Article

Agon—Are Military Officers Educated for Modern Society?

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Abstract: The research question in this article concerns how a competitive environment affects the learner's (officer cadet's) personal leadership development and their relationship to their team and with future civilian foundations. More specifically, what are the possible learning effects of the 'hidden' curriculum? This article investigates how more than 250 years of leadership education provides new army officers with new skills and how this environment may affect the cadets' leadership training. The article builds on ethnographic data gathered during the three-year education programme in most of the relevant practical locations and contexts. Data were collected using both interviews and a questionnaire. Regarding trust in their learning environment, cadets reported a mean score of 2.83 on a 1 (low trust) to 5 (high trust) Likert scale, underpinning interview data regarding the lack of trust in the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) and in their fellow cadets. Cadets also pointed out that competition hindered their learning (mean = 2.50). These findings are interpreted in relation to possible negative effects stemming from internal competition and the evaluation system as a whole. The overall output of this system is a zero-sum game, and thus affects evaluative practices and learning processes. This study is of relevance to higher education officers responsible for designing learning environments.

Keywords: competition; trust; team; evaluation; vocational leadership training; leadership education

1. Introduction

The last thing I felt after the last one and a half years of tactics and practical leadership is that there was very quickly harsh critique if it turned out badly; there was not much emphasis on learning. And there was not much room for error.

(Cadet informant)

Agon was the spirit (*daimon*) of contest among the Greek gods, and the brother of Nike (victory) [1]. In education, contests can be motivating, but one can also learn that superiority over others can be a token of success [2]. Vocational education can then be viewed as training for specific, narrowly defined jobs [3]—in the present study, becoming an officer in the Norwegian Army. Contests and rivalry will in our case—vocational leadership training—be related to a hidden core of the education, but it is not always explicit or written down in the curriculum. Most of us can relate to this; in American war movies and action-based thrillers, army officers often perform in an authoritarian manner when leading others. This formulates social scripts [4] that affect our thinking about self and others, but also the social interaction among students, between students and the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) and between the military and society. It is of little use, in army action scripts, if civilians possess higher degrees of education or central positions in society. Equal interaction based on trust falls short in such relationships—and it does not seem to be necessary, anyway. What happens will be as the military decides—interaction can be ordered. That is the way it is on film. What is it like in reality? Is it the case that military

officers assume such a super-civilian role for their own reasons, or are they trained for this? If so, this will have an impact on the effectiveness of the cooperation between the military and civilian systems when it matters most. Enhancing a common solidarity mindset between different civilian and military institutions has been formulated as an important goal for society as a whole to handle crises such as a pandemic, military operations, war and other crises [5]. The development of such synergy-oriented and trust-based forms of cooperation is also central to Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) operations. The scope of this research is to reveal how military vocational education can improve for the betterment of society and to identify potential challenges to civilian/military collaborations. These topics are of great importance to the conceptual thinking of total defence [6].

In particular, this is related to the role of the military in creating cohesion in civil society. This does not, however, seem to be the focus of the NMA education, nor can we state that we know that this has been replicated internally at the NMA in any previous studies. In this study, we therefore examined whether higher military education is adapted to the structures of modern Norwegian society, in which societal trust is often emphasised as a key feature [7]. A central premise in our study is that interaction and trust between the military system and society at large is necessary, so that together they can form an effective combined fighting force against any threats that may arise. In this study, we investigated this issue by delving into the educational and professional content at the NMA.

Major General Mick Ryan, the Commander of the Australian Defence College, has recently stated the necessity for the military to gain an intellectual edge, in order to fight future wars [8]: 'The intellectual edge for an individual is the capacity for that person to creatively outthink and outplan potential adversaries. It is founded on the broadest array of training, education, and experience that can be provided by institutions, as well as a personal dedication to continuous self-learning over a long period of time' (p. 7).

Competition between learners within educational practices and simulations can be seen as a widespread and useful method to motivate students or groups of students and to strengthen collaborative learning within higher education [9]. Pennington et al. [10] advised that competition can increase motivation at the firing range. Motivation can be defined as either intrinsic (coming from the inside) or extrinsic (coming from the outside) [11]. Gibb and Dolgin [12] found that the ten top factors influencing the retention of military pilots involved intrinsic factors (i.e., motivation). Kohn [13] problematised competitions in learning by participation in sports, because it can support antisocial behaviour regarding the costs of sharing, helping and cooperation, and a study by Schüler [14] revealed that competition in military exercises seemed to bring to the fore a wickedness in the military, and that this led to unsafe work practices. Liu and Liu [15] reported that because of fiercer competition after entering Chinese military academies, many cadets found it difficult to achieve their own personal wishes. However, as the cadets' motivation was not at the centre of our focus of research in this study, we have not explored this any further here.

Military educational practices can be interpreted as doctrine-driven [16,17], and the development of autonomous teams that are tightly coordinated and highly collaborative is vital in training. To be able to combine forces, the Norwegian training doctrines are related to those of NATO and vice versa [18] (p. 3). For example, the case presented in this paper may have relevance to other military educationalists outside Norway, highlighting the problematic aspect of having individual reward systems and an emphasis on a collaborative learning team at the same time. However, it can also be questioned whether this type of education is adequate to the army officer's central role in collaborations with their civilian counterparts in peace and in conflict. The officers need to communicate and develop relationships with civilian actors while contracting civilian personnel, interacting on research projects and collaborating within 'total defence', when that is called upon. Such areas of collaboration are based on mutual trust developed over time or spontaneous (swift) trust [19,20].

1.1. The Research Questions in the Study

The first research question in this article was: How does a competitive environment affect the personal leadership development of the learners (officer cadets) and their relationships with their teams? The second research question was: How does a competitive environment affect the learner (officer cadet)? More specifically, we wanted to investigate what the possible learning effects of the 'hidden' curriculum, learning that takes place outside the frame of 'official learning objectives', are for both of these research questions.

1.2. The Case and the Context

Since 1750, the NMA has educated officer cadets for service in the Norwegian army. It is the oldest higher education institution in Norway [21]. The purpose of the education at the NMA is to provide students with an individual 'Bildung process' (*dannelsesreise* in Norwegian), wherein each cadet must apprehend the necessary knowledge, skills and general competencies (values) that are required of an army officer [22]. There are ten subjects, of which two are reckoned as core subjects. The two core subjects are professional foundations (PF) (*profesjonsgrunnlaget* in Norwegian) and the leader and leadership development (MLD) course (*leder-og lederskapsutvikling* in Norwegian). The PF subject covers the expectations and *demands of war*. The MLD contributes to the identification of the cadet's individual starting points and needs in terms of development related to the spheres of sociability, personal and professional subjects [22]. An identification of the gap between the starting point and the fully trained officer is stressed as important and is formulated as the starting point of a humanistic Bildung-journey [23].

The division between PF and MLD can be seen as deeply rooted, as well as being a clash of realism and humanism in education. On various occasions, instructors and officers involved in the training repeatedly stated: 'In war there is only one winner!' The quote is interpreted by the researchers as legitimising the use of difficult means to prepare for the potential hostility of the military vocation. 'Train as you fight' was another quote often overheard in conversations during the fieldwork, underlining a hard and competitive approach. Cadets will eventually depend on each other, and other personnel, when they graduate and enter active duty; however, competition only intensifies as officers jockey for top stratification marks on performance reports and fight for key positions throughout their careers [24].

Besides the grades (A–F) given in the subjects, where an A represents excellent and an F represents a non-passing mark, the NMA also keeps track of the cadets in terms of their suitability to be military leaders (SML]) (paragraph 14.1 and 14.3 in the NMA regulations for education; [25]), and they are rated below norm, a little below norm, norm, a little above norm and above norm. Cadets who perform below norm have failed, and the school council advises the school principal as to whether or not the cadet can continue at the NMA. The other purpose of this system is to promote the *primus inter pares*, the best cadet in the cohort. This position is based on both exam grades and instructors' assessments, which are recorded on a 'secret' Excel scoresheet by the officer who has a special responsibility for the cadet cohort. Inevitably, cadets are ranked from approximately 1 to 50 in this system, with some cadets struggling to reach a norm level, and others competing to be in the top ten or better.

1.3. Learning Outside the Learning Objectives

From a sociocultural perspective on learning, the individual can be seen and understood in light of their surroundings [26]. One of the leading educational scientists today, Gert Biesta [27], has argued that a student entering an educational programme can learn or make valuable experiences outside the narrow frame of predefined learning objectives. He underscored that all teaching implies a risk of not obtaining all learning objectives [28]. Therefore, the unforeseen phenomenon is of importance both in the learning objectives, but also in that students train to cope with situations that are not planned. In such situations, the contract with the learning objectives can be broken [29]. Such situations open learning

processes that provide the student with leadership competencies that provide her/him with skills in handling unpredictable and complex situations when they matter the most. Central to this are learning processes based on individual reflections and awareness of relational processes employing trust, involvement and power-free discourses during a crisis [20]. In the next section, we investigate extra-curricular learning within the concept of the hidden curriculum.

1.4. The Hidden Curriculum

According to the U.S. education and curriculum researcher Philip W. Jackson (1928–2015), the activity of teaching contains more than work with a defined curriculum, as the activity of the classroom contains elements of opportunistic behaviour. Jackson [30] (pp. 166–167) writes:

> *As typically conducted, teaching is an opportunistic process. That is to say, neither the teacher nor his students can predict with any certainty exactly what will happen next. Plans are forever going awry and unexpected opportunities for the attainment of educational goals are constantly emerging . . . Experienced teachers accept this state of affairs and come to look upon surprises and uncertainty as natural features of their environment. They know, or come to know, that the path of educational progress more closely resembles the flight of a butterfly than the flight of a bullet.*

The concept of the hidden curriculum, in the process of understanding education, is related to the unexpected and the unforeseen [20] and can be used by an educational researcher to grasp the learning not prescribed in the official curricula. However, there is an underlying assumption that if vital issues are not addressed by the formal curriculum, the cadets may learn from what Jackson [30] denotes as the hidden curriculum. We use this metaphor to address some of the potential learning and unexpected outcomes of the Bildung-journey [31] encountered by the cadets at the NMA.

The main source of evaluation [30] (pp. 20–21) in a school comes from the teachers (instructors), and they continuously make judgements and communicate their assessments to students. Some of the assessments are hidden from the learners (the cadets) when the teachers (instructors/trainers) at the NMA form groups and discuss cadet performance. Part of these discussions also relates to what and how to communicate the teacher evaluation to the learner. Such hidden assessment can convey that the role of the clown [32], who asks questions that cannot be answered or proposes different solutions to practical approaches, is minimised. This is underpinned by research on character strengths among officers and cadets, where creativity is low on the list of priorities [33].

Communication and interaction (*samhandling* in Norwegian) can be seen as vital in leadership [20,34], but so too is the ability to work and perform in teams. Posner and Kouzes [35] underline that a leader's abilities to enable and motivate others to act, to foster collaboration and to get the support of their peers are all important factors related to success.

Being educated as an army officer is an important and all-encompassing activity that takes place at the NMA during a cadet's education. Officer development is the NMA's concept of leadership development for cadets being educated at the NMA. Officer development is consequently the NMA's comprehensive formation process for developing leaders for the Norwegian Army, and it is a central theme in all activity at the NMA [36,37]. The starting point for this officer development is based upon the definitions of leadership and leadership development that are described in *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* [38], where leadership is defined as the process of producing direction, alignment and commitment in collectives. Leadership development expands a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. Leadership thus revolves around the development of competencies to direct leadership processes by virtue of being in leadership roles, both formal and informal [39]. This all seems fine in theory, but there may be a difference between theory and practice at the NMA, as there seems to be a hidden curriculum and evaluation taking place, in addition to the theoretical concepts and guidelines that are supposed to govern the NMA.

There might also exist a different understanding among lower and higher levels of the military hierarchy at the NMA about what leadership is and which competences are necessary to lead efficiently. In a study by Boe and Torgersen [40] on strategic leadership competence in the Norwegian Armed Forces Cyber Defence, no common understanding of the term strategic leadership competence was found among the participants. Converging upon a common understanding of this concept would be a first stepping stone that could then be used to enhance ongoing education and competence development in order to face difficult situations as leaders. This might be the case for the NMA as well, as there might be a discrepancy between what the cadets think leadership is and what the instructors think leadership is. If the cadets do not know about the hidden curriculum, they do not know how to act or on what grounds they are being evaluated in their leadership performance.

Complicating this picture further, Torgersen and Carlsten [41] highlighted the importance of preparing strategic military leaders for differing degrees of diversity. Cadets being enrolled at the NMA may come from a variety of different backgrounds and one cannot know if the leaders at the NMA have the necessary competence to deal with this situation.

Also, contributing to the practices at the NMA, role models are linked to the cadets' own leaders, culture and practice [42]. This narrows what is considered valid practice and can enforce a self-driven power structure and a one-dimensional understanding of how leadership should be performed, wherein only people within this culture can be seen as participants. Magnussen et al. [43] have argued that the risks of this NMA practice are related to organisational narcissism and a possible distorted orientation to reality, in which the NMA fails in its given educational tasks related to the needs of society and the future demands of war. In addition, a hidden curriculum, as well as a one-dimensional leadership understanding, may enforce the challenges with what is regarded as acceptable behaviour among the cadets. In a situation of evaluation and the after-action review (AAR), altruistic behaviour and motives can be pressurised. The AAR process in military systems represents some of the most significant mappings of knowledge when it comes to lesson learned/learning from failure in training or operations. AAR forms the basis for detailed improvements of PF, MLD and technological concepts [16].

In addition to the learners being evaluated, the cadets also contribute to peer evaluation during AARs and other formal and informal situations, wherein the performances of the cadets are under scrutiny. Evaluative situations can be recognised by both ambiguity and choice [44], concerning dilemmas about whether to praise or criticise fellow cadets' actions. Such deliberations among cadets can contain considerations of loyalty to the group or cohort of cadets and/or obedience to the system and the military profession and credo. If not naïve, then different levels of rationality and rather complex variations of the prisoner's dilemma [45] can, if played well, optimise the players' performances as a group.

The dilemma showcases the challenges of obtaining the objectives of both performance and safety. Strategies that mimic others, tit for tat, did well in the experiments and simulations of the dilemma in social play, but they were vulnerable to disturbances or defective moves. The remedy for this is pro-social behaviour and generosity [46]. If playing games involving winning or losing, the contest for internal ranking among the cadets with regard to perceived trust can be seen as an important factor in the learning environment.

In this article, the reported effects of unexpected learning outcomes that were experienced by cadets are discussed in the light of the hidden curriculum, the game theory of the prisoner's dilemma [47], and creativity and leadership in team development. At the end of the study, some educational implications are suggested.

2. Methods

This article uses data from the research project 'Practice Makes Mastery?' that took place between 2014 and 2017. This research project is registered at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Project number 35059), and other research findings can be found in other research papers; *Pathei Mathos* [48], *Machine Machine* [49] and *Role models and Bildung in Vocational education: A Case Study—The national Military Academy* (Forbilder og danning

i profesjonsutdanninger: En casestudie—Krigsskolen) [50]. The data were collected at various NMA practice sites that were used during the three years of officer development and training. The project's ontological starting point was how exercises, as a learning landscape [43], affect officer cadets.

2.1. Ethnography

This research used an ethnographic approach, with a greater emphasis on observation [51] of the cadets' learning and exercise activities than on participation. The data stem from field notes, photos and semi-structured interviews with eight cadets. The cadet enters the learning structure based on his or her status as an individual and part of a team, class and cohort. One researcher (the corresponding author) followed the cadets on their practice field, but did not have what Patton [52] (pp. 340–341) calls an 'inner perspective'. The first author took the role of onlooker. In all situations while observing, the researcher retained his civilian 'outdoor' clothing and was easy to spot among all of the green uniforms. The fieldwork followed the pathways of naturalistic inquiry [53], with an emphasis on 'natural' settings and open-ended conversations. The second and third authors of this research article did not participate in the fieldwork, but contributed to the analysis.

2.2. Informants and Procedure

The contingent of cadets that were the initial 'object of inquiry' consisted of 51 males and 5 females. Their ages ranged from 20 to around 30 years. Out of this cohort, which was followed for all of their exercises, a group of eight cadets, four female and four male, were interviewed. Four interviews were conducted with each cadet: during their first week, and then at the end of their first, second and third year. The end result was that we selected participants on the basis of a grounded theory approach [54,55]. In our case, this meant that our ambition was to obtain a wide variety of experiences, and by that also a relative diversity.

The key informants were picked out by NMA training officers during the cadets' first week of training at the NMA, using the criteria given by the first author such as diversity of years in service, gender, military branch and age. The list of informants was then given to the first author. The research also involved a qualitative and quantitative questionnaire [56]. Just after graduation, an online survey was distributed, and we received 18 responses from the 54 participants (2 cadets were relegated or quit during the three-year programme). Why 36 of the cadets did not complete the survey could be related to the e-mail distribution (i.e., spam filters) or the possible perception of the study as insignificant, or to general survey fatigue. Another factor could be related to revealing the state of internal affairs to outsiders, representing a vocational codex and a wish to keep the problems in-house. This was not investigated further.

2.3. Analysis

Before the final questionnaire was distributed, three out of four interviews with the cadets were conducted. During the final stage of fieldwork, the 'hidden curriculum' of cadet learning emerged. Several informants addressed the significance of the issues of team and trust related to the 1–50 ranking of cadets. This was then integrated in the final interviews and questionnaire; the topics were present already in the second year of education [48]. All interview data were transcribed in MS Word for Windows and collected in MAXQDA 10 analysis software. The interview sets from the final year of education were sorted with MAXQDA 10 into 'competition', 'team' and 'trust'. These three themes were chosen as they were deemed the most relevant in order to answer our two research questions. The two research questions focussed upon competition and the cadets' relationships to the team, and how competition would affect the cadets. In the selected quotes we looked for similarities in word meaning derived from the answers that the informants gave. After the initial coding, the second and third author reread and refined the content of the initial coding. Then, the first author reread the coded material and made the final excerpts. The

quantitative answers given by the cadets to the questions related to trust and the effects of competition/ranking on the learning landscape were coded into IBM SPSS 28.0.

2.4. Trustworthiness

Bearing in mind the relatively low number of respondents (18 out of 54), the results give an indication of how some of the cadets (though not all) experienced the effects of competition and trust, and because of this, they may contain a negative bias. It is possible that happy cadets did not bother to reply. Another aspect of the low number of respondents may be related to the vocational codex of not exposing internal 'challenges' to outsiders and exposing the organization's own weaknesses in training to adversaries. This makes not responding the 'safe' solution. The translation [52] from Norwegian into English in this article presented a challenge. It affected aspects such as faction versus fiction and the validity of texts [57], including the communicative validity of the findings and translations. To retain both intention and meaning, the interview excerpts were kept in their 'original' Norwegian form together with the English translation in earlier drafts of the article. This allowed us to preserve the Norwegian voice. Some Norwegian expressions are enclosed in parentheses and remain in the article. To keep the Norwegian voice, we have performed literal translations and have not translated to perfect English 'syntax', and by doing that, the voices of the informants are kept. Photography provides researchers with the opportunity to relive the observed situations with the distance of an onlooker [52]. Questions about the transferability and generalisability of the findings inquire about how they are limited by their 'similarity and fittingness' [53] (p.124). These limitations may be important when we address issues with implications for military training, vocational education, leadership development and learning in commensurate situations.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This research relied on informed consent from adult participants and was conducted according to the rules and regulations provided by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Project number 35059). Information about the scope and ethics of this research was given to the cadets on their second day at the NMA at Tollbugaten 10 (T10) in Oslo, Norway. Anonymity was secured by keeping interviews and name lists on a separate, password-protected server. One cadet withdrew from participation in the project; no reasons were given or sought.

3. Findings

Within the sociocultural framework of learning landscapes [58], a learner (apprentice) is evaluated by how their work is being used (*bruksevaluering* in Norwegian) and the consequences of their learning output (*konsekvensevaluering* in Norwegian). At the NMA, the latter can also be seen as tacitly accepted by the cadets where there are the realistic credos and under the *demands of war*. In the following, cadets' reflections on relegation (being expelled from the NMA), trust and competition are presented.

In the e-mail survey, several cadets expressed that the primary outcomes from the NMA gave them the chance '*to have faith in myself*' and to be '*self-reflective*', while understanding others and caring. One cadet emphasised his need '*to keep a professional identity. This trade demands a lot from us, and to identify with the profession is important in order to grasp our own role in a bigger picture*'. These quotes add nuance to learning outcomes in relation to what other cadets points out. One cadet expressed their learning outcomes this way: '*Keep your friends close but keep your enemies closer.* [There is] *much jealousy, envy, bitterness, and rumours.*' This quote indicates that there is something that the cadet experiences or learns that lies outside the formal curricula—specifically, the hidden curricula. Another cadet wrote:

> *To judge other people's true motives and intentions. Sad, but still true. Instead of creating fantastic communities of mastery, the NMA sets the cadets in opposition to other cadets,*

and the cadets against the instructors. This does something to the learning environment, and I think it will affect us all in the years to come.

This cadet informs us that, within the learning environment, there is something about the organisation of learning that creates tensions among the cadets and between the cadets and the school. In the in-depth interviews, the cadets reflected upon the evaluation and relegation system.

3.1. Cadet Reflections on Relegation and Assessment

One cadet we have called Felicia reflected on evaluation among her peers:

Yes, it is just not fair. If he is thrown out (from the NMA), then X should be relegated also. He is better, but he got fewer opportunities to prove himself. Some just stay below the radar, others put their head up and it gets it chopped off.

Felicia reflects that some of the cadets are not treated fairly, but also that some cadets manage to cope and do not undergo the same scrutiny as others. The system is not perceived as fair. Felicia continues and adds reservations about her viewpoints:

There has been a lot of talk among the others in my cohort, and I feel it is not always fair. The evaluation of some of the cadets who are here or not here anymore. I haven't perceived it as fair. But there are also probably a lot of things that I do not know.

The assessment and evaluations are not always perceived as transparent by the cadets. This could be due to secrecy but could also potentially be due to unclear criteria and personal bias. In an interview, a cadet we have called Karl elaborated on the personal touch or differences among the NMA instructors, but also on how 'second opinions' can be prejudiced. The cadets need to fulfil and pass some obligatory practical leadership tasks, and these tasks may vary in duration and complexity. Karl reflected:

It is obvious to me that I have experienced differences between instructors (mentors) in what is evaluated as a pass or fail. I have also felt that if a cadet has been struggling, and there is hearsay in the system that this cadet is struggling and is getting warnings, and is given a new instructor/mentor, I do get a feeling that they are slaughtered unnecessarily. They are looking to see if the cadet makes 'the mistake' and 'yes he did'. So, when it is said to get a fresh look—it is not very fresh. I have experienced that in an order meeting that I felt went okay, but you know that the cadet has received a warning, he is slaughtered straight away.

In Karl's opinion, the evaluation and relegation processes can be seen in the light of scapegoating. There is one cadet under scrutiny, and the rest are 'off the hook'. However, the AAR and the learning feedback is not all dark. A cadet we have called Nils reflected on the feedback situations: 'No, some instructors are quite good at making out the most important parts. They see the whole process from when the order is given, and they point out my "repetitions" and in a way the most critical errors. And then I feel it is very good. And when they tell me what I am working well, they give me something I can use later.' As Nils reflects, evaluations can be received as valuable if attention is given to the cadets' whole process, and if references to other learning situations they have experienced are also given. However, not everything is always rosy according to Nils, as he continued:

But then there are just too many instructors that feel they have to say something just to say something. And if there are three or four instructors that provide feedback, they end up [getting] into many details. They also comment on things that we have no learning prerequisites for to address. It could be parts of my plan that are missing. Sometimes it is the order given that gives the premise for that mistake, and it ends up with too much feedback and too much information. I don't learn anything from that.

In this quote, Nils noted that the amount of feedback and information given in the AAR needs attention. Another cadet we called Beate pointed to the positives of direct feedback:

During the combat fatigue course I received specific feedback that I did not have time to address before shooting course five in the final year when I had X (head instructor). I tried to jump over a trench, and somebody shot me from the side, and I lay there on my side playing dead. X then stands over me and yells at me. It didn't affect me emotionally or anything because I didn't feel very much, but it was like; hey okay, ah, I shall not run like that, I need to move around it. (Laughs).

After this verbal feedback she reflected on why this fault occurred. Beate continued: 'Everybody had run over and across things, so the people I have been modelling are not perfect either, but this was what I had learnt. But it was kind of nice to get the clear answers: this is not the way to do it, this way is'. To be provided with clear answers and advice was appreciated by Beate. However, all of the mistakes that were not dealt with in earlier sessions had hampered her learning, and probably also that of other cadets in the cohort. This could influence the level of trust between cadets and the NMA.

3.2. Trust and Competition

According to the psychologist Erik Homburger Erikson [59], basic trust is vital in development and learning. Inspired by Erikson and the observed variations of positive feedback in AAR by the researcher, the competitive nature observed at the NMA drew the researchers' attention. Variations on questions that all started 'Do I have complete trust in . . . ?' were asked in the survey provided to the graduated cadets. A 1–5 Likert scale was used. Table 1 provides an overview of the questions and answers related to the trust that the cadets perceived in their learning environment.

Table 1. Perceived trust in the people and in the cadets' learning environment (*N* = 18).

To What Extent Do You Agree with the Following Statements	M	SD
1. I have complete trust in my fellow cadets.	3.11	0.83
2. I have complete trust in my instructors during exercises.	3.22	1.06
3. I have complete trust in company commanders.	2.94	0.90
4. I have complete trust in the NMA.	2.83	0.92
5. I have complete trust in my learning group/squad.	4.17	0.79

Scale ranging from 1 (fully disagree)–5 (fully agree). M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation.

In the vocational education, learning culture and structure at the NMA, cadets report varying degrees of perceived trust (M = 2.83 to 4.17) in their environment. Cronbach's alpha was 0.76, indicating a moderate and reliable level of reliability [60]. This may be seen as a bit odd, as one would probably expect the cadets to have a very high level of trust in fellow cadets, instructors, company commanders and the NMA as an institution to which the cadets belong. We see that the cadets felt the highest degree of trust in their own learning group/squad. The results are from only 18 out of 54 cadets, but when carefully interpreted, the data reveal that there is a breach of trust between the cadets and the NMA. The results follow a *proximo distalis* pattern: while the close unity of the learning group received a mean 4.17 with little spread, the NMA and its mentors and instructors had less positives, but a higher spread, as seen in the standard deviations reported in Table 1. Given the variations in the feedback received on more or less identical performances, we can infer that trust can be affected by the cultivated weight of competition.

3.3. Primus Inter Pares

On the first day of observation, when the cadets were introduced to the research project, they also presented themselves to each other. The most striking impression on the researcher present at that time was that several cadets underlined their own competitiveness, and some also mentioned their gambling. One interpretation of this is that it is a culturally safe behaviour. In a competitive 'elite' school such as the NMA, the cadets are told they are the best on their first day of training. Competition is seen as natural and is used by the

NMA to motivate [48]. Table 2 presents the results of questions relating to the effects of competition on learning using a scale ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree).

Table 2. Effects of competition/ranking on the learning landscape.

To What Extent Do You Agree with the Following Statements	N	M	SD
1. Does competition/ranking among the cadets facilitate learning?	15	2.87	1.19
2. Has competition/ranking among the cadets enhanced my development/learning?	16	2.50	1.27
3. Is the ranking of us as cadets motivating?	17	2.76	1.30

Scale ranging from 1 (fully disagree)–5 (fully agree). M= Mean, SD = Standard deviation.

In Table 2, some of the cadets clearly disagreed with the potential positives; however, this view was contested by some of the other participants in the survey. The results indicate that elements of competition have not been experienced as beneficial by all cadets, and competitiveness is perceived as a negative factor in their learning environment. The SML and the use of the 'secret' spreadsheet and a competitive learning culture can be interpreted, after the initial weeks, as fixed. If one cadet exceeds another cadet, leapfrogging them on the spreadsheet, the other cadet is losing their place in the zero-sum game that is created by internal ranking.

3.4. Feedback, Trust and Competition

As noted earlier, there seemed to be variations in the feedback given on different exercises. The cadet whom we called Nils reflected thus on the variations between the different years of study:

> *The last thing I felt after the last one and a half years of tactics and practical leadership is that there was very quickly a harsh critique if it turned out badly, there was not much emphasis on learning. And there was not much room for error.*

In this quote Nils pointed to the potential harshness of the educational culture of the NMA. He claimed that there was an emphasis on playing it safe and reported a shift in the final years when the cadets run the command school in one of the exercises. He continued:

> *But I felt, especially when we run the command school, that there was an emphasis on learning. If you make a mistake, it doesn't count as much, because you have learnt from that and it will be fine the next time. It is a matter of who is in charge.*

Researcher: That the tactician's got a firmer grip?

> *Nils: Yes, and one thing is the wording you use. Before the fear of failure was greater, and that fear is not as big the last year, because you are not cut down if you fail. Now it is more like 'good, then you have learnt something. You are attending the NMA to learn'. I remember hearing that [in] the third year. It was the first time, the third year. I got the question '[Instructor] Nils, do you know the difference between this and that? [Nils]—No. [Instructor]—Okay, then I will tell you. [Nils]—Sorry I did not know. [Instructor] No—but that is perfectly fine. You are here to learn.' It was like, what? I hadn't heard that before. So now I feel we can lower our shoulders a bit in the last year. The instructors have withdrawn a bit and given the cadets more responsibility. I can be a little bit more myself now.*

In this quote Nils reflected on changes in the learning environment from what we suggest is in the realm of realism, towards a humanistic approach, with less emphasis on making mistakes matter in the final year. Until then, there was an emphasis on avoiding mistakes and play-acting, hiding who they 'are'. A part of this can be seen considering the SML ranking and the spreadsheet. The cadets are sorted into the top ten, the middle and the 'bottom ten'. The perceived hostility of the learning environment and the instructors'

roles in the training were experienced by a cadet we called Klara when she was unwell and could hardly perform. She reflected on her relationship with her official mentor/instructor:

> *He was my mentor [in the] last year. The whole year had passed by, and I was acutely aware that he had lost his faith in me. He didn't think I would make it at all. It showed in everything he said and did. As a matter of fact, he said it directly. During one of the exercises, I was unwell. Couldn't speak a whole sentence without stopping (laughs), I didn't work at all. That was the first time he said something nice to me. He then came over to me and said, 'I really hope you don't pull out of the programme, because I think you are a fine cadet, and I really want you to continue at the NMA'. He put his arm around me and told me he wanted me to continue. It was the first time he had said anything positive to me. It was also the first time he had shown a human side. That he really cared. That he was not only standing on the outside of our team and shouting if anything went wrong.*

In this quote, Klara reflected on the lack of positive feedback and how some 'mentors' openly tell cadets that they cannot complete the course. Together with elements of distrust, an emphasis on competition and avoiding mistakes provides the learners at the NMA with insights from a hidden curriculum [30]. We discuss these findings and their possible implications next.

4. Discussion

One key finding is that there may exist a diversion between the learner's 'inner' contextualisation of the experiences at the NMA and the official NMA discourse [61]. Hence, learners entering the NMA can be provided with educative experiences outside what is in the curriculum [27] and official speeches. Such experiences can be related to a variety of evaluative practices and can be reported as spurious. The system creates its favourites, and they are strengthened throughout the learning processes.

Future higher education should include an ethical responsibility for society and the world [62]. In our study, we believe we have uncovered weaknesses at the NMA on just this point in relation to the interactions in our study, because the cadets perceived a low level of trust and competition was experienced as negative. Supporting evidence for this can be found in Carlsten et al. [63], who showed that the terms used to describe *samhandling* in military doctrines found relevant in education at the NMA were numerous, vague and somewhat overlapping.

This type of vocational learning, with a low level of interaction and high level of competition, can be seen as counterproductive to the aim of creating an ethical responsibility for society at large. In other words, if the cadets do not trust each other or the NMA, how will they be able to create trust in other civilian institutions or others outside the military system? Developing mutual or swift trust [19,41] may be challenging because of how the cadets have being educated during their three years of vocational leadership training at the NMA. The importance of trust has long been recognised [64], especially in military contexts [19]. The cadets perceived as less competent are fighting a continuous uphill battle. In 1943, in the book *The Psychology of Military Leadership* [10] (p.96) the motivational effects from competition were underlined, and it is fair to suggest that this view still is still present [48].

The role of the clown or jester [32] is not wanted by the system. If a cadet's performance in different practical leadership tasks does not match the instructor's view of right or wrong solutions, the cadet is in peril of receiving a negative evaluation. This may hamper innovative solutions, behaviour and thinking. The result of this can also be possibly seen in the low importance the cadets attach to creativity, simply stating that it is not seen as an important character strength for a military officer [39,65]. The system can thus be seen to be reproducing itself through narcissistic behaviour [66], where the clever action is the one that offers a physical and mental match of instructors' personalities and ideals. This also resembles Liu and Liu's [15] point that military cadets are not allowed to be themselves and therefore struggle to reach their personal goals.

The relegation axe looms above the learners, and in our view keeps possible systemic critique at bay. Other ways of thinking and acting, in the learning culture of the NMA that has been described, can be problematic for the students. Creative task solutions, too much individuality or asking questions that address what is unknown [32] can be seen as less street-smart. However, an incremental factor can be that the cadets' placements in the SML ranking can also make it less likely that weaker cadets receive more praise than (in this system) the ones who merit it. The learning outcomes from this can be seen as training to survive in the army's organisational jungle. Cadets learn to survive in the system, and this can be observed to be in harsh contrast with the Bildung journey and the humanistic ideals of self-realisation [67].

Trust can be important in 'tit for tat' games. The system of a 1–50 approach, together with sometimes unclear evaluation criteria, may weaken some of cadets' trust in the NMA and the potential goodwill of the system. Different sides of the learning environment can be seen as conflicting. Hardliners with a realistic approach can make the cadets perform. Hence, if a cadet excels among their peers, others are sinking on the spreadsheet. This can be problematic for teamwork and team behaviour and can cause alliances to form where subtle, and always positive, peer evaluations are provided in the AAR. The competition 'output' can harm the collaboration between the different naval, air and ground forces. More particularly, reduced trust in education can harm collaboration with civilian counterparts, politicians, and the armies of other nations, where interpersonal competencies can be vital. However, it remains open as to how long the butterfly of humanistic ideals can dodge the bullets of the hardliners and the 'realistic approach'. How can the humanistic behaviour and learning the cadets reported in the third year gain influence?

The focus on interaction with different stakeholders/society as a quality factor in higher education has increased [68]. We are not sure if the NMA has taken this into account in their educational curriculum. In addition, what counts as quality in higher education has been addressed by, for instance [69], who reported that the perceived quality factors identified by survey respondents in their study did not align with known and often used methodologies for ranking quality and performance.

5. Educational Implications

One takeaway for educational leaders that emerged from this basic research is related to the need for a less biased feedback culture and finding ways of promoting excellence, other than by a 1–50 ranking approach. A different takeaway is that the lack of trust towards the educational institution itself may be reflected within the military vocation and organisation. The NMA represents more than 250 years of tradition, and possibly mirrors the vocational army culture. Thus, the potential problems with trust at the NMA can also be found in the vocational context. The leadership culture enhanced in training at the NMA does not necessarily promote creativity and individuality, with the risk that the fear of failure overshadows the needs of innovation, as well as the social inclusion of civilian and military collaborations. This training can also have a negative effect when former army officers are employed by civilian associations or companies. The root cause of this potential learning outcome could be related to the hidden curriculum enforced by the NMA. As this study has identified—and to best meet the needs of society, during war, crisis and major challenges wherein collaboration between the military and their civilian counterparts are needed—several aspects of higher military education need revision.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we investigated the research question of how a competitive environment affects the learner's personal leadership development and their relationship to their team.

We also investigated a second research question of how a competitive environment affects the learner (officer cadets). The learners were officer cadets at the NMA going through a three-year education programme to become commissioned officers in the Norwegian Army. Our method of enquiry was based upon collecting ethnographic data in most of the

relevant practical locations and contexts during the cadets' three-year programme. Both interviews and a questionnaire were used to collect data. The findings revealed that the cadets experienced a lack of trust in the NMA and in their fellow cadets. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that the cadets experienced competition to be a barrier to their learning. Our interpretation of these findings is that possible negative effects stem from the internal competition at the NMA and from the evaluation system used. The result of this system creates a zero-sum game and can therefore affect the evaluative practices and learning processes in a negative way. Stated differently, it may seem that *agon*, the spirit (*daimon*) of contest among the Greeks [1], may have interfered with the vocational education and learning taking place at the NMA. As a result, the cadets revealed an unexpectedly low level of trust, and this, in combination with a highly competitive environment, might not be the best recipe for educating officers suited to modern society.

7. Limitations

Since this research was performed more than five years ago, the study programmes of the three military academies, the NMA, The Royal Norwegian Naval Academy and the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy, have been reorganised. There is now a common introductory training program emphasising joint collaboration between the branches. The baseline culture of this 'new' training is, however, related to the military training culture identified in this article; in other words, the problems from the hidden curriculum might even have been escalated by the reorganisation. Further limitations are that this article was based on a single case study and does not say anything about how officer training is performed in other nations' military academies.

Another limitation is the relatively low number of cadets who took part in our study. This must be balanced with the total number of cadets at the NMA and the difficulties in obtaining data from them. As such, our limited sample only gives a snapshot of how they saw the education at the time of data collection, and as a consequence of this, we should be careful in drawing any conclusions related to external validity based upon our sample.

Future studies on if and/or how a competitive environment affects the learner's personal leadership development and their relationship to their team and with future civilian foundations should include all of the cadets from the three years at the NMA, and possibly also from the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy and the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy as well. In addition, a larger number of questionnaires should be used, including for selective and specific in-depth interviews. These suggestions could strengthen the analyses on this topic.

It would also be very valuable to replicate our study by asking the cadets currently going through the three-year educational programme at the NMA the same questions as those used in our study, given how the educational programme has changed during the past few years. Since 2018, admission to the NMA has been based on secondary school and completed national service [70]. Such a replication study would clarify if the educational programme has changed, and, if it has changed, if or how the cadets' experiences related to trust and competition in relation to the learning environment have also changed.

The need for more research is underpinned in a statement made by Major Kibsgaard [71], a principal lecturer on leadership development at the NMA, who emphasized that there exists a double imbalance at the NMA. The double imbalance lies in the fact that 90% of today's cadets do not have a basic military leadership education when they enter the NMA, while secondly, they have far less access to role models [43], teachers and mentors (professional staff) than the pre-2018 cadets. However, there are still no scientific studies of the hidden curriculum conducted at the NMA in recent years, and there is no scientific evidence of improvement due to educational changes.

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