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# Amid Suspicion, Cynicism, and Repugnance: Teachers' Experiences of Building Trust with Incarcerated Students

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## Abstract

This article explores how teachers understand the teacher-student relationship and how they establish trust with their incarcerated students. Interviews with 14 teachers working in Sweden have been analyzed using qualitative content analysis and concepts of professionalism. The findings show that establishing relationships and trust is crucial for succeeding in their professional mission and for exercising professional discretion. It can be challenging, however, as students have been convicted of crimes or can display manipulative behavior. Teachers, therefore, need to find ways to handle feelings such as suspicion, cynicism, and repugnance without damaging their students' trust in their moral commitment and competence to serve the students' best interests. The article contributes new knowledge about how teachers navigate institutional, moral, and emotional demands to create relationships that are both conducive to learning and aligned with security considerations, illuminating what it can mean to act professionally as a teacher in correctional settings.

## Keywords

Professionalism, professional responsibility, professional discretion, teacher-student relationship, trust, prison education, correctional education

# Introduction

Teachers' work can take place in various settings with different kinds of students. What all teachers have in common, however, is the moral purpose embedded in the teaching profession, serving both the individual and the public good (Sockett, 1993). They are entrusted to help individuals develop and to equip them with knowledge and skills for their future lives. How to conduct this work in practice is not only subject to the teachers' discretion but is also affected by societal developments, such as the increased market-oriented thinking and management ideals that have emerged in Western societies (Krikken Mulders et al., 2024; Mik-Meyer, 2018; Nilsson Lindström, 2020). Teachers are required to navigate both external requirements and their own perceived standards regarding what constitutes good work. This can be challenging, as they need to make compromises while still upholding the quality of the work (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2012).

For teachers working in correctional settings, security considerations take precedence. These can constrain the teachers' scope of action and can contradict the professional norms and values of the teaching profession (Patrie, 2017, 2023; Wright, 2005). The individuals who teachers encounter have been convicted of crimes and can have an increased potential for violence or manipulation, which can be emotionally challenging (Ferguson, 2023; Jurich et al., 2001; Lukacova et al., 2018; Patrie, 2023; Wright, 2005). This can make the establishment of relationships and trust more difficult, since dilemmas that are less common in educational settings outside prison can arise. As building relationships is considered necessary for fulfilling educational purposes (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), teachers need to manage these feelings in order to support their incarcerated students' learning. In addition, relationships are not only regulated by pedagogical considerations but by the prisons' security protocols, requiring teachers to build trusting relationships in a place that is characterized by discipline, control, mistrust, and surveillance (Waite, 2024). This article explores how teachers handle these potential challenges in ways that they perceive as professional, drawing on their own account of what they say they do. The aim of the article is, therefore, to examine how teachers understand the teacher-student relationship and how they establish trust in correctional settings. My research questions are:

1. How are the teachers' ways of relating to their students shaped by the correctional setting?
2. How do teachers establish trust with their students, and what challenges are involved when seeking to establish trust in correctional settings?

The study discussed here provides new insights into the underexplored field of education in prisons by exploring teachers' experiences in the Swedish prison system. It extends our knowledge of how teachers understand the structural and institutional conditions of prisons and how they navigate tensions in the teacher-student relationships, particularly the tensions between care and control and between trust and vigilance. The focus on the teacher-student

relationship can also spark reflections on the role of trust within professionalism in a world that is increasingly steered by accountability demands (Evans, 2008; Evetts, 2006, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Mausethagen, 2013). Aligned with Evans' understanding of professionalism (2008) as something that has to be enacted, this study examines professionalism from the teachers' perspectives and what they say they do. It highlights the central role of professional judgment and supports the argument that professionalism needs to be explored "from within" (Evetts, 2013, p. 786) in order to understand what teacher professionalism in prison can mean.

The article is structured as follows: First, it provides an overview of previous research on teachers working in correctional settings, followed by a description of education in Swedish prisons, a presentation of the theoretical framework building on professionalism and professional responsibility, and a section on methodology. The findings are then presented, and the article ends with a discussion and conclusion, offering suggestions for further research.

# Previous research

Criminal justice systems and the provision of educational activities within correctional settings vary across countries. Social-political forces and cultural values shape specific prison conditions, with some countries, such as the Nordic countries, adopting a more rehabilitative approach, and others, such as Anglophone countries, adopting a more punitive one (Pratt & Eriksson, 2011). The research findings presented in this section provide an overarching understanding of teachers' experiences of working in correctional settings, as they are framed by prison routines and security concerns seen as inherent to the institution, regardless of country. Prisons can be an emotionally demanding place of work, as it can be experienced as foreign, confusing, and unsettling due to the prison culture as well as the architecture, with its high walls and fences (Lindberg, 2005; Lukacova et al., 2018; Patrie, 2023; Waite, 2024; Wright, 2005). Teachers in several studies have reported feeling unprepared to work in prisons as they had not received any prior training for teaching specifically in prisons, and have reported that learning to navigate the correctional culture can be challenging (Bhatti, 2010; Kamrath & Gregg, 2018; Lukacova et al., 2018; Patrie, 2023). Commonly reported challenges among teachers from various countries included infrastructure limiting teaching possibilities, such as the lack of internet access due to security concerns (Lukacova et al., 2018; Murphy, 2018; Patrie, 2023). Another challenge for teachers was to know how to interact with one's incarcerated students. It was necessary to maintain distance while still establishing close enough relationships to be able to teach the students (Ferguson, 2023; Michals & Kessler, 2015; Wright, 2004). Teachers had been warned about prisoners' manipulative behavior, were mindful about the risks involved in sharing too much private information with their students (Bhatti, 2010; Lukacova et al., 2018; Patrie, 2023), and chose words and topics carefully to avoid conflict (Lukacova et al., 2018). In other cases, the teachers' negative preconceptions of how their students would be were disproven, as the students were much friendlier and engaged than they had expected (Michals & Kessler, 2015; Patrie, 2023). Teachers also shared

that it could be emotionally challenging to learn about their students' crimes and their traumatic past experiences, as well as to witness the struggles of incarceration itself (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020; Michals & Kessler, 2015; Patrie, 2023).

Previous research has highlighted the complexity of teaching in prisons, which inevitably pose challenges in how to conduct the work. Research on teachers' work in prisons has remained scarce (Berglund et al., 2025; Lukacova et al., 2018), and in Sweden only preliminary studies have been conducted. This is surprising, as education is considered central to the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals in Western societies, thereby making teachers key figures in a humane prison system in Sweden. This study aims to fill this gap in research by contributing teachers' own understandings of their work in correctional settings, focusing on the teacher-student relationship.

# Education in Swedish prisons

The Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, are internationally regarded as having a particularly humane prison system with a strong focus on rehabilitation (Pratt & Eriksson, 2011; Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). The Swedish Prison and Probation Service aims at preparing prisoners with knowledge and skills that facilitate a drug-free, law-abiding, and independent life after release, rather than simply providing secure custody (Kriminalvården, n.d.-b). Participation in occupational activities during the prison sentence is obligatory. Activities include, for example, work, education, or treatment programs. In 2025, 20% of prisoners had started adult education. Corresponding to 3,841 individuals (Kriminalvården, 2026), this figure is, after work, the most common occupational activity.

The focus of this study is on municipal adult education provided in all Swedish prisons, including six facilities designated for women. It is offered across all three security classes: high, medium, and low. High-security and medium-security prisons are both closed prisons, with high-security facilities reserved for the most high-risk inmates. In medium-security prisons, the level of supervision and control can vary between different institutions. Low-security prisons are open prisons without direct physical barriers to prevent escape (Kriminalvården, n.d.-a).

Courses offered are at the compulsory, upper-secondary, and vocational levels, as well as Swedish for non-native speakers. The courses and certificates the students receive are equivalent to those obtained outside prison and do not indicate that the studies were conducted in prison (Kriminalvården, 2018). The Prison and Probation Service is the organizer (*huvudman*) and provides the education through so-called learning centers located on prison premises, with certified teachers employed directly by the Prison and Probation Service. The education is governed by the same laws and ordinances as municipal adult education outside prisons (Kriminalvården, 2018; Utbildningsdepartementet, 2011). The teachers' role is clearly defined as being of civil character and as representatives of formal adult education (Kriminalvården, 2007). Their tasks must be related to education and pedagogy, and teacher resources should not be used for general prison-related tasks (Kriminalvården, 2003). Even if

they are not assigned prison-related tasks, what teachers can do and how they relate to their students are still shaped by structural conditions, material arrangements, and institutional demands, as they carry out their work within prisons. This includes, for example, the amount of background information teachers are required to know before meeting their students. How teachers navigate these conditions in practice, and how this shapes the establishment of trust, is explored further in the findings of this article.

In October 2025, the average number of teachers employed in the prison system was 180, with 165 working in prisons and 15 in remand prisons. The number of teachers employed at a learning center ranges from 1 to 15, with an average of four teachers (Statistisk support, Kriminalvården, personal communication, November 28, 2025). Teachers work with both students at the prison where they are located and with students at other prisons in distance mode. The studies take place as a self-study course, in which teachers meet with their students weekly, either in person or by phone if the student is located in a different prison. For a more detailed analysis of the provision of education in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, see also Qiu (2025).

# Theoretical framework

The study draws on concepts of professionalism and professional responsibility to explore how teachers build relationships with their incarcerated students and the role of trust in this setting. In this study, professionalism is understood as relating to the quality of professional work and what it means to do "good" work from the teachers' perspective (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2012; Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015; Freidson, 2001; Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022; Sockett, 1993; Stenlås, 2011). To establish relationships is hereby considered a central part of teachers' professional work (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Gaining students' trust becomes crucial as it serves as a precondition for exercising professional discretion and to succeed with their teaching mission (Freidson, 2001; Grimen, 2013b). Linked to this is also the concept of professional responsibility (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), with teachers entrusted to be capable of acting morally responsible in relation to their students. They are trusted to serve their students' best interests rather than being steered by personal, economic, or organizational interests (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Evetts, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Grimen, 2013a, 2013b). Teachers are expected to possess the competence and skills to conduct the work and to determine courses of action guided by professional knowledge, proven experience, and ethical codes such as the equal treatment of all individuals as codified in the Education Act (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2010).

Trust, in that sense, requires a proactive attitude (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), and fostering students' trust in the teachers' commitment, competence, and capability is essential to their professional relationship (Grimen, 2013b). How to foster this kind of trusting relationship in practice is not given, however, but is rather subject to individual interpretation (Nilsson

& Hertzberg, 2022; Sockett, 1993). When attempting to build those relationships in correctional settings, tensions and challenges can arise. Prison arrangements, such as security considerations, take precedence and shape what teachers can do and how they relate to their students, who have all been convicted of crimes (Kemmis et al., 2014; Qiu, 2025). This shapes what teachers perceive to be professional, as they have to act in a way that sustains both personal safety and prison security while simultaneously supporting their students' learning. Failing to do so can damage students' trust as well as the trust that society at large places in teachers. This can, in turn, reduce teachers' autonomy, their control over their work, and their room for discretionary judgment. Trust, therefore, creates a greater room for action than distrust or purely contractual or transactional relationships (Abbott, 1988; Brint, 1993; Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015; Evetts, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Grimen, 2013b).

The notions of professionalism, professional responsibility, and trust as outlined above serve as a theoretical framework for exploring what teachers consider professional in terms of building relationships and how trust is established and functions in prisons, which are environments preoccupied with control, surveillance, and mistrust (Waite, 2024). Professionalism is understood as something that shows itself in practice (Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015; Sockett, 1993). This article explores what professionalism for teachers in correctional settings could entail, drawing on what teachers say they do.

# Methodology

Contact with teachers was established through the heads of school in each region, with the final sample consisting of 14 teachers. Ten of the teachers are located at a prison for men, one at a prison for women, one at a remand prison, one at both a remand prison and a prison for men, and one works as a special education teacher (*specialpedagog*). The special education teacher does not work with specific students but rather supports teachers and students across different prisons in finding the right learning support. The interviewed teachers taught a variety of subjects, such as Swedish, foreign languages, social sciences, and natural sciences. All semi-structured interviews, conducted between May 2024 and December 2024 in person or in distance mode, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To safeguard anonymity, the table below does not show whether the teacher is working in a prison for women, in a remand prison, or as a special education teacher, as there are only a few teachers in each of these groups. As the teacher in the remand prison is not located at a prison with a specific security class and the special education teacher visits prisons with various security classes, I have chosen a security class for these two teachers in order to maintain anonymity.

**Table 1**

*Overview of the interview participants*

| Name (age) | Years in latest position(s) | Security class |
|---|---|---|
| Anneli (50+) | 1-2 | |
| Marina (40+) | 3-5 | Low |
| Anders (60+) | 15+ | |
| Bengt (60+) | 1-2 | |
| Ingrid (60+) | 1-2 | |
| Linda (50+) | 1-2 | |
| Julia (30+) | 3-5 | Medium |
| Fredrik (40+) | 3-5 | |
| Sandra (40+) | 3-5 | |
| Marcus (30+) | 6-10 | |
| Eva (50+) | 15+ | |
| Johanna (40+) | 3-5 | |
| Lena (60+) | 6-10 | High |
| Amanda (40+) | 15+ | |

The data analysis was inspired by inductive content analysis as described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), which includes coding, creating categories, and abstraction. As a first step, I familiarized myself with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts and then coding the material. In all of the teachers' accounts, the differences between working inside and outside prisons and the importance of establishing good relationships with their students were thematized. This led to the creation of the two overarching categories "Being professional in the prison context" and "Relationship-building" in order to organize the data. I sorted the codes into these two categories and created further subcategories within each. This process involved an interpretation of what each code signifies and which category it belongs to. All codes within the categories were further examined to understand the relationships between them and their shared meanings. This, in turn, informed and refined my understanding of what each category characterizes and represents (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

All teachers emphasized the importance of trust as central for succeeding with their teaching mission. In this sense, being able to establish trust with their incarcerated students is a precondition for supporting their students' learning. This led to the application of the concepts of professionalism and professional responsibility in order to examine how teachers establish trust with their students and how trust functions in a coercive, potentially dangerous environment such as prison.

# Findings

The four presented themes (establishing relationships and trust, the right level of distance and closeness, teachers' distinctive role, and moral challenges) shed light on how teachers understand the teacher-student relationship and how they establish trust. The findings also

analyze the role of trust and why it is central for teachers to establish it. I have translated the quotes, originally in Swedish, into English.

## *Establishing relationships and trust*

The interviewed teachers stressed the importance of establishing good relationships and trust with their students, which they said can be achieved in several ways, such as showing care, meeting the incarcerated individual without judgment despite their being convicted of crimes, and being able to joke around. Marcus said, "that you talk to them about all sorts of things, that they have a little chat and then you've gained their trust and you've sustained their trust." For Marcus, talking with students about topics other than the subject matter and meeting their need for interaction are ways to gain their trust. The students' trust becomes something that Marcus has to both "gain" and "sustain," indicating that this requires a pro-active attitude (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011) and that he has to nourish it throughout the work.

Eva described another way of gaining trust:

> That they know that you…you're employed and you're professional and you're here to help them […] and then I do everything to help [them] and then you get their full trust for you when you behave correctly.

While being employed by the prison as a teacher creates legal legitimacy, her students' trust is not solely built on the legitimacy through employment but also through her way of conducting her work; that is, by showing that she is "professional", behaving "correctly", and doing "everything to help [them]." In this sense, her professionalism shows itself in practice (Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015). By acting in the service of her students and not being steered by personal, economic, or any correctional interests of the prison, she is able to gain her students' complete trust. Her students' trust allows her to exercise autonomy and professional discretion in her work, while acting upon professional responsibility is also what sustains her students' trust in her. Trust, therefore, becomes both a precondition for and a result of professional responsibility (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Grimen, 2013b).

When asked about relationships, Anneli said:

> Yes, it's the most important thing. Without this kind of relationship, you're not getting anywhere. Many of my students can feel a bit disappointed by society, whether it's from school or other institutions of society, so they can be a bit guarded. And if you didn't build personal relationships, I don't think we could ever complete a course.

Anneli's account illustrates how personal relationships and trust become a prerequisite for succeeding in her work. By establishing personal relationships and trying to lower the students' guard, students become more vulnerable and transfer discretionary power to Anneli. This, in turn, creates the room for action and to decide on a course of action that promotes

student learning and fulfills the educational aims (Grimen, 2013b). For her, it is only through personal relationships that it is possible to make her students receptive to her educational efforts in the first place, especially given that her students often have felt let down by societal institutions. Other teachers reported similar impressions, noting that students had experienced various negative incidents, such as previous teachers having called them "stupid" or similar, which still affect them today. These accounts suggest that relationships with students take on a more significant role in correctional settings, as it becomes the teachers' responsibility not only to reproduce and maintain the trust in them and their profession (Svensson, 2006) but also to compensate for previous negative experiences and to restore the trust that has been lost. Anders also said that "many of those who are here may not have had the best role models in the past" and expressed hope that he could "not only be a [subject] teacher but [also] some kind of role model." A few other teachers also mentioned the perception of being a role model as a teacher, serving in this position as an example of alternative, socially accepted ways of thinking and acting. This perception of the teacher role can be linked to a deep moral commitment to the holistic development of their students, focusing not only on transmitting subject knowledge but also on forming students into morally responsible citizens (Sockett, 1993). It can also be interpreted as a responsibility that the teachers feel toward the public good, whereby helping students to become morally responsible citizens can lead to a better and safer society.

### *The right level of distance and closeness*

While relationships are central to succeeding in their work, as outlined in the previous section, teachers also have to take into account the correctional setting that regulates relationships between staff and prisoners. While gaining and sustaining their students' trust presupposes some level of close relationship (Sockett, 1993), it can be "a little bit weird since you aren't supposed to have relationships with prisoners," as Lena pointed out. This indicates a dilemma between different interests and conflicts, with teachers working in correctional settings being "squeezed between" (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2012, p. 196). They have to build relationships with their *students*, while they should not have relationships with *prisoners*. Coping with such dilemmas becomes part of teachers' work as they have to relate to their students both as students and as prisoners, the latter requiring more caution. Professional discretion is needed where courses of action are decided that align with both personal safety and prison security. In the ideal case, it would fall under what teachers perceive as "good work" (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2012). One hallmark of a "good" way of approaching students in correctional settings is the guideline "personal but not private," which several teachers mentioned during the interviews. However, this rule does not only apply to teaching within prison, as Julia pointed out:

> Because even [when teaching outside prison] you're in a kind of power position where you have to assign grades and so on so you can't be too private there either.

Julia drew parallels to teacher-student relationships outside prisons: To avoid being too private is something she has to consider, regardless of where the education takes place. Distance from the student has to be maintained, as a teacher inevitably occupies a position of power, making it unethical to get too close to the student. Transgressing the line between personal and private, both within and outside prisons, can harm students' trust in their teachers' professionalism and their belief in the fair, equal treatment of all students. However, the right level of distance takes on additional significance in correctional settings. Linda pointed out that, for teachers working outside prison, "it's more from a pedagogical perspective. [In prison] it becomes a question of security." Making the wrong judgments and behaving inappropriately in correctional settings can lead to more far-reaching consequences, such as compromising prison security and one's personal safety. How the right level of distance is established remains subject to individual judgment, and different approaches are adopted. Some teachers shared that they refrain from telling their students about their future plans or details about their family, while others felt more comfortable sharing such information. Marcus reflected on his and other staff's approaches to relationships with students:

> I gain a lot from the relationship when they understand that I'm a human being. [Some of the staff] are a bit more old school and think that one should be a government authority with a uniform, demonstrating order and structure. […] I dare to be a bit more open and talk about things that [other staff] might find inappropriate.

By letting his students see a more personal side of him, he is in a better position to gain their trust, as trust presupposes some level of knowledge of the other actor (Sockett, 1993; Svensson, 2006). Students get to know him better and start to trust him, which increases Marcus's possibility to exercise discretionary power and to decide on courses of action to fulfill educational goals. Being more open is therefore considered necessary and functional (Evans, 2008), as the trust he receives in return facilitates his work. His approach can also be interpreted as a way to mitigate the power imbalances inherent in the staff-prisoner relationship, as students can see that he is a "human being" rather than a detached government authority one might be reluctant to engage with (see also the theme Teachers' distinctive role). Marcus's reasoning can also be seen in light of the fact that he works in a medium-security prison with prisoners whom he perceives as friendlier and more open, compared to another prison where he previously worked. The right level of closeness can therefore be understood as a result of deliberations based upon the specific correctional setting in which one is located, considering security class and students' backgrounds, as well as being shaped by previous experiences, personal preferences, and perceptions of one's role.

## *Teachers' distinctive role*

While the teachers have varying approaches to interacting with their incarcerated students, the role of the teacher is distinct from that of other prison staff. Several teachers have noted how their students are more open and friendlier to them than to prison officers. Johanna said:

> Yes, yeah, we all notice that there is a difference. They treat us differently. […] a teacher isn't dressed in the blue color of the uniform […] They don't always want to talk with the prison officers while it's totally fine to talk with us about different things and so on.

Other teachers share this perception, reasoning that not wearing a uniform might spare them from more rude and aggressive behavior. The clothing embodies the teachers' commitment to their students and distances them from the prison institution. Despite taking place in correctional settings, teachers are primarily linked to their teacher role, which shapes social relations in a favorable way. It enables other, more open ways of relating to each other and creates an educational rather than a correctional space. This makes it easier for students to trust their teachers and creates room for further strengthening trust, which is crucial for the exercise of professional discretion (Grimen, 2013b). The trust that is provided by belonging to the teaching profession and wearing civilian clothing is also sustained by teachers through their actions. Ingrid shared:

> On one, maybe two, occasions I was really, really close to pressing the alarm button because a discussion had escalated. But it didn't become a dangerous situation. It could have. But but on all other occasions I have my experience, my tools in my toolbox that allow me to redirect the situation so that I avoid confrontational attitudes both from them and from me and instead I redirect and talk myself out of the situation.

As the quote illustrates, a part of professional competence in correctional settings is the ability to evaluate personal safety, since situations can become tense and some students may act violently. To handle these kinds of situations in a professional manner requires judgment of what course of action is appropriate (Nilsson & Bengtsson, 2025). As is evident in other teachers' accounts as well, it is often the teachers themselves who resolve conflicts and dilemmas. This can be interpreted as a demonstration of competence, in which control over the educational space is maintained. Through this, teachers retain their discretionary power as it is not handed over to prison officers. The teachers sustain their legitimacy and their students' trust in their primary commitment to them, as few correctional influences have seeped in. Fredrik also pointed out the importance of maintaining clear boundaries:

> Sometimes when we pick up people from the housing unit, I don't want to remind [the prison officers] "Don't forget to search him" because then I'm blurring my teacher role by saying that they have to search them […] it becomes weird if I go around with security tasks.

Fredrik sees his responsibilities as strictly relating to his teaching profession and not any correctional purposes. Taking over security-related tasks involves assuming more power than is typical for the teaching profession, which can alter the social relations between him and his

students and can undermine the trust that he has established (Grimen, 2013b). By starting to "*blur*" his teacher role, prisoners might question where his moral obligations lie. It can raise the question of how enforcing security rules can be aligned with the moral purpose of education, in which values such as an individual's freedom and integrity are central. By ensuring that the students see the two distinct professional responsibilities of teachers and prison officers in practice, he is able to sustain trust, which forms the basis for conducting his work. While the division of labor and professional responsibilities become less clearly divided in real workplace settings (Abbott, 1988), the professional boundaries within prisons remain rigid, as transgressions between roles and taking over the authority of other roles can entail a security risk. Blurred boundaries between professional roles can erode trust and legitimacy in the organization (Abbott, 1988). In the case of prisons, ensuring that the prison operations are based on clearly established roles and authorities is crucial for sustaining both public trust in the prison institution and the feeling of public safety.

## *Moral challenges*

As the teachers' work takes place in correctional settings, all students have naturally been convicted of some sort of crime, some of which "are difficult not to react to" as Fredrik put it. This can lead to emotionally and morally challenging situations, which affect teachers' feelings toward their students and, potentially, their behavior. When working in correctional settings, teachers are therefore required to find ways to manage these feelings to sustain the trust in their moral commitment to serve the students' best interests. Sandra described one instance in which she had read about a severe crime that one of her students had committed and how it affected her:

> Every time I came near him. I was like [gesture and sound of uncomfortableness]. When he was moved somewhere else, I was so happy. I said: I couldn't. It doesn't feel good. I think this is bad of me, but I never treated him differently. Okay. But my feeling was like: Ugh, what a terrible guy. But he was okay [in] the prison and everything and was respectful. He behaved super well. All good. But still, just knowing what he'd done. So I don't read.

This account offers an example of a moral struggle that can arise when teachers learn about the crime a student committed, altering the social dynamics between them. Sandra devalued her feelings of discomfort and the joy she had felt when her student left, as she believed it was "bad" for her to feel like this. Evaluating these feelings as "bad" can be understood as a result of her ideals regarding what good work constitutes (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2012) and her commitment to the ethical codes of the teaching profession. The negative emotions that knowledge of the crime evokes have the potential to threaten the profession's purpose of serving students' best interests and treating all of them equally. Some teachers shared that they do not read about the convictions if possible. This avoids the negative feelings in the first place and can make it easier to assume professional responsibility for a student, as the

teacher can see the individual primarily as a student rather than a criminal. Sometimes, however, whether to read about the background or not is not solely the teachers' decision, especially in high-security prisons. Sometimes prison officers tell the teachers they have to read about a student's background as the student can be dangerous, and they should thus choose their words carefully in order to avoid triggering them.

In other cases, such as Anneli's, the teachers themselves choose to read everything:

> I always read what crime they committed […] it's important for catching signals […] I'm not only thinking about violence but I'm thinking about those who are convicted for crimes that…are about scamming the elderly or online dating scammers, so those who are very manipulative […] with that one I have to be a little careful. Here I have to think before I answer.

Anneli approaches her students with a sense of vigilance and caution, questioning their intentions and being aware of potential ulterior motives. For Anneli, who works in a low-security prison, reading about her students' backgrounds is more about detecting manipulation. In high-security prisons, reading about students' backgrounds can be more about avoiding conflicts and physical threats, since students are convicted of more serious crimes and, at times, come from more troubled social backgrounds than those in lower-security prisons, as noted by some teachers. The importance of remaining vigilant, whether against manipulation, deception, or physical risks, is emphasized by the teachers. Ingrid said:

> Because they [the prisoners] are here for a reason. And even if they seem super nice they do have other capacities and…so, that. You can't be too naïve […] it's really easy to get lulled into some kind of sense of safety.

In this example, being too naïve as a teacher can be considered risky as one's judgment becomes clouded, which can lead to actions that might be harmful for both correctional and educational purposes. Fredrik also said "you don't want to be cynical but you can't not be. It's a difficult balancing act between cynicism and naivety." Teachers are supposed to be committed to their students' development, which includes believing in their ability to change, and meeting them with an open-minded attitude. However, at the same time, distance has to be kept, whereby the sincerity of the students' intentions and behavior is questioned. Tipping too far to either side of this balancing act can damage a student's trust in their teacher. On the one hand, to question students' intentions and ability to change too often can lead to cynicism, which can compromise a teachers' ability to act morally responsible toward the students; on the other hand, if teachers act too naïvely and misinterpret their students' intentions, this can impede prison security and personal safety. Misinterpreting their students' intentions can also lead to losing trust in the teachers as they appear to lack the competence to conduct their work in a professional manner. Finding the right balance between cynicism and naivety, therefore, becomes crucial for the legitimacy of teachers' autonomy and for their

ability to exercise professional discretion. Without this legitimacy, skepticism from individual students and the public toward a teacher may grow and raise the question of whether one can trust that they are genuinely using their position of power to help students (Brint, 1993, 2006; Freidson, 2001). In that sense, discretionary power is only granted and sustained by a demonstration of competence, commitment, and capability despite morally challenging situations that can emerge in correctional settings.

# Discussion

Concerning the first research question of (1) *how teachers' ways of relating to their students are shaped by the correctional setting*, the findings show that security considerations have to be taken into account alongside pedagogical considerations when interacting with students. This is consistent with previous research (Lukacova et al., 2018; Waite, 2024; Wright, 2004, 2005). Security considerations relate to both physical safety and manipulation, of which the latter was more prominent in this study. The interviewed teachers emphasized the importance of staying vigilant and maintaining a degree of suspicion concerning their students' behavior and intentions, even in cases where a friendly, trusting relationship had been established. Being vigilant can be understood as a way to demonstrate professionalism and competence, and through this to increase trust and legitimacy by correctly assessing the situation and the student (Saunders et al., 2014). What is distinct about manipulation attempts in correctional settings is that falling for such attempts can have more severe consequences than in educational contexts outside prison. It can become an issue of one's personal safety and of prison security, and ultimately damage trust in the prison as an institution for maintaining public safety.

Some of the teachers perceive their role as an opportunity to mitigate the difficult past experiences of their students. The impact teachers can make may also be larger in correctional settings, as incarcerated students are isolated from the outside world and thus have fewer opportunities to relate to society at large. In this sense, teachers in correctional settings are crucial for supporting students in living independent, crime-free lives in which both their rights and responsibilities are assumed and upheld (Noblit, 1993), reflecting Sweden's focus on rehabilitation rather than solely on punishment. It is not only the moral purpose embedded in teaching that is more prominent in correctional settings, but also the potential for moral struggles, as the teachers work with students who are convicted of crimes. With some crimes, it is difficult to avoid feelings such as repugnance or the like, which is arguably a natural human response. Teachers, whether they choose or are directed to read about their students' convictions for safety reasons, must find ways to manage the feelings that may arise and to interact with their students in a way that sustains the trust in their commitment to serve their students' best interests.

The findings have shown how the correctional setting as a workplace affects the way teachers build relationships with their students. It can, however, also be argued that the way teachers

relate to their students is influenced by the correctional setting only to a limited extent. Teachers inhabit a distinctive role with responsibility for their students' learning, which offers different conditions for establishing trust in this setting. This leads us to the second question of (2) *how teachers establish trust with their students and what challenges are involved when seeking to establish trust in correctional settings*. Several teachers shared that their students are more friendly to them than to other staff at the prison, and that the same student can behave completely differently in the learning center compared to the housing unit. The establishment of trust may partly be facilitated by the fact that teachers wear civilian clothing instead of uniforms, which contributes to an educational space with a less visible hierarchy. It can mitigate prisoners' guarded and skeptical attitudes towards prisons and prison officers, whose tasks are linked to security, control, and surveillance. Teachers must, however, actively maintain their advantageous position for gaining prisoners' trust by responding to both students' academic and emotional needs, thereby emphasizing a proactive attitude (Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015). Sockett (1993) has pointed out that institutional power can undermine professional responsibility and that "[i]nstitutionalized teachers could be regarded simply as pawns in someone else's game plan, regulated in their roles […]" (p. 58). My findings show that teachers strive for independence in order to avoid being "pawns" in this distinct setting, where both correctional and educational aims are to be fulfilled. Teachers refrain from taking over security-related tasks, and situations are solved with limited use of other prison staff or prison sanctions, which can be interpreted as a demonstration of competence, as the teachers themselves are able to handle matters related to the educational space. It generates trust and legitimacy beyond the trust they may enjoy by virtue of belonging to the teaching profession. This trust is crucial in the teacher-student relationship, as it creates the space and secures the possibility for teachers to continue exercising professional discretion in the future (Grimen, 2013b).

A challenge related to trust that arises within correctional settings is the need to maintain the right balance between closeness and distance to the student. This is also discussed in other research, such as that of Wright (2004), who states that teachers have to "discover and sustain the delicate relational midpoint" (p. 201). Finding this delicate midpoint, where security concerns are considered but do not overshadow the relationship, is crucial for succeeding in the teaching mission. Linked to this is also the importance of remaining vigilant and avoiding both cynicism and naivety, as both can erode students' trust. It is necessary for teachers to find a way to make the students feel confident that teachers are morally committed to serving their best interests, despite feelings of repugnance towards convictions or suspicion towards students' intentions. Succeeding in upholding this primary commitment to one's students in an authentic way creates trust and legitimacy. This can be understood as a crucial aspect of teacher professionalism in correctional settings, enabling teachers to exercise professional discretion over time, even within an institution that primarily serves correctional rather than educational purposes.

## Conclusion and further research

This article has explored how teachers understand the teacher-student relationship and how they establish trust in correctional settings. It has highlighted what teacher professionalism can mean from the teachers' perspectives regarding handling suspicion, cynicism, repugnance, or naivety. Handling this in a "good" way can be seen as an expression of competence and an ability to adhere to ethical codes despite challenging situations. While the prison as an overarching organization provides the frame for the teachers' work, the teachers in this study maintain a level of independence from the prison with unique possibilities to establish trust thanks to belonging to the teaching profession with its distinctive tasks. The study highlights the value of providing education and employing teachers in correctional settings, as they can become crucial figures who contribute to a more humane climate in prison, as is shown in other studies as well (Bhatti, 2010; Michals & Kessler, 2015; Novek, 2019; Waite, 2024; Wright, 2004).

This article has contributed to research on professionalism by providing empirical insights into the complexity of establishing trust in professional-client relationships in prisons, a place to which few have personal access. It has extended research on education in prison by demonstrating how teachers navigate institutional, moral, and emotional demands in order to create relationships that are both conducive to learning and aligned with security considerations. It highlights the central role of professional judgment and what it can mean to act professionally from the perspective of teachers working in Swedish prisons. In doing so, it also supports conceptualizations of professionalism that build upon professional responsibility rather than being something that can be imposed from above (Evans, 2008; Evetts, 2006, 2013; Mausethagen, 2013). In the Swedish context, no extensive research has examined teachers' work in correctional settings. Exploring other aspects, such as pedagogical approaches and teaching practices, would allow us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the education that is offered. Further research should also include incarcerated students' perspectives, toward whom all the teachers' efforts are directed. It could deepen understanding of how students experience teacher professionalism, teaching practices, and trust. This could contribute to knowledge on how to improve education in correctional settings and add to the limited research based on prisoners' own voices.

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