

The Psychosocial in Norwegian Teacher Education in Light of Epistemic Objects and Therapeutic Culture

Gro Mathias¹, & Øyvind Førland Standal²

1. Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway.

2. University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway.

Contact: Gro Mathias, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. glor@oslomet.no

Abstract

In this article we examine how therapeutic culture disseminates into and affects teacher education in Norway. This is done through a close examination of knowledge practices revolving around the term *psychosocial*. Based on fieldwork data and drawing on Karin Knorr Cetina's concept of epistemic objects, we analyse how the psychosocial is practised, taught, and interpreted in a Norwegian primary and secondary teacher education institution. We identify three key epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial: ubiquity, emotional orientation, and self-centeredness. Due to its oscillation between compatibility and friction, the psychosocial is both nurturing and disruptive, intuitive, and demanding, meaningful and alienating. More broadly, the application of the psychosocial in teacher education can be understood in light of the interplay between intellectualisation and emotionalisation processes in modern societies. By providing insight into a previously unexplored area, the article contributes to new understandings of the changing cultural conditions of the teaching profession.

Keywords

Psychosocial, therapeutic culture, teacher education, epistemic object, professional knowledge, Karin Knorr Cetina

Introduction: The psychosocial in teacher education

Since 2003, a good psychosocial school environment that promotes health, well-being and learning has been an individual legal right for every schoolchild in Norway. This formal responsibility of schools also affects the professional responsibility and knowledge base of teachers, as they are expected to acquire certain knowledge, competencies, and skills necessary to ensure a good and safe psychosocial school environment for all pupils (Mathias, 2021).

These expectations of teachers are articulated in research, policy documents, legislation, and curricula. For example, researchers such as Mirjam Harketstad Olsen (2019), Jorun Buli-Holmberg & Cristian Blomeid Engebretsen (2019), and Gurun Aas (2019) identify teachers as responsible for creating a good psychosocial environment for every school child. In the official Norwegian report, *To belong. Measures for a safe psychosocial environment*, it is argued that there should be more emphasis on mental health issues and psychosocial risk factors in teacher education. This includes knowledge of the symptoms of mental illness and how to prevent mental illness (NOU 2015: 2, p. 339). And the national guidelines for primary and lower secondary teacher education, which provide binding standards for the curriculum and programmes of teacher education, state that the topic of the psychosocial learning environment must be covered for all student teachers. This includes “the necessary skills, knowledge, and competence a teacher needs to create a safe psychosocial school environment and to prevent and deal with violations, bullying, harassment, and discrimination” (Munthe & Meltling, 2016, pp. 10–11).

Despite the emphasis on and advocacy of specific knowledge and competencies that should enable teachers to provide good psychosocial environments, we do not know how the psychosocial is practised, taught, or interpreted in teacher education, nor how this relates to broader socio-cultural conditions such as therapeutic culture and the knowledge society. In order to explore this, we have chosen to adopt an epistemic object-centred perspective according to sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, who defines epistemic objects as processual, always incomplete, and endowed with (structuring, affective, and epistemic) agency.

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the widespread and complex domain of the psychosocial emerges as an epistemic object in Norwegian teacher education. To do this, we will draw on data from fieldwork conducted at a Norwegian teacher education institution. Our main research questions are: *What are the characteristics of the epistemic object of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education? How is this epistemic object conditioned by therapeutic culture?*

The psychosocial in context and previous research

Mental health has become a major concern in modern societies, including the mental health of children. The success of societies and nations is often linked to the mental well-being of their young people, making it a central responsibility of the state to address this issue (Buchanan, 2012). The prevalence of *a therapeutic culture*, which incorporates psychological knowledge and practices into all aspects of contemporary societies (Nehring et al., 2020), has also had an impact on education. Concepts of counselling and therapy have been adopted and normalised in the field of education. (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Smeyers et al., 2007). This development includes the growing influence of psychological knowledge and practice in the teaching profession.

The psychosocial is a well-established psychological term that is widely used in education, both in the context of preventing mental illness and disruptive behaviour, and in the context of promoting subjective well-being and happiness (Mathias, 2021). Semantically, the combination of the terms *psycho* and *social* implies the interrelationship of the two spheres, the psychological and emotional life of the individual on the one hand, and the social sphere on the other. The term originated in the fields of psychiatry and medicine in the 1990s and has gained widespread attention as an interdisciplinary scientific concept for investigating the complex interplay between psychological and social factors (Roseneil, 2014).

Globally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has played an important role in promoting the term psychosocial in education, often including it in its commitment to promoting health and well-being in schools (WHO, 2003). Existing research also highlights the strong relationship between the psychosocial environment in schools and pupils' well-being, learning and mental health (Allodi, 2010; Bowe, 2015; Green et al., 2016; Haapasalo et al., 2010). This is evident in Aldridge et al.'s (2018) definition of the *psychosocial school climate* which encompasses all "the attitudes, norms, beliefs, values and expectations that underpin school life and affect the extent to which members of the school community feel safe" (p. 155). Schools are seen as arenas where children's emotional and social capacities are managed and nurtured, for example, through deep engagement with pupils' personal backgrounds and building lasting and authentic relationships (Edwards et al., 2019; Tiernan et al., 2020).

The establishment of the term psychosocial in education intersects with teachers' professional duties centred on relationships and care, which have historically been integral to the teaching role (Hermansen, 2017). Teachers are seen as key actors whose (caring) actions have a crucial impact on the psychosocial well-being of pupils (Aldridge et al., 2018; Green et al., 2016; Smith, 2013). For example, a healthy psychosocial environment is often considered to be based on good pupil-teacher relationships (Allodi, 2010; Bouchard & Smith, 2017; Haapasalo et al., 2010; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). To facilitate learning, teachers are expected to act as psychosocial caregivers and health promoters. Warren and Robinson (2018) argue that "teacher emotions are key factors that impact classroom climate and therefore educational

outcomes and student success” (p. 22). The psychosocial is therefore often associated with teachers’ relational and social-emotional virtues such as sensitivity, caring, empathy, deep engagement, and self-reflection (Bouchard & Smith, 2017; Chow et al., 2015; Van Petegem et al., 2008).

In addition to the more traditional aspects of caring relationships, the growing body of literature on the psychosocial brings new concepts to the professional role of the teacher. This changing professional role is evident when the psychosocial is conceptualised within a psychoanalytic framework. Viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, the classroom is transformed into a counselling room where the past experiences of individual pupils become highly relevant to social and emotional (inter)action (Hogan, 2019; Walsh, 2014; West, 2014). This includes, for example, psychodynamic training of teachers to enable them to identify and respond to the unconscious drives, emotional forces, and affective expressions of school children (Hogan, 2019).

The emphasis on the psychosocial environment in educational research is consistent with general features of therapeutic culture. A therapeutic approach to education typically emphasises affective and emotional aspects and sees school as an arena for addressing pupils’ emotional problems and for promoting positive emotions (Smeyers et al., 2007, pp. 12, 14). The dissemination of therapeutic knowledge in educational practice has faced criticism (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Irisdotter Aldenmyr & Olson, 2016). For example, Ecclestone (2011) argues that therapeutic education represents an attack on knowledge itself and on young people as knowers, because it values subjective-emotional skills over knowledge. It assumes an emotionally fragile subject unable to cope with an elitist, discriminatory education system, rather than a capable subject who is eager to learn about the outside world. Others recognise that the dissemination of therapeutic thought and knowledge has opened the door to a more liberal, caring, and individual-based view of human suffering (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Illouz, 2008; Smeyers et al., 2007; Wright, 2008). For example, Wright argues that therapeutic culture has exposed the abuse of some of the least powerful in society, legitimised emotional pain, and developed a common language for articulating injury to the self and enhancing caring relationships (Wright, 2008).

Sociologist Eva Illouz (2007) has identified a significant cultural consequence of this phenomenon. In her view, therapeutic narratives focus on emotional and psychological suffering, while offering rational techniques to remedy and alleviate such suffering. In other words, in the context of a therapeutic culture, emotions are now perceived and managed with a focus on intellect and rationality. This *rationalisation* of social relations at the intersection of the domains of expertise and emotion is an important aspect of the discussion in this article.

Analytical framework: Karin Knorr Cetina and epistemic objects

To examine the epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education, we draw on Knorr Cetina's concept of the *epistemic object* as a means of analysis. The starting point for her object-centred approach is the recognition that expert knowledge *spills over* and permeates all areas of social life in the knowledge society (Knorr Cetina, 2001). The spill-over effect that expert and academic cultures have on other domains is ambivalent in its consequences, as it both offers opportunities for more creative, productive, and meaningful activities, but can also lead to confusion, conflict, and uncertainty (Knorr Cetina, 1997). For Knorr Cetina (1997), an important task is therefore to trace knowledge and the ways in which it is constitutive in social relations.

To achieve this task, Knorr Cetina (2001) defines epistemic objects as a complex amalgam of material objects, processes, ideas and concepts, factual information, strategies, policies, and so on. In other words, epistemic objects are processual entities that drive, govern, attract, and organise knowledge communities. They are characteristically open, question-generating, incomplete and endlessly unfolding. They provoke questions but also generate meaning. Their *unfolding ontology* rejects completeness and an end point. When scientifically interrogated, epistemic objects reveal themselves by increasing their complexity. They typically activate different opportunities for exploration, as they are taken up and developed further by practitioners in knowledge communities (Nerland & Jensen, 2012, pp. 104–106). Their openness to exploration, combined with their reluctance to be fully understood, results in an ongoing state of *desire* that is both affective and intellectual (Knorr Cetina, 2001, pp. 181–184).

With her account of epistemic objects, Knorr Cetina establishes a middle ground between essentialism and social constructivism. Epistemic objects are neither entirely ahistorical and asocial, nor entirely reducible to their respective social environments. The relational and processual dimension underlying this understanding of knowledge is not a deconstruction and dissolution of knowledge, but rather a recognition of knowledge as a central agent. Knowledge is an entity with epistemic integrity and agency that influences and structures its environment, rather than a tool devoid of relevant content that reproduces and maintains power structures. Thus, the concept of epistemic object is useful because it allows us to include the dimension of content in our sociological approach to knowledge.

The analysis of the psychosocial as an epistemic object provides a fruitful analytical framework because it calls for a close look at the psychosocial in terms of its epistemic content, its agency, and its practised complexity in teacher education. It is relevant because the teaching profession has also become entangled in the complex structures of epistemic objects. It has become more research-oriented and related to a variety of knowledge producers (Jensen et al., 2022). The professional community of teachers, which used to be highly autonomous and

focused on embodied and experiential knowledge, has increasingly adopted abstract and theoretical knowledge (Klette & Carlsen, 2012). As summarised by Nerland and Jensen (2012), “the role of Knorr Cetina’s micro-level epistemic objects draws attention to the multiple processes of knowing and how they simultaneously have both stabilising and transformative effects on professional practice” (p. 106). Moreover, Knorr Cetina’s notion of spill-over effects in knowledge societies, which she closely links to epistemic objects, offers a productive perspective for describing the complex relations and processes of dissemination and adaptation that occur around the psychosocial, involving a wide range of expert and non-expert fields.

Concretely, the application of Knorr Cetina’s theory of epistemic objects allows us to analyse the role of the psychosocial in teacher education in its processual, collective, and emergent dynamics. It enables us to understand the psychosocial as both socially conditioned and as integral with epistemic content. And it directs our analytical attention to the agency of psychosocial knowledge, that is to how it organises and mobilises epistemic processes (e.g., of knowledge dissemination, acquisition, and interpretation).

Method

Data and sample

This study draws on empirical data from fieldwork conducted in a primary and secondary teacher education institution (for years 1–10) in a large Norwegian city. The education of primary and secondary school teachers in Norway is subject to national regulations and has undergone a number of changes in recent years. As part of a comprehensive reform package, the teacher education programme was extended from a four-year to a five-year master’s programme in 2019. This change was implemented in the year following the fieldwork. As a result, the student teachers who were sampled for this study received their formal teacher education in the four-year programme.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Department of Pedagogy over the course of eight weeks in one semester in 2018. Pedagogy is a diverse subject that consists of different epistemological branches. The psychosocial school environment is one of many branches of knowledge taught in the department. Mathias observed and participated in courses and activities on “Pedagogy and student knowledge”, which is a compulsory subject for all student teachers. Throughout the semester, the psychosocial was an overarching curriculum theme and was compulsory for all student teachers.

Observation was an important method of gaining insight into the knowledge practices of teacher educators and student teachers. The data include observations of 19 lectures and seminars, totalling 56.5 hours. The student teachers were divided into classes supervised and taught by teacher educators, following a structure similar to that of conventional schools. Observations were carried out in three of these classes, two of which were taught by the same teacher educator and the third by a different teacher educator. At times a more participative

role was required, with Mathias engaging in conversation and asking questions, particularly during group work and more interactive parts of the lectures. This also included conversations with teacher educators and student teachers in informal settings where more direct questions about psychosocial knowledge were raised. Mathias also attended staff meetings (28 hours in total). These meetings included teacher educators planning and discussing future lectures and curricula and student practicum in schools.

Written material was another important piece of data derived from the fieldwork. This included course materials such as teaching materials, lecture notes and tutorial handouts. In addition, the data consists of assignments completed by all student teachers in one of the observed classes: 27 individual and 10 group assignments. The group assignments were approximately 15 pages of students' summaries of what they had learned during the semester; and the assigned reflections were three pages of students' thoughts, experiences, expectations and concerns about their future role as teachers.

To complement the fieldwork data, two recorded unstructured group interviews were conducted with a total of seven student teachers (all female). The first interview was pre-arranged with three student teachers. They were asked about their immediate reactions to the term the psychosocial, where and how it appeared in their training and their thoughts on being professionally responsible for the psychosocial environment. The second recorded interview took place spontaneously after a seminar in which student teachers presented their current assignments. Four of them were writing on topics related to teachers' responsibility for a good psychosocial environment. They were invited to talk about their work and experiences after the seminar. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after they took place.

The study was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and followed the principles of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality (Fangen, 2004). Participation in the study was pre-approved at the organisational level. Written informed consent forms were provided to individual participants in advance. The teacher education institution where the fieldwork took place is anonymous and only limited information about its size, profile, and location is provided. No data that could reveal the personal sensitive identity (e.g. ethnic background, political beliefs, or health status) of research participants were stored or published (Fangen, 2004). Student assignments were anonymised by the course leader before being given to Mathias. Sensitive information in this study may also include criticism and conflict in the workplace that may affect the professional status of teacher educators. The decision to withhold requested information about other participants during fieldwork was made to maintain confidentiality, which protects the non-disclosure of sensitive information (Haugen & Skilbrei, 2021).

Analysing and presenting the data

The analysis of the data was carried out in an iterative-inductive manner, which means that data collection, analysis, and writing are interrelated. Iterative describes the analytical process as a spiral movement. Collecting, analysing, and writing is an organic practice. Inductive means having an open mind and letting the data speak for itself. (O'Reilly, 2009). In essence, this analytical design allows the rigid divergence of data before theory and theory before data to be transformed into a more flexible process that requires a movement back and forth between analysis, conceptualisation, reading, reflection on theory, and writing (O'Reilly, 2009; Berg, 2004). More specifically, this means that our analytical framework, based on Knorr Cetina's notion of the epistemic object, played a role in all stages of the data analysis. While the data were conducted with an open mindset, it is clear that our theoretic-analytical backdrop to a certain degree steered our attention to specific aspects of observed phenomena, for example to the epistemic processes and collective interactions grouped around the psychosocial, as well as to the affective and intellectual responses to epistemic content. In the stages of data analysis and interpretation, our analytical framework prompted reflection on the relationship between immediate findings and broader social contexts, while the empirical data also challenged our theoretical preconceptions and sparked critical discussions about the notion of epistemic objects.

The empirical data was organised and synthesised into open codes and then transformed into overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The first stage of analysis involved familiarising with the data and confirming primary observations made during fieldwork. A large number of codes were then created by identifying and labelling significant sections of the data. Hierarchical coding structures were used to capture the richness of the data and to create codes that allowed for different interpretations in order to systematically organise the codes and identify patterns. HyperRESEARCH was used for this purpose. The codes were then synthesised into overarching themes. For the final phase of the analysis process, we were inspired by Eggebø's (2020) concept of "collective qualitative analysis". Conducting qualitative research in a collective way can be a fruitful method to stimulate creativity, innovative ideas, and flexibility, while maintaining the academic quality of the work (Eggebø, 2020). Therefore, in a collaborative workshop we visualised and mapped the themes derived from the previous stages of analysis. We engaged and played with the different components, discussed issues and themes. Based on this mapping, we created three epistemic categories, which are discussed below. To present and illustrate them, we have used examples from all data sources—observations, written material, group interviews. In this way, we hope to demonstrate the in-depth and multi-perspective basis on which this study is based. All examples have been translated from Norwegian into English by Mathias.

Results: Three epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial

In what follows, we discuss findings from the fieldwork, organised into discussions of three key characteristics that we believe best describe the epistemic object of the psychosocial: *ubiquity, emotional orientation, and focus on the self.*

1. Ubiquity

A central characteristic of the psychosocial is its ubiquitous presence. It belongs to the key features of this epistemic object to affect and disseminate into a wide range of subjects, such as *inclusion* (with emphasis on pupils with special needs), *adapted education, diversity, children's upbringing, learning communities* and *the professional role of the teacher*. All of these topics were considered by the teacher educators as related to knowledge about and methods associated with the psychosocial. It was clear from observations and conversations that teacher educators believed that topics related to the psychosocial should be integrated into every stage of teacher education. This ubiquitous character of the psychosocial was explicitly acknowledged by a teacher educator during a lecture:

It [the psychosocial learning environment] includes everything we are working with now [inclusion and adapted education]. A major area [is] [...] mental health and the social. It concerns everything. How we work together and how we see each individual pupil.

When viewed through the psychosocial lens, notions of emotional well-being and mental health promotion permeated every aspect of teacher education, demonstrating the epistemic object's agency to adapt to and cover different aspects of the curriculum, govern epistemic processes and interactions, and affect the perceptions of the human actors involved. Several student teachers were surprised by the emphasis placed on these issues, as evidenced by one student's response to another in a focus group interview:

I think the same as you that I have become very aware of the psychological process that happens in the minds of the pupils and their social interactions at school. Because I have not had any previous experience of being a teacher before I started here. And it has really preoccupied me a lot, because you see that it is almost only 30 percent teaching, and then the rest is psychosocial work. (focus group, student 3)

This understanding of their professional mandate increased the motivation of some students to become teachers, while it threatened others. The teacher mandate, as seen from the epistemic viewpoint of the psychosocial, as all-encompassing and broad was challenging for both student teachers and teacher educators. For example, a lecture on inclusion (with an emphasis on pupils with special needs), covered a wide range of learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, autism, migration-related learning difficulties, and mutism. The sheer volume of content meant that teacher educators could only cover each type of learning disability in a superficial way. And it was not possible for the student teachers to gain in-depth

knowledge and theoretical insight into of this content, given the time frame and format of the course. Moreover, complex therapeutic terminology such as *affect regulation* and *mentalisation*, which was regularly discussed in lectures, was difficult for student teachers to grasp in the limited time available. In the case of the psychosocial, the epistemic object's increasing complexity generally does not stimulate a desire to know more but rather creates insecurity and superficial engagement.

This was explicitly verbalised in conversations Mathias had with student teachers. One student shared that she had been informed about the responsibility of teachers to create a good psychosocial environment, but she lacked the knowledge of how to achieve this. Another student expressed the same concern in a written reflection:

I am not supposed to punish violations, [but] build self-esteem through trust, open-mindedness, and comfort. But how do I do that if a pupil has attachment difficulties, ADHD and is on the autism spectrum? I am supposed to build relationships according to the circle of security, but where do I start? (student reflection 7)

For student teachers, the psychosocial environment is a domain in which they are expected to *act* in order to achieve specific outcomes such as good mental health and well-being. Researchers, government bodies, and the public identify teachers as central actors who can and should influence the psychosocial environment of schools and the psychosocial well-being of individual pupils. This responsibility was also a theme in the teacher education observed. In seminars and lectures, student teachers were frequently made aware of the extent of their responsibility to create a positive psychosocial environment in their future classes. Thus, the epistemic object of the psychosocial made itself felt among the students in a tangible manner as it related to real-life situations in which the well-being and mental health of children were at stake, a degree of responsibility that two students reflected on during the focus group interview:

I think of everything that can backfire on me. That if I cannot do it, then it is my fault that someone is not doing well at school. Also, I know that it's not just my fault, there are quite a few factors, but the teacher gets quite a lot of blame then. (focus group, student 1)

You have such a freaking amount of responsibility. Everybody should be learning, everybody should get adapted education, everybody should be happy, nobody should have a tough time in school [...]. It's just a lot [...]. So you know that it's your responsibility, but you don't know how to respond to that responsibility. So, it feels very overwhelming. (focus group, student 2)

In response to this perceived responsibility conveyed by the psychosocial, several student teachers called for concrete tools and systematic knowledge. As one of the students inter-

viewed said, “I miss a programme, a system, and talking about it in a group.” If the psychosocial provoked a need for solid and hands-on knowledge among student teachers, their teacher educators did not necessarily see this as part of their mandate. Educators agreed that knowledge could not be reduced to specific tools to be applied in teaching situations.

2. Emotional orientation

“The psychosocial goes beyond the various school subjects and concerns rather the way pupils feel.” This comment was made by a teacher educator in a lecture and reflects the kind of emotionality that the epistemic object of the psychosocial aims at. The teacher educator’s statement brings into focus the emotional subjective state of the individual pupil. This emphasis on the emotional pupil subject was a common theme in the lectures and seminars, the student teachers written assignments, and focus groups. The balance between formal curriculum knowledge and concern for the emotional wellbeing of the pupil is something that the students consciously considered, as the following quotes show:

I think I must have been a little naive and thought that if you are fond of conveying knowledge and fond of teaching, then in a way it is enough. But it is not. And, well, I did not realise how big that fostering role, the mother role, the psychologist role was. (focus group, student 4)

In the school system, it is us teachers who have to be the safe adult, who not only teach things like fractional arithmetic and text analysis, but who also can give a smile and show support when things don’t look great. I still have a lot to learn when it comes to things like teaching methods and curriculum content, but, at the same time, I have very much to offer, both with my own experiences, a big smile, passion and, not least, a great deal of empathy. (student reflection 3)

The quotes shed further light on the qualities that the epistemic object of the psychosocial fosters in and requires of teachers, as they (must) become as emotionally open, sensitive, and—ultimately—vulnerable as their pupils. To establish compatibility and gain access to their pupils’ emotional selves, teachers must become attuned to the emotions and affects that define and connect the individuals in the classroom. Accordingly, authenticity is an ideal that teacher educators and student teachers see as a key factor when dealing with the psychosocial school environment. For example, during a lecture on the professional role of the teacher, students were asked to discuss their personal strengths. Caring for pupils was a central theme discussed by a group of students. The students also emphasised that a teacher’s caring should be genuine and authentic. They all agreed that being a teacher was not a role one *acted*, but a profession in which one *really* cared. Another student wrote in their written reflections that as soon as they started to give more of themselves, it was easier to feel safe in the role of the teacher. To meet one’s pupils as one’s own true self was perceived as crucial

in mastering the challenges of the psychosocial school environment. Thus, the epistemic object of the psychosocial tends to dissolve itself as an object with concrete and external epistemic content in order to be internalised in the form of authentic experiences of selfhood.

Alongside authenticity, *empathy* emerged as a key virtue that future teachers needed to acquire if they were to act in and upon their psychosocial school environment. This virtue was fostered in teacher education, both explicitly through concrete knowledge and methods, and implicitly through activities such as relationship and community building. The lectures included a variety of learning activities and didactic approaches to this end. The teacher educators were strategic about how they wanted the student teachers to experience a positive environment during their training—an experience that they would be able to bring into their profession after graduation. In addition, the teacher educators themselves sought to be caring role models and wanted their students to experience what it meant to be part of a positive psychosocial environment. This meant building meaningful and caring relationships, engaging in dialogue and debate, giving and receiving empathy, giving supportive feedback, and experiencing and reflecting on a wide range of emotions. Student teachers remain in the same class throughout their training to ensure that this is achieved.

Observations also showed how the epistemic object of the psychosocial became familiar and tangible as it was translated into human relationships and conveyed through emotional narratives of individual suffering and injustice. The student teachers' intimate knowledge of the psychosocial was to a certain degree nurtured by the teacher educators. They were encouraged to engage in close and caring teacher-pupil relationships, because it is only when teachers know their pupils on a personal level that they are able to understand and interpret their behaviour. As a teacher educator made clear in a lecture, a teacher's values, attitudes, and ability to interpret pupil behaviour are central to addressing psychosocial difficulties. The same educator also used videos of children in destructive psychosocial school environments to evoke empathy in the student teachers. Another educator read fictional stories about children who had experienced exclusion and other difficulties at school. It was evident that these methods created an emotional and participatory atmosphere during the lectures and developed empathy and a sense of goodness in the students.

Alongside these more personal and experiential approaches to exploring the realm of emotions, student teachers were also introduced to methods that derive more directly from therapeutic expertise. One example is *mentalisation*. In brief, mentalising is the process of making sense of the subjective states and mental processes of others. It has its roots in psychoanalysis and attachment theory and was initially used as a treatment for borderline personality disorder (Bateman & Fonagy, 2013). Today, it is commonly applied in a wide range of professional settings, including teaching (see, for example, Brandtzæg et al., 2016). In lectures, mentalisation was used to enable students to “see the children from the inside” and to get a true sense of who they were and what they were struggling with.

3. Focus on the self

Another key characteristic of the epistemic object of the psychosocial is the way in which it places the individual at the centre. This was evident in the lectures and in the student teachers' written assignments. Relationship building based on principles of a child-centred orientation and personalised learning was repeatedly emphasised in lectures. The student teachers were taught to recognise the unique individuality of their pupils and to attend to their needs so that they would feel safe and included. For example, one teacher educator repeatedly emphasised in her lectures that disruptive behaviour is an expression of pain and vulnerability, and therefore children who act out should not be labelled as troublemakers or problem children. This teacher educator saw disruptive behaviour as rooted in the psychosocial environment and best addressed through good teacher-pupil relationships.

Although the individual is central, a strong community perspective was also encouraged. "The community is the subject" was a phrase that the teacher educator mentioned above used several times in her lectures, almost as a catchphrase. What she meant by this was that pupils should never be left alone with their problems. Teachers must strive to see the child as a complete being, in addition to their unique environment, in order to make sense of their behaviour in class.

Adapted education is a methodology that was widely addressed and discussed in the lectures. Based on self-centred epistemologies, adapted education was presented as an ideal that aims to provide each pupil with an education that meets his or her specific, unique needs. Such needs were linked to several identity-creating variables, such as cultural and socio-economic background, lived experience, emotional register, and learning difficulties. Moreover, pupils should also be protected from harmful or exclusionary knowledge content and pedagogical methods. To give an example from a lecture: Pupils from a migrant background have different referents than pupils from a majority background. Therefore, as the teacher educator discussed, the dissemination of classic Norwegian children's literature can be harmful, as it can make a group of pupils feel excluded because they do not recognise themselves in these stories to the same extent as majority pupils born and raised in Norway.

The emphasis on the individual-based nature of the psychosocial was also evident when mental health was discussed. For example, in group assignments where students had to summarise the content of the semester, mental health and individual well-being were linked to the issue of "diversity". Diversity was thus seen not only as a social phenomenon related to cultural, ethnic, national, or religious variables, but also as related to the individual's unique mental health.

Discussion: The psychosocial between compatibility and friction

In the following discussion, we will argue that the psychosocial with its epistemic characteristics presented above—ubiquitous, emotionally-oriented and self-centred—creates both compatibility and friction. Furthermore, the interplay and simultaneity of these moments of compatibility and friction will be considered in relation to specific aspects of therapeutic culture.

According to Knorr Cetina, it is in the nature of epistemic objects that they arouse interest, interpretation, adaptation, and *desire*, when they spill-over into different knowledge communities and social relations. What happens to the desire generated by the psychosocial epistemic object in Norwegian teacher education? In its most theoretical and abstract form, it is difficult to see how the psychosocial can generate a wanting-to-know-more among the student teachers. This is because the psychosocial is often perceived as too complex, and its formalised responsibility therefore generates little curiosity or drive for further theoretical exploration. Instead of creating excitement and desire, it overwhelms and causes friction and discomfort.

However, the desire sparked by the psychosocial does not simply dissolve here. It leaves behind its theoretical and abstract complexities in order to attend to embodied experiences and practices. Because of its close association with emotions, individual experiences, and authentic relationships, the psychosocial taps into human aspects that both student teachers and teacher educators can relate to. When the psychosocial channels desire into the inner workings of the authentic self, a strong ideological foundation for teacher professionalism is created. In particular, both student teachers and teacher educators found the psychosocial's emphasis on emotions and deep personal relationships intuitively meaningful. Here, the psychosocial became compatible with one of the core aspects of the teaching profession, namely care. The caring dimension of the psychosocial is a source of inspiration and pride as it strengthens and actualises the ideological and moral foundation of the teacher. The ubiquitous character of the psychosocial makes sense in this regard, as it places the (caring) teacher at the centre of every aspect of children's well-being.

We are thus dealing with two different modes of the psychosocial and its epistemic content: one that is derived from expert fields and emerges as abstract and complex, and one that is experienced in an intuitive and embodied way. It is the theoretical content of the psychosocial that points to its original formation within expert therapeutic communities (psychology and psychiatry). But its embodied equivalence also illustrates typical characteristics of therapeutic culture. Illouz, who sees therapeutic culture as the most pronounced case of a spill-over effect according to Knorr Cetina, describes both the "intellectualisation [or rationalisation] of intimate bonds" (2007, p. 32), and the "intensification of emotional life" (2008, p. 59) in workplace settings as central therapeutic developments.

The aforementioned rationalisation phenomenon involves managing emotions using neutral methods of expression and communication (Illouz, 2007). This approach seeks to regulate and bring clarity to one's emotions by utilising impartial language. The goal is to promote a sense of control and understanding of one's feelings, leading to improved mental well-being and overall emotional stability. Methods such as mentalisation and affect regulation, which were applied at the teacher education institution, can be seen as therapeutic tools designated to map out, influence and control the psychosocial school environment. In turn, the rationalisation of emotional life implies the implementation of psychological expertise in work environments, leading to "new models of sociability" (Illouz, 2008, 59) based on affect, emotions, and human relations. Even though Illouz's research on the matter stems from economic contexts such as private companies, we also see related forms of emotionalisation in the work and learning environments the teacher educators sought to establish, namely a positive psychosocial environment based on caring relationships, dialogue, empathy, and emotional reflection.

Despite having the therapeutic narrative of individual and emotional well-being at its centre, the epistemic object of the psychosocial seems to create a certain disconnect between its theoretical and embodied dimensions, making it difficult for the student teachers to reconcile and comprehend them as two sides of the same coin. Significant in this regard is the psychosocial's ubiquity, which makes it challenging to identify its specific epistemic content. As the spill-over of therapeutic thought and practice has brought matters of the emotional self into all areas of society, it becomes difficult to distinguish between therapeutic expertise and popular science and culture.

The question of the psychosocial is also important in terms of its potential to replace of teachers' traditional epistemic practice of teaching and conveying knowledge. Moving beyond this traditional educational task, the psychosocial promotes knowledge in the form of abilities, techniques, and methods that enable teachers to care for and connect with each individual pupil and their unique background and emotional self. As the psychosocial blurs the distinction between being a knowledge provider and a mental health practitioner, this created both a sense of being overwhelmed and unrealistic expectations of the student teachers' professional responsibilities.

This tendency can be further described as a move away from objective and universal knowledge, replaced by epistemic premises based on authenticity, experience, and subjectivity. Ultimately, this would result in a relativistic notion of knowledge, which has been widely criticised (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone, 2011; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Irisdotter Aldenmyr & Olson, 2016). According to this view, common knowledge can even be seen as destructive for vulnerable school children, as it can cause or reinforce social exclusion. When solely focusing on the psychosocial perspective, the pupil is portrayed as emotionally fragile, affected, and at risk, thereby undermining their intellectual and learning abilities and curiosity about the world.

Concluding remarks

What are the characteristics of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education when considered as an epistemic object? And how is it conditioned by therapeutic culture? Our aim in this article was to give answers to these questions through a close-up analysis of fieldwork material and its wider discussion in relation to therapeutic culture. In doing so, we derived three key epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial: ubiquity, emotional orientation, and self-focus. Moreover, by applying Knorr Cetina's account of epistemic objects, we described the psychosocial in terms of its structuring agency, its channelling of desire, and its ongoing redefinition of the teacher's professional role. When brought into contact with broader contexts of therapeutic culture, such as the rationalisation of emotions and the implementation of emotion-based methods and phenomena in the workplace, we demonstrated how key characteristics of the psychosocial simultaneously create compatibility and friction. Finally, we reflected whether the psychosocial's therapeutic perspective on knowledge might imply a devaluation of knowledge itself.

Concepts and ideas derived from the field of therapy typically offer solutions to the various barriers to mental health and well-being that individuals face today. These issues have also been integrated into education and the professional responsibilities of teachers. These ideas are so ingrained in our modern culture that we tend to take them for granted. However, there is growing critical concerns about the influence and implications of emotion-oriented epistemologies in education. Our aim in this article was to contribute to this discussion by tracing the psychosocial in teacher education, highlighting its epistemic characteristics and its potential impact on teachers' professionalism. We believe that more research is needed on the ways in which therapeutic culture influences the teaching profession. It is also important to explore the relationship between subjective-emotional experience and shared objective values, and between psychological introspection and political awareness, and to shed light on how notions of pupil vulnerability and risk shape the professional mandate of teachers today.

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