Fafo

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Competence in an
inclusive pre-school
and school environment

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This is the final report in a three-year project by Fafo to evaluate the three programmes included in the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training's competence enhancement package; An inclusive pre-school and school environment. We have examined the three programmes in the competence enhancement package: a web-based programme, a session-based programme and the Learning Environment Project. In addition, we have shed light on three other initiatives: decentralised competence enhancement in schools, regional competence enhancement in kindergartens, and follow-up. The aim was to gain an insight into whether and how the three programmes in the competence enhancement package are regarded as part of a cohesive effort to enhance competence in relation to an inclusive pre-school and school environment locally.

We posed five questions in the report:

- How well is competence enhancement in relation to an inclusive pre-school and school environment applied at a local level?
- What challenges are encountered in the local implementation of the inclusive pre-school and school environment initiative?
- What are the success criteria for local competence enhancement improving the pre-school and school environment?
- How do the local authorities ensure competence enhancement in the pre-school and school environment through the decentralised and regional initiatives and follow-up?
- How do the local authorities incorporate the follow-up and the decentralised and regional initiatives into the Learning Environment Project, session-based programmes and web-based programmes?

Part of the background to this report is the Djupedal Commission's (NOU 2015: 2) proposal to amend Chapter 9A of the Education Act in order to strengthen pupils' legal protection with regard to a safe and positive psychosocial environment, free from bullying and other forms of abuse. An important part of the regulatory amendment was establishing greater local accountability to ensure proactive prevention, detection and handling of forms of abuse, such as bullying, violence, discrimination and harassment. In addition, there was recognition that owners/authorities, school heads/managers and teachers/kindergarten staff needed to increase their competence on the subject. One of the ways of addressing this need

was to develop a competence enhancement package nationally, consisting of different types of competence enhancement measures aimed at the various actors locally.

The analytical approach we will use as an organising principle is to distinguish between three types of quality, taken from the national system for quality assessment (NOU 2003: 16): Structural quality is about the organisational framework and teaching in the programmes, and who takes part. Process quality puts the emphasis on practice. This involves central and local actors' efforts to implement and apply the programmes. Outcome quality relates to the programme outcomes.

The three-way division is useful because it establishes an analytical distinction between the established practices and the organisational framework for competence enhancement in the area, which is a crucial condition, but not necessarily sufficient to have a good effect. It is possible to see quality as a continuum, between high and low, and accordingly, we can distinguish between weak and strong ownership locally (Bjørnset et al. 2020).

The question is how well the various programmes achieve the goal of preventing, uncovering and addressing bullying and other forms of abuse locally in an inclusive pre-school and school environment. These factors are all central to the work. Meanwhile, there is an important empirical question concerning whether the competence enhancement package in its current form is equally suitable for the three priority areas.

About the initiatives

The three programmes in the competence enhancement package are aimed at kindergartens, schools, authorities and owners, and the aim is to enhance competence so as to ensure a safe and inclusive environment, free from bullying and other forms of abuse. However, the structure of the initiatives varies.

The web-based programme is aimed at participants who want to work independently, with much of the teaching taking place via video and online tasks. In practice, all participants get their own user account, which gives them access to the material. The programme consists of various videos, texts and tasks for testing in practice. There is room for flexibility during the three semesters of the programme. In addition to this material, video seminars have been added between the semesters.

The session-based programme is aimed at participants who want to work independently, with support from local resource personnel, networks and group sessions. This programme consists of national and local workshops as well as development work in the relevant kindergartens and schools, which receive financial support for resource personnel locally. In addition, a so-called learning network will be established, consisting of kindergartens and schools that can work together and support each other in the development work.

The Learning Environment Project is aimed at participants who want external support. The schools are selected on the basis of the results from the pupil survey and the County Governor's general knowledge of the challenges in the school environment. The kindergartens are involved in prevention, and are selected on the basis of location (near a school with challenges in the learning environment). The most important tools in the Learning Environment Project are follow-up from an advisory team and competence enhancement for personnel. The participants receive guidance from an advisory team composed of experts from the Centre for Learning Environment and from the field of practice.

We have also examined three initiatives that are aimed at local competence enhancement more generally, where an inclusive learning environment is one of several topics that can be prioritised. These are: the follow-up initiative, which is aimed at local authorities that persistently do not achieve satisfactory results in terms of learning outcomes and learning environment. In the first year (pre-phase) of this three-year initiative, participants receive help to analyse and map challenges and choose initiatives. The next two years consist of the implementation phase, and one of the initiatives that can be chosen is an advisory team from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The decentralised initiative aims to contribute to local school development, through a collaboration between local school owners, the County Governor and local universities and colleges. The regional initiative aims to contribute to competence enhancement in the kindergartens, also here through a collaboration between local owners, the County Governor and local universities and colleges. The ambition is to develop pedagogical practices through kindergarten-based competence enhancement. This entails kindergartens defining their own competence needs and conducting competence enhancement that involves all employees.

Data and method

In order to answer the research questions, the project is designed with several and supplementary types of data and methods. This is done to address the various components of the questions, which requires both descriptive and explanatory approaches. The survey is designed to emphasise the participants' subjective experiences and assessments of their own participation, whilst also seeking out more objective outcome measures.

All three programmes in the competence enhancement package will be carried out during the project period. We have therefore chosen a design that entails following one group in each programme and attending some of their sessions, where we have been able to observe how the sessions are carried out and interview a small sample of participants. Prior to participation in the Learning Environment Project, the session-based programme and the web-based programme, respectively, all participants were sent a questionnaire. A baseline analysis was

conducted to gain an insight into participants' expectations before joining the programme, and participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire during the programme in order to identify what the participants actually learned, based on their subjective understanding, and show the results of the participation.

In total, the qualitative material consists of 20 interviews from five municipalities; three rural and two urban. More specifically, it includes four school heads, eight teachers, six kindergarten staff, one educational supervisor and one practice supervisor. To examine the objective challenges and success criteria, we have also drawn up vignettes.

In the survey of the three general competence initiatives (decentralised, regional and follow-up), we combined a survey of respondents who have been responsible for the local participation in one of the three programmes in the competence enhancement package, with qualitative interviews of those responsible for competence enhancement in kindergartens and schools in nine municipalities (of different sizes and in different locations) and in three County Governor offices. In addition, we conducted a simple document analysis based on the County Governors' annual reports.

Structural quality

We have seen how structural quality is a question of ownership of the project, of whether the content is aimed at the participants, and of the quality of the content. We see the desire for broad participation on the one hand, which embraces all those working at kindergartens and schools, but also the need for in-depth participation that can bring about change in the efforts to achieve an inclusive environment. A high degree of ownership ensures local adaptation, and the participants therefore must believe in the competence enhancement and find it relevant. Ownership of the project also requires a sufficient number of participants to take part from each unit and content that is adapted to the participants.

In the previous interim report, we pointed out several challenges with the structure of the session-based programme and the Learning Environment Project, relating to top-heavy participation and lack of sufficient integration between the levels. In this report, we have also highlighted some success factors for the high quality of the structure. Where teachers or kindergarten staff sat in work groups at the units, they considered participation to be more in-depth, and we regard it a success factor that these actors become involved in the work to a greater extent. At the same time, managers have a special responsibility for ensuring an inclusive environment, and they are particularly important players in ensuring ownership. It may therefore be necessary to hold sessions for managers, as is seen at Gardermoen, in order for participation to also be sufficiently in-depth for competence enhancement. We now see challenges with diluted participation and competence enhancement, where top-heavy participation does not reach the units.

Another success criterion we have identified is the involvement of parents. The Learning Environment Project does this to the greatest extent, and our informants highlight parent meetings as particularly successful. Involvement of parents can increase the awareness of topics. In addition, children can be more involved in all three programmes, given that they are, after all, the core element of schools and kindergartens.

Process quality

In simple terms, process quality relates to whether participants feel that the programmes have enhanced their competence in a way that is relevant to their own situation. The main finding is that participants are generally very satisfied with the content of all three programmes in the competence enhancement package. Data from the final survey show that the programmes are considered to be aimed at an appropriate level, not too theoretical, and informative. In addition, it seems that participants and project owners/speakers have a shared understanding of the problem, and are in agreement on what constitutes bullying and other forms of abuse. When we adjust for participants from kindergartens and schools, respectively, the findings are somewhat nuanced. Although all participants agree that the programme has enhanced their competence, the kindergarten staff are generally more satisfied than the school staff. This may be because the kindergarten staff regard their role as more preventive, and that the school staff are under more pressure to deal with individual cases. This impression is confirmed in the qualitative interviews, with several participants from the schools saying they found the content 'too general' and 'not very specific'. We also found that the perceived relevance of the content also depends on who participates in the programme and whether they feel it should be mostly aimed at preventing or dealing with bullying and other forms of abuse. Teachers and kindergarten assistants may need more practical content, while the management may feel the need for more theoretical and general competence enhancement.

Outcome quality

We do not have data that can shed light on whether the changes are of a lasting nature. It is also worth emphasising that the figures on bullying indicate that, despite a moderate decline, bullying in Norway is still widespread. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus among the participants that the programmes are very helpful to their work in this area. When we analysed the data in more detail, we nevertheless found interesting differences among participants. In response to direct questions, eight out of ten said their competence in physical and psychological bullying had been enhanced. In relation to cyberbullying, there was a significant difference between the participants on the three programmes. The vast

majority of participants in the Learning Environment Project felt their competence in the subject had been enhanced, but this was not such a commonly held view among participants on the web-based programme. We also used vignettes, not only to ask what the participants think, but also to see how they responded when confronted with a fictitious but concrete situation. It is difficult to interpret the results, but one finding is that both the kindergarten and the school staff consider bullying to be part of the psychosocial environment. This may seem obvious today, but historically this has not been the case. Traditionally, bullying and other forms of abuse have primarily been viewed as a matter involving two people – the person doing the bullying and the person being bullied. Our survey showed that the challenges and possible solutions were viewed in the context of the psychosocial environment as a horizon of understanding.

The general competence enhancement initiatives

The decentralised initiative for competence enhancement in schools and the regional initiative for competence enhancement in kindergartens are national competence enhancement initiatives. The funding is managed by the county governors and is allocated based on local and regional priorities. Today, it is a prerequisite that competence enhancement takes place locally in collaboration with local universities and colleges, and that agreements are entered into with these. In doing so, the competence enhancement will also cover teacher education throughout Norway, and give it a more practical orientation. In other words, the decentralised and regional initiatives require extensive cooperation between local authorities at a regional level, between local authorities and county governors' offices, and between local authorities and their local universities and colleges. The follow-up initiative is aimed at local authorities that persistently have poor results in terms of learning outcomes and learning environment. The county governors' offices and external advisors provide considerable input to these competence enhancement efforts. The competence enhancement areas that are to be prioritised for the schools are indicated in the sector's goals for compulsory education, while the Ministry of Education and Research's strategy on competence for the kindergarten of tomorrow (Kompetanse for framtidens barnehage) applies correspondingly for kindergartens. An inclusive pre-school and school environment is part of a national priority in both sectors. We find that the various initiatives and programmes aimed at facilitating competence enhancement in these areas are perceived and treated by the local authorities as more supplementary than competing. This topic repeatedly occurs as a prioritised area for competence enhancement in the decentralised and regional initiatives, for several reasons: the relatively new 'obligation to act' provision in the Education Act aimed at providing pupils with a safe and positive psychosocial school environment, and the forthcoming inclusion of similar provisions in the Kindergarten

Act. These are national priorities that have emerged as a result of local needs. Locally, administrative efforts are underway to integrate various initiatives and programmes – in collaboration with kindergarten and school staff. The potential for achieving such harmonisation is, however, linked to several factors: 1) Particularly small and medium-sized municipalities emphasise well-functioning regional municipal cooperation. 2) The relationship with the local higher education sector is important, but it is not yet fully established. 3) Initiatives and programmes from various ministries and directorates must be conducive to administrative harmonisation at a local level. 4) The follow-up of efforts initiated through projects such as the competence enhancement package must be part of more long-term strategies for an inclusive pre-school and school environment. 5) The relationship with private kindergarten owners and school owners must be carefully considered in the decentralised and regional initiatives. Through the analysis of the county governors' offices' annual reports for 2019, our survey also provides some insight into how the follow-up initiative uses programmes from the competence enhancement package for an inclusive pre-school and school environment. Although the follow-up initiative covers relatively few municipalities with poor results, we see that several of these municipalities use the session-based programme, which is aimed at kindergartens and schools in general, as part of a strategy that also includes support. The Learning Environment Project is also used. A more in-depth insight into how, as part of the follow-up initiative, local authorities devise strategies to strengthen the school and learning environment through national support schemes should be sought through research projects involving these local authorities, their strategy work and development. These insights should also include the interaction between the relevant local authorities and the representatives from the county governor's office and national or other support teams.

Conclusions

The analyses in the report show that kindergarten and school owners and staff feel that they have a significant need for more competence on safe and positive environments, bullying and other forms of abuse. There is also a broad recognition that universal rules and common competence enhancement measures are needed to ensure equal treatment of children in relation to bullying, regardless of which unit and municipality they belong to. As such, the theme of the report plays into the discussion on the prerequisites for safeguarding a universal and equal school and kindergarten provision in which a safe environment is a fundamental right. Some conclusions stand out:

- In discussions about bullying and other forms of abuse, various actors often highlight their own experiences from individual cases and how they were and

should have been handled. For the parties involved – employees, parents or the children themselves – these are unique cases, but from the outside, the cases are often similar. A key challenge is therefore that the competence enhancement programmes need to cover the ability to recognise the general aspects of a case whilst also dealing with specifics. Consequently, one conclusion is that the different programmes need to cover different types of competence. However, care must be taken to ensure that by choosing one programme participants are not missing out on important competence found in the other programmes. One challenge is perhaps that those who have an overview of the entire competence enhancement package and all competence enhancement initiatives consider the content in the various programmes to be complementary, while those wishing to attend a programme tend to assume that the only difference between the programmes is the learning method.

- Participants in all three programmes in the competence enhancement package all feel that they have a great need for more knowledge, which indicates a willingness to learn and an acknowledgement of insufficient competence.

- The usefulness of competence enhancement is weighed against how the participants feel that they function in their local everyday life. In our interpretation of this finding, this primarily relates to ownership at a local level. Put bluntly, there is no point in learning lots of interesting things if this knowledge is not applied locally. The latter largely requires the participants to adapt the knowledge they have acquired to their local working environment. The data show surprisingly few differences between participants from the various programmes in this area.

- In relation to local competence enhancement, a significant strength of the web-based programme is that the material can be viewed again after completing the programme and that the content can be discussed among colleagues. Consequently, the web-based programme can provide useful input to the collective competence enhancement of staff groups at kindergartens and schools.

- The success of the programmes is dependent on participation being prioritised, as well as high-quality content. However, quality is not only important in an objective sense; it also has a subjective dimension in that it must be experienced by the individual participant. This requires good leaders, who can convert the knowledge from general guidelines into local practice. This type of site-related sensitivity is crucial for local ownership, which we consider to be important for applying the knowledge.

- The competence enhancement programmes can be perceived as competing, but their thematic content is complementary. It is not the individual programmes that present a challenge, but the way they are used. Our analyses indicate

that the participants acknowledge that they need to enhance their competence, but this does not necessarily mean that they have the same awareness of their need for both general competence and local adaptation. Combined with time constraints, this results in participants normally choosing either the session-based programme or the web-based programme, or being eligible for the Learning Environment Project due to special challenges. However, there is a tendency for participants to need competence that is offered on one of the programmes they are not participating in. One vital success criterion is therefore of a more general nature than a question of adjustments to the three programmes. Consequently, an important question is whether the three initiatives with a general orientation we studied in the supplementary survey represent an answer or a solution to the challenge we have outlined here.

- The survey of how the local authorities coordinate or do not coordinate their efforts for competence enhancement in an inclusive pre-school and school environment based on the competence enhancement package and the more generally oriented decentralised and regional initiatives, shows that these measures are considered to be more complementary than competing. Whether different initiatives and programmes initiated nationally can be coordinated and understood in a local context, however, depends on a number of factors. From a national point of view, it is important to be aware of these factors and work to accommodate them. This includes facilitating regional cooperation, flexibility in relation to local approaches to collaboration with universities and colleges, rethinking how private kindergartens and school owners are incorporated into competence enhancement strategies, an assessment of which programmes and initiatives can work for municipalities with poor results (which are included in the follow-up initiative), and how project-based measures such as the competence enhancement package can be integrated with long-term strategies for an inclusive pre-school and school environment.