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From parent-teacher relations to professional identity in Danish and Swedish schools

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ABSTRACT

Denmark and Sweden have witnessed a historically significant amplification of parental influence in compulsory schools during the past two decades. The emphasis on parental involvement in these two countries reflects international trends of neoliberal governing of educational processes. We know very little about the interplay between beginning teachers' encounters with parents and how that influences the teachers' identity formation. This article investigates beginning teachers' experiences with parents in Sweden and Denmark and how these experiences reflect the teachers' professional identity development. Through a comparative case study approach, interviews were carried out with 10 teachers in pre-service and in-service phases of their profession to capture their interpretations of their experiences with parents. A framework involving the concepts of parent-teacher relations, professional teacher identity, and emerging and thickening trajectories was used to develop the interview questions and analyse data. The results show that beginning teachers experience challenges in their relations with parents and these challenges put a strain on their self-definition as professionals. These results provide implications for addressing the constraints on teachers' professional autonomy brought by a culture of clientelism which has the potential to change the role of teachers and therefore affect their professional identity development.

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Introduction

Denmark and Sweden have witnessed a historically significant amplification of parental influence in schools during the past two decades. Parent-teacher cooperation is central in the legislation governing compulsory school education (6- to 15-year-old pupils) in both countries (MOE, Ministry of Children and Education, 2020; Swedish Parliament, 2010, p. 800). Parents have been given free school choice and powerful roles in school governance to support pupil's education (Björk & Browne-Ferrigno, 2016). The emphasis on parental involvement in

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education in these two Nordic countries reflects international trends (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021; Kristofferson, 2007; OECD, 2020) of neoliberal governing that accentuate accountability and assessment (Buchanan, 2015), and often position parents and pupils as customers and teachers as service-providers in educational processes (Deslandes et al., 2015; Ye & Zhao, 2019).

Though parent-teacher cooperation can be conducive to children's learning (Epstein, 2005; Leenders et al., 2018), and there are teachers who consider cooperation with parents as an integral and unproblematic part of their work, incorporating parents into professional obligations can also be a major challenge for teachers (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021). Teachers may be pushed into double bind processes that are dominated by troublesome parents and conflict with the teachers' professional responsibilities (Dahl, 2017). This is especially the case for beginning teachers, who often feel unprepared for parental cooperation (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2019; Epstein, 2005), and inevitably encounter tensions between their expectations about being a teacher and the realities of professional teaching (Flores, 2004; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), including parental cooperation (Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Lassila et al., 2021). Parent-teacher relations might have a special significance for beginning teachers, whose professional identities are emerging and fragile (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). However, we know very little about the interplay between beginning teachers' encounters with parents and how that interplay influences teachers' professional identity formation.

In response to this gap in research, we investigate beginning teachers' experiences with parents in compulsory schools in relation to their professional identity development, in both Sweden and Denmark. Such a comparison is interesting because although these two countries share many societal similarities as Nordic welfare states, there are differences when it comes to teacher education legislation on parental cooperation. The Danish teacher education law has comprehensive goals for parental cooperation (MOER, Ministry of Education and Research, 2011), while its Swedish counterpart (Swedish Parliament, 2021, p. 1335) only briefly treats this issue. Furthermore, Sweden has a national induction programme to support beginning teachers' professional development, while there is no comparable measure in Denmark (K.-R. Olsen et al., 2020).

Drawing from a comparative case study of 10 beginning teachers' professional identity development in Denmark and Sweden (Rinne et al., 2023), our specific research questions are:

- (1) How do beginning teachers' interpretations of their experiences with parent-teacher relations reflect their professional identity development in the transition from pre-service teacher education to professional teaching?
- (2) How do beginning teachers' professional identity trajectories compare between Denmark and Sweden within the context of parent-teacher relations?

A comparative study of the Danish and Swedish cases can provide wider insights into what parental cooperation might mean for teachers' relations with parents and in turn their perception of self in the profession. We focus on 'parent-teacher relations' (Lassila et al., 2021; Uitto et al., 2021) rather than parental cooperation, as it is more relevant to beginning teachers' professional identity development.

Parent-teacher relations

Parent-teacher relations can be described as a ‘professional core relationship’ that is integral to the teaching profession, since teachers must engage with parents (Uitto et al., 2021, p. 462). The research on parent-teacher cooperation, interaction, or relations falls within two domains: 1) studies focusing on causes of and pathways to productive parent-teacher relations, cooperation, or partnerships (Epstein, 2005; Leenders et al., 2018), and 2) studies showing the tension-filled, ambivalent, and versatile aspects of parent-teacher relations (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021; Dahl, 2017; Deslandes et al., 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018). Our analyses are mainly informed by the second domain, in particular those few studies that address relations between beginning teachers and parents (Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Lassila et al., 2021; Uitto et al., 2021).

Power is integral to parent-teacher relations. Some studies find that parents with high socio-economic status (SES) place high demands on teachers and interfere with their work in ways that constrain the teachers in their professional responsibilities (Dahl, 2017; Gaikhorst et al., 2017). Other studies show that parents who act like customers in schools reflect the international trend of neoliberal governing of education (Deslandes et al., 2015; Kristofferson, 2007). On the other hand, Gokturk and Dinckal (2018) show a need for teachers to distribute power more equally and recognise parents as equal partners. Regardless of how these power balances create tensions, in all cases, the perception of the teachers’ professional competencies and work jurisdiction in school is pivotal for the shaping of parent-teacher relations (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021). This aspect seems to be particularly challenging for beginning teachers, who are at risk of having their professional competencies questioned by parents. Lassila et al. (2021) find that beginning teachers in Japan are held responsible for poor communication with parents, as respect for seniority overrides balanced relations. As a result, beginning teachers must conduct extensive emotional work to maintain a polite and professional distance in unequal relations.

Conceptual framework: interpretation, professional teacher identity, and trajectories

An interpretative approach (Busch, 2017) serves as the conceptual umbrella in analysing how beginning teachers’ interpretations of parent-teacher relations reflect their professional identity development. Research taking this approach explores social phenomena through participants’ reconstructions and interpretations and involves a rigorous methodology for investigating teacher identity through interviews (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Flores, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2019; B. Olsen et al., 2023; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Ye & Zhao, 2019). In this study, interpretation of parent-teacher relations occurs when beginning teachers make sense of their encounters and experiences with parents, as part of their professional tasks, by reflecting upon previous, current, and imagined future experience in comparable situations.

We understand professional teacher identity as changing and emerging from both personal and professional experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; B. Olsen, 2016). The personal aspect of teacher identity stems from beginning teachers’ beliefs about teaching, which are influenced by their own experiences of being pupils and their

subjective notions of teaching (Buchanan, 2015; B. Olsen, 2016; Rinne et al., 2023). The professional aspect of teacher identity relates to teachers' reflections on pedagogical dilemmas, their personal experiences, their professional judgement, and their willingness to learn from professional experience in cooperation with colleagues (Buchanan, 2015; Flores, 2004; K.-R. Olsen et al., 2020; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Ye & Zhao, 2019). Furthermore, teacher identity is influenced by contextual aspects, such as the availability of institutional support for professional development (Flores, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2019) and educational policies (Buchanan, 2015; Ye & Zhao, 2019). In this vein, we define professional teacher identity as the participants' interpretations of their previous, current, and imagined experiences of 'how to be', 'how to act', and 'how to understand' their work in school and society (Sachs, 2005, p. 15; B. Olsen et al., 2023).

Wortham (2006) conceptualises identity as an ongoing social process of emerging, transforming, and thickening (congealing) trajectories. Identities emerge and thicken in individual trajectories when participants interpret their past, present, and imagined experiences. The notion of trajectory has proven valuable in understanding how individuals, including teachers, in various settings, develop their identities across time and contexts (Lundqvist, 2019a, 2019b; Rinne et al., 2023; Ye & Zhao, 2019). We employ this notion to analyse how beginning teachers select and interpret events, in interviews, from their experience with teaching, and how these interpretations 'reflect the teacher's perceived identity', as the teacher 'has learned something from the events they experienced' (Ye & Zhao, 2019, p. 38). How the participants interpret their experience with parent-teacher relations can thus be seen as a reflection of their professional identity development. Accordingly, trajectory, in this article, refers to the 'identity development trajectories' (ibid., p. 38) that emerge and thicken in beginning teachers' interpretations of their ongoing experiences with parent-teacher relations.

Beginning teachers struggle to define who they are as teachers and how they understand professional values, ethical guidelines, and pedagogical competencies that constitute them as good teachers, across time and the contexts of teacher education and compulsory schools (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Teachers who work in supportive environments are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards their profession and thicken professional identity through their handling of challenges at work (Flores, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2019; K.-R. Olsen et al., 2020). On the other hand, when teachers encounter school realities that violently challenge their perceptions of themselves as professionals (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), they might develop feelings of disenchantment or even 'give up' on their profession (Flores, 2004). Thus, their emerging identities may remain 'fragile' (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011, p. 6), or thin, rather than thicken into more professional teacher identities characterised by confident practitioner control (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2021). Though identity formation is influenced by context (B. Olsen et al., 2023), we view the participants as active agents capable of 'pushing back' and resisting what they conceive as unfair parental interference in their work (Buchanan, 2015, p. 710; Kelchtermans, 2019).

Analytically, we focus on how the participants' trajectories have thickened, or remained fragile, as it appears in their interpretations of how they handle parent-teacher relations in the transition to professional teaching. During interviews, participants describe and interpret their past, present, and imagined future experiences,

allowing us to gain insights into their teacher identity. As they make sense of these experiences, particularly in the context of parent-teacher relations, they organise time, space, and agency to situate themselves as professionals in the working environment they are talking about.

Method

Research design

Data for this article stems from a comparative case study of beginning teachers' professional identity development through interviews (Rinne et al., 2023). The study consists of two phases and aims to investigate the various aspects of teacher identity development that beginning teachers undergo in the transition between their final year of teacher education (Phase 1) through their second year of professional teaching (Phase 2). In the second phase of our study, most of the participants pointed out parent-teacher relations as extremely challenging. Thus, learning to handle parent-teacher relations appeared to be a critical aspect of the participants' identity development.

We employ a comparative case study approach to investigate beginning teachers' perceptions of professional identities in Denmark and Sweden. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), the case study explores, in depth and detail, a delimited unit, in our case, beginning teachers' interpretations of their experiences with parent-teacher relations. Furthermore, the case study engages in developmental processes, that is, in this study, how beginning teachers' experiences with parent-teacher relations reflect their identity development.

Finally, the case study focuses on contextual relations, in this case how beginning teachers' identities may be influenced by the national contexts in which they are embedded through education and work (B. Olsen et al., 2023). Inspired by basic principles of comparative qualitative research (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2011), we adopt the following measures to ensure comparability and a thorough research process: 1) developing data collection processes collaboratively between researchers from both countries, 2) pursuing emergent analytical themes across data from diverse settings from the outset of the study, and 3) identifying relationships between various themes and concepts. Moreover, we view the two national settings as different contexts. Each context has its own specific traits (comprehensive vs. brief goals for parental cooperation, national teacher induction vs. no induction programme) in which beginning teachers develop their professional identities.

The research sites

Denmark and Sweden are small Nordic welfare states with tax-funded educational systems. Since the 2000s, the neoliberal turn has emphasised learning goals, international comparison of outcomes, assessment, and accountability, resulting in increased parental influence in schools. In both countries, parents' free school choice and increasing parental power in school governance give parents a powerful voice in how their children are educated (Björk & Browne-Ferrigno, 2016). Parent-teacher cooperation is a central element of the laws that govern compulsory school in Sweden and Denmark. These laws

emphasise, in comparable ways, that the school is responsible for this cooperation by accentuating the importance of parental influence and participation in education (MOE, Ministry of Children and Education, 2020; Swedish Parliament, 2010, p. 800). This societal development reflects international trends (Buchanan, 2015; Deslandes et al., 2015; Ye & Zhao, 2019). Research has also shown that parents' focus remains on the welfare and academic progression of their own children rather than on the broader school community's welfare (Kristofferson, 2007).

In Denmark and Sweden, teacher education has emerged from a vocational education tradition. But while teacher education in Sweden is taught in academic, research-based programmes, Denmark offers a non-academic teacher degree taught in university colleges. Both countries offer compulsory-school teacher education in four-year programmes with 20 weeks of internship, spread over one term every year. The Danish legislation for teacher education (MOER, Ministry of Education and Research, 2011) has detailed goals and content for parent-teacher cooperation in the general pedagogical modules, all four years of internship periods, and in didactics for all subjects, while the Swedish counterpart (Swedish Parliament, 2021, p. 1335) only briefly mentions parent-teacher cooperation in a general way. Another difference between the two countries is that beginning teachers are entitled to some form of teacher induction in Sweden (Swedish Parliament (2010, p. 800, 2, §22a) but not in Denmark, though some municipalities offer induction on voluntary basis (K.-R. Olsen et al., 2020).

Participants

Ten beginning teachers participated in the study. Six participants studied and worked in Sweden (one male and five female) and four in Denmark (two male and two female). The participants are labelled by the letter that designates their country. Swedish participants are referred to as S1, S2 etc. and the Danish teachers are referred to as D7, D8 etc. The participants were mainly employed at schools with low SES (S3, S4, S5, S6, D8) or with mixed SES (S1, S2, S10). After one year, S3 changed from a low to a high SES school, and D9 changed from a high to a low SES school.

Data collection

We conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) with all participants. The first round was conducted during 2019, while the participants were completing their final year of teacher education. The second round was conducted in 2022, when the participants had been working as compulsory schoolteachers for two years. Nine of the ten interviewees had entered professional in-service teacher practice in Danish and Swedish schools. One participant (D7) had decided that she did not wish to pursue a career in teaching. All interviews were audiotaped and ranged in length from 40 to 70 minutes.

The interview guides were structured to explore the participants' histories with school and teaching, their reflections on why they want to become teachers, and how they understand the profession. The participants were invited by email to take part in the study. All data has been collected, stored, and reported anonymously. In this study, none of the researchers have interviewed any students they subsequently supervised or

examined. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2022–0047601).

Data analysis

We transcribed all the interviews to become familiar with data. In analysis of the first round of interviews, we identified a stable set of recurrent themes, within and across the two national contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the analysis of the second round of interviews, foregrounded in this article, we created a longitudinal analysis for each participant, and compared these analyses within and across the contexts. In comparing the two cohorts, the central characteristics identified in the analysis were all related to challenges the participants experienced on entering the teaching profession. These analyses showed that eight of nine active beginning teachers found parent-teacher relations to be extremely challenging. Drawing from previous research on parent-teacher relations, and our conceptual framework of professional identity, we developed codes to analyse the participants' accounts of parent-teacher relations on the individual, institutional, and societal levels in order to analyse the teachers' identity trajectories related to each level. The individual level mainly related to the participants' personal experiences, the institutional level to the school context with a particular focus on the levels of support they encountered, and the societal level related to the national educational policies of parental cooperation (Buchanan, 2015). Interviewees differ regarding the details of their interpretations of parent-teacher relations and as a result, some were represented more in the analysis. In the findings below, it can be seen that the participants reported that they learned to establish respectful pupil-teacher relations and to communicate professionally with parents. We also look at contextual differences in development of professional teacher identity. Quotations from teachers have been translated from Danish and Swedish to English by the first and second author.

Findings

The results below are organised through the study's two research questions. In the two first sections, we answer the first research question by presenting the findings on beginning teachers' interpretations of their experiences with parent-teacher relations, and their reflections on their professional identity development in transition from pre-service teacher education to professional teaching. The third section answers research question two by comparing the role of parent-teacher relations in the development of professional teacher identity in two national settings.

From chaotic classroom environment to respectful pupil-teacher relations through supportive parent-teacher relations

A goal of achieving a mutually respectful pupil-teacher relationship can be one of the motivational aspects of becoming a teacher (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). A desire to become a 'relation-building' teacher is clearly stated by S4, who was provoked by his own

experience of being humiliated and punished by a teacher. His painful personal experience of being a pupil has engendered an empathetic understanding of the importance of respect and trustful pupil-teacher relationships.

S4's ambition regarding mutually respectful pupil-teacher relations is challenged when he enters into professional teaching. In the second interview, he acknowledges that his first term of teaching was quite chaotic. He was unable to teach, as the pupils would 'talk', and 'run around and dance on the tables' during lessons. Asked how he managed these challenges, S4 says that he would 'reflect' on this problem with colleagues and talk with pupils and their parents.

I listen to the pupils, and I respect them. It's important that they know I also require respect. If they misbehave, I'll call their parents. I asked some parents to come and attend class so the pupils would not mess up the lesson. I felt that the parents were very helpful. They want the best for their children, and they can attend my lessons. The parents attended certain lessons for about two weeks and after that the pupils were like angels. Many parents have said if it hadn't been for me, they would have changed their children's school. (S4)

In S4's comment, his interpretation of his previous experience (asking parents for assistance) and current experience (being someone capable of creating order in the classroom and a teacher that parents appreciate) intertwine to illustrate how he has become capable of creating a calm classroom environment and mutually respectful pupil-teacher relations, supported by equal parent-teacher relations, where parents acknowledge the teacher's competencies and jurisdiction and vice versa. By reflecting upon the challenges with colleagues and reaching out to parents, S4 has learned from professional experience to change a chaotic situation. He evaluates the parents' intentions and contributions. In this way, he constructs himself as the professional party with the decisive voice. Noticeably, in his agentic cooperation with the parents, S4 simultaneously displays trust, transparency and invites the parents to view him as an expert 'helping their children' (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2022, p. 1147).

Furthermore, S4 states he has become a 'less idealistic' teacher who can handle pupils 'manipulating' him to avoid participating in schoolwork. At the same time, he notices that many pupils disrupt teaching because they do not 'see the point of being in school', and he must therefore 'motivate' them. S4 has, at the same time, become 'stricter' and remained a 'warm' person. Thus, he has not only developed the ability to create a calm classroom environment and respectful pupil-teacher relations, but he has also become aware of the importance of handling these cases empathetically because pupils are in school under duress.

S4's interpretations of his experiences with parent-teacher relations illustrate a trajectory throughout which his emerging teacher identity, dominated by personal experiences of being a pupil, thickens into a more professional identity where he becomes a teacher who can relate in caring, strict, and respectful ways to pupils, listening to them and establishing order in the classroom to secure a more productive learning environment.

From challenging parent-teacher relations to 'communicating professionally' with parents

Encountering and handling challenging parent-teacher relations can be critical experiences in professional development, as they can either enhance development

or lead to fragile identities. The experiences of S5, S3, and D9 illustrate how different experiences with these challenges, and participants' interpretations of these experiences, reflect versatile trajectories of professional identity development.

In the first interview, S5 self-identifies as part of an ethnic minority. She intentionally chose to work at a school situated in a multicultural area, as she imagines she will be good at understanding parents with diverse ethnic backgrounds. Her interpretation of her future professional self as a culturally sensitive teacher (Gaikhorst et al., 2017) is inspired by her own experience of being a child of ethnic minority parents. On entering the teaching profession, this interpretation of herself, as a teacher who understands parents particularly well because of a mutual ethnic minority background, is challenged, as S5 is constantly interrupted by parents who require her to meet with them during lessons:

Parents popped up anytime when I was teaching. They required me to be available and meet with them whenever it suited them. I wasn't prepared to handle that. How could I tell them 'It's my workplace, and you cannot interrupt me' without getting personal? It was a tremendous challenge, and I thought about why this happened. I had pupils to teach. I needed help, so I talked to my colleagues, my principal, and even the pupil health team at school. The team arranged a meeting with the parents and we talked about how to cooperate in this school. All that was extremely helpful. (S5)

When parents require meetings with S5 during her lessons, they interrupt her teaching routine. S5 states that she had pupils to teach. The implication is that she views teaching as her main professional and ethical responsibility, and the interruptions constrain her in carrying it out. S5 reflects upon the problem, seeks feedback, and cooperates with her colleagues to create parent-teacher relations that are respectful of her professional responsibilities. Thus, she changes from interpreting imagined experiences with parent-teacher relations in terms of personal aspects of teacher identity (in the first interview) to reflecting on her current challenges with parents, and how her cooperation with her colleagues and principal has helped her to transform an undesirable situation and create clearer boundaries in her relations with parents (in the second interview). Her comment 'without getting personal' indicates that she strives to create a professional distance and manage her emotions (Lassila et al., 2021).

The following examples show how S5 becomes able to communicate more professionally with parents:

I have learned a lot about how to communicate with parents. I can formulate the same message to different parents in various ways, depending on the situation and relationship. I'm prepared for what may happen. I can put out fires before they arise and keep calm. It's very much about building strong relations. It's not important to be particularly principled, but to meet the parents in ways that signal 'I need time and we need to schedule the meetings', so they don't walk over me. (S5)

S5 defines herself as a professional who can nuance her communication in building 'strong' relations with parents. While the positions of parents and teacher were more blurred in the interpretation of herself as troubled in parent-teacher relations, the positions of parents and teacher are clearer in her most recent, and more nuanced, interpretation of her professional tasks and role in parent-teacher relations. In so doing, S5 not only manages to hold on to her aspirations as a student of becoming a teacher who

cooperates well with parents, she also sets a goal (clearer boundaries and professional communication in parent-teacher relations), and confidently achieves it by initiating cooperative relations at work (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

In her final year of teacher education, S5's emerging teacher identity was, in part, shaped by her personal experience of being an ethnic minority pupil. Two years later, in the second interview, her interpretations of parent-teacher relations reflect a trajectory throughout which her professional identity has thickened, as she has become a teacher who can create a productive teaching environment by pushing back untimely parental interference, maintain strong relations with pupils and parents, and communicate professionally and in nuanced ways with parents.

In comparison, S3 says, in the second interview, that dealing with parent-teacher relations was the hardest challenge she encountered in initial professional practice.

At my previous workplace, there was an incident with a pupil. I realised that the parents didn't talk about the consequences of his actions at home. It was all about their child who hadn't done anything wrong, and everything was only the other pupils' fault. It was hard. The pupil just continued to behave in ways that were not in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the school. I couldn't change it. It didn't matter what I said, if the parents said something else at home. That was a challenge! (S3)

In S3's interpretation, the overall problem was the conflicting interests of the parents and herself. The parents had a private perspective that conflicted with her professional view and duties, and placed S3 in a double-bind situation (Dahl, 2017). On the one hand, she was required to cooperate with parents. On the other hand, the actions of parents constrained her efforts to teach according to the school's ethical guidelines. Consequently, S3 changed her workplace. She says that 'my current workplace has given me confidence. It makes me feel safe'. Asked how her professional teacher identity has developed, S3 says:

I think I have a strong teacher identity. I am thriving in my profession. I feel that I'm good at it. I'm proud of being a teacher. (S3)

Though it is not entirely clear how the change of workplace has contributed to shaping better opportunities for S3's professional development, her interpretation of previous and current experiences reflects the thickening identity of a teacher who is thriving, confident, and 'good' at her profession.

Like S5 and S3, D9 identifies parent-teacher relations as the greatest challenge he encounters in his job. When trying to engage parents in creating a productive classroom climate and resolving conflicts in school, he often meets resistance and feels 'disempowered' because:

There has been a change in who is in charge of the children, and what is right or wrong. I often meet parents who state, 'it was not my child who started it'. When I was a child, I would simply be told 'you shouldn't do that again'. I'm afraid that if this tendency continues, the teachers will hit their heads against the wall so many times that they'll finally lose it all because they'll need to spend time on all the things which should be the parents' task, child-rearing. (D9)

In D9's interpretation, previous, current, and prospective experiences intersect to illustrate his awareness of the complexity and uncertainty of roles in parent-

teacher relations, including how these relations have changed during his lifetime. The implication of D9's personal school experience ('I would simply be told "you shouldn't do that again"') is that parents did not question the teacher's authority to the extent they do today, but rather supported the teacher by socialising their child into appropriate school behaviour. Currently, D9 often encounters parents who are unwilling to help him resolve conflicts ('it was not my child who started it'). The implication of P9's imagined future experience in the teaching profession (teachers 'will lose it all' and 'hit their heads against the wall') is that too much parental responsibility will be laid on teachers' shoulders.

Asked how his professional teacher identity has developed, D9 says that the way he 'talks to the pupils' and 'acts' in class reflects the teacher he wishes to be. However, he adds that he does not imagine himself as a compulsory schoolteacher in 10 years, as he is 'worried about the future' of the teaching profession, not least because of parents' unwillingness to cooperate with teachers:

I hope that the adults around the pupils can agree about what is best for them. As a teacher, you are with the children many hours every week. It would be nice if parents could say 'fair enough, my daughter acts like this at home, but maybe it's different in school', so we could compromise and cooperate. (D9)

D9 defines himself as a teacher striving to establish productive parent-teacher relations. The implication of his comment is that conflict management requires that both parties are willing to try to take the other party's perspective, but that parents are not willing to do so. This resonates with studies showing that parents might act on a biased perception of their own child, rather than considering the teacher's professional responsibility for assuming a shared position of what is best for the entire pupil group (Kristofferson, 2007).

We found that S3 and D9 were in comparable situations. The parents constrained social relations in the classroom by taking only the perspective of their own child. S3 changed her workplace and thereby provided herself with a better opportunity for professional development, while D9 considered leaving the profession. D9's comments can be analysed in at least two different ways. They may serve to illustrate that beginning teachers' professional identity can remain 'fragile' (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011, p. 6), or thin, if they are pushed to take sole responsibility for resolving discrepancies between parents' particular interests and their own professional ideals and visions (Dahl, 2017). On the other hand, D9's interpretation of parent-teacher relations in society may indicate his professional awareness of parental responsibilities, which he connects to his previous experiences of being a pupil. In both cases, when beginning teachers, such as D9, find themselves disempowered in challenging parent-teacher relations, it is likely to influence their professional jurisdiction negatively (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021).

Comparing the role of parent-teacher relations in the development of professional teacher identity in two settings

In response to the second research question, we compare Danish and Swedish beginning teachers' experiences with parents in relation to professional identity trajectories around two themes: support in the work context and powerful parents.

All the Swedish participants (except for S3 at her first workplace) worked in environments where they were supported by colleagues and school principals, while the Danish participants lacked comparable support. Accordingly, different levels of support influence the participants' identity trajectories. The analyses documented that the trajectories of S3, S4, and S5 were supported through the multiple professional core-relations (Uitto et al., 2021) they engaged in with parents, colleagues, pupil health teams, or principals in Swedish schools. Moreover, S4 describes how colleagues listen to him at teacher conferences and appreciate his ideas and suggestions. Such institutional support provides beginning teachers with the opportunity to develop their views about 'good education and the teacher they want to be' and become assets (Kelchtermans, 2019, p. 89), while they strive to create functional parent-teacher relations as part of their professional identity development.

However, in the Danish context, D9 reports that 'everything is chaotic' at his workplace, as there are no scheduled meetings. He even missed a team meeting because he was not invited. He 'feels' there is 'no cooperation in the team' and he has 'not landed in a position' where he 'belongs' at work. D10 describes how he has struggled 'to create relationships' with his new and more experienced colleagues who turn down suggestions from beginning teachers, as 'they have their methods and are not so willing to accept new input'. D8 experienced being 'alone', lacking 'collegial debate', managerial support, and guidance. This lack of institutional support led to the 'most frustrating experience' she had as a beginning teacher:

I hope other managers provide a better introduction for their new employees. My school manager asked me to attend a meeting at the municipality, with a pupil who was seriously suffering in school. Then I was suddenly at a meeting where you're only allowed to look at, and talk to, the leader of the meeting [a family counsellor], not the pupil or the parents. It's a special meeting format. My manager did not inform me about this. This is about a child's life and that must be taken seriously. I felt extremely uncomfortable and frustrated, because I didn't have a chance to prepare for the meeting, or to understand what happened in the situation. (D8)

D8's description of this encounter shows that she did not receive basic information about what was expected of her as a professional in a new and challenging parent-teacher-pupil relationship. Even though D8 was thrown unprepared into an 'uncomfortable' situation, she demonstrates awareness about her professional task—to enable the child. The lack of support experienced by the Danish participants is likely to influence their professional trajectories negatively. Institutional support from school managers, and colleagues, is crucial for teachers' professional identity development during the early years of teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Flores, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2019).

A significant similarity between the teacher trajectories in the two contexts is that most participants said that teacher education did not prepare the participants sufficiently for parental cooperation. This is exacerbated by the challenges most of the participants have encountered in parent-teacher relations as they transit into professional practice. S2 described encountering an aggressive parent who threatened the teachers, so they had to keep all the doors in the school locked. S1, S3, S5, S6, D8, D9, and D10 were to different degrees questioned by troublesome parents. Struggling to learn to handle challenging parent-teacher relations turned out to be an essential part of the beginning teachers'

professional identity trajectories. This confirms that parents, in both Denmark and Sweden, have a more influential role than ever in the schooling of their children (Björk & Browne-Ferrigno, 2016).

Conclusion and discussion

Our study shows that the participants' emerging trajectories of how to be and act as teachers in parent-teacher relations, as evidenced in the first round of interviews, are mainly based on their personal experiences of being pupils. The second round of interviews documents that the participants discover the complexity of teaching as they enter the profession, and their interpretations of parent-teacher relations demonstrate increased awareness of professional aspects of teacher identity, such as reflection upon challenges, and willingness to learn from their experiences through cooperation and collegial debate (B. Olsen, 2016). Their interpretations of such developmental experience throughout their first years in practice point towards thickening trajectories of professional teacher identity among most of the beginning teachers.

Furthermore, our study shows that though parents may play an important role in supporting their children's education (Epstein, 2005), such roles may also turn into an interference in teachers' work that may have a detrimental effect on beginning teachers' professional identity development. It becomes apparent that parents are a resource for their children's schooling when the teachers have power to define parent-teacher relations, and when both parties share goals (S4). However, when beginning teachers become responsible for resolving conflicts between powerful parents' interests and their own professional commitments in unsupportive work environments, they might feel pushed to change their workplace (S3), or develop negative attitudes towards their own professional identity, such as frustration and giving up (D9) (Flores, 2004; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Parent-teacher relations added difficulties for the participants, particularly in relation to parents who seem to focus exclusively on their children's educational needs without considering the realities and requirements of teaching and learning in schools (Dahl, 2017; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Lassila et al., 2021).

How can we understand this result from a societal perspective? Dahl (2017) finds that parents in high SES areas tend to interfere with teachers' work in problematic ways. Gaikhorst et al. (2017) find that challenges in parent-teacher relations may emerge from language barriers in urban low SES areas, while parents in high SES areas tend to be more critical towards beginning teachers. However, our study does not confirm any such linkage between SES and challenging parent-teacher relations. S3 experienced parental interference in a low SES school, while S4 had parental support in a comparable context. D9 encountered troublesome parents in both of his workplaces (one high and one low SES school). Though SES may make a difference to parental behaviour in schools, the similarity in increasing parental power across Denmark and Sweden can be viewed as a consequence of the increased 'culture of clientelism' (Deslandes et al., 2015) where parents become consumers and teachers become service providers. The challenging parent-teacher relations reported by the participants of our study suggest that parents tend to view teachers as service providers, rather than as experts with professional training, practices, ethics, duties, commitments towards their pupils, and with a high degree of autonomy in how to perform their work.

These results might have broad implications. There is a risk that a widespread culture of clientelism may clip the wings of teachers and constrain their professional autonomy, because this culture redefines the nature of what the role of a teacher should be and therefore may have a critical impact on professional identity development. The teacher as a service provider would have weak autonomy where customers (parents and pupils) may curtail the teacher's professional decisions and actions. Further research is needed to understand the culture of clientelism and what it means for the teaching profession. Moreover, policy makers must consider how parental involvement policies can support teachers in regaining the professional autonomy they need to manage parent-teacher relations based on teacher professionalism and ethics. We saw that S4 succeeded in creating mutual respectful parent-teacher relations by inviting parents into the classroom. Thus, one way to enhance teachers' professional autonomy in parent-teacher relations could be to emphasise the visibility and professionalism of their daily work (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2021).

It is intriguing to see how the supportive environments for beginning teachers in Sweden contribute to their professional identity development, in comparison to teachers in Denmark, although we cannot claim that such different levels of support exist in all Danish and Swedish schools. One reason for the difference in institutional support might be the fact that Sweden has a national induction programme for beginning teachers, while Denmark does not have a comparable measure (K.-R. Olsen et al., 2020). Thus, Denmark should consider introducing a national induction programme in the same vein as Sweden. In addition, it is apparent that the detailed goals and content for parent-teacher cooperation in Danish teacher education do not directly translate into positive experiences for beginning teachers. These experiences bring up questions about the role of teacher education and induction programmes in supporting beginning teachers in the challenging cooperation with parents. Our results suggest that measures should be taken to support teachers in coping with challenging parent-teacher relations in teacher education in both Denmark and Sweden.

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Ilona Rinne Conception of study, data collection and analyses. Read, discussed, and thus contributed throughout to the development of the article from draft to first resubmission.

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