

Leader's Legal Competence - A Contribution to Organizational Development in Kindergartens

Atle Kristensen¹, Morten Einar Edvardsen²

Nord University, Norway^{1,2}

Abstract

This study investigates how preschool managers' legal competence contributes to organisational development and learning within Norwegian kindergartens. Drawing upon the Kindergarten Act (2020), the Framework Plan (2017), and relevant leadership theories, the research highlights how legal competence enables managers to lead responsibly, ensuring compliance with laws while fostering a reflective and developmental culture among staff. Through qualitative interviews with preschool managers, findings reveal that legal competence strengthens leadership practices by providing structural clarity, building trust, and facilitating collaboration with staff, parents, and external partners. Legal insight emerges not only as protection against mistakes but also as a strategic resource for enhancing pedagogical quality and driving organisational learning. The study concludes that a preschool manager's ability to interpret and apply legal frameworks critically enhances both leadership legitimacy and organisational learning, supporting continuous development and promoting children's well-being and educational outcomes.

Keywords: Legal competence, Organisational development, Professional judgement, Learning organisation, Preschool leadership

Introduction

The Kindergarten Act (2020) and the Framework Plan (2017) regulate the content and responsibilities of kindergartens in Norway. They form a binding framework intended to ensure that all children receive an equitable, safe, and developmental kindergarten experience, regardless of which kindergarten they attend. The Act sets requirements for quality, staffing, competence, and pedagogical content, and clarifies the division of responsibilities between owners, staff, and parents. It also emphasises the rights of children and parents to participate and be involved. The Framework Plan builds upon the Act and provides a shared set of values and clear pedagogical goals, with an emphasis on inclusion, respect, and equality. At the same time, it offers concrete support for staff in their daily pedagogical work.

The preschool manager has a particular responsibility to ensure that the kindergarten operates in accordance with current laws and regulations. According to Olsen (1996), this requires legal competence in order to interpret and apply legislation in practice. Leadership in kindergartens therefore involves not only pedagogy but also organisational development, administration, and learning leadership. The Framework Plan (2017, Chapter 2) describes the kindergarten as a learning organisation, where staff are expected to reflect on professional and ethical issues, stay professionally updated, and serve as clear role models. This highlights the need for leadership competence that includes legal insight.

This study examines how preschool managers exercise leadership at the intersection between pedagogical leadership and the development of the kindergarten as a learning organisation. The preschool manager's legal competence, professional judgement, and understanding of strategic leadership are crucial for making sound decisions and setting the right priorities in a complex environment characterised by laws, regulations, employees, children, and parents. Knowledge of change management can help develop a shared practice and a collective knowledge base that benefits all involved. Based on this, the following research question has been formulated: *How can a preschool manager's legal competence contribute to organisational development and learning in the kindergarten?*

To explore this question, theory regarding the kindergarten as a learning organisation [16], pedagogical and administrative leadership [9], as well as leadership as a dynamic and continuous process in response to different needs and life situations [17] will be drawn upon. All practice and leadership must be grounded in the principle of the best interests of the child, as enshrined in the UN



Convention on the Rights of the Child. Theoretically, this chapter will illuminate what administrative leadership entails, together with theories of leadership and organisational learning in kindergartens [9]. The preschool manager's legal competence will first be outlined, followed by a closer examination of the kindergarten as a learning organisation and collaboration and participation within the kindergarten, through relevant theoretical perspectives.

Legal Competence among Preschool Managers – A Framework

When a preschool manager faces challenges that require decisions based on legislation, it is crucial to be able to provide clear and professionally grounded answers. In some cases, the answer is straightforward because the legal text is clear, the issue is familiar, or there is established practice. In other situations, precedent or unambiguous regulations may be lacking, making the manager's ability to exercise qualified judgement particularly important [11],[22]. Legal competence refers to the knowledge a preschool manager needs to lead the core activities of the preschool in accordance with applicable laws and regulations, such as the Kindergarten Act, the Framework Plan, and the Working Environment Act. This forms the basis for ensuring that the preschool's pedagogical activities are carried out in compliance with legal requirements. Legal competence is also key to building trust. A preschool manager who is able to set clear, fair, and understandable boundaries strengthens their legitimacy. The Kindergarten Act (2020) defines the preschool as a pedagogical institution, where staff are expected to actively contribute to pedagogical development. The Framework Plan (2017, Chapter 2) specifies that the preschool manager is responsible for ensuring that this work complies with legislation, and for leading processes related to planning, documentation, evaluation, and further development.

Leading staff involves balancing individual needs with the overall development of the organisation [4]. The preschool manager must identify core components in various initiatives and address potential barriers, especially when legal issues receive greater attention [23]. Effective leadership requires thorough planning, sound organisation, and capacity building within the staff group [23, p.141]. The manager must establish routines, clarify the purpose of innovation, and foster increased understanding and motivation among staff [3]. How the preschool manager allocates working time and develops plans has a major impact on the framework experienced by the staff. Chapter 7 of the Framework Plan highlights the importance of planning and evaluation to ensure alignment between practice and regulations and emphasises the significance of the preschool as a learning organisation. Preschool managers with legal education report higher competence in leading such development. Insight into the law provides a foundation for leadership that is both structured and participatory. Bolman and Deal (2020) highlight how good leaders balance vertical management with horizontal coordination – a balance that legal competence helps to achieve.

In summary, the preschool manager's legal competence is central to professional leadership. It enables qualified decision-making, especially in complex situations, and fosters a culture characterised by learning and reflection. This contributes to a safe, predictable, and development-oriented environment in the preschool.

The Preschool – A Learning Organisation

The complex demands placed on the preschool as an organisation require it to be capable of working with organisational development and learning. The preschool manager must be able to lead development work that builds collective capacity, enabling staff to learn together. In order to achieve organisational learning, the preschool manager must possess knowledge and competence in leading such processes. They must also be familiar with the expectations and requirements for the preschool's core activities as described in the Framework Plan, regulations, and other relevant legislation. A learning organisation is characterised by continuous development through collective learning, knowledge sharing, and the ability to adapt to change [4]. In a preschool context, this means that staff jointly reflect on practice, share experiences, and seek new ways to improve their pedagogical work.

The Framework Plan (2017) highlights the importance of reflection, experience-sharing, and continuous development as central elements of pedagogical practice. It describes the preschool as a learning organisation, where staff should collectively reflect on their own practice and evaluate how it aligns with the values and goals outlined in the Framework Plan. This involves active discussion and evaluation of pedagogical activities to ensure high quality. Furthermore, the Framework Plan emphasises the significance of professional learning communities, as also discussed by Stoll and Kools (2017). They stress the importance of employees' values, norms, and attitudes for continuous

and collaborative learning, along with the necessary processes, strategies, and structures that facilitate learning, experimentation, and innovation.

In addition, the Framework Plan (2017) underlines the importance of being open to change and new knowledge. Staff are expected to seek new and improved ways of conducting pedagogical work, with the aim of enhancing children's well-being, learning, and development. Reflection, experience-sharing, and development are therefore described as fundamental elements in efforts to improve the quality of the preschool. This collective learning is crucial to offering a safe, psychologically secure [6], and developmentally supportive preschool environment. The goal is for the preschool to be in continuous development, equipped to meet new demands and challenges through the ongoing enhancement of staff competence [16]. A shared understanding among staff of the preschool's goals and values forms the foundation for such a learning culture [24]. When everyone pulls in the same direction and shares a vision, a climate is created where new knowledge is welcomed and applied for the benefit of children's learning and development [4],[24].

The preschool manager plays a key role in developing the preschool as a learning organisation. Firstly, the manager must facilitate reflection and evaluation within the staff group. Pedagogical leadership involves initiating and leading processes of reflection and learning among staff [16]. This includes creating arenas where staff can discuss experiences, analyse pedagogical work, and learn from both successes and challenges. The manager serves as a role model and mentor who encourages critical thinking and continuous learning in everyday work [24]. Additionally, the manager must ensure that both theoretical knowledge and practical experience are integrated into the staff's professional development, helping them to develop a reflective relationship with their own practice. As Hargreaves et al. (2014) point out, leaders can enhance organisational performance by engaging and motivating the team through clear direction and inspiring goals. This aligns with the preschool manager's responsibility to ensure that the preschool operates as a learning organisation to promote children's developmental opportunities [16].

Collaboration and Participation

Collaboration and participation are key factors in fostering a preschool characterised by development and quality. Collaboration occurs at multiple levels – internally among staff and externally with parents and agencies such as the Educational Psychological Service (PPT). The Framework Plan (2017) emphasises that a child's needs are best met through close cooperation with the home. Leadership that combines structural and human considerations, and alternates between transactional and transformational leadership styles, is crucial for ensuring that such collaboration functions effectively [3],[4],[15].

When staff work systematically together, reflects, and share experiences, the professional community is strengthened [4]. Such arenas promote trust, openness, and learning. Reflection generates insight and drives development, and informal learning can be just as important as formal initiatives [16]. It is the preschool manager's responsibility to foster a climate in which staff feel safe to share challenges and ideas [10]. Thus, leadership is not only about administration, but also about relational and pedagogical insight. A good preschool manager supports and develops the staff, while simultaneously ensuring the quality of provision for the children. This requires both professional and ethical awareness, and the ability to build strong teams and a shared understanding of the preschool's goals [16].

The preschool manager must be able to translate the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan into meaningful practice. Legal competence helps to interpret legislation in ways that promote development, while providing security and predictability [4],[18], [11]. The preschool manager serves as a bridge between theory and practice, making legislation a tool rather than a restriction. "Uplifting Leadership" describes a style of leadership that elevates staff even when facing challenges [10]. By facilitating reflection and learning, the preschool manager can help create a setting where staff feel secure, professionally strong, and developmentally oriented [6],[24],[16].

Despite strong arenas for collaboration, the Parents' Committee for Kindergartens (FUB, 2023) reports that over half of preschool teachers have experienced conflicts with parents in the past year, whereas only 7 per cent of parents report the same [19]. This illustrates how conflicts are often perceived differently by the parties involved and highlights the need for clear communication and an understanding of different perspectives. Common causes of conflict include disagreements about the child's needs, differing expectations, and communication failures. Such situations require both relational and legal competence. The preschool manager plays a particularly important role in ensuring that conflicts are handled professionally and in the best interests of the child. Constructive conflict management can contribute to learning and improved practice [16].

Methodology

This study is based on a social constructionist understanding, where knowledge and meaning are created through interaction between people within a specific context [5]. The study is qualitative and draws upon a theoretical framework inspired by social constructivist perspectives [14]. Here, knowledge is seen as something that emerges through encounters between people and situations. This provides a strong foundation for exploring the experiences of preschool leaders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four preschool managers. In such interviews, the order of questions and topics may vary [12], which was also the case in this study.

The interviews were conducted in an open and informal style, allowing the informants many opportunities to elaborate and share their own perspectives [13]. This flexibility enabled us to navigate the interview guide fluidly and explore not only what the informants had experienced but also how and under what conditions these experiences had arisen [27]. The questions were developed using a deductive approach, based on theoretical perspectives and the researcher's preunderstanding. At the same time, the questions remained open-ended, enabling the informants to reflect freely, particularly on legal and organisational challenges. The aim was to elicit detailed and rich descriptions [27, p.316]. The study adopts an abductive approach, combining theory and empirical data to achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomenon [20].

The analysis followed an interpretative phenomenological model in six stages [25]. The interviews were first transcribed and then analysed through sorting, systematising, and reducing the material into key categories [22]. Finally, these categories were grouped into meaningful units [1], which form the headings for the presentation and discussion of the findings. These units are: Legal competence – a necessity for responsible preschool leadership, Legal competence strengthens leadership of practice, and Legal competence provides security in collaboration and leadership.

Legal Competence – A Necessity for Responsible Preschool Leadership

Preschool managers are faced with a complex and extensive body of legislation that requires legal competence to lead in a responsible and secure manner. Knowledge of the relevant laws and how they interrelate is crucial for making the right priorities in daily work [18]. Informants in the study express that relying solely on experience or general leadership training is no longer sufficient, legal knowledge is necessary to correctly understand and apply regulations in practice. Without such competence, there is a risk of misinterpreting laws or acting on an unsound basis, which could have serious consequences for children, staff, and the operation of the preschool [11].

One informant highlights the multitude of different legislations to navigate, stressing the sector's complexity: "It's not just about knowing the rules, but understanding their purpose and application in specific situations." Several informants describe how legal competence has made them better able to interpret and critically apply legal texts. One preschool manager mentions that she now "breaks down the legal text" to understand what it actually means. This reflects a more analytical and professional approach to legislation. Legal methodology provides not only answers regarding what is lawful but also offers a framework for making decisions in a systematic and documentable manner. The preschool manager's legal knowledge of laws and regulations is thus linked to norms, values, and can contribute to developing a certain value-rationality [16, p.215]. However, law must be understood and applied in close interaction with pedagogy.

Informants believe that legal competence cannot stand alone but must be intertwined with knowledge about children, learning, and leadership. As one informant states: "You have to use all your leadership competence to apply the law correctly." Good leadership in preschools demands a holistic approach, where legal frameworks provide structure, and pedagogical knowledge fills them with content [16]. With a solid understanding of the law, the preschool managers experience greater confidence in their role and the ability to act with more awareness. They can be more proactive, plan for challenges, and manage difficult cases at an early stage. Simultaneously, the competence has fostered greater humility. One informant recounts initially feeling scared, saying: "Oh my God, I'm not really in control," but notes that this also led to an awareness of the value of seeking advice and support when necessary. Legal education is thus not about knowing everything but about knowing how to proceed and with whom to collaborate when the situation demands it. In this way, legal competence has helped develop preschool managers' ability to cooperate and lead the preschool's pedagogical work [17].

Overall, the findings suggest that legal competence is essential for preschool managers when navigating a comprehensive and complex legal framework. Experience and general leadership education are no longer enough, specific legal insight is needed to interpret and apply the law correctly. Managers' report dealing with multiple laws simultaneously, requiring both an overview and

an understanding of connections. The findings indicate that legal competence contributes to a more professional and analytical approach, where legal texts are broken down and systematically applied in practice. Nevertheless, informants stress that law must be used in close collaboration with pedagogical knowledge and leadership experience to exercise effective leadership. A preschool manager cannot rely solely on legislation but must understand how to apply it in situations concerning children, learning, and staff management [16]. The findings also suggest that legal understanding increases confidence in leadership roles while fostering humility and a willingness to seek assistance when necessary. This provides a foundation for more conscious, responsible, and proactive leadership in preschools, where the manager's role and legitimacy are strengthened through enhanced legal competence.

Legal Competence Strengthens Leadership of Practice

The preschool can be understood as a learning organisation [26], where acquired competence in law and leadership not only develops the individual leader but also benefits the organisation as a whole. Informants describe how the legal knowledge they have acquired has been shared with colleagues and staff, contributing to a shared understanding and increased competence across levels within the preschool [16]. Informants further describe how good legal competence facilitates sharing knowledge with colleagues and staff. They note that this competence promotes a more unified understanding within the organisation and enhances its capacity, particularly when dealing with complex issues. Having more staff think in similar ways leads to better-justified decisions, which in turn improves case management within the broader preschool sector.

As advisors on legal matters, informants report feeling more secure in their roles, resulting in increased trust and strengthened competence among leadership teams and union representatives. As one informant put it, "I actually know something about this," describing a realisation that builds confidence both for themselves and their colleagues. They also explain how legal competence strengthens their ability to interpret and explain changes in legislation and regulations, making it easier for staff to understand the background for necessary changes. Overall, informants report that change processes anchored in legal competence are more sustainable and help prepare preschools to meet new demands [16],[8].

Several informants also highlight how the link between legal and leadership knowledge has fostered a more reflective practice within preschools. One leader describes how their leadership team has worked actively to increase awareness of the leadership role, with each leader becoming "aware of their own strategies to become a better leader." They question whether they truly act according to their intentions and how practice can be improved. This reflection is particularly associated with a more proactive leadership style – acting in advance rather than reacting afterwards [7]. The informant notes that this involves learning from one's own experiences and continuously adjusting practices. Another informant expresses strong motivation for continuous learning, especially with others. They prioritise pedagogical leadership and mentoring, even though administrative tasks often take much time. "I wish I could pass on more of what I know now," they say, describing it as an ongoing need within the organisation. They view the preschool as a place where both leaders and staff are constantly learning, noting that learning happens in the situation itself because "that's the whole point of the organisation." Knowledge in law and leadership has also led to concrete development projects within the preschools. One leader describes a project linking the staff's working environment with the children's learning environment to better understand their mandate and how it is enacted. This reflects organisational learning, where both staff and leaders together explore the relationship between formal requirements and pedagogical practice [17]. Other informants mention using various tools in staff management. One refers to a workbook used to manage difficult processes and support internal learning. Findings from the study also suggest improvements in routines and systems as a result of new competence. One informant reports that templates and routines have been adjusted, making everyday work easier for preschool managers. This shows that the organisation evolves by integrating new knowledge into practice, for example through better internal control and clearer procedures.

Informants also highlight the importance of learning arenas where they have gained insights into others' experiences and perspectives. One informant shares that it was extremely useful to discuss experiences and dilemmas with leaders at different levels. They became particularly aware that preschool leaders possess strong competence in staff management, something that often goes unrecognised. This realisation leads to increased recognition of collective experience and knowledge [7], and now there is a stronger emphasis on discussing real cases during leadership and staff meetings. In this way, the legal and organisational competence of leaders contributes to strengthening a culture where the entire preschool operates as a learning organisation.

Overall, the findings suggest that increased competence in law and leadership strengthens the preschool as a learning organisation by promoting better knowledge sharing, greater security in leadership roles, and a more unified understanding across the organisation [17], [16]. This can lead to greater reflection on practice, improved routines, and stronger collaboration between leaders and staff. It may thus develop a culture of continuous learning, where experiences are actively shared and new knowledge is translated into practice.

Legal Competence Provides Confidence in Collaboration and Leadership

The informants describe how legal competence has led to a more inquisitive and collaboration-oriented leadership style. Several emphasise the importance of consulting with support services such as HR or legal advisers when uncertainty arises. One informant puts it this way: "If I am unsure, I would rather ask to be sure." They highlight that it feels natural to seek external expertise to ensure sound decision-making. This reflects a leadership role where it is not expected that one has all the answers alone, but rather that responsibility is shown by involving relevant professionals. Another informant explains how, in their role as preschool authority, they draw on previous experiences and guidance from a superior leader, stressing the importance of "not being alone in the boat." This attitude reflects a collective and supportive view of leadership, where collaboration is seen as a strength rather than a weakness [4].

Legal insight is described as positive in relation to collaboration with union representatives and health and safety delegates. Several informants report that a good and respectful relationship with these actors is strengthened when both parties share a common understanding of rights and obligations. One informant describes union representatives as "a good whip behind the mirror," a reminder to follow the rules and act fairly. Another informant puts it: "Do things correctly and properly, so that it feels fair and understandable." This insight helps ensure that decisions, such as warnings or redeployments, are perceived as more legitimate by both staff and management because they are based on a shared understanding of procedures.

Several informants highlight how legal competence enables them to manage staffing matters in a more proactive way [8]. It creates opportunities for early intervention instead of waiting until a situation escalates into a formal and often burdensome process. Challenges are more often addressed through dialogue, guidance, and collaborative measures with the individual concerned. This approach enhances staff involvement, including them in finding solutions rather than confronting them with unilateral measures. Another informant points out that, although it can still be difficult to communicate unpopular decisions such as redeployment or redundancies, legal knowledge provides reassurance during dialogue. They can be honest, objective, and point to the fact that decisions are grounded in the regulations.

Legal insight is applied in daily work with internal communication and training. One informant describes how they now inform staff in a more structured and knowledge-based way, particularly during periods when fluctuations in child numbers occur: "Every year, as autumn approaches, I worry about staff job security," they say. They prepare by familiarising themselves with the current regulations and seeking advice, enabling them to provide clear information and show that any measures taken are fair and justified. Several informants also highlight that they now explain legal changes and new requirements more clearly, helping staff to understand them not as top-down impositions but as shared frameworks [11]. One informant stresses the importance of training staff in specific routines, such as data protection: "Be careful about what you share online... do not send emails containing sensitive personal information." They believe this helps foster a collective responsibility among staff for compliance with legal requirements.

Several informants also describe how legal competence strengthens collaboration with external actors. They experience greater confidence when working with other institutions, such as school leaders and the local municipality, particularly in matters concerning the psychosocial environment and cases of harassment. Their competence makes it easier to participate in interdisciplinary processes and to communicate in a way that builds on shared understandings of regulations and responsibilities. Some informants also note that insight into rights and participation has been beneficial when engaging in dialogue with parents, leading to more equitable conversations. This suggests that legal competence clearly has a transferable value beyond internal preschool matters, facilitating more professional and trust-based collaboration with various stakeholders [7].

Overall, the informants' experiences show that legal competence not only strengthens the knowledge base for leadership but also contributes to the development of a more inclusive and dialogue-based practice. Legal competence enables the involvement of both staff and external actors in a way that is built on clear rules and rights, promoting trust, predictability, and organisational learning.



Summary Discussion

The research question, “How can the preschool manager’s legal competence contribute to organisational development and learning in the preschool?”, frames both the data collection and the analysis, and the findings provide a nuanced picture of how legal competence among preschool managers contributes to the development of the preschool as a learning organisation. Through three main findings, it becomes clear how this competence influences the leadership role, staff practice, and the organisation’s overall capacity for development.

The findings describe legal competence as a prerequisite for responsible leadership. Informants depict a sector increasingly characterised by complex legislation and high demands for documentation, quality, and fairness in decision-making processes. Administrative governance and the ability to manage laws and regulations in practice show that preschool leadership is not solely about pedagogy [9]. Legal competence enables leaders to understand, interpret, and apply regulatory frameworks in a way that ensures organisational compliance with current legislation. This, in itself, forms the basis for trust and professional legitimacy. Without a thorough understanding of the law, managers risk making decisions on an unsound basis, potentially causing serious consequences for both children and staff [11].

Thus, the findings suggest that preschool managers with legal competence experience greater confidence in their leadership role and can make decisions that are both professionally sound and legally defensible. When the manager has control over structural elements, such as laws, regulations, and routines, it creates space for involvement, collaboration, and staff participation. This balance between vertical management and horizontal coordination can foster a climate of clarity and predictability, which encourages both trust and reflection, thereby promoting organisational learning [4],[15]. In addressing the research question, this shows that legal competence lays the foundation for organisational development. By acting fairly, clearly, and responsibly, the leader not only strengthens their own authority but also builds staff trust in organisational processes.

The study’s findings indicate that legal competence strengthens leadership of practice and supports the preschool as a learning organisation. Legal insight is shown to involve not merely compliance with regulations but using the law to support the development of pedagogical content and working methods. This perspective highlights the importance of managers being familiar with and applying legislation when shaping the core tasks of the preschool [16]. Having acquired legal competence enables managers to explain necessary changes to routines and procedures, grounding them in legislation and providing pedagogical justifications. This is crucial for achieving staff commitment and understanding, demonstrating how legal and pedagogical leadership are closely interwoven in practice.

Bolman and Deal (2020) argue that structural clarity is a prerequisite for innovation, not an obstacle. Findings from this study describe how managers use legislation to create this clarity, thereby promoting pedagogical reflection and development as staff understand the frameworks and their role within them. Through the adoption of more proactive leadership strategies, managers can act ahead of problems rather than react after escalation. This proactivity aligns with Hargreaves et al.’s (2014) concept of “Uplifting Leadership,” where leaders motivate and engage through clear direction, insight, and support. Viewed in this light, legal competence is not merely a defensive safeguard against mistakes but an active tool for improvement and quality development. In relation to the research question, this finding shows that the preschool manager’s legal competence acts as a catalyst for organisational learning. When leadership links legislation to daily practice in preschool, new ways of working that are both professionally and legally sound can be developed. This is the core element of a learning organisation: that practice is continuously developed through reflection, knowledge, and external demands [26].

The study also highlights how legal competence creates security in collaboration and leadership, as described by Edmondson (1999). Preschool managers’ report that their increased insight into rights and obligations has made them more confident in interactions with staff, union representatives, and external actors. They dare to face difficult situations but are also willing to seek advice and support when needed. This attitude reflects a collaborative and humble leadership style, where the manager does not seek to know everything but takes responsibility for ensuring decisions are quality assured and well-founded. This strengthens trust both internally and externally, which is a crucial condition for developmental work. According to Skogen et al. (2021), a shared understanding of goals and values is the basis for a learning culture in preschools, and when these goals are linked to legal frameworks, a common language for development is established.

An example from the study shows that staff perceive decisions as fairer when they are supported by known and understandable regulations. This leads to increased legitimacy of leadership and greater



acceptance of change processes, thereby promoting learning. Bolman and Deal (2020) emphasise the importance of combining structural and human considerations. Legal competence can help bridge these aspects by ensuring that staff experience both security and clarity, thus creating room for sharing, reflection, and further development. When conflicts arise, they are handled more quickly and professionally, and conflict management is seen as part of the learning process rather than an obstacle. Conflicts thus become potential sources of development, provided they are managed constructively and openly [16]. In relation to the research question, this indicates that legal competence not only strengthens the preschool manager's role but also contributes to developing a safe and learning-oriented organisational culture. When staff know that there are structures, procedures, and a shared understanding of what is right and wrong, they also dare to engage more. They feel empowered to reflect openly, ask questions, and participate actively in development work [6]. Legal competence thus becomes a prerequisite for psychological safety, which is essential for genuine organisational learning to occur [6],[10],[26].

Overall, the findings provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded answer to the research question. Legal competence contributes to organisational development and learning in the preschool. It ensures responsible and fair leadership and strengthens the preschool manager's ability to link legal frameworks with pedagogical practice. When the leader fosters trust and security in interaction with staff and partners, the foundation for transformational leadership is laid. This means motivating and engaging employees through shared goals and values. Change processes can then be led in a way that is professionally grounded, legally implemented, and collectively understood.

At the same time, some situations demand clear structures and role distribution, which is characteristic of transactional leadership [3],[15],[23]. Legal competence enables the balancing of these two leadership styles, adapting leadership to the demands of each situation. In this way, and in line with the Framework Plan (2017) and Mørreaunet et al. (2019), the preschool's role as a learning organisation can be strengthened as everyone jointly takes responsibility for quality, reflection, and continuous development. Legal competence is therefore not just a support for the manager – it is a strategic resource for the development of the entire organisation.

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