Educational management for an educational activity?
- about the municipal pre-school management and leadership structure in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis is a total coverage survey of the municipal preschool management structure. In the late 90's the preschool in Sweden became the first step in the overall educational system. It became a pedagogical activity similar to school with respect to form and content. Although the focus was on education, political voices reclaimed the unique nature of preschool i.e. educare. It became a preschool in transition between its own tradition and modernization. The idea is that the educational management structure should support a pedagogical leadership that directs the pedagogical activity towards preschool objectives. The local authority sets the structure for management in pre-school; a municipality that in itself is an institution with its own goals and objectives. These objectives can place the municipalities in the cross pressure between their own objectives and the ones for preschool. The question in this respect is; How is the management structure formed and why? Is it a structure formed with the intention of creating educational management for the local preschool or are there other factors that guide the design? A framework based on the historical background of the preschools and theoretical terms such as steering, leading, management, pedagogical leadership, educational activity, etc. was constructed. Results are based on an online questionnaire survey. 180 municipalities out of 290 answered the questionnaire, which gives a response rate at 62 %. The response rate is evenly distributed across municipal categories, categories that the municipalities were aggregated into, formed by The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The categories were handled as survey units, to support a part of the analysis and to allow a comparison between the municipalities by municipality size, both demographic and geographic. The material was analysed using the SPSS statistical program and compiled and reported with descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to demonstrate the material's characteristics and the central tendency. The results show that the municipalities' structure of management is varied. Different municipal categories do not change this varied picture of the management landscape significantly. Although the management structure varies regarding how many levels with formal titles and which positions and functions they should have, there is a consistency in which title that the formal leader for the preschool have. The municipalities primarily utilise a principalship with mixed responsibility for both preschool and school. In light of these results, do municipalities mould a structure for the educational management for the pedagogical activities in preschool? Yes and no: the municipalities do not form a structure for preschool alone. Results show that the municipalities' main purpose is not to create a line of management specifically for the preschool. The municipalities form a management structure for educational purposes dealing with an educational activity from preschool to elementary school. The new Education Act (2010:800), is a step toward distinguishing preschool leadership from school leadership and turns the leadership of preschools into a title solely for the position and function of preschool educational activities.

Introduction

This thesis is a total survey of the municipal preschool management structure. Since the late 90s preschool has been the first step in the overall educational system – a pedagogical activity that is becoming more and more similar to school in form and content. The municipality as the responsible authority decides the management structure of the preschool. The municipality is itself an institution with its own goals and objectives, which can result in conflicts depending on for whom and for what the management is designed. Today, according to the Education Act (2010:800), the management title is preschool director or the head of preschools. The result is a portion of preschool’s management structure and objectives prior to government regulation.

Problem formulation

Today municipal preschools are a type of school with management organised by the municipality. The responsibilities of the head of preschools are regulated in the new Education Act, however, that was not the case when the data for this thesis was being collected. Before regulation, the
management of preschools was left completely to the individual municipalities. This thesis provides a view of municipal management structure prior to government regulation. There are no other compilations that shed light upon how and why management structures were formed before government regulation. The picture of the organisation chart shown in this study makes it possible to compare preschool management structures from before and after the new government regulation. This thesis focuses on the question of whether the design of the management structure came about for the purpose of enabling pedagogical management for educational activities in municipal preschools or if there are other factors and objectives that have steered the design.

Purpose and questions

The purpose of this investigation is to describe how the management structure of municipal preschool is designed and why.

Questions

- Which one or which ones (job titles, positions and functions) formally lead the pedagogical activities in municipal preschools?
  - Is the task of management different in relation to its title – if so, how?
- For which purpose or purposes has the management structure been designed?
  - Who, what and where is the design of the management structure of municipal preschools decided?
  - What do the municipalities think about how the management structure functions?
- Is there something distinctive or are there similar patterns in management structures linked to different types of municipality?
  - Is the management structure and aims different in relation to the type of municipality?

Management structure as an object of study

The object of the study is management structure because it has many dimensions regarding both what is studied and why. Management structure itself is not an easy term to work with as a theoretical definition cannot be found in pedagogical research in Sweden today. In this study the Swedish Official Government Report Series’ (SOU 2004:116) description has been used to define that which is being studied. “…management structure is a concept that describes how those people with management and management tasks and responsibilities included in their different functions purely formally are intended to interplay in their common commission” (page 42).

Which of these functions are related to job title and management mandates (position and function) have been studied as well as how the structure of job titles functions are organised. The practical work of management has been left outside the study. However, questions aimed at how the management structure works from the point of view of the municipalities and how the municipalities think management should function have been asked, such as for what purpose has it been created. This study does not deal with the activity of management, but instead with the different positions and functions of the office that the municipality organises in a management structure in order achieve the goals of preschool and to carry out its tasks.

The concept of management structure includes management, management organisation and steering, within each school but also as an element in a structure where each school is included, municipally or nationally. The management structure can also be understood as support or (in unfavourable cases) as an obstacle to the principal’s management. In that way there is a national, municipal and local management structure.
In the result section the management structure is described as a structure for preschool as an institution, but also as a structure based on municipalities as comparable units with the starting point in their similarities and differences, demographic and geographic.

Background

Preschool, a pedagogical enterprise with municipal roots

The preschool we see today has its foundation in the infant institutions that were developed in the mid 1800s. The primary task of the infant institutions was to nurture, with educational elements in its activities. In the beginning the institutions were run by philanthropic societies, but then, when money was lacking, they were gradually taken over by the municipalities. The bigger the subsidies the infant institutions received the more difficult it was for them to assert their rights against the municipalities. The municipalities also increased their influence on the content of the activities. The philanthropic institutions had a board that drew up guidelines for how the enterprise was to proceed and a manageress who made sure that the tasks were carried out. The manageress could be said to be the precursor of the manager that was a common title for the preschool head/director during the true preschool expansion that took place in the 1970s.

At the end of the 1980s a change in the management structure of many preschools began. The changes were based on changes at the municipal level. For example changes in the Swedish Local Government Act (1991) gave the municipalities the right to decide freely how their committees were to be organised which created constellations of committees where issues concerning children and education were dealt with in the same committee. In connection with this, there was a far-reaching decentralisation of the management function’s mandate that result in delegation of many of the administration’s responsibilities and tasks to the preschool director. Decentralisation was a part of the professionalization of the municipal administration that took place from the 70s onward and influenced the management function (managers) in a way that redefined the role from having been part of a working team to clearly being a management position (Montin, 2007). The management structure changed in some municipalities so that the manager of individual units became the preschool director with responsibility for several units. In some municipalities a principal became the preschool director with responsibility for both schools and preschools.

From the 70s onward management of the educational activities of preschool has been relatively anonymous with time divided between administration and pedagogical management of the preschool unit, whilst being included in the practical working team. By decentralising tasks from administration to the preschool director, the management of preschools became a clearly administrative head position that contributed to increasing the distance between the pedagogical management and the personnel (Ekström, 2007). Then in the Curriculum for the Preschool (Lpfö 98) the management mandate was not regulated, instead the responsibility for the internal pedagogical activities lay on the working team. Today in the revised curriculum responsibility is regulated by clear guidelines for the management (Education Act 2010:800).

Management structure, a municipal question

Creating the management structure for preschool has been and still is the responsibility of the municipality. This is based on the municipality’s independence and the fact that the municipality is the authority responsible for preschool. However, the state regulates the scope and gives the
municipality a framework within which to work. These conditions give the municipality some room for manoeuvre when the management of preschool is organised. Responsibility for structuring and organising the management of preschool lies with the committee that has been given the task by the municipal board and in 96 % of the cases schools are under the same committee as preschool and in 98 % of the cases they have a common administration (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008). Thus the municipality’s politicians and employees decide which positions/functions the management of preschool will be allotted.

The municipalities are similar to each other regarding organisation and decision-making, but differ in geographic and demographic size. These differences provide different conditions. A large organisation is able to profit from its size, for example quality can be maintained despite a reduction in administration and other functions (Karlsson, 2007). In bigger municipalities the recruitment base for politicians is greater. Smaller municipalities have the advantage of having shorter information chains and decisions are more deeply rooted in the community (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2007).

Previous research

However, while management research in the school sector is burgeoning – driven chiefly by the National Collage for School Management – in sharp contrast on management in the early years is limited. (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris and Briggs, 2004 s. 157-158)

There are few references that deal with the management structure of preschool. Most references are about individual management in preschool and not a leader in a coherent structure from management to operations. The most recent and closest in subject matter is the licentiate thesis Struggle in the Educational Arena by Ann-Christin Eklundh (2001). As in this study, it deals with municipal management organisation, however, only in twenty municipalities in Skåne and not as here, a total survey.

In summary it can be said that previous national research gives a picture of an initially vague administrative and pedagogical leader of preschool and later a clear but distanced head. Previous research describes mainly management in preschool as management for the quality of the work environment and the working team’s well being rather than a pedagogical force for internal operations. That preschool management has not functioned as a pedagogical driving force has to do with the space allowed and the ability or the opportunity to function as a pedagogical leader, as the administrative task has taken up the most of the time.

Previous research has hinted that integrative solutions with the pedagogical management of the schools have been found in the municipalities and that municipalities as actors in the creation of management structure have influenced design based on their own organisational changes and view of management. A survey of the literature in the field provides knowledge about preschool as a political institution and organisation and how these frameworks have influenced preschool management historically. (Axiö, 1994; Boalt Boëthius & Stavren-Eriksson, 1992; Dahlberg & Åsén, 1986, 1987; Ekholm & Hedín, 1991; Eklundh, 2001; Ekström; 2007; Ellmin & Levén, 1993; Forsberg Kankuunen, 2009; Johansson & Lindberg, 1996; Kärrby, 1983, 1992; Lantz och Pingel, 1988; Montin; 1990; Riddarsporre, 2010; Rohlin, 1991; Sundell, 1991).

However, international research is more prescriptive than national research. Just as in national research, it deals with individual management in preschool and not management or management structures to any great extent.

Internationally, Granrusten and Moen (2011), who are most recent and whose object of study is most similar, have done just that. They have studied the ongoing transformation of municipal preschools’ (barnehager) administrative steering structures. As in the present study, they have examined the municipal preschool management structures, although in Norway. The difference is that it is not a comprehensive survey, instead they studied the actual consequences in a limited number of preschools and the division of labour for the management positions.

Theoretical framework

This thesis does not have a single theory as its starting point, but rather branches of theoretical starting points to analyse in relation to the subsequent conclusion. Theorisation and explanation of concepts such as institution, organisation, steering, management, management, management structure, position, function, and job title are important for understanding how the concepts are used. The theoretical framework is a way to contextualize the concept of management structure and show how a municipality and preschool as an institution and organisation have an impact on the management structure’s appearance and purpose.

The concepts of actor and structure give the basis of explanation for the relationship between the municipality as the responsible authority and actor in the creation of the structure, that is to say, the management of the preschool. The municipality is part of a structure of which the municipal preschool is also a part with a regulatory framework and government intentions that influence, restrict and enable, the actor, the municipality’s conduct.

The actor and structure perspectives make it possible to interlace the theoretical concepts and the understanding of the municipal preschool management structure from a societal perspective. The management structure thereby becomes a construct of the municipalities for controlling and maintaining the pedagogical activities of the preschool, in striving to fulfil the national goals for preschool that the institution has, which define what preschool as a pedagogical institution for children in Sweden shall be.

Method

The lack of research related to this thesis project resulted in a shift of perspective from individual pedagogical management to investigation of who is leading the municipal preschool from a contemporary perspective. Hence it was of interest to conduct a comprehensive survey of the management structure of all of the 290 municipalities. To allow such a study a questionnaire was chosen as a survey instrument.

The survey was conducted in a number of steps in order to strengthen its validity and reliability. Among other things an interview with a preschool principal who had been a preschool leader since the beginning of the 70s was carried out. A preliminary investigation of 15 municipalities’ websites was carried out in order to design a battery of questions valid for the broad spectrum of municipalities. The questionnaire in a more or less final format was checked by a director of administration and was revised after his comments. The final questionnaire was designed as a web-based questionnaire to allow as personal and, for the municipality in question, as valid a questionnaire as possible.
Having the municipality as the survey unit and the respondent has to do with the municipality being the authority responsible for the task of organising the management of preschools and therefore representatives for the municipality were deemed to be the most appropriate to respond to the questionnaire that was constructed. Persons employed in the administration were sent the questionnaire as they administer the management of the preschools. The municipalities were aggregated as survey units in part of the analysis and reporting of results to enable a comparison between the municipalities based on the size, both demographic and geographic, of the municipality. The classification of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions was used to make this division.

An overall response rate of 62 % was achieved, that is, 180 municipalities of 290 responded to the questionnaire. The material has been analysed with the help of a statistical program, SPSS, and compiled and reported with descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics have been used to show the characteristics of the material and the central tendency.

**Results**

In the early 90s many integrated solutions with schools and principalships that included both schools and preschools appeared (Eklundh, 2001). That a principal is principal for both a preschool and a school is a widespread fact that becomes clear in the results of this study. Some form of principal leads the activities of preschool, either a principal for both preschool and school or a preschool principal. In 86 % of the municipalities that responded to the questionnaire, it was stated that they have a principal in some form in their management structure, and only 11 % of the municipalities mentioned the job title preschool director.

If one looks more closely at the entire management structure, that is, those titles that are included from administration to operational level, there are no clear patterns for how municipalities organise management. In 36 % the combination of management organisation is unique. The position of preschool management is unclear. There are both hierarchical solutions with area managers and principals who are under area managers, and management organisations without hierarchical order, where the municipalities simply have listed the titles that are used in the municipality for the various school management districts. The most common, however, is a job title in combination with another job title as leader of the preschool. These job titles usually include preschool principal and principal for preschool-school. The more titles there are, the more distinctive the title combinations are.

Eklundh (2001) believes that through studying management structures one gets a view of how and where power is signed. The greatest challenge in this thesis has been just that, to interpret the results obtained from the questionnaire and see through the division of power, that is, to see who owns the predominate responsibility in the management structure. There has not been an obvious logical pattern. The lack of a pattern may be because they did not always give a hierarchical order but rather the actual management with the job titles that are included in the various areas of the municipality. Another factor is that the municipalities themselves decide how the power, de facto, is to be divided and the person who is closest to the preschool itself has in certain cases the chief responsibility for the preschool while in other municipalities it is the person who is closest to the administration who has it.

A function linked to a job title, on the other hand, is clearer. If you are the principal of a preschool-school, you have both a school and a big part of preschool, but also other activities such as a day recreational centre. For preschool principals the job description is more restricted where they all have preschool and 24 % with that job title have school as their sphere of activity. A preschool principal has only preschool as their sphere of activity to 29 %, a principal 0 %. A
preschool director has no schools in their sphere of activity, while an assistant principal has 63 %
school in their sphere of activity. In terms of management responsibility for personnel there is a
considerable difference between a principal for a preschool-school and a preschool principal. A
principal for a preschool-school has management responsibility for compulsory school teachers to
98 % and a preschool principal has it to 17 %. In summary, it can be said that if “preschool” is part
of the management title, then the sphere of activity is preschool and that the placement is to a
great degree at a preschool (see the title “head of preschools” and “preschool principal”). If you
have a title that includes “head” or “director” in many municipalities you have responsibility for
the budget and finances; examples of this are “area director” and “head of preschools”. In many
municipalities a preschool principal or principal for a preschool has pedagogical responsibility.

Changes in management structure in relation to municipal categories are most evident in large
municipalities, primarily large cities, or small municipalities, primarily municipal categories with
fewer than 12 500 inhabitants. In large cities there are more people per management position and
to a greater extent more job titles in the management structure and more unique combinations of
job titles in the management structure. In large cities it is primarily an area director who is in
charge of the preschools with a principal for preschool-school. In municipal categories with fewer
than 12 500 inhabitants there is greater homogeneity regarding who is in charge of preschools; in
these municipalities it is primarily a principal who is the head of the preschools and in those
municipalities there is one principal.

In rural areas there are mainly principals and preschool principals, only one municipality has a
director above a principal, that is, close to administration. In rural and urban areas it is primarily
organisational efficiency that governs the design of the management structure. Structural factors
and geographical distances influence to a great degree how municipalities in rural areas design
their management structures. In large cities it is primarily pedagogical considerations that govern
the design of the management structure.

Conclusion

Do municipalities design management structures for educational management of pedagogical
activities? Yes and no. The municipalities do not only design the management of preschool. The
primary objective of the municipalities is not to create a special management structure for
preschools. The municipalities design management structures for the purpose of creating a
educational management that deals with education from preschool to compulsory school – a
principalship for both preschool and schools. The municipalities do not see management of
preschools and schools as being different, but the two do have different curricula and there lies
the difference in the management task and pedagogical management. However, school and
preschool are seen as two separate forms of activity.

Management structure is foremost a structure with two or more formal management titles, a
principalship shared with foremost a principalship in a preschool suit, that is, a preschool
principal. In relation to municipal categories the varied picture of the organisational chart does
not change appreciably. The differences appear mainly in the small and large municipalities. The
large municipalities have more directors and more management levels as well as a greater
variation in management formations. Smaller municipalities have fewer directors and
management levels and less variation in management formations. The organisational efficiency is,
for the large cities and the small municipalities with geographical distance, more important than
pedagogical considerations.

In light of these results the new Education Act is a step toward distinguishing the management of
preschool from school toward becoming a new title of its own that belongs to preschool as a
sphere of activity in regard to position and function. It will become empirically interesting to investigate whether this will continue to be the case or if the municipalities still are actors that create management structures themselves. Is it going to be the state that steers, so that only preschool directors lead the pedagogical activities of preschool or the principal and the preschool director too. That is to say, will the agenda of the municipalities change and with that the new Education Act? Will it be so that the municipalities continue to create management structures for a coherent educational system or will the Education Act contribute to change that provides preschool with pedagogical management that is present and that distances itself from the rest of the educational system? Change takes time and resources, the question is if these resources or intentions to change exist.

References


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