

Professional Development Among Preschool Teachers: Meta-Conversations About Peer Counseling

SAGE Open
April-June 2024: 1–12
© The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.1177/21582440241256541
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


Hege Fimreite¹  and Øyvind Glosvik¹

Abstract

This article aims to analyze discourse about professional development in preschool, represented by knowledge movements in meta-conversations about peer counseling. Empirically, this article presents a case study based on audio recordings of focus group discussions on peer counseling. The underlying study highlights findings in the form of various speech acts as markers for central discourse among preschool teachers. Habermas' theory of communicative action is used as a framework for analyzing the preschool teachers' statements, showing that the concepts of lifeworld and system are central in their discussions. The study highlights knowledge movements pertaining to learning and becoming part of the community, knowledge movements that threaten professional aspects, and dynamics between the participants' everyday lives and the system. Peer counseling in groups appears to be a crucial transformative learning activity in the preschool setting studied. The findings presented can contribute to bridging preschool teachers' everyday lives and the system they function within and can be used to improve the education of preschool teachers.

Plain Language Summary

A changing society needs preschool teachers who continuously develop their professional competence. But professional competence is collective and this is a text about how preschool teachers learn through conversations about important professional issues. The method employed is an analysis of audio recordings of two stimulated recall conversations about peer counseling sessions with a total of eight participants. The main objective is to develop useful concepts when understanding how collective learning takes place in a preschool context. The theories focus on how tensions between the everyday world and formal systems frame both individual and collective learning. The analysis shows that a division between professionally educated teachers and non-educated assistants might create emotionally demanding situations influencing collective learning. This is seen through the lenses of theoretical concepts.

Keywords

lifeworld and system, peer counseling, preschool, speech acts

Introduction

A changing society needs preschool teachers who are critical thinkers, who challenge existing actions and understandings, and who continuously develop their professional competence. Professional competence is collective knowledge, and changes in collective knowledge can be expressed as “knowledge movements.”

Our approach to knowledge movements is to utilize Habermas' concepts of “lifeworld” and “system” (Fimreite, 2022, p. 44; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Habermas et al., 1999). We do not use the term “lifeworld”

specifically in the actual analysis, but instead utilize the concept “everyday world.” This term concretizes everyday life in preschool, and highlights preschool as a place with smooth and seamless processes around care, play, learning and formation. Preschools are part of a larger

¹Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Sogndal, Norway

Corresponding Author:

Hege Fimreite, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Kringla 10, Røyrgata 6, Sogndal 6856, Norway.
Email: hege.fimreite@hvl.no



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of

the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

whole with a “system” in the form of political and governmental guidelines and requirements. These “systems” link preschools to other parts of the education and childhood formation systems, and the formal requirements for documentation and procedures that external entities expect. “Knowledge movement” is in this text the term for processes that bridge everyday life and systems. The focus of these movements is how tensions between experiences internal to the preschool and external demands appear in conversations about peer counseling in groups. In the text this is referred to as “meta-conversations.” The aim is to investigate the role that peer counseling as a transformative learning activity can play in connection with professional development in preschools.

The article’s problem statement is: *To what extent is central discourse on professional development manifested as knowledge movements in meta-conversations about peer counseling?*

This implies that “professional development” empirically is operationalized as “knowledge movement” in this text, which is based on a case study utilizing audio recordings of conversations in two focus groups on peer counseling in a Norwegian preschool, as well as a conversation between preschool teachers, and a conversation between the preschool’s leader and a supervisor.

The conversations are, as mentioned, understood on a meta level, that is conversations on counseling. The assumption is that by analyzing these as ontological units insight is gained as much on the group level as the individual level. One could also argue that this is an untapped source to collective learning in organizations.

The following sections first introduce the study’s assumptions, theoretical basis, and methodology. The findings are then presented in the form of four different categories of speech acts. The conclusion discusses how peer counseling becomes an arena for studying the movement of knowledge.

Literature Review

Reflection on one’s practice in communication with colleagues has been emphasized as a valuable component of a professional community (Damjanovic & Blank, 2018; Evertsen et al., 2015; Irvine & Price, 2014; Postholm, 2018; Sæbø & Midtsundstad, 2022). Langelotz’s (2013) study of a teaching team whose members were required to participate in a peer counseling group supports that peer counseling can nurture new and complex processes that can be both delimiting and liberating, and Avidov-Ungar et al. (2023) highlight the importance of preschool teachers taking the role as leaders of professional learning communities. Lazzari (2012) and Fimreite & Fossøy (2018) examine preschool teachers’ professionalism based on discussions in focus groups, demonstrating the

value of collective discussion venues as arenas for professional development in an interplay with society at large. Bjerkholt et al. (2014) conducted a study of newly qualified preschool teachers, concluding that counseling conversations facilitate critical thinking about the participants’ practices. Hence, different perspectives and foundations contribute to the establishment of a shared understanding.

A literature review on transformative learning in teacher education (Hatlevik, 2018) indicates that transformative learning activities can promote critical reflection on one’s own and others’ professional practices. This approach can further promote the development of professional knowledge and skills. Smith’s (2015) study of professional learning processes in an interprofessional collaboration between preschool teachers and early childhood educators highlights the transformative power that lies in emancipatory, professional learning processes. Smith further concludes that individual commitment to plans that focus on refinement and transformation of professional practice is central to this development. These studies all support peer counseling as a transformative learning activity in the interface between the day-to-day activities and the social mission of (pre)schools.

Professions manage large societal resources and are seen as solving tasks on behalf of society (Molander et al., 2008). The preschool teacher as a professional is bound by obligations to a societal mandate, to a specific knowledge base, and professional ethical standards (Hennum & Østrem, 2016). Counseling, guidance, and mentoring are common concepts in Norwegian preschools but have not been highlighted as an activity for collective learning. At its core, the discussion presented in this article focuses on the professionalization of the preschool teacher profession, and peer counseling as a transformative learning activity that influences this process of professionalization. This transformative activity is, as mentioned in the introduction, termed “knowledge movement.”

Theoretical Underpinnings Related to Everyday Activities and the External System

The analytical tools employed in this text were developed through an abductive process where several theoretical approaches were tested. The concept of “speech act” is chosen because learning in contexts as preschool implies wording of thoughts in conversations in groups. However, the literature neither on organizational development nor peer counseling have a precise concept for this. Our suggestion is with reference to Habermas (1984) “speech act.”

Habermas’ (1984; Habermas et al., 1999) theory of communicative action is then this study’s theoretical

underpinning for analyzing preschool teachers' statements in conversations about peer counseling. Habermas' theory combines communication, action, and interaction. He uses the term "communicative action" to describe a type of interaction that is coordinated by means of speech acts (p. 66).

Habermas discusses several types of acts that can be linked to conversational situations. These include speech acts, assertions, descriptions, orders, questions, and promises. Speech acts are integral parts of language and serve many functions. It is assumed here that speech acts can facilitate the understanding of what happens in conversations about counseling situations. Such speech acts reveal tensions between the preschool's objective external environment, the preschool's social sphere, and each individual actor's subjective domain.

Speech acts are, in Habermas' terminology, linked to various types of social action. This study uses his classification of such speech acts in the following manner: (1) instrumental speech acts, which are a type of targeted statements about how one can get other actors to do something, (2) declarative speech acts, which are related to factual conditions about the situation as it is or appears, (3) normative speech acts, which are related to what is seen as right and valid in a specific, social sphere or situation, and (4) dramaturgical speech acts, which are statements or conversations about stylistic features, aesthetic aspects, or specific features of individuals' behavior or statements that are clearly rooted in the actors' subjective value.

The concept of lifeworld is taken from phenomenology, while the systems concept has its roots in Parsons and Luhman's systems theory (op. cit. p. 22). This lifeworld includes cultural, personal, and social traditions, while society as a system in many contexts can be experienced as a contrast to this lifeworld. The system appears as formally organized action sequences that exist to safeguard specific economic and political priorities. When parents hand over their children to preschools, these two arenas of home and preschool emerge as different arenas, and this can lead to conflicts between families' lifeworlds and the external system. The concept of lifeworld encompasses the primary socialization and internalization processes that maintain cultural characteristics. This concept further emphasizes close and everyday aspects in general, close relationships that characterize the care for children, and the close relationship between adults who work closely together with emotional transactions.

The systems concept can be an expression of several subsystems, including the rationalized state administration, as well as economic and political subsystems. For preschools, the system can appear in the form of priority tasks and values, for example in the Framework Plan for preschools (This Framework Plan is developed by the

Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). It contains the preschool's core values and content and guides the pedagogical practices' content and tasks.) The system can also manifest itself in the form of other applicable laws and regulations related to working hours, working environment, safety, budget, and accounting. The discourse about preschools either as an arena for "play," or as an arena for "instruction and learning," can appear as a conflict between lifeworld and system.

Hellesnes (1988, p. 90, translated from Norwegian) describes the lifeworld as follows: "...the non-thematic constitutes the background and the horizon [...]" All problematization requires a problem-free framework within which situational problems (temporarily) can be kept. This lifeworld includes "the non-thematic functions," the background, what we always take for granted. According to Eik et al. (2016), a special feature of Norwegian preschools is the employment of many individuals without formal training, and that a general culture of equality can signal that formal competence does not always govern work tasks. This indicates that the concept of lifeworld may be relevant for understanding how cultural, personal, and social traditions and characteristics affect conversations and learning processes in preschools. In peer counseling, non-thematic aspects of preschools can become thematic, and connections between the implicit and the system can be emphasized and analyzed.

This study focuses on peer counseling in groups that, according to Lauvås and Handal (2000), can contribute to the development of a common basis for action by defining, analyzing, discussing, and evaluating knowledge pertaining to specific situations. When preschool teachers bring specific challenges from their "everyday world" into the counseling sphere, peer counseling can become an arena for seeing connections between the individual teachers' lifeworlds and the system. Lycke and Handal (2012) emphasize the value of shared reflection and point out that shared conversations increase the likelihood that "silent topics" will be discussed in a setting with greater diversity of arguments, ideas, and perspectives.

Peer counseling can thus support continuous professional development in an organization (Lauvås et al., 2016). An important function of such counseling in the context of this study is to develop shared reflections on challenges related to preschools. Group peer counseling will facilitate insight into the participants' professional assumptions, theoretical standpoints, experiences, and ethical reflections. Also relevant in this context are Lauvås and Handal's (2000) perspective on professional assumptions and theories as collective phenomena, as well as starting points for the development of professional collaboration. According to Lauvås and Handal (2000, p. 275), it is important for professional

collaboration that colleagues develop their collective theory of practice through open dialogue.

Learning Between Everyday Life and Systems

This study's main assumption is that so-called "knowledge movements" combine everyday values and external systems. This is operationalized more closely through the concept of transformative learning, which contributes to the development of professional practical wisdom and identity (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Mezirow was influenced by Habermas, who proposed that meaning external to the individual is created via communication. Through critical reflection on one's own and others' arguments, one assesses the content, sources, causes, premises, and consequences of actions with the aim of understanding and justifying such actions (Mezirow, 1995, 1998).

This study further assumes that both everyday values and systems can represent challenging frameworks, thought patterns and perspectives, but that there are ways to build bridges between challenging frameworks. Mezirow (2003; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, pp. 58–59) claims that transformative learning is a form of metacognitive reasoning that involves becoming aware of, reviewing, and revising one's frame of reference in the light of new experiences and knowledge. According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), we develop frames of reference that both consciously and unconsciously control our patterns of reasoning and action. These frames also influence our perception, and how we construct meaning, categorize, and interpret new experiences and information, and how we interpret ourselves and others. The focus is on being willing to change and on seeking "the best arguments" (Habermas et al., 1999).

Learning Individually and Collectively

A conversation takes place between two or more people, often forming a kind of team. Speech acts in organizational and professional contexts can be either individual or collective. Development of professional competence includes learning and being open to, and taking responsibility for, improving professional practice (Jensen et al., 2012). This can be analyzed both at the individual and collective level.

Transformative learning contributes to the foundation for the development of practical wisdom. It also contributes to developing teachers' skills in defending their autonomy (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2011). Individual teachers can develop their competence in a collective setting that facilitates professional improvement. Should this learning be analyzed at the individual or the collective level? There are divergent views on this in the literature

on organizational learning (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998). This study, however, follows a tradition where individual knowledge development is seen as potentially enhanced in social contexts, and selectively linked to existing, organizational knowledge (Brix, 2017, p. 113).

Research Methodology

This text is based on qualitative data from one preschool. The information comes from the preschool teachers, but the analysis is based on the preschool teachers' views and opinions, not aspects of the individuals themselves. This means that we analyze the aspects of the discourses on group level as the unit of analysis. The focus is on one preschool community's "conversations about conversations," meta-conversations, which are analyzed based on concrete, meaningful statements. The authors of this study propose that knowledge movements in this community's discourse are expressed through such speech acts. Understanding takes place in a dialogical process, in which different points of view arise in a community (Gergen, 2010, pp. 13–16). When such views are formulated as meaningful statements, they are, in this text, viewed as "speech acts" that potentially provide insight into the community's opinion formation.

Brief Description of the Preschool and the Participants

The setting is a private preschool with four sections, including two toddler sections and two sections for children over three years of age. There is a total of 65 children and approximately 20 employees. Ten of the employees are formally trained preschool teachers. The preschool teachers who participated in the study were all female (age 23–58) and have different educational backgrounds and seniority. The peer counseling groups have from five to eight participants. This preschool has previously participated in an action research project (Fimreite & Fosøy, 2018), where the purpose was to develop common practice theory through systematic peer counseling in groups, based on the model "problem-oriented counseling in groups" (Lauvås et al., 2004, pp. 62–65), where preschool teachers through a structured conversation in eight phases systematically explore and counseling each other on everyday professional challenges. Since 2014, the preschool has employed peer counseling in groups.

Focus Groups

This is a qualitative analysis of conversations in two focus groups, 90 min each. The data material is gathered from the preschool teachers' conversations about peer counseling, meta-conversations, in two focus group. The goal of the preschool teachers' conversations is to

develop more accurate knowledge of peer counseling as a peer learning activity. Both conversations are based on six anonymized short statements prepared by the preschool teachers, in addition to two more explanatory vignettes made by the researcher on the topic of resistance and uncertainty since this can be easier to discuss if it is not linked to their context. The conversations were self-organized, each preschool teacher drew a note with a statement to discuss. These statements thematize different aspects of peer counseling in this community, based on problems described by the preschool teachers after the peer counseling sessions with the aim of developing their professional learning community. Researcher was in the room and guided the process, did the recording, and said as little as possible. The purpose of this study is to identify the preschool teachers' views as closely as possible to formulate a coherent and theoretical third-person perspective (Brinkmann & Tanggard, 2020).

According to Brinkmann and Tanggard (2020), focus groups produce empirical material at the group level. Focus groups represent a good method for producing data on interpretations when participants comment on each other's understandings. Conversations in focus groups make it possible to examine how people engage in collective opinion creation, and how participants clarify their experiences, reflections, and interpretations in a focused conversation (Bryman, 2016; Wibeck et al., 2007).

These six statements and two vignettes form the framework for the content of the participants' conversation. The total, combined data gathered from both approaches is analyzed as one data set. The shared, meaningful statements related to this content is in this study referred to as "speech acts" (Habermas et al., 1999).

Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved by the The Norwegian Centre for Research Data with reference number 345872. The information and processing of the data is in line with The Norwegian Centre for Research Data's guidelines. Participation in the focus group conversations was voluntary. Bassey (1990) emphasizes that respect for the participants is an important ethical guideline. This can be accomplished by appreciating the participants' knowledge and input, for example by allowing the participants to prepare cases upon which the conversations are based. Participants were offered the opportunity to read the transcribed material, but none of them took advantage of this offer.

Analysis

Data reduction and content analysis were used in the evaluation of the data. This analysis operationalizes

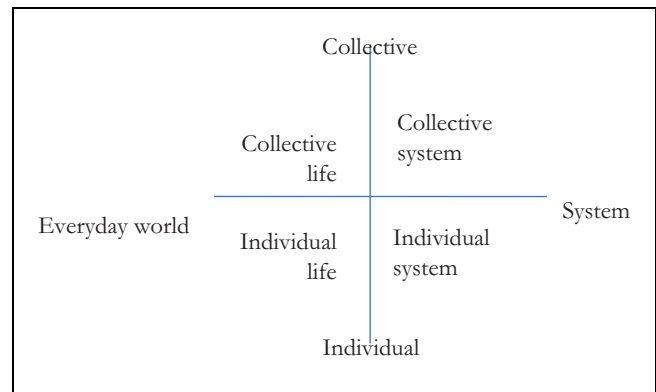


Figure 1. Basic categories, theoretical perspective.

Habermas et al.'s (1999) categories, using these as analytical concepts in what Brinkmann and Tanggard (2020) refer to as theory-driven coding. The qualitative data analysis tool NVivo was used to organize the data and to search for relationships and patterns (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The authors cooperated on the analysis of the data by coding and discussing together, in the same room in two long sessions. Any disagreement has been solved through scrutinizing and discussing the raw data.

The first step of the analysis sorts the material into four groups with statements linked to "everyday world and system," distributed along the dimensions "individual and collective" levels. This gives four main categories, shown in Figure 1: (1) "Individual life" includes practical-type statements about everyday conditions in the preschool related to individuals. (2) "Collective life" thematizes the preschool as a social community. (3) "Individual system" contains statements about professional roles, formal knowledge and other expressions characterized by external, codified, or thematic concepts that categorize individuals. (4) "Collective system" deals with structural practices, staff groups and formal issues that are not directly related to the individual.

The second step of the analysis sorts and analyzes the speech acts according to the four categories derived from Habermas et al. (1999, pp. 20–21). In addition, this study includes the dimension "individual collective" in the qualitative content analysis and draws on the tension between the everyday world and the system.

The concluding discussion analyzes the most important knowledge movements. It employs the term "transformative learning" to analyze how tensions in the preschool's professional community affect collective learning.

Results

We present the results of a two-step analysis process in the following sections. The first step is to develop a

Table 1. Speech Acts Considering Theoretical Categories in Percent (Raw Numbers in Parentheses).

		Speech acts					Proportion, every-day versus system	
		Instrumental	Declarative	Normative	Dramaturgical	Total		
Theoretically defined categories	Everyday world	Individual life	38 (6)	20 (20)	4 (5)	27 (16)	16 (47)	36 (105)
		Collective life	6 (1)	13 (13)	29 (34)	17 (10)	20 (58)	
	System	Individual system	38 (6)	22 (22)	29 (34)	27 (16)	27 (78)	64 (186)
		Collective system	19 (3)	44 (44)	37 (43)	30 (18)	37 (108)	
		Total	100 (16)	99 (99)	99 (116)	101 (60)	100 (291)	

descriptive presentation of findings and an analysis in quantified form. This step determines how the speech acts place along the dimensions of everyday world vs. system, and individual-collective. This is qualitative data presented in numerical form, which gives an overview and show patterns in the material. These findings will, in the second step, be discussed in more detail in the form of a qualitative content analysis.

Overview of Findings

Table 1 shows the main findings related to 291 classified speech acts. The main impression is that conversations about (counseling) dialogues in this preschool are about collective aspects. There are about 30% more speech acts related to collective aspects compared to speech acts related to individuals. The preschool as a collective system dominates the meta-conversations. Individuals are clearly present, but first and foremost within the framework of the preschool as a social and formal system. The number of speech acts related to topics categorized as “System” is 50% greater than speech acts associated with the category “Everyday world.” The hypothesis guiding the following discussion is that this indicates a movement from the system towards everyday world aspects. The system-oriented part of the preschool dominates throughout the day.

“Normative speech acts” constitute, by far, the largest category. Such acts focus, first and foremost, on what the professional role means for individuals. They also deal with the meaning of participation in a professional community, and which methods and procedures are to be used. These acts also deal with system coercion, meaning what everyone must do when they work in this preschool. Conversations about structures, plans, norms, systematic aspects, what has been planned and what is required by all dominate. When the conversations focus on culture, it is about the “good culture” which regulates individuals’ actions considering what has been decided in this preschool community. Opting out of professional

challenges is, for example, not normatively acceptable in this preschool.

The second largest category is the “Declarative,” which focuses on what oneself and others do, about what is seen as challenging, and how one interprets specific situations. It is also about ascertaining or observing “facts.” In many ways, this is about constructing a knowledge base through observations, and about reflections on systems and frameworks.

The “Dramaturgical” category describes individuals who protest, or who oppose dominant, local discourses. These speech acts are often caricatured, and persons are discussed using a different language style than is the case with declarative acts. Use of metaphors can be seen as an expression of something difficult thinking about or something that is emotionally demanding (Svare, 2002). The researchers propose that this category captures role-playing and local typology and abstractions about “the other.” Those that are typecast in this way are most often absent. Those present are discussed in declarative terms. This gives a colorful picture of “counter-voices” from everyday life, which appear in encounters with the system. These contradictions, as they indicate that the day-to-day preschool values are under pressure and demonstrate knowledge movements.

There are fewest “Instrumental” speech acts. These are primarily related to comments pertaining to individuals.

A Qualitative Content Analysis

The various speech acts and categories can be seen as markers for central discourses in the preschool.

Normative Speech Acts. Most of the speech acts belong to the “Normative” category, focusing on the collective level. These acts are linked to the social world and deal with what is correct and valid. They show the dissemination of cultural values and norms for how the group should or may function. Examples of such statements are: (*But*) *we must build a foundation, I think, with the*

educators, and then they have the responsibility to take responsibility. But then they must have competence, they must have knowledge and experience, and then they must have the feeling of owning it. Then I do not think that you can just pull something over your head and say that now you should engage in counseling. I feel we have worked hard and built up a competence that the educators now own.

“The method between you and the one you do not like”

Normative speech acts related to individuals refer to a subject’s commitment and the consequences of counseling as a learning activity, that one needs to go beyond one’s comfort zone if one wants to develop: *It is a forced rhythm where everyone must get involved (..) I think that sometimes you have to do things that you do not want to do in order to develop yourself.* The systems perspective also emerges in this context, in that the social mission and obligations are highlighted: *It is about paying attention to changes in society and updating oneself professionally, you have some duties in a job, you have a work directive. Misguided kindness in preschools, to just be nice to each other, that time is over.* We also find speech actions related to innovation around the use of the counseling method, such as the fact that it can function as a support in a difficult situation with another colleague: *Counseling can be a great method that you can use in a difficult situation, because then you have the method in between you and the one you do not like, so that you can rely on the method to be able to discuss what is difficult.*

“Work away the bad culture”

Normative speech acts related to the community focus on obtaining hidden patterns of action in one’s own culture: *The counseling can bring out more nuances, and then the falsehoods can emerge. We may be able to work away the bad culture because one brings out more nuances, the counseling model helps us focus and helps us create these frameworks, while at the department meeting you must cover so many things.* Collegial support is also highlighted as a consequence of peer counseling, both within teams and across teams: *One becomes aware of one’s own way of doing things, compared to others’ approaches. When sharing a challenge, you feel that you have the group behind you and that they also work towards the same goal.* In addition, the focus is on professional challenges and different approaches: *We must work with professional challenges no matter what, and counseling is a method to work on these.* Included in this category are speech acts that refer to more general reasoning about changes in collective knowledge.

Declarative Speech Acts. The second largest group of speech acts belong to the “Declarative” category. These focus on actual conditions and confirmation of

situations: *I think many thought and experienced that... oh, now we are finally done with this. In that group, I experienced that no one stated openly that they disagreed, but that some were not happy about it at first. I would say that it was imposed by the leaders.* This is not a matter of controlling or influencing anyone, but of trying to reason about observations.

“You cannot be passive in a counseling session”

Declarative speech acts related to an individual, for example focusing on what may be important to a person, can be understood as neutral: *Perhaps some know too little of what it implies; maybe some struggle with bad experiences from previous counseling. Others just jump into it; we are very different regarding this.* The material also includes speech acts that discuss peer counseling based on commitment and activity level: *You cannot be passive in a counseling session, you can say pass, but you must be active on the inside. You can tune out more at a department meeting.* The systems perspective is also expressed through these speech acts, referring to different positions and standings: *It is now part of the preschool teacher’s task to counsel; the person who does this experiences counseling where there are only educators present as more useful than when we mix skilled and unskilled.*

“We march more in step”

Several of the declarative speech acts are aimed at local systems and structures, such as different types of meetings, planning time, and various plans and documents: *Often we do not have it on our plans; this is a method for fulfilling the other goals in the Framework Plan.* Other speech acts point more to collective knowledge: *When we talk about peer counseling, we know what it is, we have become better, I think we march more in step, the educator group uses their expertise and counseling at our staff meetings.* In addition, the statements refer to the culture within the group: *Of course, there is tension in the group, such as a bad culture, so counseling is perfect.* We also find speech acts that refer to a more general reasoning about one’s own collective knowledge and how these changes: *I think about this double-circuit learning. We do not make the same mistakes all the time; now we go into more depth and change the way we do things.*

Dramaturgical Speech Acts. “Dramaturgical speech acts” are about seeing other actors in their subjective universe of wants and emotions. These speech acts are communicated in a stylistic and aesthetic manner, using colorful language and metaphors to express difficult and emotional demanding worded issues and key points: *And so, it is, that in the counseling session everyone must participate, while at the department meeting, one can be passive. (In the counseling sessions) one often focuses on a shared challenge, while at the department meetings there can be*

many, many hundreds of issues, also some nonsense issues. Such practical things that maybe not everyone can get involved in, or see as exciting to get involved in. While during counseling, one could probably say that there are more professional aspects.

“She drags both her feet”

Dramaturgical speech acts about individuals thematize, among other things, resistance as an expression of personal attitude: *When she drags both her feet, it is definitely not easy; she may be sitting there, but she is not engaged.* Speech acts in this group also refer to the systems perspective in the form of different positions and roles, as well as the preschool’s place in society: *It depends on how the leader presents it, whether one feels that something is being rammed down one’s throat, or whether one can be involved and self-guided, a preschool from the past... housewives who took a part-time job have stayed on... with potted plants and tablecloths... linked to family and home instead of to an educational institution.* We see that dramaturgical and strategic speech acts can to some extent overlap.

“It is like sticking your head into a hornets’ nest”

Dramaturgical speech acts about collective aspects focus on both structure and culture, often supported with variation in voice volume, reinforcing points by putting pressure on certain words, and in some cases following statements by laughter: *...I felt I sat there and created the entire plan, and they just sat there and received. It is like sticking your head into a hornets’ nest.* The dramaturgical speech acts in this group also refer to various aspects of the community of preschool teachers, of their own culture and of the preschool culture: *We saw that we had a somewhat halting group of educators. We do not have to be professional or have a good culture to counsel. Sometimes there are truths that are not really true because they are based on old routines. The preschool sector has a very talkative culture, it is so important that we air our problems or frustrations... and so we use that time (the peer counseling group time).*

Instrumental Speech Acts. “Instrumental speech acts” are purposeful and strategic, representing the smallest group in this study’s data. These speech acts are, directly or indirectly, about how to get other actors to do what the speaker wants them to do. These acts can be linked to both individuals and to the community. An example of such a purely instrumental speech act is: *It is often the case that they think that they have invented it themselves. I have said it many times, but they have not listened. But when they come up with it themselves then it is very interesting, so you must drip and drip and drip information until they suddenly find out that this is wise and then it blooms from below. This is perhaps the best method.* There were only a few such instrumental speech acts.

“Doing it their own way”

Individually oriented, instrumental speech acts often take place when the conversations are about motivating and facilitating internal motivation and individual well-being: *Finding her motivation, giving her some clues to motivate her to want this.* These acts are also sometimes more strategic, with the purpose of preventing opposition to favored measures: *Whoever is going to embrace what is new must have the will to do so, otherwise it will be quickly opposed.* Speech acts in this category can also be related to the systems perspective when discussing different roles and positions in the organization: *As a leader, you must let go of control and let the person do it their own way, and then you must reinforce along the way and give positive feedback on what he does.*

“A more hidden agenda”

Collectively oriented, instrumental speech acts are often “we-focused.” This indicates that the group members see the benefit of peer counseling. Examples of such statements are: *We must bring counseling into different contexts, use it in staff meetings, use counseling in different settings where we see we can use it.* Sometimes, the statements indicate more of a hidden agenda: *I think that one way to discretely introduce something is to be sensitive and understand what is stirring in the group, so that what is brought into the counseling sessions is relevant to them.* Some speech acts can be understood as an overriding type of reasoning about peer counseling as a learning activity among colleagues: *We limit that small talk. Then there is not just talking, instead, there will be more targeted professional work.* The instrumental aspect here is about being “smart” when it comes to implementation, instead of hurting someone’s feelings.

Discussion

By analyzing speech acts considering theoretically defined categories, this study identifies different knowledge movements and discourses in the preschool, both between individual and collective levels, and between everyday life and systems.

Knowledge Movements Pertaining to Learning and to Becoming Part of a Community

As noted above, the preschool studied here appears as a clearly defined, collective unit. This is evident by the many specific statements related to members acting systematically and normatively “correct,” pertaining to both the Framework Plan and the group in a social sense. This is emphasized by the many dramaturgical speech acts that, in a colorful manner, refer to individuals who do not fully adapt to the dominant discourse

(more than it weakens the image of this preschool as a strong community).

Movements along the dimension of individual versus community can, among other things, be about a search for a common pattern of action. This pertains not only to collective aspects, but also to something that each individual must learn. Studies on collective learning use the term “alignment” to characterize such processes. With this “alignment,” individuals coordinate and adjust their energy and activities to become part of a community where mutual commitment and shared understanding develop a shared path (Senge, 2006; Senge et al., 2011; Wenger, 1998).

Participating in professional discussions can lead to the individual preschool teacher knowing that the group “has his or her back” when adjusting established patterns of action and identifying truths based on old routines. Individuals fall in line, at the same time as they strengthen the preschool as a social and professional community. This movement between the individual and the collective is, nevertheless, somewhat obscured by a discourse related to the preschool as a place where “potted plants” are discussed. Not all participants are in the same place in this discourse, and variation in individual motivation or resistance can challenge movements in collective knowledge. This happens, for example, when one does not see the usefulness of peer counseling or does not go in depth when it comes to problems and working with tensions in the group.

The movement between the individual and the collective does not only take place in everyday life. It cannot be seen as uncoupled from the systems that surround the preschool. It is also about learning and becoming a professional, meaning that actions become more transparent and fundamental. This includes aspects that can be defended in open conversations, where it is possible to change opinion as the discussion develops. In this sense, learning can emerge as emancipatory (liberating). The question is, however, whether it is right to call it “liberating” if this learning only includes paying attention to normative documents from external entities. The transformative element (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) must focus on conversations about how the normative is to be understood in a specific community. This is what makes a professional community something more than the sum of the contributions of its individual members.

Knowledge Movements That Threaten Professional Aspects

It can be risky to professionalize preschools in the form of a stronger professional focus. This analysis found signs that a strong systems orientation can make the practice of the profession more mechanical, and rule

based. An example of this is that everything must be planned if it is to be done, and an extensive use of meetings, structures, positions, and orders. Seen from a learning perspective, there is a danger here that one gives up autonomy to “objective” systems such as rules, plans and procedures that can lead to alienation. One can learn and move away from what is close, not just through the professional distance created by professional knowledge, but through systems and rules that create a semblance of professionalism at the collective level.

This is part of the discourse on what is considered professionalism in preschools. On the one hand, the analysis of the speech acts shows support for structures, plans and systems, because this promotes conversations about activities, professional focus and professionalism. On the other hand, findings also indicate that preschool teachers see simple objects such as “potted plants” as artifact-like obstacles in the development of their professional identity, both as a professional group and as an educational institution. A potted plant might symbolize lifeworld, and represent a challenge to the educated preschool teachers and their professional discourses. This is pertaining to learning, as it can exclude practical experiences and understanding among some employees in the preschool. If one goes too far when it comes to excluding some employees, they will not be part of a common, collective formation of opinion that guides action. The preschool as a learning arena is divided into two.

Mezirow (2003; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) uses the term “extension of frame of reference,” but this does not happen when preschool teachers tone down others’ frames of reference. Mezirow states that this can happen consciously or unconsciously. Our frame of reference governs thought and action patterns and our ways of understanding and constructing meaning. It also governs our categorization and interpretation of new experiences, new information, other people, and oneself. Through participation in an informed and continuous discourse, preschool teachers can become aware of, take a stand on, and revise their frame of reference. They can do so in the light of new experiences and knowledge that challenge already existing ways of understanding and acting.

It cannot be the case that becoming more professional means excluding some of the other employees in the preschool. The solution must be to find ways in which their horizon of understanding can be integrated into the collective transformations.

Movements Between Everyday Life and Systems

Through the categories “everyday life” and “system,” this study discusses collective knowledge moves between extremes in local reality and external, formal requirements. Systems requirements directed at preschools can

easily be perceived as unintentional and interfere with everyday life in ways that prevent preschool teachers from learning about the practice of the profession. This is a difficult balancing act, because everyday life should not dominate the professional knowledge that preschool teachers manage on behalf of a larger professional community.

The movement between everyday life and the system is visible through topics such as uncertainty and lack of security. The underlying material shows that insecurity is expressed in several ways. There was a lot of talk about “the others” and “the other.” “The other” can be the preschool employees without a formal education, but also preschool teachers or leaders. Such concepts can point to insecure professional roles. The strong desire to have the day-to-day structured is thus expressed through a focus on plans and structure; everything must be in a plan, on an agenda or in an annual cycle to ensure action and legitimation. It may seem like a paradox that such a system is allowed to invade the everyday life. This can also be interpreted as an expression of uncertainty and fear of being perceived as a bunch of “nice girls” who are not professional enough. By planning everything, one appears neat and professional. It is difficult to argue against plans and structures. What is then a human need to understand oneself in a larger context can, through an uncertain professional role, be obscured by an unplanned everyday life. Perhaps this is a pitfall that makes professional learning processes more complicated than they need to be.

Addressing such questions can be compared to sticking your head “into a hornets’ nest.” Specifically, this pertains to the relationship between preschool teachers and the other preschool employees. Relevant questions arise related to a discourse of the Norwegian working life tradition with flat hierarchical structure and little use of command-style leadership. Basically, this deals with how employees without a college education should be included in a professional educational institution. Is it then the case that this tradition can be an obstacle to professional development that mobilizes the entire staff in transformative, professional learning processes?

Peer counseling as a transformative learning activity can help reduce the uncertainty that arises in the interface between everyday life and the system. Peer counseling seems to offer a structure that promotes professional discussions about professional challenges experienced in everyday life. Hellesnes distinguishes between formation agents and adaptation agents (Hellesnes, 1975, p. 15). The former discusses and translates political demands into a local context, while the latter implement without questioning. One can learn to do both. The findings in this study indicate that peer counseling promotes learning as formation, rather than learning as adaptation. Peer counseling becomes an arena for assessments and

decisions that rest on professional knowledge and pedagogical wisdom. In an uncritical adaptation, however, a local practice defined by plans, structures and meetings can dominate professional assessments and professional judgment. The trained professional can be held captive by both and central systems.

This study focuses on how the preschool teacher’s autonomy is maintained. The Framework Plan and other authoritative texts legitimize the work of preschool teachers, but if they do not know the content of these, they give up control and power over their own professional practice. Although these texts are part of the external systems, it is a pitfall not to participate in the professional discussion about what they entail. The everyday world then becomes a harbor of refuge for the professional who is not confident in his or her own knowledge.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that peer counseling highlights the central discourse aspects preschools and preschool teachers need to develop. Theoretically defined categories, based on Habermas et al.’s (1999) framework, capture conversations about conversations, where lively and active discussions pertaining to professional practice can be understood as “knowledge movements.” This analysis shows that the preschool as a community is a key focal point in these meta-conversations.

By analyzing the categories used, an overarching discourse emerges, namely system contra everyday lives. The pattern is that the system is pushing, resulting in leaders, mentors and preschool teachers tending to display resistance via so-called dramaturgical speech acts. The two dominant speech act types are, however, normative, and declarative, which must be interpreted as positive. It is difficult to imagine professional development that is not based on ascertaining and discussing, with an empirical orientation, combined with discussions about what this can mean in the preschool community.

This study contributes to research on preschool teachers’ professional practice development. A practical implication of this study is that external aspects can contribute to facilitating preschool teachers’ self-development through systematic meta-conversations. In this context, peer counseling in groups appears to be a fundamentally important learning activity for preschool teachers and should be included in the education of preschool teachers. Hence, this study is relevant for the education of future preschool teachers.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank Thomas Moser and Ingrid Fossøy for being critical readers, and the participating preschool for heartily opening the door for our research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval

NSD (Norwegian Center for Research Data), reference number 345872

ORCID iD

Hege Fimreite  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5007-3641>

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

References

- Avidov-Ungar, O., Merav, H., & Cohen, S. (2023). Role perceptions of early childhood teachers leading professional learning communities following a new professional development policy. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 22*(1), 225–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.1921224>
- Bassey, M. (1990). On the nature of research in education. *Research Intelligence, 36*, 35–38.
- Bjerkholt, E., Ødegård, E., Søndena, K., & Hjarnermaal, F. R. (2014). Hvordan kan veiledningssamtaler åpne for kritisk tenkning? *Uniped, 37*(4), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.3402/uniped.v37.23814>
- Brinkmann, S., & Tanggard, L. (2020). *Kvalitative metoder: en grundbog (3. udg)*. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Brix, J. (2017). Exploring knowledge creation processes as a source of organizational learning: A longitudinal case study of a public innovation project. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 33*(2), 113–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2017.05.001>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 10*(6), 807–815.
- Damjanovic, V., & Blank, J. (2018). Building a professional learning community: Teachers' documentation of and reflections on preschoolers' work. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 46*, 567–575. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0888-0>
- Edmondson, A., & Moingeon, B. (1998). From organizational learning to the learning organization. *Management Learning, 29*, 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507698291001>
- Eik, L. T., Steinnes, G. S., & Ødegård, E. (2016). *Barnehagelærernes profesjonslæring*. Fagbokforlaget.
- Evertsen, C., Tveitereid, K., Plischewski, H., Hancock, C., & Størksen, I. (2015). *På leit etter læringsmiljøet i barnehagen*. Universitetet i Stavanger, Læringsmiljøsenenteret.
- Fimreite, H. & Fossøy, I. (2018). Kunnskap i endring. *Nordic Studies in Education, 38*(1), 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1891-5949-2018-01-05>
- Fimreite, H. (2022). Kollegarettleing og endring av den kollektive kunnskapen i barnehagen [Doktorgradsavhandling, PhD]. Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2984231>
- Gergen, K. J. (2010). *En invitation til Social Konstruksjon*. Forlaget Mindspace.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action: 1: Reason and the rationalization of society (Vol. 1)*. Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action: 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason (Vol. 2)*. Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J., Smith, J., & Smith, J. H. (1999). *Kommunikasjon, handling, moral og rett*. Tano Aschehoug.
- Hatlevik, I. K. (2018). Transformativ læring. Hva er det, og hva kan det bidra med i lærerstudenters kompetanseutvikling? *Uniped, 41*(4), 384–400. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1893-8981-2018-04-02>
- Hellesnes, J. (1975). *Sosialisering og teknokrati: Ein sosialfilosofisk studie med særleg vekt på pedagogikkens problem (Vol. 323)*. Gyldendal.
- Hellesnes, J. (1988). *Hermeneutikk og kultur*. Samlaget.
- Hennum, B., & Østrem, S. (2016). *Barnehagelæreren som profesjonsutøver*. Cappelen Damm akademisk.
- Irvine, S., & Price, J. (2014). Professional conversations: A collaborative approach to support policy implementation, professional learning and practice change in ECEC. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 39*(3), 85.
- Jensen, K., Lahn, L. C., & Nerland, M. (2012). *Professional learning in the knowledge society*. BRILL.
- Langelotz, L. (2013). Teachers' peer group mentoring—Nine steps to heaven? *Education Inquiry, 4*(2), 375–394. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v4i2.22079>
- Lauvås, P., & Handal, G. (2000). *Veiledning og praktisk yrkest teori*. Cappelen akademisk forlag.
- Lauvås, P., Lycke, K., & Handal, G. (2004). *Kollegaveiledning i skolen* (3rd ed.). Cappelen akademisk forlag.
- Lauvås, P., Lycke, K., & Handal, G. (2016). *Kollegaveiledning med kritiske venner*. Cappelen Damm.
- Lazzari, A. (2012). Reconceptualising professionalism in early childhood education: Insights from a study carried out in Bologna. *Early Years, 32*(3), 252–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2011.651711>
- Lycke, K. H., & Handal, G. (2012). Refleksjon over egen undervisningspraksis—et ledd i kvalitetsutvikling? In I. T. Løkengard Hoel, B. Hanssen, & D. Husebø (Eds.), *Reflections on Teaching Practice—A Part of Quality Improvement* (pp. 157–183). Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Mezirow, J. (1995). Transformation theory of adult learning. In M. Welton (Ed.), *Defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning* (pp. 37–90). State University of New York Press.

- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative Learning as Discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education, 1*(1), 58–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172>.
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly, 48*(3), 185–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369804800305>
- Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. W. (Eds.). (2009). *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education*. Wiley.
- Molander, A., Terum, L. I., & Smeby, J. C. (Eds.). (2008). *Profesjonsstudier*. Akademika.
- Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2017). Framework Plan for Kindergartens.
- Postholm, M. B. (2018). Teachers' professional development in school: A review study. *Cogent Education, 5*(1), 1–22.
- Sæbø, G. I., & Midtsundstad, J. H. (2022). How can critical reflection be promoted in professional learning communities? Findings from an innovation research project in four schools. *Improving Schools, 25*(2), 174–186.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Broadway Business.
- Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., & Ross, R. (2011). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies for building a learning organization*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Smith, D. (2015). Exploring interprofessional collaboration and ethical practice: A story of emancipatory professional learning. *Reflective Practice, 16*(5), 652–676. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2015.1071246>
- Sugrue, C., & Solbrekke, T. (2011). *Professional responsibility*. Routledge.
- Svare, H. (2002). «Livet er en reise». *Metaforer i filosofi, vitenskap og dagligliv*. Pax Forlag.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wibeck, V., Dahlgren, M. A., & Öberg, G. (2007). Learning in focus groups. *Qualitative Research, 7*(2), 249–267.