal analysis of phenomena described of many different informants in the material when the purpose is development of new descriptions and terms (Malterud, 2004, p. 99).

In the analysis, the categories *leadership professional* and *pedagogical professional* were used. These categories constitute the ends of a dimension, as illustrated in Figure 2, and the informant was placed somewhere between these ends. In the interviews, the informants could have been asked where on this dimension they would place themselves and to what extent they considered themselves to be one or the other, but the question posed to the informants asks them to identify themselves either as leaders or as EC teachers, and this was considered the end of the dimension in the analysis.

Findings

It might be a reasonable assumption that directors in large ECCs, both private and public, more strongly identify themselves as leaders, what Møller (2009) calls leadership professional identity. The findings of the project showed that this is true to some extent, but the picture was more nuanced and varied than a simplified assumption of ECCs' size and organizational structure would imply. A finding that seemed to be important for identity formation was the degree to which the directors were aware of their roles as directors and how conscious they were about the content and function of the director role. When we asked the informants whether they experienced their roles as primarily an EC teacher in a leadership role or as a leader, their answers varied based on how conscious they were of their own leadership identity. For some directors, the answer was prompt, and their identity was often justified and presented as a choice they had made. In this group, there were both directors with a clear identity as a leader and directors who had an equally clear identity as an EC teacher. For others, it seemed as if they almost not at all had thought about this issue; their answers were somewhat vague and sometimes

hesitant. Some were uncertain about their own identity, but eventually made a choice to adopt a pedagogical professional identity or a leadership professional identity. However, regardless of the individual professional identity, it appeared that the identity of director was linked to the collective professional identity of EC teacher.

The analysis was performed using these two dimensions, experienced identity leadership professional or pedagogical professional, and the practitioners' level of awareness of their own leadership role. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

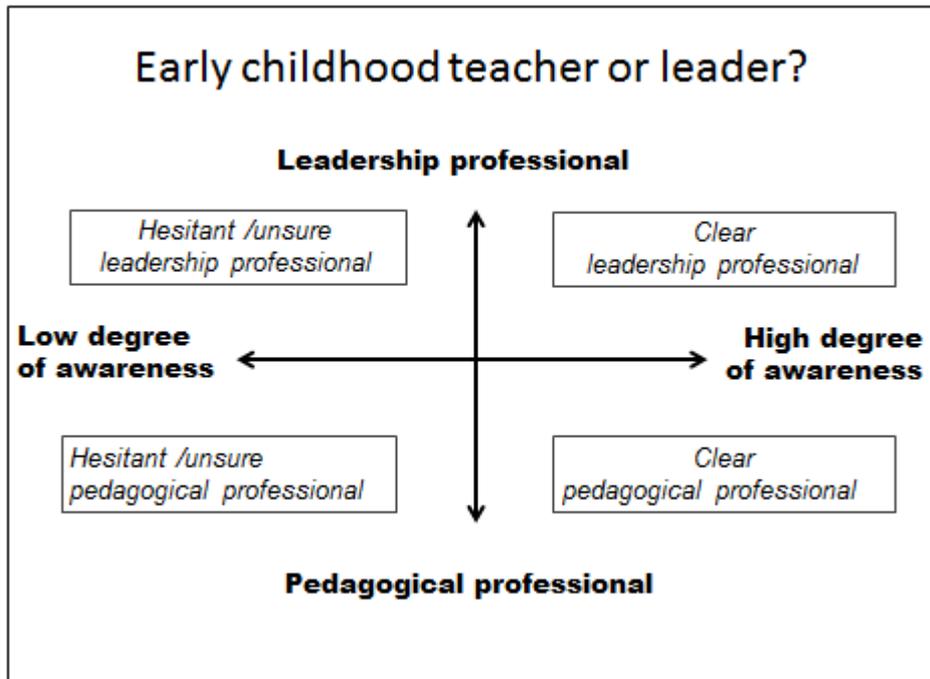


FIGURE 2 Leader or EC teacher

The model visualizes the two dimensions and the four categories selected in the analysis. On the right side of the awareness dimension are the directors who have given the impression of having a conscious stance on which identity they have as a leader. Here we find directors with a leadership professional identity and directors who identify themselves as pedagogical professionals. On the left side in the model, we find those who are unsure of their identity and those who, having argued with themselves or after follow-up questions from the interviewer, have made a choice. Moreover, here, the choices are different. It is interesting that there is no pattern in this model. Ownership and center size are distributed along the two dimensions, which the following statements will show.

Hesitant or unsure pedagogical professional

A director in a small private ECC is an example of those who expressed uncertainty about their own identity. This center was small, but the director has a 100% position as a director; this was in many ways an example of the *classic Norwegian ECC*. The director has had a long professional career and had been director of this ECC for 3½ years. She was not very conscious of her own leadership identity. She said she was unsure but wants to be a leader:

Hm! (Laughs a little) ... This was hard! ... Actually ... at least I feel most as a leader—compared to the leader/EC teacher. But whether I'm leader - yes - no, I do not know. I must think a little about this.

The question may seem somewhat unexpected; the informant did not give the impression of having reflected on this topic, and it seemed not to be important in the daily operations of the center. Another informant who expressed some of the same uncertainty was a municipal unit leader in another municipality. She led a large ECC consisting of three former ECCs, 'houses', and she had been involved in building the new ECC up to a merged unit. During the interview, she used the term *director* in such a way that it can be interpreted as EC teacher and director identity are in the same dimension, while *leader* meant something different to this informant. The collective professional identity as an EC teacher was evident, and she hesitated slightly before she landed on the pedagogical professional identity as her individual professional identity. However, she was aware of the differences in exercising leadership within her unit and in the municipal community outside:

My main identity—hmm—I am director, I think. So that's where the identity lies... That's what's in a way—that's where I have my heart, then. But at the same time, it gives me a bigger—I feel I am being strengthened as director in this cooperation across ... When I am allowed to discuss how we do with someone who has a completely different perspective from mine, for example, so I think it's changing work, organizational development ... leadership... discussing with the CEO for the IT section in my municipality... very exciting, and it gives me energy. It really does.

This unit leader was talking about being a leader within her own center and externally in the municipal community, and she participated in what Klausen (2001) calls interdisciplinary leadership teams in the municipality (see Figure 1). This presupposes a differentiated approach to leadership, to which the respondent referred as stimulating and developing, but did not seem to have impact on the identity.

Hesitant or unsure leadership professional

Another unit leader in a large unit in another municipality used the same arguments, but she came to another conclusion. She expressed that collective professional identity is important and that this is what makes her a leader. She argued somewhat with herself about this issue and her individual professional identity, and after a while, she concluded that after all, she was a leader with a leadership professional identity.

R: Well, how I experience myself... am I probably more... no, I'm both, I think. I think I'm both. Because being an EC teacher is very important to me, and I think that in this type of job you SHOULD be an EC teacher. Yes. You should have a good basic education that is directed at children, and you—you should in a way also have worked as an EC teacher to know what it's like. Then, I think you would be a skilled leader. That's at least what I experience that I am.

I: Are you primarily a leader?

R: Yes, I probably am (laughs a little) ...

Clear pedagogical professional

The clearest informant in this category was a municipal unit leader in a large unit that consisted of three centers, or 'houses'. She expressed an awareness of her own identity as EC teacher, but she was aware that she worked as a leader. She said:

When I present myself, I am an EC teacher. If someone asks me what I'm working with, then I work—then I am an EC teacher. But I know that I spend most of my time as a leader. I WILL be an EC teacher who is a leader ... But often, I'm a leader with an EC teacher education ... And so I hope that the EC teacher education makes me a better leader ...

She also said that in a way, she was changing her identity when she left the ECC and participated in outside arenas. The informant said she was aware that she was a municipal leader in her community and that the leader identity was expressed, for example, in meetings with other municipal unit leaders, not only in the EC sector in the municipality. The following statement was fairly descriptive of how the informant taught of leadership in a municipal context as something in contrast to pedagogy, something different from the content of the collective professional identity: "*Because you become very much a leader, particularly in relation to the contributions from the Chief Administrative, where the focus is on leadership and management, not the pedagogy*". She was aware that the identity as an EC teacher within the small community and as a leader outwardly in the large community required different approaches to leadership. However, the informant was clear in her statement that the collective pedagogical professional identity was also the

individual professional identity she chose to have. As the previous unit leader did, she talked about both being a leader within her ECC and having a responsibility as a municipal leader in her municipality. Both informants participated in interdisciplinary leadership teams across disciplines and professions in the municipality but had different approaches to their identity as directors.

Clear leadership professional

These are the informants whose professional identity strays most from the traditional role of director, so this category is described in more detail than the three previous. There is no basis for making an analysis of gender, but it is a fact that both the male participants in the sample are in this category. But they are quite different. The ECCs varies in size and ownership. I have chosen the four informants with the clearest statements of their identity as a leader and given them names to describe their profile. The four informants are: *The Business Leader*, *The Competitor*, *The Strategist*, and *The Lonely Rider*.

The Business Leader

This director was a male, and he was director in a large private chain that had its own educational system for the staff, including the directors. This school seemed to be central in the director's consciousness. According to his description, marketing and the chain's image were important issues. The chain had a clear policy on visibility through signage and use of logo, and accessibility to users. It appeared that the chain owner provided clear guidelines for the structure and content of centers and that this was something the director considered as his task to follow up on in the leadership of his center.

Management and leadership were, in the informant's opinion, a separate subject and a separate profession that can be learned, and a good professional leader is able to lead anything. It is not necessary to be an educated early childhood teacher to be a director, but it is an advantage to be an educated pedagogue in all types of leadership.

But I think quite frankly—I'm not saying it is right, but I think—that a good leader can lead anything ... I'm not saying that you do not need to have core knowledge of things, but it has—if I can put it—if I can use my ECC as an example, then, it is clear that the role as pedagogue, I have eight persons that can take ... eight can take the job Why should I as a director have it?

This director led the ECC in a way that has more in common with traditional business leadership than traditional ECC leadership. The focus was on marketing, promotion and business, while the operational leadership of the ECC's core areas was delegated to an EC teacher in a deputy position and the rest of the teaching staff. The director argued that "...the tasks are best solved nearest where they will be resolved". This is a very New Public Management type of statement.

The Competitor

This director was a female, and she was director in another large private ECC chain. In contrast to the previous informant, her opinion was that being an educated EC teacher is a prerequisite to lead such a large center. “... *But here (in this center)—here, you will not be able to lead unless you have a background as an EC teacher, I am TOTALLY, TOTALLY convinced*”.

The director had a long experience as a leader both inside and outside the ECEC sector and said that her identity as a professional leader had been in place for 25 years.

She was aware of that the ECC’s existence depends on how capable they are to fill all the places with children. In the area where this ECC was located, there was a 120% coverage at the time of the interview and there was an open competition between the ECCs in the area for filling up their places. This indicates that there were not enough children to fill the available capacity in all ECC’s. For this director, profiling and reputation building were important promotion tools. Food and diet had become one of the strategies in this ECC’s profile in the competition:

Well ... when it comes to recruiting children to the center ... that requires a strategy, right?... If we’re going to get all our places filled up, we need to act ... And what you must promote to get children to the center, it is of course that the children are doing well and that we have a good environment for development and learning here. And then, of course, the availability, long opening hours. And not least, in our case ... a professional kitchen. When I applied to my owners on the national level for money to establish a professional kitchen, it was the strategic part that was in focus.

The Strategist

This director was a male, and he was unit leader in medium size municipal ECC. His opinion was that leadership is more an individual attribute and that it has a lot to do with other people wanting to be led by you. He said: “*I’m not an executive educator anymore...it’s actually about creating a process that implies that people understand what it is all about and that they make it their own.*”

The director was working strategically with a long-run perspective to influence and change the municipal priority areas in the ECEC sector. One of the learning areas in the Norwegian curriculum for the ECEC sector is ‘art, culture and creativity’, and this has had too low priority, according to this director.

It’s about the art, culture and creativity area that now are lifted into our leadership agreement. It’s something I’ve been working with for five years. In five years, I have had a strategy, this must be included in the plans ... it is an important part of the ECC’s

identity but has not in a way become visible. So I worked on this in terms of placing myself in committees and councils ... to actively speak out at leadership meetings, to participate in projects, and then lift it up... For ONE thing, you are concerned about your own center, but something else is that you are supposed to have an overall view for all the children in town.

In addition to describing a long ongoing process, the quote also bears witness to an awareness of the director's own role that is interesting. The director expressed a sense of responsibility as a leader in his own organization, the small community, but also a collective responsibility as a leader in the large community. As municipal director, he was a unit leader and also a part of the municipal leadership team that was responsible for the entire ECEC sector in the municipality. The director acted as a strategic actor in this arena, with a clear goal that must be expected to have a long-term perspective. He had the ability to make tactical choices along the way as means for achieving this goal. In the interview, this director appeared as the person in the sample who most clearly seemed to restrain his role as a leader in both the large and small communities.

The Lonely Rider

This director was a female, and she was also a clear and explicitly stated leader. She was director of a small center in a relatively small private chain owned by a Christian organization (10 centers in the same municipality). She exerted a type of 'hands-on' leadership and had a clear inward perspective of her own organization. She justified her identity as a leader with the duties she performed. She bore the ultimate overall responsibility and had many non-educational tasks to take care of.

I consider myself a leader in this ECC and that I, in a way, have the main responsibility for everything that happens, the pedagogy and staff and the emotional climate—everything ... Even though this is a small center, there is—it's 60 parents, 30 children, 8 employees, special education teachers, support pedagogues who come by ... There is a lot to organize.

The director said that the ECC has an active owner and that she had some support in her own organization, both technically and administratively. However, she considered changing from her trade union for teachers to a trade union called *The Leaders*. She argued, among other things, that she should seek competence and support in her leadership work. This trade union had, in her opinion, more to offer in terms of support and expertise in the position the informant currently holds than her current pedagogical trade union. The chain ownership was relatively small and could not offer the same support system as the major chains, and the director felt a bit 'on her own'. She expressed that she had a need for more support than she could receive from the owner and her present trade union.

Discussion

The collective profession identity as an EC teacher is evident in the findings of this project. Even those informants who perceive themselves primarily as leadership professionals were clear that the collective professional identity was crucial for their leadership of the ECC, with one exception. One director in a large private chain stands out by discarding the collective profession identity as an EC teacher as a prerequisite for being a director in ECCs. Leadership is a profession unto itself, and it can be performed regardless of the organization's core activity. Being a trained pedagogue is useful and applicable in all types of leadership but is not a condition for ECEC leadership at the director level.

The Norwegian Kindergarten Act provides other professions access to director positions, but there is competence criterion linked to formal early childhood competence or pedagogic qualifications, not explicit leadership competence: "*.... other college education that gives qualifications for working with children and pedagogical expertise...*" (Kindergarten Act, 2005, section 17). This can be a competitor to the EC teacher profession. Another possible way to achieve professional leadership competence is strengthening EC teacher competence, and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training offers continuing education in EC leadership up to the master's level.

The rest of the informants had a different opinion, i.e., that the collective profession identity as an EC teacher is a prerequisite for being the director. This view is independent of ownership, center size and identity awareness level. The collective professional identity was present with all informants except one; for some, it is strong and dominant, independent of the informants having an individual pedagogic professional identity or an individual leadership professional identity.

Klausen (2001) notes that the establishment of municipal interdisciplinary leadership teams might contribute to the development of a leader's professional identity. This does not seem to be the case in this sample. Seven of the eight municipal directors were unit leaders and they participated in interdisciplinary forums for the municipality. In this role, the individual director was a part of the municipal leadership team with responsibility for the entire municipality. This structure has much in common with the illustration in Figure 1. Klausen's notes about the development of a leader's professional identity in the large community were therefore not evident in our findings.

The unit leaders' personal identity varied between leadership professional and pedagogic professional and the awareness level varied even if they participated in interdisciplinary municipal leadership teams. The informants said they were aware of their role as leaders in both the large and the small community, and they recognized both rhetoric and logic as different in the different arenas, but it cannot be interpreted from the data that this had any effect on the choice of identity. One interpretation of this is that there are individual factors that are more important to determine the individual professional identity and how conscious one is about it, than participation in municipal interdisciplinary leadership teams in the large community. This understanding is supported by Heggen (2008), who argues that individual professional identity is created through socialization and change over time through the experiences of individual professionals throughout their career.

It appears that the ECCs' size, structure and number of employees had greater importance for the directors than their individual professional identity. Directors in the largest ECCs exercised pedagogical leadership in cooperation with others, with their pedagogical leaders or with leadership teams. Several informants had an explicit focus on the leadership of pedagogical processes, but there was a difference in the extent to which the directors themselves were 'hands on' daily, leading relationally in direct interactions, or they had a more general perspective and performed their leadership more indirectly through others.

One of the informants with a leadership professional identity said that he "*is not an executive pedagogue anymore*". The statement is descriptive of what appeared in most interviews. Regardless of the individual professional identity the informants said they had, it was important to have legitimacy in the values and skills enshrined in the collective professional identity as an EC teacher. This is the foundation of leadership in early childhood and the foundation of the individual professional identity.

One finding is that there were differences in the extent to which informants focus on the large or small community. In the pedagogical leadership, the informants mostly had an inward perspective of the staff, competence and the children in their own center. This seemed to apply regardless of the size of the ECC and ownership. However, several directors also had the large community as an arena for their leadership. Externally oriented leaders had a main perspective that was not pedagogical. The directors of the two largest private ECCs who both had a leadership professional identity, considered economic and business conditions as their main tasks when they talked about the leadership of the ECC. Both directors focused on the competitive situation and the need to have full coverage in the center to maintain EEC jobs, quality and reputation.

Both these directors were focused on actors in the large community and were particularly aware of their role as providers in a competitive market. The unit leaders in the municipal

ECCs had a different perspective regardless of their professional identity. They did not express the same attention to the competitive situation and finances. They exerted leadership in the large community by, among other things, attempting to influence their owner, the municipality, through participation in municipal leadership forums and networks. These influences could be of a financial nature but also apply to the pedagogical content and the municipal priority learning areas for the ECCs, regardless of whether the unit leaders had a pedagogical professional identity or a leadership professional identity. One factor that may be significant is that directors in private ECCs have a direct responsibility as employers for their employees and thus they are also responsible for maintaining the workplaces for their staff. This is not the case for the municipal directors in the sample, where the municipality is the formal employer and not the individual ECC; thus, the directors do not have the direct responsibility to employ their employees. By overmanning, staff can be moved to other workplaces in the municipality.

Summary

One aspect of the study is that there was great variation in the informants' perception of their professional identity. Some had a clear awareness of their individual identity, whether it was pedagogical professional as an EC teacher or leadership professional as a leader. Others had a vaguer, more hesitant and uncertain approach to self-identification, possibly because it was not considered important in daily leadership. However, there was little variation in the informants' views of leadership and the collective profession identity. With one exception, the informants were clear in their statements that EC teacher education and collective professional identity are a prerequisite for being a director and a basis of individual professional identity, whether it was pedagogic professional or leadership professional.

There were some differences in how the informants focused on the large community in their leadership of the ECC. In the two largest private centers, where both directors had a leadership professional identity, they considered their main task to create good conditions for the center. This was performed with a market- and competition perspective where promotion, marketing and visibility were important means to fill up the places and establish good economics to provide good educational means. The unit leaders in the municipal ECCs who have a leadership professional identity worked through the municipal interdisciplinary leadership teams to achieve the same goals, but the market perspective was less present in the interviews; the focus was more aimed at the allocation of municipal resources.

The assumption that municipal interdisciplinary networks or leadership teams as strategic forums in the large community might contribute to the development of leadership professional identity did not seem to be of significance in this sample. The personal professional identity among the unit leaders participating in these arenas were both pedagogical professional and leadership professional.

There were no major common features of the four directors who clearly had chosen a leadership identity as their individual professional identity. These were the four informants whose choices differed the most from the traditional notion of what a director role in the ECC should be. Nevertheless, they were completely different. The directors of the two largest private ECCs, *The Business Leader* and *The Competitor*, were both concerned about leadership towards the market and competition, outwardly in the large community, but they had completely different views on what competence is required to be a good leader. The municipal unit leader, *The Strategist*, also focused on the large community, but the focus was limited to the municipality as an ECC owner. All three of these directors had highly resourceful owner organizations behind them that supported them as leaders. This was not the case for the last director, *The Lonely Rider*. She lacked this support, and she experienced standing alone as a leader in the relatively small ECC. As the other two private directors were, she was concerned about her role as an employer but had a more inward focus as a leader and a 'hands-on' leader.

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