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Principals' positioning of teacher specialists: between sensitivity, coaching, and dedication

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how principals position specialized teachers (i.e., teachers with expertise in a specific area who are assigned to build the capacity of teachers through professional development) and how these positions might enable and constrain the teachers' actions. Today, a general tendency to foster professionalization by establishing new specialized teacher roles is growing. Research reveals that principals' communication is crucial for these teachers' work, yet *how* they talk about the teachers is rarely the main object of investigation. By analyzing observational data and interviews with three principals, this study explores how Norwegian specialized teachers are positioned, locally referred to as teacher specialists, and hence how professionalization through specialization is put into practice. Drawing on positioning theory, three inductively derived positions are identified, revealing that the principals tend to equalize the specialists and the staff and emphasize the specialists' attributes rather than their subject knowledge. The results suggest that, although principals' positioning can impede potential conflicts within the collegium, de-emphasizing the specialists' expertise arguably makes it difficult to consider such roles as professionalization initiatives. Moreover, reducing specialized teachers to a matter of dedication and careful teacher approaches can constrain specialist-led development work and facilitation of inquiry-based dialogues within the collegium.

Introduction

The complexity of contemporary societies has led to a request for specialization within occupations, including the teaching profession. Policy makers worldwide seem to endorse specialization in terms of, for example, initiating reforms dividing teacher education based on student age and subject matter and transforming teachers from being generalists to now teaching only specific subjects (Muijs et al., 2005). The rationale behind these political initiatives seems to be that such differentiation and specialization may foster professionalization in the matter of strengthening teachers' scientific knowledge, autonomy, self-direction, and evidence-based practice (Molander & Terum, 2008). Moreover, given the necessity of specialization within high-status professions, such as medicine and law (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018), policy efforts to specialize the teaching

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profession can be seen as professionalization initiatives. The notion of professionalization through specialization especially applies to the growth of new formal teacher roles (e.g., Bergh & Englund, 2016; Muijs & Harris, 2003), in this article referred to as *specialized teacher roles*. This term alludes to teachers who, based on their expertise in a particular area are formally assigned to build the capacity of teachers through professional development at their school. In the literature, such teachers have been given various labels, for example, coaches, specialists, or teacher leaders.¹ Despite differing labels, what specialized teacher roles have in common is that they aim to be "change agents," facilitate stimulating discussions, be a driver for and outcome of professional development, and serve as important sources of knowledge in specific subjects or priority areas (Fuller et al., 2013; Harris, 2003; Poekert, 2012). In sum, these teachers are assumed to 'ground professional development more deeply in the actual work of teaching' (Margolis, 2012, p. 292). Although being initiatives from the Government, i.e. efforts for professionalization 'from above' (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012), specialized teacher roles are thus claimed to potentially enhance 'professionalization from within' (Evetts, 2003, p. 409).

Principals' engagement and support appear to be prerequisites for facilitating specialized teachers' professional development work, and a substantial amount of research has revealed that how principals communicate to and about these teachers is crucial for improving their legitimacy, overcoming teacher resistance, and embedding positions in existing school systems (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, the concrete language and concepts principals use has rarely been addressed as the main subject of investigation. Assuming that principals' talk matters, the concrete language used has implications regarding enabling and constraining specialized teachers' actions. Moreover, keeping in mind that these teachers aim to build the capacity of teachers through professional development, examinations of principals' talk can disclose how professionalization through specialization is adopted and put into practice by the principals. Therefore, by drawing on positioning theory (Harré & Langenhove, 1991), this article aims to investigate how principals position specialized teachers and discuss how various positions might enable and constrain specialist work and, in turn, teacher professionalization.

To do this, one instance of the phenomenon of such new teacher roles is examined, locally referred to as *teacher specialists*. In 2015, the Norwegian national government announced the implementation of a two-year pilot project with specialists in Norwegian and science-related subjects (Seland et al., 2017). Selected based on their expertise and previous experience with school development, the specialists are expected to use their expertise to work with professional development at their schools, yet the schools are given the discretion to choose the concrete specialist tasks and responsibilities. With the exception of a few contributions (e.g., Lorentzen, 2019; Seland et al., 2017), research on teacher specialists is lacking.

Studies of the Norwegian role add to the international body of research on specialized teachers in terms of providing a context and background that differ from previous studies. Historically, the Scandinavian school model has been characterized by principles such as equality (in terms of position, competence, and rank), unity, and solidarity (Imsen et al., 2017). Little or no formal distinction between staff members has been made, and the hierarchical school structure has therefore been described as relatively flat

(Møller, 2009). Consequently, the implementation of teacher specialists challenges not only the egalitarian teaching culture found in many countries but also the distinct historical relationship between Norwegian teachers and principals. As the literature on specialized teacher roles is predominantly from the United States, examining the Scandinavian context is arguably important for developing a more nuanced picture of these teachers' work, reception, and challenges internationally.

Moreover, the specialist role also represents an interesting case, as over the last decades, the Norwegian school system has gone through a development process characterized by decentralization, task delegation, and accountability (Abrahamsen & Aas, 2016). Although there are differences between the profession and the government concerning what the main aspects of professionalization are, this term is increasingly being used to describe the desired development of the profession (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012). Greater autonomy offers schools greater discretion in shaping the specialist role, which is likely to cause variations in how principals talk about the specialists. By exploring the ways in which principals talk about the teacher specialists, this study provides insight into variations in how the specialist role is perceived and how principals make sense of this role as a professionalization initiative.

The research question explored in this article is as follows: How do principals position teacher specialists, and in what ways can these positions enable and constrain specialist work? The article begins by exploring existing research on principals' support for and relationship with specialized teachers. By then describing positioning theory, the conceptual and analytical framework for the study is presented. Next, the analysis process is outlined, revealing three ways in which principals position specialists: in relation to their sensitivity (i.e. having a careful approach toward other teachers), ability to coach, and dedication. Finally, the results are discussed to shed light on how the positions might enable and constrain specialized teachers' actions.

Principal engagement

A substantial body of research has documented that the principal plays a significant role in the implementation of specialized teacher roles and that he/she might enable and constrain these teachers' work (Camburn et al., 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). A great deal of the studies have focused on principals' support in terms of communication with and about the specialized teacher.

Substantially, studies of principals' communication with and about specialized teachers seem to have focused primarily on the content of the interaction, revealing how it can range from principals sharing a vision and emphasizing instructional topics and methods to interaction regarding administrative matters and one-way information exchanges (e.g., Mangin, 2007; Szeto & Cheng, 2017). For example, specialized teachers have reported that communicating a clear strategy, allowing for individual innovation, and incorporating others' ideas are perceived as important for facilitating their work (Cheng & Szeto, 2016). Similarly, Weiner (2011) found that principals who clarify teachers' leadership goals and allow teachers to define their daily responsibilities provide teachers with a greater sense of efficiency and autonomy. In addition, principals can foster specialized teachers by talking about mistakes and providing continuous support through an open-door policy (Klar et al., 2016). Talking to the specialized teachers has

also been deemed important for the relationship between the teacher and the staff. For example, those principals who are willing to share leadership and speak with the specialized teachers about how to approach resistant teachers were found to foster those teachers' participation in specialized teachers' activities (Matsumura et al., 2010). The evaluation of the Norwegian teacher specialist pilot reports that the specialists overall are satisfied with the communication with the administration (Seland et al., 2017). However, in-depth investigations of the content of the interaction is, however, lacking.

In addition to exploring the content of specialized-teacher–principal interactions, attention has also been drawn to the frequency of the interaction. For example, Szeto and Cheng (2017) reported that 'establishing constructive and regular communication with the teachers, and encouraging the teachers' professional development (...) seemed to be conducive to teacher leadership development' (p. 112). The principals can have an inspirational, empowering, and permissive effect, either by directly or indirectly supporting the specialized teachers. Moreover, Mangin (2007) found frequency to be one of two factors that specialized teachers assess in their interactions with principals, implying that districts can influence principals' level of support by increasing these interactions.

A modest amount of studies have focused on how principals talk *about* the specialized teachers, primarily addressing the importance of speaking highly of the specialized teachers to the collegium. Encouraging the staff to work with the specialized teachers and identifying them as resources has been reported as important principal mechanisms influencing other teachers' participation (Mangin, 2007; Matsumura et al., 2009). This result is consistent with a review article revealing that sharing a common vision with the staff appears to be beneficial for specialized teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Explorations of the actual language that principals use are therefore underrepresented. In addition, a noticeable methodological characteristic of the identified studies concerns the data material used. Rather than drawing on principal data, the majority of these studies were based on interviews, surveys, or observations of the specialized teachers (e.g., Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Mangin, 2007; Matsumura et al., 2009). Based on the specialized teachers' perceptions of principals' actions and support, conclusions have been drawn about how principals should speak about the teachers.

In sum, researchers seem to agree that principals' talk matters, in terms of how they talk both about and to specialized teachers. The content and frequency of these interactions have been relatively widely explored, whereas research on how they talk about the teachers is scarce. In the few existing studies, scholars often seem to have approached this issue indirectly by relying on the teachers' descriptions rather than principal data. In general, therefore, explorations of the particular language and specific words principals use are clearly lacking. This study thus aims to contribute to the existing research by offering an in-depth investigation of principals' ways of talking about teacher specialists and by discussing how the positions can enable and constrain their work.

Theoretical perspective

To study how principals talk about teacher specialists, I draw upon positioning theory (Harré & Langenhove, 1991), as it allow for an exploration of principals' talk and discussion of how it can enable and constrain the specialists' actions. In general, this theory concerns how positions and actions shape social structures and enables

researchers to explore the dynamics of social interactions (Harré et al., 2009; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). Harré and Langenhove (1991) defined positioning as ‘the discursive construction or personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts’ (p. 217). Orally and in writing, individuals construct themselves and others. Positions are not related to functions embedded in a job or formal job descriptions but to the situated, dynamic, and mediated actions embedded in discursive patterns (McVee, 2011). Exploring principals’ positioning of specialized teachers can discover fairly agreed-upon practices, routines, and norms (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2013).

A key assumption in positioning theory is that a position limits or extends what is logically possible for a person to say or do (i.e., the person’s rights, duties, and/or obligations; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). In this way,, a person’s verbal and nonverbal communication influences the actions they can take. This means that the specialists’ actions are assumed to be enabled and constrained by how the principals position them. A vital question thus becomes how various positions can create constraints and affordances for the specialists and their actions.

Some forms of positioning are particularly relevant to the scope of this paper. First, a distinction can be made between role-based and personal positioning. The former refers to situations in which someone responds in alignment with a specific role. For example, a situation with a teacher and student involves particular ways of acting and responding based on their roles (McVee, 2011). In contrast, personal positioning is related to a person’s attributes and personal characteristics. If a person’s actions cannot be made intelligible by referring to his or her role, personal positioning can do so (Harré & Langenhove, 1991). Second, a distinction can be made between two types of positioning in relation to others: self-as-other positioning and self-opposed-to-other positioning (McVee et al., 2011). Self-as-other positioning concerns the positioning of a person as similar to others, a form of equalizing. Self-opposed-to-other positioning refers to the positioning of a person in opposition to others. These four types of positioning are not mutually exclusive, as an utterance might imply more than one type of positioning. In sum, positioning theory provides analytical resources to examine how principals talk about teacher specialists and how various forms of positioning might enable and constrain the specialists’ actions.

Methodology

Background of the study

Inspired by the Swedish *försteläraryrket* (first teacher) role, the Norwegian teacher specialist arrangement was launched as a two-year pilot project in 2015 and has two main goals. First, it aims to encourage highly qualified teachers to stay in the classroom by offering them new opportunities for professional development. Second, the specialists are expected to enhance the development of the school as a learning organization and strengthen the professional community collectively. Over the last years, the government has included several new subjects to the scheme, including vocational and practical-esthetical subjects.

Methodology of the study

The data in this study are from the initial phase of the arrangement and are based on one year of observations (2016–2017) and interviews at three schools. The fieldwork data contain approximately 100 hours of observation of the three specialists. The data provided insight into the interaction and relationship between principals and specialists and created an important foundation for the interviews. For example, noticing that one principal consistently referred to the specialist as a ‘resource teacher’ during a plenary meeting, this observation was followed up in the interview. This further revealed insight into the principals’ positioning of the specialist as a dedicated teacher (see ‘the dedicated specialist’ below). Interviews were thereafter conducted with the three principals and addressed the introduction of the specialist role and specialist–teacher and specialist–principal collaborations. The two data sources were treated similarly during analysis, but excerpts from the interviews will be highlighted in the results section. These sections, however, are representative of the complete data.

Table 1 describes the school sites, the interviewed principals, and the specialists. The schools are located in the eastern part of Norway in three different municipalities, and the municipalities were selected based on their population sizes. As the size of a municipality could influence specialists’ work, variation in this criterion was sought when selecting schools. The three schools are all lower secondary schools with 350–500 students.

The analysis involved several steps. First, the transcribed interviews and observational notes were reviewed multiple times in order to get an impression of how the principals described the specialists and to conduct a within-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By looking for statements concerning how the specialists should act, talk, or relate to other teachers or descriptions of the specialist role in general, fragments were put into broad tentative categories. The categories’ labels reflect the principals’ language, for example, ‘avoid being a *besserwisser* [know-it-all]’ and ‘approaching other teachers carefully.’

Second, as the categories were too general to reflect concrete specialist positions, an in-depth analysis of each category was conducted. In this stage, the aim was to inductively derive various positions used by the principal. A position was in this regard defined as a cohesive pattern of beliefs about the actions and expectations associated with a specialist (Struyve et al., 2018). Through the flip-flop technique, significant properties of the specific language used by the principals were identified. The flip-flop technique involves looking closely at the opposite or extreme version of a concept (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, the category ‘approaching other teachers carefully’ included utterances about the

Table 1. Description of the school sites, the interviewed principals, and the specialists at each school.

School	The principal	The specialist
Gimle school, located in a large municipality	Male in his mid-60 s. Previously worked as a teacher, and recently took a course on school development and management.	Specialized in assessment methods. Has had regular meetings with the principal.
Asp school, located in a medium-sized municipality	Female in her mid-sixties. Has a degree in teacher education and has taken courses on school management and administration.	Specialized in reading. Had a few meetings with the principal in the initial phase of the arrangement, but there have been few follow-ups.
Varden school, located in a municipality somewhat larger than Asp’s	Male in his early 50 s. Has a master’s degree in teacher education and has taken courses on school management and administration.	Specialized in literacy. Has had few meetings with the specialist

importance of not having a top–down attitude. Looking at the opposite version of top–down thus concerned asking, ‘What does it mean to have a bottom–up approach toward other teachers? How would the teacher specialist act if he/she had such an approach?’ By doing this, I found that some of the initial categories partly overlapped. For example, ‘avoid being a *besserwisser*’ and ‘approaching other teachers carefully’ both concerned descriptions of how the specialists were expected to have a delicate and thoughtful approach toward other teachers. The concept of sensitivity appeared to capture the core of the two categories and the inherent expectations in these categories. Consequently, these were merged. In total, three categories reflecting three various positions were identified in this stage: the sensitive, the coaching, and the dedicated specialists.

Third, and guided by the positioning categories proposed by Harré and Moghaddam (2003) and McVee et al. (2011), the next stage of the analysis involved analyzing the excerpts associated with the three positions by drawing on the abovementioned forms of positioning. This was helpful for exploring the principals’ language in more detail. More specifically, an excerpt was coded as *self-as-other positioning* when the principal positioned the specialist as similar to other teachers (i.e., by equalizing). For instance, in the sensitivity position, one principal talked about the importance of specialists ‘holding back their excellence’ when approaching other teachers. As this can be said to imply that specialists should tone down what apparently distinguishes the specialists from other teachers (i.e., their expertise), this excerpt was coded as *self-as-other positioning*. In contrast, *self-opposed-to-other positioning* was used when the specialists were described as distinctively different from their peers. *Personal positioning* was used when the specialists’ actions were made intelligible by referring to personal characteristics and attributes. For example, in the sensitivity position, one of the principals mentioned that she preferred introverted specialists. Last, *role-based positioning* referred to positioning in which actions and expectations were made intelligible with references to a specific role. However, as this article centers on teacher specialists, which is a role per se, role-based positioning in this case concerns formal qualifications and specific types of knowledge and experience. For example, it is logical for a teacher positioned as a coach to lead department meetings. In sum, analyzing the data with regard to the different forms of positioning provided insight into how the principals concretely talked about the specialists within the three positions. Moreover, the forms of positioning also make possible a discussion of how the positions can enable and constrain the specialists’ actions and, in turn, teacher professionalization.

Finally, in order to investigate how the specialists were positioned in relation to one another, I conducted a comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to look for differences and similarities across schools. Although more present at some schools than others, the three positions and forms of positioning used were identified across all of the schools. Consequently, I found cross-school presentation of the positions to be the most fruitful way of presenting the results. The results are summarized in [Table 2](#).

Results

[Table 2](#) displays the three positions identified in the data, how they talk about the specialists (i.e., forms of positioning), and the expectations associated with the positions. In the following paragraphs, these positions will be elaborated.

Table 2. The three identified positions, the specific forms of positioning (discursive practices) used by the principals and the expectations related to these positions.

Position	Form of positioning	Principal expectation/obligation
The sensitive specialist	Self-as-other positioning Personal positioning	Equalize differences between the specialist and other teachers (not be know-it-all and top-down, carefully approach them)
The coaching specialist	Role-based positioning Self-opposed-to-others positioning	Guidance regarding matters of professional practice (collectively and individually) and facilitate discussions and reflection in teachers' plenary sessions
The dedicated specialist	Personal positioning Self-opposed-to-others positioning	Genuinely engage in and be passionate about school improvement and/or subject-related issues

The sensitive specialist

The most prominent and recurring way in which the principals talked about the specialists was as sensitive, denoting the specialists as persons who could downplay their expertise and did not have a top-down approach. This position was not associated with any particular tasks but a general expectation that specialists have a sensitive and careful attitude that could minimize the differences between them and the other teachers. This position particularly came to light in the repeated mentioning of the specialist as a person who is not a know-it-all. For example, the principal of Asp stated that 'the ability to coach without being a *besserwisser*' was one of the crucial characteristics of specialists. After describing the specialist as introverted and 'a person people trust,' he declared that 'she has a personality that I would like to highlight,' implying a personal positioning. Similarly, the principal at Gimle declared that he would not 'make this [the scheme] an arena for those who are full of themselves.' The importance of not having a top-down approach seemed to relate to principals' perceptions of the teacher collegium as sensible for peer instruction and lecturing teachers about how to perform their job. The principal of Asp, for instance, argued that specialists' knowledge about human beings was important, as 'teachers are very sensitive to *besserwisser* persons.' In addition, the title of specialist, by definition, was perceived as slightly problematic since it indicates a high skill level. In the excerpt below, the principal of Gimle elaborates on the problem of being skilled and links it to the features of the teacher collegium:

Interviewer: [...] What do you think characterizes a good teacher specialist?

Informant: [...] You must be able to stand between your own professionalism and be able to pass it on. And [you] must have a high degree of legitimacy from the staff. I think it might be a bit Janteloven² here. You need to be trusted so that people will ask you, 'Can you help me with this? I cannot do this.' [...] It cannot be, like, 'If you want to improve, you need to observe me.' Because that is going to stop people [from consulting the specialist].

Interviewer: Because of the Jantelov mentality?

Informant: No, but isn't that ... If you are going to coach, you have to hold back your own excellence so to say, and your own solutions. Because then you are going to make people grow. And that's also why I think of the teacher specialist role as extra vulnerable, because someone has said that you are particularly skilled.

The reference to Janteloven as well as the statement to 'hold back your own excellence' suggest that the communication between teachers and specialists is crucial. In order to gain legitimacy and trust, the specialist would need to hold back her personal knowledge, skills, and solutions, and a lack of this capability causes problems for the specialist. This is

especially noticeable in the last sentence (*‘And that’s also why’*), in which the principal links the specialist’s expertise to teachers’ growth. He claims that, instead of benefitting the specialist, being positioned as highly knowledgeable hinders fulfillment of the role. The excerpt illustrates self-as-other positioning; the principal equalizes the specialist and teachers. Moreover, the way he stresses downplaying the specialist’s excellence implies that he thinks the teacher collegium is sensitive to hierarchical structures. Put differently, the egalitarian nature of the collegium seems to cause the specialist to be positioned as more similar to other teachers than what might be assumed.

The Varden principal also noted possible challenges of being seen as highly skilled. In this regard, the importance of not selecting know-it-alls was emphasized:

Informant: (. . .) So I think this can be a great arrangement, if we manage it [properly]. But it must take place within a sociocultural perspective of learning. That has to be established. Because if not, this will be completely wrong, you know. As a contribution to teachers’ professional development, I think this could be a great initiative. But we have to make sure that it does not become [an arrangement] for know-it-alls. Because I think that is going to ruin everything. Although I see that I have a lot of potential for improvement regarding using [the specialist] as a resource and make her more visible, I think that I am not very keen to make this an arena for those who are full of themselves.

Later in the interview, he made a new reference to sociocultural learning theory:

[We need to] position the specialist within a constructivist or sociocultural framework, and not a behavioristic. Because then she will become the expert who is more skilled than the other [teachers], and they become stupid. That doesn’t work.

It is not clear what the principal was referring to when he stated that the arrangement is not for know-it-alls. Literal interpretation of the term indicates that the role should not be associated with being particularly skilled. Alternatively, avoiding know-it-alls might call for teachers who, first and foremost, are able to de-emphasize their expertise in interaction with other teachers. They might be more skilled than their peers, but this is seen as immaterial because the crucial aspect is the extent to which this expertise is exposed. The last excerpt, which states that social and interactive framing is essential to the specialist’s success, supports this interpretation.

In sum, the principals primarily used self-opposed-to-other positioning when talking about the specialists, equalizing the specialist and other teachers in at least two ways. First, phrases such as ‘full of themselves,’ ‘besserwisser,’ and ‘top-down’ imply that the principals are hesitant to assume that specialists hold a higher position in the hierarchy than the other teachers. Additionally, although not explicitly demanding that the specialists hold back their expertise, the principals seem to want the specialists to somewhat conceal their knowledge. As the principals were not talking about these abilities as competencies related to the specialist role (role-based positioning), these appear to be linked to personal attributes (personal positioning).

The coaching specialist

The positioning of the specialist as a coach concerns the specialist’s responsibility to coach, both collectively and individually. The former type concerns supervising more than one teacher by, for example, leading school-level development projects, providing

presentations, and facilitating staff meetings and discussions. As the principal at Asp noted, 'She [the specialist] has coached, yet not one on one. But she coached her subject department.' Individual coaching concerns one-on-one support and guidance on matters of literacy and assessment. All the principals agreed that, in these cases, the teachers need to consult the specialist and not vice versa. Certain types of skills were perceived to be important for this position, such as the abilities to listen to and see other teachers, make people feel skilled, manage others, and change. This position and the associated expectations have similarities with the formal descriptions of the teacher specialist and the aim of the role. Consequently, this can be seen as role-based positioning.

To some extent, positioning the specialist as a coach was linked to shortcomings in the teacher collegium and a low professional understanding. The excerpt below is from the interview with the principal of Varden:

Informant: So, I'm in a phase where I'm very keen on ... How interested are the teachers in their own teaching? How curious are they? I wish that the teacher specialist arrangement could help teachers get a little more curious about their own teaching, I mean, reflect a little more on what they do. [...] And what I would hope is that such a teacher specialist can contribute to making it easier to ask questions about teaching. [...]

Interviews: So you think that this kind of role should ...

Informant: Make the teachers a bit more confident. Be confident about their teaching skills, professionalize teachers' understanding. I mean, it is all about increasing their professional understanding in order to ... I find that teachers are so emotionally affected when we are talking about their work. And I think that relates to the fact that they have a fairly low professional understanding.

According to the principal, it is expected that the specialist will be concerned with increasing the teachers' level of confidence and, hence, fostering teacher professionalism. Professionalism involves the ability to problematize, reflect upon, and unemotionally discuss one's own teaching practice. The last two sentences imply that the principal perceives emotional affectedness as preventing a professional understanding ('And I think that relates'). To some extent, emotional affectedness and professionalism thus seem to be mutually exclusive aspects of teachers' practice.

The principal of Varden assumed that the specialist, besides being a way to foster teacher professionalism in general, could attain a sense of professionalism from within: 'After having numerous externally initiated and controlled projects, the teachers are now tired of these.' In this respect, the specialist role can represent a change, he argued, by letting teachers' development 'grow from within.' Put differently, the teacher specialist could activate teachers' learning processes.

At Gimle, individual coaching was desirable, as the principal wanted teachers to come to the specialist and ask for help and advice. In the interview, he expressed that it was important that 'some in the collegium get concrete coaching, modeling, and support.' This position was also mentioned during one of the weekly meetings at Gimle, in which the principal asked the specialist to lead a slightly unplanned plenary lesson. The extract below is from the observational summary notes:

It is clear that the principal cares about the specialist's opinion and wants her judgements and points of view. In total, I counted four incidents in 45 minutes where the principal turned to the specialist and asked what she would do if she was in the principal's position. At the end of the meeting, the principal also asked the specialist to give a presentation about

writing in the forthcoming plenary meeting. The principal, in some cases, suggests that the other teachers could benefit from the way in which the specialist teaches. For example, she said, “Everyone is not as aware as you are.”

The dedicated specialist

The positioning of the specialist as a dedicated teacher was especially prominent in interviews with two of the principals, who implied that the specialist is hardworking and genuinely engaged. Although expressed as distinct attributes, the two are interconnected, as they concern engagement in school improvement and subject matter. The positioning was somewhat personal, indicating that engagement and dedication were personal attributes.

The most obvious example of this positioning was at Asp, where the principal highlighted that the teacher specialist ‘should have a genuine interest in school development in general.’ A more surprising finding was that the position also seemed to be connected to the removal of the specialist title, which was replaced with ‘resource teacher.’ When I heard about this renaming during my first observation, my initial impression was that the shift was a result of the connotations of the term ‘specialist’ (i.e., that the other teachers were novices). In the interview with the principal, however, it became clear that this was not the only reason for the new name:

Interviewer: I have noticed that you moved away from this specialist term, so you must excuse me for still using it here. But can you tell me why you think it is a bad word?

Informant: It’s a bit like, ‘Specialist – I’m better than you’ in a way. I think that is the undertone of the word. And that’s not a good way to approach the staff or, like, equals. So when we presented this to the staff, we were very – or I was – very, very aware of saying that this has nothing to do with being a specialist and being better than others. This is about providing someone the opportunity to further work with a subject or a theme for the benefit of the whole school. Then, we renamed it from ‘specialist teacher’ to ‘resource teacher.’ I think it is a more comprehensive term.

From a positioning perspective, the excerpt illustrates two things. First, the principal resists positioning the specialist as an expert and reinforces the positioning of the specialist as a peer. Her utterances thus allude to the positioning of the specialist as sensitive. Second, the principal acknowledges that the specialist is distinguished from the other teachers, but these differences are due to their genuine engagement in school improvement (“This is about providing someone the opportunity to further work with a subject or a theme (...).”). The renaming was therefore not primarily caused by the negative connotations of the term ‘specialist’ but the expectations associated with the role.

At Varden, dedication was linked to loyalty, as the principal stated, ‘I know she does not waste her time.’ The principal appeared to perceive the specialist as hardworking and trustworthy, making control and frequent follow-up meetings rarely necessary. Moreover, the principal described the specialist’s dedication by referring to personality traits, specifically introversion. Before the principal stated the following, he was asked whether the specialist role challenges informal teacher leaders in the collegium. His answer ended with a comparison of the selected specialist and the other teachers who applied for the job:

If I should think out loud, the others who applied for the title, they are more of the young and nimble type who might take ... If they had applied to the position on top of being slightly extroverted, it could have been nice for the teacher specialist role. It could have become more visible. And more, what should I say ... exposed. And at the same time, the choice I made was deliberate, that it shouldn't [be a role for extroverts] in order to reach those who are a bit quieter and work a little more steadily without being so visible.

The distinction between extroverts and introverts recurred later in the interview:

Informant: She has a lot of trust in the collegium. And she has a personality that I would like to highlight. Because she might get a bit invisible. So, that is a part of the reason – to give her the space and the position where she can present some of her knowledge. I almost forgot what your question was.

Interviewer: The balance between experience and qualifications.

Informant: Right. There were younger people that could have gotten the role, but who are a bit ... who might make themselves noticeable, you know. [But] I want the introverts to be noticed as well. And [the specialist] is one of them.

It is clear that the principal considers the specialist to be diligent and dedicated and wants her to be noticed. The reasons for the positioning are unclear; he seemingly alternates between two aspects. On the one hand, the specialist role seems to be a way of systematizing seemingly unnoticeable expertise in the teacher collegium. As the selected specialist is both skilled and introverted, the specialist role provides 'the space and the position to present some of her knowledge.' On the other hand, one might speculate that selection is primarily a form of reward for dedicated and reserved teachers in recognition of their diligent work. Regardless of this, the excerpt reveals that the specialist was not selected in spite of her introverted personality but because of it; the principal mentioned that a personal trait was related to the positioning of the specialist as dedicated, revealing that hard work and subject matter engagement are not the only expectations related to this position. Still, he acknowledged that selecting a more outgoing teacher could be beneficial because these teachers have attributes that are apparently more appropriate for the actions associated with the specialist role. The positioning of the specialist is somewhat unconventional since she has a seemingly detrimental personal trait.

Discussion

This study has provided insight into how principals position teacher specialists in three distinct ways, reflecting how various forms of positioning are used and combined. First, a form of self-as-other and personal positioning were present in the position of the specialist as sensitive, revealing how the principal equalized the specialist and the other teachers. Second, the principals used a combination of role-based and self-opposed-to-other positioning when they talked about the specialists as coaches. Finally, personal and self-opposed-to-other positioning were present in the principals' descriptions of the specialists as engaged and passionate. Using positioning theory, the theoretical lens provides a conceptual framework as well as concrete analytical resources to explore how principals talk about teacher specialists and in what ways their talk might shape their actions. The latter question is closely linked to one of the purposes of the specialist role, namely, fostering professionalization and teachers' professional development work. How the principals position the specialists and what forms of positioning they use

therefore invites the discussion of how the specialist role is viewed as a professionalization initiative. In the subsequent paragraphs, I elaborate upon the results and discuss how the principals' talk may enable and constrain specialist work and teacher professionalization.

To a great extent, the forms of positioning used by the principals and the associated expectations are in line with previous research and can be seen as both understandable and important for enabling specialist productive work. Regarding the position of the specialist as sensitive, the results reveal how the principals equalize the specialists and the teachers (self-as-other positioning). Based on these results, a premise for fostering professionalization through the specialist role is not primarily to select teachers with subject expertise but to employ teachers who have the 'right' personal skills and can avoid having a top-down approach when working with other teachers. The significance of specialized teachers' personal capacity, especially sensitive communication skills (Killion & Harrison, 2005) and the ability to understand emotional responses (Frost & Harris, 2003), is also highlighted in the literature. Although teacher collaboration has been on schools' agendas for several years, formal leadership is, in many schools, reserved for the principal, and teacher leaders are haphazard at best (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). In addition, long-standing occupational norms of autonomy and equality are hard to bend (Donaldson et al., 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Consequently, using a form of self-as-other positioning might be a precondition for dealing with the traditional egalitarian teaching culture. In turn this can enable new practices, establish trustful relationships, and make teachers receptive to specialist-facilitated activities.

A similar interpretation can be made when it comes to the position of the specialists as dedicated. As in the sensitivity position, the principals appear to view personal characteristics rather than subject knowledge as vital for enabling the specialists' professional development work. An important difference between the sensitive and dedicated positions, however, is that the principals practice a self-opposed-to-other positioning in the latter position. Teacher specialists should have, according to the principals, a special interest and engagement in development work that distinguishes them from other teachers. Therefore, this position does not imply any concrete specialist actions or expectations about how to approach other teachers. Keeping in mind that Norway has historically been characterized by egalitarianism and equity, principals might believe that positioning the specialists as particularly engaged and dedicated is less harmful or likely to create conflict within the staff than positioning them as particularly skilled. Additionally, the principals' emphasis of engagement and dedication resembles descriptions of enthusiasm and optimism as important dispositions for specialized teachers (Danielson, 2007). Consequently, the principals enable specialists' actions by talking about specialists and teachers as more or less equal regarding their skills, but unlike when it comes to dedication.

Regarding the position of the specialist as a coach, role-based positioning is used by the principals. With this form of positioning, the results imply that the principals talk about the specialists in a way that aligns with the intentions of specialized teacher roles in general and the specialist arrangement in particular. Specialized teachers have the potential for intensive differentiated teacher support and on-site improvement through empowerment (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Knight, 2009). The latter can be related to the utterance from the principal at Varden, who stated that the specialist role is a way of

letting teachers' development work 'grow from within.' This might be interpreted as if the principal wants to use the specialist arrangement to foster professionalism by increasing teachers' empowerment and putting them at the foreground of their own development processes. Although it is in an initial phase, the specialist arrangement, in the evaluation report, is claimed to have the potential to foster professionalism from within (Seland et al., 2017). Through development work within smaller groups of teachers and the promotion of knowledge-sharing culture, the emergence of the school as a learning organization can gradually take place. By using role-based positioning, the principals thus rely on a formal view of how the specialist role can foster professionalization and lead teachers' development work. This role-based positioning arguably enables specialist-led development work to a greater extent than solely talking about the specialists with reference to personal characteristics (personal positioning). In sum, the results thus reveal how the principals use the four types of positioning to talk about the specialists as sensitive, coaching, and dedicated, which in turn enables the specialists' work in three various ways.

However, even though role-based positioning was used when talking about the specialist as a coach and formal descriptions of the specialist role were relied on, it is striking how the results reveal an almost absence of specific *actions* associated with the three positions. Even when the principals talked about coaching activities, stating that specialists can stimulate teacher discussion and reflection, the description of the actions were on a rather general level with few concrete references to how they should be conducted. As implied above, the results reveal how the principals use personal positioning to emphasize the importance of certain mentalities, attitudes, or personal traits, rather than specific desirable specialist practices, the principals practice personal positioning. In some cases, the expectations were even described as an absence of undesired attitudes (e.g., the specialist must *not* be a *besserwisser* or an extrovert). On the one hand, the lack of concrete actions provides the specialists with autonomy and can signify trust in and respect for them. On the other, a clear definition of the specialist's role and responsibilities is crucial for enabling specialized teachers' work (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Without a common perception of the purpose of the specialist role, even the activities associated with the coaching position can be hard to carry out. The frequent use of personal positioning at the expense of role-based positioning arguably makes it challenging to view the specialist initiative as a professionalization initiative, as attention arguably is drawn away from what they should *do* and toward how they should *be*.

Relatedly, the overall lack of position, made visible through references to the specialists' knowledge, might further constrain viewing the specialist role as a professionalization initiative as well as complicate specialist-led development work. Several principals occasionally mentioned skills and subject knowledge as important characteristics of specialists, but the results uncovered that the principals lack systematic means of talking about this. The principals appear to have few expectations related to the specialists' use of subject expertise or possession of specialized knowledge. This is also noticeable in the forms of positioning used by the principals, as they, to a limited degree, talked about formal qualifications or specific types of knowledge (role-based positioning). The downplaying of the knowledge aspect of the specialist role can be illustrated by the removal of the specialist title at Asp. Although the principals might refrain from focusing on the specialists' expertise because they want to prevent potential teacher conflicts, certain studies indicate

that teachers' opposition to differentiated specialized teacher roles might be decreasing; teachers do not necessarily desire a completely flat organizational structure (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Lorentzen, 2019). Following this line of thinking, principals' resistance to positioning the specialist as highly skilled is unnecessary at best and can potentially be problematic considering teacher professionalization. This point especially applies to the notion of specialized teacher roles as a form of professionalization per se because professionalization alludes to a form of expertise (Molander & Terum, 2008). In addition, review articles have found that subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and organizational knowledge are key factors in determining the extent and nature of teacher leadership and coaching (Frost & Harris, 2003). Based on these studies, teacher legitimacy is gained not only by having a sensitive approach but also by demonstrating excellent teaching skills and a specialized knowledge base. Although a sense of equality between the specialists and their peers might be a precondition for increasing teachers' legitimacy and trust, exaggerated de-emphasis of specialists' expertise could have an inverse effect.

Finally, as self-opposed-to-other positioning was only used when talking about expectations related to engagement and dedication, this can be interpreted as these two dispositions being what should distinguish teacher specialists from other teachers primarily. Reducing the specialist role to a position for those who have interests in school development and not specific qualifications, the specialists might have difficulty problematizing teachers' actions or pushing teachers to move forward in their teaching practice. The principals noted that facilitation of discussions, reflection, and questioning of teacher routines are desired effects of implementing the specialist role. Viewing these tasks as activities that can foster teacher professionalism, one could argue that specialists need to be able to challenge teachers' assumptions and practices. Scholars have found that professional communities that productively engage in conflicts have a greater potential for continual growth (Achinstein, 2002). Moreover, teachers who are uncomfortable with 'being the boss' struggle to lead and often lose peer credibility (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In addition, productive tensions (Stillman, 2011) that give teachers the opportunity to learn from challenging conditions are arguably more difficult to create when the specialists are supposed to be similar to their peers. In sum, inquiry-based dialogs or questioning of teachers' practices can be challenging if the specialists are distinguished from other teachers solely based on their subject matter engagement or ability to be quiet. Enabling specialists to facilitate professional development activities thus seems to call for a combination of self-as-other *and* self-opposed-to-other positioning, for example, through positions that unite sensitivity, dedication, *and* specialized knowledge.

Conclusion

The discussion reveals how the forms of positioning and associated expectations, when explored separately, seem understandable and important for enabling specialist action. By equalizing the specialists and the other teachers and positioning the specialists as dedicated and engaged rather than experts, for example, trust between the specialist and the staff can be developed and potential conflicts might be avoided. However, by downplaying the knowledge aspect of the role, one of the original purposes of the specialist role (i.e., employing particularly skilled and experienced teachers to lead professional development work) is removed. Although equality to some extent might be a precondition for gaining teachers'

acceptance and trust, undermining specialized teachers' expertise or perceiving engagement as the cornerstone of specialized teachers' initiatives makes it difficult to consider such arrangements as professionalization initiatives. Moreover, too much emphasis on sensitivity and dedication might impede specialists from facilitating professional development activities. Consequently, when hiring specialized teachers, principals and local school authorities should arguably seek teachers with sensitivity and knowledge of content. Relatedly, principals talking to the staff about the specialist role can benefit from using both a self-opposed-to-other and self-as-other positioning, thus emphasizing their particular expertise and the intention of this role as a resource for the entire staff. Implications of the study also include future research. As this study indicates that the emphasis on equality might be linked to the Scandinavian history of egalitarianism, exploring how principals talk about specialized teachers in other contexts can uncover how positioning relates to geographical variations. In general, this will extend our comprehension of how professionalization through specialization is defined, interpreted, and put into practice by different school actors.

The study has some limitations. First, the study does not include an investigation of the actual effects of principals' talk on the specialists' work. Although, assuming that the principals' talk can enable and constrain the specialists' work, this is a premise based on previous research and the theoretical framework used in the study and cannot be backed by the study's results. Second, as the data collection started one year after the arrangement had been initiated, the analyzes may not provide a complete picture of how the principals talk about the specialists. For example, observations of how they framed the specialist role to the staff when the scheme initially was launched might have provided relevant additional data. However, the present data material provides a rich picture of the principals' positioning, as the observational data are extensive and the interview data offer the principals' retrospective glance at the specialist role and arrangement.

Notes

1. Although teacher leadership is a frequently used label when referring to teachers with the abovementioned characteristics, this is a relatively unfamiliar concept in Scandinavia. Thus, the term 'teacher leader' appears insufficient to use in the present study, as it was conducted in Norway. The absence of references to teacher leaders might be related to the historical description of the Scandinavian school model as egalitarian and based on equity and inclusion (Imsen et al., 2017).
2. Janteloven is a concept created by the Danish–Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose in 1933, and it usually refers to a mentality that individuals should not stand out or think that they are any smarter, better, or more important than others.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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