Base Groups for Educational Leadership: Enhancing Inclusion and Growth

Atle Kristensen

Nord university, Norway

Abstract

This study explores the role of base groups in an online and assembly-based further education program for principals and school leaders in primary and secondary education. The purpose of the study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the significance of base groups in higher education, offering insights relevant to educational leaders and policy developers across the country. Huber [13] refers to the central question characterizing effective leadership education as whether and how the professional development of leaders has a positive impact, for example, on school goals. A premise is a strong integration between research-based knowledge and the self-development of leaders. Another premise is individual and local adaptation of content and methods. Based on these two premises, principal education is more problem-oriented than theme-oriented, which characterizes and is highlighted as particularly important in adult learning [1]. Johnson and Johnson [14] say that by promoting an inclusive and supportive environment, future school leaders are equipped with the necessary skills and perspectives to navigate and contribute positively to the dynamic field of educational leadership. Work in collaborative base groups where positive mutual dependency and individual accountability are central elements. Focusing on participants' experience of collaborative learning, a written evaluation with open questions is conducted after each physical gathering in the study. The theming and design of the questions are deductive in nature. However, unlike closed questions through checkboxes, participants in this evaluation have the opportunity to provide rich descriptions in their answers through text fields. The analysis shows nuanced differences between the responses from the different participants regarding success in their own learning [10]. Particularly, findings from the analysis suggest that work in base groups fosters learning, support, and professional growth characterized by openness, security, and diversity. This learning environment not only enriches the academic understanding but also strengthens personal development by promoting social, academic, and cultural inclusion. This is underscored by the students as they describe that participation in the group encourages academic development through discussions, exchange of experiences, and critical thinking, while also providing opportunities for networking and practical application of theories. By facilitating a learning environment characterized by diversity, inclusion, and collaboration, the base groups represent an important step towards a more inclusive and effective educational leadership.

Keywords: *basegroups, inclusive learning environment, individual adaptation, collaboration.*

Introduction

The Norwegian education act, "Opplæringsloven §17-2," states that each school must have adequate pedagogical and administrative leadership. The principal, who is the top leader, is responsible for managing the daily operations and also works towards further developing the organization. This requires good pedagogical competence as well as necessary leadership qualities [19]. Training for school leaders is offered by the state-funded principal education in Norway through a continuing education program for principals and school leaders in primary education, secondary education, and for leaders at institutions providing base education for adults. Applicants for this education must hold formal leadership positions with personnel responsibilities [17].

The principal education program addresses key themes, theories, and research contributions within organization and leadership, with a special emphasis on organization, change- and strategic management in the school and education sector. Effective anchoring requires that leaders focus on practice and the transformation of practice, which the program seeks through a well-thought-out teaching methodology to strengthen leaders' capacity within the field as well as in leading innovative development and change efforts [22]. The study alternates between lectures and collegial experience sharing among participants through the establishment and development of communities of practice. This involves the creation and use of base groups as central learning arenas for participants.

With this background, this study seeks to explore students' experiences of working in base groups where collaboration among students and supervisor is central. The study draws its empirical data from two cohorts, fifty students, at Nord University in Bodø, where one cohort has completed the education, while the other is still undergoing it. The research question developed for this study is: How do students in the principal education program experience that working in base groups enhances their learning and growth?

A revised model (fig.1) for teamwork is used as a starting point for the theoretical foundation and analysis of this study [6]. The model is adapted to meet the local conditions targeted towards the principal education program and the participants' work in base groups.
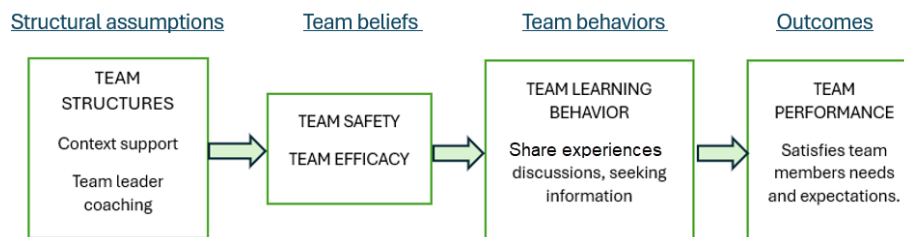

Figure 1 - A model of work-team learning.

In the following, the model's themes are described individually, anchored in theory and adaptations from the principal education program.

Structural Assumptions

The context of the principal education program is based on a strong integration between research-based knowledge and the self-development of leaders. This, along with individual and local adaptation of content and methods, makes the education more problem-oriented than theme-oriented, a characteristic that is particularly emphasized as important in adult learning [1]. Students work in heterogeneous base groups with students from different types of schools, and each group is supported by their own assigned academic supervisor who leads and supports the work. Participants are expected to be active during the gatherings, providing feedback on co-students' reflections and writings in the base groups. This can be characterized as a professional learning community within this education. The modeling of good learning communities in the program emphasizes students who contribute to exploring their own and others' experiences [8]. A practice community consists of three elements: a common activity, mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire [26]. If one of these elements is missing, the professional community will be weakened. This implies that the work on developing and managing the professional community touches on structure, context, and culture.

The principal education program is a session-based program that combines physical gatherings with work between the sessions. Academic guidance largely takes place in base groups during these physical gatherings. The purpose is to link individual learning processes with concrete evaluation and development processes. Students use their own schools in the program by formulating a problem that they use to develop competencies that are particularly central to their own leadership practice. The supervisor provides personal guidance in the individual work, but also coaching in the base group where participants are active contributors through peer mentoring [1]. Well-planned and carefully organized peer mentoring can lead to significant progress and substantial benefits such as increased motivation, confidence, and empathy for both mentors and students [4]. In this way, students have the opportunity to confront their everyday realities with impressions from other schools and link practical experiences to relevant solutions. The documentation of the work is emphasized to ensure systematic approach and to strengthen reflective practices.

Team Beliefs

Within this element of the model, emphasis is placed on psychological safety and the effectiveness of the base group. Psychological safety in the team can function as a mechanism that translates structural features into behavioral patterns of action [6]. Psychological safety and the use of humor are central to creating an inclusive environment [6]. These factors help to lower barriers to participation

and promote a more relaxed and engaging learning experience. When students feel confident about their chances for success, psychological safety in this context involves working to ensure that students feel included in the base group. Such inclusion can occur through social, academic, and cultural adaptation [18], often as a process intended to maintain the learning environment for all participants within the community [12]. A perspective on social inclusion involves adding real experiences that promote social inclusion and give students opportunities to reflect on and learn from their own actions and experiences in a safe and supportive learning environment. This approach aligns with educational perspective and the theory of cooperative learning [5], where learning is viewed as a social, interactive process.

The base group's effectiveness will depend on reducing barriers to progress [2]. When students feel safe to express themselves freely without fear of being negatively judged, it encourages greater creativity and openness in group work. Academic discussions and learning from each other are central to academic inclusion in base groups. In this context, the supervisor actively contributes as an initiator through guidance and coaching to develop confidence in the group's ability to do the job in a supportive context. In their own school, leaders within the professional community should challenge the school's and teachers' theories of action through an increased focus on quality in dialogues and discussions. By sharing knowledge and experiences, the goal is for students to experience and explore different perspectives that can enrich the learning process. In a strategic perspective for work in base groups, the goal includes stimulating knowledge, motivation, and value levels among the students [22]. A focus on an integrated perspective can bring together these three elements and provide students with a tailored collective vision where they work together in continuous learning processes [24]. This collective learning environment is underscored by the importance of diversity and how different backgrounds and experiences can complement and enhance the group dynamics and learning.

Team Learning Behavior

Learning can traditionally be seen as an individual process involving reflection on what is read, heard, and observed [15]. However, it is also recognized that individuals become learners through their participation in communities of practice. Base groups can be described as practice communities consisting of people who share a common interest or profession and learn from each other through shared activities and discussions. Learning in such a community thus becomes more than just receiving information from teachers, instructors, or books. For principal education program, the focus is on creating activity in the construction of knowledge by the learner. The education is concerned with providing students with experiences and events that create meaning. In this context, two forms of constructivism can be highlighted. Psychological constructivism deals with how we actively process information, resources, and assistance from, among others, colleagues to improve our understanding and strategies. Social constructivism is about how we develop knowledge and understanding by participating in social interactions where we actively discuss solutions and common tasks [7].

In each team, members will have different ideas about how goals should be achieved. In an investigative process of discovering and correcting errors, learning can be achieved with changes in individuals' theories of use [2, 21]. Learning together in teams can be enhanced when differences in understanding are assessed, analyzed, and discussed in detail. Well-functioning teams use such differences constructively, stimulating the team rather than confusing it with disagreements [23]. Through dialogue and discussions, the team can explore complex issues from different perspectives and make connections within a broader scope of meaning. In this way, learning through teams is more than the process of adjusting actions in a single direction. Insights are translated into actions, skills are improved, and the team can make tremendous progress exceptionally quickly.

Thus, learning becomes a central process in the study where psychological and social constructivist learning methods are emphasized. When the development of knowledge, and thus all meaningful reality, is based on interactions among people in a context [3], the practice community and the social climate within this framework become determinative for the learning that occurs. For example, the importance of processing information, feedback through dialogue and discussion, practical exercises, and other methods for skill development are highlighted. This facilitates valuable experiences for students with various work methods and tools that they can apply in their daily work, as well as processes that they themselves can lead in their staff.

Outcomes

In addition to being based on social and psychological constructivism, learning can also be viewed from the perspective of achieving a goal or a defined outcome by emphasizing the understanding of learning as an individual, cognitive, and emotional process [14]. In this way, the principal education program focuses on self-development, with the goal of students developing personal qualities necessary for effective school leadership. Through the program, they have the opportunity to explore and strengthen their leadership skills in base groups, which is essential for driving positive changes in the education sector. These aspects coincide with leadership competence outlined in the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training specifications for principal education and are part of the general competence that the program aims to develop for students [17]. Specifically, it involves leaders developing the capacity to lead a systematic and innovative development effort in their own school.

Capacity in this context may involve how they identify and work with the core components of a specific intervention, and what barriers might arise [22]. It also involves training leaders to lead a professional discourse on school development and educational leadership for the professional learning community, thereby contributing to the collective advancement of the school. However, this alone is not enough to develop a learning community. Organizational learning and learning processes, along with the professional community, need a clear direction and an intention for the processes that are initiated [11], where safety in these processes is central. Trust is the basis for psychological safety in development, and it is the leader's special responsibility to foster a community within the organization characterized by trust and psychological safety [20]. Thus, the principal study program emphasizes the leader's ability to build and strengthen the professional community, work environment, collaboration, and organizational culture. For a principal to be an inspirator and resolver of conflicts in interaction with parents, staff, other schools, school owners, and local actors, a high level of awareness and an "open-minded" approach are required [16]. This awareness is a central part of the leadership training in the principal education program and is one of several desired goals.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative study has been to investigate how students in the principal education program experience that working in base groups enhances their learning and growth. The study is inspired by phenomenological approaches, where I, as a researcher, have been focused on obtaining empirical data in the form of rich and detailed experiential material [25]. From evaluations provided by the students in the principal education program, the study collected a total of 254 retrospective descriptions of experiences and opinions from 50 students [9]. The research question and delimitations have framed the study, and evaluation forms were developed with text fields where students had unlimited opportunities to formulate their own responses. Unlike closed questions, which are typically formulated through checkboxes, open questions allowed students to provide rich descriptions in their responses. The analysis thus shows nuanced differences between the answers from different students [10]. Through a hermeneutic approach to analysis, where circular movements were made between the texts and the theory, a new understanding and meaningful main categories of the texts as a whole emerged. I have been particularly attentive to my pre-understanding and subjectivity. As I have been both a supervisor and a teacher in the program, I have been conscious of trying to maintain an objective approach to the students' descriptions and not let my own opinions color my perception. The study follows research ethical guidelines and has been approved by SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research).

Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, the findings from the students' experiences in the base group work at the principal study are described, where the headings in the model (fig.1) guide the presentation of the findings. Along the way, discussions are included about the findings with connections to relevant theory.

Structural Assumptions

The findings from the students' evaluations particularly highlight the significance of guidance. The students say that the academic supervisor plays a central role in shaping group dynamics and promoting an environment conducive to effective learning and collaboration. When the supervisor actively contributes to creating an atmosphere of psychological safety, a foundation is laid for a learning environment where all members can contribute and grow, which is essential for collective knowledge development.

The students describe how the supervisor facilitates collective learning processes, incorporating real challenges and problems from the students. This allows students to practice mentoring with each other, which they describe as motivating and creating a safe space to express their opinions, ask questions, and reveal their uncertainties. Practicing in this way can enhance students' confidence and develop empathy [4]. This enables a culture where openness and sharing both successes and failures are welcomed [23]. The supervisors' role is described by the students as highly important in promoting openness and trust. By modeling desired behavior and encouraging inclusive collaboration, space is created for all voices to be heard and valued [8]. This is especially important in groups composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, as is the case with the base groups in educational administration. The rich mix of student perspectives can be explored here, leading to deeper understanding and more creative solutions to complex problems [2, 21].

Furthermore, the students highlight constructive feedback and reflections as important structures for the work in the base groups. The supervisor leads the processes, where giving feedback is not only directed at the individual's contribution but also how the group functions and learns together in mutual engagement [26]. The students describe this as strengthening the individual learning outcome, and it is also plausible to assume that the outcome for the group will be enhanced, as members learn to give and receive feedback in a way that promotes growth and development [4].

The evaluations from the students point out some areas where there is room for improvement. They mention the need for more clarity in the guidance, consistency among supervisors, and the need to avoid confusion that can hinder the group process. These points touch both the structure and context of the work [26]. Some comments are given regarding the handling of time and tasks to be completed, where it is described that there has been some lack of clarity and structure from some of the supervisors. Thus, the students' evaluations emphasize the importance of adapting the guidance practice to meet the group's needs and promote a positive learning experience.

In summary, the findings of the evaluations suggest that the structure and context on which the guidance is based, both from the subject teacher and through peer mentoring, are central parts in shaping a productive group dynamic that supports the participants' academic and personal development. By promoting psychological safety, openness, and trust with constructive guidance, the base group helps to create an inclusive learning environment where all students can thrive and grow [18]. At the same time, it is crucial that the supervisor acts clearly, consistently, and with good structure and plan for the guidance.

Team Beliefs

In the findings from the evaluations, there are signs of strong academic inclusion within the base group. The students describe a good collaborative climate through their experiences and feedback [6]. This positive synergy can act as a catalyst for learning and engagement, where participants look forward to contributing and further developing themselves. The group members' varied backgrounds from different types of schools appear to contribute to a wealth of perspectives and understandings. When differences in understanding are assessed, analyzed, and discussed, this can lead to constructive solutions that can help create a stimulating learning environment [23]. The students describe a learning environment that promotes active discussions and honest feedback on personal experiences. Getting to know and obtaining information about each other's tasks and challenges, as well as sharing their own experiences, seems to be a valuable process for many. As one student says, "We probably like to share everyday challenges with each other." This makes it possible for group members to learn from each other and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives and approaches. When such insight is experienced as meaningful, the community of practice and social interaction can be strengthened and become decisive for the learning that takes place [3].

The students report that they experience social interaction as essential for academic and personal growth. Their ability to participate where they ask questions, share experiences, and information is central. They discuss openly, contributing to a sense of belonging and cooperation that

is crucial for an inclusive learning environment. Such a perspective on the development of knowledge, through cooperative learning, is about adding real experiences that promote social and academic inclusion [12, 5]. The term "great psychological safety" is mentioned directly and suggests that the members experience such a degree of safety that they do not fear negative consequences for making mistakes or expressing unusual ideas. This is an important factor in learning processes and in the development of new ideas, as it encourages openness and honesty, and contributes to a culture where learning from mistakes is valued [2].

The engagement and ability of the supervisors to provide clear, supportive input is highlighted by the students as important in a learning context characterized by social constructivism. Common experiences, solutions, and tasks should be discussed [7]. In terms of guidance, reflections are made on how feedback from both supervisors and fellow students is received and valued. The students describe that feedback through dialogue and discussion, characterized by honesty and constructiveness, plays an important role in the learning process and contributes to continuous development and growth [3]. The presence and engagement of supervisors are described as important in establishing a culture that values learning, community, and professionalism. Being able to share and reflect on experiences and receive constructive feedback seems to be particularly valuable. When this occurs in a context of high professional standard and clarity around goals and methods, it is described as meaningful for the participants.

Despite positive feedback, areas that require improvement are also identified. Some of the students point out a need for greater clarity and structure from the academic supervisors. It is described that the role of the supervisors can sometimes be perceived as unstructured, with a lack of overview and clarity that can lead to challenges in group work. One student states that: "Little help from the supervisor if there are uncertainties in the group when we need help or clarification." This highlights the importance of supervisors providing clear frameworks and direction for the tasks to be performed. By planning a well and carefully organized program, this could strengthen the students' learning and enhance benefits such as increased motivation, confidence, and empathy [4].

In summary, the evaluations show that a good collaborative climate, supported by psychological safety and varied group compositions, lays a solid foundation for learning and collaboration for work in the base group. However, it is important to see the challenges related to the role of the supervisor. For example, it is mentioned that some supervisors can be unclear or unstructured, which can lead to confusion or inefficient use of time. This underscores the importance of clear and structured guidance. Although there are areas for improvement, especially related to guidance and structure, it is clear that the basis for constructive interaction and learning is well established.

Team Behaviors

The findings from the evaluations indicate a strong professional inclusion within the core group. Students describe, through their experiences and feedback, a good collaborative climate [6]. This positive cohesion can act as a catalyst for learning and engagement, where participants look forward to contributing and further developing themselves. The diverse backgrounds of group members from various educational fields seem to contribute to a richness of perspectives and understandings. When differences in understanding are assessed, analyzed, and discussed, this can lead to constructive solutions, which can help create a stimulating learning environment [23]. Students describe a learning environment that fosters active discussions and honest feedback on personal experiences. Getting to know and learning about each other's tasks and challenges, as well as sharing personal experiences, appears to be a valuable process for many. As one student says, "We probably like to share the daily challenges with each other." This makes it possible for group members to learn from each other and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives and approaches. When such insights are perceived as meaningful, the practice community and social interaction can be strengthened and become decisive for the learning that takes place [3].

Students report that they experience social interaction as essential for professional and personal growth. Their ability to participate where they ask questions, share experiences, and information. They discuss openly, which contributes to a sense of belonging and collaboration that is crucial for an inclusive learning environment. Such a perspective on knowledge development, through cooperative learning, involves adding real experiences that promote social inclusion [12, 5]. The term "great psychological safety," mentioned directly, suggests that members experience such a degree of safety that they do not fear negative consequences for being wrong or expressing unusual ideas. This

is an important factor in learning processes and in the development of new ideas, as it encourages openness and honesty, and contributes to a culture where learning from mistakes is valued [2].

The role of supervisors in supporting and adapting the learning experience for each group is highlighted by the students. By providing more problem-oriented learning, this can give students opportunities to reflect on and learn from their actions and experiences in a safe and supportive learning environment [1]. The supervisors' commitment and ability to provide clear, supportive input are emphasized as important in a learning context characterized by social constructivism where solutions, shared experiences, and tasks are to be discussed [7]. The assessment aspect is reflected in how feedback from both supervisors and fellow students is received and valued. Students describe that feedback through dialogue and discussion, characterized by honesty and constructiveness, plays an important role in the learning process and contributes to continuous development and growth [3].

Despite many positive feedbacks, areas requiring improvement are also identified. Some students point out a need for greater clarity and structure from the supervisor's side. It is described that the supervisors' role can sometimes be perceived as unstructured, with a lack of overview and clarity that can lead to challenges in group work. One student states, "Little help from the supervisor if there are ambiguities in the group when we need help or clarification." This underscores the importance of supervisors providing clear frameworks and direction for the tasks to be performed. By planning a well-organized program, the supervisor can strengthen students' learning and advantages such as increased motivation, confidence, and empathy [4].

In summary, the evaluations show that a good collaborative climate, supported by psychological safety and varied group compositions, provides a solid foundation for learning and collaboration within the core group. However, it is important to address the challenges related to the supervisor's role. For example, it is mentioned that some supervisors can be unclear or unstructured, which can lead to confusion or inefficient use of time. This highlights the importance of clear and structured supervision. Although there are areas for improvement, especially related to guidance and structure, it is clear that the foundation for constructive interaction and learning is well established.

Outcomes

The majority of student feedback indicates a high degree of satisfaction with their experience and the benefits of working in the base groups. They describe a strong sense of unity in the base group, a feeling of safety, and a constructive atmosphere that promotes an investigative approach to learning where there is room to discover and correct errors [2]. The students describe benefiting from the work in the study. They mention a learning environment where they feel safe enough to take risks, share ideas, explore these, and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Many of the students mention the positive significance of this trusting group climate, which is an important experience for them as leaders to carry with them when they establish their own teams. By experiencing trust, as described by Paulsen [20] as the foundation for psychological safety, such experiences can be brought to one's own organization to strengthen one's own professional community and organizational learning. These aspects are described by the students as central to a productive learning environment, where they feel safe enough to share their thoughts and learn from each other. They describe a strong sense of shared goals and continuous reflection on their own practice.

Clear goals and directions are important for the learning process. The intention has to be is communicated to the team [11], which is something that the principal education program has focused on. The goal has been to educate leaders who are skilled in balancing different core elements in teamwork and ensuring that all voices are heard. This underlines the importance of a professional community where members actively engage in dialogue and share experiences to improve practice.

The students emphasize the importance of psychological safety in group work to promote learning through innovative learning forms [6]. Understanding and navigating group dynamics is described by the students as crucial for them as leaders. Through experiences from working in base groups work in the education program, the students have been trained to identify different roles, backgrounds, and experiences in a professional learning community, which can enrich decision-making processes and innovation [22]. Meta-analyses by Leithwood et al. [16] indicate that the most successful school leaders are "open-minded" and ready to learn from others. They are flexible within a set of core components and values. They set high standards for others and are emotionally robust and optimistic.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined how students in the national principal education program experience that working in base groups has strengthened their learning and growth as school leaders. The education has emphasized collaboration among students and with an academic supervisor as central. The study draws its empirical data from the students' evaluations of the education.

The findings from the study suggest that the work in base groups in principal education is organized with a structure and context that provide psychological safety for the students [6]. The academic supervisor plays a critical role in shaping the group dynamics and facilitating a learning environment that supports the students' ability to express opinions, ask questions, and share uncertainties, which promotes individual confidence and empathy. The culture that is promoted emphasizes openness and sharing of both successes and failures [2], which in turn fosters positive behavioral patterns, both individually and collectively [6].

The psychological safety that the students experience is crucial for effective collaboration and learning. The work in base groups in the principal education program, where these are composed of individuals with varied backgrounds, contributes to a deeper understanding and more creative and effective solutions to complex problems [2, 21]. Constructive feedback and reflections from individuals with different viewpoints appear to be central to the learning process. Students learn to give and receive feedback in a way that promotes both individual and collective growth. The students express that they are part of an environment where they can engage freely and experiment without fear of negative consequences [2].

Furthermore, the students emphasize social and academic inclusion in the groups [18], which enables a rich exchange environment where students can share and learn from each other's experiences and perspectives. This contributes to a sense of belonging that is the foundation for continuous reflection and learning. Through the group's work and supervision, students gain valuable training in developing leadership skills, which also involves group dynamics that are important in professional contexts. Despite many positive aspects, some students also point out the need for more clarity and consistency from the supervisors. This is necessary to avoid confusion and to promote a more effective group process.

The students describe the importance of structured and clear supervision combined with a strong focus on psychological safety and social inclusion as central to professional development. Overall, the findings from the study suggest that the students experience that working in base groups forms a solid foundation for individual learning and growth as school leaders.

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