

“We decide on the fly, based on previous experiences”: Staff members’ occupational practices in after-school programmes

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Abstract: Research indicates that high-quality after-school programmes (ASPs) can offer good care and foster academic and socio-emotional development in children. Staff has been identified as a critical factor in ensuring quality of ASPs. This article explores how Norwegian ASP staff members consider their occupational practices and analyses whether the group working in ASP can be considered a profession. Focus group interviews among staff members at seven ASPs were conducted, and theory of professions made up the theoretical perspective. The results suggest that the staff members’ occupational practices were based on their perceived mandate as caregivers and facilitators of activities for the children. Although the work communities were described as collaborative, the staff members’ occupational practices during ASP are described as individualised. The practices are decided “on the fly” and are derived from practical knowledge and shared occupational values established in everyday experiences rather than from practical syntheses that also include theoretical reflections and research-based discussions among colleagues. The results indicate a lack of practical syntheses that characterise professionalism and reveal a need for professionalisation among Norwegian ASP staff. The study demonstrates the importance of professional competence among ASP staff and indicates a need to introduce qualification requirements for employment in ASPs.

Keywords: After-school programme, staff member, occupational practices, professionalism, quality

Introduction

An international trend shaped by societal changes is the increasing number of schoolchildren attending after-school programmes (ASPs; Schuepbach, 2018). Whether an ASP can be considered a high-quality programme depends on factors such as curricular consistency, active forms of learning, a broad variety of activities and well-planned content based on the aims of the programme (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Schuepbach, 2016). Occupational staff has also been identified as a critical factor of good-quality ASPs (Vandell & Lao, 2016), and Schuepbach (2016) stated that “a central factor is the qualifications, education, training, and further training of the educators/staff persons” (p. 5). In this article, we explore how Norwegian ASP staff members consider their occupational practices and discuss their considerations against established professional standards.

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Starting in 1997, it became mandatory for all Norwegian municipalities to facilitate ASPs for primary school children aged 6 to 10 (Ministry of Church, Education and Research [MCER], 1998). The Norwegian ASP was established as a voluntary programme outside of compulsory school hours, and the Education Act (1998) stipulated that the programme should provide children care and supervision, and offer them opportunities for play, as well as cultural and leisure activities. The demarcation between school and ASP was stated clearly; no specific educational aims were given, and no requirements for pedagogical education for employment in ASPs were set. The 1998 version of the Education Act established the only formal aims of the Norwegian ASP until 2021, when the Framework plan for Norwegian ASP was implemented (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET], 2021). According to the framework plan, ASP must still provide children care and supervision. Additionally, the programme must provide opportunities for holistic development and learning. In line with the United Nation’s (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the framework plan emphasises the inherent value of childhood and highlights that ASP should facilitate meaningful leisure time and play. This implies that staff members should adopt a child-centred perspective, based on children’s right to self-determination and co-determination, when providing activities. Despite these expectations, no formal education or competence requirements for ASP staff are formulated (Løndal, in press; NDET, 2021).

Previous Research

In international research, ASPs are investigated within the field of extended education (Schuepbach, 2018; Stecher, 2018), and research indicates that high-quality programmes can offer good care and foster academic and socio-emotional development in children (Vandell & Lao, 2016). Research in several countries has shown that ASP staff’s educational backgrounds vary from professional education to no education at all (Böhm-Kasper, Dizinger, & Gausling, 2016; Klerfelt & Stecher, 2018). This situation might affect professionalism in ASPs, but it depends on how groups of employees collaborate and whether staff members undergo a professionalisation process. According to Stecher (2018), employees in German all-day schools constitute a heterogeneous group. This is described as a positive characteristic of the occupational cohort, since a multi-professional group can bring about diversified teaching practices and student contacts. However, this is not a universal situation. When Böhm-Kasper et al. (2016) investigated how multi-professional groups collaborate in German all-day schools, they found that patterns of collaboration between groups are underdeveloped.

Researchers in the Nordic countries have investigated how ASP staff members experience their occupational roles. Pálsdóttir (2012) found that ASP employees in Iceland interpreted their occupational roles as unclear but that they held caregiving, social development support and facilitation of play and leisure activities as the most important occupational tasks. In Sweden, a joint curriculum for school and ASP was implemented in 2011 (Klerfelt, Haglund, Andersson, & Kane, 2020). In this curriculum ASP are conceptualised as “school-age educare”, indicating that school and ASP have integrated aims for children’s development and learning. An increasing number of research articles have described staff members’ interpretations of their occupational roles in educare. Haglund (2015) found that they held traditional values concerning practices in educare, with a particular focus on providing good and safe care, sharing joy with the children and giving opportunities for free play. Other studies

have indicated that staff members experience cross-pressure between fulfilling traditional roles and their commitments to the educational aims of policy documents (Ackesjö, Lindqvist, & Nordänger, 2018; Lager & Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2021).

Research has indicated that the quality of Norwegian ASPs varies considerably between municipalities, and that the variability applies to factors such as clarity of aims, content, collaboration between ASP and school and staff competence (Caspersen et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2018). Wendelborg et al. (2018) found that 42% of staff members had completed at least one year of higher education but that only 9% had completed pedagogical education. Moreover, they found that 27% of the staff members held an upper secondary school-level trade certificate as a *childcare and youth worker*. A recent study, conducted after implementation of the *Framework plan for Norwegian ASP* (NDET, 2021), shows that the proportion of staff members with certificate as childcare and youth worker has increased significantly, to 50% (Caspersen et al., 2024). It is worth noting that ASP employees experience a lack of collaboration between school and ASP, especially between teachers and ASP staff members. The study also reveals that most staff members experience a need for increased competence in areas necessary for their practice as ASP workers. Research shows that few employees have participated in formal competence development measures during their time as ASP employees (Wendelborg et al., 2018).

Compared with other countries, Norway stands out with a clear demarcation between compulsory schooling and ASP, and an absence of educational requirements for employment in ASP (Løndal, in press). While employees in Swedish school-age educare, for example, are expected to contribute to the school's educational aims, Norwegian ASP staff members are expected to facilitate the children's leisure time. The strong position of caregiving and play is, however, a prominent common feature of ASP in all the Nordic countries.

Aim of the Study

Staff members consider caregiving and facilitating friendship among children to be the most important aspects of Norwegian ASPs, followed by offering play and creative activities (Caspersen et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2018). We have less knowledge about how staff members consider their occupational practices in ASP. The present study contributes to filling this knowledge gap. The main research question that guided the study was: *How do staff members consider their occupational practices in Norwegian ASPs?* Based on the answers to the main research question, we intend to discuss staff members' considerations against established professional standards. Therefore, we also asked an analytical research question: *To what extent can the occupational group working in ASP be considered a profession?* In referring to "staff members", we refer to all employees who participate in daily work with children during their ASP time. This includes assistants without formal education, certified childcare and youth workers, employees with pedagogical or other higher education and ASP managers. In line with Higgs (2019) *occupational practices* refer to the *enactment of roles* of an occupational group.

Theoretical Perspective

As its theoretical perspective, this study utilises sociological theory of professions. Hence, the concepts of *profession*, *professional practice*, *professionalism* and *professionalisation* are highlighted. According to Evetts (2013), professions are essentially knowledge-based occupations. Other researchers have elaborated on this and have claimed that professions are characterised by a specialised knowledge base consisting of (1) theoretical and research-based knowledge acquired through higher education, and (2) practical knowledge expressed as specialised skills, “know-how” and tacit knowledge (Grimen, 2008a; Little, 2015). *Professional practice* refers to “the enactment of the role of a profession or occupational group in serving or contributing to society” (Higgs, 2019, p. 8). The role of a profession is closely linked to the mandates given by the society, but also “involves inhabiting and realising the role in ways that pursue quality and fulfilment” (p. 5). Since professional practice always takes place within established norms and values, professional ethics are also considered an important feature of professions (Evetts, 2013; Grimen, 2008b). The mandate given by the authorities is the very basis for norms and values that apply within professions. However, these are also shaped by the social associations that constitute an occupational group. On the macro level, a value system for a professional field is established through societal regulations, management documents and control mechanisms that frame the mandates of the profession. On the micro level, socialisation in workplaces develops and shapes shared values and identities. This involves how employees identify themselves as workers and how their occupational *identities* are shaped. According to Heggen (2010), the development of such an identity is both a personal and a collective affair. The first relates to what constitutes “me” as a professional and deals with the personal integration of knowledge forms and values associated with professional practice. The latter relates to “us” as a professional group.

Freidson (2001) emphasised that employees act with autonomy based on their professional judgements. This requires that they act based on the integrated interrelation between specialised theoretical and research-based knowledge, practical knowledge and professional ethics. Practice based on such integration has been highlighted as a typical feature of professionalism. Grimen (2008a) utilised the concept of “practical synthesis” in exploring professional workers’ multifaceted knowledge base in professional practice. He argued that theoretical and practical knowledge should not be seen as dichotomies but rather as interacting knowledge dimensions. However, he emphasised that the practical aspect is particularly important in the development of an integrated knowledge base; professionalism is characterised by a coherent knowledge base synthesised through practical and personal experiences.

Qualification for professional practice can take place through both formal education and occupational practice (Grimen, 2008a; Little, 2015). However, it is emphasised that such professionalisation should serve as the bridge between arenas and synthesise theoretical and research-based knowledge, practical knowledge and professional ethics. It is also worth noting that the multifaceted knowledge base for professions and professionalism develops over time. Through the professionalisation process, workers develop their ability to integrate critical thinking and skilful and responsible actions into practical situations (Little, 2015).

Schuepbach (2016) defined professionalism in ASP as “the qualifications, capacities, and competences that are required for successful practice within a profession” (p. 5). The mandate given ASP by the authorities forms the basis for these characteristics and should act as guidelines when considering relevant theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge and ethical values for professional practice. According to Schuepbach (2016) professionalisation among ASP staff members includes “the attempt to gain the characteristics associated with professions” (p. 5). With the Norwegian ASP as an example, professionalism and professionalisation should involve other theoretical and practical knowledge than what is most prominent for teaching in school. In line with the aims of ASP, professionalism should imply knowledge about appropriate caregiving for children aged 6 to 10, facilitation of child-managed play, and how to provide holistic development and learning (NDET, 2021). Additionally, it presupposes ethical values that clearly recognise the rights of the children.

Methods

This article reports on a sub-study among staff members at seven ASPs that participated in an intervention study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a course programme for ASP staff in supporting physical activity among first graders in ASP. The programme consisted of two introductory sessions led by the researchers, focusing on children’s physical activity play, and was followed up by a municipal physiotherapist with monthly meetings at each ASP throughout one school year. The protocol of the study and its results have previously been published (Riiser, Helseth et al., 2017; Riiser, Richardsen et al., 2020). The participating ASPs were strategically selected to achieve variation in institution size and location (i. e. urban and rural areas; Table 1).

Table 1: Participating ASPs

	Urban or rural*	School size**	Persons in focus group
ASP 1	Rural	Small	7
ASP 2	Urban/rural	Medium	4
ASP 3	Urban	Small	6
ASP 4	Urban/rural	Large	5
ASP 5	Urban/rural	Medium	8
ASP 6	Rural	Large	5
ASP 7	Rural	Medium	5

* Urban = dense urban area, rural = provincial region with closeness to nature area, urban/rural = densely built area but close to nature area

** Small < 250 students, medium = 250 – 450 students, large > 450 students

In the present sub-study, we aimed to access staff members’ considerations of their occupational practices in ASPs. In searching for information about qualitative aspects, such as human beings’ considerations, understandings and experiences, various types of interview methods are available (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Since we wanted information on how

employees who worked together enact their shared mandates, we chose focus group interviews. Focus groups should consist of members from “the same milieu or the same interpretative community” (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 216), and the interview type is characterised by the researcher’s restrained role. The researcher’s task is to facilitate conditions for conversations among the group members, to introduce themes by asking initial questions directed to the entire group and allowing the group members to discuss them together (Bohnsack, 2004).

Sampling and Sample

All staff members involved in the intervention study were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. All participants were engaged in working with first-grade children, but they also had responsibility for the older children. In total, 40 staff members consented to participate in the interviews. The focus groups consisted of 4 to 8 participants (Table 1). A large proportion of the interview participants were female staff (Table 2), reflecting the predominance of female employees in the participating ASPs. Participants were between 18 and 60 years old, and 26 had more than 6 years of work experience in ASP.

Table 2: Background information, given in numbers of participants

Sex	Female	37
	Male	3
Age	< 20 years	2
	20 – 29 years	5
	30 – 39 years	7
	40 – 49 years	14
	50 – 59 years	8
	Unknown	4
Experience in ASP	< 1 year	3
	1 – 5 years	9
	6 – 10 years	12
	> 10 years	14
	Unknown	2

Only seven participants had an education beyond upper secondary school, of which four had a pedagogical education (Table 3). Additionally, 20 had been educated as childcare and youth workers, and another 3 were apprentices. Half of the participants had other vocational experiences before their employment in ASP.

Table 3: Participants' highest education, given in numbers of participants

Education	Participants
Pedagogical education at university level*	4
Other education at university level**	3
Educated childcare and youth worker	20
Under apprenticeship toward Child Care and Youth Worker	3
Other education at upper secondary school level***	4
No education beyond lower secondary school level	5
Unknown	1

* Affiliated at two of the ASPs (two at each)

** Engineer, economist, social educator

*** Vocational education (graphic work, hairdresser, childcare, health care)

Data Collection

The focus group interviews were arranged at the participants' workplaces ahead of normal ASP time, and two members from the research group served as moderators. According to the recommendations made by Bohnsack (2004), the moderators introduced themes by asking the group initial questions and allowing group members to discuss them together. Examples of initial questions were as follows: What are your responsibilities as staff members of an ASP? How are your enactment of occupational roles discussed and distributed between staff members? The moderators adopted a restrained position but followed up with supplementary questions during the interviews to acquire additional information related to the topic of the study. The interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes and were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Transcription and Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber, and the transcripts were analysed by the researchers according to the stages involved in *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Focus was placed on revealing the contextual meaning of the staff members' utterances during the interviews. The researchers searched for statements that revealed themes about what the participants considered their mandate as ASP workers, the diversity of occupational roles they adopted at ASP, how they justify their enactment of these roles, and how distribution of tasks and occupational practices are discussed among colleagues. This was initially done inductively. Additionally, a deductive analysis was carried out according to the concepts of profession, professional practice, professionalism and professionalisation.

Trustworthiness

In line with Merriam (2009), we aimed to provide thorough and transparent descriptions of the investigated context, sampling, data production and data analysis. The second author of this article participated in the data production process, offering a unique perspective on the data.

However, all authors actively took part in the analysis. We revisited the interview transcripts several times and discussed different interpretations of the materials. In line with recommendations made by Johnson (1997), we also identified explanations that stand apart from our initial ones.

Ethical Considerations

Before this study was carried out, the project proposal was examined by the *Norwegian Data Protection Official for Research* and assessed to be in line with the Personal Data Act. Prior to the interviews, we obtained informed consent from the ASPs’ management and from the participating staff members. We guaranteed their confidentiality during the research and publication process. Therefore, the names of neither ASPs nor staff members appear in the article. Throughout the analysis and writing process, ethical guidelines for compliance in research were followed.

Results

The analysis revealed that the focus group participants highlighted two main occupational roles when discussing their mandates as ASP workers: 1) roles towards the children and 2) roles as members of a work community. Furthermore, themes related to their enactment of these main roles emerged. These themes are introduced under separate headings below.

Enactment of Roles Towards the Children

All focus groups placed the greatest emphasis on the staff members’ roles as caregivers, but the role as facilitators of activities was also highlighted. There was consensus on this point within the groups, and the following quote from a staff member at ASP 2 reflects a typical statement:

My most important task is to ensure that the children feel seen and listened to, that the children can be safe. I want to facilitate a good afternoon for them.

The Caregiving Role

“Being present” and “helping the children” were stated as important aspects of enacting the staff members’ caregiving role. This became clear from the conversation among staff members (SM) at ASP 4:

SM 1:

I have to see the kids. Be there when they need help.

SM 2:

Yes, to be present for the children.

SM 3:

The most important thing is to be available to the children. Be there with them here and now.

Helping the children to thrive was highlighted by all focus groups, and special emphasis was placed on the children's desire to play with friends. Hence, staff members must ensure that all children have someone to play with during the ASP time. A participant from ASP 3 elaborated on the discreet approach employees should adopt to ensure this:

If a child is alone, we must help her to engage in play with others in a way that doesn't interfere too much with the other children's play, if that play is going well. We don't want to interrupt good play, so it's better for me as an adult to play with that child instead. It works like a magnet on other children.

The staff members' practice is portrayed as two-sided: they must help individual children become involved in play with friends, but at the same time, they must preserve the spontaneous play of the other children. Active involvement in children's activities emerged as a key focus in the interviews, emphasising staff members being present and ready to assist, but with an aim to facilitate safe and social activities for the children.

The Facilitator Role

The analysis clearly revealed the emphasis placed on facilitating activities according to the children's own choices. This seems to be linked to the notion that ASP are, after all, children's leisure time. This was made apparent in the focus group conversation between staff members in ASP 2:

SM 1:

So much is expected of the children throughout a school day. When they come to an ASP, I think it should be a free haven. The children must have the opportunity to make their own choices, building with Lego, playing football, or not doing anything.

SM 2:

The organised leisure activities start so early, often before school age. [...] It's not that we don't initiate activities. We do, but it is important that the children can make the choices themselves.

The staff members highlighted the difference between school and ASP but also between ASP and organised leisure activities. They claimed that they *initiate* various activities rather than instruct on or manage activities. Instead, they must make time, places and equipment available for self-chosen and child-managed activities. This was referred to in several groups as "Tricking" the children into taking part in something" (quote, ASP 3), "giving advice rather than giving solutions" (quote, ASP 1) and "participating *together* with the children rather than directing the activities" (quote, ASP 6).

Given that the staff members emphasised the children's right to choose activities, spontaneous play seemed to be the most obvious form of activity to facilitate, as exemplified by a quotation from the interview at ASP 2:

The children start early in organised exercise, football or gymnastics and things like that. So, they should play when in an ASP. We arrange activities that they have to sign up for, but everything is voluntary. I think it is important to facilitate play.

Although spontaneous play was highlighted, the group members in all ASPs said that they initiated sign-up activities. They seemed to be particularly concerned with organising outdoor physical activities. However, according to the staff members, they had "to be restrained with direct decisive involvement in the children's activities" (quote, ASP 1). Despite great agreement about the children's right to free play in ASP, a few staff members opposed a sole focus on spontaneous child-managed play. They argued for management and interventions

during ASP time, emphasising the potential for activities to impart educational value. They shared, “After all, we can’t only play with the kids” (quote, ASP 1). Their scepticism was first and foremost justified by the need to include all children in social activities. They stressed the responsibility of staff in ensuring inclusivity, which they asserted is not guaranteed in free play.

To summarise, there was a great deal of agreement both within and across the focus groups concerning staff members’ roles towards the children and how the roles should be enacted. The interviewees stated clear positions on their practices, but the analysis rarely discovered statements based on curricular aims or theoretical accounts. Nor did the analysis reveal patterns based on disparities between ASPs or between staff members based on age, education or work experience.

Enactment of Roles in the Work Community

The interviewees also showed a commitment to the work community at their ASPs and argued that all employees should feel good at work. An example occurred in the conversation in ASP 1:

It is important to have a good time with colleagues and to have someone to go to if there is anything wrong. Yes, and to help if needed.

All the focus groups agreed that openness and good collaboration between staff members are vital to their work. They generally considered themselves to excel in these aspects, as illustrated by the following quote:

We have worked together for a long time, so I believe that we work well together. [...] We have a good dialogue, and that’s because we trust each other.

Collaboration relies, according to the interviewees, on a shared understanding of the ASP’s main aims and recognition of the diverse strengths and weaknesses among staff members. This informs the assigning of daily responsibilities, such as registering participating children, assigning observation duties and determining tasks for outdoor and indoor activities. Formal policy documents were not mentioned in this regard. The staff members recognised that despite a joint understanding of the most important aims of ASP, they are different as individuals. The differences mentioned are not, however, linked to disparities based on knowledge acquired in occupational or professional training. Instead, they pointed out various strengths and weaknesses in practical activities and individual opinions of what children should do in ASP.

The staff members’ discussions indicated that collaboration with the host school was limited to administrative matters, for example regarding shared equipment and activity regulations. Collaboration and discussions with teachers regarding common aims and occupational practices were not mentioned. None of the groups reported on collaboration with external partners, apart from the meetings with the municipal physiotherapist established through the intervention study. Several of the focus groups referred to this collaboration as interesting and educative, particularly because the physiotherapist contributed with knowledge regarding children’ development and recommendations on activities and practices.

All the participating ASPs had a manager who was responsible for day-to-day operations. The staff members explained that the manager outlines the general scope of the employees’

tasks. However, the staff members perceived a significant degree of autonomy in their practices while interacting with the children. Staff members in ASP 5, for example, claimed that each person must decide how to solve various tasks and that choices must be made based on what is relevant to current situations:

SM 1:

It is the ASP manager who assigns each person tasks. But I am constantly around the children, and I must find solutions myself—on the fly.

SM 2:

Yes, we are assigned tasks, but we must choose what to do and how to do something ourselves.

Despite a collaborative environment, each staff member's choices concerning their occupational practices during ASP time are described as individualised. The decisions are made on the fly, relying on individual strengths and weaknesses drawn from practical experience rather than from discussions with ASP colleagues or other occupational groups.

Discussion

The results of the present study reveal some interesting issues regarding ASP staff members' occupational practices. Below, we discuss these issues against profession theory and societal mandates for Norwegian ASPs.

Staff Members' Considerations of their Mandate as ASP Workers

The results of the present study show consensus among staff members regarding their mandate as ASP workers, and this was closely linked to their roles as caregivers and facilitators of child-managed activities. When emphasising the children's freedom in leisure time, their right to be seen and listened to, and their opportunity to participate in play with friends, they adopt a child-centred approach. Their joint commitment in ensuring the children good care and activities together with friends, seem to form a common value system associated with occupational practice in ASP.

Drawing on theory of professions, we find reason to refer to how ethics in professional groups are shaped (Evetts, 2013; Grimen, 2008b). The mandate given by the authorities is, on the macro level, the very basis for norms and values that apply within professions. On the micro level, however, also socialisation in workplaces shapes shared values and identities. The staff members in our sample did not relate their mandate as ASP workers to formal documents about rights of the child or other societal mandates. Instead, general values such as "looking after the children", demonstrating "care by being present" and supporting "togetherness and child-managed play with friends" emerged consistently in the interviews. With reference to Evetts (2013) and Heggen (2010), we will argue that these values, shaped on the micro level, have formed the basis for a joint occupational identity. Hence, the value system delineating the occupational mandate of ASP staff is built upon common understandings, understandings that Grimen (2008b) referred to as general norms. This finding aligns with research indicating that ASP employees are not particularly familiar with societal aims and regulations that apply to Norwegian ASP (Wendelborg et al., 2018; Caspersen et al, 2024).

The staff members’ occupational identities and common values, seem to be related to a common-sense understanding of children’s need of care and supervision during leisure time. In terms of workplace socialisation, this seems to translate into a child-centred occupational practice, allowing freedom for the children and upholding all children’s right to be included in play. Since the identified value system is weakly connected to mandates given at the macro level, we cannot characterise it as a basis for *professional* ethics.

Practice Based on Practical Knowledge Established in Everyday Experiences

The staff members’ considerations of their occupational practices are closely associated with a shared understanding of their mandate as ASP workers. Despite a shared identity and a unified grasp of essential values and mandates, the comprehension and selection of practices are individualised. Each staff member decides on occupational practices spontaneously, relying on the appropriateness in various situations. According to profession theory, professionalism is characterised by autonomy in occupational situations (Freidson, 2001; Grimen, 2008a). Although the staff members in the present study showed extensive practical knowledge, and capabilities to act with autonomy in upcoming situations, the basis for what Grimen (2008a) described as “practical syntheses” did not appear solid. Practical syntheses involve a process in staff members where interrelation between theoretical and research-based knowledge, practical knowledge and professional ethics are integrated. Analyses of the focus group interviews did not reveal statements and arguments that point back to occupational or professional training, theoretical considerations or mandates formulated in international conventions and societal management documents. Surprisingly, the analysis did not reveal clear disparities regarding this matter either between ASPs or between staff members based on the characteristics introduced in Table 1, 2 and 3 (p. 6). We will suggest that this result can be traced back to a lack of higher education directly aimed at ASP. Previous research has also revealed that ASP employees’ familiarity with management documents is relatively low, and that few of them have participated in competence-enhancing measures (Wendelborg et al., 2018; Caspersen et al., 2024). Occupational practices appeared to be exclusively grounded in the practical knowledge gained from daily experiences and micro level workplace socialisation. Hence, relying on the theory of professions, we cannot say that the ASP staff in our sample are part of a profession.

The one-sided influence of practical knowledge on occupational practices in the present study differs from results of research carried out in other Scandinavian countries, where staff members are shown to draw from both practical and theoretical knowledge in occupational practice (Ackesjö et al., 2018; Haglund, 2015; Lager & Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2021). Despite the conflicting demands faced by staff members in these countries in juggling traditional caregiving roles and a commitment to educational aims, both practical and theoretical knowledge are evident in practice. This suggests that a professionalisation process that influences practice has progressed further in countries other than Norway. The extended availability of higher pedagogical education for workers in ASP and educare centres in Sweden and Denmark, along with established joint curricula for schools and ASPs and educare centres, might explain this difference (Klerfelt & Stecher, 2018; Øksnes et al., 2014).

Lack of Arenas for Professionalisation

The results of the present study indicate that staff members' occupational practices are decided on the fly based on everyday experiences. Theoretical perspectives on phenomena relevant for professional practice in ASP, such as caregiving, play, learning and rights of the child were rarely mentioned during the focus group interviews. The absence of such perspectives suggests lack of a coherent, synthesised knowledge base and reveals a need for professionalisation processes (Grimen, 2008a). This may seem surprising, given that half of the participating staff members hold a certificate as childcare and youth worker. Childcare and youth workers are, however, educated within a vocational programme with more emphasis on practical performance than theoretical and research-based reflection, and are not directed exclusively towards work in ASP. When staff members at only two of the ASPs had pedagogical education at university level, it appears plausible that the discussions in the focus groups mainly concerned practical knowledge (c.f. Table 3).

Professionalisation can take place through both formal education and occupational practice but requires a synthesis process where theoretical and research-based knowledge, practical knowledge and professional ethics are integrated (Little, 2015). The results of the present study indicate a lack of arenas for professionalisation of ASP staff and align well with results in other studies concerning professionalisation measures in Norwegian ASP (Caspersen et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2018). Only one of the participating ASPs had been involved in competence-enhancing measures initiated by the municipality, and limited time was set aside at the ASPs for formal discussions about occupational issues. With few employees at each ASP holding relevant higher education-based qualifications, it is unlikely that discussions drawing on theoretical perspectives and research-based knowledge will become commonplace. Furthermore, given that staff members neither reported collaboration with teachers working at the host schools, it seems that arenas for professionalisation are limited. This aligns with the findings of Böhm-Kasper et al. (2016), who found, based on studies on how multi-professional groups collaborate in German all-day schools, that staff consisting of different educational groups must be closely coupled if professional forms of collaboration are to be established. It is worth noting that several of the focus groups in the present study referred to collaboration with a physiotherapist, and that this was seen as interesting and educative. This suggests a potential for professionalisation in ASP if various occupational and professional groups are coupled in a formal collaboration.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study is the method utilised for data collection. Through focus group interviews, participants were encouraged to share their individual and collective experiences of working in ASP. The conversations generated both well thought-out reflections and spontaneous statements. Unlike direct methods, such as observation, focus group interviews only provide indirect information about the employees' occupational practices. This should be considered a limitation of the study.

The study included small, medium and large ASPs from urban and rural locations. In retrospect, we note that the 40 participants in our study had a similar distribution in terms of gender, age and educational background as reported in other studies on employees in Nor-

wegian ASPs (Caspersen et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2018). We perceive this as a strength regarding the transferability of the results to other ASP contexts. The sample was, however, drawn from a limited number of ASPs and only from the south-eastern region of Norway, and constitutes a limitation regarding transfer of the findings.

Sampling from participants in an intervention study entailed that the focus group members knew the researchers who moderated the interviews. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), this can cause participants to perceive interviews to be relaxed, which in turn can create good conditions for sharing considerations and experiences. However, we acknowledge that participants may have been influenced by their involvement in the broader study, potentially compromising the transferability of the results derived from statements about active play.

Concluding Remarks

This study investigated staff members’ considerations of their occupational practices in Norwegian ASPs and asked whether the occupational group working in Norwegian ASP can be considered a profession. The staff members claimed that their main mandate as caregivers and facilitators of activities for the children serves as a foundation for their practices. Practical knowledge from everyday experiences of working in ASPs and joint values for such work seem to shape a strong work community and a shared occupational identity. Occupational identity was evident both as a personal and a collective matter in championing child-centred practices, freedom during “leisure time” and the right of children to be included in play. The staff members expressed that their occupational practices during ASP time was individualised and situational, based on strengths and weaknesses in fulfilling practical tasks. Staff members expressing a shared occupational identity while also experiencing individualised practices may seem contradictory. The application of the theory on professionalism and professionalisation aids in understanding this contradiction. Coherent professional practices require the integration of theoretical and research-based knowledge, practical knowledge and professional ethics. The staff members’ occupational identity, occupational ethics and occupational practices, as they appear in the present study, were derived mainly from practical knowledge acquired through everyday experiences and lacked practical syntheses that characterise professionalism.

Based on the results of the study, we cannot say that the occupational group working in Norwegian ASP can be considered a profession. The newly introduced national *Framework plan for Norwegian ASP* clarifies the aims and content of ASP, emphasising the need for dedicated time for knowledge-based planning and discussions among ASP staff members. If the dimension of professionalism is emphasised in the implementation of the framework plan, the resulting changes might facilitate professionalisation among ASP staff and contribute to increased ASP quality. However, the Norwegian authorities have not followed up with requirements for professional education and competence for ASP employment. We argue that addressing this shortcoming is crucial to professionalisation and quality enhancement of Norwegian ASP.

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