



Research protocol: A cluster-randomised study evaluating the effects of a model for improving inter-professional collaboration in Norwegian primary schools



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ABSTRACT

This is the protocol for a cluster-randomised study involving 35 Norwegian primary schools (5th–7th grades) participating in a three-year project. The aim is to implement and evaluate the LOG model, a model with the goal of improving inter-professional collaboration in schools. LOG is a Norwegian acronym for Leadership, Organization and Implementation. The model comprises meeting structures and implementation support for strengthening collaborative practices in schools and municipalities. Nineteen schools have been randomised to the experimental group and 16 have been randomised to the control group. Researchers at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, have developed the LOG model and evaluate the models effectiveness. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training is the funder of the project. The funder has reviewed the protocol.

1. Introduction

Pupils are diverse and face varying difficulties in school and everyday life that need coordinated follow-up by different professions. However, this is often difficult to achieve within the school system. Inter-professional collaboration is required to produce coordinated services and provide children with the best possible conditions for learning and upbringing. Consequently, several Norwegian white papers emphasise the importance of inter-professional collaboration in the school context, to ensure that pupils receive differentiated instruction according to their needs as well as necessary help and support from relevant inter-professional actors both within and outside the educational arena (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011, 2013, 2017).

Nevertheless, there is a lack of inter-professional collaboration between different welfare services, including health, social services and education (Sloper, 2004). Studies have also demonstrated several factors prepositioning inter-professional collaboration. Two important factors, among others, are strong leadership and sufficient organisational resources to support collaborative efforts, such as resources to train the staff (Cameron, Lart, & Bostock, 2016). The literature review by Cameron et al. (2016) showed that strong leadership enhanced assurance among professionals in the new collaborative team or about their new roles. Furthermore, strong

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leadership improved the understanding of collaboration among the professionals, which could lead to improved user outcomes.

“Improving Inter-professional Collaboration in Norwegian Primary Schools” is a cluster-randomised study, commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The study evaluates the LOG model, a model with the aim of improving inter-professional collaboration in schools. The aim of this cluster-randomised study is to evaluate whether and how the LOG model improves a) inter-professional collaboration in municipalities and in schools and b) pupils’ learning environments. A total of 35 primary schools in four Norwegian municipalities are participating in the study, which is taking place over a 36-month period. The evaluation began 1 April 2017. Of the 35 participating schools, 19 were randomised to the experimental group and 16 to the control group. The study has been preregistered at ClinicalTrials.org (Identifier NCT03248245).

1.1. Background for the LOG model

Government and researchers have hypothesised that improved inter-professional collaboration will strengthen the school as a preventive arena and benefit pupils’ learning outcomes and learning environments. Enhanced collaboration may also free more time for teachers to focus on their core activities, namely, teaching (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2013; Dahl, 2016, pp. 220–211). During the years 2014 and 2015, the Work Research Institute, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University (formerly Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences) investigated different models and practices for improving inter-professional collaboration in schools (Borg, Christensen, Fossetøl, & Pålshaugen, 2015; Borg, Drange, Fossetøl, & Jarning, 2014). The main objective of the study was to develop inter-professional models and practices that could subsequently be tested by a cluster-randomised design. Combining evidence from the research literature (Borg et al., 2014), experiences from the field and qualitative analyses of developmental processes in five schools, the study found three characteristics of inter-professional collaboration that seemed to facilitate positive outcomes on pupils’ learning and learning environments: First, engaged inter-professional collaborators, supporting teachers in the classroom situation; second, engaged school principals, taking an active part in, and responsibility for, role clarifications between various inter-professional collaborators, within the school in general as well as within the classroom; and third, a “universal intervention” approach, that is, an approach which targets the whole school, rather than specific groups of pupils or teachers (Borg et al., 2014; Borg et al., 2015). Based on these characteristics, the research team developed an outline for five models for improved inter-professional collaboration (Borg et al., 2015).

2. The LOG model

2.1. Central principles of the LOG model

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training gave a call for tender and commissioned the researchers to develop further one of the five models, that is, the LOG model (Borg et al., 2015). The focus of the LOG model is on the leadership, organisation, and implementation of development processes to improve inter-professional collaboration in schools. The model emphasises managerial anchoring, a participative design and building of a developmental organisation where learning and feedback mechanisms are central. The model is designed to be adapted to local circumstances and is based on a standardised process to develop initiatives that suit the local schools rather than a fixed programme (Craig et al., 2013; Patton, Bond, Butler, & Glover, 2003).

The LOG model uses a series of dialogue conferences as arenas for the development of inter-professional collaboration through innovation initiatives within schools (Bjørke, Jarning, & Eikeland, 2013). Dialogue conferences have been used extensively in Scandinavian working life and in Norwegian school settings (Lund, 2011; Pålshaugen, 2015). In these conferences, school teachers, school nurses, educational and psychological counsellors, and child welfare social workers participate to cocreate the initiatives best suited to improve inter-professional collaboration at the actual local school participating in the project. These innovation initiatives are subsequently tested and discussed in the different arenas that are part of the model (described in 2.2 below). The LOG model prescribes a planned shift between discursive practice (dialogue conferences and other arenas) and executive practice (testing the initiatives). To ensure this, the LOG model relies on the leadership and management of the principal, and the LOG guide provides the principal with guiding instructions for the task.

Researchers and a supervision team have developed a guide and supporting materials facilitating implementation of the LOG model. The guide describes the main components and arenas of the model, as well as the responsibilities and activities that municipal school managers and school principals have to take part in. The guide also defines the requirements for school staff and inter-professional actors. In addition, the supervision team provide municipal school managers and principals with implementation support. Supervisors monitor the implementation process and ensure that the innovation initiatives are of sufficient quality according to three specified criteria: They must be inter-professional, have a “universal” approach (not predominantly targeting work with single pupils) and must be of some duration. The supervision team further act as “critical friends” to school principals and municipal school managers (MacBeath, 1998). They attend core meetings and assist in the planning process, as well as giving feedback on the execution of the LOG model, for example, the conduct of the dialogue conferences. In addition, all participating municipalities receive financial funding to enable them to cover administrative costs of being part of the project. A basic amount with a nominal value equivalent to €32,400 is allotted to each municipality. In addition, the municipalities are allotted an amount according to the number of schools in each municipality, equivalent to €10,400 per school.

The project targets pupils from grades five to seven (ages 10–12 years), however, the researchers and supervision team developed the LOG model for use in compulsory school in general. In Norway, compulsory, free-of-charge education comprises ten years and consists of the school stages primary school (grades 1–7, ages 6–12 years), and lower secondary school (grades 8–10, ages 13–16 years).

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