A Balancing Act: Navigating Policy as Street-Level Bureaucrats. A Study of Pedagogical Leadership in Early Childhood Education in Norway

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Abstract
This article focuses on pedagogical leaders' challenges and tensions in their everyday work in early childhood education (ECE) in Norway. It investigates the relationship between policies and regulations formulated in the Framework Plan for Kindergarten (FPK) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) and their leadership enactment and practices in Norway's ECE settings. Drawing on Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrats (SLB) theoretical framework, it analyses how ECE pedagogical leaders interpret and implement educational policies. The qualitative methods of this study include semi-structured interviews with twenty pedagogical leaders and four kindergarten managers and participatory observation in four ECEs. The article explores and discusses the following research questions: How do pedagogical leaders in early childhood education experience and navigate policy and regulations at work? What tensions and challenges may arise in these processes? Findings reveal the complexity of their role in navigating policy and regulations. The analysis finds three main challenges and tensions: (1) balancing compliance and autonomy, (2) stakeholders' demands and professional judgment, and (3) navigating limited resources and workload. In line with research in the ECE field (see, e.g. Børhaug & Bøe, 2014, 2022), the findings argue that the tensions and challenges of ECE pedagogical leaders may lead to a simplification of their work, decreased critical thinking, and less knowledge development, potentially impacting pedagogical quality.

Keywords: street-level bureaucrats; pedagogical leadership; ECE institution; policy enactment

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**Introduction**

In the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergarten (FPK), pedagogical leaders play a crucial role. They are responsible for laying the groundwork for children's future learning and development and ensuring a positive social start (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). As such, pedagogical leaders in Norway's early childhood education (ECE) sector are vital in embodying and promoting values and a professional orientation that fosters high-quality early childhood education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The governing documents, regulations, and guidelines these pedagogical leaders implement significantly shape their roles and responsibilities, leading to a highly politicised education sector (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017; Molander & Terum, 2008).

According to a report by Ljunggren et al. (2017), improving professional competence is crucial to enhancing the pedagogical quality in Norway's ECE institutions. Bøe and Børhaug (2022) show that understanding how pedagogical leaders' professional judgments and relationships with stakeholders influence decision-making is essential to achieving political goals of pedagogical quality. Additionally, a committee appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research found that ECE professionals, including pedagogical leaders and early childhood teachers, face various tensions and must consider different professional aspects before making decisions (Børhaug et al., 2018, p. 261). The ECE sector is highly political, with changing priorities and increasing emphasis on quality and effectiveness. As a result, pedagogical leaders face increasing demands, tasks, time pressure, and limited resources (Alvestad et al., 2019).

In the context of Norwegian ECE, the term ‘pedagogical leader’ refers to a leadership role responsible for implementing and overseeing pedagogical content (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This leadership role involves more than just leadership at the professional level of pedagogical work (Ertesvåg & Roland, 2013; Hyrve et al., 1999). The current Framework Plan for Kindergarten (FPK) and the literature on pedagogical work in ECE in the Norwegian context have conceptualised pedagogical work as learning organisations and emphasised how ECE professionals are those who implement and develop ECE content (Granrusten, 2016). Scholars have also revealed that pedagogical leaders and ECE teachers experience tensions between the learning-oriented and child-centred focus and different didactic topics formulated in FPK (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022).

A recent study on pedagogical leaders in ECE identified three forms of how pedagogical leaders enacted their role and found that the factors of competence, the kindergarten manager as a role model, and time for critical discussions of pedagogical content were vital in developing the forms of leadership enactment (Lund, 2021). Bøe and Hognestad (2017) argue that the role of pedagogical leaders is highly dual and complex, encompassing responsibility for children and staff, characterised as a hybrid. Pedagogical leaders must balance the needs of various stakeholders while managing conflicting goals and demands.
Leadership competence is crucial for improving the pedagogical quality of ECE (Børhaug, 2012; Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Lund, 2021). However, research on this topic is still limited, especially regarding the middle-management level of pedagogical leaders and their implementation of policy into practice (see, e.g. Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Lund, 2021). Thus, research shows that there is a variation in leadership and pedagogical practices among Norwegian ECE institutions, which may affect the pedagogical quality (see, e.g. Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Gotvassli et al., 2020; Hognestad & Bøe, 2016; Lund, 2021). Gotvassli et al. (2020) suggest that ECE staff could be considered street-level bureaucrats (SLB) due to the characteristics of their work and the implementation of the framework plan into pedagogical practice.

However, my study focuses significantly on the pedagogical leadership role in ECE and analyses findings within the theoretical framework of street-level bureaucracy. I argue that this perspective contributes to a fuller understanding of the complexity of the pedagogical leader’s middle-management role and how pedagogical leaders in ECE in Norway, especially, navigate and manage the tensions and challenges of their everyday work as street-level bureaucrats. Hence, the findings may be valuable in terms of how professionals handle tensions and challenges in other ECE and work settings with similar work characteristics.

In this article, I argue that it is essential to examine how professionals exercise discretionary power at the micro-policy level and the coping strategies they develop in their work environment, characterised by a high level of autonomy, discretion, cross-pressure, and tensions, to understand the processes of “policy in practice or policy enactment” of ECE pedagogical leaders in Norway (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010). The significance of the current study arises from the need for more research on the role of pedagogical leaders in ECE and how policy impacts how they enact their roles. This article explores how pedagogical leaders interpret and implement the political intentions in the framework plan and the potential tension and challenges they face in their everyday work in the ECE. The following research questions are prepared and will be discussed in this article: How do early childhood education pedagogical leaders experience and navigate policy and regulations at work? What tensions and challenges may arise in these processes?

Lipsky’s (2010) theoretical framework of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) is used to analyse and discuss how pedagogical leaders navigate these policies and regulations and the potential challenges and tensions. The decisions made by pedagogical leaders in this study seem to play a critical role in shaping the pedagogical quality of ECE. The contributions of this study may give valuable insights into the processes of “putting policy into practice” and how policy and regulations are received and experienced, providing helpful information.
for national and local governments and policymakers as well as ECE owners and leaders. In the following section, I will initially elaborate on the role of pedagogical leaders in the Norwegian ECE setting before giving a brief overview of the literature and theory of street-level bureaucrats, the methodological design, the findings and discussion, the limitations of the study, and finally, the conclusion.

**Street-level bureaucrats (SLB): Discretion and coping strategies**

Lipsky (2010) emphasises that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) have significant discretionary power in their work. This discretionary power becomes crucial due to the inherent ambiguity of political decisions, high workloads, and limited resources (Lipsky, 2010). SLBs must interpret political intentions and the needs of service recipients, effectively using substantial discretion as policymakers for the service recipients (Ball, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). Regular interactions with citizens require discretion. However, SLBs need more information or resources to make the best decisions in each case, which is an aspect of the SLB’s work (Lipsky, 2010).

Consequently, SLBs develop coping strategies to manage their workload and influence the potential outcomes and quality of work. These coping strategies may lead to mass treatment of clients, significantly impacting the services provided. The SLB perspective challenges the prevailing notion that frontline workers naturally and effectively implement policies in organisations and that implementation of policy does not always align with the authorities’ political intention (see, for example, Brodkin, 2012; Hupe, 2015; Hupe & Hill, 2015; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Winter et al., 2022).

The SLB perspective is widely used in social service, health, political, and administration research studies (Brodkin, 2012; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Winter et al., 2022). Street-level bureaucracy perspectives are often called the “democracy black hole” because SLBs make significant decisions that impact the welfare and freedom of citizens. Street-level bureaucrats may adapt their goals to match their capacity for managing their workload and cope with limited resources (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Therefore, understanding the institutional context of SLB processes and work is crucial, as Hupe and Hill (2015) and Hupe (2014) highlight. Additionally, Winter et al. (2022) argue that professionals’ personal beliefs about their ability to influence reforms and political documents, such as the Framework Plan for Kindergarten (FPK), affect the implementation of these reforms.

Børhaug and Moen (2014) and Ljunggren et al. (2017) emphasise that ECE professionals, including pedagogical leaders, may be perceived as SLBs due to their high work pressure, ambiguous and conflicting goals, dilemmas, direct contact with the public, and a high level of discretionary power. Following Lipsky (2010), pedagogical leaders in ECE institutions are responsible for implementing policies, supervising their teams, and ensuring high-quality care for children (Bøe & Børhaug, 2022; Gotvassli, 2020; Lipsky, 2010).
Although pedagogical leaders in ECE may not fit the classical SLB type, they share common traits with street-level bureaucrats in other sectors, such as social workers, police officers, and teachers, as outlined above (see, for example, Ball et al., 2011; Hupe, 2014, 2015; Hupe & Hill, 2015; Lipsky, 2010). Essential characteristics of their work include autonomy in role performance, low influence on framework conditions, high workload, limited resources, dual roles as gatekeepers for the state and helpers for the service recipients, insecurity about work tasks, feelings of inadequacy, and high discretion in their work (Lipsky, 2010). These characteristics align with the findings of studies on ECE work in Norway that pedagogical leaders in Norwegian ECE institutions encounter conflicting and ambiguous goals, different values, challenging-to-measure goal achievement, minimal employer feedback, and some negative attitudes towards the owners (Gotvassli, 2006, pp. 42–44). Lipsky (2010) suggests that professional tensions may arise from ambiguous and conflicting goals and a lack of time and resources. However, SLBs can use their autonomy and discretion to implement policies and employ various coping strategies, such as limiting client demand and cherry-picking (Lipsky, 2010).

Methodology and research design
The study is based on a qualitative methodological approach, semi-structured group interviews of twenty pedagogical leaders from four ECEs, individual interviews with four kindergarten managers and fieldwork and participatory observation, two weeks in each ECE centre, all eight weeks from 2018–2019. Participant observations and fieldwork were selected as they provide a close view of the situation from the inside of the daily practices and the informants’ perspectives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition, the interviews were conducted to gain insights into the informants’ perspectives, opinions, and experiences (Kvale, 2009). This study’s primary data source is observations and interviews with pedagogical leaders (PL). However, the interviews with the kindergarten managers (KM) are supplementary; they enrich and contextualise the pedagogical leaders’ statements and practices. The thematic analysis approach and ethnographic method enabled me to identify shared patterns, themes, and variations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2022). According to the SLB theory, a comprehensive understanding of welfare institutions can only be obtained by viewing them from the perspectives and experiences of the professionals responsible for their operation (Lipsky, 2010).

The sample and selection
The ECE centres are selected based on location, ownership, and the percentage of cultural diversity (5–10 per cent), representing a variety of organisational structures but similar in cultural diversity. The four ECE centres represent urban and rural settings, are owned privately and publicly, and are similar in cultural diversity in the group of children, with around 10–15 per cent having minority backgrounds, representing an average ECE in
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Norway. Three of the ECE centres were large, with five to six departments, while one was smaller, with two departments organised as an oppvekststun (Norwegian), a school and ECE combined. A department typically includes 14–18 children, 1–2 educators (one pedagogical leader and one early childhood teacher) and 1–2 assistants or unskilled workers, depending on the children's ages. The pedagogical leaders differ in work experience, educational background and gender. All informants, except one, had a majority background. Table 1 displays the sample, informants, ECE and their pseudonyms.

Table 1. Overview of the sample, including ECE centres and informants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early childhood education (ECE) centres</th>
<th>Informants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fictive names</td>
<td>Units</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solbakken Five</td>
<td>Urban</td>
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<td>Nordlys Five</td>
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<td>Fjellgard Two</td>
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<td>Parken Six</td>
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Interviews

I conducted individual and group interviews with pedagogical leaders and individual interviews with the kindergarten managers to understand their experiences and perceptions in depth. The interviews supplied valuable insights into their self-presentations, values, wishes, goals and crucial decision-making factors. The group interview method captures the dynamics of conversations and discussions and gives insight into the social context in which meanings are shaped (Kvale, 2009). Additionally, group interviews fostered professional discussions and encouraged reflection on work as leaders and how they experienced
their everyday work situations. The group interview approach also ensured a more balanced power dynamic between me as a researcher and the informants, which is essential for ensuring the quality and validity of the interviews (Kvale, 2009). All interviews were conducted in the ECE centres. Their weekly scheduled meetings were used. To ensure and heighten research reliability, I tried to distance myself from the collected data, to be as objective as possible, and to derive findings from actual circumstances rather than subjective interpretation or unexpected events in the research process (Wadel, 2014). Asking the pedagogical leaders the same questions in the interviews and using an observational guide helped me in this respect.

**Participant observations and fieldwork**

Fieldwork is based on relational frameworks, aiming to understand human actions through these perspectives. Within this framework, participatory observation and fieldwork are fruitful methods for collecting data on complex human behaviours and interactions (Wadel, 2014). Fieldwork in your own culture is more accessible in practical terms, as it involves speaking the same language and sharing mutual “common knowledge” (Giddens, 1976, s. 16). However, it is essential to recognise that shared understanding and “the insider knowledge” also produce blind spots and should be critically examined (Wadel, 2014). Therefore, reflexivity on biases and positioning in the field studied is a crucial aspect of participant observation (Fangen, 2010; Wadel, 2014). Initially, I needed to be open-minded to gain in-depth knowledge of the field, including what was taken for granted. A balance between closeness and distance is essential for reflexivity, allowing researchers to see the culture or social environment from the informants’ perspective (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Further, having an “outsider” perspective on your culture is critical to identifying and questioning commonly accepted beliefs and implicit knowledge. Questioning “normal” behaviours and the structure of everyday life in ECE was a helpful approach for gaining an outsider’s perspective. As a social anthropologist and a former teacher, I have professional knowledge of schools as an educational institution. However, my understanding of ECE institutions was more limited, except for my experience of having three children in ECE and briefly teaching in early childhood teacher education. My academic background as a social anthropologist differs from that of researchers in the ECE field, who are mostly ECE teachers. My educational background and limited experience may, therefore, be both an advantage and a disadvantage in positioning as an “insider” or “outsider” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Because of my professional background, I could take on the role of a novice. I observed, asked questions, tried things out, and made mistakes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Such an approach to the field may have reduced the ECE staff’s feeling of being assessed by me, leading to a more natural and relaxed behaviour.
**Ethical considerations**

The study has been prepared and approved according to the ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Agency for Shared servies in Education and Research – Sikt. This study is part of a larger research project examining how pedagogical leaders engage in culturally diverse ECE settings, the pedagogical leaders’ roles and the experiences of refugee parents encountering the Norwegian ECE. However, this study focuses on how policy and regulations are experienced and translated into professional practice by pedagogical leaders. The research has obtained written approval from all informants to ensure ethical compliance. All participants could withdraw their consent before publication. The secure storage of notes and audio recordings ensures confidentiality.

**Analysis**

In this study, I used a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach (Braun et al., 2022) to analyse the datasets, interviews, and observations connected to pedagogical leadership in Norwegian ECE. The analysis process involved six steps: (1) reading the transcripts, (2) coding, (3) analysing based on produced codes, (4) critically reviewing the codes, (5) re-reading the transcripts, (6) reporting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coding process began with identifying challenges and tensions related to work experienced by pedagogical leaders. The observations provided insight into their professional practices, while interviews offered insight into their perceptions and attitudes. After sorting and refining the codes, several challenges and tensions appeared as common themes in the data. These were then narrowed down into three analytical themes: (1) **Balancing compliance and autonomy**, (2) **Stakeholders’ demands and pedagogical justification**, and (3) **Navigating limited resources and workload**. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the practical implementation of policies and the real-life challenges that the pedagogical leaders in the study experience (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Table 2 below shows an overview of the analytical stages, the sorting of common themes, combining and narrowing the themes into the following three analytical categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical themes</th>
<th>From interviews</th>
<th>From observations</th>
<th>Synthesis of themes in both datasets</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balancing compliance and autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Maja from Solbakken discusses the tension between adhering to guidelines and addressing each child’s needs.</td>
<td>A leader prioritises children’s needs over administrative tasks during a staff shortage.</td>
<td>Demonstrates the practical application of balancing policy compliance with professional autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stakeholders’ demands and pedagogical justification.</strong></td>
<td>June from Fjellgard expresses difficulty when parents’ beliefs conflict with pedagogical approaches.</td>
<td>Pedagogical leaders’ interactions with parents discussing children’s sleep routines, food, and clothing reveal challenges in balancing cultural expectations with ECE practices.</td>
<td>Highlights the struggle to align pedagogical approaches and views with diverse parental expectations.</td>
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Findings

Pedagogical leaders face an increased workload due to balancing limited resources, managing stakeholder demands and coping with external constraints while upholding professional values and norms. Most of the pedagogical leaders in the study express struggles to meet stakeholders’ needs, particularly parents with elevated expectations. During my fieldwork, I observed many encounters, conversations with parents, discussions in meetings, and between staff addressing this and other issues, creating workplace tensions and challenges.

The analysis reveals various tensions and challenges that pedagogical leaders face and how pedagogical leaders develop coping strategies to translate policy and regulations into practice. The development of different coping strategies to manage these challenges and tensions seems to be connected to contextual factors, such as the pedagogical leaders’ work experience and educational backgrounds, the kindergarten manager role enactment, and the organisational culture within the centre, relevant factors in analysing the development of variations in how policy is acted out in practice (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010). The pedagogical leaders have shared experiences of tensions and challenges but have diverse ways of coping and managing them. Also, their professional values and practices seem to influence the development of different coping strategies. In the next section, I will first present the values and practices pedagogical leaders report as vital in their leadership role and the complexity and nature of their work, followed by an elaboration of the main findings of the tensions and challenges that the pedagogical leaders experience in their everyday work in Norwegian ECE.

Values and practices – the complexity of the pedagogical leadership role

The pedagogical leaders highlight the importance of support, trust, inclusion, and responsibility as vital in their role as pedagogical leaders, emphasising interactions with stakeholders, particularly parents and families, and the teams they manage. Some highlight that they prioritise cooperation and joint decision-making, emphasising equality, trust, and support. Meanwhile, others focus on control and structure, prioritising values of authority and responsibility. They embody engagement, openness, and responsibility, actively seeking and developing knowledge in their professional practices. The tensions and challenges


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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navigating limited resources and workload</td>
<td>Jeanette from Parken mentions the priority of completing forms and keeping track of regulations despite resource constraints.</td>
<td>Pedagogical leaders discuss the challenges of balancing administrative duties with pedagogical work with children and staff.</td>
<td>Emphasises the practical impact of limited resources on the ability to maintain pedagogical quality.</td>
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experienced by pedagogical leaders are reflected in the coping strategies identified in the analysis. In the following sections, I will present the shared tensions and discuss their consequences on pedagogical quality and content.

To fully understand the processes—“from policy to practice,” we need to analyse what the professionals do—their practices and tasks, in their work context at the micro-level, as argued by scholars in the field of SLB (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010). Analysing what the pedagogical leaders do, their practices are categorised as follows: (1) planning and organising, (2) information and communication, (3) guidance and support, and (4) nurture and care. The various categories of work and tasks differ in nature. For example, information and communication, nurture and care involve dialogue, joint decision-making, collaboration, and teamwork, and have a democratic nature involving all staff. While planning and organising, guidance and support are solely put on the pedagogical leaders. Rapid changes and many simultaneous activities characterise the work dynamic, the schedule, and the structure of ECE. Due to this work dynamic, pedagogical leaders must plan activities that can easily be changed and professionally justified. This work characteristic implies that pedagogical leaders’ work is both dual and complex and involves high pressure, where they must prioritise in a rapidly changing work environment (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Lund, 2021).

During fieldwork, I observed how pedagogical leaders made decisions, as this pedagogical leader, Ingrid, commented when she had to leave the department due to a leader staff meeting, knowing that the staff felt overwhelmed because of a shortage of staff and a high level of conflicts in the group of children that day:

I feel that I am always “falling short.” My team suffers, and so does the group of children. The kindergarten manager complains that I tend to deprioritise meetings. I find it stressful to decide what to do when these situations occur. However, I need to be with my team and the children today, as this is in the children’s best interest, which has always been my priority, and therefore, I value this as the best solution. In such a situation, I must use my professional discretion to make decisions, as I did today. (Field note from Nordlys)

The work situation above exemplifies the complexity of pedagogical work. These challenges require rapid decisions and may create tensions, which may lower the ECE professionals’ aspirations and professional standards. However, Ingrid, the pedagogical leader in Nordlys, uses discretion to legitimise her decision. The three tensions and challenges found in the analysis of observations and interviews will be elaborated in the following sections.

**Balancing compliance and autonomy**

During the group interviews, pedagogical leaders discussed the tension between compliance and autonomy. The theme involves following external regulations while maintaining professional independence, interpreting autonomy, and translating political goals into local
practice. They emphasised the importance of meeting regulatory requirements while preserving academic freedom and addressing individual needs, and the issue of discretion and professional judgment to ensure compliance with the FPK and regulations, as stated by Maja, a pedagogical leader at Solbakken:

We must adhere to guidelines and standards while creating an environment responsive to each child’s interests and developmental needs. Sometimes, I struggle to make the best decision for the children. The best decision may be to disregard the parents’ perspectives, which is a difficult judgement. Moreover, the group of children sometimes takes priority, while at other times, individual children require attention.

According to Maja, pedagogical leaders have professional autonomy and must balance children's needs and parents’ demands, creating difficulties in decision-making and defining high-quality pedagogical work. In Norway, in education and also as a cultural value, prioritising children's development is seen as a core value, referred to as “in the best interest of the child” and stated in FPK as follows: “The best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration in all actions and decisions concerning the child” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 8). Therefore, this core value will likely be the priority in pedagogical leaders’ decisions regarding children and influence professional values and reasoning. However, the child’s best interests involve discretionary assessment, which gives the pedagogical leaders the power to decide what this entails and legitimise their work.

Most pedagogical leaders emphasise the need to meet regulatory requirements and political intentions while ensuring pedagogical freedom and addressing the unique needs of children and families in their care. Their prioritisation of specific tasks and professional practices or their leadership enactment seems to reflect the characteristics of their organisational and professional culture, their leadership enactment, and how they reason and prioritise when faced with cross-pressure.

Although most informants expressed tensions between compliance and autonomy in translating and enacting political obligations formulated in the FPK, how they experience the degree of autonomy or compliance differs. Some pedagogical leaders view the FPK as a script to decide the best way to conduct their work: “The FPK [Norwegian: rammeplan] is our Bible. It tells us what to do” (Monica, pedagogical leader, Fjellgard). In contrast, some pedagogical leaders commented on the FPK as guidance that provides flexibility and autonomy:

In addition to ensuring the smooth operation of the unit, you must also ensure that the annual and weekly plans are implemented in line with the obligations formulated in the FPK. Additionally, you develop the “monthly newsletter” and pedagogical plans with the various didactic themes outlined in the FPK. The new framework plan seems more straightforward, telling us what to do but not how. However, it gives us freedom and autonomy. (Grete, pedagogical leader at Solbakken)
A few also claim that FPK legitimises their professional reasoning to challenge and facilitate the assistants’ knowledge development processes, exemplified by the kindergarten manager in Fjellgard, Sissel’s statement below:

The framework plan guides actions and decisions in early childhood education (ECE). It guides while allowing for freedom and autonomy. During team meetings, I reference the framework plan to ensure all employees understand the rationale behind my decisions and professional actions. The assistants should be more willing to use their “planning time” [Norwegian: plantid]. They fear I will assign them pedagogical tasks, like leading the daily gathering with children [Norwegian: samlingsstund]. Nevertheless, I try to push them a little so they can develop their professional knowledge.

The findings show that pedagogical leaders strive to balance between autonomy and compliance. Factors such as organisational culture, role enactment of kindergarten managers, and resource availability significantly influence pedagogical leaders’ decision-making processes and coping strategies when facing tensions and challenges. In Parken, team meetings and daily conversations mainly focused on practical matters like cleaning, diaper changing, and daily schedules. In Solbakken and Nordlys, the pedagogical leaders engaged in critical professional discussions of pedagogical issues, decision-making and professional practices. In Fjellgard, team meetings prioritise reaching joint solutions and consensus, with pedagogical leaders emphasising communication, cooperation, trust and safety over controlling and leadership authority.

Stakeholders’ demand and pedagogical justifications

Many of the pedagogical leaders in the study are concerned with conflicting pedagogical philosophies and upbringings, as this may create friction in developing a good partnership with parents, especially with minority parents. Balancing and nurturing a positive relationship with parents while following existing frameworks is perceived as challenging. A pedagogical leader in Nordlys, Per, shows how tensions can be avoided or minimised in practice.

I can share an incident I experienced, which I would describe as a “culture conflict”. It is related to sleep and sleeping routines in ECE. The child is new to early childhood education (ECE), and when asked about sleeping patterns, the mother replies that the child can sleep whenever she wants – at 10, 3, or half past 5. If she wants to sleep, her mother says she will be allowed to. Nonetheless, I now believe that a child who is 1.5 years old cannot make such a decision. It is challenging when a mother has this requirement, and we cannot force the baby to sleep. Then, our job is to set up a sleeping routine like the other children in the kindergarten. It is challenging to emphasise the importance of sleep to a 1.5-year-old child who refuses to sleep in a crib and usually decides where and when to sleep. It demands a lot from us.
As shown, the pedagogical leaders emphasise the increased pressure from stakeholders, particularly parents with minority backgrounds. As pedagogical leaders, unlike kindergarten managers, they have direct contact with parents. The pedagogical leaders’ perspectives on partnership with parents may be interpreted as a manifestation of more selective and involved parents and a more culturally diverse group of children and parents. The case above illustrates a challenge professionals face in meeting the needs of all children and parents. Their work situation may be affected by limited time and staff resources, as well as the need to respect the opinions and views of parents.

Hence, they must work with discretion and provide professional justifications. When pedagogical reasoning differs from parents’ beliefs, they may prioritise the latter due to limited resources and high demands. Some pedagogical leaders feel inadequate in their encounters with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds and may need more formal knowledge of migration pedagogy. Their attempt to teach minority parents the “right way” may be due to a lack of knowledge and resources. They may argue favouring procedures, routines, and regulations, lowering their work aspirations, or avoiding complex tasks due to demanding parents. The case above illustrates tensions between expectations and views on upbringing, resources, and workload. Pedagogical leaders must recognise all parents’ needs and perspectives to maintain a strong partnership as required by legislation (FPK) and to support respect and tolerance (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Pedagogical leaders may, however, lack resources and time to meet all parents’ needs, which may conflict with their professional values and what they believe is in a child’s best interest, leading to ethical dilemmas:

I find it difficult when parents express views or beliefs contradicting my pedagogical stance or views on upbringing. What should I do in these situations? In most cases, my decisions and actions will be guided by what I believe is in the children’s best interests.
(June, a pedagogical leader at Fjellgard)

Several of the pedagogical leaders also noted that parents’ expectations have changed. Today, parents are more informed and assertive in their demands, and some pedagogical leaders also value higher expectations from parents as a positive development: “It motivates us to improve our knowledge and practices” (Otto, a pedagogical leader of Nordlys). Pedagogical leaders experience and manage tension differently, perceiving increased demands as positive and challenging, encouraging their professional expertise and using their discretionary power.

*Navigating limited resources and workload*

Balancing the needs of colleagues with the demands of kindergarten managers and owners while managing work pressure with limited resources is a challenge for pedagogical
leaders. Time and resource constraints may lead them to deprioritise knowledge development and discussions to manage these challenges:

As a pedagogical leader, I understand that my colleagues, managers, the owner, parents, and children have different and often conflicting needs that we must meet. The municipality [the owner] imposes strict guidelines and budget cuts, making it challenging to collaborate on critical issues. When we encounter such dilemmas, we make decisions and discuss the case together. I prefer making decisions jointly. However, we always prioritise the children's best interests when managing these situations. The well-being of children should always be our top priority. (Endre, pedagogical leader of Nordlys)

Pedagogical leaders seem to prioritise children’s needs to manage these tensions. The child’s best interest in Norway is fundamental to early childhood education (ECE). It is also outlined in the FPK and The Kindergarten Act (2005), reflecting the country’s core beliefs about children and childhood. Many of the pedagogical leaders in the study emphasise the importance of creating a positive work environment. The pedagogical leaders argue that this is crucial for keeping high pedagogical quality and providing a good ECE experience for all children. As pedagogical leaders are responsible for maintaining pedagogical quality with limited resources, this issue is emphasised by many of the leaders in the study. Another theme in the data is the pedagogical leaders’ discussions of tensions between administrative and pedagogical work with children and their teams. More pressure on documentation in the sector makes them prioritise administrative tasks over care of children.

We must prioritise completing all the forms and keeping track of regulations. However, sometimes I feel that administrative tasks take too much of my time and distract me from pedagogical work with children and my team. (Jeanette, a pedagogical leader in Parken)

Limited resources and workload may lead to lower service quality. Increased stakeholder demands for report writing and form completion may create pressure and lead to deprioritising professional development. Karin, a pedagogical leader at Nordlys, comments on the current changes in her role towards more administrative work.

I must establish a positive work environment and teach my assistants to work independently, ensuring they maintain high pedagogical standards when I am out or away. However, I want to spend more time with children and have fewer meetings and administrative tasks.

Due to a more culturally diverse group of parents, some children need additional support and resources. However, due to a lack of time and administrative pressure, this is not the pedagogical leaders’ main priority. The ECE centre, Parken, is the largest in the sample,
housing six departments. The kindergarten manager of Parken, Oline, reports that lately, they have experienced high sick leave and had to address challenges related to a large group of newly arrived refugee families with young children. Oline reports further that some pedagogical leaders in Parken complain about high work pressures and stress. She explains that the staff need more time for professional knowledge development, both jointly and individually, especially in migration pedagogy, to meet the challenges of collaborating with refugee parents. However, the high level of sickness absence minimises this, as more practical tasks must be prioritised:

A high share of the staff expresses they lack knowledge in their encounters with refugee parents and have asked for more education in migration pedagogy. Sadly, we experience constraints in terms of time and cost. Also, frequent substitutes make daily routines more challenging for pedagogical leaders, as they must teach new substitutes instead of focusing on pedagogical work. (Oline, kindergarten manager of Parken)

Lise, a pedagogical leader at Parken, commented on recurring challenges with what she labels as “those from other cultures”, saying, “There is so much fuss with those noodles they bring in their lunch boxes. Why do they not bring regular sandwiches?” An “exotic” and different lunchbox is considered bothersome, causing more work. Considering issues such as “exotic” lunch boxes, clothing, sleeping and language barriers, creating extra work, may reflect their high work pressure and insecurity due to a lack of knowledge and competence when working with this group of children and parents.

A pedagogical leader, Eva, in Parken, says this during a team meeting discussing the work with children and parents from minority backgrounds: “Moreover, it becomes a burden for the staff if things need to be done differently, and they must spend much time explaining to them how things are done here [in Norway].” According to FPK, pedagogical leaders must acknowledge all children’s cultural and social backgrounds with tolerance and respect. However, as this quote illustrates, the lack of resources makes it challenging to fulfil these political intentions.

Pedagogical leaders encounter challenges, develop strategies for their work, and discuss prioritisation. They develop strategies to manage stress, tension, resource constraints, dilemmas, and ambiguous goals and demands. The pedagogical leaders’ coping strategies may also impact the quality of the pedagogical work and how they encounter different challenges, such as encounters with minority parents, as outlined above.

Discussion

In this article, I have investigated the experiences of pedagogical leaders in four Norwegian ECE institutions and explored how they navigate and respond to policies and regulations.
The main findings reveal that the pedagogical leaders in the study encounter several challenges and tensions in their roles, pushing them to employ coping strategies when implementing these policies and regulations. Their strategies encompass prioritising professional reflection, adhering to ECE regulations, making compromises in autonomy, and using discretionary power to manage workloads and alleviate stress. Pedagogical leaders seek to balance between conforming to regulations, exercising professional judgment, managing workloads and resources, and addressing parental requests. According to Lipsky (2010), discretionary power can be used to compensate for limited resources. The study shows that some pedagogical leaders prioritise regulatory adherence and FPK over parental demands or may focus on administrative work instead of developing critical pedagogical knowledge. These practices may be seen as examples of compensation mechanisms, as Lipsky (2010) argues.

The experiences of the pedagogical leaders in the study concerning compliance and autonomy granted by the FPK show variations in professional practices and understanding. While some pedagogical leaders perceive themselves as having professional autonomy, others experience constraints and a sense of control exerted by political authorities through the obligations specified in the FPK. The pedagogical leader’s ability to cope with these dynamics connects to factors such as their work experience, academic background, the role-modelling behaviour of kindergarten managers, and the dominant organisational culture within the four ECE centres. The organisational culture may emphasise administrative tasks or collective learning, affecting the discretion exercised by pedagogical leaders. The findings indicate a growing emphasis on administrative tasks over pedagogical knowledge development. This shift towards more routinisation of work is also noted by several scholars (Børhaug, 2013; Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Børhaug & Lotsberg, 2010).

The pedagogical leaders in the study employ significant discretionary power, translating policy into practice, which can be characterised as SLBs, as articulated by Lipsky (2010). Furthermore, this study’s findings illuminate how contextual micro-level factors influence daily work and the strategies professionals employ in their “street-level” roles to cope with the challenges and tensions they encounter (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010).

**Coping strategies – a balancing act**

In this article, I have explored the complex dynamics faced by pedagogical leaders in ECE in Norway and how political decisions and guidelines at national and international levels are implemented into professional practices. It underscores the complexities in policy implementation, which depend significantly on how ECE professionals interpret and apply these guidelines amidst contextual factors, emphasising the nuanced ways education policies are interpreted, adapted, and sometimes challenged within the ECE sector, noted by researchers in the field of SLB (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010).
The findings highlight that adapting to demanding workloads can lead pedagogical leaders to prioritise rule adherence over collaborative and reflective practices, impacting the quality of their work. This adaptation manifests their role as SLBs, where they exercise autonomy and adjust goals to navigate their work challenges. The study also indicates a trend in the Norwegian ECE sector towards formalising routines and procedures to respond to higher demands on documentation and outcomes (Børhaug et al., 2020). The study reveals that pedagogical leaders are pivotal in shaping micro and “street-level” educational policy. Their approach to policy implementation, influenced by high levels of discretion, varies from strict adherence to the FPK to more flexible interpretations. These variations in approaches and professional leadership practices enacted by the pedagogical leaders are contingent on the demands and expectations of stakeholders, resonating with the SLB theory (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010).

Furthermore, organisational culture and structure significantly impact pedagogical leaders’ ability to manage these challenges. The study suggests more support and resources for pedagogical leaders to adequately meet the FPK’s demands. Given the constraints of resources and workload, pedagogical leaders often focus on tasks within their confidence realm (Lipsky, 2010), which may result in overlooking the perspectives of minority parents, also highlighted by Lund (2021). The findings align with research in the field of ECE that argues that pedagogical leaders in Norwegian ECE settings play a crucial role in promoting the well-being and development of young children (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Lund, 2021). As shown, their roles require a balance of skills and flexibility to influence policies and practices effectively.

Addressing the challenges they face, as outlined by Bøe and Børhaug (2022) and Børhaug and Moen (2014), is vital for enhancing the quality of the ECE services in Norway. This study suggests the need for more supportive resources for pedagogical leaders, enabling them to better navigate the complexities of their roles in line with the SLB perspective and studies of ECE in the Norwegian context (Børhaug & Moe, 2014; Gotvassli et al., 2020; Lipsky, 2010).

**Limitations of the study**

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences and challenges of pedagogical leaders in Norwegian early childhood education institutions. However, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Nonetheless, this limitation aligns with the concept of naturalistic generalisation, suggesting that similar settings can derive insights from this study (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). Additionally, it is essential to consider the possibility of social desirability bias in participants’ responses, which could have led to the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of specific challenges and tensions, as this was explicitly focused upon in the interviews. Lastly, the research is context-specific to the Norwegian setting and may not directly apply to other countries. Nevertheless, the concept of
naturalistic generalisation implies that the insights gained here can be relevant in similar contexts (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). In conclusion, these limitations should be considered when interpreting the results, underscoring the importance of conducting more research in diverse contexts (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

The implications of street-level bureaucrats’ “policy in action”
The study highlights the critical roles of pedagogical leaders in Norwegian ECE as they navigate between social mandates formulated in the FPK and practical implementation challenges. The study found three central tensions: (1) balancing compliance with autonomy, (2) managing stakeholder demands and professional judgment, and (3) navigating limited resources and workload. These insights show that pedagogical leaders play a critical yet complex role as street-level bureaucrats, exercising discretion and developing coping strategies amidst these challenges. The study calls for improved support and resources to empower pedagogical leaders, ensuring the high-quality enactment of ECE policies and fostering an environment encouraging the holistic development of children. Further research in varied ECE settings may broaden the understanding and inform policy and practice improvements in the sector.

Author biography
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