

External kindergarten review: why, how and what experience has been gained?

Summary of

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This report presents, summarizes and discusses experiences from a specific method for assessing the quality of day-care services: external kindergarten review. The method differs from other methods of measuring the quality of day-care services – such as self-evaluation by staff, user surveys and benchmarking/reporting – in introducing and systematizing an external perspective on the kindergarten in question.

The method originated in an external school review in the Hardanger/Voss skills region, and has spread from there to several of the country's other regions and municipalities. We have identified locations where external kindergarten reviews are practised and the experience gained from different practices. By way of conclusion, we use this material to formulate some recommendations for the Directorate of Education's efforts to develop a national model for external kindergarten reviews.

Different approaches to quality in day-care

Quality assessments are based on the approaches to – or targets for – quality that have been established for the kindergarten's activities on the basis of general objectives. Norwegian kindergartens have been given what we refer to as a dual mandate: Kindergartens shall provide care, play, learning and personal development. On the one hand, they pursue a social objective of caring for the individual child in the here and now, and on the other an educational objective of establishing a basis for the child's further development. Today, kindergarten is considered part of the educational pathway, but separate from the educational system as such. It is based on voluntary participation, a separate objects clause, legislation and curriculum, with specific educational methods. Everyday routines and interaction between the children and staff are intended to form a basis for safety, personal expression, learning and personal development. The concept of *process quality* is often used to refer to the quality of the relationships between the children and the staff. Another approach focuses on *outcome quality*, which refers to the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Moreover, *structure quality* encompasses the frameworks within which the kindergarten operates, such as financial conditions, the state of the building and the outdoor areas, and the competencies and working conditions of the staff. Finally, *equal-access quality* focuses on how day-care services should be available to and maintain a relationship of mutual exchange with all families, irrespective of their backgrounds in terms of finance, language or schooling. Process, outcome, structure and equal-access qualities reflect the diversity of quality goals that kindergarten owners, managers and staff are expected to strive to achieve.

Different methods for quality review of day-care services

This diversity of goals is accompanied by a diversity of measurements. Most kindergartens undertake user surveys among parents, while some also provide opportunities for the children themselves to assess the services. Parent surveys may concentrate on various quality indicators, but will most commonly focus on outcome, structure and equal-access quality. As a rule, such approaches to quality will also dominate when kindergarten owners establish standards and reporting routines to specify goals that are stipulated in laws and regulations. Moreover, self-evaluations of the kindergarten's activities, such as the status analysis, encompasses all types of quality assessment, including process quality. External kindergarten reviews provide an opportunity to supplement the internal perspective gained through status analyses or other methods with an external perspective. Such external reviews concentrate on the key objectives of day-care facilities, including interaction between staff and children, play and care, and the different subject areas offered by kindergartens. External kindergarten review is thus suitable for assessing process quality.

Method for summarizing experience

We have identified the prevalence of external kindergarten reviews, different practices and the variety of experiences by way of a telephone survey encompassing all county governors' offices as well as the people responsible for day-care in selected skills regions and municipalities. On the basis of the telephone survey we then selected three geographical areas where we visited and interviewed parties associated with a total of eleven different kindergartens: Hardanger/Voss skills region, Sør-Helgeland skills region and Sarpsborg municipality. Kindergarten managers and staff, parents and external reviewers were interviewed about their experiences from external kindergarten reviews.

Three models for external kindergarten review

On the basis of this mapping we identified what we will describe as three different models for external kindergarten review: *the basic model*, *the combined model* and *the specialist model*. The basic model originates from external kindergarten review as it has been developed and practised for nearly a decade in Hardanger/Voss, and as it is mainly practised in the NEA region of Sør-Trøndelag county, the HAFS region of Sogn og Fjordane county and the Østre Romerike region of Akershus county. The combined model is based on prevailing practice in the Sør-Helgeland region of Nordland county, while the specialist model is based on practices that we identified in Sarpsborg municipality, Østfold county.

In the basic model, an external kindergarten review is undertaken in five stages. First, the facility to be reviewed conducts a status analysis. In light of the results of this and other quality assessments, such as parent reviews, the kindergarten selects a topic for detailed assessment. As a norm, the kindergarten should select a topic which has been documented as presenting challenges. The reviewers are so-called peers, meaning that they work as administrators or educational managers in a neighbouring municipality on a daily basis and have undergone special training as reviewers. To initiate the second stage, the two reviewers prepare a proposal for a future vision, which involves four

quality objectives. Each objective is linked to an example of good practice required to reach the objectives. The future vision is sent to the kindergarten and serves as a basis for a dialogue between the reviewers and the staff. Thus, the future vision describes development objectives and establishes assessment criteria in the form of examples of good practice. The third stage encompasses collection of information to permit assessment of the kindergarten's practices, and is undertaken by reviewers who visit the kindergarten from Monday through Thursday. In this period they conduct interviews with the administrator, a meeting with the staff, the parents and the children, as well as make observations in the kindergarten. This results in data that are combined with background documentation to form the basis for the review. At stage four, the reviewers prepare and present an evaluation report. This is done in the course of the review week, with a presentation for the administrator, staff, the kindergarten owner and a parents' representative on Thursday. The report is based on the collected data. These are compared item by item with indications of good practice. Wherever the kindergarten complies with good practices as documented by all data sources, the data are displayed in green shading. If there is non-compliance, the data are shaded in red. Green denotes the kindergarten's strong aspects, while red indicates a need to improve their activities. Delivery of the report concludes the responsibilities of the reviewers. At stage five, the responsibility shifts to the kindergarten's owner and administrator, who need to follow up the results of the review and convert them into developments.

The combined model differs from the basic and specialist models in that the external kindergarten review is undertaken for two purposes: development as well as control and monitoring. As the authority responsible for day-care services, the municipality is charged with ensuring that the local kindergartens (municipal as well as private) comply with prevailing legislation and regulations. As a kindergarten owner, the municipality may also undertake external reviews. In the combined model, these two tasks are merged, so that the reviewers undertake external review as well as monitoring of public and private kindergartens. The external review is based on the same methodology as the basic model.

The specialist model differs from the basic and combined models in several respects. The review is undertaken by municipal employees with special competence in quality assessment and development. The reviewers spend an entire week in the kindergarten and base their information-gathering on their own observations of its practices. No meetings or interviews with parents are conducted. Nor are the children interviewed, but they are heard as part of the observations. At the end of the review week, a staff assembly is held, where the employees are invited to reflect on, rather than describe, their own practices. The reviewers' role does not come to an end when the week is over; they may also assist the kindergarten in its ensuing development efforts. The review report is not written and presented during the review week, but is completed and presented at a later date. In addition to the review, it also includes advice and ideas for further development efforts.

The three models share the feature that the external kindergarten review includes an internal perspective obtained through a status analysis or another form of self-evaluation. Moreover, that the kindergarten alone or in consultation with its owner

defines topics/activity areas that it wants to be assessed, and that the reviewers prepare a future vision with quality objectives and indications of good practice. A third shared element is that the kindergarten is visited by external reviewers who identify prevailing practices and prepare a public evaluation report that serves as a basis for the subsequent development work in the institution.

The three models differ, however, in the objectives of the review. The combined model pursues two purposes: monitoring of the kindergarten's activities with regard to prevailing legislation and regulations for purposes of control, and review based on the future vision with the aim of development. The basic and specialist models pursue only one objective: review with the aim of development. Moreover, the models differ in terms of what lends legitimacy to the review process among the reviewers and those being reviewed. In this regard, the specialist model differs from the basic and combined models; in the specialist model, the professional skills of the reviewers lend legitimacy to the assessments. As we see it, in the specialist model it is not the peer status in itself that lends legitimacy to the review process, it is the wealth of data that are collected and the way in which this material is processed. A third difference consists in the relationship between assessment and guidance. The specialist model again stands out from the others by not establishing a formal distinction between assessment and guidance; the specialist reviewers may provide both. This contrasts with the basic and combined models, where the work of the reviewers ends with the presentation of the evaluation report, leaving the development work to the kindergarten owner and administrator.

Do external kindergarten reviews promote quality improvement?

As we have seen across all the models, the objective of the external review is primarily to encourage learning and development of the kindergarten's activities. We have identified four different forms of change that may result from an external review: *Concrete measures* in the form of reconstruction or reorganization of the kindergarten; *reflection and change of practice*, when individual staff members or the staff group as a whole are inspired to discuss and change their prevailing practice; *personnel changes*, which rarely occur as a direct consequence of the review process, but may come as a result of subsequent organizational changes and new working methods; and *major projects*, such as preparing a vision for the kindergarten or a new programme for how the institution will work with language development. The owner and administrator are responsible for development work, but these different forms of change require various degrees of attention, time and skills. Some administrators told us that they had been provided with skills and support for this work, in consultation with the owners. Nevertheless, we largely tend to find that the administrators have a feeling of being left virtually alone with the development tasks. Especially in the work involving major projects or reflection and change of practices, they would like to have access to a discussion and development partner, someone who can help prioritize and systematize the development tasks in a busy working situation and provide the required skills.

The external review provides the kindergartens with external assessment competence by way of a systematic method. No such institutionalized and systematic provision of skills is associated with the subsequent development work. In our opinion,

this is a weakness. It can be countered by involving local skills communities, such as the university colleges, in the review and development work. Another measure could be to establish a national group of kindergarten supervisors, similar to the one established for schools, from which the kindergarten owners can seek assistance for development processes.

Recommendations

Kindergartens are part of the education system, and the external kindergarten review is based on the same principles as external school reviews. However, the characteristics of kindergartens require a different approach.

Half of all kindergartens are private, while no more than 3.5 per cent of students at the primary and lower secondary levels attend private schools. As the authority responsible for day-care, the municipal councils have no legal basis for imposing an external review on all kindergartens within the municipality's boundaries. All kindergartens are obligated to undertake quality assessments and development work, but may decide for themselves how to comply with this requirement. The municipalities' involvement in external kindergarten reviews therefore tends to be restricted to municipal facilities. The combined model represents an exception, since it combines review and monitoring. As the authority responsible for day-care services, the municipality undertakes monitoring of public as well as private kindergartens. We have also found that private kindergartens are occasionally included in external reviews following the basic and combined models. This takes the form of local collaboration, including a clarification of who will pay for the review. In some locations the private kindergartens pay for themselves, in others the municipality funds the review of public as well as private facilities. In our opinion and in light of prevailing legislation, such local collaboration is the best approach to involving private kindergartens in a comprehensive effort for external review in regions or municipalities. We also recommend that the national authorities obtain an overview of the efforts associated with quality assessment and development in Norwegian day-care, including in private facilities.

Kindergartens differ from schools also in terms of their educational programmes. External school reviews are largely based on interviews with managers, staff members, students and parents. In addition, varying kinds of observations of the educational practices applied in classrooms are included. Kindergartens have no classrooms, nor any specified learning outcomes for each child; emphasis is placed on the provision of care, training and learning that take place in the relationship between the children and the staff throughout the day. Access to such educational practices may be obtained through interviews and reflections/discussions in meetings to which staff members and parents are invited, and through interviews with the children. At the same time, observation of practices provides an highly valuable form of access. Should external kindergarten reviews therefore follow the specialist model, in which observations made by specialists constitute the primary approach to the review?

We point out that the specialist model is applied in Sarpsborg, a municipality which is sufficiently large and resourceful to have its own specialists who are trained in conducting observations in ways that lend legitimacy to their assessments. Smaller

municipalities will hardly possess the basis for having such specialists. In the regions that apply the basic and combined models for their reviews, administrators and educational supervisors who are employed in day-care assume the role of reviewers. Thus, the review is conducted by peers. This provides educational competence as well as experience and familiarity with the operation of kindergartens. At the same time, inter-municipal collaboration permits a certain degree of independence, by having reviewers from one municipality conduct reviews in others. Using administrators and educational supervisors for this task is also a method for sharing and building competence that will benefit the reviewers' home kindergarten as well.

The peer method applied in the basic and combined models includes a broad range of parties: kindergarten managers, staff members, parents and children are all heard and seen. In this manner, the data collection undertaken by the peer method thus in principle helps include all parties that shall be included in the assessment of the kindergarten's activities, in accordance with legislation. The professionally based in-depth observations resulting from the specialist model will not be able to provide the same range of data. However, for this broad approach to be representative in practice, sufficient time needs to be spent in the kindergartens, and those who conduct the interviews and meetings need to possess the necessary skills, for example when it comes to interviewing children, and routines need to be established to include the parents in the review process on an ongoing basis.

We found that the peer reviewers tend to have a variety of approaches to the observations and collection and processing of data. We interpret this as indicative of a need to raise and diversify the skills level among the reviewers; this can be achieved by establishing separate national skills workshops for them. At the same time, the current regional efforts should continue to serve as a basis, for example the practice of letting experienced reviewers serve as mentors to new recruits.

A national model for external kindergarten review can be based on elements from external school reviews. However, the content, methodology and skills must be especially developed for external kindergarten reviews. This is required in order to establish a quality assessment of kindergartens that permits evaluation of a characteristic of kindergarten pedagogy: the safety, personal development, learning and formation that can be established in the relationship between the children and staff of a kindergarten – process quality.