

Leadership and Legal Competence: The Key to a Good Kindergarten Environment

A qualitative study on how preschool managers' legal competence affects the work environment in kindergartens

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Background for the Study



Kindergarten Leadership Responsibilities

The owner of the kindergarten is legally responsible for following regulations, while the preschool manager handles employer duties and leads both teaching and administrative work, which requires legal competence.



Work Environment Importance

Good work environments strongly affect the quality of kindergarten services.

The Working Environment Act covers both physical and social workplace conditions, and employers must ensure good working conditions.



Changing Leadership Focus

More paperwork requirements have changed managers' focus from teaching leadership to administrative tasks, especially in bigger kindergartens.

Research Question and Theoretical Framework

Research Question

How do preschool managers describe the significance of their legal competence for the work environment in the kindergarten?

Theoretical Framework

The study builds on theories of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and Dewey's (2015) view on learning as a social process.

Work Environment Factors

The study examines the physical work environment, the psychosocial work environment, and organizational conditions in accordance with the Working Environment Act § 4-1.



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Methodology

Qualitative Approach

The study follows a social constructivist tradition, where knowledge is created through interactions between individuals in a given context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four preschool managers who had further education in law for leaders.

Abductive Approach

The study combines deductive principles from theory with an inductive approach to explore the participants' experiences.

The analysis followed Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2017) abductive model through six stages of analysis to interpret the leaders' experiences.

Background



Physical Environment



Psychosocial Environment



Leadership in Kindergartens

Physical Work Environment in Kindergartens



Health and Safety Work

The Working Environment Act says the workplace must be safe for everyone. This includes checking all factors that might affect staff health and wellbeing.



Body-Friendly Equipment

Kindergartens need furniture that fits staff bodies well. Good equipment helps prevent injuries when lifting and carrying children.



Safety Measures

Safety rules are key in workplace guidelines. This means having non-slip floors, safe play areas, and clear emergency exits to prevent accidents.



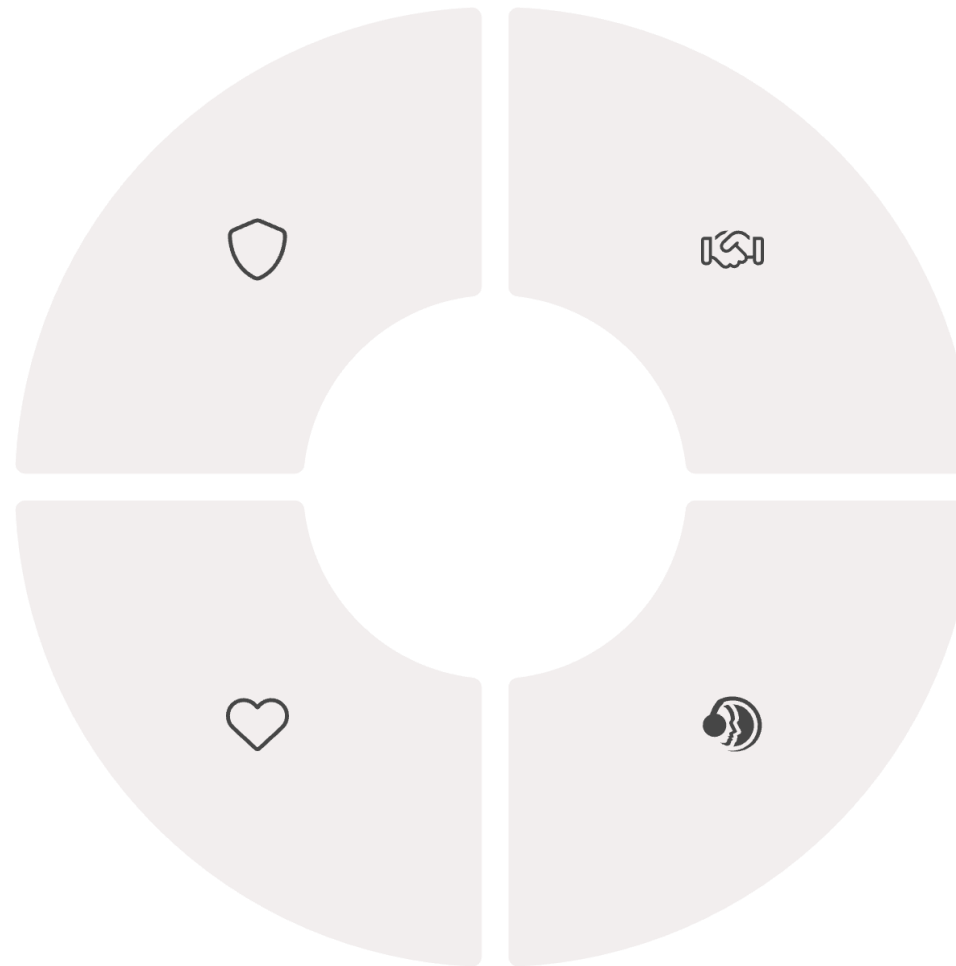
The Psychosocial Work Environment in Kindergartens

Legal Regulation

The Working Environment Act § 4-3 sets requirements for the psychosocial work environment. The work environment must be free from discrimination and harassment.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety within a team can function as a mechanism that translates structural features into behavioral patterns and promotes inclusion among members.



Conflict Prevention

Conflict prevention and management are crucial tasks, where leaders have a special responsibility. Employees also have a duty to participate in conflict resolution.

Collaboration

Collaboration are essential for preventing conflicts. Management should promote collaboration through joint projects, meetings, and social activities.

Leadership in Kindergartens

Transformational Leadership

By practicing transformational leadership, management ensures that employees are heard and included in decisions that shape their work life.

Regular staff meetings, workplace surveys, and open discussions are effective ways to achieve this.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership often involves maintaining administrative order, creating structures, motivating through performance rewards, and ensuring that daily tasks run smoothly.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership shifts focus from individual roles to leadership practices. In organizations with strong democratic and collegial values, it supports shared decision-making and can strengthen development and drive change.

Some challenges

The informants describe some main challenges

- Physical
- Psychological
- Leadership



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Physical Challenges in Kindergartens

Complex Strain

Physical strain in kindergartens represents a significant challenge for both employees and leaders.

Daily operations involve heavy lifting, continuous static strain, and a high level of activity.

Proactive Strategies

Innovative strategies to reduce strain are highlighted as an essential factor for improving the physical work environment.

Legal Competence

The informants describe how their legal competence has increased through studies.

This makes them better equipped to handle difficult situations related to physical strain, sick leave, management authority, and duty of loyalty.

Psychological Challenges in Kindergarten Leadership

Emotional Pressure

Descriptions from participants in the study suggest that the emotional pressure that employees face daily can also be demanding.

Findings from the study indicate that leadership in kindergartens involves significant psychological strain, particularly related to legal issues, personnel matters, and organizational challenges.

Middle Managers' Dilemma

One of the most challenging aspects of the leadership role described is the handling of personnel matters, especially follow-up of sick leave and conflict resolution.

Leadership for a Good Work Environment



Culture Building

Leaders address work environment issues by improving the social climate in different ways.

They use their knowledge of laws, solve conflicts, and work to create a shared culture everyone believes in.



Clear Communication

Good leadership and clear communication help create a better work environment.

One leader said that understanding legal matters gives them "more confidence in leading," which helps them be more clear and open with staff.

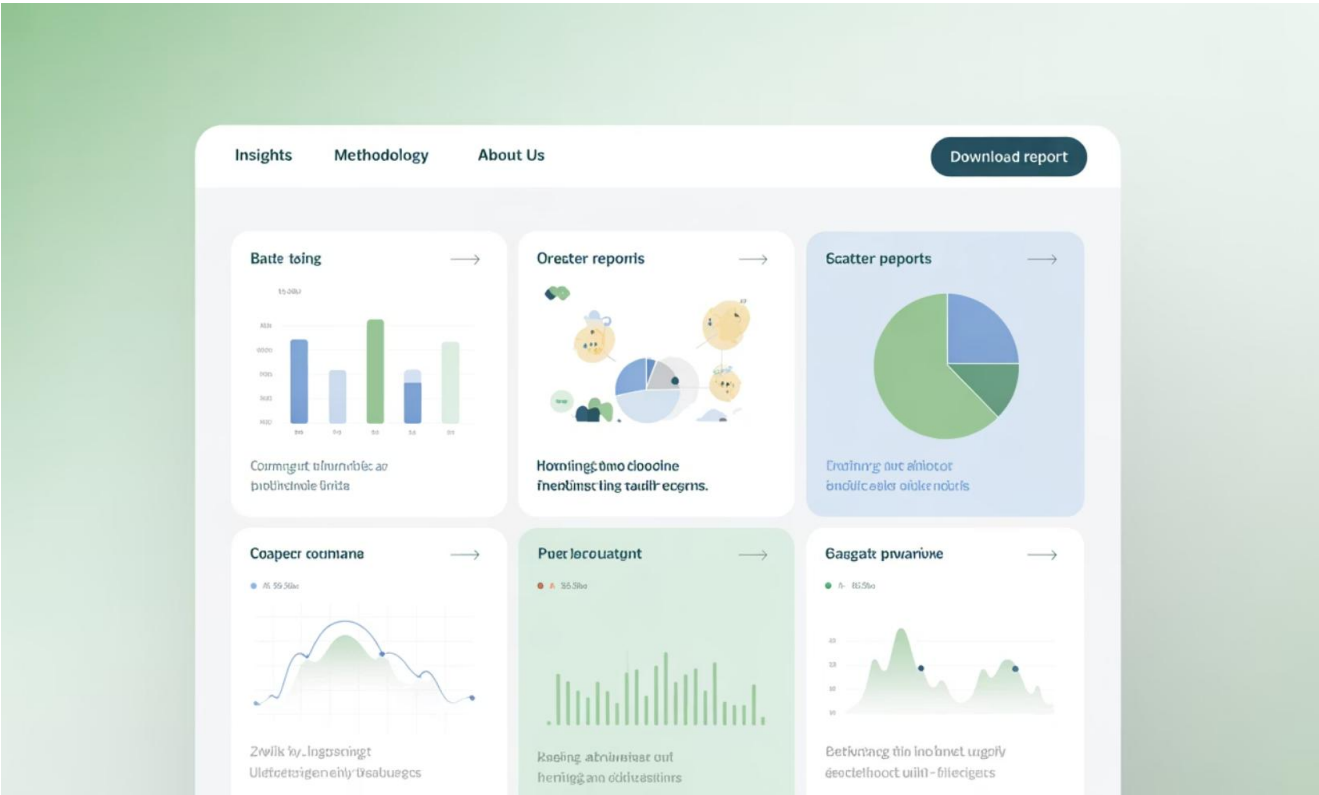


Participation

Leaders report that when staff help make decisions and are included in the process, they feel more connected to their work.

This involvement helps staff better understand and accept changes in the kindergarten.

Key Findings



Key Findings: Physical Work Environment

The study shows that kindergartens often lack proper setup for staff comfort, which can lead to body injuries.



Main Challenges

Physical problems in kindergartens are not just about lifting and body strain. They also connect to feelings and how work is organized.



Strategies

Good leaders plan ahead. They know the rules, adjust the workplace, allow rest breaks, and create safe work habits to reduce body strain.



Main Barriers

Lack of funding and poor workplace setup are the biggest problems for a good physical work setting.

Many informants in the study point to money problems as a challenge. This matches research showing that leaders in public jobs often must balance quality with tight budgets.

Key Findings: Psychosocial Work Environment

Legal Competence

Legal competence helps leaders handle personnel matters more fairly, but uncertainty about regulations still creates stress.

Documentation

Clear documentation and communication strengthen trust in the leadership role and reduce uncertainty among employees.



Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is crucial for well-being and productivity and involves leadership that listens to, supports, and involves employees.

Participation

Leaders who support involvement and inclusion deal better with work environment problems. This fits with research that shows the importance of balancing the physical work environment and good teaching.

Key Findings: Leadership



Balanced Leadership

Effective leadership balances legal requirements, administration, and relationship building.

Legal insight combined with leadership skills strengthens the work environment.



Leadership Styles

Both transformational and transactional leadership are essential.

Transformational fosters common culture, while transactional ensures structure.



Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership improves efficiency and participation, strengthening the work environment.

Leaders often have limited influence on overall organizational management.



Legal Uncertainty

Summary



Leadership Challenges

Legal uncertainty, personnel matters, and organizational challenges create stress among leaders.

Employers must ensure a good working environment through systematic HSE work, in accordance with the Working Environment Act.



Psychological Safety

Psychological safety, supported by clear structures, legal competence, and collegial support, reduces stress.

The Working Environment Act requires a workplace without discrimination and bullying, making conflict management important.

Summary



Leadership Balance

The study examines how preschool managers' legal competence affects the work environment.

Effective leadership balances legal requirements, administration, and relationship building.



Good Work Environment

A good work environment requires physical, psychosocial, and organizational measures.

Legal insight combined with leadership competence strengthens the work environment through culture building and inclusive leadership.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Increased Further Education

To strengthen preschool managers, increased further education in administration and leadership, including law, is recommended, in line with findings showing that half of preschool managers believe they need additional education in these areas.

Tailored Leadership Models

Further research on tailored leadership models for the kindergarten sector is recommended, focusing on how different leadership approaches can be adapted to the unique context and challenges of kindergartens.

Conflict Management

Systematic work on conflict management, legal competence, and psychological safety can contribute to a more sustainable work environment for leaders and employees, and should be examined more closely in future studies.

Work Environment and Quality

More research on the connection between work environment and quality in kindergartens is recommended, as the study shows that this is an area that is less documented in kindergartens than in schools, despite the challenges often being comparable.