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Max Weber on Various Types of Legitimate Dominance for Leaders: A Longitudinal Study of Adults' View of Play and Learning in Preschool

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The preschool is challenged by the fact that organizational measures taken to reduce differences in dominance between different groups require guarantees against the arbitrary exercise of power by the leaders. Preschool workforce consists of teachers, educated pedagogical leaders of departments or groups of children, and assistants with no specific training requirements in the legislation. However, many assistants have completed a vocational training program in high school, but they have no leading positions. Head teachers or managers are responsible for the preschool as a whole and are often recruited from the pedagogical leaders level. This paper presents a longitudinal study of adults' views on play and learning in preschool. The study is part of a comprehensive development project, its overall goal being to achieve a common understanding among preschool staff about the importance of play as a fundamental factor in children's learning. Data was collected in the form of recurring letter-writing over a five-year period. In their letters, all employees had the opportunity to express their opinions regardless of education and formal position. The result of the study shows significant differences in the view on the importance of play between pedagogical leaders and assistants. In order to explain what happened during the development project and to achieve a deeper understanding of effects of different approaches in daily work, I turned to Max Weber and his typology of legitimate domination in an organization.

Keywords: play and learning, letter writing, pedagogical leaders, assistants, legitimate domination

Introduction

This paper presents a longitudinal study of an on-going development project on adults' view on play and learning in preschool. The study was conducted in an organizational network of 15 preschools in eastern Norway, with approx. 300 employees, 1100 children and 2000 parents. The preschools selected range in size

from 28–121 children with different profiles and focus areas, such as sports, nature and literature. The overall purpose of the development project is to explore the possibilities of creating a common understanding between different groups of employees about the importance of play for learning.

According to the preschool network, the development project, The Importance of Play in Preschool (TIPP), aims to improve the daily work of preschools by implementing new working methods that benefit children, parents and employees. The network's philosophy is to be moving, willing and innovative. Norwegian preschools in general take their social mandate seriously and have good knowledge of the importance of the first years of a child's life. The Scandinavian kindergarten model, characterized by a view of learning where care, play and learning are interlinked, has a traditional role in Norwegian preschools (Martinsen 2015). According to the Kindergarten Act (Ministry of Education and Research 2018), children have a legal right to participate in the daily program that consists of time, free to play, out-door activities, playing in groups, supervised activities, meals and reading/show-and-tell time. In order to provide children with optimal opportunities to learn and develop, there are political expectations that every preschool should be characterized by professional and educational quality (Steinnes and Haug 2013).

In preschool, there are different professional groups. Preschool workforce consists of educated pedagogical leaders of departments or groups of children, and assistants with no specific training requirements in the legislation. Assistants have no leading positions. Head teachers or managers often have a background as pedagogical leaders and are in charge of the whole preschool. Steinnes and Haug (2013) note that only about a third of the preschool staff acquired academic and professional knowledge from formal education. The remaining two thirds are employed as assistants with no formal job requirements. This can lead to challenges regarding education quality and different opinions of how to deal with daily work with the children. Results from the study show different views on the importance of play between pedagogical leaders and assistants. The experience-based positions and knowledge of assistants challenge the legitimate dominance of formal rules and procedures as well as the pedagogical leaders who execute them.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the views and attitudes of the various staff groups, and look for possible ways

leading to further successful development, I turned to Max Weber and his typology of legitimate domination in an organization. Max Weber is one of the most cited organizational theorists, but knowledge of his works is often limited to his ideal typical organization model (Barcharach and Lawler 1980). However, Weber did not only recognize organizations as simply rationally determined systems of interdependent structures, but as systems in which political tension among interest groups can emerge and re-emerge. Studying groups of pedagogical leaders and assistants in preschool makes it important to assume that individuals may become political in groups, and will therefore have a greater impact on the organizational structure. To understand the political system in organizations, we also need to understand how and why groups mobilize their power (Omisore and Nweke 2014).

What defines a system as 'legitimate' is much discussed and the answers depend on how we define the terms. According to Weber (1972), those subjected to domination have a certain degree of belief in the system, and that makes them willing to obey orders in a somewhat voluntarily way. Szelenyi (2016) raises the question of how strong the subordinates' beliefs must be in order to acknowledge domination as legitimate. Another question is who should hold such beliefs. Steinnes and Haug (2013) emphasize that in order to answer questions like this in the Norwegian preschool context, we ought to investigate how the relationship between different groups of staff affect the activities and responsibilities in the preschool daily work and how the existing practice can be explained. Gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of Weber's view of the difference between power and dominance can help to answer these questions.

Theoretical Framework

A metaphor is 'a basic structural form of experience by which human beings engage, organize, and better understand their world' (Morgan 1983, 601). Organizations are described through metaphors as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems and instruments of domination (Llewelyn 2003). In professional organizations, position of the chief executive (ceo) is at the base of the organizational pyramid. Professional experts dominate from the front line and other personnel provide the skills and service needed to complete the day-to-day work (Quinn, Anderson, and Finkelstein 1996). In preschool, the chief executive´s counterpart

is the headmaster or manager and the pedagogical leaders are the professional experts. However, the assistants carry out a large part of the daily work in practice, in close contact with the children. Some scholars (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005) claim that dominance occurs from not only the structure and hierarchy of the organization, but through the impact of predetermined interpersonal interactions.

McCammon (2018) defines the basic idea of organizational domination as imbalance of power that enables certain members of the organization to control other members and their actions in daily work. Manifestations of domination and resistance occur simultaneously and are emergent, situated and concurrent (Alcadipani, Hassard, and Islam 2018). In contrast to power, dominance is always manifested and connected to context- and relationship-dependent interactional patterns. When dominance develops into oppression, it will lead to resistance, in terms of covert practice, 'below the radar' (Mumby 2005) from individuals and groups who feel threatened. Power struggles between different individuals and groups would commonly have a negative impact on organization's work and results. Identifying causes of contradictions and looking for possible solutions is important for turning a negative trend into a positive development (Greer, van Banderen, and Yu 2017).

Dominance resulting from the power struggle is a recurring element in Max Weber's work on social relations and democracy (Breiner 1996). Legitimate exercise of power is, according to Weber, best suited to establish a balanced and functioning dominance occurrence in an organization. Power relations structured by the relationship between command and obedience relate to dominance (Armbruster 2006).

Domination is a concept, more refined than power, since the existence of power does not always turn out like domination. Weber links the power to concepts of authority and rule, and defines it as the probability of actors within a social relationship carrying out their will despite resistance (Weber, Parsons, and Henderson 1947). Weber (1978, 94) speaks of domination as a special case of power that can emerge in diverse forms.

> [...] from the social relations in a drawing room as well in the market, from the rostrum of a lecture-hall as well from the command post of a regiment, from an erotic or charitable relationship as well as from scholarly discussion or athletics.

Weber (1978) defines power as a probability of forcing one´s will on the behavior of others. In an organization, rational actors will choose the most appropriate means to realize their goals. As attending to goals depends on the behavior of colleagues, rational actors need options to influence colleagues' activities in desired direction (Brennan 1997). Weber undeniably had a well-defined and elaborated concept of dominance but he did not formulate a complete theory in this area (Armbruster 2006). Weber's view on domination assumes that those who are the subject of domination also have a certain degree of 'belief' in the system that dominates them (Szelenyi 2016). Similarly, the choice of a given order becomes to some extent a voluntary choice among the subordinated. Hodgkinson (1996) adds that when organization members are ready to accept authority, they sanction the actualization of organizational values, which is clearly visible in the letters from the preschool employees on all levels.

In Norwegian preschool, there is an asymmetric structure and distribution of roles among the professionals. Steinnes and Haug (2013) emphasize that established kindergarten tradition, practical structures and different professional competence among the staff have contributed to an unbalanced prevalence of domination and submission between different groups of employees. To change this pattern, Steinnes and Haug (2013) recommend changes in kindergarten teacher education and educational courses for kindergarten assistants combined with long-term work-based developmental projects. However, it is not obvious that collective notions on learning and play in preschool will change, due to the increase of individual competence.

Methodology of Research

Successful development of an organization requires insight into the means of expression that individuals and groups use to describe and analyze their own work. Scherp (1998) points out that all employees need to rely on their own ability to judge what is appropriate in different situations. Conscious and planned experiential learning, with employees reflecting on their daily work, is an important part of a professional change process. Tiller (2006) talks about action learning, with reflective practitioners 'who are open to insight into their practice, use self-confidence, and engage in participant-guided problem solving in continuous professional development' (p. 53).

A longitudinal study is a research design following specific individuals over time, with data collected repeatedly (Caruana et al. 2015). In this study, I have investigated selected groups of preschool personnel over a period of five years. The chosen strategy has enabled me to reflect on appreciable patterns of change and predict possible directions for future development in the preschool network.

As for methodological design, I chose autoethnography because of its ability to explain, describe and provide insight into human behavior in context (Purcell-Gates 2004). Autoethnography as empirical research methodology focuses on narrations and descriptions of personal experience in a context (Hughes and Pennington 2017).

For data collection, I decided to use reflective letter writing (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2012) to enable employees to describe themselves and reflect freely on their experience of their daily work in preschool. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) emphasize that letter writing as a research method is well suited in the context of personal experience. Letters offer a unique form of data, representing thoughts, feelings, and observations that may occur over a period (Barton and Hall 2000; Salmons 2018). Validity and reliability of letters depend on credibility of the narrators (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). With letters from preschool employees, written during their practice over time, I perceive that their descriptions of everyday life are truthful and coherent testimonies based on their respective reality.

The empirical material consisted of 116 letters from managers, teachers and assistants from a number of selected preschools in the network. All personnel in the units selected were invited to write a letter based on predetermined questions or themes. Hughes and Pennington (2017) state that autoethnography allows the researcher to locate a phenomenon of interest and consider a critical reflexive approach to thinking and writing. Cohen and Manion (1991, 103) talk about 'purposive sampling,' in which the researcher selects the information units that can be perceived as relevant to describe a particular context.

The first two sessions of writing in 2014 and 2015 aimed at identifying the daily work in participating preschools from the staff perspective. The following rounds in 2017 and 2018 were essentially formative evaluations of the ongoing development of the TIPP project. The issues and themes for the letters remained identical in the four data collections as follows.

- Describe your experience of good play.
- Recount a personal experience of play you had as a child and why you remember it.
- Tell about a special occasion where you observed children's play.
- In what way can play be the basis for learning and overall development?
- What effect can the adult role have on children's play?
- How do you document children's play and learning?
- How do you use guidance and reflection to strengthen your professional role?

Results and Analysis

According to Weber, the ideal types of domination are domination through a constellation of interests and domination through authority – regardless of personal motives or other interests (Kalberg 2005; Weber 1978). These ideals have different origins, with the first one based on the impact of goods and skills, and the other derived from an alleged duty to follow existing procedures and guidelines for the organization (Brennan 1997; Weber 1978).

Weber (1978) argues that organizational members can act as free, autonomous individuals, only when one´s actions are rationally consistent with administrative values. Legal norms must turn into a common grounded idea of rationality with the aim of strengthening the work towards goal fulfillment, as outspoken by letters from preschool managers, which indicates that a development has taken place.

> I think adults play a central role in children's play. We are responsible for facilitating good play. In my kindergarten, over a long period, we have the job of developing the three magic words: Start, Protect and Develop. [Manager 2014]

> We find that there has been a positive development and that we are on the right path. We have reached an increased shared understanding, and we are heading towards a common language of play and learning. We will continue to work for the mutual understanding of useful methods and tools. As Head, I will continue to inspire, motivate and guide based on the project's goals and the preschool's mission. [Manager 2018]

In most letters, there are efforts to develop the preschool's work in accordance with the purpose of the project. The organization appears to be a culture of change – and perhaps moving towards a learning organization (Senge 1990).

> We talk a lot about our work. What do we do now? What is best for the children? Best for us adults? Do we have time for this? Prioritize first? How about a person who does not like large groups? Should we split? Reflections and conversations during the day. We make a large number of choices during the week that require competent adults. We talk informally together all day. [Pedagogical leader 2015]

Statements from both assistants and pedagogical leaders show that they perceive their work as dominated by common interests in the view of children. These are examples of shared values, based on traditions and practical structures, independent of formal positions in the organization (Steinnes and Haug 2013).

> We look at the children and their play with different eyes and it is the alpha and omega that we talk together and share our observations with each other. [Assistant 2018]

> The main goal of TIPP was to strengthen the preschool as a learning arena through children's play. This means that all children in our preschools should have a good play and learning environment, time for play and reflective adults with a common understanding of play and learning [Pedagogical leader 2018]

The following statements, on the other hand, can be perceived as an example of how preschool teachers as executors (Breiner 1996) perceive dominance, resting on everyday faith of and respect for valid rules. The statement is from 2014 and describes a valid expectation for all preschool staff before the development work began.

> It is the responsibility of adults to be good role models and to create a good environment. It is also the responsibility of the adults to make sure that everyone has someone to play with. [Pedagogical leader 2014]

Domination by a constellation of interests seems to be more oppressive than an authority having the duties of obedience clearly established. The conceivable contradiction between different perceptions of what is right and what is wrong is determined by a

direct impact of power from a preschool manager. Weber (1972) defines it as a competitive selection, intended at the imposing of one´s will over others within a social relationship (Breiner 1996).

> The adults in the kindergarten should always be present and accessible to children. Adults should facilitate a good play, be a supporter of the children, give them advice and guidance, observe, help the children who strive to get into the play, intervene when needed and participate in the play on children's premises [Manager 2015]

Weber (1978) argues that domination by a constellation of interests within an organization must be converted to domination of authority to be successful. This is clearly visible in letters from assistants, who are not willing to limit their skills and experience as professionals just to subordination towards the formal educational leadership.

> We can certainly develop our experiences into something positive, through guidance and help. By showing what is right and wrong [Assistant 2014]

> From my own experience, I know that we can play a big role in children's play. We are role models and it is amazing how much the children take after what we say, what we do and how we act in play [Assistant 2015]

Weber (1978) points out that the heart of authority domination lies in its capacity to make the ruled internalize the will of the rulers as though it were their own. A starting point for TIPP was to identify existing perceptions of the content and performance of work. There was nothing new to add, just to get better at daily work, implemented from accepted norms and guidelines.

> I think I learn something new every day. New situations arise all the time and I have to have a plan for working with the different children and follow given rules and routines. Discuss different situations with my educational leader to develop my skills [Assistant 2018]

Weber demands that 'any given legal norm may be established by agreement or by imposition, on grounds of expediency or value-rationality or both, with a claim to obedience at least on the part of the members of the organization' (Weber 1978, 217). One letter from a preschool manager explains the shared responsibility among the adults.

Summary Results

2014 According to the correspondents, there is essentially harmony in preschool units. No major issues of conflict are evident from the letters, although there are a few different opinions about certain parts of practical work with the children.

2015 Assistants and teachers express different views on a number of issues. What distinguishes them most is the perception of adult roles. Assistants feel frustrated that their knowledge and experience are not sufficiently utilized by the organization. They wish to contribute to collective learning, but the organization seems not to be adapted to a change.

2017 Both assistants and teachers are positive about new tools and working methods that have been added to workplaces through the TIPP implementation. Different groups' perceptions of the adult role are still polarized – but now unconditionally discussed in different contexts and from different perspectives.

2018 In the fourth round of letters, the daily work seems to be characterized by planning and strategies for change. The willingness to cooperate among different professional groups has increased in the ongoing improvement process.

Discussion

The 'The importance of play in preschool' project (TIPP) started in 2014. The overall purpose of TIPP was to develop the participating preschools through an increased focus on children's play. The basic idea was to implement methods that would contribute to more reflection, common understanding and to achieve a common language for children's play and learning.

After five years of development work, TIPP is a well-established concept in the organization. Most employees have a relationship of some kind with TIPP. The concept of 'user adoption' (Pai and Arnott 2013) has been introduced to implement methods that employees are expected to adopt and make their own. The management clearly communicate what they expect from the employees. Over time, the understanding and acceptance of the implementation work seems to have increased. Decisions and actions based on rationality and clarity are customary in organization's daily work. (Corvellec and Holmberg 2004). In recent years, the view of organizations has changed from mechanical systems to units that are more organic (Burns and Stalker 2015).

Dynamics of change do not exist in formal structures only. In successful development work, informal action patterns of individual leaders and groups would be developed and disseminated to other parts of the organization. To develop an organization means, among other things, to negotiate and reach agreements by a kind of virtual negotiation between actors. Key elements of these negotiations are 'we-thinking' and thinking for and against common attention and action (Chater et al. 2017)

In the letters, there is a noticeable desire to develop the preschool's work in accordance with the project's purpose. Virtual negotiations provide a bridge between individual cognitions and the unwritten rules of social interaction and culture in the preschool network (Misyak et al. 2014). On the other hand, different opinions between assistants and educational leaders on issues, such as the importance of adults for children's play, seem to have increased. However, reflection and guidance give room to discuss various issues more unconditionally than before.

When structural patterns are changed and adapted to new directions, conflicts may arise between individuals and groups who experience themselves as winners or losers. Voices of the assistants have undoubtedly contributed to a more nuanced discussion, but perhaps also to increased polarization on certain issues. Assistants and their belief in the strength and success of their work may challenge the traditional dominance of preschool rules and practices and of educational leaders as executors.

It is a challenge for preschool that democratic impulses to equalize the dominance between different groups require equal rights and guarantees against arbitrary use of power. To explain what really happened in the TIPP project on the relationship between the various target groups, I immersed myself in Max Weber's theory of organizations' internal and external life.

Clegg (1994) argues that Weber still has a relevance in studying organizations, not predominantly for his theory, but for his recommendation to analyze the cultural constitution of phenomena.

Conclusion

In the TIPP project, those who have discovered the practical benefits of the new methods use them in their daily work and provide feedback that they have achieved a better overview of what they do and why. Reflection on requirements in the control documents has gained a greater place in planning and evaluation. The adults have

become more aware of what they are doing and of the opportunity to learn and develop in their profession in their own workplace. Methods have led to increased knowledge in the organization and children's play has been given more space.

Development projects often rely on ideal conditions, where each participant is uncritically expected to relate to plans and strategies presented, regardless of their opportunity for contributing to and influencing the process. A deficiency in TIPP results is the difference in how participating preschools have implemented new methods in reality. Empirical data shows that some of the participants seem to perceive development mainly as an unwanted addition to their regular work.

According to Brennan (1997), Weber argues that in most relationships someone has the capacity to get others to obey commands even when the others may not want to.

> The dominated persons, acting with formal freedom, rationally pursue their own interests as they are forced upon them by objective circumstances. [Weber 1978, 943]

Mills (1940) notes that structures of dominance in an organization include more or less abstract cultural values, expressed through different actions and vocabularies of motive. Clegg (1994) emphasizes that the main relevance in Weber's analysis of organizations is the inevitableness of substantive values being the core of any organization (Clegg 1990). The basic values in the preschool network and the development project TIPP are outspoken by one of the heads.

> The soul in the kindergarten is created by our employees who care about their work, who are dedicated and who give of themselves in what they do professionally and playful. Our core values are Big Heart, Joy and Intense work. [Head]

A central question is whether Weber would approve that individual members of an organization could come together and create a value-oriented system of legal norms by mutual agreement. If so, can it be consistent with Weber's basic view of the interplay of self-seeking interests between impeccably rational actors?

Another question is if Max Weber's writings still hold in the twenty-first century. Some organizational theorists question the relevancy of Weber´s theories in our modern age of different economic, social and technological realities very different from his contemporary ones (Greenwood and Lawrence 2005; Lounsbury

and Carberry 2005). Other scholars, on the contrary, claim that Weber's writings on authority are still material in modern organizations and contribute to the thinking of today's management scholars. Houghton (2010).

Well, says Clegg (1994, 76), 'Max Weber is dead: let us bury the reverberations of his pessimistic insights with him, leave the corpse interred and rewrite the epitaph and obituary.'

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