

Executive summary

In this anthology, we present results from the project Evaluation of implementing the framework plan for kindergartens. A new framework plan for early childhood education and care (ECEC) came into force in August 2017, and the implementation of this framework plan is investigated in the evaluation. The project has two overarching research questions: 1) How do key actors interpret the goals and intentions of the revised framework plan, and how do they experience the implementation process? and 2) How do actors at different levels work to implement the framework plan? In addition, the project has investigated two issues related to specific topics in the framework plan – transitions and Sámi content: 3) How do key actors and kindergartens work to include Sámi rights in the framework plan; and 4) How do key actors and kindergartens facilitate and ensure children's transition from home to daycare institution, internally in kindergarten and from kindergarten to school.

The framework plan has a content side and a management side. The evaluation, therefore, emphasises both the implementation of the framework plan's content and provisions of the framework plan as a management tool. Much of the content is known from previous framework plans. Still, an important ambition was to strengthen certain content elements, such as the work on transitions, subject areas and working methods. Clarifying and allocating responsibilities and roles is crucial to achieving the authorities' goals of raising quality and social equalisation by strengthening the content and tasks of kindergarten. When the new framework plan came into force in 2017, it emphasised what kindergartens must do rather than what they should do. At the same time, a framework was established for the relationship between authorities, owners and kindergartens. The anthology is organised into different chapters that dives into key areas of the framework plan: work with the subject areas, progression, Sámi themes, and transitions. In addition, we

discuss the new governance structure for ECEC, emphasising the strengthened role of the owner and the municipalities' supervision of kindergartens' work with the framework plan.

Work with subject areas, progression and transitions

The investigations of the kindergartens' implementation of the subject areas conclude that the subject areas of the framework plan have mainly been carried over from previous framework plans. Kindergarten staff work with the framework curriculum's subject areas on the basis of a holistic didactic approach where the subject areas are seen in context and as overlapping. It is emphasised that working with the subject areas and the connections between them is a natural part of everyday activities in kindergarten.

One of the intentions of the framework plan from 2017 was to give the concept of progression a more prominent place than in previous framework plans, and progression is proving to be an ambiguous concept in the framework plan and in ECEC. There is significant variation in the understanding and use of the concept of progression among owners and directors and in how staff in kindergartens understand and work with progression. The work on transitions has been continued and further strengthened in the kindergartens. A key finding is that transition work in kindergartens is, to a considerable extent, routinised and written down. The municipalities are particularly involved in the work on the transition from kindergarten to school and after-school programmes.

Strengthening the framework plan as a management instrument

One ambition of the 2017 framework plan was to strengthen the framework plan as a management instrument to compensate for differences and ensure equalisation. The framework plan was also given a separate section with provisions specifying the responsibilities and roles of the provider, the director and the pedagogical leader in the kindergarten. In this respect, the new responsibility provisions in the framework plan clarify ownership responsibility for

kindergartens. However, our research points to a paradox: The strengthening of ownership responsibility occurs in a sector characterised by a decentralised structure and major differences in municipal governance capacity. The ownership structure is also varied, and the availability of resources and a strong tendency to merge can exacerbate differences between kindergartens in terms of their ability to work systematically with the framework plan.

Strengthening the framework plan as a governing tool should also provide a better basis for supervising kindergartens. The municipal measures to follow up kindergartens' implementation of the framework plan vary in scope, organisational form and thematic focus. The majority of the municipalities surveyed find that supervision has been strengthened as a governing tool so that the municipality can demand that the entire framework plan is covered and that the kindergartens ensure this. The municipalities have also included new rules for internal control and work on the psychosocial kindergarten environment in their supervision, which coincides with the perception of supervision as a stronger governing tool. However, the analysis reveals a paradox: the proportion of municipalities using supervision to follow up the framework plan decreased between 2020 and 2023. However, the municipalities use several management measures to support the implementation of the framework plan, such as networks, guidance, various initiatives and projects, quality assurance and competence enhancement.

Tensions in the framework plan create challenges and dilemmas in implementation

The framework plan contains a tension between regulations and curriculum. The more precisely formulated framework plan can contribute to the legalisation of ECEC. A more concise text that clarifies responsibilities and tasks will be easier to implement and monitor. The framework plan is also a curriculum that specifies the purpose and content of kindergarten as an educational activity. This dual status as both a regulation and a curriculum challenges the municipalities' supervision and the day-to-day pedagogical work in the kindergarten.

The framework plan also harbours an inherent tension between control and autonomy. Tighter governance through the revised framework plan indicates

a more hierarchical management of the kindergarten field. At the same time, the evaluation finds that governance is characterised by several soft instruments, such as supervisors and networks. For example, the Directorate for Education and Training's guidelines are widely used by kindergartens. The combination of more hierarchical governance and many soft instruments can be characterised as post-New Public Management. In this form of governance, state authorities seek to compensate for differences in local responsibility, varied owner resources, and owner involvement, which can challenge the objectives of local autonomy.

The framework plan is also characterised by a tension between standardisation and local adaptation. The framework plan is intended to promote uniformity in the quality of the programme while at the same time being adaptable to local needs. In other words, it provides scope for promoting both uniformity and variation at the same time. Standardisation of the pedagogical work in kindergarten may be perceived as a safe way of following up on the provisions of the framework plan. Still, at the same time, kindergartens may lose the impetus for professional development adapted to local needs. The various tensions in the framework plan appear to create challenges and dilemmas in implementation.

The evaluation shows that the implementation of the framework plan represents both a continuation of previous framework plans, and a change. Adaptations between the framework plan and the Kindergarten Act, and between the Kindergarten Act and the Education Act, for example, regarding the transition between kindergarten and school, contribute to measures pulling in the same direction. The same applies to staffing and pedagogical standards for kindergarten and guidance and competence enhancement measures. Parallel measures in the kindergarten field appear to be crucial resources for implementing the framework plan and help move closer to quality improvement and social equalisation goals. This emphasises the importance of viewing kindergarten in relation to other institutions and policy areas.