

# Development of Hybrid Professionalism: Street-Level Managers' Work and the Enabling Conditions of Public Reform

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## **Development of Hybrid Professionalism: Street-Level Managers' Work and the Enabling Conditions of Public Reform**

This paper examines the role of street-level managers in the development of hybrid professionalism. Based on a longitudinal analysis of an organisational reform, we highlight the work of street-level managers in promoting a hybrid 'social work-like' professionalism to reconcile social work professionalism with managerial bureaucracy. We highlight four managerial activities—organisational design, discursive reconstruction, R&D project mobilisation and legitimisation in reform documents—and connect these to enabling and constraining conditions in the reform. Overall, we found that the development of hybrid professionalism is contingent on enabling conditions providing material and discursive resources that proactive managers can employ to transform professionalism.

Keywords: Professionalism, hybridity, public reform, institutional work, street-level managers, social work

## **Introduction**

Public management scholars have increasingly focused on the roles and positions of professionals and professionalism (Giacomelli, 2020; Noordegraaf et al., 2016). This is because of the complexity of public services, which tend to span different organisational and professional spheres and thus require whole service systems to ‘co-create’ public value (Osborne, 2018) and solve ‘wicked’ rather than ‘tame’ problems (Head & Alford, 2013). As street-level organisations must adopt changes during the course of public reforms, the roles of professionals become intertwined with reform objectives and agendas. Since public sector reforms tend to accumulate rather than replace previous reform models and principles (Hendriks & van Gestel, 2017), street-level organisations, managers and professionals face competing requirements and are inclined to acquire roles characterised by hybridity (Denis et al., 2015).

In discussions of hybrid professionalism, scholars have called for additional knowledge of how such professionalism is developed and managed and the enabling conditions for this (Giacomelli, 2020). Scholars have also called for additional knowledge of the management of professionalism at the street level (Gassner & Gofen, 2018). Street-level managers are managers operating ‘at the intersection of formal policy making, local target populations and everchanging and highly contextual work’ (Gassner & Gofen, 2018, p. 552). They are key actors in the implementation of organisational change in the public sector (Klemsdal et al., 2022). This is a challenging position because their subordinates are professionals who value and expect autonomy and discretion and are accountable to both central and local governments with differing modes of governance and histories of professionalism.

This paper’s key objective is to improve the understanding of the management of hybrid professionalism by focusing on how it is promoted by street-level managers. This is done by studying how street-level managers stimulated the development of a novel form of hybrid professionalism in a ‘whole-of-government’ reform in Norway (the Nav reform) from 2006 to 2021. The reform aimed to provide integrated services to increase the labour market participation of vulnerable groups by merging organisations with competing institutional logics: 1) local social services entailing a subordinate logic of social work professionalism, and 2) the central Public Employment Services entailing a dominant logic of managerialist bureaucracy involving a combination of bureaucratic hierarchies and regulations and performance management.

In this rather unbalanced constellation of logics, it was unlikely that professionalism would thrive—an assumption confirmed by the reform trajectory. What started out as visionary reform ideas of integrating the two logics—easily adopted by the development-oriented street-level professionals and managers—was soon replaced by demands for efficient case processing, national control and standardised work tools, resulting in experiences of de-professionalisation and marginalisation among professionals. Yet, despite the strong influence of managerialist bureaucracy, a hybrid '*social work-like*' professionalism evolved and spread among street-level organisations, thereby reconciling the institutional logics at the street level.

Our research questions concentrate on how professionalisation occurs in this organisational context. Our analysis is based on available research from the reform trajectory (67 texts). Drawing on institutional theory, we assessed the 'institutional work' (Cloutier et al., 2015; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) of street-level managers as they attempted to (re)align the contradictory and unbalanced institutional logics of professionalism and managerial bureaucracy. Accordingly, our research questions are as follows: What is the institutional work through which street-level managers promote a novel hybrid professionalism in institutionalised managerial-bureaucratic contexts, and what are the conditions enabling and constraining such work?

We contribute to the theory on hybrid professionalism by showing the various forms of institutional work through which street-level managers promote such professionalism: (a) the organisational design of roles and tasks of hybrid professionals, (b) discursive reconstructions of the meanings and relevance of professionalism in this new context, (c) active use of research and development (R&D) projects to develop and make professionalism relevant for (or even essential to) service provision and (d) grounding and legitimising the need for professionalism in public policies and reform documents. Second, we show that the important, and still poorly recognised, work of street-level managers drew on enabling conditions in the reform environment. Specifically, these conditions include financial resources for R&D projects in the central administration and legitimacy for professional change in political reform agendas that embrace local autonomy and competence development. These enabling conditions offered crucial support for the ongoing internal developmental work related to organisational design and discursive changes among street-level organisations.

## **Managing Hybrid Professionalism**

A range of studies have focused on the relationships between managers and professionals, both in general and in the context of public reform (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011; Numerato et al., 2012). The relationships between professionals and managers are often depicted as clashes between the extreme positions of professional versus organisational logics (Anteby et al., 2016), where managers subordinate or ‘de-professionalise’ professionals (Brodkin, 2011; Evetts, 2013). As professionalism constitutes a distinct, institutionalised mode of organising (Freidson, 2001), attempts by (middle) managers to transform professionals’ practices or roles are thus likely to be met with various forms of resistance if the changes do not align with the professionals’ values (Berg, 2006; Tummers et al., 2015). A result is ‘implementation gaps’ and ‘policy slippage’, where the strategic changes do not play out as intended.

However, studies have shown that professionals can adapt to managerial demands when they are to be performed in complex organisational settings requiring multiple forms of expertise by developing hybrid professional traits (Blomgren & Waks, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2007). Recent studies have provided insight into organisations’ impact on professionals, their adoption and management of hybrid roles, how and why they embrace such roles and how they perform them in their daily work (Giacomelli, 2020). In his review of hybrid professionalism, Giacomelli (2020) noted that there has been a lack of focus on the role of managers in the hybridisation of professionalism, as well as on the enabling conditions for such managerial work (p. 1638). Such a focus shifts the perspective on professional transformation away from it being conducted by actors operating on behalf of the profession (Scott, 2008), such as professional associations (Greenwood et al., 2002), to managers changing professionalism ‘from within’ organisations.

Street-level managers are key actors in the implementation and facilitation of organisational change because they are so closely connected to the overseeing of professionals and their work while also being responsible for reaching strategic organisational objectives (e.g., reform objectives). For this reason, the position of street-level management is ‘sandwiched’ between professional and organisational interests and logics and is thus affected by numerous tensions and contradictions (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Street-level managers may also be professionals themselves and thus be ‘hybrid managers’ with one foot each in the managerial and professional domains, respectively. A key premise in the literature is that hybrid managers’ status as professionals and their basis in the professional domain endow them with

particular legitimacy and authority in relation to frontline workers (see also Spehar et al., 2014).

The literature has highlighted a variety of means that street-level managers may employ to hybridise professionalism. Managers may broker between different types of knowledge across organisational and professional boundaries (Burgess and Currie (2013). Managers may promote professional change through transformational leadership, such as leadership through encouragement, inspiration and motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006), which influences the professionals' learning capabilities (Zhang et al., 2022) and promotes work engagement (Ancarani et al., 2021). Managers may explain changes to professionals and thus help them understand their implications through a variety of discursive activities (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Other means include engaging professionals in training and role development activities (Fitzgerald & Sturt, 1992).

Managers can also promote change by connecting the professionals' (role) identities with the interests of the organisation (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016). For example, Reay et al. (2017) showed how this was accomplished by facilitating interactions, meetings and conversations, but also through support by 'renegade professionals' wanting professional change. Reay et al. (2013) further emphasised that managers can encourage professionals to try out new behaviours and engage in 'micro-level theorising' around the implications of such behavioural changes in their organisational contexts. Such changes do not involve radical shifts in professionalism but rather incremental microprocesses.

Gassner and Gofen (2018) took a broader perspective and suggested that the position of street-level managers in the interstitial space between decision makers, the local public and professionals enables them great authority over the processes of service delivery and the work of professionals. They highlighted four managerial 'functions' in this street-level position: (a) the translation of formal policy decisions to street-level work, (b) the adaptation of direct delivery arrangements to solve implementation gaps, (c) the mobilisation of volunteers and (d) the articulation of a clientele perspective upwards in the organisation.

In terms of enabling conditions for street-level managers, studies have highlighted the roles and social positions of hybrid managers (i.e., managers who are themselves also professionals). Their professionalism enables them to (perhaps more or less unconsciously) reproduce professionalism in the new organisational context, albeit in a new form. McGivern et al. (2015) distinguished between 'incidental hybrids', who use the manager position to

‘represent’ and ‘protect’ traditional professionalism, and as ‘willing hybrids’, who develop new manager–professional identities and practices to reconcile the contradictions between professionalism and managerialism. In a study of managerial strategies to implement reform changes, Breit, Fossetøl and Andreassen (2018) highlighted the strategy of developing hybrid professionalism as an exceptional strategy, contingent on the professional backgrounds and entrepreneurial leadership traits of street-level managers.

In our analysis, building on these insights about middle managerial strategies and enabling conditions, we draw on institutional theory. Institutional theory is commonly used to study hybridity, depicting it as different ways of blending contradictory or competing institutional logics (Denis et al., 2015; Giacomelli, 2020; Reay et al., 2017). Institutional logics prescribe what constitutes legitimate behaviour and provide understandings and conceptions about operational situations, appropriate goals and legitimate means for achieving those goals (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics are sustained at the field level (e.g., through the existence of different logics struggling for dominance) and manifested as an (to the extent that the logics are incompatible) ‘institutional complexity’ at the street level that managers are required to handle in their efforts to transform institutionalised role identities and work practices (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011).

We conceptualise the efforts of managing and reconciling institutional logics at the street level as institutional work (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Handling contradictory logics is central for street-level managers during public reform processes, involving, among others, ‘structural work’ (e.g., changing organisational design), ‘conceptual work’ (e.g., explaining changes), ‘operational work’ (e.g., making changes work in practice) and ‘relational work’ (e.g., establishing boundaries and building trust) (Cloutier et al., 2015). Specifically, institutional work conceptualises the mediation between the reforms, which are manifestations of institutional change (Christensen & Lægheid, 2011), and professionals’ role identities, which in turn represent institutional stability (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). From this perspective, professionals are institutional carriers, organisations are sites and vehicles for professional action and managers—especially street-level managers—are in a key position to integrate professional and bureaucratic logics through institutional work.

## **Research Context**

Our research context is the implementation and aftermath of Norway's largest public service reform (the Nav reform). The reform passed Parliament in 2005 and was implemented in 2006, aiming to increase the employment of vulnerable groups in need of flexible, personalised services. The reform was a 'whole-of-government' or 'post-New Public Management (post-NPM)' initiative, as the government used it to increase the capacity of the public service system to address the underemployment of vulnerable groups as a 'wicked problem' cutting across existing policy areas (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Fimreite & Lægreid, 2009).

The Nav reform is situated in a policy area that has witnessed reforms across Europe (Minas, 2014; van Berkel et al., 2017). These policy and reform shifts have restructured the roles and positions of professionalism in this emerging field of 'activation work' (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012). The Norwegian reform is one of the most radical to date (Champion & Bonoli, 2011) because the integration has been intra-organisational; in other words, it has merged social work professionalism with public employment services in the newly established street-level organisations.

The reform involved the establishment of street-level organisations (Nav offices) in the municipalities around the country as 'one-stop shops' (Askim et al., 2011). They were established as a partnership between the central Labour and Welfare Administration and the local social services agency in the municipalities. The resulting organisational form has been described as a hybrid combination of vertical and horizontal coordination and of the old welfare administration, NPM features and 'whole-of-government' features (Askim et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2014). Professional social workers were expected to collaborate with the employment service occupations and had to transform their role identities to take on the employment realm and work under the influence of an NPM tradition.

## **Methodology**

The background for this study is a 'mystery' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) that emerged in the author's research on the reform, namely the diffusion of what we characterised (and describe further below) as a 'social work-like professionalism' in street-level organisations

that have been significantly influenced by the dominant bureaucratic logic in the reform—in other words, a situation of institutional complexity where professionalisation seemed unlikely.

We decided to probe this mystery through a secondary analysis of the scientific literature on the reform. A first reason we chose this method was that, given our emphasis on examining the trajectory over a relatively long period of time since the reform, the best option was to draw on secondary sources. A second reason was that in the years since the reform, there have been many studies on the reform from different perspectives (also by the present authors), thus providing ample opportunities for a longitudinal analysis. Our analysis is not meant to synthesise evidence in an additive way but rather to draw insights from a range of studies to form a cumulative understanding of our theoretical puzzle.

We began by selecting studies based on our own experiences in the field, as well as with the help of experts. We complemented this with a search of the relevant Norwegian database, Oria, for additional data. In the initial data selection process, we included only empirical studies and studies that focused on the intersections of professionalism and organisational context. Hence, we excluded studies that focused exclusively on clients or the content of professional work with clients. Our search yielded 67 texts: 50 scientific articles, 12 research reports and 5 political documents. These texts were then distinguished into three broad categories: ‘professionalism’ (i.e., studies of social work professionals in their organisational contexts), ‘managerial activities’ (i.e., studies that focused on the efforts of street-level managers to transform professionalism) and ‘conditions’ (i.e., studies of the reform implementation in general and the conditions for managerial activities in particular). See the appendix for an overview of the texts and categories.

The analysis proceeded in two broad and overlapping stages. In the first stage, we created a coherent narrative regarding the transformation processes based on a narrative review approach (Hammersley, 2001). This approach enabled us to analyse the change trajectories over a long period of time while also accounting for the rich and dispersed sets of observations and arguments in the literature. We used the ‘condition’ studies to identify three broad phases in the reform trajectory based on the politicians’ and top management’s reform objectives and key turning points for these. These phases are as follows: First, a ‘reform creation’ phase (2000–2007) involved the establishment of the new organisation, as well as experimentation with integrated work forms; Second, a ‘reform restructuring’ phase (2008–2014) involved a substantial reorganisation of the whole labour and welfare administration to increase efficiency, such as centralisation of national insurance tasks, implementation of new

(digital) standardised work tools not requiring professional knowledge and skills in encounters with clients and increased emphasis on the use of performance indicators and requirements regarding documentation (Andreassen, 2019; Jantz et al., 2015)); Third, a ‘reform revival’ phase (from 2015 onwards) was spurred by a policy shift that revitalised the legitimacy of professionalism in street-level services. This phase involved, in many ways, a return to the original reform ideas: underscoring integrated services, the need for autonomy for developing new forms of professionalism and experimentation at the street-level (Fossestøl et al., 2020; Hellang et al., 2019). Following the identification of these phases, we used the ‘professionalism’ studies to examine the social workers’ responses and the hybrid professionalism that emerged through the trajectory. Table 1 provides an overview of this analysis.

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In the second phase of the analysis, we used the ‘managerial activities’ texts to examine our research question regarding street-level managerial work to develop hybrid professionalism. We cross-checked the managers’ work with the narrative review conducted in the first stage to examine the second research question involving the enabling conditions for their work. In this iterative analytical process, we gradually identified four forms of work applied by managers that actively promoted professionalism: organisational design and redesign, discursive reconstructions, the use of research and development projects and legitimisation in reform documents. Importantly, as we will show in detail below, the managers’ work was intimately connected with the phases in the reform, operating as enabling and constraining conditions.

Despite the rather extensive array of empirical studies, a limitation is that the data mainly involved qualitative studies. A large portion of the literature was written in Norwegian and much were based on ‘grey area’ literature, such as research reports commissioned by national authorities. Where applicable, we documented our analysis with English literature, highlighting content from Norwegian literature when English texts were unavailable.

Furthermore, no studies have provided a complete description of all street-level organisations and their managers’ professional backgrounds or efforts to promote professionalism (if any at all). Previous studies had underlined a variation in managers’ response strategies to reform changes based on a selection of street-level organisations (Andreassen et al., 2011; Breit, Fossestøl, & Andreassen, 2018; Fossestøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015). Therefore, we

cannot claim that the efforts of managers that we describe here were equally dominant across all street-level organisations—in fact, it is likely that there are variations in the type and extent of the strategies used. Nonetheless, recent survey data from 2019 and recent case studies from a variety of street-level organisations do indicate an increasingly widespread development of hybrid ‘social work-like’ professionalism (Fossestøl et al., 2020).

### **Emerging Hybrid Social Work-Like Professionalism**

The reform integrated two competing institutional logics: 1) a logic of professionalism in the local government social services staffed with professionals with higher education, discretionary autonomy and a role identity connected to vulnerable users with complex problems requiring a holistic approach (Gundersen, 2014; Indset et al., 2012; Røysum, 2013); and 2) a logic of managerialist bureaucracy in the large state administration dominated by bureaucratic regulations, a managerialist New Public Management steering and a longstanding narrow task interpretation in the public employment service focused on the placement of employable, job-ready, unemployed workers with little emphasis on client-oriented professionalism in street-level work (Berg, 2006; Berg et al., 2002; Fossestøl, 1999; Jantz & Jann, 2013).

Within the organisational context of this large national managerial bureaucracy, it was unlikely that professionalism—and the social work profession—would thrive and develop. Nonetheless, over more than 15 years, a professionalisation process occurred, although not with a linear trajectory or without tensions and constraints, and not in all street-level organisation (Breit, Fossestøl, & Andreassen, 2018; Fossestøl et al., 2020). Managers and professionals have complained that the lack of resources hampers quality casework, but their complaints also revealed the development and diffusion of ambitions to provide what we characterise as a ‘social work-like professionalism’. This hybrid professionalism, both user and employment oriented, draws on the helping aspects of social work and includes organising elements from a managerialist bureaucracy logic, regulations and a focus on employment (Andreassen & Natland, 2020; Helgøy et al., 2010, 2013).

In recent years, street-level managers have been less prone to regard services for vulnerable clients as rule-oriented administration and as guided by standards and procedures only. The implementation period’s predominant focus on basic and common competence for all employees, standardised assessment tools, accountability measures and digitized work

practices (Andreassen, 2019; Røhnebæk, 2016; Røysum, 2013; Fossetøl et al., 2016) was complemented by enhanced individualisation and tailored services requiring flexibility and discretionary judgements (Andreassen & Natland, 2020; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2016; Øvrelid, 2018)).

Managers describe services for vulnerable clients as tailored to each individual and provided by workers who take effort in identifying what works to each individual and have the time to follow each individual service user (Spjelkavik et al., 2016). Managers shield these opportunities for holistic work practices (Bakkeli, 2022), and although they not only recruit social workers but also workers with other bachelor educations (e.g., nursing, pedagogy or social science), they request the professional knowledge, skills and capabilities to make discretionary judgements, competences traditionally associated with social work (Andreassen & Natland, 2020).

However, managers see the social contract of professional work as mediated by the mission of the organisation, in contrast to the social work tradition of emphasising the necessity of allowing opposition to policy and bureaucracy (Erlien, 2016; Liodden, 2020). Moreover, the goal of employment is highly valued, as this quote from a manager demonstrates: ‘The focus is work, no matter if you are a social assistance client or receive other benefits [...] Whether this goal is close or far in the future, it is important not to lose sight of it’ (Andreassen & Natland, 2020).

Street-level workers with varying backgrounds and client groups have reported using relational skills, discretionary judgements, trust and respectful relationships with clients to motivate clients (Hagelund, 2016; Håvold, 2018). Furthermore, they engage in opportunities to use their professional expertise, work in more integrated ways and serve vulnerable clients better (Fossetøl et al., 2020; Hellang et al., 2019).

Furthermore, although not without exceptions (Fossetøl et al., 2020), social workers have increasingly accepted working under the bureaucratic requirements of national authorities. Although social workers are not as enthusiastic as other frontline workers, they are not, in general, critical of conditionality and sanctions (Terum et al., 2017). They no longer only regard standardised work tools as time-consuming and troublesome but also as important to master in their everyday work (Hansen & Natland, 2017; Røhnebæk, 2016; Øvrelid, 2018). This also counts for new digital interactions with clients that increase transparency and reduce asymmetry (Breit et al., 2020).

The resulting contemporary professionalism has involved, in keeping with social work (Røysum 2013), more widespread attention to the complexity of the extensive problems faced by vulnerable clients, not only clients requiring social assistance but also clients looking for national insurance benefits with long-term health conditions, impairments and reduced work capacities entitled to more extensive ‘follow-up’. This attention to complexity has been particularly common in internally provided activation programmes and teams targeting young clients. Furthermore, it has increasingly involved the use of holistic work practices, in line with social work’s ‘person-in-situation’ concept, emphasising the qualitative relationship between clients and professionals. This has been enabled by giving more frontline workers (and not only social workers) lower caseloads and thus opportunities for more intensive and personalised follow-up with small client portfolios (Bakkeli et al., 2020; Frøyland & Fossetøl, 2014; Frøyland et al., 2014; Spjelkavik et al., 2016). Such programmes resemble key forms of social work, and social workers believe that they enable social work (Bakkeli & Breit, 2022).

The professionalism that has been prevalent among street-level organisations is not the ‘ownership’ of the social work profession; rather, it is available to and taken up by all frontline workers and appropriate for client work, irrespective of the workers’ educational backgrounds or occupational roles. For example, one recent report quoted a manager referring to the practice of the former social service of visiting clients at their home: ‘Workers with state responsibilities are now much more oriented towards a form of social work, with a holistic approach in their follow-up of clients. They do home visits, participate in interorganizational teams around their clients, drive their clients to the doctor if their schedule allows it’ (Quote from Hellang et al., 2019, p. 111). Key elements of traditional and transformed professionalism are summarised in table 2.

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### **Street-Level Managers’ Promotion of Hybrid Professionalism**

We now turn to our research questions and highlight four activities of street-level managers who had ambitions of securing professionalism in the new street-level organisations and link these to the enabling and constraining conditions in the three phases of the reform trajectory.

## *Organisational Design*

For many managers, attempts to create an organisation that promotes the development of holistic service delivery in accordance with the ‘whole-of-government’ ideas of the reform were central throughout the reform period. This involved transforming institutionalised work forms from the former organisations, implementing the policy goal of service integration and developing new work roles in street-level organisations. A key activity of the managers was organisational design, specifically developing new departments and teams across old boundaries, and strengthening the workflow and communication between different parts of the organisation for the benefit of users (Andreassen & Fossetøl, 2011a; Helgøy et al., 2010, 2013)

In the ‘reform creation’ phase, organisational development involved radical change and experimentation with new organisational designs and work forms. This exploration was enabled by a reform policy that provided a few mandatory templates with regard to organisational design. In addition, the variation between offices was high, and the employees saw experimentation as a necessary remedy for developing integrated work forms. In smaller street-level organisations with a manager with a social work background, more integrated role identities for joint work emerged (Andreassen, 2011a). This change also included many social workers who expressed approval of the reform objectives, for example, because they regarded the reform as targeting the weakest citizens—even though many were also sceptical of the new integrated work forms. This approval of social workers was also reinforced by the introduction of a designated employment programme for social assistance recipients (‘Qualification Programme’) in 2007 (e.g., Gubrium et al., 2014; Røysum, 2013).

In the ‘reform restructuring’ phase, reform objectives and service integration development efforts in street-level organisations were placed on hold (Andreassen & Fossetøl, 2009). Efficiency demands instead motivated many managers to return to the pre-reform division of labour among employees; a considerable re-specialisation took place (Helgøy et al., 2013). Due to the chaotic situation resulting from the logistical problems in the centralised benefit administration, managers described focusing on what was termed ‘fire extinction’ (‘brannslukking’) and ‘ad hoc management’ to adhere to the shifting administrative demands placed on them (Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015; Fossetøl et al., 2016). The managers directed their attention inwards and towards making a chaotic situation workable for their employees (Helgøy et al., 2013; Klemsdal et al., 2022).

This chaos constrained the managers' ability to use organisational design to promote hybrid professionalism and service integration, and managers responded in different ways to the incompatibility between the national demands of efficiency and the street-level development of service integration (Fossestøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015). Some responded by adhering mainly to the national demands, others created specialised sub-organisations so they could separate between national demands and local development and others attended to them on an ad hoc basis. Still others, particularly managers with municipal backgrounds, held on to the aim of providing holistic services to clients with complex needs and emphasising the role of social work professionalism, despite these constraining conditions (Fossestøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015). These managers continuously undertook incremental redesign steps with teams and units crossing former service divides and the state versus municipal service areas, especially regarding young clients and the employment programme for social assistance recipients (Fossestøl et al., 2014; Frøyland et al., 2014; Helgøy et al., 2013).

At the same time, social workers were more inclined to do former 'state tasks' because of increasing workloads, but arguably, also due to increased insight into the social characteristics of many of the state recipients' challenges (Fossestøl, Breit, & Borg, 2015). However, the most professionalism-demanding social recipients were still the responsibility of social workers, and social workers increasingly considered the new organisational conditions incompatible with their professionalism and worried that the most vulnerable clients would be underserved (Røysum, 2010, 2013; Skjefstad, 2013). As a result, many 'embraced' their 'municipal' tasks and clients and were generally sceptical of further service integration (Andreassen, 2011b; Andreassen & Fossestøl, 2011b; Fossestøl, Breit, & Borg, 2015).

In the 'reform revival' phase, managers, underpinned by the return of politicians and national authorities to the initial reform objectives, again engaged more actively in organisational design, and the idea of professionalism has, in recent years, seemed to play a more central role among a much broader spectrum of managers (Andreassen & Natland, 2020; Fossestøl et al., 2020). These developments are connected to the reduction of the logistical problems in case processing, the implementation of new digital systems shifting client contact from routine tasks to follow-up and a clearer understanding of what activation work was all about—which all made it easier for managers to return their focus to organisational development (Fossestøl et al., 2020). The question was again how to optimise the organisation of the office to secure integrated services and new work roles, which shattered the old divisions of labour. The concept of a learning organisation became central, such as an organisation based on a

practical, bottom-up development of the offices that presupposed the employer's active engagement.

### *Discursive Reconstructions*

Another activity undertaken by managers to underpin organisational design was reconstructing social work professionalism from something in conflict with the new integrated work forms to something underpinning and fundamental to them. For example, some managers argued that social work professionalism is relevant to all client groups, not only social assistance recipients; that team-based work forms improve holistic service provision; that labour market participation is only suitable for the most job-ready clients but also a realistic goal for people with complex problems; and that standardised ways of working are not incompatible with professional discretion.

In the 'reform creation' phase, the constructions emphasised the integrating potential of social work professionals in the reformed organisation. The argument appealed to the values of integrated services, reciprocal dependence, and cooperation. 'Our aim is to better meet the totality of needs that citizens have', one manager underscored (Øyhaugen, 2006). The manager further stated that the goal for every client is some form of activity, depending on individual qualifications and needs, and the workers from the three organisations integrated by the reform were 'equal partners': 'We are dependent on each other's knowledge and skills; we interact as one organisation with the citizens in the centre! It works, and it is fun'.

The reform was met with optimism among many social workers, who saw the construction by the managers as a way to support 'their' client groups. However, the intended changes were also challenging for many social workers, who argued that their education was not appreciated when other workers without the necessary education could take over their work. They argued that the narrow focus on work first took attention away from the holistic needs of vulnerable groups and that the ruled-based standardised and gradually highly digitised ways of working were inappropriate when it came to the discretion needed for the vulnerable (Røysum, 2013).

In the 'reform restructuring' phase, these challenges became especially prominent. Managers tried to motivate employees by arguing that to meet clients' needs, all resources must be shared across the traditional boundaries between the municipal and state services and that this

is a responsibility of every street-level worker (Fossestøl, Breit, & Borg, 2015). For example, one manager sought to move from what they coined a ‘traditional’ to a ‘contemporary’ school of social work, the former being the pre-reform role of social work and the latter involving the role of social work in the reformed organisation (Breit, Fossestøl, & Andreassen, 2018). ‘All good work is good social work’ and ‘all our employees are employed in Nav’ (e.g., not by the state or the municipality) were common phrases expressing such concerns (Fossestøl et al., 2014).

In the ‘reform revival’ phase, after the dust of the reconstruction phase had settled, the activation agenda, long forgotten, gradually became more prominent. The managers emphasised that elements of social work were central in employment-oriented work, thereby rejecting the notion that the work was only a matter for ‘state’ employees or for accomplishing the ‘state’s’ reform objectives. For example, in joint meetings, managers shared success stories that contained elements of social work as prerequisites for success (Hellang et al., 2019). Furthermore, professional street-level managers argued that good social work required focussing on clients’ employment opportunities (Andreassen & Natland, 2020), with an emphasis on legitimising employment as a central part of social work: ‘Ensuring that a person has a job to go to is the best social welfare measure in the world’, one manager claimed (Quote from Breit, Fossestøl, & Andreassen, 2018, p. 38).

### *Active Use of Research and Development Programmes*

A distinguishing feature among managers throughout the reform is the extent to which they actively applied for and utilised resources for competence development in national R&D programmes and to ensure that the results they generated were made relevant for the whole organisation. In the labour and welfare services in Norway, such programmes have a long history predating the reform, operating as an indirect and network-oriented means of governance and hence stimulating knowledge development and service integration ‘bottom up’ (Andreassen & Aars, 2015). As part of the reform, managers responsible for the development of social work competence who became part of the new Labour and Welfare Administration continued the tradition of stimulating professionalism through such programmes (Indset et al., 2012). The programmes have thus operated as key enabling conditions for street-level managers’ efforts to promote professional stimulation and transformation throughout the reform.

In the early part of the reform, R&D efforts primarily targeted social workers and social service clients, partly as a residual effect of the pre-Nav era. Such efforts are exemplified in an R&D programme called HUSK (2006–2011), which aimed to strengthen social work professionalism in preparation for the reform (Johannessen & Eide, 2015). However, this programme built on the pre-reform social work model rather than facilitating compatibility with the new reform context (Andreassen, 2015; Gjernes, 2014).

Later in the reform, across the ‘creation and reconstruction phases’, the scope of the R&D programmes targeting professionalism in the Nav offices involved a broader spectrum of employees. For example, the R&D programme that succeeded HUSK in seeking to promote service development and competence for vulnerable clients (called ‘Practice and Knowledge Development in the Nav Offices’, 2014–2017) explicitly underscored that the goal was to develop new competence among *all* employees (Breit, Fossetøl, & Pedersen, 2018).

Likewise, in the programme ‘Comprehensive Follow-Up of Low-Income Families (HOLF, 2016–2019)’, the managers were required to report on how they ensured that the programme became an integrated part of the offices’ ongoing activity, secured internal cooperation and made knowledge available to all employees at the office (Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2020).

Such R&D programmes have provided potential resources bolstering street-level managers’ efforts to experiment with new ways of organising work and developing social work professionalism in their offices. Funding has enabled ambitious street-level managers to employ highly motivated project workers, hold onto a development agenda, expand the labour market orientation at the office for professionals working with vulnerable clients and develop holistic forms of work and cooperation among all employees. The collaborative nature of the programmes has also enabled networks to form between street-level managers and employees in different offices, researchers and/or academic institutions and managers in the Labour and Welfare Directorate (Breit, Fossetøl, & Pedersen, 2018; Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2020).

In the ‘reform revival’ phase, R&D programmes have involved increased emphasis on ‘evidence-based’ knowledge, thus shifting the focus from a more experimental to a more positivist research agenda. Recent programmes have involved implementing new working roles according to evidence-based standards or protocols, for example, as ‘employment specialists’ working in accordance with the principles of Supported Employment (Bakkeli & Breit, 2022; Spjelkavik et al., 2016). As the core objectives of job specialists are to provide

holistic follow-up services to vulnerable clients through the use of ordinary, competitive work, they bridge between some of the principles of social work and the objectives of the labour market orientation of the services. Job specialist positions have been staffed by workers from various professional backgrounds, and proactive professional street-level managers have used these roles to reinvent and ‘update’ social workers’ competence, especially in how to approach employers, and they have also expanded other professional’ skills with a more holistic social work-like professionalism (Bakkeli & Breit, 2022).

For managers, drawing on these national programmes has involved tensions between the practical knowledge base among social workers (and scholars) and the increasing evidence-oriented knowledge of the national administration and scholars (Bakkeli, 2022; Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2020). Nevertheless, the characteristic of national R&D programmes is that, although they involve interventions based on social work, at the street level, they included workers without professional social work education and have focused not only on individual client encounters but also on actors in the labour market and on the bureaucratic forms of work required in the reformed organisations (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2016). Overall, this has made it possible for managers to support a social work-like professionalism by including projects primarily focused on social workers with other educational backgrounds.

### *Legitimising Professionalism in National Reform Policies*

A fourth activity involved taking advantage of and making national reform policies relevant to the professional work practices and role identities of street-level organisations. The managers sought to (re)legitimise the role of professionalism by considering themselves to be in a position to interpret the meanings of the reform ideas for street-level practice and explicitly connecting the organisational transformation processes at the street level to the national reform objectives and documents. In so doing, they made connections between micro-level changes in street-level organisations and broader macro-level reform changes and the requirements for a transformed and renewed form of social work professionalism.

In the ‘reform creation’ phase, experimentation with new divisions of work across old boundaries was all legitimised with reference to the reform policy. Since the policy had formulations that were closely connected to social work professionalism, these were especially important. Formulations of a new comprehensive personalised service, where

employment, income security and counselling were connected, had mobilising potentials, and proactive managers actively used such formulations to legitimise the changes, seeking to bridge the gap between traditional social services, state bureaucracy and standardisation and the goal of increased employment of vulnerable groups (Andreassen & Fossetøl, 2011b).

This connection with the original reform ideas was an ongoing activity throughout the reform, but there were considerable setbacks during the ‘reform restructuring’ phase. During this phase, the initial reform policy was, as we have seen, generally disregarded, as the central authorities shifted attention towards installing a more efficient organisation through the reorganisation of the benefit administration, call centres and standardised work tools. While many managers apparently focused their attention first on central administrative demands, some managers sought to integrate the original (‘whole of government’) political reform objectives with the new (NPM) administrative objectives, albeit this proved to be a challenging task (Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015).

The ‘reform revival’ phase laid the framework for renewed attention to professionalism in client work and gave street-level managers more independence to continue their reorganisation attempts from the first phase. Increasingly, the managers and street-level organisations, not only the proactive ones, took advantage of their restored autonomy to design local services and forms of professionalism. Managers actively used concepts in the political documents, such as ‘local strategic leadership’ and ‘learning organisation’, or similar concepts they developed themselves, to frame local organisational development work (Fossetøl et al., 2020).

Moreover, there was less emphasis in the political documents on performance management and more emphasis on collaboration with other municipal services, such as services for refugees or clients requiring long-term social assistance. Managers described how such collaboration made it easier to motivate employees to work holistically with clients (Fossetøl et al., 2020). Crucially, managers also regarded the previous challenges with case processing chaos and the division between ‘state’ and ‘municipal’ employees and interests as a thing of the past. Hence, they argued that the current contextual conditions have enabled a more unbroken line between the reform ideas and their local contingencies of adhering to these ideas. Overall, managers’ ability to connect and incorporate (original) reform ideas has been a crucial resource for facilitating and motivating change among their employees.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

Our longitudinal analysis centred on the types of activities, conceptualised as ‘institutional work’, performed by street-level managers to promote professionalism in difficult organisational settings. The analysis was spurred by our observations as researchers in the field that a hybrid ‘social work-like professionalism’ had developed in the reforming organisations despite the existence of a dominant managerial–bureaucratic logic that had apparently subordinated the logic of professionalism.

We identified four types of institutional work carried out by the managers and connected them with enabling and constraining conditions during the different phases of the reform. First, the work of organisational design shows how street-level managers work with labour divisions and role identities according to the ways in which professional work is performed (Cloutier et al., 2015; Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015). Second, discursive reconstructions comprise important resources for integrating differing institutional logics at the street level, thereby navigating institutional complexity and contradictory interests (Cloutier et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2005; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) and connecting professionals’ (role) identities to the interests of the organisation (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Reay et al., 2017). Such reconstructions resemble a transformational leadership orientation based on idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Zhang et al., 2022) while also showcasing the discursive ways of brokering between professional and organisational knowledge domains (Burgess & Currie, 2013).

The two first types of work are relatively well known in the literature, as they comprise many of the material and discursive resources street-level managers have at hand (Cloutier et al., 2015; Gassner & Gofen, 2018). The two others are, in our view, more novel and under-theorised activities, as they highlight how street-level managers promote change by drawing actively on the enabling conditions in the broader political and administrative reform landscape rather than promoting change primarily within the boundaries of street-level organisations.

The work of mobilising research and development projects is important for street-level managers, as these findings can help them actively make knowledge development and learning around professionalism relevant for all employees in street-level organisations. This work showcases the possibility for street-level organisations to function as street-level

‘experimental sites’ (Reay & Hinings, 2009) in which conflicting institutional logics are handled by developing or implementing new knowledge. Our findings thus connect street-level management with the theory on public service innovation, which highlights the importance of collaborative knowledge development and learning to improve service integration at the street level (Sørensen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the use of R&D as an enabling condition is challenging for managers, as such projects are contested terrains marked by competing interests and forms of knowledge (see also Burgess & Currie, 2013).

The activity of legitimising professionalism in public policies and reform documents is arguably an important and understudied aspect of street-level managers’ agency in influencing professionalism. Such overarching political strategies are important for legitimising managerial work, as they contain rules, guidelines, concepts and objectives for the provision and organisation of services (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). More specifically, in contrast to NPM policies, ‘whole-of-government’ policy strategies are important resources for street-level managers in their efforts to develop hybrid professionalism, as the strategies align closely with the values of the professionals (Hendrikx & van Gestel, 2017; Tummers et al., 2015). When managers draw on policy strategies, they do not primarily view themselves as translators of the policies to make them relevant to street-level workers (Gassner & Gofen, 2018) but rather as relatively autonomous interpreters of what the reform means for the street-level organisations. As this managerial autonomy is de facto embedded in the reform policies—in our case, both the original and the ‘revitalised’ reform documents—such local interpretations become an important feature of establishing and legitimising the street-level manager role.

Examining the reforming organisations from the perspective of street-level organisations over a period of 15 years since the beginning of the reform shows the close connection between the work of street-level managers and enabling conditions in the reform landscape. As we have shown in the trajectory of the phases, the influence of managerial efforts to transform social work professionalism was highly dependent on the opportunities for local development provided by the strategic reform policies, where in our case, such opportunities existed only in the initial ‘creation’ phase and the third ‘revival’ phase. Summing up, we found that the development of hybrid professionalism at the street level was contingent on enabling conditions that provided material and discursive resources that proactive managers can actively make use of in their professional transformation agendas.

## **Contributions**

Our study contributes to the literature on the management of professionalism. Our findings underscore and make more explicit the connection between street-level management and the development of hybrid professionalism, which is an important and still understudied aspect of both street-level management (Gassner & Gofen, 2018) and the notion of hybrid professionalism in public management (Giacomelli, 2020). Our findings extend these analyses by highlighting the crucial role of enabling conditions in the surrounding political and administrative landscape as catalysts for street-level managers' work. This study showed that the effective transformation of professionalism at the street level is done not solely at the street level but through managers' recognition of and capitalisation on such conditions. The long timespan covered in our study both provided nuance and made more explicit the enabling/disabling conditions affecting street-level managers' decisions in the different stages of the reform.

The four described activities also draw and expand on previous studies on institutional work in the context of public reforms (Cloutier et al., 2015; Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen, et al., 2015) and link them more closely to the management and transformation of professionals. How managers can use principles of organisational design and discourse to align professionals' work and identities more closely with the organisational objectives has been well recognised by the literature (Burgess & Currie, 2013; Reay et al., 2017), as is the important role that R&D projects can play as a driver of collaboration and service integration (Sørensen et al., 2021). We provide novel insights into the important role that street-level managers' active interpretation of political reform policies has played in professional transformation processes, a feature that has received scant attention in previous studies.

Finally, while our study has been made in the context of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, which is one of the most radical reforms to date as it has involved the intraorganizational integration of social work professionals and other occupational groups, we believe our findings are relevant to other welfare contexts, as the challenges to and transformation of professionalism is a generic trait in contemporary welfare-to-work reforms (Champion and Bonoli 2011; Minas 2014; van Berkel et al. 2017).

**Table 1: Phases in the reform trajectory**

	<b>Reform creation (2000-2007)</b>	<b>Reform (re)structuring (2008-2014)</b>	<b>Reform revival (2015-&gt;)</b>
Turning point	Parliamentary reform decision of merger between state administrations and local partnership around the Nav offices (2005)	Comprehensive organizational redesign involving centralization of decision making and specialization of tasks	The minister of labour and welfare intervenes in the national labour and welfare administration
Main events	Establishment of street-level Nav offices in all municipalities, 2006-2010. Experimental pilot phase of first Nav offices, 2006-2007	Establishment of specialized units for pensions and national insurance case processing (2008) Establishment of national call centres. Criticism from The General Audit, open hearing in the Parliament, and extra funding to benefit administration.	The top manager in NAV is fired due to lack of results on the reforms employment/ activation objectives An expert committee is established to survey the administration and give propositions for future development, followed up in a White Paper ('NAV in a new era, 2015-2016).
Reform objectives	Pre-reform initiatives and revisions (2001-2006) The parliamentary decision (2005): - A unitary and integrated frontline - Influential street-level offices with responsibility for measures - Clear role and position of the municipalities - Street-level autonomy to adapt services to local circumstances - Government based on pedagogical means to integrate understandings and cultures - Orientation towards collaboration	Increased emphasis on service efficiency by the top management in the national administration. Implemented through among others: - Standardized instruments, work tools and measures - Functional specialization between service provision and case processing - Increased emphasis on performance management (e.g. number of 'job-matches'). - Use of digital technology to support performance management	Content in the White paper: - Emphasis on labour market (re)integration of the most vulnerable clients - Revitalising and empowering of the street-level organizations - Less emphasis on standardization and performance management – and more on street-level leadership. - More emphasis on learning at the street level. Followed up and operationalized in strategic document in Nav ('Development of the NAV offices – more manoeuvring space and responsibility', 2016)

**Table 2: Key elements of traditional and transformed professionalism**

<b>Traditional social work professionalism</b>	<b>Transformed social work-like professionalism</b>
Focus on vulnerable groups	Focus on vulnerable groups
Comprehensive and holistic support	Comprehensive and holistic support
A perception work with clients to require discretion and autonomy, and subsequently a scepticism towards standardisation of work tools and measures	A perception work with clients to require discretion and autonomy, yet incorporating organizational work tools and measures
Social mandate to perform as the client’s advocate, if necessary, in opposition to policy and bureaucracy	Social mandate mediated through the organization
Exclusive ownership of higher educated social workers	Available to all frontline workers, irrespective of which higher education they possess

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