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Developmental Educators: Articulating Identity and Expertise in an Evolving Allied Health Field

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Abstract

Developmental Education is an emerging allied health profession in Australia. Developmental Educators (DEs) are disability specialists whose practice is informed by human-rights-based, holistic, and person-centred frameworks. This qualitative descriptive study explores how DEs perceive and articulate their professional identity and scope of practice within the broader allied health sector. Building on prior survey research, two focus groups involving 15 practising DEs were conducted to examine their reflections on previously published findings. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: professional identity, the breadth and distinctiveness of DEs' scope of practice, and the perceived need for greater visibility and recognition. Participants described their work as multidisciplinary yet distinct from established professions, emphasising their role in disability practice and interdisciplinary collaboration. This study contributes to the literature on emerging professions by analysing how DEs construct and defend professional boundaries within a historically under-defined domain of disability practice.

Keywords

Developmental Educator (DE), National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), disability professional, professional identity, professional boundaries, allied health landscape, social determinants of health

Medical to social model

Developmental Education emerged in Australia amid significant societal and policy shifts in disability service delivery during the late twentieth century (Bottroff et al., 2000). Central to this period was the emergence of the social model of disability, which challenged the dominant medical model that framed disability primarily as an individual impairment to be treated by health professionals (People with Disability Australia, 2023). Instead, the social model conceptualises disability as arising from environmental barriers, societal attitudes, and low expectations (Shakespeare, 2017). This paradigmatic shift created demand for a workforce equipped to support self-determination, community participation, and autonomy, contributing to the emergence of Disability Studies as a formal academic field (Johnstone, 2012).

Historical and educational development of Developmental Educators

Developmental Education developed in response to these shifts, alongside broader deinstitutionalisation and community-based reform efforts. Reviews of disability services in the late 1970s and early 1980s highlighted the inadequacies of custodial, institution-based models and called for person-centred, community-oriented approaches (Wiesel & Bigby, 2015). These reforms contributed to the decline of legacy roles such as “mental deficiency nursing” and supported the emergence of new professional roles focused on social training, developmental support, and inclusion (Bottroff et al., 2000; Mafuba et al., 2026).

Educationally, Developmental Education evolved through purpose-designed tertiary qualifications responding to these changing service paradigms. The profession’s educational pathway commenced with diploma-level qualifications in the early 1980s, which enabled the transition of legacy disability workers into community-oriented roles. These programs subsequently progressed to degree-level qualifications during the 1990s and 2000s, integrating perspectives from psychology, education, sociology, and disability studies. This trajectory culminated in the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education, an interdisciplinary program emphasising rights-based, person-centred practice (Flinders University, 2025). The curriculum has continued to evolve in response to sector reforms, including the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIA, 2021; Rillotta & Alexander, 2020).

Tertiary Disability Studies programs are offered in Australia, Canada, the United States, and Iceland (Rillotta & Alexander, 2020), contexts characterised by strong disability rights movements, welfare systems extending beyond strictly medical models, and policy frameworks that recognise disability as a social and structural issue rather than solely an individual impairment. However, Flinders University remains the only institution offering both the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education and the Masters of Disability Practice and Leadership (Developmental Education). Graduates of these accredited programs are eligible for full membership with the national self-regulating professional association, Developmental Educators Australia, and must meet ongoing professional development requirements and adhere to the Developmental Educators Australia Incorporated Code of Ethics and Practice (DEAI, 2026a).

In Australia, graduates of accredited Developmental Education programs can work across advocacy, policy, service coordination, and leadership roles within the disability sector. Positioned as disability specialists who work *with* rather than *on* people with disability, Developmental Educators (DEs) challenge conventional clinical hierarchies and provide an analytically useful case for examining how emerging professions establish professional recognition among established service systems.

Achieving professional recognition

Despite alignment with progressive disability frameworks, Developmental Education has faced challenges in achieving professional recognition. Professions that work with stigmatised groups, including people with disabilities, often face greater challenges in achieving professional recognition despite the complexity and significance of their work (Doyle et al., 2022; Leicht & Fennell, 2001). Limited understanding of Developmental Education and perceived overlap with established allied health disciplines have contributed to slow professional recognition and ongoing ambiguity regarding scope of practice (Ellison & Matthews, 2012; Rillotta & Alexander, 2020). In response, Developmental Educators Australia Incorporated (DEAI) was established in 2009 to support professional development and advance recognition. DEs were formally recognised as Allied Health Professionals in South Australia in 2011, affirming their place within multidisciplinary disability services (DEAI, 2026b). While this recognition marked a significant milestone, continued efforts remain necessary to consolidate professional identity and clarify professional scope of practice, reflecting broader international patterns in which emerging disability professions pursue ongoing recognition through rights-based frameworks, interdisciplinary training, and formalised scopes of practice.

Developmental Educators

Today in Australia, DEs work across a wide range of settings, engaging in planning, advocacy, service coordination, and policy development. They hold roles in state and federal government as well as non-government sectors, supporting people with diverse disabilities and neurodivergence across the life course (Rillotta & Alexander, 2020). Their holistic, developmental approach reinforces professional values of inclusion, autonomy, and community participation (DEAI, 2026c). At the core of DEs' practice is a commitment to self-determination and the recognition of people with disabilities as experts in their own lives.

As qualified allied health professionals, DEs specialise in working with people with disabilities through a social justice and human rights framework that promotes full and effective inclusion in society (DEAI, 2026c). Their practice is informed by the human rights, social, neurodiversity, and biopsychosocial models of disability, and they work in partnership with individuals, families, and support networks to deliver specialist services. These include skill development, behaviour support, advocacy, education, and capacity building (DEAI, 2026c).

DEs operate both independently and collaboratively within interdisciplinary teams, working alongside other allied health professionals such as Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists,

Speech Pathologists, Psychologists, Exercise Physiologists, Dietitians, and Social Workers, as well as medical and nursing professionals (DEAI, 2026a).

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is a government-funded program that provides individualised funding and support services to Australians with permanent and significant disabilities (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2021). Supporting approximately 500,000 Australians, the National Disability Insurance Scheme has increased demand for professionals with disability specific expertise, including DEs (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2021).

DEs are formally recognised by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as qualified providers of therapeutic supports (DEAI, 2026c). Under the National Disability Insurance Scheme Pricing Schedule (2026-2027), they are authorised to deliver Therapy, Employment and Early Childhood Supports at the same rate of pay as other allied health professionals including Occupational Therapy, Speech Pathology, Social Work and Rehabilitation Counselling. This includes conducting functional capacity assessments, skill development, developing behavioural supports, and individualised training. While some specialised support items remain restricted to other professions, DEs are sought after for their ability to work within multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary teams (Ellison & Lante, 2016; Rillotta & Alexander, 2020).

Challenging clinical language in disability practice

The work of DEs aligns closely with contemporary understandings of social determinants of health, which refer to the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes, such as the conditions in which people live, learn, work, and interact. These factors often shape the lived experience of disability. As new collaborations emerge between healthcare, public health, and social services, each sector brings different perspectives on social determinants, and these differing perspectives can lead to misunderstandings (Alderwick & Gottlieb, 2019). As such DEs find their broad, person-centred scope of practice is frequently misunderstood or conflated with other professional roles. Rather than medicalising social issues, DEs focus on addressing environmental and attitudinal barriers to inclusion. Consequently, clinical terminology such as “patient”, “treatment”, or “medical”, is misaligned with their practice. This disconnect contributes to some DEs’ discomfort with identifying as allied health professionals, despite formal professional recognition within that category. By tackling structural and attitudinal obstacles to inclusion, DEs enhance health and wellbeing in ways that extend beyond clinical intervention, offering a holistic and socially responsive approach to disability support.

Claiming space in allied health: Study rationale

This study examines how DEs negotiate professional identity and scope of practice within the allied health landscape. DEs assert professional claims over disability provision, a domain that has historically lacked cohesive ownership and is intersected by multiple established professions, including psychology, occupational therapy, and social work (Scotch, 1989). By examining how DEs define their scope of practice in this space, the study contributes to scholarship

on how emerging professions negotiate and maintain professional boundaries when scope of practice intersects with that of long-established professions.

Findings from a previous self-assessment survey indicated that many DEs experience ongoing challenges in achieving full professional recognition by professionals from more well-established allied health professions (Rillotta & Alexander, 2020). DEs reported limited understanding of their scope of practice among other allied health professionals, colleagues, people with disabilities, caregivers/families, and the public. These ongoing challenges highlight the need for continued efforts to clarify and communicate the distinct contributions of Developmental Education to the allied health sector. While the survey identified patterns of limited professional recognition and understanding of DE as a profession, it could not capture how DEs interpret these experiences, negotiate professional boundaries in practice, or articulate their scope within the allied health field. This limitation pointed to the need for qualitative exploration.

The current study aimed to address the research question: “How do Developmental Educators perceive and articulate their professional identity and scope of practice within the broader allied health landscape in Australia?”

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by several sociological theories of professions that define how Developmental Educators establish, negotiate, and sustain the status of Developmental Education as a profession, and how they experience their professional identities. This study draws most prominently on theories of professional recognition, jurisdiction and legitimacy (Abbott 1988; Gieryn, 1983; Kyratsis & Meda, 2026; Rubin, 2024) and of collective professional identity (Abbott, 1988; Kyratsis & Meda, 2026).

Professional recognition, jurisdiction and legitimacy

The “professional recognition” of any profession as distinct depends on others (e.g., other health professions, members of the public) accepting its right to claim authority within a certain professional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). “Professional jurisdiction” refers to the professional practices, functions, scope of practice, and expertise that distinguish one profession from another; it is “what constitutes a profession...what is done and by whom” (Rubin, 2024, p. 5). Successfully establishing a distinct professional jurisdiction contributes to “professional legitimacy”. Put simply, a profession must first demonstrate that it is distinct from other professions to be recognised as legitimate.

Professions may establish and maintain legitimacy by continually competing for and defending professional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Rubin, 2024). This competition and defence, known as “boundary-work” (Gieryn, 1983), comprises “purposeful efforts of professional groups and their members to influence the boundaries between professions” (Weber et al.,

2022, p. 2). Maintaining such boundaries is important because professional boundary “encroachment” (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026) by a similar profession may undermine a profession’s distinctiveness and, consequently, its legitimacy and recognition (Abbott, 1988). Some also suggest that professional legitimacy rests primarily on a profession’s “core character” rather than its distinct “functions or boundaries” (Abbott, 1995; Rubin, 2024, pp. 4-6).

Collective professional identity

Professional identity is “an individual’s self-definition as a member of a profession and is associated with the enactment of a professional role” (Chreim et al., 2007, p. 1515). Professional identities are not fixed. They are constructions requiring ongoing, active “identity work”: “activities to create and sustain identities congruent with self-concept” (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026, p. 2). Relevant to this study, the development of emerging professions can involve *collective identity work*: *shared* activities to define the values and norms of the profession and to maintain the boundaries of its distinctive professional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). Collective identity work can be done, for example, through “professional associations, socialization rituals, jurisdictional mandates, routines, identity prototypes, and distinctive professional logic” (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026, p. 2). For members of emerging professions in the early stages, demanding collective identity work is required to ensure a congruent collective professional identity (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026).

Together, these theories supported our examination of the complexities of Developmental Education establishing and maintaining professional recognition, and of DEs negotiating their professional identities.

Materials and methods

A qualitative study was conducted by utilising two focus groups conducted by researchers from the discipline of Disability and Community Inclusion, Flinders University. Focus group research is based on the idea that group interaction encourages participants to explore and clarify their individual and shared perspectives. This interaction can lead to a deeper understanding of the issues being discussed, as participants build on each other’s responses, challenge viewpoints, and generate new ideas collectively (Acocella, 2012; Tong, et al., 2007). The advantage of focus group interactions is that they can assist participants to explore their experiences and clarify their views in ways that a one-to-one interview may not provide (Kitzinger, 1995).

To be included in the study, participants needed to hold current full membership with DEAI. Focus group participants were recruited via a flyer sent to DEAI who then distributed it to all Australian members via email and social media. Fifteen South Australian DEs participated in the study, with group sizes of 7 and 8 respectively, consistent with recommended focus group parameters of 4-12 participants (Tong et al., 2007). Participants represented a range of pro-

fessional roles, including DE, Team Leader, Senior Practitioner, Manager, Activity Co-ordinator, and Lecturer. They had graduated between 1988 and 2016 and reported an average of 12 years of experience in the field (range: 1-29 years).

The scope of the study was intentionally limited to the perspectives of practising DEs. While the inclusion of other allied health professionals or service users may have provided valuable additional perspectives and comparative insight, the study was designed to focus specifically on the ways DEs themselves experience their professional identity. This scoping decision aligns with the study's aim to contribute to the literature on emerging professions by examining how DEs as a collective understand and articulate their own professional identity and define their scope of practice within the allied health landscape.

Participants were invited to one of two focus groups to discuss their professional roles as DEs currently working in the disability field. Building on the earlier survey of 121 DEs, participants in this study were presented with survey findings and invited to reflect on whether these results reflected their own experiences and challenges. Both focus groups were conducted in Adelaide, South Australia, and each session ran for 60 minutes. Focus groups were conducted by authors one and two, the first also holding full membership with Developmental Educators Australia Incorporated. Focus group participants were provided with an information sheet and gave both verbal and written consent to participate in this study and agreed to uphold the confidentiality of the interview discussions. The focus group interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behaviour Research Ethics Committee (No. 6576).

This study is informed by a critical disability studies perspective and undertaken by researchers who are both scholars of disability and participants in the educational and professional field under examination. Three authors are lecturers in the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education, and two authors hold full membership with Developmental Educators Australia. We therefore occupy a dual position as observers of, and contributors to, the professionalisation of Developmental Education. Rather than attempting to bracket out this positioning, we adopt a reflexive stance that recognises how our proximity to the field shapes the framing, interpretation, and aims of the research (Finlay, 2002). This insider perspective enabled a nuanced understanding of potential professional tensions and lived experience of professional identities pertinent to this study, while analytic rigour was supported through collaborative coding, transparency in analytic decisions, and engagement with the theoretical framework of established theories articulated above.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process included transcription of group interviews, identifying and labelling codes, developing initial themes to capture significant patterns, and defining what each theme represented and which aspects of the data it captured.

The first author and a postgraduate research assistant independently reviewed the transcripts, and generated open codes based on words and phrases used by participants. These open codes were then grouped into categories and subsequently developed into broader themes through an iterative process involving multiple rounds of coding and discussion to ensure consistency and rigour. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus at the open coding stage (Cascio et al., 2019).

Although the focus group questions were designed to prompt discussion around professional identity, scope of practice, and professional recognition, themes were not predetermined by the interview guide. Rather, themes were generated inductively through analysis of patterns in how participants interpreted, prioritised, and made sense of these issues across the dataset. Themes were constructed based on shared perspectives and recurring interpretive patterns rather than a direct mapping onto interview questions (O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004; Palmer et al., 2010). Three overarching themes were identified: professional identity as a disability specialist, the breadth of the Developmental Educator scope of practice, and the perceived need for greater promotion of Developmental Education as a profession.

Results

The three themes presented below capture recurring patterns in how participants articulated and interpreted their professional identity, scope of practice, and professional recognition within the allied health sector. Each are expanded upon below, including direct quotes to illustrate each theme.

Professional identity as a disability specialist

The DE role was described as highly diverse, covering a range of areas including youth justice, government departments, school settings, brain injury, massage therapy, mental health, and recreation sectors. Additionally, participants acknowledged that each individual DE often develops specific areas of focus based on their interests and professional experiences. Working diversely across existing disciplines made it difficult for DEs to communicate the Disability Education role succinctly, for example:

[...] it is not easy to, in a very small statement, say what a DE does. It really depends on where you work and what you do. There are obviously some commonalities, but it is not easy because it is so multidisciplinary. (participant #5)

It is like you’ve got this big list of skillsets, and you can do it all...And, I guess each DE has probably got their own passion and their own set of skills where they want to work within. (participant #13)

Some of the difficulty in explaining what a DE does was because the DEs’ scope of practice was seen as similar to other allied health professions. However, participants reported the DEs’ scope was also distinct:

We also overlap with other disciplines and that's a strength and that's sometimes also a challenge at the same time. (participant #5)

[...] it's a partnership with the OTs, the physios, the speechies and everyone getting together. But I'm the disability professional. So, when people in those other allied health roles don't have a strong background in physical or intellectual or neurological disabilities, you know, their discipline is narrowed. I see it as the partner and I'm the disability partner. (participant #1)

Despite this ambiguity, participants consistently identified disability expertise as the defining feature of their professional identity:

I often encourage people to say that we are disability specialists because that is where our strength is. (participant #5)

[...] I'm a disability specialist and I feel good when I say that. So, I feel like other disciplines can't say that. So, that is often the term that I will use when I talk about my profession. (participant #1)

[...] we are trained in disability and really we're the only [profession] that is. (participant #14)

Participant #1 further accented the value of DEs' disability expertise by stating that many health service providers still held "misconceptions about people with disability" and did not recognise co-occurring condition, such as dual disability of intellectual and psychosocial disability. Affirming DEs are "really good facilitators in supporting people that have those other complexities."

Participants reported that their academic training provided a strong foundation in disability-specific knowledge and practical application, which they perceived as contributing to current demand for DEs in the sector:

[...] from where I am, everybody wants DEs. They can't get enough of them at the moment with all these new agencies. (participant #13)

[...] people would go: "Oh, wow I want one of them [DEs]. Why can't we find them? Where are they?". (participant #7)

The breadth of the Developmental Education scope of practice

Participants were clear about the values that underpinned Developmental Education as a profession. They identified that person-centeredness, a holistic perspective, empowerment, self-advocacy, and a human rights-based approach were fundamental to their work. Person-centered practice was considered in part to be "[...] really honing (sic) in on people and who they are and what their interests are" [participant #11]. Some participants observed that other

professionals may focus primarily on specific areas of need, whereas DEs aim to consider the broader context of a person's life: "... the whole person and what effects they have in all parts of their life..." [participant #1]. Focus group participants considered DEs took a holistic approach, citing that other professionals may concentrate on only one aspect of the person's life (the professional's area of speciality). Empowerment and self-advocacy were also seen as professional values that "fundamentally underpins everything" a DE does [participant #7]. Another core element of the DE profession was said to be having a human rights approach, that is, one that respected and listened to the person with disability [participant #1].

Participants asserted DEs fulfill a variety of roles. For example, support co-ordination [participant #2], completing standardised assessments [participants #9 & #10], positive behaviour support [participant #9] and providing skill development for people with disability, their family members and disability support staff [participants #15 & #11].

Participants reflected on the importance of DEs to balance clinical practice with providing practical supports in the natural environments where people live, work and engage in leisure activities. This was contrasted with more traditional models of service delivery that may rely on office-based or clinical settings:

Well, actually, a DE will practically help...Instead of coming in and out in that kind of more clinical way. Whereas, I feel like families feel like some of those other professions, like they might write a plan and go: "Here you go". But they're not teaching those supporters how to use it. I think that's a huge strength of DEs, which families are really finding. (participant #11)

We [DEs] understand some of those situations that your family is in and we can come up with some practical strategies that might make your day-to-day lives a bit easier. (participant #12)

Furthermore, participants #11 and #15 provided examples of how working alongside people with disabilities in their environments adds value to the clinical role. One example was provided by participant #15, who recalled visiting a person with disability in their home; the visitation revealed that the client's inability to cook meals was because of the lack of facilities in the home, not because of the person's lack of skill. Conferring, participant #11 shared an instance of her visiting a child with disability at school, where she spent time speaking with the teacher and with the child. Through this interaction in the school environment, the DE was able to understand why a current emotional regulation program devised by another professional was not working. The DE adjusted the program to include items of interest to the child, which provided motivation for the child's engagement, leading to a successful outcome. While participants emphasised the value of this practical, hands-on approach, one participant cautioned that it is important to distinguish DE practice from that of support workers: "I think

as long as we're clear that it [DE] isn't a support worker role. I don't mean that as a negative thing either. Support workers are very important" [participant #10].

Promotion of the profession of Developmental Education

Most participants agreed the DE profession needed further promotion, providing a range of strategies that may improve the professional profile of DEs. Suggestions included "[...] engaging our current [DEAI] members or trying to get more [DEAI] membership" [participant #11]. However, another participant suggested to "[...] profile people that just have a DE degree that have gone on to big things. You know, they're holding high up positions" [participant #12]. Another participant acknowledged the need for extra funds: "[...] if we have a bit more money, we can promote the profession more" [participant #9].

Views were mixed regarding whether a change in professional title might enhance recognition. One participant suggested that renaming the role could help align it more closely with contemporary disability discourse: "[...] maybe we need to rename ourselves in order to be moving forward...so that we are more disability friendly in a way rather than education" [participant #6]. Others expressed concern that a title change could undermine existing progress and require restarting promotional efforts:

[...] a title change now [would] be quite difficult and we would start promoting our discipline all over again. And, I think like many other disciplines, some disciplines are not very descriptive in what their role title is. "OT" for example is also pretty broad and vague. I know it has taken them a long time as well to be recognised as professionals for what their role is. And, I think now we have achieved recognition by National Disability Insurance Agency, now that's really important and I think we just need to keep working away. I think also as DEs we need to take responsibility ourselves as well for promoting our profession. (participant #5)

Another participant reflected on the broader responsibility for professional promotion, noting that universities and training institutions also have a role to play:

So, I feel like we have come a really long way as a profession...it has taken quite some time, I think, to build our profile...I think it's deeper than that. I think it's about promotion of who we are...the university has a role. (participant #3)

Discussion

This discussion is not offered as a neutral account of an emergent profession, but as a critical examination grounded in close engagement with the field. Drawing on participants' accounts of their experiences as a DE and on several sociological theories of professions (Abbott 1988; Gieryn, 1983; Kyratsis & Meda, 2026; Rubin, 2024), the analysis examines how organisational, professional, and contextual dynamics shape the scope of practice and professional identity of DEs. The findings indicate that DEs possess a broad

scope of practice underpinned by professional values associated with disability rights, person-centredness, and empowerment, contributing to growing demand for their expertise across diverse disability contexts. Consistent with earlier research (Rillotta and Alexander, 2020), DEs in this study continue to report that their professional contributions to disability service systems remain poorly understood and under-recognised by others.

Rather than framing this challenge as one of overt jurisdictional conflict, the findings suggest that professional recognition for DEs is better understood as an outcome of interacting structural foundations, professional dynamics, and contextual conditions, which together perpetuate ambiguity regarding DEs' scope of practice within an otherwise collaborative allied health landscape.

Multidisciplinary practice, role ambiguity, and professional dynamics

Participants consistently emphasised the breadth of scope and multidisciplinary orientation of DEs as key strengths of the profession. This reflects the profession's educational foundations, which integrate content from education, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and health (Flinders University, 2025). Such integrative training supports flexible and responsive practice, but it can also complicate professional identity when roles are expansive or poorly delineated (Colyer, 2004; Jackson, et al., 2019).

In the present study, participants described working across diverse employment contexts and responsibilities; including collaborative work support workers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and teachers, to name a few. While DEs' scope of practice was reported to overlap with those of other allied health professions, particularly in activities such as selected assessments and support co-ordination, behaviour support, and supporting skill development, this overlap was not characterised as competitive or exclusionary. Instead, participants consistently emphasised collaborative and complementary relationships, aligning with research suggesting that overlap is common in multidisciplinary environments and does not in itself signal a threat to establishing professional jurisdiction (Klein, 1996).

Role ambiguity emerged as the dominant feature shaping professional identity of DEs and their professional recognition. Participants expressed uncertainty about how their role was understood within an allied health landscape characterised by overlapping professional jurisdiction. Importantly, this ambiguity was experienced as an internal and relational challenge rather than as active "boundary encroachment" (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026) by other professions.

Practice in everyday contexts, lived experience, and defining characteristics

Participants defined their professional identity as "disability specialists". They emphasised that disability-specific expertise and person-centred values distinguished Developmental Education from other professions. A defining feature of DE practice highlighted by participants

was work undertaken in everyday, non-clinical contexts such as homes, schools, and community settings. Participants emphasised delivering practical, context-responsive support alongside people with disabilities and their families. This orientation reflects some “core characteristics” that define Developmental Education as a profession, encompassing values-driven, person-centred, and rights-based professional practice shaped by lived experience. Having a clear understanding of these core characteristics may serve to bolster professional legitimacy (Rubin, 2024).

These core characteristics align with principles long advocated by the disability rights movement and with evidence that support delivered in non-clinical environments enhances outcomes and is highly valued by people with disabilities and their families (Mavromaras et al., 2018; Nancarrow & Borthwick, 2021; Singh, 2018). At the same time, participants reported that working outside conventional clinical settings contributed to confusion about the DE role, particularly in distinguishing their scope of practice from that of disability support workers.

Despite clearly defining the distinguishing characteristics of Developmental Education, participants reported ongoing challenges gaining professional recognition as the result of the defining characteristics of the DE role itself (i.e., broad, overlapping scope of practice; contextual responsiveness; and relational work) inherently intersecting with the work of numerous other disability professions and support roles, rather than as a failure to successfully claim and defend unique professional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Gieryn, 1983).

This illustrates how the core characteristics of Developmental Education itself could hinder its perceived professional distinctiveness in systems designed according to narrowly defined, clinically delimited professions (Hindhede & Larsen, 2020).

Defining collective professional identity for greater recognition

Given the challenges participants identified around establishing unique, distinct professional jurisdiction, outlined above, efforts to establish professional legitimacy may benefit from greater attention to how DEs’ collective professional *identity* may be distinct from that of other professions more-readily recognised within the medical model. DEs consistently described a shared values-driven professional identity, which may provide a stronger basis for establishing professional legitimacy in the face of an overlapping scope of practice (Rubin, 2024).

Specifically, DEs consistently described a deeply relational approach grounded in values of empowerment, person-centredness, and collaboration as a core characteristic of their collective professional identity, in which DEs *are led by* people with disability. These values may distinguish the professional identity of DEs from that of allied professions operating within a medical model grounded in values of paternalism (characterised by clinical distance, diagnosis, and treatment), in which professionals act *for* or *to* clients (Hindhede & Larsen, 2020;

Shortell, 1974). Understanding and articulating this coherent, distinctive, values-based professional identity of DEs may therefore strengthen the professional legitimacy of Developmental Education and, in turn, support its professional recognition.

Advancing public professional recognition

Participants' accounts suggest that advancing professional recognition for DEs depends on strategic efforts to increase public and broader allied health sector and collective professional identity of DEs. Participants described several strategies for such professional recognition, including:

- increasing professional membership in Developmental Educators Australia Incorporated,
- profiling qualified DEs as positive examples of the profession,
- increasing funding for promoting the profession,
- being cautious about suggestions to change professional title, and
- seeking assistance from university and training institutions to support professional recognition.

The publication of the Developmental Educators Australia Incorporated Scope of Practice (DEAI, 2026a) represents an important mechanism for increasing clarity around scope of practice and professional jurisdiction. Alongside inclusion in public sector classifications and National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing arrangements, these developments represent significant advancements in professional recognition of Developmental Education.

While strategic and structural efforts such as defining scope of practice and inclusion in peak bodies are essential for strengthening the collective professional identity of DEs, intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies also play a vital role in fostering a sense of professional identity and pride (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2020). DEs can affirm their collective professional identity by recognising that scope ambiguity is a natural part of emerging professions (Kyratsis & Meda, 2026). Mentoring, both receiving guidance from experienced professionals and offering support to newer practitioners, can also be especially powerful in transferring knowledge and cultivating a coherent professional identity and culture (Copnell, 2010). As practical approaches to collective identity work (Abbott, 1988), mentoring and research engagement are commonly reported mechanisms for fostering professional recognition in more consolidated professions. Their relative absence in participants' accounts may therefore be understood as evidence of a profession in an ongoing process of developing a coherent collective professional identity and associated professional legitimacy, rather than as evidence of deficiency as a valuable and worthwhile profession.

Finally, the findings highlight the significance of broader context, particularly disability policy reforms such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the development of Foundational Supports (Commonwealth of Australia, 2026), in shaping the demand for DEs and the professional recognition of Developmental Education. While the National Disability Insurance Scheme has expanded demand for disability-specific expertise, it has also intensified

expectations for role clarity and demonstrable value within competitive service environments.

Taken together, this analysis illuminates how greater professional recognition for Developmental Education may emerge through collective efforts to refine and perpetuate a coherent professional identity characterised by shared values and active efforts to advance public understanding of DE scope of practice. Understanding these interactions may help:

- explain why DEs may experience ongoing professional recognition and identity challenges despite current strong integration within multidisciplinary disability service systems, and
- inform active efforts to bolster the professional recognition of Developmental Education in the future.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, neither people with disabilities nor their families were interviewed to ascertain their perspectives of DEs and their roles. This represents an important area for further research. Additionally, while there are 373 registered DEs in Australia and New Zealand (DEAI, 2023), a small group of practising DEs participated in the focus groups. The small sample may not be representative of the larger DE population. Furthermore, while focus groups can be a valuable tool for generating insights into people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences, disadvantages include participants expressing socially desirable opinions to conform with the opinion of the group (Acocella, 2012).

It is also acknowledged that the first three authors teach into the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education course, with authors one and three holding full membership with Developmental Educators Australia. This may have introduced bias to the planning, data collection, analysis, or writing phases of research. However, the research team continuously reflected on their own biases and engaged in ongoing self-assessment, reflecting on their own beliefs and values and adhered to ethical research guidelines. Nevertheless, researcher involvement with the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education course makes it difficult to completely eliminate the potential for researcher bias. Hence the findings should be considered in relation to the researchers' positions (Clark & Vealé, 2018). Future research seeking the perspectives of people with disability and other allied health professions on the DE role would be valuable to 1) inform efforts to promote professional recognition, and 2) better inform how DEs can work in alliance with people with disability as experts in their own lives. Further opportunities for future research include investigating how the publication of the Developmental Educators Australia Scope of Practice (DEAI, 2026a) affects the collective professional identity of Developmental Educators.

Contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to the sociology of professions by examining Developmental Education as a profession emerging in response to needs that have historically been overlooked or

underserved by established professions in the disability sector. As such, DEs represent an emerging professional group that negotiates professional boundaries and jurisdiction, and that continues to define their scope of practice, and assert their professional identity within a well-established allied health field. This makes Developmental Education a compelling case study for understanding how newly emerging professions gain professional recognition and how professionals in emerging professions develop their professional identities.

Conclusion

Developmental Education represents an emerging profession within the disability sector, characterised by a person-centred and multidisciplinary approach to support. Building on previous survey research (Rillotta and Alexander, 2020), this study provides deeper insight into how DEs perceive and articulate their professional identity and scope of practice, with participants describing roles that extend beyond direct client support to include collaboration with families, disability support workers, and interdisciplinary teams. These accounts reflect both the breadth and depth of DE expertise and the growing demand for their skills across diverse disability contexts.

Despite this demand, DEs continue to face challenges in establishing unique professional jurisdiction and legitimacy. Paradoxically, many of these challenges stem from the very strengths that define Developmental Education as a profession with a broad scope of practice and a relational approach grounded in values of empowerment, person-centredness, and collaboration. While these attributes align closely with contemporary disability support frameworks, they also contribute to scope-of-practice ambiguity and complicate efforts to define and maintain professional jurisdiction within the allied health landscape.

This paradox reflects broader dynamics in the emergence of new professions, where establishing professional boundaries, negotiating collective professional identities, and the pursuit of professional recognition are ongoing processes. Rather than advocating for Developmental Education as a profession, this paper contributes a sociological analysis of how DEs navigate professional identity, negotiate professional legitimacy, and claim professional jurisdiction within a contested allied health field. The recent adoption of a formal Scope of Practice (DEAI, 2026a) represents an important step toward clarifying professional scope and advancing professional recognition. Continued efforts to articulate the distinct value of DE practice will be essential to securing its place within the evolving allied health system. By examining these processes, the study also offers insights relevant to other emerging professions working in complex, interdisciplinary, and rights-based domains.

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Author Contributions

JA & FR conceived the study and were responsible for the design and focus groups. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by JA and MB and FR.

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Conflict of Interest

JA & MB hold full membership with Developmental Educators Australia. Three authors are lecturers in the Bachelor of Disability and Developmental Education at Flinders University, South Australia.

Ethics Statements

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behaviour Research Ethics Committee (Project No. 6576).

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Developing Professional Status: Child Welfare Workers, Social Workers and Social Educators in Norwegian Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of how the position of employees with a bachelor's degree related to social work in Norwegian schools has developed from 1997-2024. The analyses are based on administrative data on education and labour market outcomes made available by Statistics Norway. The occupational codes used are interpreted as the outcome of jurisdictional negotiations across legal, public, and workplace arenas, in line with Abbott's theory of professional development. While the number and proportion of social work professionals in schools have increased, recognition of their competence—as reflected in occupation, salary and employment percentage—varies. Meanwhile, employment as assistants has remained consistent, highlighting school social work as a fragile jurisdiction. Their employment may also be legitimised as individual rights to special education, potentially explaining a stronger position for social educators.

Keywords

School social work, professional status, child welfare workers, social workers, social educators, welfare-state professions

Introduction

School is, and has historically been, a contested site for debates about schooling, learning, inclusion, and the development of democracy, where actors with different competences and perspectives shape the school (Højholt & Kousholt, 2020). This paper explores the evolving status of one such group of actors: the social work professions in Norwegian schools.

In recent decades, expectations of schools have expanded internationally, both in relation to inclusive education, as articulated in the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994), and to the care of students' mental health and well-being (Margaretha et al., 2023). During this period, school social work has been described as a growing field of expertise focused on supporting students' well-being, both individually and through school-wide preventative measures (Huxtable, 2022). However, professional roles, qualifications and organisation vary across contexts, making cross-national comparison challenging.

Within the Scandinavian states, schools have integrated new professions concerned with the social aspects of schooling to varying degrees and through different arrangements. In Sweden, social workers have been legally required as part of the school health service for students since 2010 (Perlinski et al., 2026). In Denmark, social pedagogues have been integrated into everyday school practices following a reform in 2014 (Thingstrup et al., 2018), while social workers have not been systematically integrated into schools (Strandby et al., 2023). These developments illustrate that the state plays a key role in regulating which professions are granted formal recognition within a welfare-state context.

In Norway, no regulatory requirements govern social work or social pedagogic professions in schools. However, according to figures from professional unions, child welfare workers, social workers and social educators have been increasingly employed in Norwegian schools since the 1990s (Borg et al., 2015; Håvie, 2012). These professions are often collectively referred to as social workers and may be seen as representing a perspective characterised by a holistic understanding of individuals within their social and societal contexts (Henriksen et al., 2025). Because they all hold bachelor's degrees related to social work (BSW), they may collectively be referred to as BSW professionals (Singstad et al., 2024). Social educators originated in the care of people with intellectual disabilities (Messel, 2013). They hold dual qualifications, as they are also licensed healthcare personnel.

Professions are continuously shaped by shifts in societal needs, changes in the objective foundations of their work, and competition with other occupational groups (Abbott, 1988). Professional development can be understood as negotiating professional boundaries through claims to jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). Welfare-state professions are granted authority to perform tasks on behalf of society to meet fundamental needs of the population (Alexandra & Miller, 2003). At the macro level, the status of a welfare-state profession may be understood as a contractual relationship with the state, which provides legitimacy for professional claims

to jurisdiction and influence in public and policy processes in their field of expertise (Eriksen & Molander, 2008). This institutional legitimacy underpins jurisdictional negotiations at the workplace level.

The legitimacy of the BSW professions has developed within specific welfare institutions that have constituted an important part of the objective foundation of their work. As these institutions have evolved, the professions have adapted and are now present in a range of institutions where their shared generalist competence is relevant (Henriksen et al., 2024). While they are recognised as welfare-state professions, their entry into schools may represent a new phase of professional development.

Recently, the authorities have stated that there is a need for more information about occupational groups in schools other than teachers (Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). A report from Statistics Norway documents the presence, educational backgrounds and employment characteristics of such personnel in student-related work in 2022. At that time, there were 3,006 BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools, making them a small group within the school workforce (Steffensen & Dystland, 2024). While this report shows that the majority of BSW professionals are engaged in student-related work, research on school social work and BSW professionals' roles and status in Norwegian schools remains limited (Singstad et al., 2024). Some peer-reviewed qualitative studies (Eek et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Michelsen, 2019) and case and survey reports (Bergene et al., 2021; Mordal, 2017; Nyhus et al., 2014) have addressed the topic. Several studies across Scandinavia have explored the developing roles and status of these newer professions in schools through the lens of jurisdictional negotiations (Eek et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017). In Norwegian schools, the lack of formal regulation and legal requirements may contribute to unclear roles and status at the workplace level while also creating opportunities for locally developed roles (Berg et al., 2024; Gjertsen et al., 2018; Singstad et al., 2024).

Drawing on the concept of jurisdiction, professional status here refers to the degree to which a profession is recognised as having legitimate authority over areas of professional work. Given the absence of formal jurisdiction in schools, the extent to which BSW professionals are recognised and positioned at the workplace level may provide an indication of how the profession's status is developing within the educational field. Since current knowledge about their occupational positioning is largely limited to local contexts or specific points in time, the empirical basis for discussions about their position as a group within the field of education has been limited. Accordingly, this study explores their evolving professional status through the following research question:

How have the employment patterns of BSW professionals in Norwegian compulsory schools developed from 1997-2024?

This study analyses measurable indicators that reflect how BSW professionals have been positioned within schools over an extended period by combining educational and occupational data from Statistics Norway. To understand this development in the context of changing school conditions, the following section provides relevant background information.

Division of labour in the context of Norwegian schools

Unlike many other countries, most children in Norway attend public schools (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2025). Since 1997, children have entered school at the age of six, and ten years of schooling have been compulsory. Schools are expected to meet the needs of all children, who have the right to attend their local school (Education Act, 2023). Norwegian schools are governed through a system in which the state sets the overall framework, while municipalities interpret and implement it at the local level (Sivesind, 2024). The absence of formal regulation and national guidelines for employing non-teaching professionals is justified by the need for local autonomy, as professional roles and service needs may vary between schools and areas (NOU 2019:23).

A major reform in 1992 reduced the number of specialised schools and increased student diversity in mainstream education. Since Norway's commitment to the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, inclusion has been mentioned with increasing frequency in education policy (Haug, 2024), alongside a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020)). However, remedial measures such as alternative learning arenas, specialised departments and specialised schools still exist. The number of students in alternative arenas has even increased over time (Nordahl et al., 2018).

While schools are required to provide access to school health services and educational-psychological counselling services, the professionals delivering these services are usually employed externally, and schools have been characterised by a mono-professional structure. Teachers have traditionally worked alongside teaching assistants in supporting roles. This division of labour reflects early welfare-state arrangements, in which one occupation holds full jurisdiction while others occupy supporting or subordinate roles (Erichsen, 1996).

Teachers' workplace jurisdiction remains strong, as they are still the only school-employed profession with legally mandated responsibility for student-related work. Statutory student-teacher ratios introduced in 2018 further reinforce their presence (Pedersen et al., 2022). Teachers' roles encompass both didactic and social-pedagogical aspects of education. In primary schools, much guidance related to social and emotional difficulties is provided by students' contact teachers (Singstad et al., 2024). Most secondary schools have a guidance counsellor position, which has traditionally been held by teachers (Michelsen, 2019).

From the 1990s onwards, education policy shifted towards a stronger focus on learning outcomes (Prøitz, 2014). Curriculum reforms aligned with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) policies, alongside increased external control inspired by new

public management, have pressured teachers' professional autonomy (Askling et al., 2016). Teachers' roles have expanded as new responsibilities have been added, with expectations layered onto existing tasks rather than replacing them (Caspersen et al., 2026). As demands on schools have become more complex, teachers' jurisdiction has expanded accordingly.

The introduction of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools

Increased complexity is also problematised in policies calling for other types of professionals in schools. Several policy papers have highlighted enhanced interprofessional collaboration, beginning with the government paper *Time for Learning*, which emphasised enabling teachers to concentrate on their core task of teaching (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010)). Students' right to a safe psychosocial learning environment and the social and emotional needs of an increasingly diverse student population have also been highlighted (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020); Meld. St. 20 (2012-2013); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024); NOU 2010:7; NOU 2019:23). Service development and research projects have been initiated by the authorities to promote more inclusive schools (Nordhagen et al., 2022) and interprofessional collaboration within and across services through initiatives such as *The support network for the students* (Borg et al., 2014; Borg et al., 2022). BSW professionals have participated in some of these initiatives as milieu therapists, indicating opportunities for new areas of work despite the absence of formal regulation.

Milieu therapist is a common occupational title for BSW professionals across a range of welfare arenas and is the preferred designation used by the professions' unions for BSW professionals working in schools. In schools, milieu therapy is not therapy in a clinical sense; rather it involves planned and systematic efforts to promote students' well-being, participation, learning and social development (Borg & Lyng, 2019). Both the teachers' union and the BSW union describe school-based milieu therapists as undertaking preventative work at individual, group and organisational levels, as well as working with individual students based on special education decisions (Nyhus et al., 2014). However, milieu therapist is not a protected title, and BSW professionals may compete with special education teachers, paraprofessionals with certificates in child and youth care and unqualified staff, all of whom may be involved in school-based social support (Bergene et al., 2021).

The increased presence of BSW professionals in schools has been interpreted as a response to locally identified needs (Borg et al., 2015). For newly introduced occupational groups, clear leadership support can be crucial to their integration and to strengthening their professional status within the school organisation (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Michelsen, 2019). However, previous findings indicate uncertainty about how school leaders perceive BSW professionals. Non-peer-reviewed reports examining how employees with different educational backgrounds are utilised suggest differences in the roles of BSW professionals. Social educators appear more closely linked to students with diagnoses and special education needs than social workers and child welfare workers (Bergene et al., 2021; Borg et al., 2015). Child welfare workers and social workers are most often reported to work as milieu therapists. While this is also common

among social educators, they are more frequently reported to work as assistants, teachers and special educators than the other two groups (Bergene et al., 2021).

In a qualitative study, Eek et al. (2024) examined school leaders' rationales for employing social educators in primary schools. They found that school leaders referred to students' increasingly complex needs and emphasised the value of hiring autonomous professionals who were present throughout the school week. Special education decisions also appeared central to leaders' legitimisation of employing BSW professionals (Eek et al., 2024). In both this study and a report on schools that had actively prioritised milieu therapists (Borg & Lyng, 2019), school leaders placed greater emphasis on the generalist competence of BSW professionals than on distinctions between their specific educational backgrounds.

By mapping all BSW professionals employed in Norwegian schools over an extended period and analysing group-level patterns, this study examines how the status of BSW professions has developed, both collectively and across distinct professional groups. The absence of designated roles and statutory requirements makes BSW professions in Norwegian schools an informative case for examining how professional status develops locally in response to welfare-state needs under conditions of weak formal jurisdiction and high local autonomy.

Data description

The analyses are based on administrative data on education and labour market outcomes from Statistics Norway. These data enable detailed examination of individuals' educational backgrounds and professional profiles. We draw on registers covering education, income (tax records) and employment for the period 1997-2024. The dataset includes all individuals employed in ordinary primary and lower secondary schools (corresponding to NACE code 80.120 until 2007 and code 85.201 thereafter). This includes both private and public schools. Private schools constitute approximately 10% of all schools (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). From 2007 onwards, occupational codes are available, enabling analysis of the occupations held within schools. All occupational codes in Statistics Norway describe both the type of work performed and the educational level required.

BSW professionals can be identified using both occupational codes and educational data. We begin with educational data because we are interested in how BSW education is recognised. A BSW is defined as an individual who has completed a higher education degree in child welfare, social work or social education at the time of employment measurement. However, individuals who also hold a teaching qualification in the year of analysis are classified as teachers. We define teachers in accordance with official statistics from Statistics Norway (Iversen et al., 2021). For the analyses of occupational codes, we apply a 50% threshold. From 2015 onwards, we use the agreed position percentage; for earlier years, we use a three-category classification of agreed working hours, in which the first category, short part-time, corresponds roughly to less than 50% of full-time employment.

As an additional indicator of competence recognition, we include salary data. To examine differences in wages, we use annual pension-qualifying income in the year of analysis. This measure includes all income from employment or self-employment but excludes capital income. To assess systematic differences in wages across occupational codes, we conduct multivariate analyses of estimated differences in standardised wages. To account for unobserved heterogeneity that could bias wage comparisons across occupational groups in schools, we include municipality and year fixed effects in all specifications. Municipality fixed effects absorb time-invariant local differences, such as labour market conditions and municipal pay practices, while year fixed effects control for nationwide wage trends and year-specific shocks. Our estimates therefore rely on within-municipality, within-year variation, reducing the risk that wage gaps reflect spatial or temporal confounders rather than genuine occupational differences. We additionally control for years since completion of BSW education (and its square, to allow for diminishing returns over time), employment share (full-time equivalent), and whether a master's degree has been obtained, accounting for experience, part-time work, and further qualification. Because employment share is only available from 2015 onwards, analyses controlling for it cover 2015-2024. Municipality fixed effects capture only time-invariant differences and do not account for time-varying local conditions, such as fluctuations in municipal finances or local labour market demand. To the extent that such factors are correlated with both occupational composition and wages, estimates may still be biased.

Results

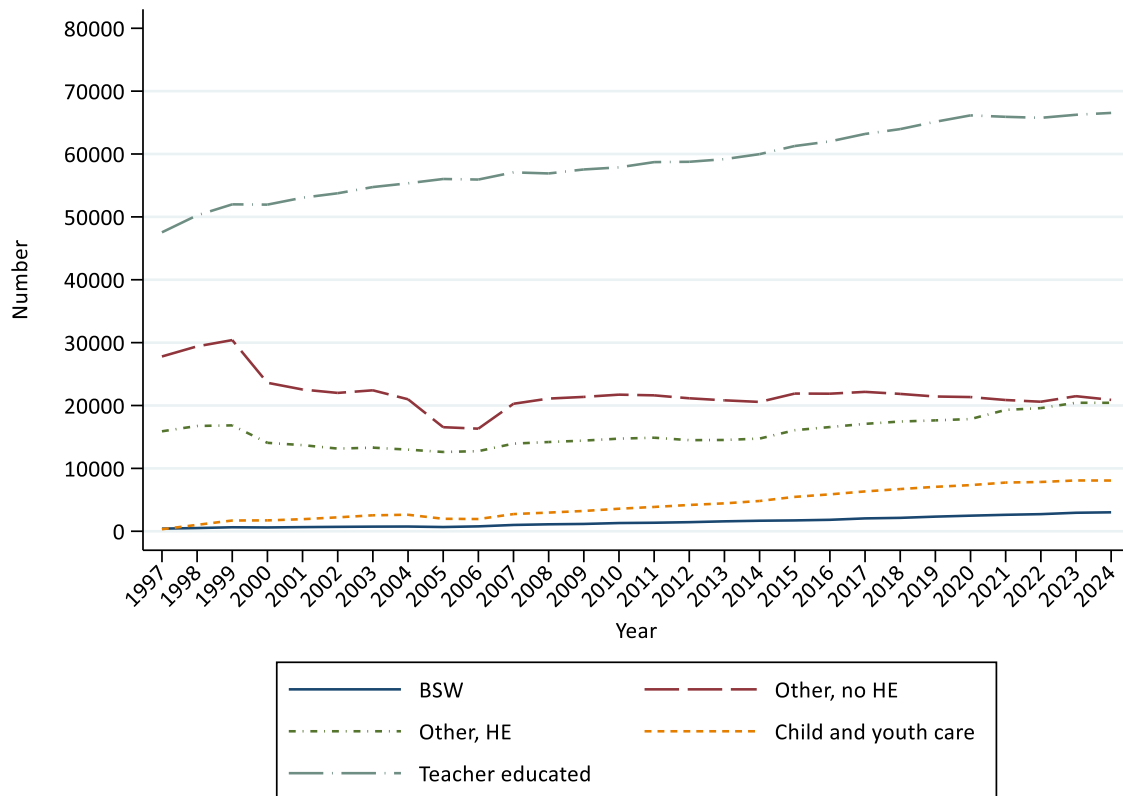
The employment of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools

We found a steady increase in the number of school employees with a bachelor's degree in child welfare, social work or social education in Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, rising from 422 in 1997 to 3,016 in 2024. Their share of all school employees increased from 0.5% in 1997 to 2.8% in 2024. In 2024, 4.6% of all BSW-educated school employees had obtained a master's degree. The average employment percentage for BSW professionals in 2024 was 78.5%, compared with 92.9% for teachers.

As shown in Figure 1, the increase in BSW professionals in schools occurred alongside other changes in the school workforce. Vocational training in child and youth care was introduced in 1994, and the number of paraprofessionals holding this qualification increased steadily from fewer than 1,000 to more than 8,000 in 2024. Compared with this pronounced growth, the increase in BSW professionals was more modest.

Figure 1

The development in number of school employees holding a teaching degree, child and youth care certificate, BSW degree, other higher education or no higher education, 1997-2024.

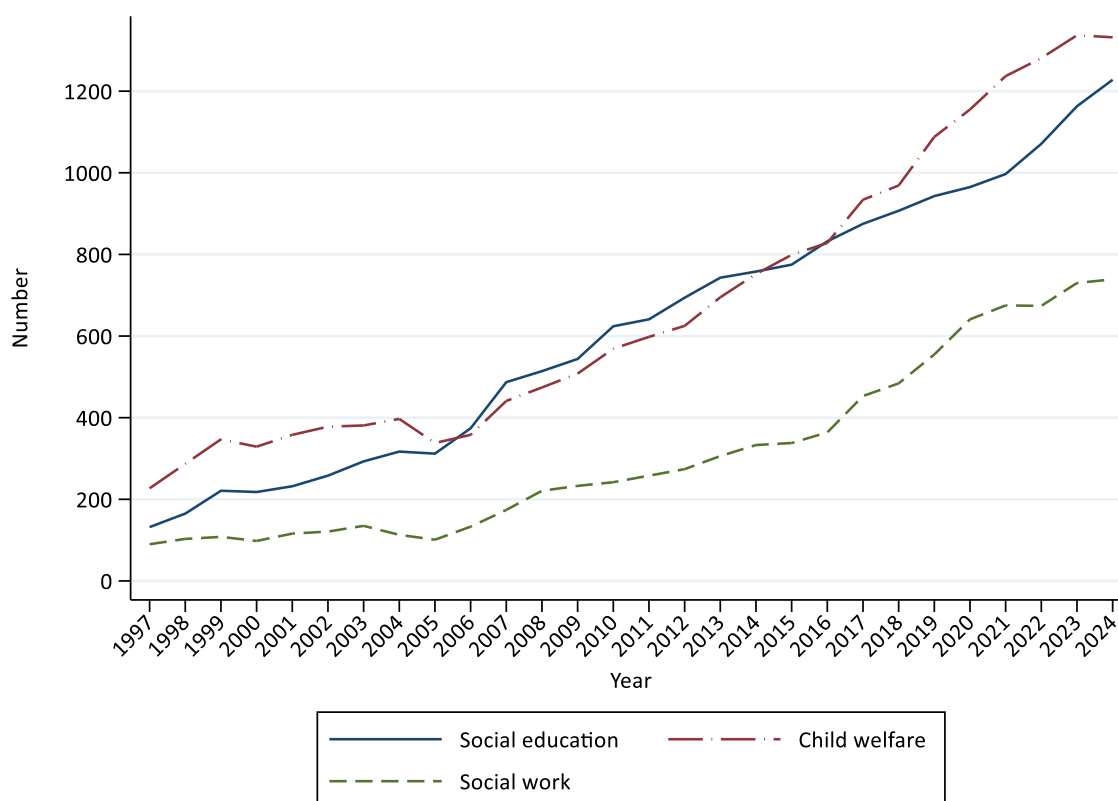


Changes were also evident in the “other” categories. The number of employees without higher education declined substantially, while the number with higher education increased moderately, reflecting a broader societal trend towards higher educational attainment. Teachers remained the dominant education group, increasing from approximately 48,000 employees in 1997 to more than 66,000 in 2024.

We next examined the distribution of BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools across the three educational backgrounds, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Number of BSW professionals working in Norwegian schools (grades 1-10), by type of BSW education



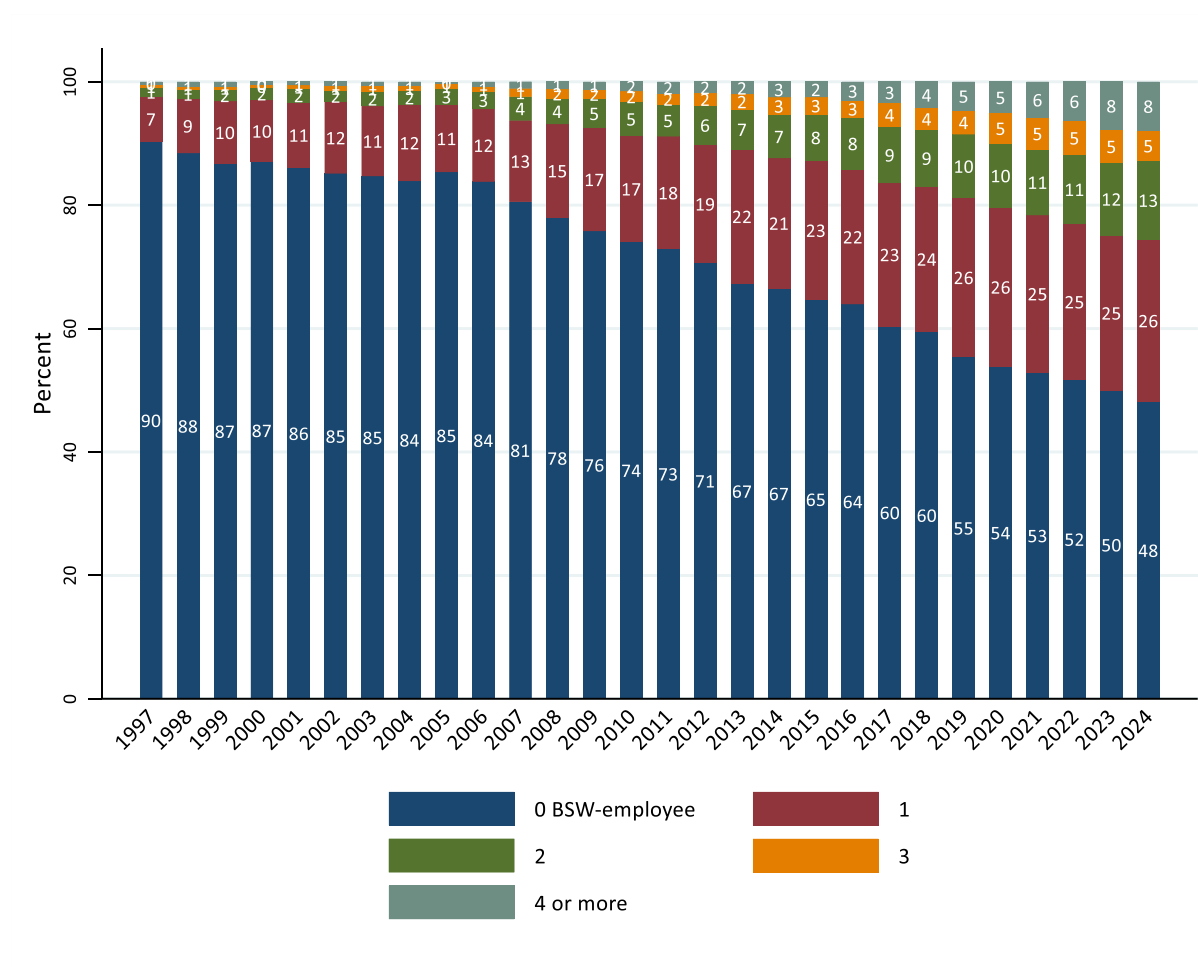
Throughout the period, social workers represented the smallest subgroup, while child welfare workers and social educators alternated as the largest. In 2024, BSW professionals employed in schools comprised 22% social workers, 37% social educators and 41% child welfare workers.

BSW professionals' distribution across schools

Since school leaders make employment decisions, changes in the number of schools employing BSW professionals may indicate shifts in their status. We therefore examined both the share of schools employing BSW professionals and their distribution across these schools from 1997 to 2024 (Figure 3). The proportion of schools employing BSW professionals increased substantially, from less than 10% in 1997 to 52% in 2024. Among schools employing BSW professionals, half had only one such employee in 2024. Some schools have prioritised employing larger numbers of BSW professionals as part of whole-school preventative strategies (Borg & Lyng, 2019), which may help explain the increase in schools employing four or more. However, our data do not capture variations in organisational structures, and other explanations, such as employing BSW professionals in alternative learning arenas, cannot be ruled out.

Figure 3

Share of schools employing 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or more BSW professionals



Although most BSW professionals did not work alongside another BSW colleague, there was an increasing trend towards schools employing more than one. This could indicate a strengthening of their position at the school level through access to a professional community of like-minded colleagues, even if limited to one or two individuals. However, this would depend on additional factors, such as the status associated with their occupation.

The occupations of BSW professionals in schools

Thus far, we have examined the prevalence of employees holding a bachelor's degree in child welfare, social work or social education in schools, regardless of their employment percentage or occupation. In the following analysis of occupational codes, we focus on employees potentially involved in day-to-day interprofessional collaboration and therefore include only BSW professionals with an employment percentage of 50% or higher.

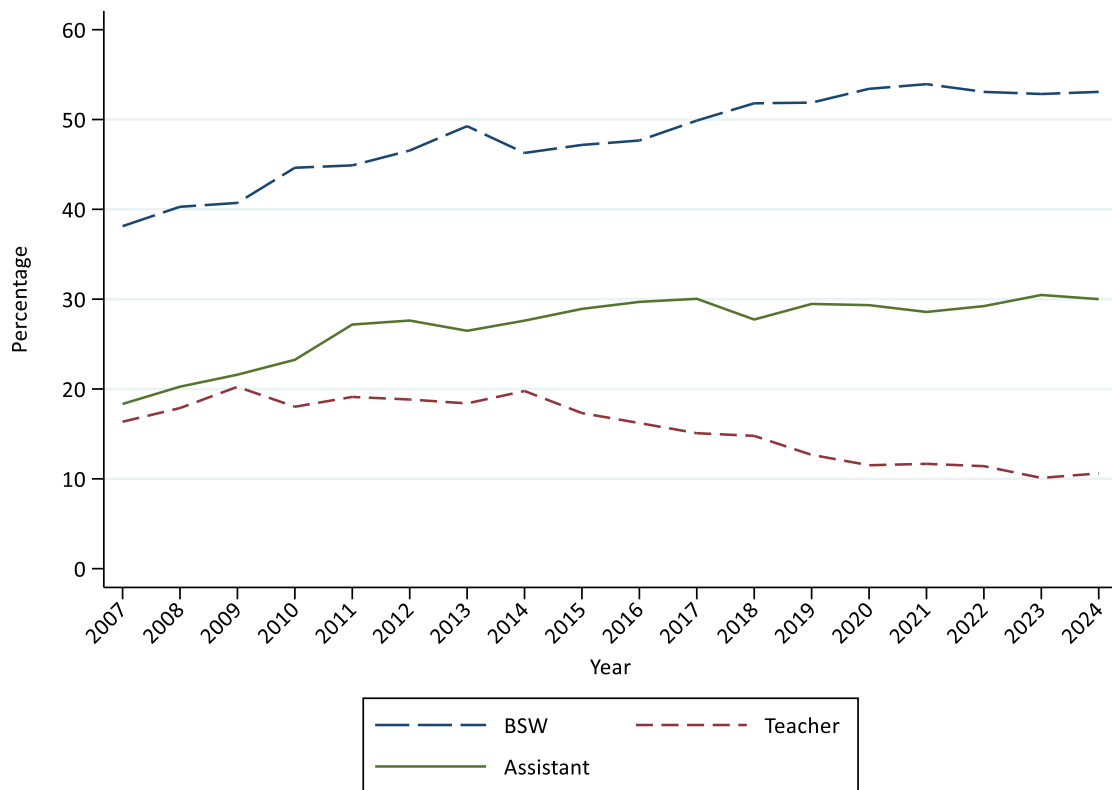
Across the period, school employees with a BSW degree were registered under more than 200 occupational codes, with varying required education levels and tasks. We created one

category for each of the three occupational codes directly linked to the respective BSW educational backgrounds. In addition, we analysed three occupational categories related to student-focused work in schools: *assistant*, *teacher* and *milieu therapist*. Together, these six categories covered the majority of BSW professionals. Fewer than 5% of BSW professionals were engaged in administrative roles. A small number were registered in other occupations, such as nurse or occupational therapist. Occupations unrelated to welfare, health or education were treated as missing in the analysis.

The *teacher* category included all positions in which teaching was the primary area of responsibility, including special education teachers. The *assistant* category comprised occupations requiring upper-secondary education or less, such as teacher assistant or social work assistant. Most BSW professionals in this category were employed as social work assistants, a role more closely involved with the school environment than that of a teacher assistant. The *milieu therapist* category comprised codes explicitly using the term milieu therapist, with or without reference to a specific educational background. When paired with an occupational code indicating bachelor-level education, the title social work assistant was also included. Only 0.4% of BSW professionals were registered under codes linked to the guidance counsellor position; these were included in the milieu therapist category. The distribution of BSW professionals across assistant, teacher, and BSW-relevant positions is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Percentage of BSW professionals employed as assistants, teachers or in occupations relevant to BSW education, 2007-2024



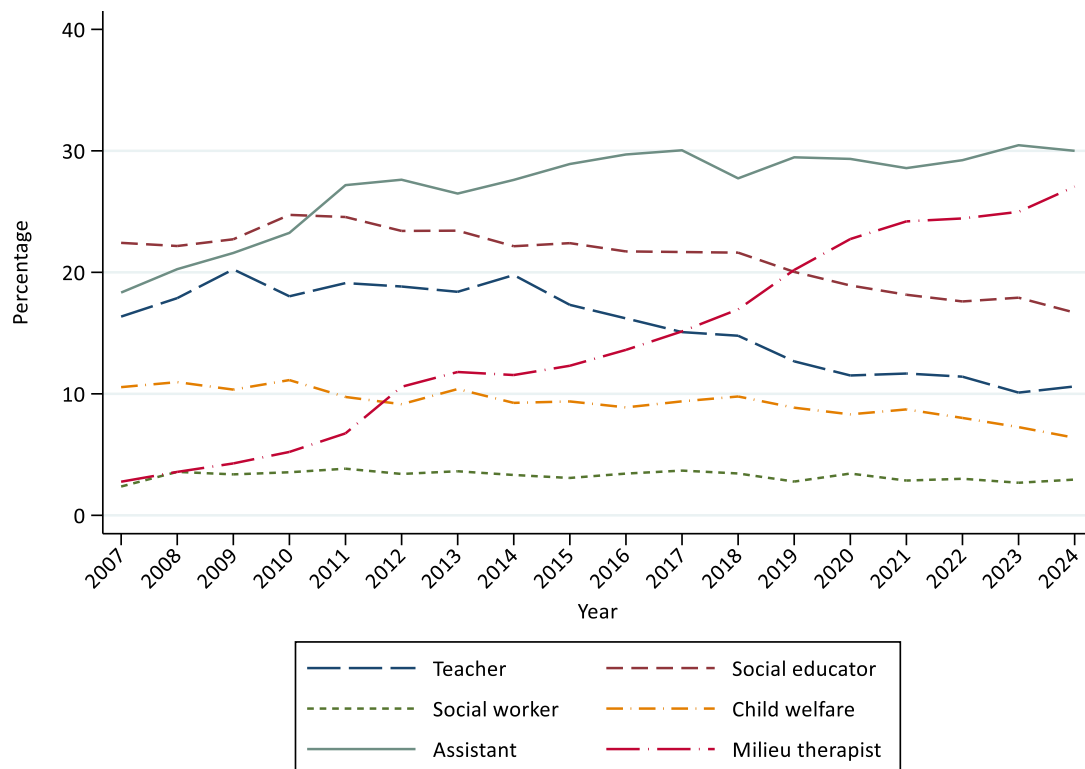
The share of BSW professionals registered as assistants has remained stable at approximately 30% since 2011. This suggests that part of the increase in BSW professionals in schools reflects their continued employment in roles that do not require higher education and are formally associated with lower degrees of professional autonomy. However, by 2024, 53% of BSW professionals were registered under occupational codes indicating the appropriate level of education and describing work relevant to their training. The use of these codes has increased over time, potentially indicating growing recognition of their competence as bachelor-level social work professionals. The declining proportion of BSW professionals employed as teachers supports this interpretation, suggesting a shift from teacher substitution towards social work.

To further explore occupational differentiation, we repeated the analysis by disaggregating BSW-relevant occupations into milieu therapist and education-specific subcategories (Figure 5). When examining differentiated BSW-relevant occupations, several nuances emerged. Child welfare worker and social worker remained the least-used occupational categories throughout the period, while social educator consistently remained the largest education-specific occupation. Milieu therapist became the second-largest from 2019 onwards, possibly

reflecting some success in union advocacy for the adoption of milieu therapist as a job title for BSW professionals. Notably, when disaggregated, assistant remained the largest occupational category throughout the period.

Figure 5

Percentage of BSW professionals employed as teachers, assistants, milieu therapists or in education-specific occupational categories, 2007-2024

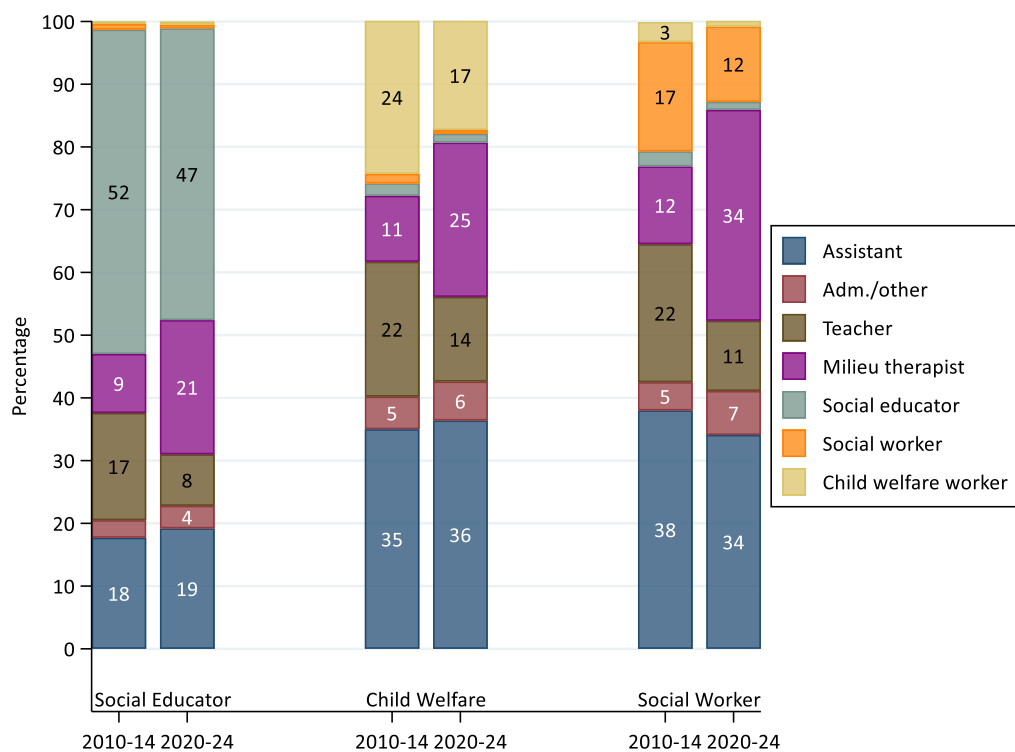


Occupational codes and educational background

To examine subgroup differences in status, we analysed the alignment between educational background and occupational category. We compared average distributions in an early and a late phase of the study period to capture potential changes within and between the subgroups, as shown in Figure 6. Education-specific occupational codes were predominantly used for individuals holding the corresponding qualification, although some BSW professionals were registered under occupations linked to one of the other two educational backgrounds.

Figure 6

Distribution of the three subgroups of BSW professionals across occupational categories



Our analysis of the first period revealed notable differences between the BSW professions in their distribution across occupational categories, particularly regarding education-specific occupations and the assistant category. In the period 2010-2014, 52% of social educators were registered in occupations explicitly aligned with their educational background, compared with 24% of child welfare workers and 17% of social workers. Meanwhile, social workers and child welfare workers were employed as assistants considerably more often than social educators. This difference between the three groups remained consistent over time. The decline in the teacher category was also present in all three groups. While the assistant category remained considerably more prevalent among child welfare workers and social workers than among social educators, movement into the milieu therapist category was particularly prominent among social workers.

Because occupational codes are intended to describe the nature of the work, our data suggest that social educators are recognised as a specific professional category relevant to schools more often than the other two professions, which most often hold occupations signalling generalist competencies. The recognition of BSW professionals' competence in such occupations appears less clear, given the continued use of the assistant category.

Employment percentage and salary level

Given that a substantial share of BSW professionals has been employed in positions not aligned with their educational level, we considered it important to further explore differences in status between all BSW professionals in occupations with and without educational requirements, including those in smaller positions. As indicators of appreciation and recognition of competence, we analysed employment percentages and salary levels.

The type of BSW education was associated with differences in employment percentage. Social educators had a slightly higher average employment percentage (82.6%) than child welfare workers (77.8%) and social workers (78.2%). The main difference, however, was between employment as an assistant and employment in occupations requiring a higher level of education. When BSW professionals across the three educational backgrounds were registered as assistants, the mean employment percentage was close to 70%. When their occupation was milieu therapist, social educator, child welfare worker or social worker, the average employment percentage was closer to 80%.

These data do not capture the tasks performed. However, the assistant occupational codes indicate lower educational requirements as well as lower levels of independence and autonomy. Lower employment percentages may therefore reflect less time spent in arenas where planning, evaluating and decision-making occur, potentially reinforcing assistants' subordinate position in the workplace division of labour.

Salary level is typically associated with the type of position held. To obtain a more precise measure of the difference between being employed as an assistant and being employed in a BSW-designated occupation, we compared wages. Estimated wage differences between BSW professionals in assistant positions and those in BSW occupational codes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Estimated wage gap for BSW-educated workers in assistant occupations compared with those in BSW-designated occupations: baseline and fixed-effects estimates

VARIABLES	(1) norm_w	(2) norm_w	(3) norm_w
Assistant	−0.142*** (0.006)	−0.044*** (0.003)	−0.044*** (0.004)
Observations	18,989	18,989	18,989
Controls	NO	YES	YES
FE	NO	NO	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. |

Note: The dependent variable is wage normalised as deviation from the mean wage among BSW-educated workers in the same year: $(\text{wage} - \text{mean wage}) / \text{mean wage}$. Controls in Model 2 include employment percentage only. Controls in Model 3 include having a master's degree, years since BSW education, years since BSW education squared and employment percentage. Fixed effects include year and municipality.

On average, the wage gap between BSW professionals in assistant positions and those in BSW-designated positions is approximately 14% of the mean wage. After controlling for employment percentage in Model 2, this gap narrows to 4.4%. This adjusted estimate remains robust when including additional controls for years since completing BSW education, master's degree, year, and home municipality in Model 3. These findings suggest that occupational titles signal how workers are valued in the labour market, although differences in employment percentage explain a substantial part of the wage gap. To further explore the assistant position, we compared BSW-educated assistants with paraprofessionals holding a certificate in child and youth care (Table 2).

Table 2

Estimated wage gap for BSW-educated in assistant occupations compared with paraprofessionals in assistant occupations

VARIABLES	(1) norm_w
Assistant BSW	0.128*** (0.004)
Observations	72,111
Controls	YES
FE	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Note: The dependent variable is wage normalised as deviation from the mean wage among assistants (BSW- or vocationally educated) in the same year: $(\text{wage} - \text{mean wage}) / \text{mean wage}$. Controls include having a master's degree, years worked in school, years worked in school squared and employment percentage. Fixed effects include year and municipality.

We found that the wage gap between BSW-educated assistants and paraprofessionals with a certificate in child and youth care in the same position is approximately 13% of the mean assistant wage. This suggests that employers may recognise and reward the additional competencies associated with BSW education, even when individuals are not formally employed in BSW-designated positions. The assistant position thus appears occupationally ambiguous:

it is not fully recognised as BSW-level work, yet BSW-educated workers in this position are compensated above workers with vocational child and youth care training.

Discussion

This study explored the employment patterns of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools and how they have changed over time in the absence of legislative anchoring. We found a substantial increase in the employment of BSW professionals in schools over the 27-year period studied, with 52% of schools employing one or more by 2024. We also found a somewhat stronger association between BSW education and occupations related to school social work over time. In the following, we discuss how these findings may contribute to understanding the status of the BSW profession within schools. As an exploratory study, our analysis also raises questions and identifies avenues for future research that extend beyond the scope of this article.

School social work as a new jurisdiction?

Although BSW professionals remain a minority within the total school workforce, their growing presence may contribute to jurisdictional changes. Jurisdictional change generally takes place either through external shifts that open a new jurisdiction or through professions actively seeking new territory (Abbott, 1988, p. 90). The growth of BSW professionals in schools may reflect active efforts by BSW professionals in the workplace arena to establish a position within schools as one of several welfare-state sectors where they see their social work competence as relevant (Håvie, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2025). Professions' unions have also claimed jurisdiction in legal and public arenas, by demanding that milieu therapists become a legal requirement in schools and advocating for BSW professionals' qualifications for this position.

Furthermore, shifts external to the BSW profession, such as policy signals and changes in teachers' working conditions, may help explain the expansion of their employment to half of all schools. Although school social work is not established as a distinct jurisdiction through direct governance, educational policy has increasingly emphasised inclusion, psychosocial well-being and the diverse needs of students while promoting interprofessional collaboration as a means of addressing these issues (Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). These developments may be understood as indirect forms of governance, communicated through ideological means of power (Sivesind, 2024). These policy shifts, together with the jurisdictional claims made in the public arena, may have led schools to view the employment of BSW professionals as a legitimate and valid solution to challenges, at least in the years following the White Paper *Time for Learning* (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010)) and the *Support Network* projects (Borg et al., 2015), which contributed to *the support network* becoming an established term in discourse around schools.

Our findings indicate a stronger association between BSW education and occupational positioning in schools over time, as demonstrated in the shift from the ‘teacher’ to ‘BSW’ occupation. Profession-specific occupational titles are difficult to interpret in terms of task content because BSW professions lack formally established jurisdictions within schools. However, school leaders have emphasised generalist BSW competence over profession-specific qualifications in milieu therapist roles (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Eek et al., 2024). We therefore interpret both profession-specific and milieu therapist occupational codes as reflecting recognition of generalist BSW competence in school social work.

Beyond their descriptive function, occupational titles may carry symbolic value in jurisdictional claims made in the public arena. The growth of the milieu therapist category may reflect union-level jurisdictional negotiations while simultaneously signalling that school social work is not a jurisdiction belonging to a single profession. In the present study, we analyse the positioning of BSW professionals within schools as an indication of whether their social work competence is recognised. Therefore, we cannot conclude whether the BSW profession has gained control over the milieu therapist role in schools. Future research could use the milieu therapist position as a starting point to examine the extent to which it represents a site of jurisdictional competition between occupational groups and which qualifications, beyond BSW education, are recognised as relevant.

The ambiguous assistant position

The assistant position is relevant when discussing professional status. Professional work involves classifying problems, reasoning about them and acting upon them based on a profession’s knowledge base (Abbott, 1988). Assistant positions, however, are associated with lower autonomy and lower educational requirements and traditionally occupy a supporting role to a superordinate profession. This could imply that one-third of BSW professionals in schools are not expected to participate in the full scope of professional practice.

BSW assistants’ salaries suggest that their competence is recognised and rewarded despite their occupational position. However, both salary levels and employment percentages were lower than in BSW-designated occupations, indicating a possible devaluation of BSW competence.

Several factors may contribute to this ambiguous assistant position. Schools and municipalities balance multiple demands, including financial pressures, students’ legal rights, and external control (Caspersen et al., 2026). Educational policy has repeatedly emphasised the need for additional professional competence in schools to support students and relieve teachers of tasks, thereby allowing them to focus on their core responsibilities (Meld. St. 19 (2009-2010); Meld. St. 20 (2012-2013); Meld. St. 34 (2023-2024)). At the same time, social pedagogical support for students remains part of teachers’ professional mandate. The continued use of assistant positions may partly reflect this overlap, indicating that BSW professionals are positioned within teachers’ jurisdiction rather than developing a distinct social work jurisdiction.

Further research is needed to examine whether and how assistant positions shape professional practice.

The relationship between BSW professionals and child and youth care workers may also be an important area for future research. Claims that BSW professionals can operate as equals to teachers at the individual, group and system levels may imply the emergence of a social work jurisdiction in which paraprofessionals, who substantially outnumber BSW professionals, become subordinated to them.

Individual needs or inclusive practices?

We have argued that the use of any of the three BSW titles may indicate a school social work position. However, social educators stood out as the only profession whose most frequently used title was directly linked to their specific education. They also had slightly higher employment percentages. In contrast to previous reports, we found that social educators were employed as assistants less frequently than child welfare and social workers. Taken together, these findings suggest that social educators have a somewhat stronger position than the other two professions.

The public image of a profession changes very slowly (Abbott, 1988), and the historical link between social educators and the care of people with intellectual disabilities may have influenced their position in schools. Previous studies have suggested that social educators in schools often support students with special educational needs, indicating that their employment may be more readily legitimised through individual special education decisions. Their comparatively stronger position may therefore reflect recognition of specific competences related to legally regulated individual needs, rather than indicating hierarchically superior status to other BSW professions in schools. Furthermore, a stronger link between education and occupation does not necessarily entail greater professional autonomy. In special education, teachers still formally hold jurisdiction, which may position social educators in a subordinate role.

While social educators may have a stronger connection to special education, the employment of BSW professionals more broadly has also been legitimised through individual special education decisions (Borg & Lyng, 2019; Eek et al., 2024). This may point to individual needs and legal rights as structural factors shaping professional practice in schools, as well as to the critique of the discrepancy between policy intentions and actual change towards more inclusive education for all (Haug, 2024). The ‘support network’ projects aimed to enhance interprofessional collaboration while avoiding exclusionary practices (Borg et al., 2015). Developing new practices, such as employing BSW professionals in roles beyond individual student support, may depend on collegial and leadership support (Borg & Lyng, 2019), while organisational factors have also been highlighted as crucial (Borg et al., 2022; Michelsen, 2019).

In this study, we have only briefly addressed organisational aspects such as employment percentage and the distribution of BSW professionals across schools. Working-time agreement has been a central issue for teachers regarding professional control over when, where, and how their work is performed and may therefore be important for new professions entering schools. Further research is also needed to determine whether the increase in schools employing four or more BSW professionals could be related to an increase in specialised departments or alternative learning arenas. Because creating more inclusive practices involves reflection on and changes to overall school practices (Haug, 2024; Nordhagen et al., 2022), further research is needed to determine the extent to which the BSW professionals contribute primarily to remedial individual support measures or to the broader development of inclusive school practices.

Conclusion

This study provides the first national longitudinal overview of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools. It shows substantial growth in their employment from 1997 to 2024, with half of all schools employing one or more in 2024.

The findings suggest increased recognition of BSW education in schools, alongside continued variation in occupational positioning, with one-third employed in assistant positions. Together, these findings indicate that BSW professions have gained a more established position in schools, while their professional status in this context remains underdeveloped. The somewhat stronger position of social educators may indicate a connection to special education. However, further research is needed to examine how formal positions relate to professional practice and how BSW competence contributes to Norwegian compulsory schools as arenas for inclusion, participation and learning.

Limitations

This study is limited to BSW professionals employed directly in schools; their status within municipal-level interprofessional support services for teachers and students falls outside the scope of the analysis.

The period analysed coincides with a phase of relative economic prosperity for Norwegian municipalities. As noted in evaluations of the teacher norm, this favourable context may partly explain why no clear changes in BSW employment were observed despite the norm's constraints on principals' autonomy in staffing decisions. It remains uncertain whether future variations in municipal economic resources will affect the position and integration of BSW professionals in Norwegian schools. Further research could examine these dynamics.

As occupational codes are registered by school leaders or their delegates, some degree of misclassification due to human error cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, the patterns identified in our material are based on a large number of observations and are likely to capture

meaningful variation in occupational positioning. The supplementary analyses of salary and employment percentage lend further support to this interpretation.

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Scientific Professionalism Among Iranian Scientific Associations: Beyond Sociology and Liberal Academic Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines how scientific professionalism is organized under institutional constraints and structural pressures. It extends Burawoy's fourfold typology—professional, critical, policy, and public—beyond sociology to other sciences, focusing on Iranian scientific associations. Professional work concerns intra-disciplinary standards; critical work reflects scientific assumptions and practices; policy work addresses institutional problem-solving and decision-making; and public work connects expert knowledge to wider publics. Drawing on survey data from 100 active Iranian scientific associations, the article shows that all four forms of professionalism can be identified beyond sociology, but not as clearly distinct roles. Scientific professionalism in Iran is weighted toward the professional dimension: critical reflection remains largely embedded in professional standards, while public and policy engagement overlap through semi-formal or institutional channels. In summary, typologies developed within liberal aca-

demic environments require reinterpretation when applied to non-liberal contexts characterized by centralized governance and oversight, metric-driven evaluation, limited public visibility, and political influence.

Keywords

Scientific professionalism, scientific associations, intra-academic professionalism, extra-academic professionalism, non-liberal context, institutional ecology, Iran

Introduction

Professions are not simply occupations governed by socially valued norms; they are also organized around specialized knowledge, institutionalized credentials, jurisdictional boundaries, and forms of labor-market shelter that distinguish them from other forms of work (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). At the same time, professions are commonly associated with claims to autonomy, public service, and socially valued responsibility (Sullivan, 2005). Professions have played a pivotal role in modernity: on the one hand, by linking social cohesion to the moral consequences of the division of labor (Durkheim, 2014); and on the other, by articulating the moral foundations of rational capitalism (Weber, 2001). Building on these classical foundations, subsequent theoretical traditions—from Parsons (1968) to Abbott (1988) and Freidson (2001)—have elaborated the institutional, structural, and power-laden dimensions of professional life, thereby deepening our understanding of professions as key institutions of modern social order. Within this tradition, the academic profession has been understood as a “key profession” (Perkin, 1969, p. 227), while academic work has been described as “the most pure professional work” (Abbott, 1988, p. 118), both as a body of knowledge and as a professional institution. This perspective draws on studies such as Merton’s (1973) ethos of science, Ben-David’s (1972) organizational analyses, and Mitroff’s (1974) discussion of counter-norms, highlighting features such as epistemic autonomy, collective self-governance, and peer-mediated quality control (Mieg, 2022). Although most research—particularly in the Global North—has focused on the internal characteristics of science, the definition of scientific professionalism (SP) and its relationship to the external environment remain contested, with notable exceptions such as Burawoy’s (2004) framework, which extends professionalism beyond purely disciplinary concerns. This contestation becomes especially significant when attention shifts from individual scientists to scientific associations as collective professional actors. Scientific associations are often regarded as “representatives of the profession” (Bird, 1998, p. 316), insofar as they help define standards, articulate disciplinary interests, and serve as organized arenas in which expert knowledge may be connected to broader social concerns and institutional expectations. In this respect, they offer a particularly useful site for examining the collective and multidimensional character of scientific professionalism.

In response to these debates, this study draws on Burawoy's typology of sociology (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 9–11) and extends its analytical logic beyond sociology to the broader field of scientific professionalism in Iranian scientific associations. Although Burawoy's framework has been influential and widely debated (Abbott, 2007; Holmwood, 2007; Turner, 2005; Wallerstein, 2007), this study examines whether Iranian scientific associations exhibit forms of scientific professionalism beyond narrowly disciplinary and positivist orientations, particularly in their critical and extra-academic dimensions. Over the past two decades, Iran has experienced substantial scientific growth¹, and scientometric indicators show a steady increase in the country's scientific output, placing Iran prominently in global rankings (Islamic World Science Citation Center [ISC], 2024; Yaminfirooz et al., 2024). At the same time, structural challenges such as centralized control, metric-based evaluation, and political restrictions on professional activity have persisted (Heshmati & Dibaji, 2019; Mirzaie & Qarakhani, 2014; Nasiri et al., 2015; Tarikhi, 2020). Complementing this structural emphasis, previous studies have examined how institutional structures and scientific actors jointly shape professional practices (Mirzaie & Qarakhani, 2014; Qarakhani & Mirzaie, 2014, 2016). Iranian scientific associations have also been identified in Iranian policy and research sources as intermediary actors linking the scientific community to policy-making and national decision-making processes (Farasatkah, 2007; Khalifeh Soltani et al., 2012). Despite their expansion and the significant functions expected during this period, these associations have faced serious challenges in maintaining professional autonomy and sustaining their activities (Ghaneirad, 2006; Ghaneirad et al., 2019; Khosrokhavar et al., 2007; Qarakhani & Mirzaie, 2022). Drawing on survey data from active Iranian scientific associations, this study examines how scientific professionalism is configured in a setting where centralized licensing, metric-based evaluation, and politically mediated visibility redefine the boundaries of public engagement. Rather than proposing a universal alternative to Burawoy's typology, this study operationalizes and empirically tests its dimensions and examines how they are reconfigured within a non-liberal scientific environment.

Burawoy's typology of sociological professionalism

Over the past two decades, Burawoy's model of professionalism in sociology has been widely discussed, with numerous studies and reviews highlighting its significance (e.g., Burawoy, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2021). Inspired by Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), which critiques conventional American sociology and emphasizes its scientific and ethical dimensions, Burawoy highlights the persistent gap between sociological knowledge and the public sphere. Developed in response to the depoliticization and commercialization of academia, Burawoy's (2004, 2005) model of professionalism seeks to restore the critical and public dimensions of scientific practice. In his 2004 ASA presidential address², entitled "For Public Sociology", Burawoy advocates public engagement as a means for sociology to confront its relevance crisis. He centers the framework on the questions of for whom and for what sociology is pursued and emphasizes the interdependence of the four forms of sociological work (Burawoy, 2005).

In his model of the “division of sociological labor,” Michael Burawoy (2005, p. 4; 2021, p. 36) identifies four types of sociological knowledge—professional, critical, policy, and public—each representing a distinct form of professionalism within the discipline. Professional sociology, as the core of the discipline, represents the mainstream of sociological knowledge. It “includes research conducted within research programs that define assumptions, theories, concepts, questions, and puzzles” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 12) and is considered the “sine qua non” of policy, public, and critical sociologies (Burawoy, 2005, p. 10). Critical sociology involves “critical debates of the discipline within and between research programs” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 12). It entails the scrutiny and evaluation of concepts, normative and descriptive hypotheses, and professional practices across the discipline. Critical professionalism raises two central questions: Why do professionals pursue their work, and who benefits from it? Policy sociology involves “defense of sociological research, human subjects, funding, congressional briefings” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 12). Burawoy defines it as “sociology in the service of a goal specified by a client. Policy sociology’s *raison d’être* is to provide solutions to problems presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 9). Public sociology “brings sociology into a conversation with the public, understood as people who are themselves involved in the conversation” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 7). Public sociology emphasizes the responsibility of science and scholars to address urgent issues such as climate change, human rights, refugee crises, and racism. In this form, the sociologist collaborates closely with a visible, engaged, and active local community to reveal the unseen and transform the private into public (Zussman & Misra, 2007).

Burawoy (2005) organizes these four professionalisms along two axes: intra-academic (professional, critical) versus extra-academic (policy, public), and instrumental (professional, policy) versus reflexive (critical, public). In a comparative study, he outlines distinct priorities in national models of sociology: the U.S. combines professional and policy sociology; Soviet sociology was largely aligned with the party-state, while post-Soviet Russian sociology shifted toward market-driven policy research; South Africa emphasizes public engagement alongside critical sociology; and Norway balances public sociology with welfare-state collaboration (Burawoy, 2004).

Despite its influence, Burawoy’s typology has been the subject of wide-ranging critique on epistemological, institutional, and practical grounds. Scholars argue that it imposes overly rigid boundaries and neglects the hybrid and fluid character of sociological practice (Abbott, 2007; Brint, 2005; Holmwood, 2007; Patterson, 2007; Tittle, 2004; Turner, 2005; Wallerstein, 2007), a shortcoming made especially visible in non-Western contexts (Arribas Lozano, 2018; Quah, 2005, 2011; Webster, 2004). Conceptually, the instrumental-reflexive dichotomy is viewed as untenable (Abbott, 2007; Morrow, 2009; Powell, 2013; Wallerstein, 2007). Critics further contend that privileging critical or activist forms risks dogmatism, undermines objectivity, and politicizes professional associations (Deflem, 2005; Goldberg & van den Berg, 2009; Holmwood, 2007; Massey, 2007; Turner, 2005). Among the four types, public sociology has

attracted the most substantial criticism. Patterson (2007) argues that it should also encompass policy work undertaken by sociologists for governments or private organizations. Others caution that privileging consensus over empirical rigor undermines scientific standards (Smith-Lovin, 2007; Stinchcombe, 2007; Tittle, 2004). Wallerstein (2007) goes further, rejecting the category altogether, insisting that all sociologists are, by definition, public sociologists. Institutionally, critics highlight the model's Western bias and its failure to account for diverse organizational settings. Empirical studies document how neoliberal reforms, such as those in post-apartheid South Africa, redirected sociology toward policy-driven research while marginalizing public engagement (Webster, 2004). Meanwhile, Quah (2005, 2011) emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive professionalism. The typology is also criticized for neglecting disciplinary pluralism (Holmwood, 2007) and for overlooking interdisciplinary perspectives, including those in gender and race studies (Glenn, 2007). In response, several alternative frameworks have been proposed as correctives: Turner's (2005) distinction between humanistic and scientific sociology, Abbott's (2007) ethically grounded approach, Wallerstein's (2007) cognitive-ethical-political model, and Quah's (2005, 2011) dual mission that combines knowledge production with social engagement. Taken together, these critiques highlight recurring conceptual, institutional, and practical challenges in Burawoy's typology, underscoring the need for empirical research on how scientific professionalism is configured across different contexts, particularly in non-liberal settings.

Research design and methods

This study adopts a quantitative empirical approach to examine scientific professionalism and assess how Burawoy's typology can be extended beyond sociology to conceptualize, measure, and analyze it within Iranian scientific associations. The research design comprises three interconnected components: (1) the conceptual extension of the typology of scientific professionalism; (2) the design and validation of a dedicated scale to measure scientific professionalism in the Iranian context; and (3) the empirical assessment of scientific professionalism among active scientific associations in Iran at the time of data collection.

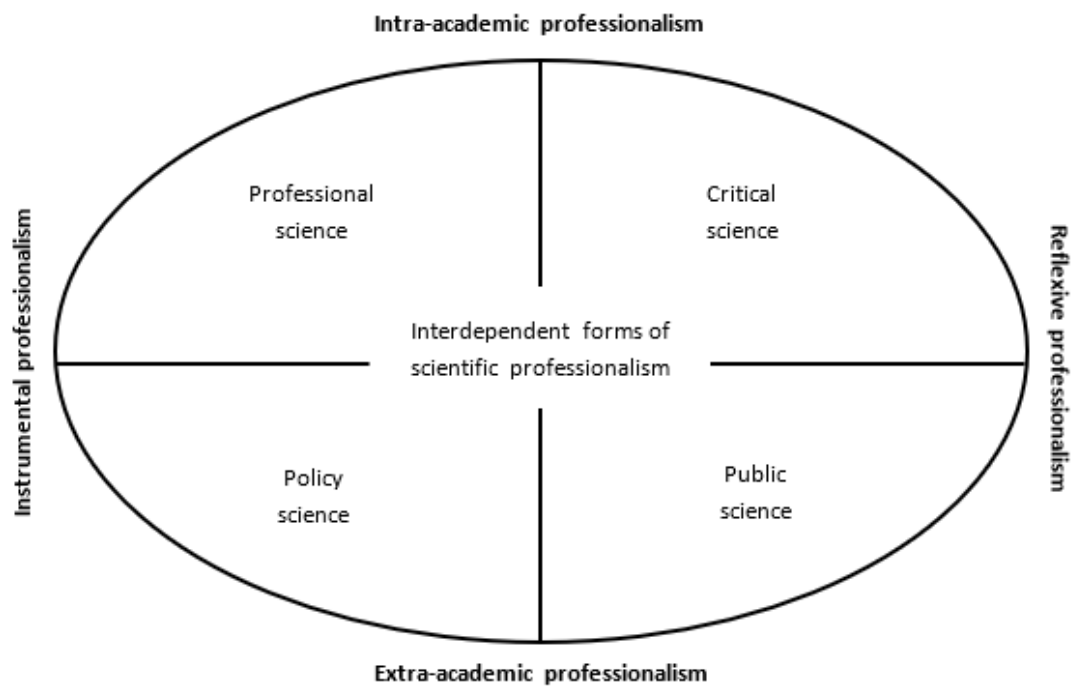
Toward a typology of scientific professionalism

This study builds on Burawoy's (2005) typology of sociology as a profession and, while considering the critiques directed at it, extends its analytical logic to the broader domain of science. Burawoy identifies four types of professionalism—professional (PRP), critical (CRP), policy (POP), and public (PUP)—and situates them along two cross-cutting dimensions: intra-academic versus extra-academic, and instrumental versus reflexive. In the present analysis, this fourfold typology is retained, while the two dimensions of intra-/extra-academic (IAP/EAP) and instrumental/reflexive (IP/RP) are employed as an analytical framework for systematically mapping the orientations of scientific professionalism. This perspective assumes that science is not confined to purely intra-disciplinary self-regulation, but extends into institutional, political, and civic arenas and engages heterogeneous audiences, stakeholders, and constituencies. Extending this framework beyond sociology requires attention, first, to the

plural character of scientific practice across disciplines and, second, to the dynamic interaction between disciplinary professional norms and broader social demands. Accordingly, the typology presented here, and illustrated in Figure 1, should be understood not as a mechanical reproduction of Burawoy's model, but as an effort to apply its analytical logic to the broader field of scientific professionalism.

Figure 1

Types of scientific professionalism



Note. The authors' conceptualization of scientific professionalism extends and reconfigures Burawoy's (2005) typology of sociological work. The four forms are analytically distinct but interdependent. The model implies neither a fixed sequence nor equal, symmetrical, or causal relations among them; their interrelations may instead be reciprocal, differentiated, and context-dependent.

In Burawoy's original formulation, public sociology emphasizes dialogue through civil society and the media, whereas critical sociology carries a stronger normative orientation toward questioning disciplinary assumptions. In this study, public professionalism is operationalized as extra-academic civic engagement and critical professionalism as epistemic and methodological reflexivity. This re-specification is particularly relevant in Iran and in cross-disciplinary research, where channels of public engagement are more restricted and uneven, and not all fields engage society or express the normative dimension of critical professionalism in the

same way. For this reason, the study emphasizes more general, measurable, and comparable indicators of public and critical engagement.

Methodologically, this extended typology serves as a context-sensitive tool for analyzing scientific professionalism in Iranian scientific associations, which occupy a distinctive position within Iran's scientific ecosystem at the intersection of disciplinary life, state regulation, and societal engagement. These associations operate under official state authorization, are supervised by the Commission of Scientific Associations of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and are required to submit annual activity reports based on formally prescribed indicators. Given these characteristics, the present scale was developed to identify distinct forms of scientific professionalism, their relationships, and their potential roles in linking academic and extra-academic orientations under Iran's structural constraints and institutional requirements. Two main research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent can the proposed scale reliably and discriminatively assess the dimensions of scientific professionalism within Iranian scientific associations?
2. What configurations of scientific professionalism emerge among Iranian scientific associations, and how are these configurations shaped by structural and institutional constraints in a non-liberal context?

Sample selection and data collection

The survey was conducted among Iranian scientific associations to address the research questions and collect data. In recent decades, Iranian scientific associations have proliferated, and their activities are regularly evaluated and ranked using the "Performance Evaluation Indicators" by the Commission of Iranian Scientific Associations (CISA, 2016). According to the official list issued by CISA, which operates under Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), 322 scientific associations were registered and licensed at the time of the study. Most of these associations are based in Tehran, with some located in other cities throughout Iran. They cover a range of academic fields, including Humanities and Social Sciences, Basic Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Agriculture, Interdisciplinary Studies and Art (CISA, 2021). Initially, we planned to survey all 322 associations listed by CISA, but we later focused on 164 active associations. According to CISA, about half of the associations were inactive at the time of the survey. Therefore, questionnaires were sent to all active scientific associations. The participants included presidents, vice presidents, or board members representing their scientific societies. After a four-month data collection period from May to August 2017, 105 questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of approximately 64% among active associations. After excluding incomplete responses and duplicate entries, 100 valid questionnaires remained (see Appendix A). These represent roughly 61% of active Iranian scientific associations and were included in the final analysis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Disciplinary Distribution of Iranian Scientific Associations*

Disciplinary field	Population		Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Basic Sciences	14	8.5	13	13.0
Engineering and Technology	46	28.0	21	21.0
Agriculture	21	12.8	16	16.0
Humanities	27	16.5	15	15.0
Social Sciences	28	17.1	17	17.0
Interdisciplinary Studies	25	15.2	15	15.0
Art	3	1.8	3	3.0
Total	164	100%	100	100%

Note. Authors' calculations based on the CISA list of scientific associations (2021).

Measurement and analytical strategy

The SP scale was developed and evaluated through a multi-step analytical process. Descriptive statistics were computed to examine items and dimension distributions. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, and construct validity was tested via exploratory factor analysis. Relationships among dimensions of scientific professionalism were examined using Spearman's rank-order correlations. To evaluate variation across groups, ANOVA was used, and cluster analysis was used to identify broader typological patterns in SP orientations. Overall, these analyses provided the foundation for assessing item performance, validating the scale, and understanding the empirical structure of scientific professionalism in the Iranian context.

Development and validation of the SP scale

Guided by the study's conceptual framework and expert input from the sociology of science, an initial pool of 40 items was developed. Content validation involved iterative expert review and cognitive pretesting with presidents of Iranian scientific associations to ensure clarity, relevance, and domain coverage. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important). Following item analysis in the main survey, the item pool was reduced to 23 items (see Appendix B). Items were eliminated for redundancy, low corrected item-total correlation, adverse effects on α/ω , low communality, weak or cross-loadings in factor analysis, or problematic distributions (e.g., ceiling or floor effects). The final 23-item instrument retained coverage of the four theorized dimensions—Professional, Critical, Policy, and Public. Internal consistency for the overall scale was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .943$; McDonald's $\omega = .942$). Cronbach's alpha was calculated on complete cases after listwise deletion of item-level missing responses, and reliability estimates for the four subscales were also strong (Table 2). Overall, these results support the internal coherence of the SP scale and its usefulness for examining variation across Iranian scientific associations.

Table 2*Reliability Coefficients for SP Subscales*

SP subscale	Number of items	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
Policy	7	.916	.918
Public	5	.919	.918
Critical	4	.846	.853
Professional	7	.855	.857

Note. Authors' calculations based on collected data.

The reliability estimates ($\alpha = .846-.919$; $\omega = .853-.918$) and the retained four-factor structure indicate that the 23-item SP scale has satisfactory internal consistency and can be used to examine variation across scientific associations.

Structure of scientific professionalism

Sampling adequacy was satisfactory ($KMO = .873$), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(253) = 1614$, $p < .001$, indicating that the inter-item correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. To examine the dimensional structure of the 23-item SP scale, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring (PAF) with Promax rotation. An oblique rotation was preferred because the four dimensions of scientific professionalism—public, policy, professional, and critical—were conceptually related and not expected to be orthogonal (Table 3). The initial unrestricted solution suggested a five-factor structure based on the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1). However, inspection of the scree plot indicated a clear leveling off after the fourth factor, supporting a more parsimonious four-factor solution. Closer inspection also showed that the fifth factor was weak and not theoretically interpretable (see Appendix C). Because it was supported by only a narrow cluster of items and did not represent a substantively distinct dimension, it was not retained. Instead, a four-factor solution was adopted, as it provided a more parsimonious and theoretically meaningful representation of the SP scale.

Table 3*Variance Explained by Scientific Professionalism Dimensions*

Types of SP	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% Variance	% Cumulative	Total	% Variance	% Cumulative
Public	10.430	45.346	45.346	10.092	43.877	43.877
Policy	2.757	11.987	57.333	2.363	10.273	54.150
Professional	1.672	7.271	64.604	1.350	5.869	60.019
Critical	1.139	4.952	69.555	0.769	3.343	63.362

Note. Extraction method: principal axis factoring. Rotation method: Promax with Kaiser normalization. The rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Authors' calculations based on collected data.

The analysis supported a substantively interpretable four-factor solution broadly consistent with the theorized structure of the SP scale. The rotated pattern matrix was broadly consistent with the conceptualized four-dimensional structure of scientific professionalism (Table 4). The public dimension emerged most clearly through NGO-oriented and civic engagement; the policy dimension through collaboration with governmental and applied institutional actors; the professional dimension through disciplinary stewardship and internal professional regulation; and the critical dimension through critical reflection on established norms, reward structures, and theoretical or methodological frameworks.

Table 4*Factor Loadings Matrix for Scientific Professionalism Items*

Items of SP	Extra-academic		Intra-academic	
	Public	Policy	Professional	Critical
Joint publications with NGOs	.881			
Taking members from NGOs	.846			
Membership in NGOs	.837			
Research collaboration with NGOs	.791			
Applying knowledge to assist and support NGOs	.783			
Applying knowledge in government service		.978		
Research collaboration with government agencies		.819		
Research cooperation with the private sector		.780		
Applying knowledge in the private sector		.744		
Joint publication with government agencies		.722		
Taking members from governmental organizations		.472		
Joint publications with the private sector		.438		
Working with academic departments to protect knowledge			.751	
Validating knowledge dissemination			.857	
Sensitivity to the knowledge content and its quality			.736	
Recruiting specialists with professional competence			.594	
Challenging established knowledge			.505	
Critiquing existing research			.461	
Critique of teaching methods and knowledge transfer			.436	
Questioning established norms of the knowledge				.814
Critique of resource and reward allocation methods				.802
Criticizing theoretical and methodological frameworks				.580
Assessment of knowledge implementation procedures				.510
Number of items	5	7	7	4

Note. The items were originally written in Persian and are presented here in approximate English translation.

Extraction method: principal axis factoring. Rotation method: Promax with Kaiser normalization. Factor loadings below .40 were suppressed. The rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Authors' calculations based on collected data.

As shown in Table 4, the four dimensions are empirically distinguishable but not fully separate in practice. Several items expected to load on Critical loaded more strongly on the professional dimension, suggesting that, in the Iranian context, some critical practices remain embedded within routine professional standards rather than institutionalized as a fully separate sphere. Likewise, the proximity between the public and policy dimensions indicates that extra-academic engagement often combines civic, governmental, and applied forms of action. Overall, Table 4 supports a coherent four-dimensional structure while also highlighting meaningful overlaps among adjacent dimensions.

Correlational patterns of scientific professionalism

The correlation matrix shows a structured yet uneven layout of scientific professionalism. The strongest within-domain connection occurs in the extra-academic sphere, where policy engagement and public participation are closely linked (policy-public, $\rho = .71$). This indicates that organizations active in the policy field are often also involved in the public realm. Inside the intra-academic area, the professional and critical dimensions exhibit a strong correlation ($\rho = .66$), suggesting that critical reflexivity typically remains part of professional standards rather than evolving into a fully independent sphere. Cross-domain correlations are somewhat higher for critical than for professional, but the overall pattern is better understood not as evidence of critical being the main organizing principle, but rather as a sign of overlap and uneven differentiation among the four dimensions.

Table 5

Correlation Matrix for SP Dimensions

SP	Professional	Critical	Policy	Public
Professional	-	.66**	.47**	.50**
Critical		-	.57**	.57**
Policy			-	.71**
Public				-

Note. Values are Spearman's ρ ; all coefficients are significant at $p < .01$ (two-tailed). Pearson r replicates the same ordering and comparable magnitudes.

Authors' calculations based on collected data.

Taken together, the matrix supports an interpretation in which the intra-/extra-academic divide is more pronounced than the instrumental/reflexive contrast. In this configuration, the professional dimension remains the core and most stable, while extra-academic engagement is expressed most clearly in the close pairing of Policy and Public. Overall, the correlational pattern suggests that scientific professionalism in the Iranian case is organized less around sharply differentiated, separate roles and more around a shared professional core that extends unevenly into extra-academic domains.

Disciplinary variation in scientific professionalism

Among the four dimensions, the professional dimension had the highest mean score ($M = 4.25$, $SD = .64$), indicating that internal professional regulation and knowledge stewardship were the most strongly endorsed forms of scientific professionalism. Policy ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .91$) and critical ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .86$) ranked in the middle, whereas the public dimension had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.02$), suggesting a comparatively weaker orientation

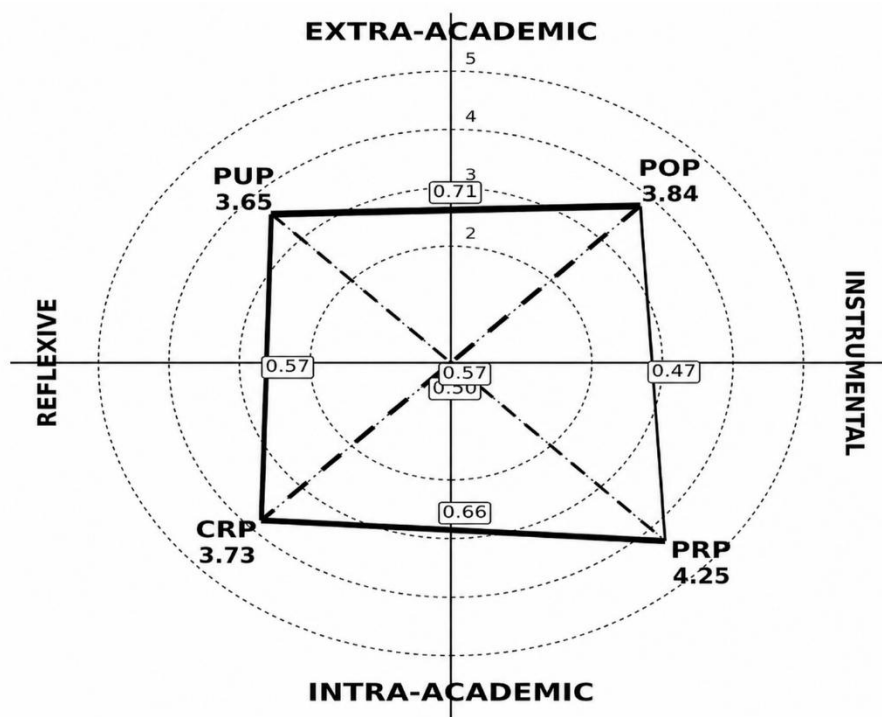
toward civic and NGO-related engagement. The professional dimension also had the lowest dispersion, while the public dimension showed the highest variability across associations.

The professional dimension was highest in Agriculture and the Humanities and lowest in Social Sciences, whereas critical professionalism was highest in Interdisciplinary Studies and the Humanities and lowest in Engineering and Technology. Public showed its highest mean in Interdisciplinary Studies, whereas policy varied little across fields (see Appendix D).

Figure 2 maps the four dimensions of scientific professionalism across the intra- and extra-academic and the instrumental/reflexive quadrants, combining mean scores (node positions) with rank-based correlations (edge weights).

Figure 2

Configuration of Scientific Professionalism



Note. The position of each dimension is determined by its mean score; a greater distance from the center indicates a stronger orientation toward that form of scientific professionalism. Line thickness is proportional to Spearman's ρ , dashed diagonal lines denote cross-domain correlations, and mean scores are displayed next to each dimension.

The configuration highlights two main patterns. First, the intra-/extra-academic divide is more pronounced than the instrumental-reflexive contrast, as reflected in the alignment of the pro-

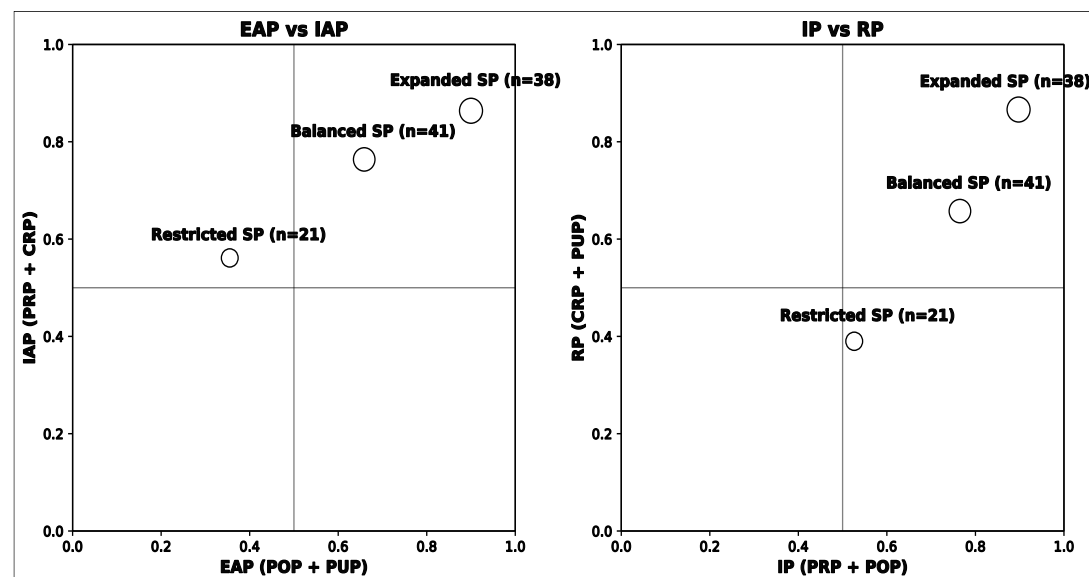
fessional and critical dimensions within the intra-academic domain and of the policy and public dimensions within the extra-academic domain. Second, the main variation among associations lies not in a shift from instrumental to reflexive professionalism, but in the uneven extension of a shared professional core into extra-academic domains. The professional dimension remains the strongest dimension across the configurations, while the strong pairing of the policy and public dimensions suggests that policy-oriented associations are often publicly engaged as well. Overall, the four dimensions are organized across two broad domains— intra-academic and extra-academic activity—whereas the instrumental-reflexive distinction operates less as an autonomous axis than as a secondary gradient.

Configurations of scientific professionalism

A one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant disciplinary differences across the four dimensions of scientific professionalism ($N = 97$; Art excluded due to its small sample size), with F values ranging from 0.06 to 2.05 and all $p \geq .080$. Accordingly, mean differences across disciplinary fields are interpreted descriptively rather than inferentially. To uncover latent patterns in the data and explore alternative typologies of scientific professionalism, a k -means cluster analysis was conducted using the four SP dimensions. The three-cluster solution yielded conceptually clear, interpretable configurations, with reasonably balanced cluster sizes and meaningful separation across the four dimensions.

Figure 3

Three-cluster map of Scientific Professionalism Among Iranian Scientific Associations



Note. Coordinates are based on the mean cluster centers and rescaled to a 0-1 range for visual comparison.

Cluster labels indicate the number of associations in each group.

Figure 3 shows that the three configurations are differentiated primarily along the intra-/extra-academic axis. In the left panel, the expanded configuration lies closest to the extra-academic pole, indicating the strongest extension of the professional core into the public and policy domains. The restricted configuration lies closer to the intra-academic pole, suggesting a stronger concentration around the internal academic core, whereas the balanced configuration occupies an intermediate position. This pattern aligns with the cluster centers: the expanded cluster scores highest across all four dimensions, the balanced cluster remains relatively high but more moderate, and the restricted cluster has the lowest overall profile. Across all three clusters, the professional dimension remains the strongest, indicating that the key difference among associations lies not in the presence of professionalism itself, but in the extent to which the professional core extends beyond academia.

By contrast, the right panel shows much weaker differences among clusters along the instrumental/reflexive axis. This suggests that variation among associations is better understood not as a clear shift from instrumental to reflexive professionalism, but as an uneven expansion of a shared professional core into the public, policy, and critical domains. Taken together, the two panels indicate that the Iranian case is best understood as a field in which scientific professionalism varies mainly in the extent to which it moves from an intra-academic professional core toward extra-academic engagement. This interpretation is also consistent with the article's broader findings, including strong within-domain correlations between policy and public and between professional and critical dimensions, which point to overlap and uneven differentiation. A chi-square test also found no statistically significant association between disciplinary category and cluster membership (Pearson $\chi^2(10) = 8.44$, $p = .586$), suggesting that the distribution of the three configurations cannot be explained by disciplinary grouping alone.

Discussion and conclusion

The empirical findings gain further significance when considered in relation to Burawoy's typology and the institutional and political context in which Iranian scientific associations operate. Among these associations, the professional dimension is more strongly expressed than the other dimensions of scientific professionalism, while critical reflection remains largely embedded in professional self-regulation and public engagement often proceeds through policy-oriented and semi-formal institutional channels. This configuration suggests that scientific professionalism is shaped not only by disciplinary norms but also by the institutional and political conditions under which associations operate.

Recalibrating Burawoy's typology in the Iranian context

The findings of this study show that extending Burawoy's typology beyond sociology is both empirically feasible and analytically illuminating; however, it requires conceptual recalibration. In Iranian scientific associations, all four dimensions of scientific professionalism—pro-

professional, critical, policy, and public—were identifiable in the data, yet their empirical configuration appeared more compressed, overlapping, and asymmetrical than in Burawoy's original formulation. More specifically, the intra-/extra-academic axis—a relatively positional and institutionally observable distinction—appeared more robust than the epistemic-normative instrumental/reflexive axis. As a result, the four analytically distinguishable forms tended to be organized around two dominant domains: a professional-centered intra-academic domain, within which critical reflexivity remained largely embedded, and a policy-centered extra-academic domain, through which much public engagement was channeled. The k-means clustering pattern reinforces this interpretation: the three identified configurations—expanded, balanced, and restricted—were differentiated primarily along the intra-academic/extra-academic axis rather than the instrumental/reflexive one. Across all clusters, the professional dimension remained the strongest, and the main difference among associations lay in the extent to which this professional core extended into extra-academic spheres. The absence of significant disciplinary differences across the four dimensions, together with the non-significant association between disciplinary category and cluster membership, suggests that the observed configurations are better understood in terms of levels of engagement than disciplinary boundaries.

From this perspective, the Iranian case is better understood as a field in which scientific professionalism varies primarily with the extent to which it moves from an intra-academic core toward extra-academic engagement, rather than as a complete shift from instrumental to reflexive orientations. The theoretical significance of this finding lies in showing that, in a non-liberal context, the main issue is not the absence of Burawoy's dimensions but rather shifts in their weight, interrelationships, and modes of expression. Here, the professional dimension appears not merely as one of four dimensions but as the most stable and institutionally consequential anchor around which the others are organized. The critical dimension also appears to remain largely embedded within this core, while public engagement seems to proceed less through an autonomous public sphere and more through policy-related and semi-formal channels.

These findings support critiques that regard the boundaries of Burawoy's typology as overly rigid and the instrumental/reflexive distinction as conceptually unstable or imposed (Abbott, 2007; Brint, 2005; Holmwood, 2007; Morrow, 2009; Patterson, 2007; Powell, 2013; Tittle, 2004; Turner, 2005; Wallerstein, 2007). At the same time, the present results do not imply abandoning Burawoy's framework. Rather, they show that the framework's value lies primarily in its heuristic capacity to reveal contextual differences in the intensity, overlap, and orientation of the dimensions of scientific professionalism. Burawoy's model should therefore be understood not as a fixed and universal map but as a flexible framework for understanding context-dependent configurations of scientific professionalism.

Institutional and political context of scientific professionalism in Iran

The observed configuration of scientific professionalism cannot be adequately understood without attention to Iran's institutional and political context. Although scientific and academic associations in Iran are formally regarded as civil and professional bodies, in practice they operate within a scientific field that is centralized, regulated, and institutionally unequal. These associations require formal authorization to operate, are overseen by the CISA under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and are monitored through annual reporting and formal performance evaluations. Official indicators also show that a substantial proportion of evaluative criteria is oriented toward the professional and policy functions of associations (CISA, 2016). Scientific associations are described as intermediary institutions that link the scientific community and the policymaking system and are expected to play a stronger role in policy decision-making (Farasatkah, 2007; Khalifeh Soltani et al., 2012). Taken together, these features point to an institutional environment in which associations are largely understood as producers of science, organizers of scientific activities, and providers of services or advice to state bodies. Under such conditions, the professional dimension is reinforced both formally and structurally, becoming the basis for other forms of scientific professionalism, since the continuity and legitimacy of associations depend, in part, on conformity with official evaluative frameworks.

Simultaneously, this scientific field is shaped not only by its institutional logic but also by broader political and structural pressures. Internal restrictions, quantitatively driven scientific production, metric-driven evaluation, and centralized control have created conditions in which the extra-academic aspects of professionalism develop unevenly (Heshmati & Dibaji, 2019; Nasiri et al., 2015; Tarikhi, 2020). Complementing this structural emphasis, previous studies have shown that institutional structures and the agency of scientific actors shape one another (Mirzaie & Qarakhani, 2014; Qarakhani & Mirzaie, 2014, 2016). Scientific associations are not exempt from this dynamic: despite their semi-autonomous position, their required compliance with formal institutional requirements may itself help reproduce the institutional ecology in which they operate (Ghaneirad et al., 2019; Qarakhani & Mirzaie, 2022). In such an environment, public professionalism is expressed less through an autonomous public sphere and open dialogue with society than through policy-related, semi-formal, and institutionalized channels, helping to explain the strong overlap between the policy and public dimensions. The comparatively low mean but high variability of public professionalism further suggests that public engagement is not uniformly absent or weak across associations, but unevenly distributed and, where it is more strongly expressed, closely connected to policy-oriented forms of engagement. Although the critical dimension is less prominent than the professional dimension, it is by no means absent; rather, it remains largely embedded in intra-academic activity, particularly within the professional core, where it takes the form of epistemic and methodological reflexivity.

Under these conditions, dimensions of professionalism that are institutionally enabled and practically attainable become more salient, while others remain constrained or compressed. The three configurations identified in this study—expanded, balanced, and restricted—do not merely reflect disciplinary differences. Rather, they indicate variation in the extent to which associations extend their professional core beyond the academic sphere, given shared constraints. The Iranian case thus suggests that these configurations reflect different ways of navigating a common institutional environment, rather than distinct disciplinary models of scientific professionalism (Ghaneirad, 2006; Ghaneirad et al., 2019; Khosrokhavar et al., 2007; Qarakhani & Mirzaie, 2022).

Implications, limitations, and future directions

The main contribution of this article lies not in rejecting Burawoy's typology but in reconstructing it for context. Four implications follow from the findings. First, levels of engagement—or the extent to which the professional core extends beyond the academic sphere—emerge as an analytically important axis of variation in scientific professionalism. Second, in the Iranian case, the intra-academic/extra-academic divide appears more robust than the instrumental/reflexive axis. Third, structural pressures and institutional ecology must be explicitly incorporated into analyses of scientific professionalism. Fourth, overlap and hybridity among the dimensions should be understood not as anomalies but as part of the logic of scientific professionalism in constrained and regulated environments. In this sense, Iran is not merely a peripheral or exceptional case but an illuminating one for the comparative study of scientific professionalism in non-liberal contexts. Beyond these theoretical implications, the study also makes a methodological contribution by providing an empirically grounded 23-item measure of scientific professionalism that operationalizes Burawoy's four dimensions beyond sociology and provides a basis for further validation and comparative research across disciplines and institutional contexts.

This study also has limitations. The data rely on the self-reports of association leaders and may therefore be affected by institutional optimism or situational factors. In addition, applying Burawoy's framework across diverse disciplines may obscure field-specific differences. Moreover, the evidence in this study is cross-sectional and is therefore better suited to identifying configurational patterns and relationships among dimensions than to demonstrating long-term causal change. These limitations also point to directions for future research. Mixed methods designs, longitudinal studies, and cross-national comparisons can clarify the conditions under which scientific professionalism moves toward greater autonomy, broader public engagement, or deeper institutional compression. From this perspective, Iran can serve as a productive comparative case for examining how scientific professionalism is shaped simultaneously by institutional arrangements, national regulatory systems, and global regimes of metric-driven evaluation.

Overall, the article's main contribution is not to reject Burawoy's typology, but to operationalize and empirically assess its dimensions and to re-specify their relationships in context.

More broadly, models of professionalism developed in liberal academic settings should not be treated as fixed typologies when applied to non-liberal environments. Rather, they can serve as flexible analytical tools for showing how professional roles are compressed, redirected, or institutionally reshaped under conditions of centralized regulation, political constraint, and unequal access to public autonomy.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Endnotes

¹According to the official report published by the Islamic World Science Citation Center (ISC) in May 2024, Iran ranked 19th globally in scientific production in 2023 based on the Web of Science database, with 68,982 articles and a 2.03% share of global output. In Scopus, Iran ranked 14th worldwide, producing 74,420 articles and accounting for 1.95% of the global share. These achievements, together with H-index scores of 474 in Web of Science and 490 in Scopus, underscore Iran's established scientific position internationally and demonstrate significant scientific growth over the past two decades, particularly in engineering, medicine, and materials science (ISC, 2024).

²As Burawoy reflected in his final interview, he never regarded himself simply as a public sociologist but rather as an "evangelist for public sociology" (Burawoy & Benson, 2025). This distinction is revealing: his model of professionalism was not insulated from the world but grounded in a reflexive orientation toward publics. The trajectory that began with his 2004 ASA presidential address and was amplified during his presidency of the International Sociological Association (2010–2014) established a privileged platform for advancing this model. Teaching, writing, and activism were, for him, inseparable practices animated by the conviction that sociology should "start with the world" and foster living conversations among students, the public, and scholars (Burawoy & Benson, 2025, para. 14). His professional life has also been systematically charted in a recent bibliometric study, which highlights four core orientations in his scholarly trajectory: methodological reflexivity, engagement with the Global South, critiques of marketization, and a call for public sociology, thereby reinforcing the interpretive account offered here (Raj & Sinha, 2024).

Appendix A

Table A1

Scientific Associations Included in the Survey

1. Association of Desert Management and Control (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Modiriyat va Kontrol-e Manateghe-Biabani-ye Iran)
2. Association of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies (Anjoman-e Oloom va Fanavari-ha-ye Shenakhti-ye Iran)
3. Association of Control and Instrumentation Engineers (Anjoman-e Mohandesan-e Kontrol va Abzar-e Daghigh-e Iran)
4. Association of Energy Consumption Management (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Modiriyat-e Masraf-e Enerzhi-ye Iran)
5. Astronomical Society of Iran (Anjoman-e Nojoom-e Iran)
6. Genetics Society of Iran (Anjoman-e Zhenetik-e Iran)
7. Informatics Society of Iran (Anjoman-e Informatik-e Iran)
8. Iranian Anthropological Association (Anjoman-e Ensanshenasi-ye Iran)
9. Iranian Aquaculture Association (Anjoman-e Abziparvari-ye Iran)
10. Iranian Association for English Language and Literature Education (Anjoman-e Amoozesh-e Zaban va Adabiyat-e Engelisi-ye Iran)
11. Iranian Association for Population Development (Anjoman-e Jamiyat-e Tosee-ye Iran)
12. Iranian Association for Radiation Protection (Anjoman-e Hefazat dar Barabar-e Ashaeh-ye Iran)
13. Iranian Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature (Anjoman-e Tarvij-e Zaban va Adab-e Farsi-ye Iran)
14. Iranian Association of Agronomy and Plant Breeding (Anjoman-e Oloom-e Zeraat va Eslah-e Nabatat-e Iran)
15. Iranian Association of Economic Law (Anjoman-e Hoghough-e Eghtesadi-ye Iran)
16. Iranian Association of Environmental Specialists (Anjoman-e Motakhasesan-e Mohit-e Zist-e Iran)
17. Iranian Association of Fiction Literature (Anjoman-e Adabiyat-e Dastani-ye Iran)
18. Iranian Association of Food Science and Technology (Anjoman-e Oloom va Sanaye-ye Ghazaei-ye Iran)
19. Iranian Association of Geography and Border Regions Planning (Anjoman-e Joghrafia va Barnamehrizi-ye Manateghe-e Marzi-ye Iran)
20. Iranian Association of Geography and Urban Planning (Anjoman-e Joghrafia va Barnamehrizi-ye Shahri-ye Iran)
21. Iranian Association of Irrigation and Drainage (Anjoman-e Abiyari va Zehkeshi-ye Iran)
22. Iranian Association of Islamic Economics (Anjoman-e Eghtesad-e Eslami-ye Iran)
23. Iranian Association of Islamic Studies (Anjoman-e Maaref-e Eslami-ye Iran)
24. Iranian Association of Management Sciences (Anjoman-e Oloom-e Modiriyat-e Iran)
25. Iranian Association of Microbial Science and Technology (Anjoman-e Oloom va Fanavari-ye Mikrobi-ye Iran)
26. Iranian Association of Plant Cell and Tissue Culture (Anjoman-e Kesht-e Solul va Bafat-e Giyahi-ye Iran)
27. Iranian Association of Qur'anic Sciences and Hadith (Anjoman-e Oloom-e Qorani va Hadith-e Iran)
28. Iranian Association of Qur'anic Studies and Islamic Culture (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Motaleat-e Qorani va Farhang-e Eslami)
29. Iranian Association of Rainwater Catchment Surface Systems (Anjoman-e Sistem-ha-ye Sotooh-e Abgir-e Baran-e Iran)
30. Iranian Association of Remote Sensing and GIS (Anjoman-e Sanjesh az Doori va GIS-e Iran)
31. Iranian Association of Textile Engineering Science and Technology (Anjoman-e Oloom va Fanavari-ye Mohandesi-ye Nasaji-ye Iran)
32. Iranian Bioengineering Association (Anjoman-e Mohandesi-ye Hayat)

33. Iranian Comparative Education Association (Anjoman-e Amoozesh va Parvaresh-e Tatbighi-ye Iran)
34. Iranian Counseling Association (Anjoman-e Moshavereh-ye Iran)
35. Iranian Association for Cultural Studies and Communications (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Motaleat-e Farhangi va Ertebatat)
36. Iranian Educational Management Association (Anjoman-e Modiriyat-e Amoozeshi-ye Iran)
37. Iranian Engineering Education Association (Anjoman-e Amoozesh-e Mohandesi-ye Iran)
38. Iranian Environmental Assessment Association (Anjoman-e Arzyabi-ye Mohit-e Zist-e Iran)
39. Iranian Environmental Education and Sustainable Development Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Amoozesh-e Mohit-e Zist va Tosee-ye Paydar-e Iran)
40. Iranian Geographical Association (Anjoman-e Joghrafiyai-ye Iran)
41. Iranian Higher Education Association (Anjoman-e Amoozesh-e Aali-ye Iran)
42. Iranian Hydrogen and Fuel Cell Association (Anjoman-e Hidrojen va Pil-e Sokhti-ye Iran)
43. Iranian Hydrology Association (Anjoman-e Hidrologi-ye Iran)
44. Iranian Literary Criticism Association (Anjoman-e Naqd-e Adabi-ye Iran)
45. Iranian Management Association (Anjoman-e Modiriyat-e Iran)
46. Iranian Marine Engineering Association (Anjoman-e Mohandesi-ye Daryaei-ye Iran)
47. Iranian Nematology Association (Anjoman-e Nematodshenasi-ye Iran)
48. Iranian Operations Research Association (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Tahqiq dar Amaliyat)
49. Iranian Philosophy of Education Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Falsafeh-ye Talim va Tarbiyat-e Iran)
50. Iranian Psychological Association (Anjoman-e Ravanshenasi-ye Iran)
51. Iranian Quaternary Association (Anjoman-e Koaternari-ye Iran)
52. Iranian River Engineering Association (Anjoman-e Mohandesi-ye Roodkhane-ye Iran)
53. Iranian Scientific Association for Peace Studies (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Motaleat-e Solh-e Iran)
54. Iranian Scientific Association for Quality (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Keyfiyat-e Iran)
55. Iranian Scientific Association of Acarology (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Keneshshenasi-ye Iran)
56. Iranian Scientific Association of Archaeology (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Bastanshenasi-ye Iran)
57. Iranian Scientific Association of Architecture and Urban Planning (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Memari va Shahrsazi-ye Iran)
58. Iranian Scientific Association of Biosafety (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Imeni-ye Zisti-ye Iran)
59. Iranian Scientific Association of Chemical Engineering (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Mohandesi-ye Shimi-ye Iran)
60. Iranian Scientific Association of E-Learning (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Yadgiri-ye Elektroniki-ye Iran / YADA)
61. Iranian Scientific Association of Electronic Commerce (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Tejarat-e Elektroniki-ye Iran)
62. Iranian Scientific Association of Energetic Materials (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Mavad-e Porenerzhi-ye Iran)
63. Iranian Scientific Association of Foresight (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Ayandehnegari-ye Iran)
64. Iranian Scientific Association of Foundry (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Rikhtehgari-ye Iran)
65. Iranian Scientific Association of Gas Engineering (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Mohandesi-ye Gaz-e Iran)
66. Iranian Scientific Association of Geography and Rural Planning (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Joghrafia va Barnamehrizi-ye Roostaie-ye Iran)
67. Iranian Scientific Association of Internal Diseases of Large Animals (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Bimari-ha-ye Dakheli-ye Dam-ha-ye Bozorg-e Iran)
68. Iranian Scientific Association of Management Accounting (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Hesabdari-ye Modiriyat-e Iran)
69. Iranian Scientific Association of Mycology (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Gharchshenasi-ye Iran)
70. Iranian Scientific Association of Oceanography (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Oqyanusshenasi-ye Iran)
71. Iranian Scientific Association of Passive Defense (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Pedafand-e Gheyr-e Amel-e Iran)
72. Iranian Scientific Association of Probiotics and Functional Foods (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Probiotik va Ghaza-ha-ye Farasoodmand-e Iran)
73. Iranian Scientific Association of Professors of Persian Language and Literature (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Ostadan-e Zaban va Adabiyat-e Farsi-ye Iran)

74. Iranian Scientific Association of Science and Technology Parks and Incubators (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Park-ha-ye Elm va Fanavari va Marakez-e Roshd-e Iran)
75. Iranian Scientific Association of Sedimentology (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Rasobshenasi-ye Iran)
76. Iranian Scientific Association of Solar Energy (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Enerzhi-ye Khorshidi-ye Iran)
77. Iranian Scientific Association of Urban Economics (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Eghtesad-e Shahri-ye Iran)
78. Iranian Scientific Association of Visual Arts (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Honar-ha-ye Tajassomi-ye Iran)
79. Iranian Scientific Association of Waste Engineering and Management (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Mohandesi va Modiriyat-e Pasmand-e Iran)
80. Iranian Scientific Association of Wind Energy (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Enerzhi-ye Badi-ye Iran)
81. Iranian Scientific Camel Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Shotor-e Iran)
82. Iranian Scientific Carpet Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Farsh-e Iran)
83. Iranian Scientific Composite Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Kompozit-e Iran)
84. Iranian Scientific Concrete Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Beton-e Iran)
85. Iranian Scientific Peptide Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Peptid-e Iran)
86. Iranian Scientific Society for Suicide Prevention (Jamiyat-e Elmi-ye Pishgiri az Khodkoshi-ye Iran)
87. Iranian Social Welfare Association (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Refah-e Ejtemaei-ye Iran)
88. Iranian Society for the History of Islam (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Tarikh-e Eslam)
89. Iranian Society of Education (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Talim va Tarbiyat)
90. Iranian Society of World Studies (Anjoman-e Irani-ye Motaleat-e Jahan)
91. Iranian Sociological Association (Anjoman-e Jamee-shenasi-ye Iran)
92. Iranian Sociology of Education Association (Anjoman-e Jamee-shenasi-ye Amoozesh va Parvareh-e Iran)
93. Iranian Watershed Management Association (Anjoman-e Abkhizdari-ye Iran)
94. Iranian Weed Science Association (Anjoman-e Oloom-e Alaf-ha-ye Harz-e Iran)
95. Linguistic Society of Iran (Anjoman-e Zabanshenasi-ye Iran)
96. Physical Society of Iran (Anjoman-e Fizik-e Iran)
97. Scientific Association of Health, Safety and Environment Management and Engineering (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Modiriyat va Mohandesi-ye Behdasht, Imeni va Mohit-e Zist)
98. Scientific Association of Light Steel Buildings (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Sakhteman-ha-ye Fooladi-ye Sabok)
99. Scientific Association of Packaging (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Basteh-band)
100. Scientific Association of Police Research (Anjoman-e Elmi-ye Pazhohesh-ha-ye Entezami)

Note. Authors' final analytic sample, matched against the Commission of Iranian Scientific Associations (CISA) roster.

Appendix B

Table B1

Descriptive Statistics for SP Scale Items

Item allocation follows the final four-factor solution reported in Table 4: Professional (7 items), Critical (4), Policy (7), and Public (5).

Dimension	SP scale item	M	SD
Professional	Working with academic departments to protect knowledge	4.13	.90
	Validating knowledge dissemination	4.26	1.04
	Sensitivity to the knowledge content and its quality	4.57	.73
	Recruiting specialists with professional competence	4.48	.73
	Challenging established knowledge	4.04	.92
	Critiquing existing research	4.05	.90
	Critique of teaching methods and knowledge transfer	4.14	.91
Critical	Questioning established norms of the knowledge	3.93	.98
	Critique of resource and reward allocation methods	3.41	1.25
	Criticizing theoretical and methodological frameworks	3.57	1.11
	Assessment of knowledge implementation procedures	3.95	.91
Policy	Applying knowledge in government service	3.90	1.12
	Research collaboration with government agencies	3.96	1.21
	Research cooperation with the private sector	3.89	1.17
	Applying knowledge in the private sector	3.92	1.17
	Joint publication with government agencies	3.79	1.08
	Taking members from governmental organizations	3.57	1.27
	Joint publications with the private sector	3.66	1.10
Public	Joint publications with NGOs	3.42	1.31
	Taking members from NGOs	3.68	1.18
	Membership in NGOs	3.62	1.14
	Research collaboration with NGOs	3.74	1.20
	Applying knowledge to assist and support NGOs	3.74	1.11

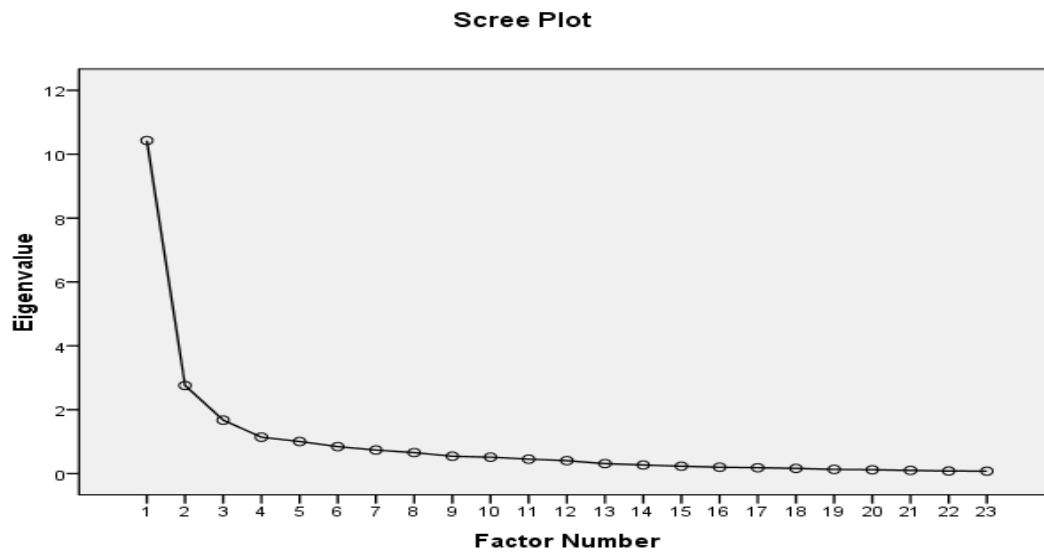
Note. Items were originally written in Persian and are presented here in approximate English translation. Responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important), with higher scores indicating greater perceived importance.

Authors' calculations based on collected data.

Appendix C

Figure C1

Scree Plot for the Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Scientific Professionalism (SP) Scale



Note. The scree plot shows a clear levelling off after the fourth factor, supporting retention of the four-factor solution over the weaker five-factor alternative.

Authors' analysis based on collected data.

Appendix D

Table D1

Disciplinary Profiles of Scientific Professionalism

This appendix reports descriptive profiles of the four observed dimensions and four derived axes across the seven disciplinary fields in Table 1, using the final 23-item allocation reported in Table 4.

Discipline	N	PRP	CRP	POP	PUP	IAP	EAP	IP	RP
Basic Sciences	13	4.37	3.90	3.85	3.80	4.14	3.82	4.11	3.85
Engineering and Technology	21	4.14	3.37	3.76	3.55	3.75	3.65	3.95	3.46
Agriculture	16	4.46	3.64	3.84	3.44	4.05	3.64	4.15	3.54
Humanities	15	4.39	3.98	3.87	3.62	4.18	3.74	4.13	3.80
Social Sciences	17	3.87	3.63	3.91	3.51	3.75	3.71	3.89	3.57
Interdisciplinary Studies	15	4.30	4.00	3.87	4.20	4.15	4.03	4.09	4.10
Art	3	4.48	4.00	3.67	3.00	4.24	3.33	4.07	3.50
Total sample	100	4.25 (0.64)	3.73 (0.86)	3.84 (0.91)	3.65 (1.02)	3.99	3.74	4.04	3.69

Note. Values are mean scores. For the total sample, standard deviations are shown in parentheses only for the four observed dimensions. The final item allocation is PRP = 7 items, CRP = 4 items, POP = 7 items, and PUP = 5 items, consistent with Table 4. Science professionalism comprises four dimensions: PRP (professional), CRP (critical), POP (policy), and PUP (public). The derived axes are arithmetic means calculated from the unrounded dimension scores: $IAP = (PRP + CRP) / 2$; $EAP = (POP + PUP) / 2$; $IP = (PRP + POP) / 2$; and $RP = (CRP + PUP) / 2$.

Authors' calculations based on the final analytic dataset.

Displaced Professional Authority: Expertise and Legitimacy in Higher Education

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Abstract

Authority over teaching and learning in higher education can be shaped by organisational position and procedural responsibility as well as by educational expertise. This article conceptualises the potential misalignment between these bases of authority as *displaced professional authority*: not deprofessionalisation, but a reconfiguration of how expertise is recognised and authorised. Drawing on sociological theories of professions and higher-education governance, the article examines how performance indicators, audit practices and governance structures can mediate academic judgement by prioritising demonstrability and alignment. The argument is not that expertise is diminished, but that its authority can be conditioned by competing bases of legitimacy. The article therefore offers a conceptual lens for examining how expertise, authority and legitimacy are negotiated across political, institutional and everyday contexts, and identifies a need for empirical research into how these dynamics shape academic work and the conditions under which academic freedom is exercised.

Keywords

Professionalism, academic freedom, managerialism, accountability, governance, hybrid roles.

Introduction

In recent years, the question of who holds authority over higher education—and on what basis that authority rests—has become increasingly contested. Political actors, senior managers and external agencies exercise growing influence over the purposes and practices of universities, while the authority of academics as knowledge-based experts is subject to growing scrutiny. Higher-education research has examined these developments through the lenses of neoliberal reform, academic capitalism and new public management, highlighting how they reshape institutional governance and academic work (Deem, 1998; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Less attention, however, has been paid to how these shifts reconfigure the grounds on which authority itself is legitimised: who is recognised as entitled to make educational judgements, on what basis such entitlement is justified, and how this affects the conditions under which academic work is carried out.

This article advances the concept of *displaced professional authority* as a conceptual lens for analysing these changes. The argument does not claim a straightforward process of deprofessionalisation, nor does it assume that academic work constitutes a fully bounded profession in the classical sociological sense. Rather, it focuses on the relationship between expertise (knowledge-based capacity to make educational judgements), authority (the socially recognised right to make such judgements) and legitimacy (the basis on which that right is justified). The central claim is that these elements can become misaligned: authority over teaching, curriculum and quality may be exercised through organisational position and procedural responsibility, while the forms of expertise associated with educational and disciplinary judgement are mediated or marginalised. The notion of displacement thus captures a shift not from one professional group to another, but from epistemic to positional and procedural bases of authority.

Academic freedom is often invoked in discussions of authority in higher education, but its relationship to expertise and decision-making requires careful clarification. International frameworks such as the UNESCO (1997) Recommendation and the Magna Charta Universitatum (2020) define academic freedom as encompassing the rights of higher-education teaching personnel to teach, research and participate in institutional governance without undue interference, under conditions of intellectual and institutional autonomy. These formulations establish academic freedom as a normative condition that enables scholarly and educational work, rather than as a direct source of decision-making authority. In this sense, academic freedom secures the formal inclusion of academic staff in processes of educational governance and protects the exercise of professional judgement, but it does not in itself determine the basis on which authority is recognised within those processes. The analysis developed in this article therefore distinguishes between the formal protections associated with academic freedom and its substantive enactment in practice. While academic staff may participate in committees, boards and quality assurance processes, the extent to which their expertise is

recognised as authoritative within these structures is contingent on how legitimacy is constructed—whether through disciplinary knowledge, organisational position or procedural alignment. From this perspective, displaced professional authority does not necessarily erode academic freedom as a formal principle, but may reshape the conditions under which it can be meaningfully exercised in relation to teaching and curriculum. Academic freedom is therefore treated here as a potential normative implication of displaced professional authority, rather than as a constituent concept alongside expertise, authority and legitimacy.

Building on this conceptualisation, the article engages with, but is distinct from, existing discussions of managerialism, audit cultures, organisational professionalism and hybrid roles in higher education. Research on managerialism and audit cultures has examined structural transformations in governance and accountability (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shore & Wright, 2000), while work on changing administrative and hybrid roles has explored evolving occupational boundaries, identities and forms of organisational expertise (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). Bringing these strands together foregrounds a related question that is less often made explicit: how the grounds on which authority itself is legitimised are reconfigured. The shift examined here is therefore not primarily a redistribution of authority between groups, but a transformation in the criteria through which authority is recognised and justified.

Rather than introducing a new institutional logic or occupational category, this article offers an analytical perspective that foregrounds the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy as a dynamic and contingent configuration. The concept of displaced professional authority highlights the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative, including how positional and procedural forms of legitimacy can mediate, reshape or constrain the exercise of educational judgement. In doing so, the article contributes a conceptual lens for analysing how authority is constructed, circulated and enacted across different organisational contexts, and for examining the implications of these processes for the organisation of academic work and the conditions under which academic judgement can be exercised.

This article adopts a conceptual analytical approach to examining authority in higher education. It does not present original empirical data, nor does it aim to provide a systematic review of the literature. Rather, it develops an interpretive synthesis of existing scholarship to clarify how authority is constituted and legitimised across different contexts of higher-education governance. The analysis proceeds through a theoretically informed engagement with literature on professionalism, institutional governance and academic work, drawing selectively on empirical studies to illustrate broader patterns rather than to establish generalisable claims. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive account of higher-education systems, but to offer a conceptual lens that clarifies the shifting relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy. In this sense, the argument is heuristic: it is intended to provide a framework for interpreting existing developments and for guiding future empirical inquiry into how these dynamics are experienced and negotiated in practice.

These dynamics can be examined across multiple sites of higher-education governance. In political and societal arenas, public discourse and policy frameworks provide competing grounds on which claims about higher education may be treated as legitimate. Scholarship on the political contestation of expertise highlights how knowledge claims acquire authority within wider relations of trust and power (Scott, 2019), while comparative studies show how performance-based funding, quality audits and policy steering reconfigure relationships between states and universities (Santiago & Carvalho, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004; Želvys et al., 2021). Such arrangements illustrate how political mandate, public accountability and economic priorities can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Within universities, these pressures are mediated through governance arrangements that redistribute decision-making authority. Over the past three decades, higher-education institutions have evolved from primarily collegial communities into complex organisations characterised by hierarchical management structures and strategic coordination. Research documents a shift from professor-led decision-making towards executive leadership and managerial oversight (Jones et al., 2025; Santiago et al., 2015; Shin, 2015). While the extent and form of these changes vary across national systems, they commonly involve a greater emphasis on metrics, planning and accountability, which can privilege organisational position over disciplinary or pedagogical expertise in decisions about teaching and learning (Shepherd, 2018; Taberner, 2018). As Rowlands (2013) shows, collegial bodies such as academic boards may continue to play important roles, but their influence is often reshaped within broader managerial frameworks.

At the level of everyday practice, these arrangements are experienced through quality assurance processes, performance indicators and reporting requirements that structure how educational work is documented and justified (Elken et al., 2020; Morley, 2003; Taberner, 2018). Programme coordinators, course leaders and administrative or hybrid staff operate within institutional environments in which educational judgement must often be articulated through formal procedures and external standards. While such systems can support coordination and accountability, they can also privilege demonstrability and compliance over more tacit or context-sensitive forms of expertise (Elken et al., 2020; Taberner, 2018). At the same time, changes in administrative and hybrid roles have contributed to a blurring of distinctions between organisational competence and educational or disciplinary expertise (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). As heterogeneous forms of work are brought under a shared professional vocabulary, positional authority may take on the appearance of epistemic legitimacy—a dynamic central to the analysis developed here.

Taken together, these developments point not to a uniform transformation of higher education, but to a set of recurring tendencies through which authority is reconfigured across different contexts. The article therefore examines displaced professional authority across three

analytical sites: the political and societal arenas in which higher education is framed; institutional governance structures through which authority is organised; and the everyday practices through which it is enacted and negotiated. These are not discrete levels at which a single form of authority is independently reconfigured. They are analytical sites in which different claims to educational authority intersect. Throughout the article, educational authority refers to the socially recognised right to shape decisions concerning teaching, curriculum and educational quality. The analysis therefore asks how claims grounded in political mandate, positional or procedural responsibility and epistemic expertise affect the conditions under which educational expertise carries such authority.

Developing this perspective, the article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy in higher education, offering a more precise vocabulary for analysing their divergence. Second, it situates debates on managerialism, professionalism and hybrid roles within a common analytical frame focused on the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative. Third, it provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research into how these dynamics are experienced, negotiated and contested in different institutional and national settings, and with what implications for the organisation of academic work.

Expertise, authority and legitimacy

Understanding how authority in higher education becomes detached from expertise requires clarifying the relationship between three closely related but analytically distinct concepts: expertise, authority and legitimacy. *Expertise* refers to the knowledge-based capacity to make informed judgements within a domain. *Authority* denotes the socially recognised right to make such judgements and to have them accepted. *Legitimacy* concerns the grounds on which that right is justified, whether through knowledge, position, procedure or other forms of validation. While these elements are often aligned in idealised accounts of professional practice, they may also diverge. The analysis that follows focuses on how such divergence is produced and sustained in higher education.

Classical sociology of professions provides a useful starting point. Professions have been understood as occupational groups granted epistemic and moral authority on the basis of specialised knowledge and public trust. Greenwood's (1957) early formulation and Freidson's (2001) influential account of professionalism both emphasise the alignment of expertise, authority and responsibility within relatively stable jurisdictions. Within this model, authority is justified through peer review, disciplinary competence and a normative commitment to serving the public good.

Subsequent work has complicated this picture by emphasising that professional authority is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated and contingent relation. Legitimacy depends not only on technical competence but on the social and organisational conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative (Saks & Adams, 2019). Professionals frequently operate

within environments shaped by multiple, and sometimes competing, expectations, including efficiency, accountability and ethical responsibility (Harrits, 2016). Professionalism, in this sense, is better understood as an ongoing practice of securing and maintaining legitimacy than as a stable occupational status.

Higher education occupies an ambiguous position within this landscape. Academic work has historically been organised around disciplinary expertise and collegial self-regulation, yet it has not been constituted as a fully bounded profession in the classical sense. There is no unified system of credentialing, no exclusive jurisdiction over teaching and no consistent requirement for formal pedagogical training (Shin, 2015). Authority in universities has therefore rested on a hybrid configuration combining knowledge-based judgement with organisational roles and procedures. Weber's (1921/2019) typology helps illuminate this arrangement: elements of traditional authority are visible in collegial recognition of scholarly standing, while rational-legal authority is embedded in formal roles, rules and institutional hierarchies.

Contemporary transformations in higher education can be understood as a reconfiguration of this hybrid arrangement. As Henkel (2005) shows, changing regimes of accountability and governance reshape the conditions under which academic expertise is recognised and exercised. At the same time, organisational practices increasingly frame administrative and managerial roles in professionalised terms, conferring forms of legitimacy grounded in organisational competence rather than disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge. Gornitzka and Marheim Larsen's (2004) analysis of Norwegian universities illustrates how administrative roles have been differentiated and reclassified, raising questions about the emergence of new forms of organisational professionalism.

This expansion of the professional label has important implications for how authority is constructed. As organisational roles are described as 'professional', the distinction between knowledge-based expertise and organisational function becomes less clear. Authority may then be justified not through epistemic credibility but through positional responsibility and procedural competence. The displacement at issue in this article should therefore not be understood as the erosion of a clearly bounded academic profession, but as a shift in the grounds of legitimacy: from expertise-based justification towards positional and procedural forms of validation.

These developments can be situated within broader analyses of changing governance regimes. Freidson's (2001) distinction between professional, bureaucratic and market principles provides a useful heuristic for understanding competing bases of authority. The professional principle privileges expert judgement and peer accountability; the bureaucratic principle emphasises rules, standardisation and audit; and the market principle foregrounds competition and responsiveness to external demand. Rather than treating these as discrete or fully coherent 'logics', the analysis here uses them as ideal-typical reference points for understanding

how different forms of legitimacy are invoked in practice. In higher education, shifts in governance have increasingly elevated bureaucratic and market-based forms of justification, often requiring that expertise be translated into measurable outputs or documented procedures.

Empirical research in higher education documents how these shifts are enacted. Studies of governance show the growing importance of managerial coordination and strategic oversight (Maassen, 2003; Rowlands, 2013), while research on hybrid or third-space roles highlights the emergence of actors who operate across academic and administrative domains (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008). At the level of everyday practice, Trowler (2008) demonstrates how institutional norms and expectations shape the enactment of academic work. Taken together, this literature indicates that authority in universities is not simply redistributed, but reconstituted through changing relationships between expertise, organisational position and procedural accountability.

Viewed through the lens of displaced professional authority, these developments highlight a recurring possibility: expertise, authority and legitimacy can become misaligned. Authority over teaching and learning may be exercised through organisational roles that require procedural compliance, while the forms of expertise necessary to make substantive educational judgements are mediated, constrained or subordinated. This conceptualisation does not assume a uniform transformation across all systems, but identifies a set of tendencies through which authority is reconfigured. It is this misalignment—rather than the decline of a profession per se—that provides the analytical foundation for the sections that follow.

Political and societal authority

To understand how the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy is reconfigured in higher education, it is useful to begin with the political and societal contexts in which universities are situated. For the purposes of this analysis, this encompasses the public discourses, policy frameworks and forms of political representation through which expectations about the purposes, responsibilities and governance of higher education are articulated. These contexts matter because they establish competing grounds on which claims about higher education may be treated as legitimate. Educational expertise is one such basis, but political mandate, public accountability and economic priorities can provide others. The analytical question is therefore not simply who speaks about higher education, but on what basis particular claims acquire authority and how those claims subsequently shape the conditions within which educational judgement is exercised.

Public contestation of expertise provides one illustration of this relationship (Scott, 2019). Expertise may be challenged not because the underlying knowledge has disappeared, but because its authority depends upon wider judgements about trust, representation and legitimacy. Such contestation takes different forms and varies considerably between political and national contexts: in some cases it concerns the credibility of expert advice in public decision-

making, while in others universities or particular forms of academic knowledge themselves become objects of political scrutiny. The significance for displaced professional authority lies not in treating these developments as evidence of a uniform decline in expertise, but in recognising that epistemic credibility does not by itself secure authority. Political mandate, public visibility and other forms of legitimacy may coexist with, compete with or override claims grounded in specialised knowledge.

These developments are also reflected in the ways higher-education systems are governed. Across many national contexts, political actors play a central role in setting system-level priorities and performance expectations through strategies, regulatory instruments and hybrid steering arrangements (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019). The Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al., 2026) documents substantial cross-national variation in the de facto protection of academic freedom and includes institutional autonomy as one of its institutional dimensions. Its most recent data identify significant declines in institutional autonomy across a range of national settings, while also showing considerable variation in their extent and trajectory. More broadly, performance-based funding, policy steering and other regulatory arrangements demonstrate how formal institutional autonomy can coexist with mechanisms through which political priorities influence university activity. Taken together, these patterns show how different bases of political and institutional legitimacy can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

A related feature of contemporary higher-education governance is the growing use of technocratic mechanisms such as audit systems, economic models and performance indicators. Such mechanisms translate complex institutional and educational processes into forms that can be compared, monitored and incorporated into system-level decision-making. In doing so, they can privilege forms of legitimacy grounded in measurement and demonstrability over those grounded in disciplinary or pedagogical judgement. The issue is not that measurement is inherently opposed to expertise, but that it provides an alternative basis on which claims about educational quality and institutional performance can acquire authority. Comparative research shows how these forms of steering reshape relationships between states, institutions and academic staff by strengthening organisational coordination and accountability (Lorenz, 2012; Musselin, 2013; Santiago & Carvalho, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004).

What is at stake in these developments is not simply the increased presence of external influence, but a shift in the criteria through which authority may be justified. Within this analytical frame, political and policy actors need not claim expertise in educational practice for their interventions to carry authority; their claims may instead derive legitimacy from electoral mandate, economic rationale or public accountability. Decisions about higher education can therefore be framed and evaluated according to criteria that are only partially aligned with pedagogical or disciplinary forms of knowledge. This does not render educational expertise irrelevant, but changes the conditions under which it carries authority: expert judgement must operate within frameworks whose terms may be established through other bases of

legitimacy. From this perspective, the significance of the political and societal context lies not in the exclusion of academic actors, but in the coexistence and potential prioritisation of different grounds of legitimacy in shaping the conditions under which educational judgement is exercised.

Taken together, these developments illustrate not a uniform erosion of academic expertise, but ways in which its authority can be reconfigured. Political and economic rationalities can shape the criteria through which educational value is recognised, and academic judgement may be required to align with externally defined priorities and indicators. From this perspective, expertise is not displaced in the sense of disappearing, but repositioned: it remains present, but its authority can be mediated through political, organisational and procedural forms of legitimacy. It is this reconfiguration—rather than a simple loss of expertise—that constitutes a key dimension of displaced professional authority, in which political and economic forms of legitimacy can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Institutional governance and managerial authority

Within universities, the broader reconfiguration of expertise, authority and legitimacy is mediated through institutional governance. Over recent decades, many higher-education systems have introduced reforms commonly associated with managerialism, new public management (NPM) or enterprise governance. These developments have altered how authority is organised and exercised, not by eliminating academic expertise, but by reshaping the conditions under which it is recognised as authoritative. In particular, organisational position and procedural responsibility have become more prominent bases for legitimising decision-making in areas historically shaped strongly by disciplinary and pedagogical judgement (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shepherd, 2018).

These reforms were frequently framed as processes of modernisation. Across OECD contexts, changes in the 1990s and 2000s promoted efficiency, accountability and responsiveness, encouraging universities to adopt management practices drawn from the corporate sector (Amaral et al., 2003; Deem, 1998). In many cases, this involved a strengthening of hierarchical coordination and strategic planning alongside existing collegial structures. O'Reilly and Reed (2011) describe this as an increased reliance on bureaucratic forms of control, in which metrics and line management play a greater role in coordinating organisational activity. While the extent of these changes varies across national and institutional contexts, they are commonly associated with more formalised accountability arrangements that shape how educational decisions are justified.

Market-oriented mechanisms have developed alongside these bureaucratic forms. Student-satisfaction measures, rankings and performance-based funding provide institutional mechanisms through which competition, comparison and reputation can enter university governance (Croucher & Lacy, 2022; Watts, 2017). Senior leaders—such as vice-chancellors, rectors

and deans—may accordingly be positioned as organisational executives accountable to governing boards and external stakeholders (Croucher & Lacy, 2022). Within such arrangements, authority can be linked to the capacity to manage resources, mitigate risk and demonstrate performance, rather than resting solely on disciplinary or pedagogical expertise. This does not displace expertise entirely, but reframes the conditions under which it contributes to decision-making.

These shifts are also visible in the criteria through which educational leadership is legitimised. Research suggests that leadership roles may emphasise managerial competence alongside, and sometimes over, scholarly or pedagogical experience (Ekman et al., 2018; Santiago & Carvalho, 2012). Where organisational responsibility provides the principal basis of a leadership role, authority may therefore derive from position and the capacity to navigate institutional processes rather than directly from expertise in curriculum or pedagogy. In such cases, expertise may instead be consulted, translated or operationalised within frameworks established through positional responsibility and procedural accountability.

Understanding how managerial authority becomes established within universities requires attention to this distinction between bases of legitimacy. Managerial authority need not be justified through claims to disciplinary or pedagogical expertise; it may instead derive from responsibility for organisational coherence, risk management and accountability to institutional or external requirements. These are themselves legitimate organisational functions and may require substantial expertise, but they differ from the epistemic grounds traditionally associated with academic judgement. The analytical issue is therefore not whether managerial actors possess knowledge, but what kind of knowledge provides the basis for authority in decisions concerning educational practice. Decision-making authority can consequently reside with actors whose relevant expertise is principally organisational or procedural, while disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge enters the process through consultation or implementation.

A related development concerns the expanding use of the term *professional* to describe administrative and managerial roles. Studies in the Australian context show how administrative staff have identified increasingly with professional status and occupied more visible strategic positions within universities (Szekeres, 2004, 2011). This form of professionalisation confers legitimacy grounded in organisational competence and procedural expertise rather than disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge. Comparable processes of occupational professionalisation have also been examined in other organisational domains, including hospital administration (Cronin et al., 2018). Within higher education, the significance of this vocabulary lies in its potential to obscure distinctions between forms of expertise, allowing organisational competence to function as a proxy for educational judgement and thereby reinforcing positional authority in domains shaped by disciplinary knowledge.

Administrative actors also play important roles in quality assurance, compliance, data management and student services, activities that help establish the organisational parameters within which academic work is conducted (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Szekeres, 2011). Their involvement need not itself constitute displacement; specialised administrative knowledge may be essential to effective institutional governance. The relevant question is how such expertise relates to authority when organisational processes extend to decisions concerning teaching, curriculum or educational quality. Where procedural competence becomes a basis for determining substantive educational matters, distinctions between organisational expertise and educational judgement may blur.

Hybrid or third-space roles further complicate this picture. Staff working across academic and administrative domains often combine elements of disciplinary knowledge with organisational and procedural expertise (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008). Such roles can facilitate coordination and translation across different parts of the institution while also illustrating how authority can emerge through the ability to navigate institutional systems and reconcile competing demands. The authority associated with hybrid roles is therefore not located exclusively in either expertise or position, but may arise through their interaction.

Managerial authority is also enacted through organisational practices that signal legitimacy. Strategic plans, performance reports and evaluation frameworks provide mechanisms through which institutions demonstrate alignment with external expectations. As Shore and Wright (2000) argue, such practices can be understood as forms of performative accountability, in which organisational coherence and control are enacted through documentation and representation. Metrics—including research assessments, student surveys and performance indicators—translate complex activities into comparable outputs (Lorenz, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004). In doing so, they can affect which dimensions of institutional activity become most visible and readily available as grounds for organisational judgement.

Taken together, these developments can be understood as a reconfiguration of collegial governance rather than its disappearance. Academic judgement may continue to carry substantial authority, but it can operate within frameworks structured by institutional strategies, metrics and procedural standards. Committees and collegial bodies may retain formal decision-making roles while operating within organisational environments that shape the terms on which decisions are made (Rowlands, 2013). Authority is therefore not necessarily removed from academic actors, but can be mediated through systems that affect how academic judgement is articulated and justified.

From the perspective of displaced professional authority, the key issue is not simply the growth of managerial control, but the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy within these arrangements. Organisational position and procedural accountability can provide bases for legitimising decisions alongside disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, and may condition the terms under which that expertise enters decision-making. This should not

be read as implying a uniform transformation across institutions or systems, but as identifying a set of tendencies through which educational authority may be reshaped. Institutional governance is therefore a key analytical site for examining when and how educational expertise is recognised as authoritative, and how organisational structures mediate its exercise.

Local governance, compliance and everyday practice

If broader political and institutional arrangements shape the conditions under which authority is organised, everyday practice is where relationships between expertise, authority and legitimacy are enacted and experienced. Here, authority is exercised and negotiated through routine interactions among academics, administrators and hybrid staff, within institutional procedures and accountability requirements that structure educational work. It is also where competing claims to professionalism become particularly visible—not as a simple distinction between professional and non-professional actors, but as a tension between different bases of legitimacy, including disciplinary expertise, organisational responsibility and procedural accountability.

These dynamics are particularly evident in the bureaucratic infrastructures that structure teaching and learning. At faculty and departmental level, staff operate within established systems of quality assurance, learning-outcome specification and accreditation. While such systems can support coordination and accountability, research also shows how formalised quality processes can constrain discretionary judgement and generate substantial demands for documentation (Elken et al., 2020; Morley, 2003; Taberner, 2018). Where activities such as specifying learning outcomes, documenting curriculum alignment or justifying assessment design are undertaken primarily to demonstrate conformity with institutional requirements, they can be understood as a form of *compulsory performativity*. In such circumstances, quality assurance may be experienced less as reflective evaluation than as an obligation to demonstrate alignment with established standards.

Programme coordination provides an analytical illustration of how expertise and authority can become partially decoupled. A coordinator may possess substantial expertise in curriculum, pedagogy and student learning while remaining accountable through organisational processes that prescribe how educational decisions must be documented, approved or evaluated. Where the ability to demonstrate conformity with such requirements becomes important to securing approval or recognition, what might be termed *accountability competence* can operate as a basis of legitimacy alongside pedagogical or disciplinary judgement. Displacement in this sense does not imply an absence of expertise, but concerns the conditions under which that expertise is able to carry authority.

These processes also involve ongoing judgements about what constitutes legitimate authority in particular situations. Actors must not only exercise expertise, but interpret which forms of justification are likely to be recognised within the institutional context. This can involve fram-

ing educational reasoning through established procedures, performance indicators or accountability requirements, including where these sit uneasily alongside disciplinary or pedagogical considerations. Legitimacy is therefore not simply imposed through formal governance structures; it is also enacted through everyday decisions about how educational work is framed, justified and presented. Academic, administrative and hybrid staff can consequently participate in reproducing organisational forms of authority through the practical necessity of operating within their terms.

These processes can also have an affective dimension. Requirements to report student evaluations, respond to performance data or document educational practice may encourage forms of self-monitoring through which academics interpret their work in relation to institutional expectations. Archer's (2000) account of internal conversations provides a way of understanding how individuals seek to reconcile such expectations with personal and professional commitments. Similarly, Tandilashvili and Tandilashvili (2022) identify tensions between managerial norms and educational values within performance-oriented environments. Acting 'professionally' in these circumstances may therefore involve navigating competing expectations and bases of legitimacy rather than simply applying an established body of expertise.

Hybrid or third-space roles further illustrate how authority is negotiated in practice. Staff working across academic and administrative domains often mediate between different expectations and forms of knowledge (Kehm, 2015; Smith et al., 2021; Whitchurch, 2009). Their credibility may depend partly on their ability to translate between organisational requirements and academic practices. Within such roles, procedural literacy—the ability to interpret regulations, manage documentation and navigate institutional processes—can itself constitute a valued form of expertise. This need not replace disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge, but can become an additional basis on which authority is recognised within organisational settings.

Taken together, these arrangements can shape how educational judgement is articulated. Rather than relying solely on collegial deliberation, formal quality systems may require educational decisions to be rendered demonstrable through specified standards, documentation and evidence of improvement. Research on European quality systems identifies a growing emphasis on evidencing improvement within wider evaluative-state dynamics (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). Audit processes can similarly operate as forms of ritualised verification (Power, 1997), generating documentation demands that compete with opportunities for more informal or reflective forms of educational work (Elken et al., 2020). The significance for displaced professional authority lies in how such processes make particular forms of judgement more readily visible, verifiable and institutionally actionable than others.

These arrangements can also produce different interpretations of what constitutes professional conduct. For some actors, professionalism may be associated with responsiveness to

organisational priorities and procedural expectations; for others, it may remain more closely tied to disciplinary standards and educational values. Studies of performance management and appraisal show how staff navigate such expectations by recalibrating how their work is presented and justified (Field, 2015; Houston et al., 2006). Programme coordination again illustrates the potential tension: influence may depend heavily on relational credibility and collegial trust, while formal institutional processes also require educational decisions to be expressed in procedurally recognisable forms.

From the perspective of displaced professional authority, the significance of these everyday practices lies in their capacity to reproduce particular configurations of legitimacy. Documentation generated through local quality and accountability processes can feed into institutional reporting and external evaluation, thereby reinforcing the organisational value of measurable indicators and procedural alignment. Everyday practices therefore do not merely respond to governance structures but can contribute to their reproduction. At the same time, these arrangements depend on the participation of academics, administrators and hybrid staff whose different forms of expertise remain necessary to educational work. The resulting configuration is one in which professionalism can involve an ongoing process of navigation between epistemic judgement and organisational requirements, rather than functioning as a stable or uncontested basis of authority.

Competing bases of legitimacy and the reconfiguration of professional authority

Across the political, institutional and everyday contexts examined in this article, the analysis identifies a recurring possibility: expertise, authority and legitimacy can become misaligned. Educational expertise continues to inform teaching, curriculum and educational quality, yet the authority to make and justify decisions in these domains may also be exercised through organisational position and procedural accountability. This condition is described here as displaced professional authority—not the disappearance of expertise, but a reconfiguration of the terms under which it is recognised as authoritative.

Understanding this shift requires reconsidering how professionalism operates in higher education. Following Freidson (2001), professionalism can be understood as a mode of organising work in which authority is grounded in specialised knowledge, peer accountability and a normative commitment to the public good. In universities, however, such authority has historically rested less on formal professional closure than on the credibility of disciplinary expertise and scholarly judgement. The analysis developed here suggests that these epistemic foundations now operate alongside, and in tension with, alternative bases of legitimacy, particularly those associated with organisational governance and political accountability.

From this perspective, the key issue is not the coexistence of multiple forms of legitimacy, but how they are prioritised and translated into decision-making authority. Political mandates, organisational procedures and performance indicators provide alternative means of justifying

decisions about higher education. These forms of legitimacy do not necessarily replace expertise, but can mediate how it is mobilised: academic judgement may be required to align with institutional strategies, become visible through documentation, or be validated through measurable outcomes. Authority is therefore not necessarily removed from academic actors, but can be re-situated within frameworks that condition how expertise is exercised and recognised.

This interpretation is consistent with broader analyses of contemporary governance. Studies of audit cultures (Lorenz, 2012) and performance-oriented accountability (Watts, 2017) show how organisational and policy environments reshape expectations of academic work, while research on the political contestation of expertise highlights the ambivalent status of knowledge in public life (Scott, 2019). Expertise may be invoked as a resource for solving problems, yet constrained when it challenges political or organisational priorities. One potential normative implication concerns academic freedom. As Gray (2022) and Ryder (2022) suggest, the credibility accorded to academic judgement matters to the conditions under which academic freedom can be exercised; changes in how expertise is recognised as authoritative may therefore have consequences for its substantive enactment.

Within institutions, these dynamics are reflected in the reconfiguration of professional roles. Managerial forms of professionalism emphasise responsiveness, accountability and demonstrability, reframing academic work in terms that align with organisational priorities. As O'Reilly and Reed (2011) argue, such developments reorient professional practice towards meeting institutional expectations, while Haga's (1976) account of managerial professionalism illustrates how responsibility may be recoded in terms of efficiency and compliance. The result is not the elimination of academic values, but their reinterpretation within administrative and procedural frameworks.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a broader reordering of how authority can be constituted in higher education. Across the tendencies examined here, authority may be justified through positional responsibility, procedural alignment and demonstrable performance alongside, or sometimes in preference to, expertise. The concept of displaced professional authority captures this shift by foregrounding the misalignment between knowledge-based judgement and the conditions under which it is recognised as legitimate. This does not imply a uniform transformation across all contexts, but identifies a set of tendencies through which authority is reconfigured.

The contribution of this perspective is therefore not to propose a simple restoration of professional authority, but to clarify the terms on which it is negotiated. By focusing on the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy, it becomes possible to analyse how competing expectations are lived and mediated in practice, and how they shape the conditions under which academic judgement can be exercised. This, in turn, points to the need for

further empirical work on how these dynamics unfold across different institutional and national settings, and with what implications for the future of higher education.

Conclusion

This article has examined the reconfiguration of authority in higher education across political, institutional and everyday domains. While shifts associated with managerial governance and changing accountability regimes are well established, the analysis suggests that their significance can extend beyond organisational adjustment to the grounds on which authority is claimed, exercised and recognised. The concept of displaced professional authority captures a potential misalignment between educational expertise and the bases on which authority is legitimised. Although its specific configurations will vary across national and institutional contexts, the analysis identifies recurring tensions between epistemic judgement and positional or procedural forms of legitimacy.

Across these analytical sites, legitimacy is constructed, circulated and enacted through different but interacting mechanisms. Political and societal arenas furnish policy, economic and public rationales through which claims about higher education are justified; institutional governance translates such rationales through organisational hierarchies, audit and accountability arrangements; and everyday practice interprets and reproduces them through decisions about educational work. The sites therefore do not represent separate forms or owners of authority, but illuminate how different claims to educational authority intersect and shape the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Understanding this reconfiguration clarifies what is at stake in contemporary debates about higher education. The issue is not simply whether academic authority is declining, but how the relationship between expertise, legitimacy and decision-making is being reorganised. Organisational vocabularies of professionalism, for example, can obscure distinctions between different forms of expertise, enabling positional authority to function as a proxy for knowledge-based judgement. From this perspective, the challenge is less one of restoring a prior model of professional authority than of analysing how authority is constituted under contemporary conditions.

One normative implication of this analysis concerns academic freedom. Academic freedom is not reducible to the possession of expertise, nor is it guaranteed by formal participation in governance structures. Rather, its substantive meaning depends on the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative within institutional decision-making. While academic staff may retain formal rights to participate in educational governance, the reconfiguration of authority described in this article suggests that the exercise of academic freedom may be mediated by organisational and procedural forms of legitimacy. This does not imply its erosion as a principle, but highlights the need to consider how it is enacted in practice in relation to teaching and curriculum.

The analysis developed here therefore points toward the need for further empirical and conceptual work. In particular, there is a need to examine how different actors interpret and negotiate competing bases of legitimacy in specific institutional contexts, and how these negotiations shape not only the organisation of academic work, but also the conditions under which educational judgement is recognised, contested and sustained. Such work would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how authority operates in higher education and its implications for the future of academic practice.

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Hybrid Professionalism in Municipal Culture: Training, Functions and Identity

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Abstract

This study examines how territorial scale conditions professionalism in fields that lack jurisdictional closure—a condition common to many public-sector occupations but largely unexamined in the literature on hybrid professionalism. It analyzes the case of municipal culture professionals in Galicia (Spain), a field contested by three occupational groups: social educators, cultural managers and sociocultural animators. A mixed-methods design combines a survey of 147 professionals across 313 municipalities with 16 interviews. The results reveal a highly qualified collective (85% with university degrees) but marked disciplinary dispersion, and a functional distribution in which managerial tasks (84.3%) far exceed sociocultural dynamization (29.9%); only 28.5% perceive correspondence between job title and actual functions. The study proposes the concept of territorial hybrid professionalism: municipalities with fewer resources paradoxically sustain closer socio-educational practice, showing that organizational scale, not resource endowment alone, shapes which forms of professional practice are possible.

Keywords

Hybrid professionalism, professional identity, cultural workers, jurisdictional competition, sociocultural animation, cultural management, professionalization, territorial professionalism

Introduction

The sociology of professions has been built largely on occupations that achieved jurisdictional closure—medicine, law, engineering—where credentialing, licensing, and collective organization secured exclusive control over a domain of work (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Larson, 1977). Far less is known about occupations that operate durably without such closure: fields where competing groups make overlapping claims, no credential confers exclusive access, and the settlement between contenders is continually renegotiated rather than resolved. Public-sector occupations are especially exposed to this condition, since administrative structures and budgetary constraints shape their jurisdictions as much as professional projects (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015). Yet research on hybrid professionalism has paid little attention to a variable that is unavoidable in local government: territorial scale. Municipalities differ enormously in size, resources and organizational complexity, and these differences plausibly condition which forms of professional practice are possible at all. Whether—and how—scale shapes professionalism in a field lacking closure remains an open question.

This article addresses that question through the case of municipal culture professionals in Galicia (Spain), a region in northwestern Iberia with 313 municipalities of highly heterogeneous characteristics, ranging from urban centers of over 200,000 inhabitants to rural municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents. These professionals operate at the intersection of public administration, socio-educational action, and cultural mediation, in a field where three occupational groups—social educators, cultural managers and sociocultural animators—compete to define the contents, methods and purposes of public cultural intervention. These three groups are not studied here as separate populations; the survey and interviews target the holders of municipal cultural posts—referred to throughout as municipal culture professionals—whatever their disciplinary background.

Municipal cultural posts in Spain are filled by three occupational groups with distinct training traditions—social education, sociocultural animation, and cultural management—but none constitutes a regulated profession for access to these posts: there is no enabling qualification, no dedicated professional college, and no profession-specific regulation. They operate within a legal framework that recognizes culture as a citizen right yet makes almost no cultural service mandatory and defines no professional profile to deliver it. This legal fragility—a constitutional right without mandatory professional provision—is the structural condition within which the jurisdictional dispute analyzed here unfolds, and it means that the forms of professionalism emerging in each territory are shaped by administrative structure as much as by

professional agency. The regulatory and occupational specifics are set out in the study context section below.

Research on cultural workers in Europe has addressed their precarity (Belfiore, 2022), the competing institutional logics of cultural organizations (Góral, 2025, 2026), professional rationalities in publicly funded institutions (Lindström Sol, 2023) and shifting employment conditions (Ellmeier, 2003), but has not examined how territorial scale configures the professionalism emerging from jurisdictional disputes. In Spain, empirical work has documented the training profiles and working conditions of municipal cultural professionals (Martinell & Marcé, 1995; Ortega et al., 2019; Pose-Porto, 2006), the tension between the two paradigms (Caride, 1998; Ventosa, 2002; Úcar, 1992) and the institutional development of cultural policies (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Rius-Ulldemolins & Rubio-Arostegui, 2016; Zallo, 2011); recent research confirms the persistence of training-function misalignment (Consello da Cultura Galega, 2024; Gradaílle Pernas et al., 2024). None of this work applies the sociology of professions at the municipal level, and no study addresses this collective in Southern Europe from that framework. This article contributes to filling these gaps.

The primary focus of this study is the relationship between territorial scale and forms of professionalism, examined through the lens of jurisdictional disputes in the cultural field. Three research questions guide the analysis: (a) what is the training and disciplinary configuration of municipal culture professionals, and how does it reflect the absence of jurisdictional closure?; (b) how does the tension between cultural management and sociocultural animation logics—the two dominant professional paradigms in the field—manifest in the functions actually performed, in the perception of professional (mis)alignment, and in the constraints imposed by the administrative structure?; and (c) how does territorial scale condition the forms of professionalism that emerge from this tension? To address these questions, the study combines two analytical levels: the system of professions (Abbott, 1988), which accounts for the competition between occupational groups for jurisdictional control, and individual professional practice (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015), which captures how professionals combine competing logics in their daily work. Social educators, the third competing group, predominantly align with the sociocultural animation logic; their jurisdictional claim operates through the argument that cultural work is a legitimate field of social education practice (the position defended by the Galician College of Social Educators, CEESG). The central argument is that the jurisdictional dispute has become a permanent structural condition that generates forms of hybrid professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015) whose configuration depends critically on territorial scale, producing a paradox in which municipalities with fewer resources maintain greater proximity to socio-educational practices—not merely as a professional choice but as a consequence of the administrative and resource constraints that shape workplace jurisdiction.

Theoretical framework

Jurisdictional disputes and professionalism in the cultural field

As outlined in the introduction, two analytical levels structure the analysis. At the system level, Abbott's theory illuminates competition between occupational groups for jurisdictional control. Each of the three groups mobilizes a different knowledge base: social educators claim cultural work as socio-educational intervention; sociocultural animators invoke community dynamization methodology; cultural managers appeal to planning and service-delivery frameworks. The dispute is not nominal but reflects opposed conceptions of purpose—social transformation versus efficient service provision.

Abbott's (1988) framework highlights two key concepts for this case: jurisdictional settlements and the three arenas of jurisdictional claims. Abbott argues that full jurisdictional monopoly is rare; most professional conflicts result in limited jurisdictional settlements—partial, negotiated compromises that are inherently temporary and evolving (Abbott, 1988). He identifies several forms of settlement, including full jurisdiction, subordination, intellectual jurisdiction, division of labor, advisory jurisdiction, and client differentiation. The relevance of this typology for municipal cultural work is immediate: the competing groups in this field have not achieved full jurisdiction; rather, they have reached unstable, evolving settlements that vary across municipalities. The empirical manifestation of these settlement forms in Galician municipalities—and how they vary with territorial scale—is analyzed in the Results and Discussion sections.

Equally important is Abbott's argument that jurisdictional claims must be validated by three distinct audiences, each operating as a separate arena: the legal arena (courts, legislatures, licensing boards), the public arena (media, general culture, citizen perception), and the workplace arena (the daily scene of actual labor). Abbott (1988) identifies a "profound contradiction" between the formal arenas and the informal workplace arena, where boundaries are constantly blurred through "workplace assimilation". This three-arena model has direct analytical implications for our case, as it allows examination of how the same professional group may hold different jurisdictional strength in each arena—and, crucially, how territorial scale may condition these arena-specific configurations. The empirical application of this model to our data is developed in the Discussion.

At the level of individual practice, Noordegraaf's (2007, 2015) hybrid professionalism framework analyzes how professionals combine contradictory logics daily. The articulation between levels is productive: the irresolution of jurisdictional dispute at field level generates the conditions under which individuals develop hybrid practice at organizational level, exercising the discretion Lipsky (2010) attributed to "street-level bureaucrats".

The two paradigmatic models embody differentiated logics: sociocultural animation, rooted in Social Pedagogy (Caride, 1998; Trilla, 1988; Úcar, 1992) and the French tradition (Gillet,

2006), positions the professional as community mediator; cultural management (Martinell & Marcé, 1995; Rubio-Arostegui & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2012) positions them as resource administrator. These are jurisdictional positions, not merely methodological options.

This tension maps onto Evetts' (2003, 2011) distinction between organizational professionalism—imposed through accountability mechanisms and external control—and occupational professionalism—constructed through shared values and self-regulation. The functional predominance of administrative tasks documented in our Results reflects organizational professionalism, while resistance to abandoning socio-educational practices reflects occupational professionalism. Fournier's (1999) notion of professionalism as a “disciplinary mechanism” is also relevant: the invocation of managerial efficiency reorients practice toward administrative logics.

From pure to hybrid professionalism: an analytical framework

In contemporary public domains, “pure” professionalism based on esoteric knowledge and autonomy (Freidson, 2001) is giving way to hybrid forms combining professional and organizational logics—a dynamic documented across European cultural work (Belfiore, 2022; Góral, 2026; Lindström Sol, 2023).

However, these studies do not address the territorial dimension as a constitutive variable of professionalism, nor do they consider a particularity of the case at hand: the incomplete professionalization of the field. Unlike consolidated professions that possess mechanisms of social closure (Larson, 1977), municipal culture professionals lack an enabling qualification, a professional college, and specific normative regulation. Three collective actors claim to represent the occupation in Galicia—the Galician Association of Cultural Management Professionals (AGPXC), the working group on sociocultural animation and cultural management of the Galician College of Social Educators (CEESG), and the Commission on Cultural Policies of the Galician Council of Culture. Their published position documents and our interviews with their representatives reveal divergent definitions of the occupation, none of which has become a shared professional project; these are analyzed in the Discussion. While these professionals also operate as cultural intermediaries (Maguire & Matthews, 2012), the professionalism framework is more productive for our purposes as it captures jurisdictional competition dynamics that intermediation theory does not.

Methodology

Study context: Occupations, training and regulation

The three occupational groups that fill municipal cultural posts follow distinct training and regulatory pathways. Social education (educación social) is a collegiate profession with a 240-ECTS university degree regulated under the Bologna framework and historically linked to social pedagogy; its professional body defines cultural mediation as one of its core competencies (ASEDES, 2007). Sociocultural animation (animación sociocultural) is certified through a

higher vocational qualification within the Sociocultural and Community Services family. Cultural management (*gestión cultural*) long lacked a specific undergraduate degree, with training channeled through postgraduate programs. A dedicated four-year degree was authorized in Galicia only in 2021; its first cohorts had not entered the labor market when our data were collected, so it is not reflected in the training profiles reported below, but it constitutes an active and datable closure attempt whose effects remain to be seen. Occupational recognition, meanwhile, remains partial: the national employment services created a specific entry for cultural managers only in 2012, nested within a broader category whose official label refers to social-work support and does not mention culture (FEAGC, 2012).

Access to municipal cultural posts occurs through competitive public-employment examinations across three qualification bands, with entry requirements and job descriptions set independently by each municipality. The federation representing cultural managers has repeatedly proposed a standard correspondence between titles, functions and qualification bands (FEAGC, 2019), but these proposals are not binding, and empirical studies of Spanish municipal cultural workers consistently report heterogeneous titles, variable contractual status and no common functional profile (Bernal Ruiz, 2009; Ortega et al., 2019).

The legal framework combines a strong declaration of rights with minimal service obligations. The Constitution establishes access to culture as a citizen right and assigns cultural promotion to the autonomous communities; local-government legislation lists cultural promotion among municipal competences, but the only mandatory cultural service is the public library, and only in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. A 2013 reform further narrowed municipal discretion by repealing the provision that had allowed complementary cultural activity. Galician regional legislation likewise lists cultural activities and facilities as a municipal competence without specifying professional requirements.

This configuration contrasts with contexts where the occupation is state-certified: in France, the “animateur socioculturel” holds a structured diploma pathway and a dedicated occupational code (Bock, 2022), while in the Nordic countries municipal cultural workers operate within strong welfare-state structures. The Spanish case therefore represents a field where a recognized public right coexists with an unregulated professional workforce—precisely the configuration in which jurisdictional settlements remain provisional.

General design and methods integration

This study is embedded within a broader investigation using a mixed-methods design integrating convergent and sequential explanatory models (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Data from two phases were used: the survey of cultural professionals (Phase 3) and in-depth interviews (Phase 4). Integration was carried out at three levels: in design (quantitative findings informed qualitative sampling), in analysis (systematic comparison of quantitative patterns with qualitative narratives), and in interpretation (construction of a joint narrative articulating both types of evidence).

Quantitative phase: Survey of professionals

A questionnaire of 59 items (16 closed, 8 Likert-scale, 35 open), designed following survey research principles (Fowler, 2014), was administered to cultural professionals across all 313 Galician municipalities. Data collection spanned August 2022–December 2023 across four phases, including final-phase telephone administration to maximize responses. Of 313 questionnaires sent, 189 responses were obtained (60.4%), of which 147 corresponded to professionals effectively performing cultural functions as a principal or significant responsibility of their position. The 42 excluded responses corresponded to municipalities where cultural functions were assumed directly by political office-holders or staff without stable connection to the cultural area. Territorial distribution: A Coruña 64 (43.5%), Pontevedra 32 (21.8%), Lugo 31 (21.1%), Ourense 20 (13.6%), with response rates ranging from 21.7% (Ourense) to 68.8% (A Coruña) of municipalities per province. Data was processed using SPSS v.28 with descriptive statistics and chi-square tests for categorical associations when expected frequencies permitted.

Qualitative phase: In-depth interviews

Thirteen professionals were intentionally selected using maximum variation criteria (Kvale, 2007): territorial diversity (rural, rururban, urban), training profile (education-related and non-education-related), predominant intervention model (sociocultural animation and cultural management), professional experience (under five years, 5–20 years, over 20 years), and type of contract. Professional experience was included as a selection criterion to capture potential generational differences in how the two logics are understood and combined. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted between September 2022 and March 2023, with durations ranging from 52 to 108 minutes (mean: 75 minutes). No time limit was imposed; interviews concluded when both researcher and participant considered that the topics had been sufficiently explored. Interviews were conducted in Galician. Participants were recruited independently across different municipalities, with no professional connection. Thematic saturation was pragmatically assessed by tracking the emergence of new codes: the final three interviews generated no new categories, though they enriched existing ones. Fewer than the twenty initially planned (five per province) were achieved, as recruitment constraints required adaptation; the reduction affected mainly urban profiles in Lugo and Ourense, limiting generalizability in those contexts.

Transcriptions were produced using the Whisper v3 automatic speech recognition model, executed on the infrastructure of the Galician Supercomputing Center (CESGA), and manually reviewed to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis followed the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). ATLAS.ti software was used to manage the data corpus—organizing transcripts, applying codes, and retrieving coded segments—but all analytical decisions (code creation, category formation, theoretical integration) were made by the research team through iterative close reading and discussion. Coding proceeded in three phases—open, axial, and selective—generating 47 initial codes, grouped into 12 intermediate

categories and, finally, four selective categories: training configuration, jurisdictional disputes, hybrid professional identity, and territorial conditioning. Member checking with four participants representing diverse profiles produced nuances in the “active resistance” category—participants stressed that their resistance was pragmatic rather than ideological—but did not modify the categorical structure.

Participants are identified by codes (PAC-001 to PAC-013) encoding territorial context, training profile, predominant model, and professional experience. Quotations include contextual information in parentheses and have been translated from Galician.

A second interview strand targeted the collective actors that claim to represent the occupation in Galicia. Semi-structured interviews (mean duration 90 minutes, in person or online) were conducted with the president of the AGPXC, the coordinator of the CEESG working group on sociocultural animation and cultural management, and the coordinator of the Cultural Policies Commission of the Galician Council of Culture. These interviews explored each organization’s origins, membership, relations with public administrations and, centrally for this analysis, how it defines the occupation and conceptualizes the relationship between cultural management and sociocultural animation. Their accounts were triangulated with each organization’s published position documents. Together they provide the evidential basis for the analysis of competing jurisdictional strategies presented in the discussion.

Ethical considerations and reflexivity

The research followed institutional ethical regulations for social research. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were guaranteed. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela. No conflicts of interest exist. This research was funded by the Ministry of Universities of the Government of Spain under the University Teacher Training Programme (grant FPU19/02860).

The principal investigator has previous professional experience in sociocultural animation, which facilitated field access but also carried a risk of interpretive bias favoring the socio-educational model. To mitigate this risk, several strategies were implemented: member checking with diverse participants, review by researchers with different disciplinary orientations, and explicit attention to discordant data—particularly the perspectives of professionals who embrace the managerial model without identity tension.

Results

Academic training: High qualification with jurisdictional dispersion

Table 1 synthesizes the training profile of the professional collective, revealing high academic qualification alongside notable disciplinary dispersion that has direct implications for the jurisdictional configuration of the field.

Table 1*Training profile of municipal culture professionals (n=147)*

Dimension	Category	n	%
Maximum level of training	Long-cycle university degree or equivalent	50	34.0
	University diploma	45	30.6
	Master's degree	15	10.2
	Higher vocational training	15	10.2
	Bachelor's degree (Bologna)	12	8.2
	Upper secondary education	7	4.8
	Doctorate	3	2.0
Main disciplinary areas	Education Sciences and Pedagogy	48	32.7
	Economics, Business and Tourism	11	7.5
	Law and Legal Sciences	10	6.8
	Philology and Linguistics	10	6.8
	Humanities	8	5.4
	Behavioral Sciences	7	4.8
	Other areas (>10 distinct fields)	53	36.0

Note. Author's elaboration from survey data.

A bivariate analysis of training levels by disciplinary area was considered, but the cell frequencies for several combinations were too low ($n < 5$) to permit meaningful statistical interpretation. Descriptively, Education Sciences professionals are predominantly concentrated at the long-cycle university degree (Licenciatura) level (reflecting the pre-Bologna Diplomatura en Educación Social), while Economics/Business professionals show greater dispersion across degree levels.

Crucially for jurisdictional analysis, Education Sciences predominate (32.7%), reflecting historical links between cultural action and social education in Galicia, while the presence of more than fifteen knowledge areas evidences the absence of a jurisdictional credential—unlike the certified pathways described in the study context above. This pattern of training fragmentation in the cultural field has also been documented at the broader European level (Sternal, 2007). Participation in continuing education is high (67.3%) but engagement with professional networks remains low (46.2%), evidencing weak occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2003). Although 85% hold university degrees, only 43% of positions required one (Pose-Porto & Caride, 2022): only 12.1% of civil servants are classified in group A1, while 34.8% are in C1; among contract staff, only 12.2% reach the highest group while 45.9% remain in the intermediate one. Professionals with master's degrees and long experience thus often occupy auxiliary-level posts—a structural mismatch between qualification and institutional recognition that, in Abbott's (1988) legal arena, denies a highly educated workforce formal jurisdictional

standing. Among those with specialized training, concentrations appear in General Cultural Management and Sociocultural Animation (9.5%), Cultural Services and Industries (6.8%), Heritage and Museology (3.4%), and Education and Cultural Mediation (2.7%), with a notable absence in emerging areas such as cultural technologies (Abbott, 1988).

Professional functions: Multi-functionality and jurisdictional misalignment

Table 2 presents the distribution of functions, evidencing the preeminence of management tasks over sociocultural dynamization. The percentages are not mutually exclusive, as each professional performs multiple functions simultaneously: the most frequent concentration is between three and seven simultaneous functions per professional (over 70% of the sample), with exceptional cases of between eight and twelve functions, particularly in rural municipalities. The most common combinations group management-coordination with design-planning and administrative management, constituting a predominantly managerial functional core. Only a minority combines this core with sociocultural dynamization functions; these professionals are, empirically, those who embody the hybridization that this article theorizes.

Table 2

Main functions performed by municipal cultural professionals (n=147, multiple response)

Function	%
Management and coordination of cultural activities	84.3
Design and planning of cultural programming	59.1
Administrative and financial management	53.7
Sociocultural dynamization and citizen participation	29.9
Management of cultural facilities and spaces	27.2

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% as this is a multiple-response item. Mean number of functions per professional is between 4–5. Author’s elaboration.

Deeper analysis reveals additional patterns. The most frequent type of misalignment is performing functions of a higher professional category than formally assigned (17.7%), followed by tasks unrelated to the cultural domain (11.6%) and responsibilities outside the assigned category (7.5%). In territorial terms, municipalities under 5,000 inhabitants concentrate functional overload and non-cultural tasks, while those over 50,000 concentrate higher-category functions performed without formal recognition or remuneration—quantitative support of what Abbott (1988) describes as different workplace settlements emerging in different organizational contexts.

The gap between the 84.3% dedicated to management and coordination and the 29.9% performing sociocultural dynamization functions constitutes the central empirical finding of the jurisdictional reconfiguration of the field. The causal attribution of this displacement, however, requires nuance: increasing administrative complexity and the lack of active citizen demand operate simultaneously, and the existence of professionals who maintain animation practices in equally bureaucratized contexts indicates that bureaucratization is not deterministic on its own.

The interviews illustrate this complexity. A professional in a rururban context with over 20 years of experience describes the tension:

My employment contract says I am an administrative auxiliary with the functions of cultural animator technician. The title is cultural animator technician, and the category is administrative auxiliary. [...] We try to slip in, let's see, there are some animation things, but no. Essentially cultural management. When we analyze offers, proposals, and so on, the goat goes to the mountain [i.e., old habits die hard], and we go to the analysis from that socio-educational perspective. (PAC-003, rururban, education profile, sociocultural animation, >20 years)

This testimony reveals a deep identity tension: the professional acknowledges that their practice is “essentially management” but maintains a socio-educational orientation as an interpretive framework that guides their decisions, even within the managerial frame. At the other end of the spectrum, an urban professional with less than five years of experience describes entirely administrative functions:

The actual functions I perform right now are drafting specifications for public tenders, writing reports of all kinds. [...] In general, a good part of my work has to do with drafting specifications and reports. [...] I believe that by definition a culture technician is a special administration technician. Special means they contribute knowledge that, in principle, another cannot. So, insofar as my function is ninety-something percent administrative and legal right now, I am performing more the functions of a general administration technician than a special administration technician. (PAC-004, urban, non-education profile, cultural management, <five years)

The misalignment between formal job title and actual functions, synthesized in Table 3, constitutes a structural indicator of jurisdictional indefinition. Only 28.5% of professionals perceive full correspondence, while 40.7% express some degree of disagreement.

Misalignment was assessed through a combination of survey items and interview data. The survey included a Likert-scale item asking professionals to rate the correspondence between their official job title and their actual functions, as well as open-ended items inviting them to describe discrepancies. The categories of misalignment (performing higher-category functions, executing non-cultural tasks, assuming responsibilities outside one's assigned category)

emerged inductively from the open-ended responses and were subsequently validated through the interviews, where participants were asked to describe their daily functions and compare them with their contractual designation.

Table 3

Perceived correspondence between job title and actual functions (n=123)

Degree of correspondence	n	%
Fully agree	35	28.5
Partially agree	38	30.9
Partially disagree	21	17.1
Fully disagree	29	23.6

Note. 24 professionals did not respond to this item, possibly due to ambiguity of their contractual situation.

Author's elaboration.

Analysis of association between municipality type and misalignment distribution yielded a chi-square result that, while not reaching conventional statistical significance ($\chi^2=11.83$, $df=6$, $p=.066$, Cramér's $V=.22$), shows a pattern consistent with the qualitative evidence: in rural municipalities, misalignment is predominantly linked to functional overload and assumption of non-cultural tasks, while in urban municipalities it concentrates on performing higher-category functions without corresponding formal recognition. Given the mixed-methods design, this quantitative pattern is interpreted not as a standalone finding but as one element within a converging body of findings that includes the qualitative data presented below.

Professional identity: The emergence of hybrid professionalism

Table 4 presents the distribution of contractual job titles, which maps the jurisdictional dispute as materialized in administrative structures. The coexistence of "sociocultural animator" (25.2%) and "culture technician" (15.0%) as the two most frequent professional titles materializes the jurisdictional dispute at the terminological level. The datum that 15.6% corresponds to political office-holders indicates that in a significant proportion of municipalities cultural action remains un-professionalized; this figure would be amplified if the 42 excluded responses were included, as these corresponded to municipalities where cultural functions were assumed by political figures or non-specialized staff.

Table 4*Contractual job titles for cultural work positions (from the broader sample)*

Job title	%
Sociocultural animator	25.2
Political officeholder	15.6
Culture technician	15.0
Administrative staff	6.8
Cultural manager	4.8
Employment and local development agent	4.8
Culture and youth technician	3.4
Other titles	24.4

Note. Percentages are calculated over the total of responses received (n=189), including those subsequently excluded from the analytical sample. Author's elaboration.

The data on title evolution further illuminates the dynamic character of jurisdictional settlements. Among respondents, 61.5% report that their position has not experienced changes in its official title, while 23.0% confirm modifications, and 15.6% do not know whether previous changes occurred. Among those who have experienced title changes, the most frequent transformation involves the figure of sociocultural animator (8.2%), followed by culture technician (4.1%). These transformations follow two directions: some move toward greater technical specificity (from generic titles toward “culture technician”), while others reflect an expansion of functions incorporating complementary areas such as sports, youth, or linguistic normalization. In Abbott's (1988) terms, these title changes represent evolving settlements: what was once a clear sociocultural animation jurisdiction is being progressively renegotiated through the administrative renaming of positions—a mechanism that operates in the legal arena (formal contractual categories) even when the workplace arena (actual daily practice) may remain unchanged.

Professionals' own preferred titles reveal jurisdictional aspirations: “culture technician” (14.3%), “culture technician with complementary areas” (6.1%) and “cultural manager” (4.8%)—a claim for technical recognition in the legal arena, combined with acknowledgment of multifunctional workplace reality.

Taken together, these data document a directional shift: the “socio” component is being shed from job titles in favor of technical-administrative designations, a trend consistent with the

receding presence of cultural work within the social education field (CEESG, 2025) and with the consolidation of “cultural manager” as the sector’s preferred professional label (FEAGC, 2012, 2019). This can be read as a disciplinary mechanism in Fournier’s (1999) sense, though our cross-sectional data establishes the direction of the terminological shift rather than its causal effect on identity. One interviewee illustrates the tension: his contract states “cultural management technician”, but on his office door he has placed “sociocultural animation technician” because, as he states, “that is what I want to be” (PAC-001, rural, education profile, sociocultural animation, 5–20 years). This act of symbolic resistance reveals that professional identity is not passively received from administrative categorization but actively constructed through everyday micro-practices.

Regarding the preferred intervention model, the questionnaire included a closed question with three options (cultural management, sociocultural animation, and mixed model). The results showed that 56.6% chose the mixed model, 23.1% chose sociocultural animation exclusively, and 20.3% opted for cultural management exclusively. While the closed format with an intermediate option may induce a centripetal tendency, the coherence between this result and the qualitative patterns reinforces its significance. The 20.3% who opted exclusively for management deserve attention: qualitative analysis suggests this group concentrates among urban professionals with non-education training profiles, representing the most advanced form of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2003) and demonstrating that hybridization is not universal but rather one among several possible identity positions.

The qualitative analysis allows formalization of three identity patterns that correspond to different positionings along the continuum between organizational and occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2003). Table 5 synthesizes these patterns with their defining characteristics.

Table 5*Identity patterns and their relationship with analytical variables*

Pattern	Evetts' continuum	Profile association	Territorial association
Deliberate hybridization	Integration of both logics; occupational values guide organizational practice	Education profile; intermediate experience (5–20 yrs)	Rural and rururban; small to medium municipalities
Active resistance	Practice predominantly organizational; occupational orientation maintained as interpretive frame	Both profiles; variable experience	Preferentially urban; also rururban
Managerial assumption	Organizational professionalism embraced without identity tension	Non-education profile; variable experience	Urban; larger municipalities

Note. Associations are tendential, derived from qualitative analysis of 13 interviews. Not all cases conform to the pattern. Author's elaboration.

The hybridization documented here is not merely a label but a specific configuration of professional practice whose constitutive elements can be identified empirically. Hybrid professionals—those falling within the “deliberate hybridization” pattern—combine: (a) community-facing functions characteristic of sociocultural animation with (b) administrative-managerial functions characteristic of cultural management; they do so (c) guided by a socio-educational interpretive framework that shapes how they approach managerial tasks, while (d) operating under administrative constraints that formally classify them as managers. Because these are multiple-response items, most of the 29.9% who perform sociocultural dynamization functions also perform the management functions reported by 84.3% of the sample; this subset—animation practice retained within a managerial core—constitutes the empirical core of hybridization. In the interviews, hybrid professionals consistently describe this combination not as a choice but as a structural necessity imposed by the absence of specialized support staff, particularly in small municipalities (PAC-001, PAC-003, PAC-010).

The territorial paradox: Scale, resources and forms of professionalism

The territorial dimension conditions forms of professionalism in counterintuitive ways. Among respondents, 76.9% consider that supra-municipal administrations significantly condition their work, rising to 85.7% in municipalities under 5,000 inhabitants and falling to 62.5% in those over 50,000. This differential dependency creates a paradox: rural municipalities, with more limited resources and greater external dependence, maintain significantly greater

proximity to sociocultural animation practices, while urban contexts, with more resources and greater autonomy, develop professionalism more aligned with managerial logic. Greater material resources do not produce stronger socio-educational practice—if anything, the reverse: the same external dependency that signals scarcer own resources coincides with a higher prevalence of sociocultural dynamization in smaller municipalities, while administrative management predominates in larger ones. This pattern is not explained by professional preference alone: it reflects the structural reality that small municipalities lack specialized administrative staff, requiring the culture professionals to maintain direct community contact as part of their multi-functional role, whereas in larger municipalities departmental specialization channels professionals toward administrative tasks.

The interviews reveal the mechanisms. In rural contexts, the human scale facilitates direct knowledge of community needs, personal proximity operates as immediate social accountability, and the absence of heavy administrative structures allows flexibility; the local associative fabric—music bands, women’s associations, cultural groups—sustains participatory practice even when the professional lacks formal time for it (PAC-010, rural, education profile, sociocultural animation, >20 years). In urban contexts, departmental specialization, bureaucratic layering and the technological mediation of institutional relations generate structural distance from the community.

This paradox has its shadows. The extreme multifunctionality of rural contexts—where professionals also cover sports, education, youth and even the municipal census—dilutes professional identity and prevents specialized expertise; community proximity often depends on individual voluntarism rather than institutional structure; and more precarious conditions compromise continuity. Cultural action in rural municipalities is therefore not “better” but qualitatively different: stronger relationally, weaker technically.

Both veteran practitioners (PAC-001, PAC-003, PAC-007, PAC-010) and the representatives of the three collective actors periodize the evolution of the paradigmatic tension into three phases, a reconstruction consistent with documented accounts of Spanish cultural policy over the same period (Rius-Ulldemolins & Rubio-Arostegui, 2016): a period of relatively peaceful coexistence (2000–2008), in which both models operated in differentiated spaces; an intensification of the conflict during the economic crisis (2008–2015), with growing hegemony of the managerial paradigm driven by budget cuts and accountability pressures; and a current phase (since 2015) of searching for synthesis and hybrid models, possibly linked to generational change and the emergence of professionals socialized in a context of greater paradigmatic plurality. This periodization is a reconstruction from professional memory rather than a longitudinal measurement; whether the third phase represents a stable trend or a cohort effect remains open.

Professional recognition: The institutional-social gap

The data on recognition completes the portrait of a field whose institutional position does not correspond to its social valuation. Among professionals, 68.7% perceive positive valuation from the municipal government, compared to 86.4% who perceive positive citizen valuation—a gap of nearly 18 percentage points. This gap is territorially modulated: smaller municipalities show higher but more variable citizen and institutional recognition, respectively, while larger ones show more stable institutional valuation and weaker citizen recognition.

Among those perceiving positive institutional valuation, 43.5% describe it as “quite” valued and 25.2% as “very” valued, while 27.2% feel “little” valued and 4.1% perceive none. Citizen recognition is less variable: 55.1% “quite” and 31.3% “very” valued.

Discussion

The results allow the articulation of one principal theoretical contribution and two empirical findings with relevant theoretical implications for the field of professions and professionalism studies.

Theoretical contribution: Territorial hybrid professionalism

We propose territorial hybrid professionalism to designate a hybridization in which territorial scale operates not merely as context but as a constitutive element of professional configuration. Unlike Noordegraaf’s (2007, 2015) account of hybridization as a response to organizational complexification, our data show that hybridization adopts qualitatively—not merely quantitatively—different configurations depending on scale, occurring through different mechanisms. In rural municipalities, it occurs through the integration of both logics within the same person, who acts as manager and animator simultaneously out of structural necessity. In urban municipalities, hybridization, when present, operates through the aspiration to integrate a socio-educational dimension into a predominantly managerial practice—identity resistance within organizational constraints rather than integration born of structural conditions.

Abbott’s three-arena model illuminates this variation: rural professionals hold stronger public-arena jurisdiction (higher citizen recognition) and workplace versatility but weaker legal-arena standing, while urban professionals show the inverse. This arena mismatch—not professional preference alone—drives the forms of hybridization documented here.

Jurisdictional dispute as permanent condition

The case documents what Abbott (1988) theorized through his concept of jurisdictional settlements: the provisional, evolving compromises professions reach when full monopoly is unattainable. Our data reveals a mosaic of coexisting settlement forms. In rural contexts, the settlement approximates a division of labor: the culture professional handles community-facing work and programming while the mayor or councilor controls strategic and budgetary decisions (PAC-001, PAC-010). In urban contexts, it resembles subordination: technicians

work under political authorities who define priorities, with limited autonomy (PAC-004, PAC-006). Where multiple professionals coexist, client differentiation emerges. Crucially, professionals are not the only ones who are engaged in jurisdictional struggle; they are significantly constrained by the administrative boundaries of local-government legislation and the availability of public resources. None of these settlements is stable: they shift with political cycles, budget changes, and generational turnover, confirming Abbott's insistence that settlements are "rarely full and never final".

The organized representation of the field reproduces this instability. Both the published position documents of the three collective actors and our interviews with their representatives reveal three incompatible definitions of the work. The AGPXC proposes a functional hierarchy in which cultural management is the planning and design of cultural plans and programs, while sociocultural animators are field-level implementers "in direct contact with society"; its published job-classification document builds a graded structure of cultural posts and calls for statutory regulation (AGPXC, 2020), a claim to intellectual jurisdiction that concedes execution while retaining conceptual control, aligned with the national federation's definition of the cultural manager (FEAGC, 2009, 2019). The CEESG working group advances the opposite claim, situating both cultural management and sociocultural animation inside socio-educational intervention as specializations on an equal footing—a position elaborated in the profession's own literature, which argues that local cultural management in Galicia is properly a function of the social educator (Ventura, 2020) and that sociocultural animation is a modality of social education (Caride, 2005). The Cultural Policies Commission proposes "sociocultural management" as an encompassing category covering broader domains of everyday life—an advisory jurisdiction that frames the field without controlling practice.

None of these proposals has become a shared position, and the asymmetry of institutional resources helps explain why: social education holds a regulated degree and a professional college but reports cultural work as an area of receding presence (CEESG, 2025); cultural management has a growing associative structure, a recently secured occupational entry (FEAGC, 2012) and, since 2021, a dedicated degree, but no professional college and no enabling qualification requirement for access to municipal posts; and the Council of Culture is an advisory body without employer status. Spanish scholarship has accordingly characterized the professionalization of cultural management as an unfinished task (Ortega et al., 2019), and studies of the Galician sector identify persistent training and recognition deficits (Caride & Pose, 2021). The plurality of legitimate perspectives thus appears less as a transitional deficiency than as a structural feature of a field where no actor commands the resources for closure.

Applying Abbott's framework to an unconsolidated field is defensible: his concept of settlements explicitly accommodates incomplete and evolving arrangements, and recent applications to semi-professionalized fields (Góral, 2026; Jensen, 2019) confirm its analytical productivity where jurisdictional boundaries remain fluid.

The creation of a dedicated cultural management degree in 2021 illustrates the point precisely: it represents a new closure attempt launched from the educational arena, but one that yet confers no exclusive access to municipal posts and has not displaced any competing claim. In Abbott's terms, a credential has been created without a jurisdiction attached to it—a reminder that settlements evolve continuously and that closure requires not only a qualification but its legal recognition as a condition of practice.

The institutional-social recognition gap

The 18-percentage-point gap between citizen recognition (86.4%) and institutional recognition (68.7%), modulated by territorial scale, constitutes an arena mismatch in Abbott's terms: strong public-arena jurisdiction coexists with weak legal-arena standing. This finding suggests that in fields with incomplete professionalization, community-based legitimacy can function as an alternative pathway to professional consolidation—one that operates through the public arena rather than the legal arena.

Conclusion

This study has addressed three research questions about municipal culture professionals in Galicia. Regarding the first question (training configuration and jurisdictional position), the results show a highly qualified collective (85% university graduates) whose disciplinary dispersion across more than fifteen knowledge areas—combined with the absence of an enabling qualification and an occupational classification that does not recognize cultural management as a distinct category—prevents any single group from establishing jurisdictional closure. Where the state does not name an occupation, it cannot confer jurisdiction on it. Regarding the second question (manifestation of the tension between logics), the data reveal a systematic displacement: 84.3% of professionals perform management functions while only 29.9% engage in sociocultural dynamization, a pattern driven not only by bureaucratization but also by a legal architecture that assigns municipalities cultural competence while making almost no cultural service mandatory, and by fiscal rules that narrowed discretionary cultural activity. Only 28.5% perceive full correspondence between their job title and actual functions. Regarding the third question (territorial conditioning of professionalism), the study documents that territorial scale constitutes a structuring variable: small municipalities produce hybrid practitioners through structural necessity, while larger municipalities channel professionals toward administrative specialization. This territorial hybrid professionalism represents the study's principal theoretical contribution.

Abbott's settlements and three-arena concepts have proven productive here. Municipal cultural work is characterized not by a single jurisdictional arrangement but by a mosaic of co-existing, evolving settlements varying across municipalities. The multi-arena mismatch—weak legal jurisdiction, strong public recognition, variable workplace arrangements—constitutes both the structural condition of the field and the engine of the hybrid professionalism documented here.

For policy, the findings suggest that regulatory frameworks should recognize and strengthen the hybrid character of the profession rather than attempting to artificially resolve the tension between management and animation. This implies designing training pathways that combine technical-administrative and socio-educational competencies, developing normative frameworks flexible enough to adapt to territorial realities but precise enough to guarantee minimum standards of qualification, and fostering mechanisms of collective articulation that overcome the current fragmentation of the sector's representation.

Limitations

The 147-professional sample, while comprehensive, is not statistically representative; A Coruña is overrepresented (43.5% of responses vs. 29.7% of municipalities) and Ourense underrepresented (13.6% vs. 29.4%). The exclusion of 42 municipalities without dedicated professionals renders invisible the most de-professionalized contexts. Self-selection bias may overestimate socio-educational orientation. The techniques employed capture perceptions that do not always correspond to actual practices (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). Qualitative findings rest on thirteen interviews; urban profiles in less-represented provinces are underrepresented. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs, Southern European comparisons, and ethnographic observation of actual practice.

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