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# Group discussions: an active learning resource for school and kindergarten leaders?

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In higher education programmes, group discussions are commonly used as a form of active learning to support students in their learning and knowledge development beyond what is provided by traditional lectures. However, such student-centred learning approaches and methods have received scant attention in empirical research.

**Purpose:** This study, which used an action research design, investigated how group discussions, as an extension of lectures, can contribute to students' learning. The findings are intended to support comprehensive insights into, and further development of, the authors' and others' higher-education teaching practices.

**Method:** The study context was a National Kindergarten and School Leadership Programme offered by one Norwegian university, where the co-author of this article was located. Our research question was: How do students perceive group discussions about a lecture as contributing to their learning; and what can we learn from this about our own teaching practices? The core data were students' reflection notes, with observational data used as background material. Data were analysed thematically.

**Findings:** The analysis indicated that group discussions as extensions of lectures can provide learning opportunities that promote the students' learning, both collectively and individually. Through group discussions, learning opportunities emerge in the interaction between theoretical knowledge addressed in the lecture and practical, experience-based knowledge based on the students' ideas from their organisational contexts. In this interaction, learning experiences are produced that provide the students with increased understanding and new perspectives about how they can drive development in their practice contexts and how they, as school leaders, can act in new ways.

**Conclusion:** The findings offer insight into how students' experiences of group discussions, based on lectures, contribute to their learning. However, they also reveal that organisational and structural conditions related to poor quality task design and some elements of the discussions themselves can inhibit learning potential.

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## Introduction

Researchers of higher education typically identify two main teaching approaches: student-centred; and teacher-centred (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne 2008). The teacher-centred approach has traditionally been dominant, where, for example, the teacher lectures and students are passive participants (Pettersen 2005). Student-centred teaching, typically coupled with active learning methods, stands in contrast to lectures and activities that are primarily teacher-centred (Biggs and Tang 2011). Several research studies have found that students' learning outcomes improve when teaching incorporates more student-centred approaches (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Uiboleht, Karm, and Postareff 2018). Kantardjiev (2019) pointed out that students construct their knowledge through interactive activities and a drive to achieve higher cognitive levels when they take part in student-centred learning. In higher education, student-centred learning can be seen as a collective learning arena in which students actively acquire knowledge through interaction with others (McDonald, Kazemi, and Kavanagh 2013).

Internationally, research has uncovered a shift in higher education teaching culture in recent years, with increased variation in teaching approaches (Tynjälä and Gijbels 2012), although teacher-centred approaches still prevail (Amundsen and Haakstad 2018). Damşa et al. (2015) argue that in the Norwegian context, empirical research focusing on student-centred approaches used in higher education has been scarce, claiming that such approaches and methods should receive greater attention, especially regarding their implementation in practice and any associated challenges.

The study reported in this article is empirically grounded in an advanced education programme for kindergarten, primary and secondary education leaders, offered by one Norwegian university. This university offers various National Kindergarten and School Leadership Programmes funded by the Norwegian Directorate of Education (The executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research, responsible for kindergartens, primary and secondary education), within which lecturers and researchers teach a variety of topics. The authors of this article were both members of the programme team, with the lead author teaching on the programme under examination. As in other higher-education programmes, this programme commonly uses group discussions as a learning method to support students in their learning and knowledge development beyond the traditional lecture.

The study examined a single teaching session in which group discussions were used as a student-centred learning extension to a teacher-centred lecture. It investigated how group discussions contributed to students' learning to gain a comprehensive insight into, and further develop, teaching practices within the programme. The study employed an action research design (Carr and Kemmis 1986), in which the programme was studied by those working within it. It was characterised by collegial collaboration, which provided opportunities to reflect on and enhance teaching practices (Postholm and Smith 2017; Ulvik and Krüger 2012; Ulvik and Smith 2016).

## Background

The following sections present relevant research on active learning methods and describe Wells' Spiral of Knowing (1999) – the conceptual framework employed in the study.

## Research context

Internationally, active learning methods in higher education, particularly group discussions, have been the subject of research, although there is limited research in the Norwegian context regarding these methods. Some studies provide quantitative evidence of impact on learning outcomes, while others illustrate a range of additional potential benefits for students.

Impact evidence is found primarily in studies relating to the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, and teacher education. A meta-analysis of 225 American and Canadian STEM undergraduate programmes (Freeman et al. 2014) showed that active learning led to increases in examination performance, sufficient to raise average grades by a half, and that failure rates under traditional lecturing increased by 55% compared to the rates observed under active learning. A randomised controlled trial (RCT) of students engaged in a physics and chemistry undergraduate programme in Norway revealed that physics students randomised to take part in an active seminar in addition to a traditional lecture achieved an average of 0.36 better examination grades than students in a control group, who did not receive the active seminar. In contrast, there were no differences between the equivalent intervention and control groups among the chemistry undergraduates (Netland, Sivertsen, and Olufsen 2018). Both physics and chemistry students in the intervention (active seminar) group also reported feeling they had learned more compared to those who were randomised to receive teacher-centred instruction only. Finally, in the field of teacher education, one international study has suggested that student cooperation tends to yield better academic results than competition or individual learning methods (Johnson and Johnson 2017).

In addition to measurable improvements in learning outcomes, active learning methods have also been found to offer a range of less quantifiable benefits. For example, medical students in India reported preferring small group discussions, considering these a better approach for learning selected topics than traditional lectures (Roshni and Rahim 2020). Norwegian student teachers expressed several benefits associated with such activities, such as experiencing different kinds of dialogue, despite the challenges that can sometimes arise from dominant participants, passivity of some group members, or a perceived lack of structure (Unhjem and Furu 2020). Norwegian undergraduate economics and administration students also highlighted several advantages of ‘café dialogue’, a form of active group discussion, which includes activities such as discussing theories presented in lectures, receiving input from peers, reinforcing curriculum knowledge and experiencing this approach as a complementary, not substitutive, method. These advantages included increased problem understanding and engagement (Elvekrok and Smith 2013; Hvatum, Tjernæs, and Egge 2021).

Several traits can be observed across the various active learning approaches described above. First, effective teacher planning for teaching and learning and its implementation can substantially enhance student learning (Baeten et al. 2010; Biggs and Tang 2011; Kirkwood and Price 2014; Vennebo and Aas 2020). Second, student preparation for the learning activity is crucial for optimal functioning (Hwang, Lai, and Wang 2015; Unhjem and Furu 2020). Finally, there are a range of preconditions for inducing individual and collective learning. These include: clear communication of learning objectives; a safe student environment with a non-judgemental, confidential

space for discussion; engaged subject instructors; varied teaching methods with opportunities for active learning approaches and student collaboration; and the provision of constructive feedback about student work (Hatlevik 2018). However, integrating such approaches, especially in teacher education, has often proved challenging (Canrinus, Klette, and Hammerness 2019). Chang-Tik (2023), for example identified challenges in how teachers deliver instruction and provide support to their students. Good student-active learning is characterised by teachers having sufficient expertise in selecting the most appropriate approaches to maximise learning outcomes from specific course materials (Sadler 2012).

### Conceptual framework

The study reported in this paper is underpinned by the constructivist conception of learning, captured in Wells' (1999) conceptual model, the *spiral of knowing*. We used this model to help us examine how students participating in the study perceived group discussions about a lecture as contributing to their learning. Wells' (1999) model represents a universal sequence of the learning that leads to increased understanding, which is suggested to be the goal of all useful learning. From this perspective, learning is understood as an iterative dialogic process that occurs through meaning-making between individuals and communities. This involves individuals acquiring knowledge and skills and developing a deeper understanding of what they are 'coming to understand' through four learning opportunities: *experiences; information; knowledge building; and understanding* (Wells 1999, 84–85). The multiple learning opportunities that complement each other in the *spiral of knowing* model helped us gain a holistic understanding of how students perceived their learning from group discussions about a lecture.

The first learning opportunity identified by Wells (1999) is about individuals bringing *experiences* unique to themselves and their social and cultural influences into a shared activity. These represent the personal resources of interpreted past experiences that individuals use to make sense of new information. As past experiences encounter new information, so new learning opportunities arise. These new opportunities are encountered as *information* – the second of Wells' (1999) learning opportunities. This information represents others' interpretation of knowledge and experiences, which individuals can either remember or forget, based on how this interacts with their own experiences and interests. In order for information to lead to an enhancement of understanding, it must be articulated through the third of Wells' (1999) learning opportunities – *knowledge building*, where individuals develop understanding through various forms of social interaction, actively transforming and expressing information with personal experiences. The goal is not to reproduce information but to create an understanding of its meaning in new contexts by exploring different perspectives, challenging each other's ideas, and building on each other's knowledge. In this way, knowledge building can contribute to shared knowledge. This insight can serve as the interpretive framework for the last of Wells' (1999) learning opportunities – the opportunity *to understand*, or to make sense of new experiences, which guide effective and responsible future actions. In such social interactions, Wells (1999) encouraged the creation of an atmosphere in which participants are able to feel safe exploring and expressing their thoughts and ideas.

## ***Study context***

In the following section, we present details about the National Kindergarten and School Leadership Programme and about the session, which exemplified a typical teaching session provided to programme participants. The programme is at master's level, spanning one year and including four two-day sessions, along with a final examination. The participants are kindergarten leaders (teaching children aged 1 to 5) from municipal and private kindergartens; and school leaders within primary (pupils aged 6 to 12), secondary (pupils aged 13 to 16) and upper secondary (pupils aged 16 to 19) education and training. The session under investigation was designed around four specific actions, which are outlined below. The lead author of this article played a key role in designing the session, while both authors were involved in researching Actions 3 and 4.

### ***Action 1 – planning the teaching session***

The topic was 'the pedagogical value chain' (adapted from Louis et al. 2010 in Paulsen 2019, 17). This model provides a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence student learning, from the central and the local (school owner) educational authorities, through individual school leadership, to teachers' practices in the classroom. The session's objectives were formulated as follows: 1) Students know the metaphor 'the pedagogical value chain'; 2) students can describe the pedagogical value chain of which they are a part; and 3) students have knowledge about the significance of the relationships between the various levels in the system. The session was planned in three parts: 60 minutes of lecture time (Action 2); 50 minutes of group discussions (Action 3) and 10 minutes for reflection notes (Action 4).

### ***Action 2 – implementation of the lecture***

Using the 'pedagogical value chain' model, the lecturer presented the session's objectives and reviewed the system levels from the central and local (school owner) educational authority, to the students' learning and learning outcomes. During the session, students were asked to draw and describe the pedagogical value chain in their kindergarten or school and describe it to the person sitting next to them. Finally, the lecturer introduced the students to the tasks and frameworks for the group discussions they would conduct after the break (Action 3) and then presented the reflection note and how it should be answered (Action 4).

### ***Action 3 – conducting group discussions***

After a 15-minute break, six group discussions took place, with each group working on two tasks: 1) summarising the theoretical framework presented before the break and discussing the aspects that had transfer value for their organisation, and the reasons for this (30 minutes); and 2) discussing the actions that could be taken to develop further strong connections between school and kindergarten owners, and school leaders or managers (20 minutes).

### ***Action 4 – reflection notes***

Directly after the group discussions, students noted their reflections. They were asked to reflect on how the tasks had contributed to their learning beyond the lecture, how

aspects of the group discussions had facilitated or hindered their learning, and how the group discussions could impact their leadership.

### **Purpose**

Against this background, the overall purpose of the study was to investigate how the group discussions used as a learning method in this leadership education programme contributed to students' learning by extending a lecture. The study's main aim was to gain comprehensive insight into the learning potential of such group discussions to inform our own teaching practices and those of the wider teaching team, as well as to make knowledge available to others who offer similar leadership education programmes. To pursue the overall purpose and aim of the study, we posed the following research question: *How do students perceive group discussions about a lecture as contributing to their learning; and what can we learn from this about our own teaching practices?*

### **Method**

The study employed a collaborative action research design (Heron and Peter 2008), in which colleagues sought to integrate action, reflection, theory and practice by collaborating to develop new understandings and practical improvements. The research also drew on the principles of practical action research (Elliott 1991), where the development of practices within a community – in our case, teaching and learning practices within the field of educational leadership – and the enhancement of both the community's and the individual participants' competence are central concerns. Heron and Peter (2008) emphasised that collaborative action research requires a research community in which all participants engage on equal terms and understand the research approach. In our study, members of the university educational leadership team participating in the research had different roles due to variations in the time resources available. In practice, six of the members participated in the observations and completed observation logs, while the authors of this article carried out all data analysis and writing.

### **Ethical considerations**

The Norwegian ethical guidelines for social science-based research, provided by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH), and the guidelines given by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) were adhered to throughout the research. All participants consented to participate. They were informed about the study, were assured that their data would be handled confidentially, and were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without explaining their reasoning. To ensure anonymity in our reporting, the names of the programme, the university and all participants are undisclosed. Each student was assigned an anonymous code as follows: school leaders' names were replaced with the codes SL1 to SL10 and kindergarten leaders' names with the codes KL1 to KL20. The student groups were numbered from G1 to G6. For example, KL3, G3 means Kindergarten Leader 3, Group 3. More information about the selection of students and groups is provided below.

## *Data collection*

The authors of this paper are both members of the university educational leadership team, composed of researchers and lecturers, who teach various topics on the kindergarten and school leadership programmes. The lead author of this article teaches on the programme and collaborated with the lecturer who conducted the lecture. This collaboration involved practical planning of the group discussions, including encouraging students to reflect on their learning through participation.

There were 30 students enrolled on the leadership programme (10 school leaders and 20 kindergarten leaders), all of whom participated in the research study. We did not adopt a sampling approach. For the group discussions, the students were divided into their regular learning groups – school leaders (two groups of five), and kindergarten leaders (four groups of five).

The study relied on two main sources of data. First, individual reflection notes from the 30 students were collected through anonymous structured online forms immediately following the group discussions. The students were prompted to consider how the tasks enhanced their learning beyond traditional lectures, identify aspects of the group discussions that either facilitated or hindered their understanding, and think about how the conversations could influence their personal leadership development. The reflection notes were written in Norwegian, and the excerpts utilised in this article were translated into English. These comprised the core study data.

Second, the lecturer's PowerPoint presentation, used in the lecture to introduce the group discussions to students, along with observation logs of the introduction to group work and the group discussions, served as background data. The lead author of this article, who collaborated with the lecturer for the practical planning of the group discussion, observed the lecturer introducing the tasks and discussion frameworks to the students. The two authors of this article, the lecturer, and three colleagues in our university educational leadership team, each observed one of the six group discussions, using a structured observation form. This form contained five predefined themes, developed by the authors, and reviewed with all observers in advance of the discussions. The themes were: 1) discussion framework and task types; 2) selection of leader and the leader's role; 3) framing of discussion topics and focus; 4) knowledge foundation and communication patterns; and 5) wrapping up the discussion. During the group discussions, which lasted for 50 minutes, the observers sat with the groups and were passive in the role, 'observer as participant' (Gold 1958, 122), meaning that none of the observers asked questions, commented, or engaged about experiences, perspectives or reflections.

## *Data analysis*

The research adopted a collaborative analysis strategy in which the authors, as researchers, conducted the analysis collectively to create the necessary distance from the data and validate the research (Tjora and Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis 2017, 251–252). We first engaged with the dataset independently to foster an understanding of the data before coming together to conduct the analysis processes described below.

The analysis of students' reflection notes was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to thematic analysis, which incorporates a sequential process with six phases.



We chose this approach because it is theoretically flexible and involves researchers in the knowledge-producing process through reflective engagement with theory, data and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2019). Although we used the phases as a basis for analysis, it is important to emphasise that we moved back and forth between these, with the analysis occurring in intersecting phases.

In Phase 1, we thoroughly read all the reflection notes independently to become familiar with the data. In Phase 2, we came together to conduct systematic data-driven coding by selecting all text segments relevant to the research question. In Phase 3, we examined and organised the codes to identify broader patterns of perception and potential themes. By the end of this phase, we had a collection of preliminary themes. In Phase 4, we examined these themes to determine whether they addressed the research question. In Phase 5, we examined each theme to assess whether it contained any subthemes – in other words, we delimited, defined and named the themes. We concluded that we had five: 1) *organisational conditions*; 2) *conversational climate*; 3) *summary of lecture topic*; 4) *learning from others' practice experiences*; and 5) *relating group discussion content to leadership role*. In Phase 6, we substantiated each theme by extracting and using quotations from the data and contextualising the analysis within the theory of knowledge building and the relevant literature.

The background data collected through observations were systematically analysed using qualitative content analysis (Berg and Lune 2012). The content of the observation logs, from the introduction to and execution of the group discussions, was analysed in a four-step theory- and empirically-driven process inspired by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). In Step 1, we read through all the observation logs independently to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. In Step 2, we categorised this material according to the themes (categories) derived from the analysis of the students' reflection notes. In Step 3, we conducted group-level close analysis of each theme (category) to understand the content and identify the characteristics of each. In Step 4, we used a summative approach to compare the characteristics of themes 2 to 5 (themes related to the execution of the group discussions) between the groups. The findings from this analysis were used to contrast and support the findings based on the analysis of the core data.

## Findings

The findings were organised by the five identified themes derived from the analysis of the students' reflection notes, exemplified with relevant excerpts from the notes and evidence from the observations.

We found that two of the themes, *organisational conditions* (1) and *conversation climate* (2), aligned with what Wells (1999) and other researchers highlight as conditions, or prerequisites, for individual and collective learning. *Summary of lecture topic* (3) was about information; *others' experiences gained from practice* (4) was about information and knowledge building; and the last theme, *relating group discussion content to leadership role* (5) was about information, knowledge building and insights. More detailed findings relating to each of these five themes are provided, in turn, below.

## Organisational conditions

In general, the students emphasised that the organisational conditions surrounding group discussions contributed to their learning. Issues highlighted as important were group composition; time; group leadership; and objectives and task formulation.

In relation to the first issue, group composition, excerpts from some of the students are provided below. These demonstrate that having a small group size, in this case no more than six members, was considered an important enabler for their learning. As one student commented: '[There were] just enough members in the group' (KL3, G3). Other students highlighted the value of the opportunity that the groups provided to discuss lecture topics with students from different educational contexts and leadership roles.

The fact that we come from different organisations allows us to see it from various angles and shed light on it from everyone's perspective. We all have slightly different understanding, which makes it extra interesting. (KL9, G4)

It was beneficial to have principals and department heads in the group and participants from different school types and municipalities. (SL9, G2)

The timing and duration of the group discussions were also reported by students to be important factors. Several found it conducive to their learning that the discussions took place directly after the lecture, allowing them to discuss the lecture topic immediately, which likely contributed to better knowledge acquisition. As one commented: 'It was good to discuss the subject matter immediately after the lecture' (KL8, G4). Some students reported that the available timeframe of 50 minutes was sufficient to promote learning, allowing all group members to participate in the discussion, for example: 'Everyone gets to talk; enough time' (KL3, G3).

However, others described being unable to use the time effectively, which potentially hindered their learning. This kindergarten leader explained: 'We lacked control over time and didn't focus enough on summarising' (KL, G3). An analysis of the observation data confirmed that all groups, with the exception of one, started on the second task (discussion actions) after about 30 minutes, as stated in the assignment text. However, we found that summarisation and conclusion of actions related to the students' discussions were limited. This highlights a necessity for more structured guidance and opportunities for reflection, which could help strengthen learning and enable students to better consolidate their understanding.

Generally speaking, the students found that having a group leader was conducive to learning. The teacher instructed the groups to choose a leader with responsibility for ensuring participation from all members, and for summarising the discussions. In some groups, leadership was reportedly effective; in others, there was a view that leadership could have been more effective, as reflected in the statements below.

Nice to have someone who led the discussion. (KL11, G5)

Rounds ensured everyone contributed, and different aspects of the lecture were highlighted. (KL15, G6)

Summarising was up to oneself. A bit more leadership. (KL1, G3)

Features of group leadership that were found to contribute to learning included: having the lecture illuminated from multiple perspectives by a group leader who could facilitate discussion and ensure equal participation; and having a group leader capable of leading discussions through to constructive conclusions.

The analysis of observation data showed that, on average, groups took one minute to choose a leader, with the selection occurring either through nomination and confirmation by others (four groups) or by a group member voluntarily taking on the role (two groups). Two groups elected to have a timekeeper working alongside the group leader. This proved to be an effective strategy. The analysis indicated some variation in how group leaders executed their roles, although certain action patterns appeared common. For instance, discussions about the tasks usually started with the group leaders reading the task aloud, mentioning the time frame, and then saying something like: 'The floor is open' or 'Let's go around the table'. Group leaders mainly participated in discussions themselves, alongside other group members, but also kept track of the time and drove the progress of the conversation saying, for example: 'We need to move forward'. None of the group leaders dominated the discussions. Rather, those who took the lead, as intended, did so in appreciative ways by asking follow-up questions and ensuring that all group members had the opportunity to speak. In groups with students who took up a lot of time in the conversation, some group leaders interrupted those students, while others did not. It seemed beneficial for the group discussions when the leaders took a proactive role and intervened with students who dominated the conversation.

The final topic related to organisational conditions concerning objectives and task formulation. Several students considered that being introduced to the learning objectives was important for their learning, although they did not explicitly discuss or explain the significance of the objectives further. They also highlighted the value of tasks being formulated with explicit content, and a 'request' for what should be discussed. However, in some cases students experienced the assignments and the mandate as unclear or ambiguous, for example, in relation to understanding what was implied by the term 'summarising' in Task 1. These varying perspectives are illustrated in the following excerpts:

Having the session's objectives in advance impacted the learning and outcome I gained from the session. (KL8, G4)

Task 2 had a more precise mandate than the first task. That made it easier to get started more concretely. There was less guesswork and small talk. (KL15, G6)

There were some initial uncertainties about how to summarise the theoretical framework. (KL14, G5)

This emphasises the importance of providing clear objectives and task formulations.

### *Conversation climate*

The students highlighted various aspects of the group's conversation climate when describing what they perceived to be conducive, or inhibiting, to their learning. The conversation climate was found to encompass group dynamics and forms of communication. Group dynamics highlighted by several students as important for learning

included active participation, engagement, curiosity, and support from others in the group. Engagement and active participation reportedly built trust within the group, which fostered curiosity about each other and facilitated shared understanding among group members. As this student noted:

Everyone is active and participative, offering input related to the task. This fosters trust and belief that I can learn something from the participants. (KL9, G4)

The communication forms emphasised as conducive to learning included listening to others, using questions, and engaging in discussion. Listening to others was sometimes reported to lead to new thoughts; using questions to offer perspectives one had not considered before; and using discussion as a form of communication to enhance understanding and expand perspectives on both theory and personal practical contexts. As this student commented: 'Somebody asked questions I had yet to think of and questions I might not have dared to ask' (SL9, G2).

Through the analysis of observational data, it became evident that communication relations were symmetrical – balanced and reciprocal between group members, and that the group climate was characterised by care and respect. The use of questions and discussion as forms of communication were also confirmed through the observational data. Students tended to inquire about each other's experiences with a focus on seeking clarification. For example, their questions such as: 'What do you mean by that?'; or 'How is it in your context?' were orientated towards seeking specific details rather than fostering an exploratory and inquisitive approach, which could have facilitated a deeper understanding of others' practical experiences. While many students reported positively about the communication within their groups, others highlighted that a dominance of individual students had inhibited their learning, as illustrated by the following excerpts.

Inhibiting can perhaps be said to occur when some individuals dominate the discussion more than others. (SL6, G2)

It can be inhibiting if group members take a long time to express their points, and we're not confident enough in the group to speak up about it. (KL17, G6)

Perceptions of dominance were primarily related to the fact that considerable time was spent by individual students who often took the floor or spent a long time expressing themselves without others feeling confident to intervene. Repetitive expressions of opinion from students who adhered to their ideas were felt by several students to limit their learning. The analysis of observation data showed that, while all students were involved in the group discussions, in two groups, there were examples of one student occasionally taking more speaking time than others. On some occasions, the group leaders interrupted these students, achieving this by associating the tasks identified for discussion and extending invitations to fellow group members to contemplate and articulate their perspectives.

### *Summary of lecture topic*

Several students stated that reproducing knowledge of 'the theoretical framework' by summarising the teacher's lecture was important for their learning. Their

excerpts revealed that they found the summary to be useful, enabling them to discuss their comprehension of the lecture content while also exploring the lecture theme in greater depth. These students felt that the summary facilitated a connection between the theory and their practical contexts. Two examples are provided below.

We got to delve deeper into aspects of the presented framework. (SL3, G1)

Summarising the theoretical framework helped provide hooks to anchor the theory. It became more related to everyday kindergarten practices. (KL7, G4)

Additionally, some students highlighted that the summary provided insights into the discrepancies between their practical situations and the theoretical model of the educational value chain introduced in the lecture. The two excerpts below show how some students were able to consider, and challenge, the technical aspects of this theoretical model in the context of their everyday practice.

It is crucial to have relationships both ways. Missing some arrows from boxes 2 to 4 and 1 to 3. The voices of parents and students are missing. (SL8, G2)

The group raised the idea that there might be a separate box within the internal structure of the kindergarten, i.e., a relay from pedagogical leaders to skilled workers/assistants. (KL10, G4)

These examples illustrate how these students encountered a theoretical model that did not fit the experiences they derived from their working contexts. The presence of a disparity between the theoretical model and practical application appears to foster engagement and promote learning. This situation encouraged the students to become actively involved in identifying solutions and comprehending the complexities of their respective fields.

### *Learning from others' practice experiences*

The fact that the group discussions made it possible to access experiences that others had gained from practice and see these in connection with the lecture topic was something that many of the students highlighted as important for their learning. The benefit was viewed in two ways: starting from others' experiences and viewing these in connection with the lecture topic; and starting from the lecture topic and viewing this in light of others' experiences. With regard to the former, two students expressed the following.

In others' descriptions of how the value chains operate in practice, there is much to learn about utilising this in the best possible way. (KL15, G6)

Insight into others' daily lives provides a different perspective on one's own. (SL7, G2)

Several students mentioned that these processes promoted learning by providing perspectives that helped them see their practical contexts in a new light. They perceived that others' experiences, which emerged through the process, enhanced their learning. Whether or not such experiences were recognisable and aligned with their own, others' experiences could serve as a source of motivation and potentially be utilised in their own practice contexts.

The analysis also revealed that students found it valuable to start with the lecture theme and view this in light of the experiences that others gained from practice. This pertains to how the group discussions functioned as a process, allowing students to base their understanding in the pedagogical value chain and then connect the theory with the diverse experiences of other students from various organisations. The two excerpts below provide an illustration.

The ability to connect theory with various practices and organisational structures in different municipalities/ownerships contributed to gaining 'practical experiences' of the theoretical material right after the lecture. Very beneficial from my perspective. (KL4, G3)

The discussion was perceived as relevant and offered new perspectives to view my practice with fresh eyes based on the model. (SL9, G2)

Throughout the discussion, students reflected confidently on utilising the theory and model as a starting point to establish clear links to their practices. As the excerpts demonstrate, these processes gave them practical experience and new perspectives. By 'retelling' the theory in their own words, students were able to connect to concrete examples of practice that were conducive to their learning. The analysis of observational data revealed that, in some of the groups, attention was drawn to the link between schools and the school owner, as shown in the model. This information was used as a point of departure by the students to discuss how they understood this link in their respective school contexts and what they, as school leaders, could do to strengthen the link. The participants in one of the groups agreed that they found this clarifying.

### ***Relating group discussion content to leadership role***

In general, the students found it valuable to connect the content of the group discussions to their leadership roles. They explained how exchanging experiences gave them new ideas, practical examples and insights into actions and decisions taken in their leadership roles and practice contexts. The excerpts below show that sharing experiences in the group discussions provided fertile ground for learning for these two students. This included both an expanded interpretive framework, and an increased understanding of how to lead development in their own practice contexts.

Sharing the experience of how the pedagogical value chain operates in different schools, and the experience of the exchange, provided practical examples and ideas for how to develop the work between levels in my school. (SL2, G1)

Discussing the theory together inspired me to generate new ideas – like creating more touchpoints between me and the owner, understanding what I can and should communicate upwards to improve this collaboration, and receiving input for establishing networks for principals – we often work in isolation. (KL3, G3)

Students also highlighted that, through group discussions, they had gained increased knowledge about how they, as leaders, could take new approaches. This was evident in the analysis of the reflection notes and observations. For example, they mentioned strengthening connections with school owners, developing the leadership team, and improving relationships between levels within their organisations, including themselves as leaders, and the staff.

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how group discussions can contribute to students' learning in the extension of lectures, and to gain comprehensive insight into, and further develop, teaching practices using lectures combined with group discussions as an asset for students' learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that several students found summarising the lecture subject matter and discussing its transferable value to their organisation as beneficial for their learning. With reference to Wells (1999), this learning might have emerged in the 'meaning making' process in which the students' personal experiences interacted with the subject matter. This process was based on the interplay between preparations and perceptions from their practical everyday life, and new information in the form of the lecture's communication and interpretation of knowledge. Learning also occurred through the paired task in the lecture session, where students were required to draw, describe, and explain to a fellow student the value chain they were part of in their practical context. The fact that this helped students remember, provide hooks for theory, recognise, and reconstruct the idealised chain to their situation suggests that there had been an interplay between their experiences and the information they received in the social interaction of meaning making with both the lecturer and their fellow students.

Regarding *organisational conditions*, the students highlighted some aspects of the group discussions that contributed to their learning. They particularly mentioned factors such as time allocation, group composition and group leadership. The fact that the group discussion took place immediately after the lecture while the content was still fresh in memory, that the teacher clearly and explicitly communicated the time frame for the discussions, and that the groups were homogeneously composed (Unhjem and Furu 2020) by placing kindergarten leaders and school leaders in separate groups, were perceived as conducive to learning. Explicit instruction from the teacher and precise task formulation, so that the students knew what to do, were also considered important. In cases where the students perceived the task, or the instruction from the teacher, as unclear, this created uncertainty and hindered learning. This can be related to two key factors. First, the time spent interpreting the tasks or creating a shared understanding of how to solve them, was limited in all the groups. Observational data showed that those in the leadership role varied in the extent to which they encouraged discussion of this. Second, supportive and procedural information (Chang-Tik 2023) provided by the lecturers in advance of the group discussions, including information about the learning intentions (goals) of the group discussions could have been more precise. According to Hatlevik (2018), this is a prerequisite for individual and collective learning.

*The conversation climate* in the group discussions was effective in supporting students' learning when it was characterised by openness, engagement, understanding and support. This is consistent with findings from studies in teacher education that identify these as important factors in promoting learning (Hatlevik 2018; Unhjem and Furu 2020). The students also highlighted the importance of effective group leadership and ensuring that everyone participated in the discussion. This finding is consistent with research by Elvekrok and Smith (2013) and Hvatum, Tjernæs, and Egge (2021), which shows that choosing a group leader who can ensure everyone's participation in the discussion is essential for learning. Analysis of observation data indicated that timeframes were



sometimes not adhered to, resulting in tasks not being discussed and the designated group leader primarily participating on an equal footing with the other participants in the group without necessarily maintaining a coherent thread and directing the discussions (Vennebo and Aas 2020). Some group discussions were also dominated by individual students (Unhjem and Furu 2020). In this context, it is relevant to consider whether we took for granted that school and kindergarten leaders would be skilled in leading group discussions and whether, for that reason, we could have prepared them better to understand that the role would require them to encourage and be catalysts for meaning-making processes, to support individual and collective learning.

The students generally found *summarising the lecture topic* conducive to their learning. This was reportedly helpful in helping them ascertain how they understood the lecture content and provided an opportunity to explore the lecture theme collectively and more deeply. Processes of mutual meaning making, including sharing ideas and experiences, enabled them to relate the presented theory to their practice contexts and, where necessary, challenge the model. As such, the summary of the lecture topic enabled students to integrate their experiences into a shared activity, as Wells (1999) summarises: as experiences encounter new information, new opportunities for understandings and coming to know arise.

Several students also perceived *learning from others' practice* as beneficial. Whether this shared learning was based on the theoretical framework, or on experiences derived from practice, appears to be secondary. For example, some students' reflection notes demonstrated that they better understood their leadership role, and relationship with their school owner, as a result of having listened to and discussed the experiences of others. Moreover, the observation data captured examples of some students commenting that this had contributed to clarifying their thoughts, with new insights and understandings emerging in the interactions of practical, experiential and theoretical knowledge. Students wrote that they experienced learning from others by being able to listen and ask questions about each other's descriptions and contributions, regardless of whether these were similar to their own experiences. This illustrates how learning opportunities (Wells 1999) emerged and came into play through processes of meaning making, where students could create connections between each other's practical experiences and the pedagogical value chain, that is, between theoretical, and practical, experiential knowledge (Elvekrok and Smith 2013; Hvatum, Tjernæs, and Egge 2021). The learning experiences provided students with increased understanding and awareness, new thoughts and perspectives, inspiration, motivation and new insights and notions about how they could drive development in their own practice contexts and, as leaders, act in new ways. This indicates that students developed context-informed theoretical insights through group discussions based on personal experiences, information and knowledge building (Wells 1999).

This insight could further contribute to students' leadership in their kindergarten or school through new spirals of knowing (Wells 1999), where new insights are developed by integrating personal experiences and information and knowledge-building. In this sense, group discussions beyond lectures can act as catalysts for learning through meaning-making processes with significance for individual role performance in practice and practice development. Despite the relatively consistent perception of students that group discussions contributed to their learning, the observation data suggests that it is important to question whether the discussion group format has untapped learning



potential. Wells (1999) emphasised that an exploratory and questioning approach is a prerequisite for knowledge building to yield new personal insights. Although students were curious about each other's experiences, the findings indicated that their questions rarely led to a deeper exploration of others' experiences.

In general, the students found it relevant to *relate discussion group content to their leadership roles*. By exchanging experiences, the students gained new ideas, practical examples and insights into leadership actions taken in their practice contexts. The students also gained increased knowledge about how they could take new approaches in their leadership roles; this aligns with what Wells (1999, 85) referred to as insights that can serve 'as interpretive frameworks' for new understandings, actions, experiences and information.

### Limitations

Although a key strength of this study was its utilisation of more than one data source to explore the research question, the reliability of the observation data was potentially compromised due to the involvement of six different observers – one per discussion group. The quality of the study could possibly have been enhanced with the use of video recordings of the discussions, providing an opportunity to examine the progression of the dialogues after the event. Additional limitations lie in the fact that the students' reflection notes provided self-report data, which is prone to bias, rather than a more objective measure of learning outcomes. However, a larger-scale measurement study was not the purpose of this study. The aim was to achieve an in-depth understanding of this specific group of students' learning experiences and, for this, our data-collection approach was appropriate and proportionate. More broadly, the study underscores the importance of further research focused on the role of group discussions and lectures in facilitating an in-depth exploration of the subject matter. Such investigations could encompass a diverse range of university educational programs to enhance understanding and engagement within the academic community.

### Conclusion

This study has shown that group discussions in combination with lectures can provide learning opportunities that promote students' learning, both collectively and individually. Students experience group discussions as contributing to learning beyond the lecture itself by allowing them to learn through summarising lecture topics, sharing practical experiences and relating the content of the group discussions to their leadership roles. An important finding is that a clear framework must be in place if the group discussions are to provide an effective climate for learning. A positive conversation climate within the group is also essential. In our study, we found that learning opportunities emerge when there is a safe environment for discussion, and in the interplay between provided theoretical knowledge about the lecture topic, and students' practical, experiential knowledge and experience. This interaction can create learning experiences that increase students' understanding and awareness, new thoughts and perspectives, inspiration, motivation and insights, which they can take into their leadership roles. However, we also found that

organisational factors such as poor-quality task design, missing or unclear instructions before the discussion, or a lack of clarity about the group leader role, can hinder learning potential.

These findings raise several implications for our own, and potentially others' teaching practices in higher education leadership programmes. We have found the data from our study to be broadly reassuring, which encourages us to continue with this student-centred learning approach, applying the knowledge we have gained regarding how preparations, execution and discussions can improve students' learning. The findings can also help make other higher education teachers aware of how group discussions can be a positive contribution, enabling students to develop expanded insight into individual and collective learning processes that can be useful for them in their own leading work. Our study has also shown that action research, in which higher education teachers explore aspects of their teaching practices, can provide a rich knowledge foundation for the collaborative development of teaching and learning practices in higher educational programmes for leaders in kindergartens and schools.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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