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Table of Contents

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The Role of Educational Science in Professional Knowledge: Student Teachers' Reflections

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Abstract

The significance of theoretical knowledge for professional practice is widely acknowledged, but how students in professional education construct meanings of their major subject remains understudied. This study examined how primary student teachers reflect on the role of educational science in their professional knowledge. Textual data were collected after their first practicum in a Finnish primary teacher education programme. Discourse analysis identified four discourses. In the discourse of depth, educational science enabled a thorough understanding of pupils. In the discourse of multifacetedness, simultaneous consideration of multiple aspects of teaching was evident. In the discourse of topicality, teachers could stay updated regarding the knowledge society through educational science. The discourse of systemicity underscored the contribution of educational science to societal progress. This study provides a better understanding of student teachers' professional knowledge in curriculum development and programme design within teacher education.

Keywords

Professional knowledge, discourse analysis, teacher education, educational science, major subject

Introduction

In professional higher education, students' major subjects play an important role in shaping how knowledge resources are adopted and adapted for use in practical training and future professional practice. An abstract theoretical knowledge base is a key characteristic of any profession (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015). In professional education, the major subject is the main mediator of this knowledge. However, newly qualified teachers often struggle to integrate the theoretical knowledge they gained during their studies into their practical work (e.g. Leijen et al., 2015; Puustinen et al., 2018; Zaragoza et al., 2021).

To better support student teachers' academic study achievements, further research has been called for to examine how teachers perceive their studies (Lähteenmäki et al., 2024). Despite this need, students' perceptions of their major subjects, which are integral to their professional knowledge, have been scarcely studied. Existing research has focused on the reasons and values underlying the choice of a specific major (Goller et al., 2019) or the change of a major (Bäulke et al., 2022) rather than on the role of major subjects in building professional knowledge. In addition, there are challenges in the Finnish teacher profession that also challenge teachers' professional knowledge, such as an increasing school segregation and selectiveness that cause societal differentiation (Peltola, 2021). On the international level, there are even more challenges, such as difficulties in recruiting competent teachers, teachers' declining academic achievements, and the declining status of the teaching profession (Alatalo et al., 2021). These challenges further highlight the importance of examining student teachers' relationships with their training.

In this study, we investigated Finnish primary student teachers' reflections on educational science, which is their major subject. In Finland, educational science as a major includes studies in educational psychology, general didactics, research skills, thesis work, and several supervised teaching practicums in teacher training schools. We used discursive methodologies that focus on the ways in which meanings are constructed by language use. This perspective is beneficial because professional discourses and narratives are not confined to the individual but are constituted through reciprocal relationships embedded within cultural conventions (Heikkilä, 2022b). This study enhances the previous understanding of how student teachers construct meanings of their professional knowledge (Heikkilä & Hermansen, 2024; Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023; Nerland & Jensen, 2012) by addressing the research question, "How do primary student teachers construct meanings of educational science as part of their professional knowledge?"

Professional knowledge of teachers' work

Knowledge formation and construction are prerequisites for developing a coherent understanding of teachers' work (Campbell, 2018) and thus for mastering the core challenges of the teaching profession (Guerriero & Révai, 2017). However, over the years, there has been considerable debate about what constitutes professional knowledge in teaching, which can also be understood as underlining the importance of knowledge to the profession (Loughran, 2019). Some researchers consider only research-based knowledge as professional knowledge (e.g. Zaragoza et al., 2021), whereas others include practical, relational, and experience-based knowledge (e.g. Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023). This study follows the latter view, focusing on theoretical knowledge (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015), while also recognising the need to integrate it with other knowledge resources to be properly used in the profession (Phillips et al., 2023).

Acting in the profession, teachers draw on a diverse range of knowledge sources, including those related to school subjects, subject didactics, pedagogical knowledge, social relations, organisational knowledge of the school sector, specific student groups and their families, and the community surrounding the school (Heikkilä & Hermansen, 2024; Shulman, 1987). These knowledge sources are also evident in efforts to categorise teacher knowledge, as exemplified by the seminal classification proposed by Shulman (1987), which includes content, pedagogical, and pedagogical content knowledge and its elaborations, such as the technological pedagogical content knowledge framework developed by Mishra and Koehler (2006). The existence of multiple domains and their intersections underscores the multifaceted nature of the knowledge necessary for effective teaching.

The realities of day-to-day teaching fuel the need to understand teachers' professional knowledge and its development, use, and value through practice, which involves understanding the synergetic relationship of formal and practical knowledge (Loughran, 2019). Thus, at the individual level, situational and practical experiences can also contribute to professional knowledge, provided that they are understood, interpreted, reflected upon, and elaborated through the lens of practical knowledge. By critically reflecting on previous teaching episodes, teachers can use both personal and practical knowledge (Wieser, 2016). This is because teachers require continuous adaptation to emergent and evolving classroom processes and situation-specific skills to exercise professional judgement (Biesta, 2007). Teachers enrich their professional knowledge through application and reflection within the specific circumstances and pedagogical contexts in which they navigate between general and specific knowledge (Loughran, 2019).

Recent research has increasingly focused on examining teachers' professional knowledge from theoretical stances rooted in social practice-based perspectives (Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023; Knorr Cetina, 2001; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). The present study examined the diverse relationships and cultures surrounding professional knowledge in teachers' work, emphasising that knowledge use is context-dependent and involves conceptual and material artefacts. This means that knowledge takes on different purposes depending on its context of use. In teacher education, this can be particularly evident in practicums, where student teachers navigate between several knowledge sources.

The role of teacher education in the development of professional knowledge

Teacher education is crucial in shaping student teachers' professional knowledge. How student teachers learn to construct meanings of professional knowledge is likely to impact their pre-service qualification process and future professional practice (Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023). Research suggests that teacher education programmes focused on research are effective (Tatto, 2015) because they help students and in-service teachers perceive and interpret their teaching experiences in ways that would otherwise not be accessible to them. The research base of teacher education has been strengthened in many countries (Afdal & Spernes, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Learning to consume and conduct research fosters critical, creative, and productive engagement with professional knowledge (Barnett, 2005). The research used must be of sufficient quality, up to date, relevant to the situation in which the teachers work, and judiciously applied, in line with ethical demands and role obligations (Phillips et al., 2023). In this process, the major subject plays the most important role.

Epistemic diversity is a key characteristic of teacher education (Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023). It manifests in curricular divides between academic disciplines, school subjects, and educational foundations, as well as in the major separation between university and school as distinct learning arenas (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015) characterised by differences in institutional practices, logics, and conventions for defining legitimate knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 1999). This separation is further emphasised by the differing epistemic beliefs held by institution-based and school-based teacher educators (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015).

Consequently, student teachers may struggle to grasp the relevant knowledge in teachers' work and to achieve a sense of epistemic coherence owing to the various institutional practices and knowledge types associated with each context (Heikkilä & Hermansen, 2024). Knowledge acquisition by student teachers must undergo negotiation processes to establish meaningful relationships with various types and aspects of knowledge that render them applicable in practical work (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015). Previous research has illustrated how student teachers actively engage in knowledge work as they apply knowledge from one institutional context to another by using research skills in the practicum (Heikkilä, 2022a).

Epistemic diversity has often been verbalised in the gap metaphor between theory and practice, which are perceived as distinct and separate entities, thus usually strengthening the dichotomy. In this context, *theory* typically refers to educational theories and research-based knowledge taught in teacher education, whereas *practice* refers to teachers' practical work in the classroom (e.g. Hermansen, 2020; Leijen et al., 2015). This perceived gap between theory and practice has been considered problematic (Jenset et al., 2019; Puustinen et al., 2018), making it challenging for students and newly qualified teachers to apply theoretical knowledge to their teaching practice and connect theories to their work (Leijen et al., 2015; Zaragoza et al., 2021).

Rather than reinforcing the dichotomy between theory and practice, an increasing focus is placed on understanding how different forms of knowledge are intertwined in specific situations of professional practice. The aim should be to find a non-dualistic position that acknowledges the importance of both theory and practice (Biesta, 2007; Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023; Hordern, 2019). Emphasising personal reflections on knowledge makes it possible to overcome the gap between theory and practice, and recognise that professional knowledge encompasses both theoretical and practical elements. Student teachers play an active role in creating personal and agentic relationships with professional knowledge (Heikkilä, 2022a; Heikkilä & Hermansen, 2024). This involves attention to outputs and processes (Healey, 2005). In other words, in the instruction of the major subject, the focus should be not only on knowledge resources but also on knowledge generation processes, such as practising research skills (Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023). To build on this tradition, we examined how student teachers construct meanings of educational science. Thereby, educational science is viewed not only as theoretical information to be digested (which is also important) but also as processes of doing, that is, of engaging with education science in classroom practice through more advanced methods of noticing, interpretation, and decision-making.

Methods

Context of the study

Teaching is a valued profession in Finland, and Finnish teachers have a great deal of agency in their work (Heikkilä et al., 2023). Teacher autonomy is guaranteed by law, as there are no standardised tests or school inspections. Teachers are not expected to merely train children in specific skills but to provide them with a more holistic education (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). The acceptance rate for primary teacher education programmes is less than 10%, which means that universities can choose the best-suited students for the profession (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). Moreover, the accountability policy in Finland is different from that in many other countries, and initiatives are implemented through consensus, collaboration, and shared development (Toom & Husu, 2021).

In other countries, many teacher education programmes include some kind of educational science as a subject domain, but its organisation and whether it forms a “major” vary across geographical and educational contexts. In Finland, primary student teachers major in educational science, study subject didactics, and take minors such as special needs pedagogy or advanced studies in subject didactics, such as music or mathematics, which allows them to teach in more numerous positions.

This study was conducted at a university that represents a typical primary teacher education programme in Finland. According to the curriculum of the primary teacher programme at that university, the point of departure for the programme is close, research-based interaction between teaching and educational and multidisciplinary research (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). The professional basis for the programme is teaching in grades 1–6 in comprehensive schools. The structures of the primary teacher education programmes in universities throughout Finland are basically similar, although some regional differences and emphases exist.

Data collection

We collected textual data from student teachers' coursework after the completion of their first teaching practicum, which was part of a wider entity of the course and was assessed as either "passed" or "failed." Prior to the practicum, student teachers had studied the basics of educational science and research skills on campus. The practicum took place in a teacher training school, as in primary teacher education in Finland in general, and its goals included introducing teachers' workload and the learning environment and multicultural classrooms, observing interconnections between theory and practice in teaching and learning situations, and introducing various teaching methods (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). Of the 100 student teachers enrolled in the practicum, 61 (61%) consented to participate in this study; thus, their reports were analysed. Of the participants, 51 were female and 10 were male, and their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years, however most were in their early 20s.

The student teachers were given the following guidelines for writing their reports:

> Reflect on your thoughts about the following topics and justify your views (why you think like that). Link your reflection to the practicum and other study modules in the teacher education programme and literature if you wish. Write in your own words. You can use the numbered parts as subtitles. Aim for a reflexive writing style instead of mere descriptions.

In the part used for this study, the guidelines were as follows:

> Reflect on the significance of educational science in the teaching practicum: What is educational knowledge according to your view? What is the significance of educational science in teachers' work? What is the role of research skills in teachers' work? How can teachers develop their work? What educational phenomena did you notice in the practicum? How were they manifested?

Although the topic of educational science was only one part of the report, it was theonly part used in the study. Our initial goal was to use the whole report, but we found that the parts were quite separate and written differently. The section concerning educational science in the practicum was mostly written in a way that was both reflexive and profound, and appeared to stimulate the student teachers to reflect on professional knowledge, although this was not explicitly asked. The length of the parts used ranged from 100 to 300 words.

This study complies with the ethical principles of research with human participants and the ethical review in the human sciences in Finland, published by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (TENK, 2023). According to these guidelines, a formal ethics review statement from an ethics committee for human sciences was not required for this study. Identification codes were used for anonymity. The student teachers were asked to provide written permission for their report to be used for research purposes, however they did not know the exact topic of the research, which means that it did not influence their answers.

Data analysis

We used discourse analysis to examine how the student teachers constructed meanings of educational science. Discourse analysis is a broad methodology for studying language in use and is simultaneously an analysis of language and practices in society (Gee & Handford, 2012). It is founded on the idea that through speaking and writing, we make the world meaningful in certain ways and not in others, and we shape, produce, and reproduce the world through language in use (Gee & Handford, 2012). The origins of discourse analysis are social science and philosophical frameworks by postmodern theorists, such as Michel Foucault (1926–84). However, discourse analysis, which may also be called textual analysis, is now also used in small-scale educational research in more applied ways (Atkins & Wallace, 2012).

The term *discourse* simply signifies an expression of a point of view that is taken for granted and left unquestioned (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Such expressions are not always formulated as explicit arguments but are often conveyed through subtler means that can be revealed through textual analysis. Discourses are constructed by careful choices of emotive words or a careful selection of facts, which leaves out those that do not fit the point of view in case (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). They are also interconnected with the cultural expectations with which the speaker or writer negotiates (Heikkilä, 2022b). In other words, individuals do not entirely or consciously choose specific recourses; rather, they draw upon and enact culturally available discourses to make sense of their experiences and activities. Thus, discourse emerges through the use of grammatical and linguistic resources situated within a specific cultural context.

In addition, we also draw from linguistic research by paying attention to Hyvärinen (2008) and Tannen's (1993) "evidence of expectation," which includes features such as repetition, hedging, negation, contrast, evaluative language and evaluative verbs. Analysing these grammatical resources reveals how individuals negotiate between personal and cultural expectations, demonstrating that such expectations are socially shaped and conventionalised (Hyvärinen, 2008). In this way, language is examined not only as a tool for communication but also as a social practice embedded within broader societal structures (Gee & Handford, 2012).

We began the analysis by carefully reading all the reports. After the research theme was narrowed to student teachers' reflections on educational science as part of their professional knowledge, we focused on the part concerning educational science in their practicums. Following Hyvärinen (2008) and Tannen (1993), we paid particular attention to repetitions, hedges, negatives, contrastives, evaluative language, and evaluative verbs to reveal the grammatical resources that the student teachers used. On the basis of this analysis, we found that the student teachers constructed meanings of educational science through four discourses, each reflecting a particular aspiration for their future professional roles. Across all discourses, educational science appeared to be something they wished to engage with proactively. However, the nature of this engagement varied: Two discourses emphasised individual-level practices, while the other two were oriented towards broader societal change.

After identifying the discourses, we used colours to highlight those parts of the data. We presupposed that the discourses would be visible and change between sentences and inside sentences; thus, we were prepared to use a small unit of analysis. However, it turned out that the discourses emerged in larger parts of the text, often consisting of several sentences. After completing the analysis, we also found that the four discourses were fairly equally represented in the data. However, some sentences were written at such a general level that they did not indicate any discourse.

Findings

In the following sections, we present four discourses indicating striving for depth, multifacetedness, topicality, and systemicity. The first two discourses focused on individual teachers' professional development. In the latter two discourses, the perspective on educational science was broader, relating to society and its changes.

Discourse of depth

The discourse of depth was characterised by expressions related to understanding pupils and their needs in a profound manner. In this discourse, educational science was manifested as vital in understanding pupils' behaviours, backgrounds, and families to teach and educate them. Scientific educational knowledge enabled the student teachers to rise above the firsthand impressions that a person without teaching qualifications might rely on. The outputs and processes of educational knowledge were visible in this discourse. First, research orientation and the skills of noticing and observing, which the student teachers had just learned and practised, were expressed as important. Second, reading educational research literature was considered effective in deepening pupils' understanding. The ability to diagnose learning difficulties was also mentioned. In the following excerpt, educational science is depicted as a foundation that provides teachers with insights into what issues are important and how and why to take certain actions:

> For a teacher, educational knowledge is important. It highlights the importance of observation and makes the teacher more responsive to observations. Studying educa-

> tional science also makes it easier to process the observations. It is easier to understand causalities in pupils' behaviour or learning by having a knowledge base of the issue. Educational science also gives the teacher the tools to discuss these issues and helps to understand the child and support them further.
>
> In addition, research skills play an important role in teachers' work. Such skills speed up the teacher's observations. The teacher is also able to utilise observations in planning teaching and connect pieces of knowledge more quickly to each other. (Student Teacher 11)

In this excerpt, the student teacher strives to understand the pupils deeply. The discourse appeared to maintain that the teacher should not depend on everyday firsthand observations, as mastering educational science reveals further nuances. The message is highlighted by several positive verbs, such as "to make easier," "to understand," "to give," "to help," "to be able," and "to utilise." The processes of educational science are emphasised by the argument that research skills make teachers more capable of observing, while the outputs are evident in the statement that a teacher's knowledge base makes them more capable of understanding those observations. Both perspectives are strengthened by metaphors: research skills as "giving tools" and knowledge base as "connecting pieces." An efficiency perspective, presented in a positive light, is also visible in terms of "speeding up" observations and integrating knowledge "more quickly." Thereby, the discourse argues for the role of educational science in facilitating communication in the school environment.

Discourse of multifacetedness

The discourse of multifacetedness also focused on individual teachers' professional development, but in a different way. The nature of teachers' work was manifested as situational and thus required multiple perspectives. The expressions highlighted that the circumstances slightly differed every day; therefore, teachers were required to continuously adapt to what transpired in the classroom. The discourse presupposed that there is no ready-made or one-size-fits-all recipe for good teaching. Professional knowledge involved reading a wide array of educational research literature because it offers many multifaceted views on teaching. For example, by reading scientific articles, they can gain insights and ideas to modify their teaching. Research literature was described as useful in shaping their professional identity as teachers because professional knowledge was about realising this many-sidedness. In the following excerpt, the student teacher reflects on the multifaceted character of teachers' work, which requires combining knowledge resources, such as theoretical knowledge and knowledge from different policy levels:

> Educational science is significant in teachers' work because education and teaching are always goal-oriented activities. It is meaningful because education and teaching are not just occasional activities happening for occasional reasons. Educational science and understanding education have an important role in the teachers' work and

> education, whereby the teacher bases their activities on scientific knowledge. Therefore, teachers' work is not only based on their own opinions and views but also has a scientific basis. For example, during the practicum period, it was easier to plan lessons when you understood the objectives of the subjects and were able to combine the different phases and objectives of the lessons with each other. During the practicum period, the knowledge learned from the courses also helped in constructing the lessons. (Student Teacher 71)

In this excerpt, the role of educational science is viewed as intertwined with teachers' professional practice. The discourse was constructed by depicting different aims, which link educational science and professional practice. The student teacher mentions aims at many levels: general aims of education and teaching, school subjects in the curriculum, and separate lessons. These aims are conceptual artefacts that guide teachers' work. From their point of view, this work was rendered more effective and versatile by mastering educational knowledge, which offers multiple perspectives on daily teaching. The discourse is highlighted by strong adjectives, such as "significant," "meaningful," and "important," and by two uses of the adjective "occasional" (repetition). Words such as "whereby," "therefore," and "for example" support the argument for tying knowledge resources from the campus and practicum.

Discourse of topicality

The discourse of topicality is characterised by the element of time. In general, teachers' work and professional development were manifested as strongly tied to time, and teachers' professional knowledge included several approaches. First, the discourse maintained that teachers must keep up with changes in society. For example, teachers must discern valid knowledge from disinformation and misinformation. Second, to perform well, they must keep up with the educational research literature as new, up-to-date research findings emerge all the time. Third, teaching methods and education styles have evolved. Fourth, reflection is a prerequisite for teachers' professional development. However, in this discourse, teachers' tasks were expressed not only as trying to keep up with everything but also as proactively impacting school development (e.g. the curricula). This is also expressed in the following excerpt:

> In the practicum, we had the opportunity to practice the knowledge we had drawn from the university. Educational knowledge is the theoretical knowledge that we learn at the university and that we can concretely implement in the practicum and working life. It involves studies on society and education, which aim at developing teachers' know-how on improving oneself as an educator. Producing educational knowledge by research is necessary because society is changing all the time and thereby also people. That's why it's important to find new perspectives and causalities. Thereby, we can change while the world is changing, and educational knowledge remains topical and high-quality. Being a teacher is about constant development. As a teacher, you can

> develop yourself by reflecting on your work and searching for new information from the most topical studies. (Student Teacher 18)

In this excerpt, the approach is more holistic than in the previous discourse; it is about not only the teacher but also society. Verbs such as “improve,” “change,” and “develop” involve the aspect of time and simultaneously refer to optimism concerning society and education. The expectation appears to be that if teachers turn to research-based knowledge and have the energy for professional development and reflection, education can be improved. In general, the attitude towards educational science is manifested as positive in this extract, as indicated by verbs such as “having an opportunity” and “can,” the latter of which is expressed several times. The excerpt also shows a shift from the subject position of the teacher to a wider perspective: The student teacher argues that educational knowledge must remain topical and high quality. In general, the discourse of topicality appears to be interwoven in several ways. The changing society makes teachers’ professional development and conducting educational science necessary; however, this is not depicted as a strict obligation but as an inspiring opportunity.

Discourse of systemicity

In the same vein as in the previous discourse, the discourse of systemicity extended beyond the individual teacher’s work. This discourse highlights the interconnectedness of research and teaching. The perspective was not only that teachers should have knowledge of educational research literature and base their teaching on research findings, but also that teaching impacts research. In addition, the participants referred to the role of educational science as not only informing teachers about how to teach but also being vital to developing schools and society in general. For example, knowledge of curricula could not be viewed as stable and something that teachers should simply adopt, as curricula are updated according to recent research. Thus, educational knowledge is expressed as ambivalent and ever-changing in society. Teachers’ professional development was characterised by learning to see connections between different phenomena. In the following excerpt, a wider picture of educational science beyond teachers’ work is illustrated:

> In my view, educational knowledge is knowledge of education, cultures of education, and processes and institutions of growth and learning. Educational knowledge is formed by wide-ranging research on education, civilisation, and its societal relations. Education plays an important role in teachers’ work. Educational knowledge is critically and creatively applied in educational practices and pedagogics. The role of research skills in a teacher’s work is to maintain the quality of teaching. Science is constantly evolving, and that is why it is important that the teacher keeps up with current research on educational phenomena. In this way, we guarantee education that is based on recent research and is of high quality and equal in Finland, regardless of regions, schools, or teachers. (Student Teacher 90)

In this excerpt, educational research-based knowledge is defined broadly not only by pedagogy, but also by cultures, processes, and institutions of education, and it is linked to relationships in society. Striving for systemicity is visible in the view of teaching as part of this whole, and powerful words are used, such as "the processes and institutions of growth and learning," "wide-ranging," "civilisation," and "to evolve." In addition, the value of educational science is manifested not only as informing the teacher but also, more broadly, in its critical and creative application in wider practices of education. "Criticality" and "creativity" are skills that university-based teacher education can, at its best, offer; however, explicit use of these expressions requires advanced reflection from a student teacher. When speaking about research skills, the output view is more strongly emphasised. In this excerpt, being up-to-date with educational research literature is linked to the macro-level aims of high-quality and equal education. Verbs such as "to maintain" and "to guarantee" refer to the wide purposes of educational science, and the pronoun "we" refers to an expectation of a collective responsibility of teachers and a will to be part of that.

Discussion

This study examined Finnish primary student teachers' reflections on the role of educational science as their major subject and contributes to discussions of professional knowledge in professional education (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015; Heikkilä & Hermansen, 2024; Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). The discourse analysis of student teachers' written reflections revealed distinct aspirations, illustrating the diversity in which student teachers perceive educational science. Despite having spent only a few months at the university and participating in a limited number of courses related to educational science before engaging in their practicum, the student teachers constructed a meaningful relationship between educational science and professional practice. The reflections did not exhibit a clear dichotomy between theory and practice (cf. Puustinen et al., 2018). Instead, they revealed the significance of theory for practice and vice versa while differing in terms of whether the focus was more on an individual or societal level. The practicum context, where the student teachers reflected on their major, highlighted knowledge processes alongside knowledge outputs (Healey, 2005; Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023).

In summary, the discourses indicate that beginner student teachers exhibit diverse needs and purposes for educational science. This ranges from seeking depth and versatility in their teaching to staying current with societal trends and comprehending the broader societal implications of their work regarding contributing to change, educational quality, and equality. In countries where primary teaching is not a popular profession and programmes lack suitable candidates, a similar situation is difficult to imagine. For the present, these findings are encouraging.

In the discourses of depth and multifacetedness, the focus was on individuals: understanding and supporting the pupil or teacher. The reflections manifested skills that included observing pupils, planning lessons, and providing rationales for teachers' actions. According to previous research, observation can help student teachers better understand their students and their backgrounds (Heikkilä et al., 2023). In the discourse of depth, educational science was a valuable tool for conducting in-depth examinations of individual pupils and classrooms.

The discourses of topicality and systemicity transcended individual pupils or teachers. Further, by acknowledging community, society, and cultural levels, extended beyond the confines of “the school walls.” Within these discourses, teachers were not perceived as solitary figures in their own classrooms. Instead, they were recognised as professionals with a societal impact. While the discourses of depth and multifacetedness emphasised the importance of theory for practice, the discourses of topicality and systemicity underscored the importance of practice for society. Hence, the latter discourses portrayed teachers as school reformers engaging in collaboration with the community. Considering the current challenges related to the increasing segregation of schools in Finland (Peltola, 2021), educational science could equip student teachers with agency to actively contribute and express themselves in society as educational professionals in a large sense.

Particularly in the discourse of systemicity, attention was given to the importance of practice influencing theory. This relationship introduced a sense of epistemic agency, depicting teachers as active contributors engaged in knowledge-laden activities (Heikkilä et al., 2023). Teachers were portrayed as proactive actors who took a stance (e.g. regarding equal education) as part of their expertise. This discourse incorporated ethical considerations into the reflections on the teaching profession. However, in depicting the discourses in this manner, we do not imply that the latter two discourses depict more advanced ways of engaging with educational knowledge. Indeed, in the discourses of depth and multifacetedness, research literacy (Eriksen, 2022; Phillips et al., 2023) and specific research skills, such as observation and critical thinking, were emphasised. Such research skills can help student teachers reflect on themselves as future professionals (Heikkilä et al., 2023).

The student teachers' reflections on their experiences in the practicum underscore the inherent interconnectedness of theory and practice within the realms of teaching and teacher education. This article actively contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education, aligning with prior studies that challenge the utility of rigidly distinguishing between the two (Hermansen & Mausethagen, 2023; Hordern, 2019). Our findings also indicate that student teachers perceived their major subject as meaningful and relevant to their professional development. Methodologically, the discourse analysis illustrated how student teachers constructed the meanings of educational science at the language level. As a practical implication, the role of teacher educators is to actively facilitate the process of establishing meaningful connections between diverse knowledge domains. In addition, teacher educators are tasked with making this amalgamated knowledge visible to ensure that student teachers can effectively integrate and apply their learning across various facets of their educational journeys.

This study has limitations. First, as the data were collected in connection with a course, it remains unclear how the participants might have responded in a different setting, such as an interview or written task conducted by a researcher from another institution. Second, the study did not capture the evolution of the student teachers' reflections and did not include the perspectives of more experienced teachers. However, the novice student teachers could already construct wide and varied meanings of educational science.

Teacher education is shaped by sociocultural norms and predefined notions of the ideal teacher, which influence student teachers' views of themselves as professionals (Juutilainen, 2023). Therefore, further research is needed into how student teachers' discourses on educational science evolve during their initial teacher education and professional careers, and into how to best support student teachers in perceiving their role in the knowledge society.

Conclusion

Providing support to students in their professional fields to enable them to engage with their majors as part of their professional knowledge involves considerations at multiple levels. While individual teacher educators must attend to this aspect, this study conveys a significant message for the broader domains of programme development and curriculum design in teacher education. The discourses of depth and multifacetedness indicate that student teachers are willing to examine their own work in practicums and in future teaching and articulate a need to have theory and research skills as entangled tools when entering the classroom. In addition, insights from the discourses of topicality and systemicity provide valuable knowledge. The findings highlight that novice student teachers perceive themselves as integral actors in society and are driven by broader aspirations to contribute to educational change, equity, and school development. Finally, it is a question of the meaningfulness of work. In teacher education programmes, the ultimate goals of the teaching profession should be visible and discussed with student teachers. The student teachers seem to be interested in how the profession is constructed through time and determining the ethical drivers of the profession.

However, student teachers may not receive ample support and encouragement in this direction throughout their studies. In Finland, primary teacher education programmes often emphasise educational psychology but place less emphasis on educational sociology, educational philosophy, and educational history, and those areas are less visible in the practicums. Teachers' role as developers of schools and communities (Reinius et al., 2024) could be strengthened through a more comprehensive consideration of various perspectives from different educational science traditions. Alongside educational psychology, educational sociology, philosophy, and history should also be taught and integrated with teaching practicums to support student teachers' professional development into agentive actors in society. Thus, the fundamental question of what areas of study to include in the major is still valid for curriculum design and programme development in teacher education and other professional fields.

In any professional field, students' aspirations for their major should be supported. It is not self-evident that students in all professional fields have a clear vision of their major and its practical benefits in their future profession, as was observed in the participants of this study. The main implication of this study is that it provides tools for teacher educators to know the student teachers and support their aspirations. The study enables actors within teacher education to understand that there are several, different perspectives on the major among student teachers. For curriculum design, the study gives an idea that the teaching of educational science could be organised according to the principles that are found as discourses in this study: depth, multifacetedness, topicality and systemicity. In addition, the study highlights that the teacher educator can help student teachers to step back and reflect on their own thinking about the role of educational science in the teachers' professional development. When student teachers are asked to reflect on their major, it also makes possible for student teachers to discover that it can have many, complementary roles in their future profession.

The role of the major subject varies between professional fields. Although the abstract theoretical knowledge base taught in professional education is important to any profession, teacher education faces challenges (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015). Those who apply to teacher education programmes may have the teacher profession, rather than the major, in mind. In contrast, in study fields leading to generalist professions, the role of the major is highlighted. For example, students of sociology or cultural history may focus more on creating personal meanings for their major and construct their profession based on those meanings. Therefore, the multiple meanings that the student teachers in this study created for their major were somewhat surprising. Reasons for this may be found in several sources. According to prior research, the way theories are taught and how students study may influence students' views of the importance of theoretical knowledge for professional practice (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015). If the significance of educational science is conveyed to student teachers from the beginning of their studies and integrated into practicums, student teachers are more likely to construct personal meanings of it.

In addition, students' study efforts may be essential for perceiving theoretical knowledge as important for professional practice (Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015) and academic achievements (Lähteenmäki et al., 2024). In Sweden, teachers' grade average in compulsory school has significantly declined (Alatalo et al., 2021). The recruitment problem in Sweden implies that many primary school teachers are uncertified, and research indicates that these teachers have lower grades than certified teachers (Alatalo et al., 2021). In Norway, teacher education became a five-year master's programme in 2017 (Mausethagen, 2024), which has implications for how student teachers perceive their major. In Finland, teacher education still attracts many motivated applicants who have the potential to digest theoretical knowledge and tailor it to a specific profession. However, in the future, it is imperative that professional programmes in teacher education and other professional fields address and nurture students' aspirations during their study years and working life.

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Beyond Served and Secured: Client Work and Reconceptualisation of Professionalism

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Abstract

Within theories of professions, clients of welfare-state professionals are typically portrayed as passive beneficiaries who are served and secured by professional expertise and ethics. This framing implicitly omits that in a client position, even the clients perform work.

Drawing on a research project on rehabilitation following traumatic injuries, the article shows both the explicitly expected and recognised work that clients undertake while seeking to recover from impairments, and the largely invisible work shaped by implicit presuppositions embedded in professional services. The empirical findings form the basis for a discussion of the mechanisms by which this work is rendered invisible to professionals and within theories of professions, and of the implications for reconceptualising professionalism. Theories of professions must incorporate that clients are not merely subject to professional work, but that clients' work is conducive to the outcomes commonly attributed to professionals' work.

Keywords

Invisible work, patient work, client work, professionalism, rehabilitation

Introduction

Deeply ingrained in theories of professions is an understanding of professions as occupations that perform specialised work grounded in theoretical knowledge, hold exclusive jurisdiction over a field of labour, based on credentials achieved through formal education and training, and with a commitment to doing good work, rather than pursuing economic gain (Evetts, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Wilensky, 1964). The citizens who are the professionals' clients—especially the clients of welfare-state services—are visible as beneficiaries of professional work, as people being served and secured.

Clients are served in the sense that they can benefit from and rely on professional expertise. Professional work involves applying specialised knowledge to individual cases to classify and reason about a problem and take appropriate action (Abbott, 1988). In this framing, the clients present or represent professionals' work tasks.

Clients are secured by a guarantee that work is performed according to a code of ethics—a set of moral norms and a service ideal of devotion to the best interests of the clients and society more than personal interests or profit: "Professionalism requires professionals to be worthy of trust, which means to put clients first, to maintain confidentiality and not use their knowledge for fraudulent purposes" (Evetts, 2013, p. 780).

This implicit portrayal of clients, conveyed by theories of professions, as being served and secured by professional work, omits the fact that in a professional-client relationship, clients also work. Client work appears invisible, and to the extent that it is visible, it is seldom described as work. By omitting client work, theories of professions ignore how client work is shaped by the service system—what professional services offer, what they presuppose, and where service boundaries are drawn, and, crucially, how this work is essential for clients to benefit from professional work and achieve desired outcomes.

To locate a more active role for clients, one must look beyond theories of professions to health care research and the sociology of health and illness. As early as the 1980s, Strauss and colleagues pioneered the study of patient work (Corbin & Strauss, 1985, 1988; Strauss et al., 1982), but these insights have hardly diffused into theories of professions.

Based on a research project on rehabilitation following traumatic injuries, the article investigates the efforts—here seen as work—that people undertake while recovering from impairments and how this work relates to professional work. Drawing on the typology from Hatton (2017), the article discusses the spatial, legal and cultural mechanisms that help to explain the invisibility of client work, especially within theories of professions, and suggests implications for the reconceptualisation of professionalism.

The client and theories of professions

In the literature on professions, professions are typically understood as a type of occupation with distinctive features. While the distinction between a profession and other occupations is viewed a matter of degree than kind (Evetts, 2003; Hughes, 1958), most scholars point to the following defining features (Adams, 2018; Evetts, 2003, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Saks, 2012):

specialised expertise grounded in formal knowledge and practical apprenticeship; a code of ethics and service orientation; autonomy with self-regulation and collegial control; and authority recognised and trusted by clients and employers. These ideal traits can be read as an ideology that secures professions' sheltered position in the labour market, ultimately benefitting the profession itself (Evetts, 2013; Saks, 2012), but also as a value system meant to serve the interests of clients and society (Evetts, 2013).

Much research has examined the work of professions, adopting a "doing-lens" on occupations (Anteby et al., 2016). Yet, most attention is given to the consequences of task content and practices for the professionals' identity, meaningfulness and dignity (Anteby et al., 2016) and to the jurisdictional struggles among different professions to define, control and perform certain tasks (Abbott, 1988). Claims for jurisdiction are claims to classify a problem, to reason about it, and to take action on it—the three tasks of professional practice (Abbott, 1988). In this description, clients present or represent professionals' tasks. While Abbott notes that features of clients affect professional work and jurisdiction, for example, clients' willingness to comply with professional prescriptions, the efforts (or work) that clients undertake in professional-client relationships receive little attention.

Thus, in theories of professions, clients are largely invisible and present only implicitly as being served by professional work and secured by professional expertise and ethics. This is not to suggest that research grounded in theories of professions has entirely overlooked the clients of welfare-state professionals or the professionals' relationship with them, although it has not been a prominent topic (Harrits & Larsen, 2016). However, clients are typically examined through the eyes of professionals and in relation to professionals' status and work. Examples include research on how client perceptions influence professional reasoning (Jacobsson, 2014; Møller, 2016), which client situations are deemed "non-problematic" (Rexvid & Evertsson, 2016), which attitudes professionals hold towards patient participation and whether patients' rights and access to knowledge are seen as threats to professional authority (Eklund, 2024; Larsen, 2016; Leemeijer & Trappenburg, 2016). Clients' work remains largely invisible.

Even in a healthcare anthology analysing paid and voluntary "support workers" without professional qualifications, the work of patients receives little attention (Saks, 2020). Included in what the authors see as an "invisible workforce" are unpaid informal carers and peer support workers who transform personal experience into experiential knowledge, but not the work of patients. Here, work is understood as tasks performed for others—work that mirrors professionals' work.

However, a growing strand of scholarship argues that economic, social, cultural, technological, and demographic changes require a fundamental reconceptualisation of what professionalism means and what professionals are. New conceptualisations situate professionalism within relationships to clients, the organisations in which professionals work, civil society and the broader public (Flam, 2019; Münte & Scheid, 2017; Møller, 2019; Noordegraaf, 2015, 2020). In Noordegraaf's ideal-type "connective professionalism," expertise, autonomy and authority are constituted through these relationships (Noordegraaf, 2020). Professionalism is not solely linked to the professional as an individual but is instead embedded in professional work processes.

Such reconceptualisation repositions the client. For example, it is recognised that the outcome of professional work is produced through interaction with clients (Münte & Scheid, 2017), and that clients want to be co-deciders and even co-producers (Noordegraaf, 2020). It is further argued that a reconceptualised professionalism must take into account that relationships to clients are personal and emotion-based rather than detached (Harrits, 2016). An "explicit" professionalism is suggested, which can promise transparency about sources of knowledge, articulation of judgements, and documentation of decisions (Møller, 2019). Yet, even within such reconceptualisation, the client is typically framed within the bounds of professional work—as the bearer of complex problems and higher expectations that pose new demands on professionals.

Given that client relationships have always been integral to professionalism, and that the success of professions depends on their ability to redefine what professionalism entails, as Alvehus et al. (2021) argue, it is crucial for theories of professions to incorporate the work of clients.

Patient work

While the work of clients seems invisible in theories of profession, the sociology of health and illness conceptualised patient work as early as the 1980s through the formative writings of Strauss and co-authors (Corbin & Strauss, 1985, 1988; Strauss et al., 1982). Their perspectives on the types of work performed by patients in hospitals and by chronic patients and their families at home can also apply to analyses of the types of work performed by clients of welfare-state services more generally.

According to Strauss et al. (1982), patients work to manage and shape aspects of their illness trajectories. In the hospital context, this involves work that mirrors staff work, such as following instructions in the performance of procedures or interventions, and work that is supplementary to staff work, such as maintaining composure during procedural tasks.

Patients also perform work that staff cannot, such as providing information about allergies to certain drugs or explaining other chronic illnesses whose symptoms may interfere with staff's work (Strauss et al., 1982). Patient work may substitute for work that staff did not perform but were supposed to perform or that patients believe is the responsibility of staff (Strauss et al., 1982). Patients may perform work that they find necessary, although the staff might disagree (were they aware), such as monitoring for potential errors or incompetence. Patients may rectify staff errors directly or report or complain to the responsible authorities.

Finally, patients engage in work that lies beyond what staff may consider within the scope of their work, such as coping with highly personalised, deep identity problems caused by severe illnesses or injuries. Corbin and Strauss (1988) highlighted that ill or injured people engage in the strenuous cognitive and emotional work of contextualising an illness into their lives, coming to terms with their body and activity limitations and reconstructing their identity and biography.

Except for this identity work, the work of hospital patients is not directly translatable to work performed during long-term trajectories following injuries, impairments and chronic conditions, as the latter also involves other professional services provided by a variety of organisations within a specialised division of labour. Furthermore, in recent years, focus on self-management of chronic conditions and technological innovations to support this self-care has spurred a revived interest in patient work (Valdez et al., 2015; Yin et al., 2020). However, scholars note that much of that work is invisible, unrecognised by health systems, and poorly understood (Rogvi et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2020). To understand patient—and client—work, it is necessary to discern the mechanisms by which that work is rendered invisible.

Mechanisms rendering work invisible

Understanding invisible work means understanding what counts as work. Work is visible or invisible because of our mental models of what work is (Budd, 2016). Conceptualisations of work are often narrowly conceived and typically unstated, and work that deviates from dominant conceptualisations is devalued and rendered invisible (Budd, 2016). What is regarded as work “does not depend a priori on any set of indicators, but rather on the definition of the situation” (Star & Strauss, 1999, p. 14).

In her discussion, the invisibilisation of women’s work outside paid employment, Daniels (1987) notes that work is typically recognised as work when it is paid, requires skills, and is undertaken in the public world. In contrast, activities that are not valued as work tend to occur in private settings, without an audience, and are often perceived as “natural” for the person performing them, rather than as tasks requiring skills. Daniels argues that expanding the concept of would lead to a keener awareness of the work involved in social constructions of daily life, serve to dignify this work, and foster respect for the efforts and skills it demands. Similarly, Glucksmann (2016) argues for an inclusive concept of work that acknowledges the largely unrecognised “consumption work,” that is, the labour involved in the use of goods and services and the acquisition of the skills necessary to undertake consumption.

According to Star and Strauss (1999), either the worker or the work can be rendered invisible. The worker may be made a non-person even if the act of working or the product of the work is visible. The opposite dynamic occurs where workers are themselves quite visible, yet the work they perform is invisible or relegated to taken-for-granted expectations. Work may become invisible by virtue of routine (and social status): “If one looked, one *could* literally see the work being done—but the taken-for-granted status means that it is functionally invisible" (Star & Strauss, 1999, p. 20).

In a literature synthesis, Hatton (2017) distinguished three intersecting sociological mechanisms—cultural, legal and spatial—through which work is rendered invisible and thus devalued. *Sociocultural* mechanisms are in effect when labour is devalued by virtue of hegemonic cultural ideologies relating to gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, or age. *Sociospatial* mechanisms take effect when labour is devalued because it is physically segregated from a culturally defined worksite—outside of a workplace, for example, in the domestic sphere (in private homes), or in non-traditional worksites. *Sociolegal* mechanisms are in operation when work is devalued because it is excluded from legal definitions of employment, for example, when workers are legally characterised as not working for wages but for some other reason.

Based on these perspectives on patient work and mechanisms that render some forms of work invisible, I turn to the empirical exploration of client work in the context of recovering from impairing injuries.

Empirical material and analysis

This article draws on a five-year project studying rehabilitation following traumatic injury. Rehabilitation trajectories were examined from the perspectives of injured individuals and professionals in hospital- and community-based rehabilitation settings and employment services. In Norway, these are all public services delivered by the state or municipality.

The project involved seven researchers and three PhD students, who participated in data collection and analysis. As the broader findings of the research are reported extensively elsewhere, the present analysis zooms in on the efforts undertaken by injured individuals during their recovery trajectories—efforts which they did not describe as work but nonetheless felt were necessary. Understanding these efforts as work allows me to explore the clients' contributions to outcomes that are often attributed to professional work but remain invisible within theories of professions.

Traumatic injuries are often disabling conditions affecting many aspects of everyday life, including social and vocational participation, and they lead to lengthy recovery processes involving many healthcare and social welfare services (Andelic et al., 2018; Borgen et al., 2022). In many respects, the work undertaken by people living with and recovering from traumatic injuries is also illustrative for other chronic conditions.

Using an open narrative approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), the data comprised interviews with 21 affected individuals conducted at two points in their recovery trajectory: upon discharge from hospital-based rehabilitation and two to three years later. Eleven males and ten females of working age from various occupations were interviewed; the youngest were in their 20s at the time of their first interview, the oldest in their 60s.

The data also included interviews with 16 hospital professionals, conducted following observations of eight one-hour interdisciplinary team meetings about patients. In addition, 25 professionals were observed during these meetings. Furthermore, group interviews were conducted with 34 community-based rehabilitation professionals and 27 employment services professionals in eight municipalities. The educational backgrounds of the interviewed professionals included nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology, medicine, social work, pedagogy and law.

In interviews with professionals from local services targeting a broad spectrum of diagnoses and social problems, an illustrative case story (vignette) was used to focus on the professionals' work with traumatic injuries. For further information about data collection and method, see the more elaborate empirical analyses from the projects (Alm Andreassen & Solvang, 2021; Solvang et al., 2023).

The Norwegian data protection authorities approved the study. The interviewed individuals received invitations to participate from professionals at the hospitals. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees, from the patients discussed in the observed meetings and from the professionals. To avoid being overly intrusive and to protect the patients' privacy, there are no direct links between the interviewed patients and the observed professionals. All interviews and observations were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

The analysis was guided by the concept of patient work. Interviews with the injured individuals were first approached by assembling everyone's story of their recovery trajectory, and then carefully examining these accounts for the kinds of effort involved. The identified efforts were sorted into broader types of work. Thereafter, observations and interviews with the professionals were examined to understand how the service context shaped this work. In the analyses, the professionals' talk and actions were understood as institutionally embedded—as representations of their organisational context, professional role, and problem perceptions. This understanding was supported by the professionals' own accounts. In recounting how "we" act in a given case, they spoke as workers with professional identities and as members of service-providing organisations. The final analytical step involved developing a meaningful categorisation of the types of work, examining mechanisms that rendered some work invisible, and inferring implications for theories of professions.

Client work during trajectories of recovery

Work shaped by service system offers

Recovery trajectories involved work shaped by what the service system offered. This included work that Strauss et al. (1982) described as mirroring or supplementing professional procedures and practices. It was visible work that professionals, and the organisations they represented, expected of patients and clients, although it was not always labelled as work. There was significant consensus among professionals and injured individuals regarding the end goal of rehabilitation—improved functioning and restored health—and the need for individuals to work on their rehabilitation and to care for their health.

Working on their rehabilitation entailed what I term *restoring work*—extensive training to improve bodily and mental functioning, which was occasionally compared to a full working week of regular employment. One man described the effort required to retain restored capacity as “being sentenced to a life of training.” Restoring work also involved applying compensatory strategies and assistive technologies in attempts to control deterioration and manage everyday life, and the following self-care, self-monitoring and self-management of treatment, prevention and control, which is described in much literature on patient work (Grue, 2016; Huyard et al., 2019; May et al., 2014; Oudshoorn, 2008; Pickard & Rogers, 2012).

Another form of work was *capacity assessment*, by which individuals assessed how the injuries affected their lives as employees, parents or spouses, and their ability to care for themselves. For many, this entailed the enduring work of continuous adjustment to both improvements and deterioration. For example, one woman described how she consciously tested her work capacity during her slow and gradual return to work, which included recurring healthcare interventions to address the setbacks she encountered. Learning was part of this process. Professionals taught patients about the consequences of their injuries and ways to handle them. Some referred to this support as “school.” Such patient education is designed to equip affected individuals (and family members) with the requisite knowledge, tools and assistance for the work of mental and bodily self-management.

Following capacity assessment was the *work prioritising and balancing* when injuries compelled the individuals to consider how to live with their permanently reduced capacity—a challenging balancing act between working on their personal rehabilitation (as expected by the professionals), being a loyal and caring family member and friend, and living by citizenship obligations of self-support, their own wage-worker identity and returning to work. The injured person was not always the only family member with a long-term condition requiring support and care. Injured individuals also had to determine whether to accept help from others for everyday activities (e.g. getting dressed each morning) or to invest major effort in maintaining their independence while managing the consequences of impairment. Assessing their capacity and finding congruity between their capacity, their own wants, and the requirements imposed on them was time-consuming work.

Perhaps most demanding was the effort to come to terms with their situation as injured or sometimes permanently disabled. This *work of biographical reconstruction* involved managing the “biographical disruption” and disconnect with their pre-injury self, caused by the onset of severe illnesses or injuries (Bury, 1982; Levack et al., 2010). The injured individuals had to learn to live with altered bodies and reconstruct disrupted biographies, self-identities and work identities (Levack et al., 2010; Solvang et al., 2023; Trusson et al., 2021).

Corbin and Strauss (1988) described this work as a process of coping with the profoundly personal issues of identity as falling outside of what professionals conceive as the scope of their work. However, in the studied rehabilitation service, the professionals did provide support for biographical reconstruction. Patients were expected to share their struggles in group settings with professionals and fellow patients in a process of learning and reflection.

Work shaped by service system presuppositions

Some types of work were inescapable consequences of the presuppositions on which professional service systems are designed. For example, when professional services are designed with peer-support elements, clients are expected to work not only on their own recovery but also perform supportive work with others. Also, other forms of work were presupposed.

System-managing work was a type of work presupposed by service design. It involved surveying service systems to understand where and how one's needs might be addressed, identifying relevant services, making sense of service mandates and responsibilities, detecting entry points, and making one's needs known to professionals. It also involved learning service-specific organisation, language and terminology and application and contact procedures. It was described as a hard and lonely job comparable to "wandering in the wilderness."

Employment service professionals illustrated how such requirements were ingrained in procedures. Before sickness entitlements expire, clients receive written information about opportunities to apply for temporary incapacity benefits if their ability to return to work is hindered by injury or illness. The letter includes an invitation to contact the employment agency. However, as the professionals explained, in cases of mental illness or reduced initiative due to brain injury, there is a risk that clients may not respond and therefore lose their income security. Although the professionals acknowledged that outreach might be appropriate in these cases, the employment agency is not set up to reach out to passive clients; clients must assume responsibility for their cases. While the welfare-state grants impaired citizens social rights, the organisation that administers these rights is not designed to accommodate impairments. Others have described similar dynamics, for example, the work that hearing-impaired people must do to access healthcare services and to secure equitable care (DeVault et al., 2011; DeVault, 2014).

Surveying the system also included efforts to identify competent professionals with the requisite knowledge to understand individual needs. Information regarding the expertise, skills, trustworthiness, or personal qualities of the professionals involved in their rehabilitation was requested not out of suspicion or distrust but of a desire for professionals, for example, a physiotherapist, whose interpersonal style and approach matched the patient and who could motivate and support the continuous effort that rehabilitation demanded.

System-managing work also involved ensuring that service providers followed up as planned, promised, or expected. There were stories about checking that the system worked as it should, detecting and correcting failures, mistakes, and errors, and teaching professionals about the implications of their injury that they apparently were unaware of, but which the injured individuals believed required action. For example, one woman described being assured by hospital professionals that follow-up would be provided, but after waiting many months, she concluded she had been forgotten. She decided to call the hospital every day until an appointment was scheduled; she had to take control, she said, or she might not have received the necessary follow-up care. As illustrated by this story, system-managing work involved administering and coordinating contact with various parts of the service system, tasks that, due to brain injuries, were often handled by family members. This monitoring and rectifying staff errors and responding to service gaps resembles substituting for work that staff did not perform or work that patients believed was necessary, although the staff would disagree (Strauss et al., 1982). The interviewed professionals highlighted dynamics that may drive such work. Mundane workplace events, such as sickness absence, job shifts and staff turnover, based on the professionals' rights as citizens and wage earners, may interrupt clients' relationships with professionals and increase the likelihood of mistakes and errors.

System-managing work is required to make oneself available for professional help, to access and benefit from professional care (Rogvi et al., 2021). In a welfare-state, citizens can access a range of healthcare and social services, with a corresponding division of labour and organisational, professional, and geographical boundaries that define who does what and for whom. Within a system of professions, each profession claims ownership of its own field of expertise (Abbott, 1988). To that end, professions define their own proper work and demarcate their boundaries against others, and in so doing, they define the department, service or area of expertise to which a problem or a client belongs (Cramer et al., 2018). This division of labour and expertise defines which target groups can legitimately request services because they fit the eligibility criteria or the bounds of professional expertise. Those seeking help must therefore understand how to navigate the system, and as services vary by location and change over time with new regulations and professional knowledge, such work is an ongoing task (Dalgarno et al., 2023; Grossman & Mullin, 2020).

Because of this division of labour, administration and coordination are also needed. Problems caused by individuals' injuries frequently crossed jurisdictional boundaries between types of professions, services, and administrative levels. Most services are operated on the basis of client initiative. This is widely noted in research on patient work, for example, in a distributed care system, patients must coordinate their treatment and manage interdependencies between different service providers (Dalsted et al., 2012; Unruh & Pratt, 2008; Valentine et al., 2022).

System presupposition requires also *justification work*—demonstrating need by providing information and documentation about one's illness or impairment. This occurred both in face-to-face encounters with professionals and in written applications for services and benefits.

Professionals used this information to assess an individual's need for professional intervention or eligibility for welfare support and whether the case profile matched the service offering of the intervention or the eligibility requirements.

The interviewed individuals told many stories about such justification work. One woman noted that the forms and questionnaires she had completed enabled the professionals to decide whether her profile matched the available intervention. One man described repeated applications for assistive technology that appeared to be based on the assumption that his condition would improve and his impairments would disappear, rendering him ineligible for welfare support. Another man referred to separate application procedures for a prosthetic, a wheelchair and a modified car, even though they all pertained to an amputation.

Justification work is undertaken because the services are crucial to those dependent on them and this work is a consequence of rules governing access to health care or welfare support. Before being granted social security, citizens are required to demonstrate need, eligibility, and deservingness. Similarly, the principle of needs-based health care requires those seeking help to demonstrate their credibility and legitimacy as recipients of professional services (Edwards & Sines, 2008; Grue, 2016; Johannessen, 2018; Korhonen & Komulainen, 2019; Mik-Meyer & Obling, 2012; Werner & Malterud, 2003).

Work shaped by service boundaries

Also shaped by service design is *residual work* arising from the jurisdictional boundaries of professions and services. While some problems align neatly with the welfare-state's system of support and professional expertise, others are left unattended, for example, because no prescribed measure or intervention exists.

In one observed hospital meeting, a doctor remarked that a discharge-ready patient with injury-triggered social skills deficits was a candidate for programmes in "good management training" and "social communication." The remark was tongue-in-cheek, as no such programme was offered by the hospital or the patient's local healthcare services, which the doctor was uncomfortably aware of. As the patient's problems did not fit any of the available tools or treatment programmes, she and her next-of-kin were left to deal with the problems, which all the professionals regarded as resulting from her brain injury and believed would affect her personal relationships. Similarly, community-based elder-oriented rehabilitation services could not adequately address the needs of severely injured working-age patients. One local professional noted that traumatic injury required "real" rehabilitation and then immediately amended this to "classic rehabilitation," a level of service far more extensive than what the municipality offered. In these and other cases, due to such service gaps, the work of managing residual problems was left to the affected persons and their families.

Translation work was needed to convert abilities learned in formal rehabilitation settings to everyday settings without professional assistance. This work was necessary because the "real world" differed from the shielded service settings where patients could minimise or deny the severity of their problems. "When you get excellent rehab like I have […] you are wrapped in cotton wool," one man said. One woman referred to the rehabilitation setting as a "bubble;" another used "incubator," likening hospital discharge to "being thrown off a cliff." When discharged from rehabilitation services, injured individuals must translate hard-earned abilities for use in entirely different everyday contexts.

Translation work is a consequence of rehabilitation taking place in professional workplace settings that are structured by service purposes and knowledge bases that shape how clients' problems and solutions are envisioned—privileging organisational and professional goals (Levack et al., 2011). Professional testing and training programmes set measurable short-term goals that may neglect the individual's everyday preferences (Christiansen & Slomic, 2021). When an individual's goals seem unduly ambitious or unrealistic, professionals may set more attainable goals that are achievable with tools under their control, such as muscular strength training or techniques for improving attention. While these concrete abilities may help achieve longer-term goals such as returning to work, the accommodated rehabilitation setting in which they are acquired and learned may differ vastly from ordinary homes and workplaces. Consequently, injured individuals are left with the work of translating their acquired abilities into everyday use, and like residual work, it is a form of work out of sight for the professionals.

Client work and mechanisms of invisibilisation

The above analysis has shown that clients are not (and have probably never been) mere recipients of professional expert work but instead perform many types of work, demanding both effort and skills. The work is a consequence of their impairment but shaped by the setup of the service system. Some client work is visible; other work is apparently invisibilised.

Recognised and most often visible is clients' work on their rehabilitation—restoring health, assessing capacity, prioritising within reduced capacity and reconstructing their biographies. This work conforms to sociocultural models of what clients are expected to do—wanting to get well, learning from professional expertise, and complying with professionals' recommendations (Flinkfeldt, 2017; Parsons, 2005/1951). It is (at least partly) located in professional workplaces and mirrors professional work, is based on professional expertise, often performed alongside or with instructions from professionals and with their educative support. It can even be recognised as genuine work because it duplicates or supplements staff work (Strauss et al., 1982).

There is also work performed in response to presuppositions embedded in the service system that could be rendered invisible through several mechanisms.

Sociocultural mechanisms operate as mental models of clients are inscribed in legislation, professional support and service design. These models prescribe how a proper client should act, and which tasks are taken care of by the system. They expect clients to work on justifying needs and eligibility, but also presuppose the more invisible system-managing work. Finally, the boundaries of the service system leave to the clients (and their families and network) the work of translating professional help into everyday life and the residual work with all problems that do not fit. These forms of work are consequences of service design but are rendered invisible by the taken-for-granted premises on which the system is built, as illustrated by employment services requiring client initiative. Such work often goes unrecognised as it is perceived as contributory actions—an expectation of clients to "do their part" (DeVault et al., 2011, p.8). The workers are themselves quite visible, yet the taken-for- granted status of the work they perform means that it is "functionally invisible" (Star & Strauss, 1999, p. 22).

Sociocultural mechanisms may also produce invisibility when the work challenges the trust that clients are expected to place in welfare services. This may render invisible the system-managing work of assuring that professionals are personally and professionally capable of motivating and supporting individual needs. Invisibilised, too, may be the monitoring not of their own health condition (as highlighted in research on self-management) but of the actions, and especially non-actions, of the services, ensuring that promised support for recovery is in fact undertaken. Clients might consciously hide this work because they expect professionals to dislike it if they knew, anticipating that staff would not see their work as legitimate (Strauss et al., 1982).

Through sociolegal mechanisms, neither client work nor the workers are encompassed by legal rights to safe physical and psychosocial working conditions. In Norway, the legislative act on the working environment explicitly excludes the work of patients in health institutions, rehabilitation institutions and the like. In effect, almost all client work is non-work—outside the legal definition of work. Sociolegal mechanisms similarly devalue the work required to fulfil the conditions attached to accessing the social and legal rights that welfare-states ascribe to citizens.

Sociospatial mechanisms render much client work invisible since it is dislocated from professional work and workplaces and not performed in the public world of what is seen as a workplace (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017). Work is invisible because it is often performed when professionals are not present (Strauss et al., 1982), away from the locations of professional service providers (Unruh & Pratt, 2008), and linked to everyday life (Grue, 2016). As Daniels (1987) notes, activities that are not valued as work occur in private settings, without an audience, and seen as natural instead of skills-demanding tasks.

Implications for the conceptualisation of professionalism

This analysis has identified many types of client work and how they are shaped, but also invisibilised, by professional services. While the analysis does not claim to encompass all forms of client work or all mechanisms rendering work invisible, it nonetheless suggests a reconceptualisation of professionalism, one that considers clients as more than passively served and secured by professional expert work.

First, a reconceptualised professionalism must account for connections between professionals and clients beyond mere interaction and heightened client expectations, and must explicitly embrace work undertaken by clients themselves, recognising that professionals' expert work is far from sufficient for clients to benefit from professional services. Clients are not merely the subject of professional work; rather, clients' work is conducive to the outcomes of what, in theory, are perceived as professionals' work.

Second, while the view of professionalism as a value, where clients are ideally protected by professionals' code of ethics, remains, a reconceptualised professionalism must acknowledge that professional ethics cannot prevent all gaps, mistakes or failures. Professionals are human, and problems that cause clients to work are not primarily due to professionals pursuing fraudulent purposes, but due to their being specialised employees with bounded expertise and working hours within services with given mandates.

Third, recognising that clients undertake work does not negate that they can also benefit from and rely on professional expertise. Indeed, in-depth expertise is actively desired by clients (Alm Andreassen, 2016). As this analysis demonstrates, professional work involves not only applying specialised knowledge to classify, reason about, and take action in individual cases, as Abbott (1988) suggested, but also transferring expert knowledge to support clients' own work on their problems. Client work can be facilitated by system-offers of educative support based on professional expertise. Therefore, a professionalism acknowledging that client work is driven also by system presuppositions could incorporate such educative support to better enable the skills-demanding system-managing work.

Fourth, ignoring client work raises ethical concerns due to the detrimental consequences of invisibility (Crain et al., 2016): that the work is not valued, that workers fail to demand recognition for this work and that it may not be addressed in theory or practice. Instead, the burden of unacknowledged, yet essential, work is placed on vulnerable individuals, who are already tasked with much work stemming from the problems that led them to seek professional services in the first place.

Finally, a reconceptualised professionalism must move beyond depicting clients as merely presenting or representing the tasks of professionals. This expert-role model does not align with the actual process of problem-solving. Instead, professionalism must include clients' "consumption work" and the skills necessary to undertake such work (Glucksmann, 2016). By addressing the interconnections between professional and client work, as Glucksmann (2016) suggests, it becomes clear that client work occurs not only because clients want to be co-producers, but is inevitably shaped by the expectation and presuppositions of professional work and the service system—what is offered, what is presupposed, and where boundaries are drawn.

To conclude: Prevailing conceptualisations of professionalism characterise professions as workers. Expertise, ethics, autonomy, and authority are attributes characterising what professions are, not what they do. A reconceptualisation of “connective professionalism” (Noordegraaf, 2020) properly grasps how the professional-client relationship requires these characteristics to be relationally understood. A revised understanding of professionalism should similarly account for the nature of professional work—not merely of the character of this work, but also how outcomes are produced. Professional work is seldom the sole form of work necessary for clients to benefit from expert services. Professional work and its outcome cannot be viewed in isolation but are intrinsically linked to work undertaken by clients. Without recognising this interdependence of professional and client work, theories of professions risk overestimating the value of professional contributions while neglecting the critical and often invisible role played by clients.

Ethics declaration

The empirical research on which this study is based was evaluated and approved by the data protection officer at Oslo University Hospital in 2013 (2013/1814) and by the Norwegian data protection authorities (Data Protection Services) in 2014 (39475). Informed consent was obtained from all parties, including the interviewed patients, those discussed in the observed meetings and the professionals involved.

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Organizational Professionals Challenging Principal Autonomy and Professionalism?

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Abstract

Swedish principals have traditionally enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, with extensive responsibility for local schools. However, changes in governance and the expansion of central administration have challenged the conditions for principal autonomy and work. Through a multiple-case study of six Swedish municipalities, this paper aims to expand knowledge of the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for traditional professionals. The findings illustrate that principals perceive this expansion as both controlling and supportive. Principals' perceptions vary according to organizational professionals' training, experience, assignments, and approaches to local decision-making. Although the expansion of organizational professionals may challenge principal autonomy at a general level, at the level of practice, principals express navigating these challenges to preserve professional autonomy. Overall, the study demonstrates that it is possible for principals and organizational professionals to develop a mutual understanding of how to control quality and improvement work without undermining principals' professionalism.

Keywords

Organizational professionals, local education authority, principal autonomy, principal professionalism

Introduction

Since the 1990s, changes in the management and control of many public sectors have led to the expansion of central administration (Alvehus & Andersson, 2018; Hall, 2025). This expansion has involved the employment of professionals tasked with both supporting and controlling traditional professionals (Cronin et al., 2018; Mik-Meyer, 2018). However, previous research shows that despite this dual mandate, professionals in central administration tend instead to "begin[s] to direct other entities of the organization" (Alamaa et al., 2024, p.12). As a result, this expansion has redefined work and decreased autonomy among traditional professional groups (cf. Frostenson, 2015).

These changes in management and control, including the expansion of professionals in central administration, have also been implemented in the field of education (Ball et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Buch, 2016; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Prøitz et al., 2021), where they have been further reinforced by efforts to address declining student outcomes and growing disparities within and between schools (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). In addition, international educational policy increasingly stresses the need for actors at all levels to be accountable for school improvement and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

In Sweden, where this study is situated, these changes in governance—the expansion of professionals at the local education authority level (i.e., intermediate level), and recent policy recommendations stressing actors' shared responsibility for educational improvement—have reshaped the conditions for principals' work and autonomy (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Antonsson, 2025; Nordholm et al., 2024; Paulsen et al., 2014).

In this paper, we therefore focus on how principals, whom we regard as a knowledge-based occupational group (cf. Evetts, 2009a), perceive the expansion and work of a group of professionals at the local education authority level assigned to quality and improvement work. There is an ongoing discussion of such professional groups. For example, Alamaa et al. (2025) and Noordegraaf (2007) conceptualize them as hybrid professionals. We understand them as organizational professionals, defined as an ideal type of workers who are "responsible for organizing" (Noordegraaf et al., 2014, p.21). At the general level, the expansion of organizational professionals can be regarded as a development based on organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009b).

Organizations are maintained by their personnel as well as by their institutional environments (Linde & Svensson, 2021). Although individuals are influenced by the organizations in which they are embedded, they still have sufficient agency to act in alternative ways (Battilana, 2006). Thus, an interplay emerges between organizations, professions, and their institutional contexts, ultimately leading to tensions. Drawing on qualitative data from a multiple-case study of six municipalities, this paper explores tensions at the intersection of organization and profession (cf. Parding, 2007). It aims to expand knowledge about the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for traditional professions within education. The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do principals perceive the expansion and work of organizational professionals?

RQ2: What do the expansion and work of organizational professionals tell us about challenges to principal autonomy and professionalism?

While previous research has studied relationships between managers and controllers or HR experts (Forsberg & Cregård, 2023; Liff & Andersson, 2021), this study explores principals' perceptions of organizational professionals who operate within the same domain of expertise as principals themselves. Research on the expansion and work of organizational professionals—and its consequences for traditional professions in education—remains limited, underscoring the significance of this study. The Swedish case is of particular interest, as the managerial changes described above contrast sharply with Swedish principals' historically strong decision-making authority and professional influence (Wermke et al., 2022). Theoretically, this study contributes by deepening the understanding of organizational professionals and their influence on traditional professions' autonomy and professionalism in education. To contextualize the study, the next section reviews research on principal autonomy and professionalism in the evolving landscape of Swedish education, followed by a presentation of the study's theoretical framework.

Principal autonomy and professionalism in a changing Swedish educational landscape

According to Noordegraaf et al. (2014, p.23), professionalism is socially constructed and can be understood as the outcome of "consciously enacted professionalization projects." In Sweden, principalship originally functioned as a rotating assignment among teachers, grounded in the tradition of *primus inter pares*—the first among equals (Ullman, 1997). However, an extensive transformation of the Swedish school system and changing ideas about governance in the public sector, together with the work of strong interest groups, contributed to separating the principal's role from the teaching profession. Through this process of stratification (Alvehus & Andersson, 2018), Swedish principals initiated a professionalization project that positioned them as leaders of public education (Jarl et al., 2012). Despite detailed state regulations, external control was weak, leaving principals with a high degree of local autonomy (Wermke et al., 2022).

Today, within Sweden's decentralized and goal- and results-oriented school system, educational managers and other professionals at an expanded local education authority level work on behalf of locally elected politicians to prepare and implement decision-making proposals (Jarl, 2025). In addition, local education authorities and principals share responsibility for systematically following up on students' results, allocating resources according to students' needs and improving education in local schools (SFS 2010:800). To fulfill these responsibilities, principals depend heavily on the economic, administrative, and professional resources provided by the local education authority, which adds further complexity to their work (Nordholm et al., 2023; Richard, 2024). In fact, increased control by local education authorities—over finances, recruitment, and areas targeted for improvement—has contributed to tensions between principals and these authorities (Antonsson, 2025; Liljenberg et al., 2023; Ståhlkrantz & Rapp, 2026). In some cases, local education authorities respond swiftly to political pressure by overruling principals' decisions, thereby constraining principal autonomy (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Liljenberg & Samuelsson, 2025).

The expansion of central administration within local education authorities has further challenged principal autonomy. It has both increased principals' administrative workload and given them less time to focus on what they consider to be the central role of their profession—to improve educational quality (Liljenberg et al., 2023; Jerdborg, 2023; Ärlestig & Törnsén, 2014). In this study, the organizational professionals at the local education authority level are assigned responsibility for quality assurance and improvement—areas previously overseen by principals and teachers. This shift raises concerns that principal autonomy and context-sensitive decision-making may be downgraded in favor of standardized decisions formulated by organizational professionals. This resembles what Ärlestig (2014) calls the power struggle between actors at different levels who all seek to improve education.

Theoretical points of departure

In this section, we outline how the study is informed by two interconnected theoretical points of departure: autonomy at the level of practice and professionalism.

Autonomy at the level of practice

Autonomy in education is widely understood as a multidimensional phenomenon operating on different levels (Frostenson, 2015; Kim & Weiner, 2022). As noted earlier, Swedish principals have traditionally exercised autonomy in their decision-making about educational improvement. Today, however, principal autonomy can be seen as increasingly challenged by changes in governance and administration, as well as by the formal allocation of responsibility for educational improvement to local education authorities. Importantly, though, this does not necessarily imply that principal autonomy is equally limited at the level of practice (cf. Frostenson, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, a clear definition of autonomy at the level of practice is required. We therefore draw on Wermke et al. (2022), who build on Ingersoll's (2003) theorizing on power distribution and control in organizational decision-making. Wermke et al. conceptualize principal autonomy as a two-dimensional phenomenon. The first dimension concerns decision-making power, while the second relates to ensuring appropriate foundations for those decisions. Because autonomy is linked to the locus of power within the organization—that is, "who control the most important *decisions* that are to be made" (Wermke et al., 2022 p.737, original emphasis)—this conceptualization is particularly relevant for our analysis. Furthermore, autonomy is understood as relational and negotiated among actors and within specific contexts (Nordholm et al., 2025). Decision-making authority is therefore not merely a matter of acting independently; it also involves the capacity to exert influence through both formal and informal power relations.

In relation to practice, Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) caution against the normative assumption that autonomy is inherently positive and control inherently negative. Rather, they highlight the complexity of the relationship between autonomy and control, describing both as "always in process" and ubiquitous, as they are "constantly being made and remade, negotiated and renegotiated in all of our daily interactions" (p.205). In addition, Wermke et al. (2022) argue that in complex educational contexts, expanded decision-making authority combined with intensified control may increase the risks borne by individual principals. The more decisions principals are expected to make, the greater their accountability—and the greater their risk. From this perspective, restricted autonomy that reduces individual risk may, at times, be experienced as favorable. Schulte (2023, p.43) further conceptualizes autonomy as individuals' capacity for critical reflection on their options, freedoms, and constraints. Such reflection "does not take place in a vacuum but is bound by norms, which again are produced by (and in turn keep alive) social-cultural, emotional, political, professional, etc. normative systems." In other words, principal autonomy at the level of practice is shaped by both individual capacities and contextual conditions that enable or constrain action.

Expertise, autonomy, and authority are regarded as key dimensions of professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020, p.207). Principal autonomy can thus be understood as an expression of professionalism. According to Evetts (2009a), the discourse of professionalism can "be analyzed as a powerful instrument of occupational change and social control at macro, meso and micro levels and in a wide range of occupations in very different work, organizational and employment relations, contexts and conditions" (p.20). Hence, we draw on understandings of principal autonomy (Wermke, et al. 2022) and professionalism (Evetts, 2009a, 2009b; Noordegraaf, 2020) to discuss challenges to principals related to the expansion and work of organizational professionals at the level of practice. In the following section, we outline the research design and methodology.

Research design and methodology

This qualitative multiple-case study (cf. Yin, 2009) forms part of a larger project designed to develop knowledge about how local education authorities organize and manage quality and improvement work. Even though the Swedish school system is highly decentralized and heterogeneous and includes many independent school providers, the scope of the present project is limited to municipalities, in line with its overall research objectives.

Six municipalities were strategically selected (Flyvbjerg, 2011) to reflect national variation (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner (SKR), 2022) in terms of (1) municipality classification, (2) the number of inhabitants, and (3) geographic location. This selection also reflected differences in organizational structures, such as personal and financial resources. Table 1 provides an overview of the municipalities included in the study. To protect anonymity, further identifying details are omitted.

Table 1

The six municipalities involved in the study

Municipalities	Inhabitants	Classification
A	Medium	IV
B	Medium	II
C	Small	III
D	Medium	II
E	Large	III
F	Small	IV
Inhabitants: Small: < 15,000 inhabitants, Medium: 15,000–60,000 inhabitants, Large: > 60,000 inhabitants		
Classification: II: Municipalities near large cities with many commuters, III: Municipalities with or near medium-sized towns, IV: Municipalities with smaller towns or rural municipalities		

The larger project generated data through semi-structured interviews with superintendents and deputy superintendents (who serve as principals' line managers), principals, and local education authority representatives assigned to quality and improvement work (organizational professionals) in the six municipalities. In addition, approximately 100 hours of observations were conducted, capturing interactions among principals, superintendents, deputy superintendents, and organizational professionals. The present study builds on the 81 semi-structured interviews, while the observational data served as a complementary source for contextualizing and validating interview accounts.

The respondents (see Table 2) were recruited through a multi-step process. First, we interviewed superintendents and/or deputy superintendents. Based on their descriptions of various local education authority organizations, we identified and interviewed a selection of organizational professionals assigned to educational quality and improvement work. Finally, we interviewed all principals in the smaller municipalities (C and F), while in the larger municipalities (A, B, D, and E), a selection of voluntary principals participated.

Table 2

Study respondents

Municipality	Superintendents and deputy superintendents	Organizational professionals	Principals
A	2	2	10
B	3	2	12
C	1	2	6
D	2	2	8
E	2	3	11
F	2	3	8
(N = 81)	**12**	**14**	**55**

All interviews started with the respondents describing their professional background, formal education, work experience, and current assignment. They were then asked to reflect on both the present situation and developments over time, particularly changes in central administration and in the roles of organizational professionals. Subsequent questions were tailored to each respondent category and addressed various aspects of how local education authorities organize and manage quality and improvement work, how this relates to the needs of local schools, how it affects principals' work, and how collaboration functions within each organization. Examples of questions posed to principals include: How has quality and development work at the local education authority level changed over time, and what has it meant for you as a principal? How would you describe the local education authority's current quality and development work that you are involved in? How are development needs and initiatives identified and decided upon? What support do you receive as a principal in the quality and improvement work that you are responsible for? What challenges have you identified based on the fact that local education authorities and principals have overlapping responsibilities for quality and development work? The interviews lasted 60–75 minutes and were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. All respondents provided written informed consent prior to participating in the study.

Analysis

First, we read the interview transcripts several times to establish a strong understanding of the respondents' statements. We then conducted an initial descriptive analysis to capture the titles, positions, educational background, work experience, and assignments of organizational professionals and to detect patterns of frequency and similarities between local education authorities (Saldana, 2009). At this stage, we also identified additional parts of the transcripts that were relevant to addressing the study's research questions.

In the second phase of analysis, we conducted an inductive qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the goal "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p.314). We followed Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) analysis procedure. In the first step of coding, meaning-bearing units capturing descriptions of organizational professionals and their work, their relation to principals' work, and relations between the two groups of professionals were identified. In the second step, the meaning-bearing units were condensed and coded into sentences describing principals' perceptions of organizational professionals and their work. Each statement was assigned one or more codes. Examples of codes include *mutually supportive, experiencing administrative relief, perceiving work approaches as controlling, and perceiving neglected professional competence.* In the third step, codes were compared and sorted into categories and further clustered into two broad themes. These themes were labeled depending on whether principals perceived the expansion and work of organizational professionals as *controlling* or *supportive*.

In the third phase, we increased the abstraction of the analysis by directing our focus towards principal autonomy and professionalism. Drawing on the work of Wermke et al. (2022) and Noordegraaf (2020), we re-coded the meaning-bearing units by asking two questions: (1) In which areas do organizational professionals make decisions or exert influence? (2) What does this tell us about principal autonomy and professionalism? The outcomes of the analysis are presented in the following section.

Results

We present the results in three sections. The first section outlines the contextual background for the organizational professionals identified in the study, offering a frame of reference against which the findings can be interpreted. The subsequent sections then present two themes that capture how principals perceive the expansion and work of organizational professionals, integrated with an analysis of how principal autonomy and professionalism are manifested at the level of practice.

A myriad of titles, positions, and ways of organizing

The descriptive analysis revealed considerable variation in the organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement work within local education authorities. Across the municipalities, titles, positions, and organizational arrangements varied widely. In some cases, these differences reflected municipal size; in others, they did not. Despite this variation, there were significant similarities between the formal education and work experiences of the organizational professionals. All interviewed professionals held university degrees; most had degrees and prior work experience in education, and a smaller number had backgrounds in the social sciences. A detailed overview of titles, formal education, work experience, and areas of responsibility is provided in the appendix.

The medium and large-sized municipalities (A, B, and E) had established specialized units dedicated to quality and improvement work. These units were directed by managers to whom several organizational professionals reported. Meanwhile, in the small municipalities (C and F) and in one of the medium-sized municipalities (D) there were no such units, and, overall, fewer managers and organizational professionals. Thus, while certain similarities were evident, the organization of quality and improvement work also differed across municipalities, reflecting variations in local context.

Principals perceiving the expansion and work of organizational professionals as controlling

The analysis revealed how the principals sometimes strongly questioned the expansion of organizational professionals. They interpreted this development as an expression of increased control that reduced principal autonomy and reinforced managerialism. Traces of such managerialism were particularly evident in municipalities with large, specialized units comprising several organizational professionals.

The principals expressed doubts about the relevance of these units, arguing that professionals positioned within them were too distant from local schools and lacked the contextual knowledge necessary for meaningful educational improvement. The principals perceived that the positioning of organizational professionals in such units was impeding their possibility of receiving accurate support. According to the principals, distanced organizational professionals led their work in an unwanted, managerial direction.

> P7 Municipality B: I'm dubious. I think the idea is good, but we are too far from each other, and often it's the principals who have to provide the unit [with data or information] instead of the other way around. They send emails, and the principals must answer a lot of things; they miss what the unit is supposed to do. […] But it's easy for such a unit to get too far from reality.

Similar perceptions were expressed in municipalities without specialized units, particularly when organizational professionals were disconnected from the principals' daily work. Principals raised concerns about the decision-making mandates assigned to these professionals. They argued that organizational professionals sometimes defined areas of improvement despite lacking sufficient knowledge of local conditions and needs. In this sense, principals experienced managerial governance as overriding their local decision-making authority and, consequently, their autonomy.

Although principals acknowledged that organizational professionals' expertise could represent a strategic resource, they often perceived this potential as overshadowed by a discourse of control. They contended that the direction and pace of quality and improvement work were frequently grounded in standardized models rather than adapted to the realities of principals' work. When organizational professionals exercised control over improvement processes, principals felt that their professional knowledge and locally identified needs were marginalized.

Thus, when hierarchical structures of authority and managerialism prevailed, and organizational professionals were given decision-making mandates in areas that previously belonged to principals, the principals perceived their autonomy as being challenged. These perceptions prompted feelings of frustration, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> P2 Municipality A: We have discussed a lot in the last year, among the principals, who controls who. We don't want to feel like we are a class that gets homework; it can't be like that. So, we have searched for […] signaled quite clearly that we need greater participation because there is a great deal of respect for the work that is done, but the problem is that it does not matter how good it is, unless it is anchored with us.

Principals also highlighted concerns about competence, particularly when organizational professionals lacked formal training in education. Such situations were interpreted as a deficit in relevant expertise and, by extension, as a challenge to professional authority. One example involved a quality developer with a degree in political science who worked in Municipality C as the representative of a regional network. However, the principals lacked trust in this representative, arguing that a principal would have been better suited for the role. The following excerpt illustrates this skepticism:

> P1 Municipality C: I don't remember her/his title, if s/he is […] I think her/his current title is development manager, but before it was organization developer or something. […] Okay, but s/he […] is not even from the field of education.

The principals' lack of trust eventually led the quality developer to withdraw from interfering with the principals' day-to-day work. As a result, the distance between the quality developer and the principals increased. This withdrawal enabled principals to make more independent decisions, thereby strengthening their autonomy at the level of practice. A similar example of decision-making authority initially being assigned to organizational professionals without formal training in the field of education was found in Municipality F. In this municipality, the superintendent tasked an ICT strategist and a school economist with developing the local education authority's program for systematic quality assurance, rather than involving the principals. In the interviews, the principals described this decision as a signal that their professional knowledge was not sufficiently valued. They questioned the competence of the organizational professionals involved and, in doing so, challenged the hierarchical authority and managerial logic underpinning the decision.

> P6 Municipality F: Now we're going to work like this with systematic quality work, and the principals maybe have more knowledge, but maybe just don't have time to do it; it gets a bit tricky. […] that the wrong professions should do the work, rather than the ones who are better […] or maybe […] [laughs] do the work that you would have liked to be involved in and do yourself.

Being bypassed in important decisions and in the initiation of development work, as illustrated above, reinforced principals' doubts about whether their competence was recognized within the organization. It also raised broader questions about who controls principals' work. Some principals argued that organizational professionals gradually expanded their mandates, effectively taking over decision-making in additional areas.

> P1 Municipality D: They have kind of come up with their own assignments and their own plans: "This is what all principals should work on now," and "We need to give lectures [to principals] about this." And we have been like, "No, wait a minute, [laughs] this doesn't fit at all." So, I have had to train myself in civil disobedience, […] I have had to train myself in saying "No" and holding back.

Thus, the principals questioned organizational professionals when they perceived them as too demanding and controlling. When the principals felt controlled, their mistrust of organizational professionals increased. They emphasized the importance of organizational professionals acting as partners in dialogue rather than as directors of their work. However, several principals suggested that the latter role—characterized by control—had become increasingly prominent within their organizations.

> P8 Municipality E: Earlier, we had a quality developer who is no longer working here, and instead, we have a controller. I think that the two roles symbolize or communicate two different ways of thinking about and working with development. A controller is a controlling function that wants statistics and data, and "This is how we do it," while the quality developer is perhaps more involved in the development process.

In summary, principals' perceptions of being controlled emerged most notably when organizational professionals—especially those lacking formal training in education or prior experience as principals—acted as their superiors and exercised decision-making authority in areas previously under principals' jurisdiction. By questioning the expansion and work of these professionals, principals tried to reclaim their autonomy.

Principals perceiving the expansion and work of organizational professionals as supportive

The analysis also showed that, in addition to expressing concerns, principals described the expansion and work of organizational professionals as sometimes being beneficial to their practice. In the data, this was visible when organizational professionals relieved principals of their administrative duties, such as by collecting and compiling statistics related to educational improvement.

> P2 Municipality D: We get that from central administration, from the planning strategist. And it comes in really nice columns and so on. It's the final grades, or the June grades, and then we get it divided into different columns, both subject by subject, and back in time, points, averages and so on.

Through this form of support, the principals were able to direct their focus toward analysis, strategic planning, and the implementation of school improvement processes. In this way, the principals still controlled the decision-making within the areas they regarded as the essence of principalship without having to waste time on more general administrative tasks. Hence, in these situations, organizational professionals did not challenge principals' autonomy but rather supported them in maintaining professional control. This approach seemed to facilitate principals' recognition of the organizational professionals' competence, encouraging exchange based on trust and legitimacy.

> P3, Municipality A: They are skilled, they are talented, and therefore we have also become more and more dependent on them in some way, in terms of, "Help us with this, is there any information around this?" and so on. And then they start to deliver and are quickly even slightly ahead. So yes, they are skilled, but it could have been the opposite experience, in terms of them being disruptive. Or that they are working on activities that you don't think go hand in hand with what we need. But that's not the case.

When such collaborative conditions prevailed, organizational professionals were able to question principals' decisions without the principals perceiving it as an attempt to take control and overrule them.

> P8, Municipality A: So very supportive too. And developing. They have the mandate to sometimes ask these slightly difficult questions so that we can develop to the best.

These examples show that it is possible for both parties to acknowledge the other's competence. A similar case was identified in Municipality E, where organizational professionals offered support to teachers rather than to principals. Principals expressed a desire for similar support and even considered jointly hiring a professional to assist them with school improvement processes. This reflects a form of collegial authority in which principals are willing to invite organizational professionals into their work—provided this occurs on their own terms.

> P5, Municipality E: We tested the idea: "What if we could hire someone together that our five units could share? What could that look like?" We have been thinking about that, because as principals we all feel that having someone that kind of sets up good strategies and supports us in how to think is important. We thought that would be good, because that's what quality work is all about.

Even more strikingly, in areas such as jurisdictional documentation and systematic quality assurance—formally assigned to principals but not traditionally associated with their core professional identity—principals sometimes actually delegated control to organizational professionals. To manage uncertainty and risk, they sought confirmation and guidance from these professionals. In doing so, principals appeared to voluntarily relinquish a degree of autonomy in order to strengthen their decision-making in areas perceived as complex and high-stakes.

> P8, Municipality B: When you get to know the organization developer and understand what kind of person s/he is and how s/he is into details, you realize that s/he knows a lot and is a person that you really can learn from and get support from. Since then, we have turned to her/him a lot. You can ask her/him a lot, and s/he explains what s/he means, and then it becomes easier to understand. So, s/he is … S/he controls our quality work, I would say.

In other words, principals' perceptions of support emerged when organizational professionals relieved the principals of their administrative duties, contributed expertise that strengthened principals' decision-making, and acknowledged principals' contextual knowledge and authority. While the two themes presented above—control and support—differ in terms of how expertise, autonomy, and authority are configured, principals in both cases sought to maintain influence over their professional domain. The findings indicate that principals' perceptions of organizational professionals are closely tied to whether they experience their autonomy as being challenged or reinforced, and to how their expertise is recognized and negotiated. When organizational professionals intervened in what principals perceived as the core of principalship, principals resisted. Conversely, when they contributed complementary expertise without encroaching on principals' autonomy, they were accepted and even valued.

Our findings highlight how principals and organizational professionals can build collegial authority and reciprocal trust. Increased administrative workloads appear to make principals more willing to delegate tasks they consider peripheral to the essence of principalship. Such selective delegation reflects elements of professionalism. Thus, the findings suggest that principals' expertise and authority continue to shape—and at times delimit—the work of organizational professionals.

Discussion

As a result of changes in governance at a general level, the presence of organizational professionals has expanded across public sectors, thereby challenging traditional professions (Alamaa et al., 2024; Alvehus & Andersson, 2018; Cronin et al., 2018; Hall, 2025; Mik-Meyer, 2018). This multiple-case study, drawing on empirical data from six Swedish municipalities, set out to deepen our understanding of the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for principals, who are typically regarded as traditional professionals within the field of education. The findings revealed a myriad of titles, positions, and organizational arrangements for organizational professionals within local education authorities. Moreover, they showed that principals perceived the expansion and work of organizational professionals as both controlling *and* supportive. These differing perceptions were related to organizational professionals' training and experience, their formal assignments, their approaches to principals' decision-making, and to principals' own understandings of the essence of principalship. Although these results may not be unexpected, they are significant in demonstrating how autonomy is negotiated among actors and within specific contexts (Nordholm et al., 2025). They are also powerful in the way they illustrate that there is no "best" way of organizing organizational professionals. Rather, principals' perceptions depend heavily on how organizational professionals engage with principals' contextual knowledge and their responsibility for local decision-making.

This study reinforces previous research portraying principalship as a demanding and complex role (Nordholm et al., 2023; Richard, 2024), not least in relation to the expansion of organizational professionals. It also confirms that societal and policy demands for improved educational outcomes remain strong (Darling-Hammond, 2004), alongside recurring calls for education systems to respond to emerging challenges (OECD, 2023). One organizational response to these pressures has been the expansion of central administration at the intermediate level, mirroring developments in other public sectors (Hall, 2025). Furthermore, such expansion can be seen as creating new career pathways for principals within the educational bureaucracy (cf. Alvehus & Andersson, 2018). In this study, the organizational professionals and principals were assigned to work within the same areas of expertise—areas where principals previously were autonomous. Notably, several organizational professionals were trained in education and had prior experience as principals, suggesting that principal expertise remains valued. In this sense, the expansion of organizational professionals may be interpreted as an extension of the historical trajectory of principals' professionalization project, rooted in the tradition of *primus inter pares* (Jarl et al., 2012; Ullman, 1997). However, this development raises a critical question: does it represent a "consciously enacted professionalization project" (Noordegraaf et al., 2014, p.23), benefiting all principals, including those still working in the local schools, or has it become an implicitly enacted project that primarily advantages former principals who transition into administrative roles?

At a general level, the expansion of organizational professionals can be understood as an example of an organizational answer to societal demands to improve education based on managerialism, emergent in the logic of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009b). In some instances, the principals in our study interpreted this expansion as signaling a need to be directed and controlled “by other entities of the organization” (Alamaa et al., 2024, p.12). In other cases, however, principals perceived their knowledge as being acknowledged and valued by organizational professionals, which fostered collaboration and mitigated tensions. This latter finding adds nuance to research from other public sectors that emphasizes the dominance of central administration.

Even though changes in governance and administration have challenged principal autonomy at a general level, in this study, principals expressed an urge to maintain their decision-making in areas they understood as representing the essence of principalship (cf. Liljenberg et al., 2023). The findings show that principals actively sought to shape their working relationships with organizational professionals—directing them to provide support and relieve administrative burdens where appropriate. In some cases, organizational professionals appeared to accept a subordinate role, enabling principals to preserve autonomy (cf. Wermke et al., 2022). In other instances, principals distanced themselves from organizational professionals in order to safeguard their authority.

Thus, our findings show that the implications of organizational professionals for principal autonomy and professionalism are played out in diverse ways. Given that these positions are hierarchically constructed and separated from schools, one might expect principals to understand the expansion of organizational professionals in education as a power struggle between actors at different levels (cf. Ärlestig, 2014). However, our findings suggest a more nuanced picture. Principals did not invariably regard such dynamics as zero-sum. In some situations, they even initiated collaboration and leveraged organizational professionals’ expertise to strengthen their own decision-making—particularly in high-stakes areas such as jurisdictional compliance, where accountability entails heightened risk (cf. Schulte, 2023). The study, therefore, indicates that it is possible for principals and organizational professionals to create a mutual understanding of who controls “the most important *decisions* that are to be made” (Wermke et al., 2022, p.737, original emphasis).

Swedish principals generally possess extensive academic training and express a desire to engage in informed, reflective practice. They also expect their professional knowledge of local contexts to be respected. Yet, changing conditions contribute to high turnover rates among principals (Richard, 2024). If principals are to fully utilize their knowledge and prioritize what they perceive as stimulating and enriching, local education authorities need to reinforce rather than undermine principal autonomy, preferably by relieving principals of their many time-consuming administrative duties. While principals in this study expressed a willingness to embrace their formal responsibility for local decision-making, there is a risk that their work becomes intellectually impoverished if organizational professionals gain excessive influence over core professional domains. Such a development could, paradoxically, generate further demands for central administration to prescribe, monitor, and correct tasks that principals might otherwise have managed effectively under more favorable conditions. Based on our results, we therefore urge local education authorities to remember that what is perceived as efficient in the short term can have unforeseen consequences in the long term.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study—in line with previous research—has shown that the expansion of organizational professionals can, under certain conditions, undermine professionalism. However, it also shows that principals strive to remain influential actors who actively navigate and, where possible, capitalize on changing organizational arrangements. While this study is situated within an educational context, the patterns identified may be analytically generalizable to other contexts in which managers work alongside organizational professionals with overlapping areas of expertise.

Considering the limited research on organizational professionals and managers with overlapping areas of expertise, the need for additional studies is paramount. Moreover, future studies in education could apply a quantitative design and thereby achieve additional insights into differences according to contextual prerequisites, such as municipality size or what the expansion of organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement work in education could actually mean for student outcomes.

In decentralized school systems, politicians and managers at the intermediate level are powerful actors. For the future of education, it is crucial that these actors foster conditions for constructive collaboration between organizational professionals and principals, grounded in mutual trust and professional legitimacy. Finally, we encourage these actors to reflect carefully on a fundamental question: What do future schools require—principals who function as mere implementers of externally defined directives, or principals equipped with the resources and authority to make both urgent and strategic decisions in the service of educational improvement?

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Appendix

Appendix A: Organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement in education

Municipality	Titles	Formal education and work experiences	Focus of quality and improvement work
A*	Manager of the learning and health unit	Education, principal, teacher	Deputy superintendents, principals
A*	Quality strategist	Education, principal, teacher	Principals, teachers
A**	Developer of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and learning; Developer of work experience program and knowledge; Scientific leader; Special education teachers		Deputy superintendents, principals, teachers
B*	Organization developer	Education, principal, teacher	Deputy superintendents, principals
B*	Manager of student health and development unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
B**	Pedagogical developers in math, reading, writing and ICT; Developer of work experience program and knowledge; Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
C*	Organization developer	Political sciences	Principals
C*	Manager of pupil health and ICT strategist	Education, teacher	Principals, teachers
D*	Organization developer	Political sciences, coordinator	Deputy superintendents, principals
D*	Planning strategist	Public administration, administrator	Deputy superintendent, principals
D**	Developer of ICT, Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
E*	Quality controller	Education, teacher, refugee coordinator, integration expert	Deputy superintendents, principals
E*	Manager of pedagogical development unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
E*	Manager of student health unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
E**	Developers of work experience program and knowledge; Pedagogical developers in Swedish as second language, math, reading and writing, science, ICT, democracy and human rights; Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
F*	ICT strategist	Education, teacher	Principals, teachers
F*	School economist	Economy	Superintendent, principals
F*	Regional strategist	Education, principal, teacher	Superintendent, principals
*Respondents **Others described in the interviews (formal education and work experiences unknown)			

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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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Becoming Clergy: How Agency and Identity are Afforded to Novice Professionals Through Traditional and Ritual Practices

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Abstract

The article contributes to the growing research interest in professional agency and identity by examining how novice clergy experience their first years as parish pastors in the Church of Norway. Based on focus groups with newly graduated ministers, analysed with practice-theoretical and socio-cultural perspectives, we identify two modes. The first emerges when pastors enter traditional, well-established practices that lend them authority, clarity of task, and relational traction. The second mode is also afforded by enrolling in a traditional pastoral role but avoids defensiveness by being more improvisational and expressive, expanding the professional role in time and space. We argue that previous contributions (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, Reite) have tended to downplay the importance of ritual, stability and receptiveness. We further discuss (with Heikkilä) the relationship between our theorised modes, the clergy's linguistic expression of their experiences, and the material and symbolic reality of the practices in which they participate.

Keywords
Clergy, novice professionals, newly educated, pastoral practice, passivity, practice theory, professional agency, professional identity

Introduction
This article contributes to the discussion of how newly educated candidates move from being novices to becoming accomplished professionals (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Schutz, 2018)[1]. Seeing the process "as negotiations conditioned by interchanging social and historical frames" (Reite, 2013, p. 48), we ask: How do novice professionals develop identity and agency in their interaction with professional practices? What are critical turning points and recurring dynamics in this complex process? The article follows the lead of an increasing number of scholars in making professional agency and identity a central perspective across institutional domains (Castelló et al., 2021; Edwards, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Heikkilä, 2022; Hökkä et al., 2012).

Based on an empirical project on newly educated clergy in The Church of Norway, we argue that professional agency can be experienced as passive and receptive rather than as active and initiating. This implies that an emerging professional identity is less about how an authentic person struggles to fit into an objective, externally given role, but rather about how a given role mediates an authentic professional self. The context for these dynamics is professional practices that are relatively stable and offer well-defined tasks and roles. The article considers how this agency of stability develops when it is challenged, identifying defensive mechanisms and more inventive and improvisational approaches. We first argue that stable practices and roles should be appreciated as providing possibilities for developing professional agency and identity. Second, we argue that the more experimental mode need not be a departure from existing practices but can be seen as improvisations over well-known themes. Third, we consider implications for how a practice-theoretical and a more discursive approach to professional agency and identity are negotiated.

Situating the article
Literature on novice clergy's professional agency is limited and does not centre around certain salient discussions that one finds in other professions, e.g., on teachers' or therapists' professional agency in accountability regimes (Buchanan, 2015; Krikken-Mulders et al., 2024). Hence, we will not provide a comprehensive literature review, but present two contributions that provide our point of departure.

[1] A popularised presentation of the article's main findings have been published in Norwegian in the research report *Pastoral entré* (Felter et al., 2025, p. 89f).

A normative account of professional learning as formation: Campbell-Reed & Scharen

In a North American context, Campbell-Reed and Scharen have conducted the longitudinal project *Learning pastoral imagination* (LPI). It explores how novice clergy move from being students who are "imagining ministry" towards the "pastoral imagination" of the experienced pastor (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2011; Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2023; Scharen & Campbell-Reed, 2016). The authors are central contributors in the field of practical theology, employing theories that have a great impact on the discipline. Although the terms are not much used, the project is interested in how young clergy develop agency and identity, highlighting moments when "action, understanding, and a new sense of situated possibility come together" (Campbell-Reed & Scharen, 2011, p. 325).

In spite of similarities, *LPI* differs from our project in two important respects. First, the social and collaborative aspects of pastoral agency seem undertheorized, as the authors focus primarily on the individual pastor's embodied and spiritual wisdom. This is signalled in the prevalent use of Dreyfus' novice and expert theories, and in the foregrounding of the "intangible qualities" of pastors who "embody habits of mind, and enact wisdom (…), seeing in depth and of creating new realities" (2011, p. 325). Although the development of pastoral skills is described as taking place "immersed in the practice of ministry" (2011, p. 338), the project tends to portray this practice as general rather than as specific and contextualised. This makes it difficult to zoom in and theorise the concrete, mediated interaction between specific, contextualised institutional practices of the novice clergy.

Secondly, Campbell-Reed & Scharen have a particular interest in how novice clergy navigate the changing and fluid landscape of religion. We see a risk of making a false dichotomy between "ministry, in a traditional, mainstream congregation" and "emerging models of ministry" (…) that require[s] improvisation, imagination, and initiative for the work to be vibrant" (2011, p. 333). There is a tendency to highlight the impact of particular situations, the "holy cow!" or "aha moments," (2011, p. 339), rather than studying the importance of regular and recurring practices.

An account of professional learning as networking between blackboxing and unfolding: Reite

Reite's research interest is in how professional learning is mediated and conditioned in a changing knowledge society.[2] She argues that clergy is a fitting case for welfare professionals in general, because increased secularisation and cultural diversity have given clergy "a status of 'in-between'—and professional learning may be at the core of their challenges" (Reite, 2013, p. 48). Where *LPI* leans into a theological, virtue-ethical and expertise-based understanding of maturing professional knowledge, Reite brings actor-network theory and socio-

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[2] Reite and this article's first author wrote our PhD dissertations within the same overall research project 2012-2016, both employing socio-material theories to the fields of professional and religious learning.

material perspectives into the field, in which professional learning is seen “as enacted” and “as networks” (2013, p. 49). She draws upon Latour’s research on laboratory work as processes of *blackboxing*, where scientists work to establish facts as “unproblematic and certain” (2013, p. 50). Transferred to professional knowledge, “the ‘blackbox’ can represent the facts and routines that seem certain and appear unquestioned” (2013, p. 50). Professional learning, then, is stretched out between the poles of framing existing knowledge (standards and routines) and of “handling the innovative and new.”

Based on meticulous shadowing of five pastors, Reite identifies two modes of *blackboxing* and *unfolding* respectively, and adds *tinkering* as a third, median mode (2013, p. 53). Professional knowledge as *blackboxing* is conceptualised as “standardising and routinising networks,” and as “expertising ‘the message.’” For Reite, pastors within this mode enter a role “instead of acting individually.” Emphasis on routines and recycling material “seems to lead to disenrollment and exclusion,” “little agency,” and clear separations between clergy and people and between professional and private emotions (2013, p. 54). Contrasted to professional learning as *blackboxing* are dynamics of *unfolding*. Reite observes this when technical equipment breaks down, and the pastor must find a new solution, and when new liturgical material throws local clergy off their routines. *Tinkering* is found when *blackboxed* practices become uncertain or are situated in a not clarified field between work and private life, with negotiations taking place between clergy and a large number of actants.

Reite’s approach expands conventional theological accounts, and the three modes provide fruitful perspectives on the processes of professional agency and identity we discuss below. Still, we see a need for additional contributions. First, our empirical focus is on novice clergy in transition from university to a professional career, not on experienced mid-to-end-of-career pastors. Second, we question Reite’s extension of Latour’s conceptualisation of scientists’ knowledge creation to professionals who engage relationally with other humans. The latter context is not about creating theory or stabilising laboratory experiments, but to let knowledge unfold in ways that support practices such as learning, health, art, or religion.

Theoretical perspectives

There has been growing interest in the concept of “professional agency” (Edwards, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hinostroza-Paredes, 2020), often discussed in close connection with professional identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). The concept is primarily developed in research on teachers, with discussions on accountability regimes as a backdrop (Buchanan, 2015), but seems to be moving into other fields (Castelló et al., 2021).

Agency is a highly theorised term. Its meaning varies depending on academic contexts, and it may still be seen as a “source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought,” with “an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). Agency is often positively framed as being able to learn, change and shape both surroundings and one’s own professional identity (Day, 2018; Giddens, 1984, p. 3), since "identity construction and negotiation is not simply a matter of adopting certain socially pre-existent and prescribed identities" (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 651). Still, agency should not be limited to groundbreaking and innovative actions, "connected to subjects' autonomy and self-fulfillment, acting as a force for change and for resistance to structural power" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 46). Rather, it should include everyday, routinised interaction, although that tends to be under-communicated.

Our conceptualisation of agency is aligned with a practice-theoretical perspective. With Ahearn, we see agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2010, p. 28), and with Hökkä, "as socially shared, culturally, historically and socially shaped, and provided through mediational means" (Hökkä et al., 2012, p. 86). With Biesta & Tedder, we hold that the "concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of an environment rather than simply in an environment" (2007, p. 137). This implies that we focus on the interaction between actors and practices (Edwards, 2015, p. 780). Agency is not seen as "residing in individuals," but "as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction," "*achieved* in concrete settings and in and through particular *ecological* conditions" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). This further entails that issues of professional agency are intimately interwoven with issues of professional learning and identity. Central contributors to this field have been Lave & Wenger (1991), whose theories conceptualised learning as processes of moving vertically from legitimate and peripheral towards fuller participation, and Engeström (2001), who emphasises how late modern organisations are destabilised and decentred, with learning being seen as horizontal and expansive.

Heikkilä argues that an undertheorized concept of agency, explored with "conventional humanist qualitative methodology […] easily guides the researcher into thinking of humans as separate from each other and from the wholeness in which we all live" (Heikkilä, 2022, p. 2). At the same time, she is attentive to how agency is linguistically and narratively constructed (2022, p. 2): People "position themselves in various ways, sometimes as victims and sometimes as agentic beings" […] and that "they shift constantly between these positions." Such stories are not personal or individual, but rather "grammatical resources," "embedded in a web of cultural narratives." In this way, Heikkilä's approach is similar to ours in the emphasis on the inherently social nature of agency, and at the same time, there may be some tension between her post-structural and narrative perspectives and our emphasis on practices that are materially mediated (Reckwitz, 2008).

Material and methodology

The article is based on two research projects on newly educated clergy and their professional learning and knowledge. The main project has followed theological candidates in Denmark, Norway and Sweden from their last term at university through their first one and a half years as clergy in Scandinavian-majority churches (Kaufman et al., 2024; Ideström et al., 2025). Although decreasing, church membership is still high in these countries (per 2024, Norway 62%, Sweden 51%, Denmark 71% of the total population), and the share of funerals being conducted in church is higher than the membership number (in Norway 2024, 82%). This influences the work week and relationships of parish clergy.

A delimited pilot project invited a group of Norwegian ministers who graduated from MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo three years earlier to participate in focus groups around how they experienced their first years in ministry (Felter et al., 2022). In Norway, the standard way to become a minister in The Church of Norway is to attend a six-year-long professional education at university level, where theoretical and more 'practical' elements are integrated. The participants in the pilot project were in their late 20s or early 30s. This article is based on the pilot project material, but is also informed by the analysis of the main project.

Eight people (four men, four women) participated, forming two focus groups with four participants in each. The groups were randomly assigned, apart from equal gender distribution, and moderated by three teachers/researchers from MF and one Danish researcher (Felter). The first author did not take part in the focus groups, as he was at the time in charge of the program in which the informants had participated.

We chose focus groups to allow different stories interact and highlight commonalities and differences between the informants (Finch et al., 2014). We developed a short interview guide based on two questions: "tell us about things in your work where you feel that you succeed/that you master," and "tell us about things where you do *not* feel that." We had follow-up questions, but wanted the focus group dynamic to play out as a creative and reflective conversation. Each group lasted almost two hours, followed by a shorter plenary session with all participants, group leaders and the first author. All conversations were recorded and transcribed.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, there was a joint analytical stage where the research group met and discussed preliminary, mainly inductive findings. We loosely followed Malterud's text condensation strategy (2012), moving from highlighted sections in the transcriptions towards theoretically informed statements. We ended up with two ideas for articles: One that primarily thematised the relationship between the (hidden) curriculum and the first work experiences (Felter et al., 2022), and this article, which considers the professional agency of the novice pastors.

Second, the first author coded the material in atlas.ti, to make sure that nuances were registered and that elements that contradict the overall idea were considered. He worked through all the code reports, distributing excerpts into the article sketch. During the whole process, we had meetings in the project group, giving feedback on analytical ideas, outlines and drafts.

The project could be characterised as research on one's own practice, and we have been aware of the pitfalls of becoming too normative, defensive or critical both vis-à-vis the program and the informants. All five authors are ordained ministers, although all now work in academic positions. Three of the authors have been involved in the academic program at MF and had knowledge about the informants that is not expressed in the material. This has been discussed repeatedly in our meetings. We have been intent on letting both critical and surprising insights be heard, even when they felt unwelcome or irrelevant. It is also important to emphasise that the projects are not evaluation research, but that the goal has been to understand more of the dynamics involved in professional learning in the transition from university to ministry.

We notified Norwegian centre for research data (SIKT) about the project. The project has been conducted in accordance with established research ethical norms.

Analysis

During the analysis, two modes of professional agency and identity emerged. This was a result of the condensation and coding procedures conducted with the whole material as one case. It became clear that each mode corresponded with one of the groups respectively (see the discussion section 3 below). In other words, the research participants who are quoted in the first part belonged to group A, and the second part to group B.

1. Ritual practices mediate agency and identity

Asked to share examples of when they felt that they succeeded, mastered, and felt joy in their work, the group A participants gave relatively brief answers.

a. Settled practices—Settled agency and identity

> Anne: My first thought was the funerals, really, and I did not expect that when I graduated. But that may be the area where I feel the safest from start to finish. And it is so concrete. It is delimited and I know exactly what to do at any given time. […] And that's probably also [the area] where I get the most positive feedback.

To her surprise, Anne found funerals to be her favourite field of work. The other participants agreed. First, they described funerals (and worship services) as representing concrete, well-formatted tasks, with set rules and agreed-upon division of labour. They were able to draw upon a richly textured theological and cultural knowledge when they prepared and conducted the rituals, and they had developed skills in "building and putting it together." Further, this role clarity also constituted and promoted the relational aspects of pastoral work. The novice clergy experienced this in the conversations with families ahead of the funerals, where "people come because there is a reason," as one participant says. This makes it possible for families to share both personal memories and grief. It was also felt in the funeral itself: "To stand in front of the people and leading [them] with the liturgy in my back," as one informant said.

There is a sense that the ritual works, which leads to the "most positive feedback," which again strengthens the clergy's sense of knowing what to do and how to relate.

This implies, secondly, that the clergy's subjectivity in the practice, and hence identity, is strengthened. The novice clergy experience that they are being lent authority grounded in a traditional role that stretches back for centuries. It is a form of authority that the novice receives more than achieves. They tell about how in their first internships as very young students, they are recognised as the pastor in the moment they enter a new home. "The long line of priests before us have contributed to a fundamental trust," one participant reports.

"I did not expect that," Anne said. She seems to suggest that there is a distance between the initial motivation that brought her to theological studies and ministry, and the experiences that have contributed to her professional agency and identity. The change is not primarily cognitive, as if novice clergy were persuaded by lectures or literature. Rather, it is by entering into the practice field of the rituals that they are attuned to its embodied, constitutive performances. The practice lends agency and identity.

b. Rituals and their openings—Possibilities and threats

> Abigail: So, I've become good at improvising church services. [I] feel safe in the liturgy […] and discover new ideas and inventions along the way and use them to make the service better. I think I am good at including co-celebrants in the service, confirmands and volunteers to read in the service, and I get a lot of good feedback on that.

Even the most traditional and regulated ritual needs to be 'done' and accomplished continually. This implies possibilities for improvisation, change and conflict. We read "I feel safe" not as a defensive statement but rather as an expression of a good circle where clarified agency and identity work is nurtured by, and nurtures, relationship building and improvisations. "I've become good" signals that learning takes place in the work, facilitated by the structure of the practice. At the same time, experiences of cracks in established practices point to areas where novice clergy do not feel mastery:

> Alan (edited): The pulpit is one of the few places in our society where you are allowed to say whatever you want. No one comes up and contradicts you. That's part of what also makes it a bit vulnerable and that's part of what I was talking about with funerals and funeral services. Someone has lost a child; how can you say something meaningful about life and God then?

The *liturgical* and *biblical* words are there to be recited, with a script that someone else has made, sometimes many centuries ago. The *sermon's* words, however, often uttered from a salient pulpit, are not scripted but provide the minister with an open situation. Issues of agency understood as free choice and space for a more personal expression come to the fore: What do you do with words? The dilemma is intensified when those listening are not regular churchgoers who know the priest and will hear a new sermon next Sunday, but families who have come this one time to church because of a specific and often emotionally charged incident. "The fear of saying something wrong is in the back of my head," one of the participants says of the funeral sermon, «which often makes me use an old sermon I know works."

The unquestioned authority that is a strength in the liturgical part now is turned into a threat. Alan wishes that they had worked more on the content of funeral sermons during training and suggests that theological students should do internships where "each make a funeral service and work a little with them." Together, that would produce a stock of sermons that could be shared among the priests-to-be. Other participants also call for more skill training in areas where they feel out of their depth.

The unstable and open character of the practices is visible in the role and identity of the young clergy.

> Anthony (edited): When you experience disasters, people lean on you quite a bit and look for the priest in small and big ways [….] When something doesn't work in the congregation, it's also the priest people look for. Last Sunday when no one had turned on the coffee machine for church coffee, it's the priest they come and talk to. Without it being the [responsibility of] priest at all, but people look at the priest because the priest is considered a leader in the context of church services. Whereas in the staff it's not necessarily like that.

The quote pinpoints two challenges: First, the clearly defined ritual role of the pastor is not easily translatable into the hybrid web of practices that constitute a congregation and a parish, including seemingly mundane, material issues such as a broken coffee machine. How not to be exhausted by these conflicting expectations, how to know when to simply act on them and when to lead people to someone else? Abigail shares how her new congregation assumed that she would be an excellent child and youth minister, due to her young age (and maybe gender). However, "I have no idea" about children, she sighs.

Second, the last sentence in the excerpt indicates that although most lay parishioners see the priest as the obvious leader, the other church employees do not necessarily share that view. This brings us to our third observation.

c. Professional agency and identity when practices change, are threatened and in decline

Even well-established practices may become marginalised, face declining support and, hence, weakened credibility and meaningfulness in society. This again affects the professionals engaged in them. We see traces of this in the material and will point to two representative examples.

First, the traditional image of the minister has been that of the one main character surrounded by a group of helpers. However, this does not go well with more collaborative and relational ideals for professional work and leadership in society and church. The material provided stories of good collaboration between professional groups and between professions and volunteers, but there are also testimonies of difficulties. Anthony shared how he would like to work "interdisciplinary" around an educational activity, but "usually, it's only multidisciplinary":

> Anthony (edited): I collaborate quite a bit with the catechist who does not have a church education [and] a rather different church background, and then I feel my professional pride quite a lot. [...] I am challenged by the catechist that I can just forget about liturgical terms, it is so foreign [for people] we cannot have that. We must rather have a pleasant, fun gathering. And then I have to choose my battles a bit.

Anthony felt that the catechist neither knew nor respected established liturgical practices. The catechist's argument was simply that "it is so foreign" for the typical participant. Thus, Anthony is taken out of the clear role and agency identified above. When the logics of the traditional practices are not convincing to his colleague, he is challenged to find a meta language to argue for his way of doing things, or to simply "choose [his] battles a bit" and let it be.

The second example is Alan's story about a conflict with a local funeral director. Funeral directors meet most families the same day or the day after a person has died, and in this meeting, most practicalities around the funeral are decided, including the choice of hymns.

> Alan: They have decided on the hymns and printed the program before I find out that I will be the priest at the funeral in question […]. Then I feel that, […] I am more than just him who will come in here and then leave again. I would rather lead that ceremony. And in a way use my knowledge and skills to consider what fits together in terms of theme and text and situation and hymns and order of hymns.

At the outset, the conflict between Alan and the funeral director revolves around scheduling and information. It may, however, be symptomatic of changing trends in the larger field of funerary practices, where religious actors are placed in a sub-contractor role vis-à-vis the widened role of the funeral directors (Walter, 2017). Similar to Anthony above, Alan is not allowed to simply ease into the traditionally wide professional agency and identity but feels forced to argue against the limited role that the funeral director assigns him.

2. Agency and identity through exploring the boundaries

In the other focus group, Benjamin was first to raise his hand, sharing a story about his sermon at a recent confirmation service. In Norway, the share of 15-year-olds who are confirmed lies at around 50 % of the population, which makes confirmation a well-established practice similar to the funeral, with churches filled with festive families who often have little regular contact with the church.

a. Improvisation over settled practices

Benjamin enthusiastically shared how his sermon merged philosophy and theology, in an attempt to communicate that the "Christian search for truth" is identical with "all humans' search for the truth." He combined St. Paul's journey to Damascus with how ISIS were also on the way to Damascus at the time. He was conscious of the communicative challenge, trying to reach both confirmands and their families, being well aware of how a sermon "sounds for an irritated uncle who didn't find a parking spot." Benjamin shared "the incredible feeling when you have reached the end of the sermon, but it feels like I could have gone on for an hour." He felt that the congregation went along with him on a journey.

Benjamin told the story to highlight the importance of academic theological training. His own personal background is very "churched;" for him "faith is a word and a language to navigate within." At university, however, this closed religious practice was opened and given new impulses. He was introduced to intellectual and rhetorical resources that helped him attain an analytical distance and made it possible to now be "out on the town square as a priest."

Benjamin's story lasted many minutes and set the pace for the rest of the group. Barbara described how she had come to enjoy improvisation. Similar to Abigail in the first group, she met expectations to be the perfect pastor for children and youth. Contrary to Abigail, however, this did not make her frustrated: "'fake it till you make it' has been my approach!," she said. This opened up for a more daring approach that she developed during her first years. She told stories of how she sometimes went against the advice of her superiors, and about taking chances during worship services.

> Barbara (edited): I had a family service, and then I opened up for the children to make suggestions, and a boy says "maybe God is not a man, no, maybe God is neither man nor woman. Maybe God is everything, and like God standing by the coffins." I love that! Now I get to use my theology, now I get to use my expertise and extract the theology from what that 5-year-old says.

Benjamin and Barbara shared the experience of the first focus group, which found that traditional, well-established practices foster professional agency. However, they differ in that they treat them more as points of departure and playgrounds, rather than becoming defensive when countering the open and sometimes tension-filled aspects.

b. Networking through settled practices

Bianca's story takes us out of the church building. She shares what she did just a few days ago, leading an information meeting for confirmands' parents in her parish.

> Bianca (edited): I came home that night and thought about how I *love* parent meetings [everyone laughs]. I really like the role you get as a priest. Both trying to be like [hesitates] cool enough to be a youth priest that the young people like, and at the same time show myself as a steady, solid, safe adult that [the parents] can trust take care of their children when they are in church.

The others are amused that a parental meeting is a pastoral success story, as it is usually seen as a management activity necessary for more important activities to run smoothly. However, Bianca sees the leadership potential in inviting parents, building relations and communicating her role as relevant for both groups present. She also makes an ecclesiological point: Church is more than what happens in the church building on Sunday morning, but is a community interwoven with the local community. This entails that a pastor is also a pastor in a wider, public time-space. A seemingly unimportant meeting becomes a venue for communicating how the whole community should be characterised by care and human dignity. Rather than seeing a hybrid identity as a problem, Bianca embraces and utilises it.

One of the tasks of the Church of Norway clergy is to visit homes on behalf of the police to inform about the death of a loved one. Ben shares a particularly demanding visit, where he felt that "I can't fix this. This is too intense." But gradually, as he approached the flat, he calmed down. "I know how to behave, and I know what signals to look for in the person. What kind of attitude I should have. I know what role I have in a situation like that." This echoes the insights from the first group, that there is a role identity available that lends agency in the demanding situation. Ben's visit reflects a 'settled' practice, as most Norwegians know what it means if a minister stands outside their door in the middle of the night. At the same time, however, there are signs that new, less scripted practices emerge:

> Ben: There was one instance where I thought that I cannot do this. A pupil in one of the high schools in my area had died […]. They ask for a priest and then I come as a priest. But what about being a priest do they need and want? And how am I supposed to give an obituary at a school? [...] Still, I think that is something of the most meaningful, I have never felt so small and so important as I did then.

Ben's immediate reaction is that "I am not equipped for this!" There was no course at university about improvising and conducting memorials in a school setting. For Ben, the expectation needs interpretation; he does not know "what about me as a priest they need and want?" After the initial bewilderment, however, there seems to be enough interpretive resources to avoid being paralysed. He finds agency that works creatively outside the traditional settings.

Discussion

In the following, we take our point of departure in the two modes that emerged from the analysis, and we discuss the theoretical implications of these. First, in a discussion with Reite's conceptualisation of professional learning, and second, in dialogue between an expert theory and a more practice-theoretical based notion of agency. Third, we discuss how the activity of interpreting and articulating experiences of ministry in a focus group setting also influences and plays back on these experiences.

1. Professional agency and identity experienced as passive and received

Our analysis points to a different kind of agency than that which is typically portrayed as proactive initiative, as breaking with conventions, and as professionals being encouraged to *manage* identities "as distinct from coping with them" (Day, 2018, p. 61) and renegotiate established work identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 647). For Campbell-Reed & Scharen, pastoral agency and identity are developed in dramatic and overwhelming *situations* more than in the routines of traditional *practices*. We argue, however, that professional agency can also be experienced as 'found by' and 'lent to' professionals, and even come as a surprise when they discover it.

One may ask: Is this agency at all? It seems paradoxical that agency, which is etymologically related to being active, could have such strong *passive* elements. Still, we argue that this makes sense. First, even the most scripted parts of being a pastor are about expressing and performing, similar to how an actor is agentic in a play, even though words and choreography are given. Further, the settled pastoral practices create spaces for clergy to enter into caring relationships with families, to interpret and give expression to a life lived, and relate it to Christian traditions in an interplay between the ritualised and the improvised.

This is also why the analysis' second mode is not dichotomously separated from the first. The first mode also includes dynamics of improvisation and expansion, but it tends towards defensiveness, because professionals experience reciprocal trust within the traditional and stable roles, but become insecure in their openings and emerging contradictions.

What we identify in the second mode is not a departure from the settled practices, but rather more innovative improvisations over these preexisting themes. The second mode includes exploration and pushing of the boundaries of both time and space that typically stabilises traditional pastoral practices, and in this way also makes the pastoral role more complex and multi-layered.

As such, the second mode challenges the tendency in Reite's account to paint an opposition "between the facts, routines and the innovative and new" (Reite, 2013, p. 49). We argue, rather, that *black-boxed* practices are potential starting points and resources for *unfolding* practices. Also, the second mode is not well captured by Reite's term *tinkering*, since we find an intimate dialectic between a passive and 'found' agency and an agency that explores boundaries and expands pastoral practices.

We make one caveat: Our project followed newly educated clergy, whereas Reite studied clergy who had been in the job for many years. This suggests a need for more research into whether the same practices that lend agency and identity in an early phase of a professional career risk becoming tedious and draining in the longer run.

2. Professional agency as afforded through enrolment in integrative practices

As stated above, one way to theoretically understand the interplay between a passive and active agency, and between a given and improvised identity, is to see them as constituted by practices. Practices are lending their practitioners clothes, buildings, rites, tasks, texts, etc. Novice clergy find agency and identity by moving into and doing what is laid out for them, and by gradually improvising and challenging these preexisting tasks and roles. In that way, they re-constitute and change the same practices.

For Campbell-Reed & Scharen, moving from imagined ministry to pastoral imagination entails a shift from "self-focused worries […] to focus on the needs in the situation" (2011, p. 324), aligned with Dreyfus' theories of expertise. They take as an example tennis legend Federer, and see his play as an expression of "embodied knowledge," "muscular and neurological," that makes the game "masterful, imaginative, even beautiful," beyond "mere mastery, strategy, and skill" (2011, p. 326).

This is consistent with our analysis. However, we see it less as an inner process and more as a dialectic process between the affordances of specific practices and the participants becoming enrolled in them. There is no "athletic promise" without an athletic practice that mediates a web of doings, material spaces and equipment, norms and standards, and often a particular atmosphere. Decisive is whether the hard work of practising is experienced as with little reward, or if it resonates with embodied talents and provides space to gradually move freely and express oneself with the identity of an accomplished player.

This approach challenges binaries between the social and the individual. Materials, rules and people within a practice constitute learning as increased participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and this includes the embodied and neurological dimensions involved. We agree with Campbell-Reed & Scharen that experiences of "overwhelmings" and "crises of responsibility" can lead pastors towards exhibiting "pastoral imagination." It is also easy to understand that it is "amid such seeming complications and disruptions that the pastor's role and soul begin to come together" (2011, p. 331). What we challenge is the implied dualism of "role" and "soul", similar to how Reite sees black-boxed professional learning as "entering a role—employing an actant—instead of acting individually" (2013, p. 54). Our analysis shows that the 'role' mediates the 'soul,' with soul meaning an authentic and capable, and at the same time found and received, professional agency and identity.

At the same time, the analysis made clear that practices contain openings and disturbances. These are integral to the practices themselves, e.g., when pastors need to formulate their own words between the scripted words. They also become visible when practices come under pressure from processes of change, e.g., when established pastoral *roles* and *tasks* are challenged by new professions in the local church, and from the wishes of funeral directors and families.

Of interest, then, is how novice professionals relate to these. Here, Reite's portrayal of black boxing that "lead to disenrollment and exclusion" seems apt, where many "pastors draw a distinction between 'we' and 'them'" (2013, p. 54). The safety of a 'found' agency and identity can have as its byproduct a defensiveness when stability is challenged, where novice clergy is concerned with drawing lines around their pastoral identity. Another expression is when participants call for quick-fix solutions, which risk reducing the complexity of 'wicked problems' (Grint, 2010), such as "finding words against death" (Davies, 2008) to manageable recipes.

The generative aspects of 'found agency' is consonant with theories of communities of practice that are often quoted in literature on professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). That there is a downside in the form of defensiveness fits, on the other hand, with the criticisms raised by Engeström (2001) and others that a community of practice approach risks becoming nostalgic. It may overlook, partly, how deep-seated societal changes reconstitute traditional practices, and, partly, that participants are never taking part in a single practice but weave together many different engagements. There is a need for an ontology of the social that accepts the "tensions inherent within the social structure itself" (Ahearn, 2010, p. 33), and that theorises the fundamental changes taking place "as work and organisations are increasingly operating in unstable, fluid and poorly bounded arrangements" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 13).

We agree with Engeström's warning against nostalgically pretending that there are stable professional practices that play the role of unquestionable 'habitus.' However, we will argue against too quickly turning this into a normative plea for change, because this comes with its own risks of overlooking the value of stable practices and the need to nurture these. Our analysis has shown that novice professionals may find agency and identity through embracing the *vita passiva* of traditional practices, but also that they may tweak, tinker and innovate them through improvisation and expansion in time and space.

3. A socio-cultural account of agency—Mediated by narratives

When we analysed the material, there was little doubt that the participants talked about the same overall field of practices, recognisable across geographical and cultural differences. This is not to deny that the stories are interpretations, but they came across as shared constructive efforts. It is difficult to show in very short excerpts, but to us as researchers, it was clear that the focus groups worked as intended: The participants commented on each other's reflections, elaborating or expressing nuances. What was more surprising was how different the two groups turned out, and that the two modes we identified in the analysis corresponded to the two respective focus groups. This was not by design; participants were randomly assigned to the groups. Why, then, were the groups so different from each other?

It is easy to see the role of the first 'responder.' Anne made her point briefly, focusing on the general practice of the funeral, and then invited the next participants to share. Benjamin told his story with passion, detailing one particular situation as a self-contained unit. The difference not only affected pace and focus for the rest of the group but also influenced how participants portrayed their own professional agency. We are well aware that this is speculation, but based on our knowledge of the participants, we find it probable that if any one of the participants had changed group, he or she could easily have followed the discourse established by the first speaker. Participants in group A could have told stories that fit better with mode 2, and vice versa.

If we are right in this assumption, it confirms Heikkilä's argument that people position and define themselves through narratives, and that these are not only personal and individual but also social and cultural. What story participants tell may be dependent on how they feel that day or the group they are part of. Our interest, however, is not primarily in a post-structuralist view of narration and narrative practices, but rather in how these narratives reflect and capture tensions and contradictions in and between practices that affect the subjectivity and agency of novice participants. This is also where Heikkilä's emphasis on the "incomplete and intertwined character of agency" makes sense for us (Heikkilä, 2022, p. 2f). Even the most stable practice is changing, creating imbalances and tensions that may lead to stagnation, conflicts or expansions and reorientations. The stories told are not stable descriptions of who the participants are, but rather testimonies of the tensions that condition their professional agency and identity.

This instability is, further, a reminder of the fragility of doing qualitative research with focus groups, and even to enter the role of a non-directive leader of a supervisory or therapy group. There is a distinctive power in the first speaker's ability to set the tone and pace, and it is challenging to interpret what tensions and contradictions the first story is a testament to, and what other stories could also have been told.

Conclusions and implications

A main contribution of the article is to reconsider the importance of practices that convey roles and tasks stable enough to lend novice professionals agency and identity. We draw attention to a receptive form of agency and identity that is experienced as 'found' or 'given.' When traditional practices are under pressure from global and local change processes, we will argue that one should offer resistance and not underestimate the importance, and surprising viability, of a stable context for professional life.

Further, the article argues that there are two modes of agentic negotiation when the practice field is becoming less stable and more porous. On the one hand, we have identified a defensive approach that is in many ways similar to what Reite terms a *black boxed* mode. On the other hand, we have identified a mode of agency that is improvisational. As such, it could be called an *unfolding* mode, but compared to Reite's concept, our professionals seem to identify more strongly with the traditioned tasks and roles and then explore expansive agentic spaces based on these.

Finally, we have argued that a socio-cultural and socio-material approach does not preclude an interest in the discursive aspects of practices. An apt example is how the dynamics of a focus group invite participants to highlight certain aspects of their experiences over others. We argue, however, that the two modes are more than discursive resources; they point to contradictions within and between the material and symbolic practices.

What do these conclusions entail for universities that qualify candidates and for the institutions that welcome them as novice professionals? We will point to two areas: First, we argue that the present day's attention to how societies and institutions are changing and fluid may carry a risk that we become inattentive to aspects of practices that are more stable. Research, teaching and institutional leadership should be as curious and explorative towards stability as they are towards change. Second, this balancing has important implications for how professional agency is taught in academic programs and invited in institutional settings. Our article contributes to a view of agency that is more trusting and less dependent on constant initiatives from the professional taking part. Maybe even non-religious professionals could take inspiration from a view of agency that is given, lent and, in a mystical way, characterised by passivity.

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