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Teachers' Collaborative Work at the Boundaries of Professional Responsibility for Student Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Wellbeing is a current theme in educational policy. However, responsibility for ensuring student wellbeing is an underexplored aspect of teacher professionalism. Although the scope and boundaries of those responsibilities are becoming to a greater extent defined externally, this does not make teachers' work more straightforward. This article examines how teachers handle ambiguity and tensions in order to find practical solutions in routine work with issues of student wellbeing. Extended observations of collaborative work in a Norwegian primary school and interviews with teachers form the dataset. The analysis centres on different patterns of handling ambiguity and tensions in everyday work. The conclusions highlight the significance of workplace collaborative contexts oriented toward making the complexity and underlying normative tensions of wellbeing work more visible and approachable.

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Introduction

Caring for students beyond their academic performance has always been a critical part of teacher professionalism, attracting people to the profession and contributing significantly to professional commitment and self-fulfilment (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Nias, 1996). This work, however, had long remained on the margins of policy and the concept of student wellbeing only recently entered policy documents not merely as a condition for better academic outcomes, but as an outcome of education itself (OECD, 2017). In many countries, the curriculum has become more elaborate in describing non-academic aspects of schooling and more instruments of development and accountability are being installed, such as school climate surveys or antibullying campaigns. Thus, the scope and boundaries of teachers' professional responsibilities for student wellbeing are no longer defined situationally and intuitively by individual teachers and schools (Coleman, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Spratt, 2017).

This article explores teacher collaborative work on issues of student wellbeing in the Norwegian context. In Norway, students are entitled by law to "a safe and good school environment that promotes health, wellbeing, and learning" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a). The curriculum outlines teachers' responsibilities regarding such dimensions of wellbeing as mental health, socioemotional welfare, coping skills, inclusion, agency, peer relationships, and experience of meaning and joy. This caring aspect of professional work, however, has become more regulated in the recent years. In particular, the law requires schools to take measures on wellbeing

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concerns within set deadlines, document casework, and justify decisions to other actors and families (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017b). Those developments reflect a broader trend toward better transparency and accountability of teachers' work, often achieved through external oversight and standardisation of professional practices (Cohen et al., 2017; Mausethagen & Smeby, 2016).

Yet, wellbeing is a contested, "catch-all" concept covering a wide range of complex, interrelated issues at individual and group levels (Coleman, 2009; Dodge et al., 2012). It can refer to subjective experiences of happiness, meaning, empowerment, and self-actualisation, but also to objective indicators, such as socioeconomic status, education, health, and social networks (Fisher, 2019). Moreover, growing diversity brings along competing perspectives on wellbeing and demands sensitivity to particular social and cultural contexts in professional work (Spratt, 2017). At the school level, wellbeing work involves cooperation with increasingly more professional groups including counsellors, social workers, and nurses, which come with their own agendas, perspectives on wellbeing, and professional languages (Borg & Pålshaugen, 2019; Guvå & Hylander, 2012; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017).

Therefore, although the scope and boundaries of teachers' responsibilities are becoming to a greater extent defined and regulated externally, this does not make wellbeing work more straightforward and professional boundaries necessarily clearer. Rather, the existing research claims that teachers' work at such multiple, high-stakes boundaries is filled with ambiguity and tension. Some authors associate it with high external expectations and tighter regulation of professional work (Carlbaum, 2016; Dahl, 2017; Dodge et al., 2012). Others point to the central role of teachers' tacit and often conflicting assumptions regarding students' socioemotional needs (Biesta et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2011; Rothì et al., 2008). Altogether, previous research suggests that the scope and boundaries of teachers' professional responsibility for student wellbeing require continuous negotiation from within the local professional context, by teachers themselves and not merely in terms of methods—in terms of what needs to be done—but also in terms of defining problems at hand. From a practical standpoint, understanding how teachers do so is important for supporting the development of teacher professionalism from within schools and the profession (Evetts, 2003).

Against this backdrop, the article pursues the following research question: How do teachers handle ambiguity and tensions in work at the boundaries of professional responsibility for student wellbeing? The analysis draws on observations of weekly grade-level team meetings collected over one school year in a Norwegian primary school and in-depth interviews with the teachers. Team meetings were a central organisational routine for wellbeing work, particularly for student cases requiring communication and cooperation with families and external actors. The choice of a school in a high-minority neighbourhood provided a complex perspective on issues related to cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and religious diversity. Furthermore, choosing observations as primary data was important for revealing how ambiguity and tensions involved in work at the boundaries were handled situationally, in direct response to problems of practice, rather than in hypothetical terms. Extended observations also made it possible to see teachers' work in a long-term perspective within different structural contexts.

The article is organised in the following way. First, I review some important themes in the existing research on teachers' work with issues of student wellbeing. I then introduce the analytical perspective on professional responsibility. The methodological approach and the findings are presented thereafter. The analysis concentrates on the patterns of handling ambiguity and tensions in wellbeing work. The findings are, thereafter, placed within the larger discussion regarding teacher professional responsibility and teacher professionalism more generally.

Previous Research

The relational and caring aspects of teachers' work are intensely emotional (Lortie, 1975; Nias, 1996). Caring for student wellbeing is an important source for professional commitment and self-fulfilment but it is also a source of frustration and vulnerability (Isenbarger & Zembylas,

2006; Kelchtermans, 1996). We know that the more important teachers regard the demands of the caring aspect of their profession, the higher is stress, uncertainty and a sense of vulnerability in striving to meet those demands (Ekornes, 2017; Graham et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2010; Rothì et al., 2008). Some studies suggest that teachers in high-minority urban schools experience a particularly devastating sense of uncertainty regarding the limits of their professional responsibilities (Elstad, 2009; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Kelchtermans et al., 2009; Mintrop & Charles, 2017). Mintrop and Charles (2017), for example, highlight the significance of collaborative work for professional confidence in such contexts.

Most commonly, however, professional uncertainty and vulnerability are related to increased external control. For instance, Carlbaum (2016) shows how a growing use of parent complaint systems leads to more individual problem-solving strategies with reference to law and, thus, more risk-averse, contractual relationships at the home-school boundary. Similarly, a study by Dahl (2017) indicates that increasing accountability pressures can make teachers act in stricter compliance with bureaucratic regulations rather than in the spirit of the social mandate. Moreover, some studies find that the emphasis on standardised learning outcomes deepen the confusion in how teachers perceive their responsibilities for student wellbeing and narrow the attention to concerns directly linked to achievement (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Rothì et al., 2008; Samnøy et al., 2020). For instance, Rothì et al. (2008) illustrate how a fear to lose control in the classroom and fail to produce better results makes teachers more included to interpret students' problems as behavioural and, thus, apply disciplinary measures rather than consider classroom climate as a more complex wellbeing issue.

Moreover, tensions often arise in finding common language and methods at professional boundaries, for example, with special needs teachers, social workers, or nurses (Borg & Pålshaugen, 2019; Guvå & Hylander, 2012; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017). An example is a tension between increasingly psychologised, as opposed to pedagogical, discourses used to frame wellbeing issues. Spratt (2017) points out that prevailing discourse of illness, difficulties, and deficiencies tend to shift teachers' role to the background and may narrow wellbeing work in school settings. Another boundary, at which teachers' role is challenged, is with families. The research indicates that teachers experience significant stress when communicating wellbeing concerns to parents, which has been in some contexts associated with different cultural perspectives on parenting and schooling, while in others—with high expectations coming from well-educated, wealthy parents (Bæck, 2010; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Piot et al., 2010).

So, we know that, on the one hand, narrowing of teacher responsibilities and more risk-averse professional work can be related to increasing external involvement and control. On the other hand, existing research suggests that a narrower understanding of wellbeing, reduced to what is easily observable in student behaviour or to what is familiar to teachers from their own experience, can follow from a lack of specialised knowledge required, for example, to spot early signs of mental health issues or domestic abuse (Rothì et al., 2008; Solberg et al., 2020). Not least, teachers personal values, beliefs, and attitudes towards students' social and emotional needs play a critical role in what sort of wellbeing issues are noticed and prioritised (Biesta et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2011).

Altogether, the existing literature points out that tensions and ambiguity in work with student wellbeing come both externally and internally. However, while much of earlier research focus on teachers' perceptions regarding their responsibilities for student wellbeing, how teachers *handle* ambiguity and tensions at the boundaries of such responsibility in situ has been explored to a limited extent. This study addresses this question by looking at teachers' day-to-day collaborative work on student cases and their reflections on it. The article offers a situated perspective on student wellbeing as it is explicitly or implicitly taken by teachers in specific cases. In broader terms, it discusses teacher professionalism, in contexts where external regulation is growing while at the same time, there is an emphasised need for situated, context-specific professional judgement.

Analytical Perspective

The analytical perspective in this article assumes that the scope and boundaries of professional responsibilities are being continuously defined both externally and internally—by policy, the national curriculum, ethical standards, broader social norms, organisational culture, other professional groups, as well as by teachers themselves, not least situationally in a direct response to emerging problems of practice (Evetts, 2003). Moreover, teacher professional work presupposes normative tensions and ambiguity, which have to be negotiated in everyday practice (Biesta, 2015; Green, 1983; Mausethagen et al., 2021). Such a "processual" perspective on professional responsibility—and professionalism more generally—requires attention to micro-processes of boundary work, through which ambiguity and tensions are handled (Langley et al., 2019; Little, 2002).

This view on professional responsibility presupposes that teachers do not merely choose methods to address students' social and emotional needs, but to a great extent define those needs (Biesta, 2015). Put differently, teachers' responsibility involves "a legal, moral, and intellectual mandate" to define not only the terms of practice in specific instances but the very terms in which it is appropriate to think about complex social phenomena, such as wellbeing (Hughes, 1981). Thus, the boundaries of professional responsibility depend on how teachers handle ambiguity and tensions associated with having to interpret the terms and norms of wellbeing in a particular context. Such interpretation may, for example, involve balancing out student subjective experiences and more objective conditions of wellbeing (Fisher, 2019).

The concept of collaborative boundary work offers a useful supplementary perspective to empirically explore how the boundaries of responsibility are being negotiated by teachers in situ. It emphasises processes "through which groups, occupations, and organizations work *at* boundaries to develop and sustain patterns of collaboration and coordination in settings where groups cannot achieve collective goals alone" (Langley et al., 2019). This stands in contrast to competitive practices aimed at mobilising boundaries to sustain legitimacy and privilege among professions and organisations and configurational practices aimed at manipulating boundary landscapes from a policy and leadership perspective (Gieryn, 1983; Liljegren, 2012). In other words, this article is concerned with how teachers handle ambiguity and tensions in work where the boundaries of professional responsibility cannot be clearly and universally defined, rather than, for example, how jurisdictional boundaries are disputed with other professional groups. In work at boundaries, the role of boundary spanners is significant.

Boundary spanners are people and objects that are formally or informally positioned to facilitate cooperation and coordination at the boundaries and hold some authority and power as guides, mediators, translators or brokers (Bowker & Star, 1999; Penuel et al., 2013). In school settings, human boundary spanners are, for example, counsellors or administrators with a good overview of the boundary landscape—involved actors and their relationships, available resources, relevant policy, and knowledge. Boundary objects can be reports, schemes, and templates that facilitate, formalise, and expedite coordination with external actors.

Empirical Setting and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach. A mid-size public primary school (550 students) located in an urban high-minority neighbourhood in the Eastern part of Norway was selected using purposeful sampling as an information-rich site for observing teacher collaboration. The research was undertaken with a 6th-grade teacher team consisting of six teachers collectively responsible for 75 students. They had worked together for several years and had a relatively balanced profile in terms of experience (3 years +), age (from 26 to 60) and gender (one male and five female teachers). The study covers a full school year (2016–2017) and involves interviews with the teachers (two group interviews, 4 hr), 40 hr of observations (19 meetings), and go-along interviews

conducted right after meetings. Agenda for meetings was shaped by emerging concerns regarding student wellbeing, rather than by response to policy directives. The school counsellor was often present at meetings and the teachers relied on her involvement and advice regarding cooperation with families, special needs teachers, and external services.

Non-participant observations were undertaken evenly throughout the year and in-depth group interviews were conducted in the middle and the end of the year. The interviews were conversational and approximated naturally occurring data, which aimed to give participants space and prompts for approving, resisting, and explaining viewpoints (Saldana, 2012). Interviews were taped, transcribed, and relevant extracts were translated into English. Observations rely on fieldnotes due to the sensitivity of information shared in the meetings and limitations placed by the school administration on audio recording. There are also no references to specific teachers to protect anonymity and the data was further anonymised by removing details that could identify the school or students. However, all quotes in the interview extracts and observational accounts are teachers' member-checked unabridged speech. Iterative communication between the data sources was possible because the interviews were designed to follow up on specific instances of practice. From here, more general perspectives on student wellbeing and teacher professional responsibilities were elicited. Such triangulation of data can be seen as strengthening trustworthiness of findings and conclusions (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Merriam, 1998).

The analysis followed a process of identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning guided by the research question and the analytical perspective (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The dataset included detailed fieldnotes with 2–5 cases per meeting and interview transcripts. On the first step, I compressed the data by making descriptive annotations to cases, some stretching over several meetings, and mapped them thematically with relevant interview excerpts. In this pool of cases, I highlighted instances of ambiguity and tensions expressed through teachers' doubt, confusion, uncertainty, or frustration in trying to define the scope of their responsibilities in specific cases. I coded also for the kind of boundaries—or a constellation of boundaries—at play, such as with families, social services, school administration, etc. I noticed at this point that practically all cases evidenced significant ambiguity and tensions, as opposed to being examples of smoothly following guidelines and routines. However, ways of handling ambiguity and tensions differed.

I then looked closely within and across cases to identify patterns. In this, my thinking was supported by the existing research on student wellbeing and more general literature on dilemmas in teachers' work (Ehrich et al., 2011; Green, 1983; Mausethagen et al., 2021). Data triangulation helped to see different layers of ambiguity and tensions within and across cases. Specifically, the interview data largely aligned with the earlier studies and indicated ambiguity related to increasing external regulation and diversity of student backgrounds. At the same time, the observations pointed to tensions associated with being squeezed between competing social values, professional commitments, and different perspectives on wellbeing. The next step was guided by the concept of boundary work. I looked for patterns of handling tensions and ambiguity, that is, particular moves in collaborative work that helped the teachers transition from defining what problem they are dealing with to a practical solution. Those patterns differed considerably in the degree of explicitness regarding perspectives on wellbeing at play.

The study assumed ethical considerations in the conduct and the analysis of data, including reflexivity towards fieldwork practice and relations (Hammersley, 2006). To ensure the validity, the findings and preliminary interpretations were discussed with other researchers as a way for communicative validity and, at an early stage, with the teachers as a way for respondent validation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The analysis offers theoretical interpretations and analytical generalisations, which means that external validity might be limited to teachers working in similar structural, social and organisational contexts. The research adheres to the guidelines for the ethical conduct of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics.

Findings

This section presents an account of teachers' collaborative work on student cases. It takes departure in specific cases from the observations but also uses the interview excerpts to put forward teachers' voices. The interview and observational data revealed somewhat different layers of ambiguity and tensions. In the interviews, the teachers primarily associated doubt, stress, and frustration in defining the boundaries of their professional responsibility with external factors, such as diversity and complexity of student backgrounds, increasing knowledge demands about mental health and domestic abuse, documentation requirements, and power struggles with parents. However, how the boundaries were defined within a hectic environment of meetings held after a whole day of teaching depended much on how the teachers handled ambiguity and tensions in order to find practical solutions. They did so in three ways (1) by steering away from ambiguity and tensions toward more stable boundaries of responsibility (2) by downplaying ambiguity and tensions in communication at the boundaries, and (3) by explicating tensions and ambiguity.

Steering Away from Ambiguity and Tensions

Steering away from ambiguity and tensions, particularly associated with student relationships and cultural differences in parenting practices, was a sporadically used way of working at the boundary. It sometimes implied reframing a potentially complex wellbeing problem into an issue of learning difficulties so that a practical solution could be found and put forward. In other cases, the teachers evoked more formal boundaries to set clearer limits to professional responsibility. One such example comes from a meeting in August.

The meeting started with one of the headteachers sharing her frustration with parents' expectations. She had been earlier informed about an episode in the social media, which some parents considered bullying. It happened during summer holidays and involved students from her class. They expected the headteacher to intervene and the teacher's name was tagged in the social media. The episode escalated to the level of parents and the headteacher was called to get involved. At the meeting, the other teachers validated her frustration for being dragged into student conflicts "off the clock". They agreed that mediating student relationships on social media in summer is beyond their responsibility. This move may be interpreted as a way to steer away from ambiguity regarding *whose* responsibility mediating student behaviour and relationships are by setting more formal boundaries. In a go-along interview, the teachers nuanced their position by adding that they felt that the word bullying was often used by parents "manipulatively" "to shake off their share of responsibility". This follow-up comment suggests a power struggle at the home-school boundary, in which defining the terms of wellbeing in specific cases is tightly linked to negotiating whom responsibility for finding a solution is assigned to and where the limits of professional responsibility are drawn.

A rather different way of steering away from ambiguity and tensions had to do with a need to find solutions for complex wellbeing issues directly correlating with academic performance. The following extract from a meeting in December illustrates how the teachers strived to assume responsibility and find a workable solution. They did so, however, by gradually shifting to more stable boundaries of professional responsibility for academic performance.

In the following excerpt from an interview, the teachers supply background to a student case discussed earlier at the meeting. The case is about a boy, whom the teachers observed to be lonely, absent-minded, and exhausted in the past months. The case was taken up repeatedly that year, and the teachers' reflections on it provide an important insight into the normative tensions underpinning professional responsibilities for student wellbeing.

Teacher 2: We have children from very different homes. Many do not get any support with homework at home. Some go to a religious after-school, they have no free time, they are at this school 24 hours per week, in addition to regular school.

Teacher 6: We shouldn't go into others' private lives, we cannot. But we must just emphasise that this is important …
Teacher 2: For me, this is tempting to say that school should come before religion, that it is a priority. But this is wrong to say so. I do not dare say this!
Altogether: No, you cannot!
Teacher 2: But what I mean is that when you move to Norway, you should much effort at school to manage in the society later.
Teacher 3: They lose in the end, do not cope with the curriculum. In addition to all they learn at school, even more must be done at home.
Teacher 5: We only want best for them, so I think they need time for homework like all others. There are more issues. They become exhausted because of no free time. And children have the right to play! They have the right to enjoy childhood! [pause]
Teacher 2. Well … I do not think much about cultural differences, I think they are … weak. It has nothing to do with culture. This is just they have another background. We do not notice anything about religion …
Teachers: No!
Teacher 6: Children are just children. But there are … challenges, that we see a lot.

The excerpt shows the teachers getting squeezed in a tension between social values and norms and professional commitments. They bring up respect for religious views and practices of the family, which is reflective of the broader social values of tolerance, inclusion, and multiculturalism. They emphasise, however, a right to enjoy childhood, play, and get support at home. Across the observational data, teachers' perspectives on diversity, childhood, and schooling often collided in a similar way, making it difficult to explicate the values and rationales behind problem-solving. In this extract, it is also interesting how the teachers initially come close to explicating a perceived tension point ("I do not dare say this"), but then steer away from it toward clearer boundaries of responsibility for academic performance ("I rather think that they are weak"). A quote below from the same interview expands on how the teachers looped back weak academic achievement to student wellbeing.

> We can say that in a few years, many of them will drop out of high school, and this will be because they did not have enough foundation to continue studies. They will be in a much weaker position than others to get a job. And then? Unemployed. This is something we want to see and correct.

What comes forward in this excerpt is how teachers' situational perspective on wellbeing fluctuated from being framed in terms of rights to enjoy childhood to prospects of future employability and social integration. Such reframing moved the teachers toward more stable boundaries of responsibility for academic performance and opened up ways to be more proactive. It did, however, potentially narrowed the scope of possible solutions to remedial measures.

Downplaying Ambiguity and Tensions

Downplaying tensions at the home-school boundary was another common pattern in case work. This pattern was particularly evident in the meetings facilitated by the school counsellor, who helped to review student cases and wellbeing issues in the grade more generally. Her role can be seen as a boundary spanner. She was not merely working at the boundary with families, external professionals, and the school, but was actively setting the culture and rules for such work. Her way of spanning the boundaries involved buffering, mediating, networking, and preparing teachers for sensitive conversations with parents or social services. In this, the counsellor was particularly focused on downplaying tensions that can potentially stall cooperation at the boundary and delay help.

One example is a case of a boy, whose father required him to bring a detailed daily report accounting for what he had done at school and how he had behaved. The teachers explained that the boy looked scared and seemed to hate school because of the pressure at home. They expressed a strong opinion of the father's parenting practices and the impact on the boy's wellbeing.

They also, however, saw the case as a sensitive issue of sociocultural differences. To their understanding, the parents considered such control as necessary for ensuring better academic performance and, consequently, future wellbeing interpreted in terms of being able to find a well-paid, high-status job. The tension between different perspectives on wellbeing—as in the lived moment and in the desired future—prompted the counsellor to re-direct the meeting with the following question: "What is it that is happening with the boy, how is he feeling?" He looks miserable and scared, the teachers answered. The counsellor emphasised the student's subjective experience of wellbeing and moved to solutions: "What can we do for him now?" The teachers suggested that they should act indirectly and scaffold his relationships with peers by encouraging him to join a sports team and make extra effort to support him in the aspects of learning he enjoys.

Spanning the boundary here can be seen as delicate downplaying of tensions between how wellbeing was defined by the teachers and the family. This case makes also visible how context-specific the terms of wellbeing are in professional practice, if students' subjective experiences of joy and meaning are emphasised, and how much practical solutions depend on those underlying values. A similar way of spanning the boundaries involved equipping the teachers with concrete tools to downplay tensions with parents to focus the attention of student experiences, rather than on differences in interpreting norms of student wellbeing. For instance, the counsellor regularly insisted on particular communicative strategies at the boundary, such as "I-statements" ("I observe that your child is often feeling lonely"). An example is a case of a girl, who according to the teachers, "watched too much Polish TV at home". The teachers were, on the one hand, concerned that watching too much TV in a family language hinders her opportunities for learning and socialising in Norwegian. However, they also expressed concerns regarding giving parents patronising advice about watching TV. In a go-along interview, they explained ambiguity by actually "seeing some value in the exposure to the family language". The counsellor's advice, in this case, was to frame communication with the parents in terms of finding solutions for socialising ("We observe that your daughter is seeking friendships at school"), rather than emphasising insufficient Norwegian skills. In most observed meetings, it was such precise but careful language that the counsellor emphasised as central to boundary work.

Explicating Ambiguity and Tensions

Another case involving language difficulties and wellbeing issues reveals a subtle but notable difference in how the teachers handled ambiguity and tensions, namely, by way of making them more visible. The case comes from a routine grade-level weekly meeting. It concerned a boy, who had been recently transferred from a refugee camp and spoke very little Norwegian. He lagged behind academically and developed no friendships at school. The teachers expressed concerns for his wellbeing in terms of social integration and emphasised his low chances for further education and employability. They had already started developing a plan for more one-to-one language tutoring, when one of the teachers offered a change of perspective. She suggested that the boy may rather benefit from "more experiences of success" and for that, they could use his skills in English and "temporarily adapt some of the classes for [the use of] English". That could help him—and his family—feel more included, she emphasised.

What the teacher did can be interpreted as a move of explicating and problematising an often taken-for-granted perspective on wellbeing in a high-minority setting, which links wellbeing tightly to future employability and focuses the attention firmly on academic performance. The teacher explicitly contrasted it with a perspective of schooling as a place, where children are given chances to experience success and joy in the moment. It was, in other words, a deliberate choice to situationally prioritise one perspective on wellbeing over another in order to find a context-sensitive solution, rather than focus merely on learning difficulties.

Interestingly, explicating different perspectives on student wellbeing and underlying values was also evident in how the teachers worked and reflected on the routine of writing case reports. Reports

were used as a boundary spanner to document and communicate information across professional boundaries to external specialists and social services. Here is how the counsellor described this relatively new routine.

> Teachers have little experience in writing down their observations and rationales. They often ask for help from people who have knowledge in particular fields, like special needs pedagogy. We also developed templates and try to make sure all our planned measures are actually implementable. So that teachers are able to do their work.

It is notable that while the counsellor is firmly focused on workable solutions, explicating rationales stands central in her explanation. More informal observations in the teacher lounge suggest that the teachers, often afraid of misinterpreting or being misunderstood, put much thought and effort into formulating those rationales. The following excerpt from the interview with the teachers unpacks some of the reasons.

Teacher 5: This is part of the job. If you have a suspicion, there are considerable consequences. Those situations are painful. They actually hurt.
Teacher 4: I have been in situations, when parents understood me in a completely different way than intended, and this became an issue. You can quickly be called to the principal's office if parents feel that what you said or wrote is "not ok". And then you have to lay low …
Teacher 1: Always lay low.
Teacher 4: Always just accept. You should not say "No, this is not what I meant, you are wrong". You must lay low.

On the one hand, the excerpt shows teachers' vulnerability, which such boundary spanners as case reports may reinforce as they put into words often intuitively made observations and conclusions based on partial information. However, while the teachers sometimes spoke about reports as a bureaucratic routine that "steals valuable time from actual wellbeing work", they also saw it as a professional routine. In particular, the observations indicate that when informally consulting each other on writing reports, the teachers felt pushed to explicate their rationales and situated perspective on student wellbeing in a way that goes beyond the needs of academic performance. A distinct reference in such reports, according to the counsellor, was children's rights—a right to play, enjoy free time, peaceful environment at home, opportunities to develop friendships. In many ways, being more explicit about underlying, possibly conflicting values helped the teachers to be more transparent and confident in coordinating positions and efforts at the boundaries—among the teachers as well as with families, counselling services, and other actors.

Discussion

This article investigates how teachers handle ambiguity and tensions involved in everyday work on issues of student wellbeing. Three patterns of collaborative boundary work came forward in the analysis: steering toward more stable boundaries of responsibility, downplaying ambiguity and tensions, and explicating them. Rather than demarcate the lines of responsibility, those moves helped the teachers find practical solutions at the boundary with families and other actors (Langley et al., 2019).

This study looked at teachers' work with diverse wellbeing issues and in a hectic environment of afternoon meetings held after a whole day of teaching. In such an environment, strategies of steering away from or downplaying tensions were largely unavoidable to address as many student cases as possible (Mintrop & Charles, 2017). Thus, the findings to some extent reflect the existing literature in pinpointing the focus on solutions in teacher collaborative work, rather than unpacking problems of practice and making underlying rationales explicit (Lefstein et al., 2019). Moreover, in line with some earlier studies, the teachers in this study pointed to vulnerability and stress associated with external factors, such as accountability and differences in how student wellbeing and teachers' responsibilities were interpreted by families (Carlbaum, 2016; Dahl, 2017; Gaikhorst et al., 2017).

The observation data extends those findings by showing that rather than external factors alone, much of ambiguity and tensions can be related to how teachers themselves made visible and negotiated often competing perspectives on wellbeing at play in specific student cases. They typically did so by considering both students' subjective experiences of feeling unhappy, lonely, or exhausted and more objective indicators of wellbeing such as possibilities for further education and social integration (Fisher, 2019). Subjective and objective indicators, however, were closely interweaved in professional practice and were far from clearly and universally defined. Rather, they reflected value tensions inherent to educational practice and social relations more generally (Biesta, 2015; Green, 1983; Mausethagen et al., 2021).

One example of a normative tension, which the teachers faced in this study, was between the social norms of respect for diversity of religious practices on the one hand, and the values of equal opportunities for education and teachers' own perspectives on children's wellbeing, on the other. Those values were only rarely explicitly discussed as interrelated and potentially competing. Another example of a normative tension, particularly relevant for high-minority contexts, was a perspective on wellbeing as experienced in the moment, including the value of playing, having free time, and enjoying childhood, and a more instrumental perspective related to future employability and social integration. Reflecting the findings of Rothì et al. (2008), this tension often remained implicit, resulting in a reframing of complex wellbeing issues into cases of learning difficulties.

However, the analysis illustrates that when underlying normative tensions were formulated in a more explicit way, complexity of student cases seemed more approachable, and the teachers defined the scope of their professional responsibility more confidently. Among other things, being more explicit gave the teachers more authority and agency in work at the boundaries. It helped to be more divergent in work, where there are no standard or ideal solutions but plenty of risks and uncertainties. As in the case of the student transferred from the refugee camp, it encouraged a new perspective on student wellbeing as empowerment and, thus, a broader scope of possible solutions rather than remedial tutoring. In case reports, the language of children's rights helped to support teachers' observations with value-based argumentation referencing to students' right for play and free time. That said, the role of case reports as a boundary spanner in this study is conflicting. Reflecting the conclusions of Dahl (2017) and Carlbaum (2016), the teachers argued that reporting routines push them to "lay low" and be more risk-averse, for example, by way of reframing wellbeing issues in terms of academic performance.

In the bigger picture, the article contributes to the discussion regarding teacher professionalism. It shows professional work, which is being increasingly regulated and simultaneously, requires a nuanced consideration of multiple perspectives on wellbeing and close attention to student individual needs. In particular, the analysis suggests that teacher professionalism has much to do with being able to see wellbeing work—and professional practice more generally—as filled with normative tensions and dilemmas that are continuously negotiated in context (Biesta, 2015; Green, 1983; Mausethagen et al., 2021). For that, the development of professional discourse that helps to unpack and discuss normative tensions and ambiguity stands central (Lefstein et al., 2019; Little & Horn, 2007).

For further research, it is important to examine how the way teacher collaborative work is structured helps to make those underlying tensions and ambiguity in wellbeing work more transparent. At the same time, there is a need to examine how teachers make use of local knowledge about student wellbeing, both gathered through experience and by way of informally observing and talking to students, as well as with help of externally developed tools and resources. A practical implication of the study is the significance of workplace collaboration that gives space and tools to make normative ambiguity and tensions arising from day-to-day wellbeing work more transparent and, thus, more approachable. It may help to develop teacher professionalism that goes beyond accumulating practical experience of individual problem-solving but does not reduce professionalism to implementation of the curriculum and guidelines. Moreover, the focus on handling normative ambiguity,

rather than on merely linking practice to the ideals of the national curriculum, can make more visible—to teachers themselves and other actors at the boundaries—the complexity of professional work conducted at vague but high-stakes boundaries of responsibility for student wellbeing. This may eventually matter for how teachers experience wellbeing work—as frustrating and stressful or as continuously confirming the significance of their social mandate and, thus, reinforcing a sense of professional commitment and self-fulfilment.

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