

Exploring the sustainability of the teaching profession: A thematic analysis of teachers' perspectives

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Abstract: Teacher shortage and turnover is a growing problem in Sweden, yet little is known about the organisational factors associated with these problems. The current study explores teachers' experiences of organisational processes and aims to identify relevant job demands and resources linked to professional sustainability for teachers. In this study, semi-structured focus group-interviews were conducted with five groups. In total, 44 teachers (33 women and 11 men) working in southern Sweden participated. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Three key themes illustrating aspects of teachers' perceptions were identified: Hindrances, Culture, and Leadership. The findings indicate that the participants experienced poor organisational structures effecting both their professional and personal lives. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of what impacts professional sustainability for teachers in Sweden.

Keywords: focus groups, Sweden, professional sustainability, teacher, wellbeing, working conditions

Raziskovanje trajnosti učiteljskega poklica: tematska analiza gledišča učiteljev

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Povzetek: Pomanjkanje učiteljev in njihova fluktuacija je na Švedskem vse večji problem, vseeno pa so organizacijski dejavniki, ki prispevajo k omenjenima problemoma, slabo poznani. Pričujoča študija raziskuje izkušnje učiteljev z organizacijskimi procesi in poskuša identificirati pomembne delovne zahteve ter vire, povezane s poklicno trajnostjo učiteljev. V petih fokusnih skupinah smo uporabili polstrukturirane intervjuje. V študiji je skupaj sodelovalo 44 učiteljev (33 žensk in 11 moških), ki delujejo na jugu Švedske. Vsebinsko intervjujev smo analizirali z uporabo tematske analize in identificirali tri ključne teme, ki ilustrirajo vidike zaznav učiteljev: ovire, kultura ter vodenje. Izsledki kažejo, da so se udeleženci soočali s slabo organizacijsko strukturo, ki učinkuje tako na njihovo strokovno delo kot na zasebno življenje. Rezultati prispevajo h globljemu razumevanju dejavnikov, ki vplivajo na poklicno trajnost učiteljev na Švedskem.

Ključne besede: fokusne skupine, Švedska, poklicna trajnost, učitelji, blagostanje, delovni pogoji

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Teachers increasingly leave the profession, both in Sweden (Boström et al., 2020) and worldwide (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). In addition, national reports (Statistics Sweden [SCB], 2017a) consistent with international research (Ingersoll et al., 2012; Taylor, 2013) describe it as increasingly difficult to both recruit and retain qualified employees. Furthermore, as many as 14% of Swedes under the age of 65 with a teacher's degree, never started to teach or are currently not working in the field (SCB, 2017b). Sweden is estimated to be lacking more than 79,000 teachers by the year 2035 (SCB, 2017b), something which is of great societal concern.

Professional sustainability in the education sector

Professional sustainability concerns workers' ability to maintain a quality of life both in the workplace and at home, over an extended period. Although the area of sustainability has gained researchers' attention since the early 2000's (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2005), little is known about the organisational factors linked to professional sustainability in the teaching profession (Boström et al., 2020). It has, however, been well established that high levels of stress affect teachers' health negatively and is linked to depressive symptoms, depression, burnout, and increased alcohol consumption (Schonfeld et al., 2017). In addition, in a Swedish study by Schad and Johnsson (2019) teachers reported higher degrees of stress and sleeping problems compared to other occupational groups. They were further found to have an unhealthy balance between work and free time (Schad & Johnsson, 2019). Previous international research has also shown stress to be linked with a lack of work engagement, job dissatisfaction, and poor job performance (Banerjee & Mehta, 2016). In addition, recent studies have investigated teachers' workplace communication (Schad, 2017, 2019), work-life conflicts (De Carlo et al., 2019), teacher stress (Schonfeld et al., 2017), burnout and coping (Herman et al., 2018), as well as well-being (Schad & Johnsson, 2019), all indicating a problematic work situation. More research around professional sustainability for teachers combined with an urgent need to improve the work environment for teachers is needed to make teaching an attractive profession (Boström et al., 2020).

Theoretical framework

Although the relationship between workplace-related stress and well-being has been well studied, many questions are left unanswered regarding educator stress (Schonfeld et al., 2017). In order to understand the circumstances related to teacher stress and wellbeing, the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) developed by Demerouti et al. (2001) has become an increasingly used tool in educational settings for understanding psychosocial experiences in the working environment (De Carlo et al., 2019; Evers et al., 2017). The model makes a distinction between two psychological processes with a focus on the interaction between job demands and resources, as influenced by the local context. The basic assumption is thus that interactions

between demands and resources are experienced differently in different work-settings. The model also highlights factors protecting the employees, such as boosting their commitment and engagement, while taking into account both work-related aspects and the employee's personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Applying the JD-R model in educational organisational settings is particularly interesting. Teaching is a creative (Tanggaard, 2011) and knowledge-intensive profession (Schad, 2019). Accordingly, educators have contextually anchored needs when it comes to job resources such as lifelong learning and continuous development. As exemplified in an Italian study, support from supervisors and participation in decision-making are two types of job resources which can effectively help teachers cope with job demands (De Carlo et al., 2019). A detailed understanding of the balance between job demands and resources is therefore crucial for keeping teachers healthy and helping them grow (Evers et al., 2017).

Furthermore, there is growing consensus that some job aspects causing stress have exclusively negative consequences, whereas other aspects have both positive and negative consequences (Podsakoff et al., 2007). For example, Travis et al. (2020) point to stressors that negatively impact performance, "job hindrances", including work characteristics such as role ambiguity, job insecurity, having relevant but unmanageable tasks, and interpersonal conflicts. Research shows that these types of demands elicit negative emotions, thus interfering with employees' work goal achievement and well-being (Travis et al., 2020).

When examining the teaching profession, previous research demonstrates a consistent relationship between a lack of autonomy and occupational stress, in which teachers who experience autonomy display higher job satisfaction, whereas teachers with little autonomy instead experience higher levels of occupational stress (McIntyre et al., 2017). For example, levels of autonomy for primary teachers predict teacher engagement positively and teachers with high levels of autonomy also show stronger work engagement (Sokmen & Kilic, 2019). Typically, teachers' autonomy involves teachers' perception of influence over schoolwide policies and decisions. In addition, it involves classroom control (Pearson & Hall, 1993). For example, teachers having to deal with a workplace full of burdensome procedures and bureaucracy are more likely to experience stress (Smylie, 1999). Decreased autonomy and increased bureaucracy thus impact teachers' well-being at work. Limited budget, demands for results, and continuous efficiency in combination with lack of communication, increased administrative burden, poor psychosocial work environment, lack of leadership, and educational support can easily negatively affect teachers' professional life (Schad, 2019).

The present study

To gain a bottom-up perspective, this study explores teachers' perceptions of organisational processes and aims to identify relevant job demands and resources linked to professional sustainability as those occur during teachers' daily work activities. Semi-structured focus-group interviews

were chosen as an appropriate mean for data collection. As teachers form a homogenous group (Check & Schutt, 2012) with similar shared experiences an interaction between the participants will likely enhance the results. In the present study, we used an exploratory secondary analysis (Cheng & Phillips, 2014) of data collected as part of a larger qualitative study about Swedish teachers' experiences of supportive and hindering factors in their profession (Schad, 2019). The results may increase our understanding of how to create a more sustainable work environment for teachers which in the long run could help retain and recruit teachers.

Method

Participants

In a pool of seven school districts in a municipally in southern Sweden (population 35,000), three districts were drawn to participate in the research study. The headmasters of these three primary and secondary schools informed the teachers and distributed information materials regarding the study to all teachers working at least 75%. At two of the schools, the interest to take part was high and two focus groups could be formed at each respective school. At one school, however, the interest was low, and groups could not be formed. The school commissioner then recruited one additional school and one additional group was formed, generating in total five groups. In total, 44 teachers took part (33 women and 11 men, consistent with the gender-distribution of teachers in Sweden (SCB, 2018). Each group had seven to nine participants and were interviewed on two occasions by the first author.

Procedure

The data collection was conducted during the period of February-April 2015 in Scania, Sweden. The dialogues were digitally recorded, and the audio files entered in MAXQDA (version 11) and transcribed for clean read. The duration of the interviews was 66 to 81 minutes, with an average interview time of 73 minutes generating over 12 hours of raw material. School A and B each had two focus groups, meeting on two occasions (A1, A2, B1, and B2), while School C had one focus group with interviews also on two occasions (C). Most of the participants attended both the first and the second meeting, while some teachers participated exclusively in the first or the second meeting. For example, in School A

(group A1) seven of the eight participants participated in both the first and the second meeting, while one teacher attended only the first meeting and two teachers participated only in the second meeting. The same pattern existed in all groups; therefore, slightly different group constellations arose each time. Descriptive data on gender distribution and focus group sizes at school-level in each school is presented in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted utilizing an open-ended interview guide containing questions regarding the participants views on their work life from perspectives having to do with sustainability (e.g., Do you work in a sustainable way? What would need to be different for your work to be more sustainable? In what way do teachers in your school lack or experience a sustainable work situation?).

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as an appropriate method for data analysis. Due to the nature of the research question, transcripts were analysed with both inductive and deductive processes in mind (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), in an iterative manner as described by Stake (2010). The analysis was carried out in six steps, following Braun and Clarke's recommendations (2006). Firstly, in order to get familiar with the data, recordings were listened to and the data was read and re-read by the authors. Initial ideas were noted down during this phase. Secondly, initial codes were generated with the intention to analyse the material further. As a third step, the preliminary coding of the first focus group was expanded and adjusted based on the findings of the remaining group interviews. Interesting features were collected into themes. After reviewing themes in phase four, a thematic map was generated in phase five. Themes were then defined and named, and the process was completed by producing the report.

Ethical considerations

The participants received written and oral information regarding the purpose and procedure of the study and then signed a consent form before taking part in the group interviews. The moderator stressed that participation was voluntary, and all information would be treated with confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, data is presented without reference to age, gender, or workplace. The research protocol (reg. number 2014/654) was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund, Sweden.

Table 1

Descriptive data at school-level

School	First meeting			Second meeting			Age		Years of experience	
	male	female	<i>n</i>	male	female	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
A1	0	8	8	0	7	7	50.6	10.6	21.8	13.2
A2	2	6	8	2	5	7				
B1	5	4	9	4	4	8	48.4	10.7	17.8	11.2
B2	3	6	9	3	4	7				
C	3	4	7	3	5	8	39.1	7.8	11.3	5.9
Total	13	28	41	12	25	37				

Findings

Three main themes representing teachers' perceptions on professional sustainability were identified during the analysis of data: (1) hindrances, (2) culture, and (3) leadership. Each of the themes and subthemes are elaborated in Tables 2-4.

Theme one: Hindrances

This theme portrays several burdensome aspects of work having to do with *bureaucracy*, *lack of trust* from parents and society, as well as the struggle with *changing teaching demands*, all constituting demands hindering the participants in their teaching duties.

Turning to the first subtheme, *bureaucracy*, the participants reported an increased administrative burden in combination with lack of time interfering with their work. The administrative tasks included e-mail correspondence, a general increased administration (such as documentation), ordering teaching materials, and calling substitute teachers, tasks which formerly used to be carried out by administrative staff. The participants also talked about the importance

of having time for working online in order to keep up with decisions and changes within the organisation since information from supervisors or colleagues increasingly is given online and not during scheduled physical meetings. According to several participants, the time needed for online administration has increased substantially during the past few years.

Furthermore, the participants experienced a frustration with not having the time to keep up with administrative tasks on a daily basis and shared a view that the increased administration takes time away from teaching duties such as lesson planning. One participant described how teachers employ different strategies to deal with the flow of information:

One issue is how you personally attend to the tasks you are assigned. One person might be stressed and have his/her weekend ruined while another colleague doesn't even open the e-mail during weekends.

Some older, more experienced teachers explained how they actively rebel against the system by for example ignoring to keep up with e-mails.

Table 2

Subthemes and sample quotes for theme 1: Hindrances

Subthemes	Sample quotes
Bureaucracy	"I put a lot of time replying to e-mails from parents and attending to information distributed by e-mail from management"
Lack of Trust	"The art of teaching is very much like being an artist, you need to have the freedom and time for inspiration in order to do a good job. The more management restrain our working hours the less productive we become"
Changing teaching demands	"I think much stress the last 5 years comes from the changes in the Swedish board of education and new ways of thinking, demands on how to work differently than before, one is forced into it"

Table 3

Subthemes and sample quotes for theme 2: Culture

Subthemes	Sample quotes
Lack of cooperation	"We have no colleagues to exchange ideas with, it is just a matter of luck to have a colleague who knows your subject and who possibly can help relieve your workload. Therefore, it becomes difficult to collaborate when it comes to planning classes and grading students"
Personal development & learning	"Something that is very stressful is when we don't have competence for certain things..."
Jack of all trades	"One has to be a Jack of all trades"
Lack of influence	"Other teachers have no say in decisions because they had no opportunity or time to participate in that specific decision"

Table 4

Subthemes and sample quotes for theme 3: Leadership

Subthemes	Sample quotes
Unclear tasks	"We have to do tasks the principal does not have time for"
Leader-coworkers relations	"We never receive appreciation for what we have accomplished from anyone, we never get affirmation from our supervisors"
Change management	"The job assignments have changed but the working conditions have not"

The second subtheme illustrates how participants view *lack of trust* from caregivers as constraining them in their role as teachers. The participants reported that parents often question their competence and expect them to adapt their teaching to specific children. One participant spoke about this and claimed:

Society is aiming that way. We constantly feel pressured and supervised from the outside on how we should be working. The parents are constantly watching over our shoulders and making sure we do our job in a way they approve of.

The third subtheme illustrates how teachers struggle with *changing teaching demands* in the organisation such as keeping up with new syllabuses and new trends in instructional practices. These demands make it hard for them to work in an autonomous manner. Moreover, teachers must also adapt to rapid technological development and implement technology, which they hardly master, in their teaching. The following quote by one participant illustrates this issue:

Generally, I believe society is reflected in the school. New kids every year, we constantly need to renew ourselves according to society. Every profession to some degree needs to do this, but I think this is especially true for teachers. The whole digitalization affects us. You can't continue working in the same manner as two years ago, you need to renew yourself. It is fun and stimulating but can also be difficult at times.

The participants also discussed how the rationale regarding teaching has changed over the years, and the way in which teachers are expected to change their thinking to keep up with new trends, regardless of what they themselves believe in.

Theme two: Culture

The following theme includes four subthemes relating to cultural aspects in the studied schools, all influencing teachers' work as the teachers experience a *lack of cooperation*, scarcity in *professional development*, and an expectation to fulfil multiple roles i.e., *jack of all trades*. Teachers also report *lack of influence* over schoolwide policies and decisions.

The first subtheme embodies how *lack of cooperation* between colleagues affect teachers' work. One teacher argued that the reason for lack of collaboration has to do with lack of suitable conditions in order to develop common themes in pedagogical instructions. In contrast, one participant argued that teachers often prefer to work on their own, and due to this reason, experience a heavier workload. He further argued that if teachers were willing to work more in teams, and drop some of their autonomy, they would be able to work more effectively:

The art of teaching has traditionally been very free. People who have become teachers have wanted a lot

of individual responsibility, the people who study to become teachers today are the same. That is what collides, you expect your freedom, but if we reduced that freedom, the workload might decrease.

However, there seems to be consensus among the participants that working independently is also one of the joys of the profession, and one of the reasons why they chose to be teachers in the first place. One of the participants expressed that he chose to become a teacher is because of the creativeness and freedom it entails, as exemplified in the following quote: "Teaching is very much like being an artist, you need to have the freedom and time for inspiration in order to do a good job."

Moreover, the participants discussed the few opportunities for *professional development and learning* that they have and argued that financial support and lack of time limit teachers from furthering their education. The general sentiment was that management expect teachers to carry out their professional development without neither allocated time nor financial support from the school. Many teachers were explicit about their needs for new knowledge and development. As one of the teachers expressed:

Something that is very stressful is when we don't have the skills for certain things, like competence we didn't gain during our studies but are expected to have now, when there are new demands expected of teachers.

Furthermore, according to one teacher this expectation to handle situations they have no training for can lead to feelings of helplessness. In addition, he pointed to that teachers are expected to have certain skills required by the state and that this constitutes a dilemma.

The third subtheme, which we have called *Jack of all trades*, demonstrates how the norm in schools is that teachers are expected to be flexible and multitask in many aspects of their work. Participants reported how they teach, plan classes, and grade papers, while at the same time catching up with e-mails from parents or supervisors. Some teachers described the situation with humorous remarks such as "One has to be a Jack of all trades", others were more serious about the burden and referred to the conditions as unfair and inhumane, arguing that "One works like a slave". Several teachers expressed that it is impossible to catch up and spoke about having chosen to work part-time instead of full time, in order to be able to handle expectations.

The fourth subtheme is illustrated in teachers' *lack of influence*. One participant stated that: "Every day, when I arrive at work in the morning, I open my mailbox and go, what is the surprise today?". One of the participants describes being part of a culture where not all teachers can influence decisions: "Those teachers who communicate well through e-mail and voice their opinions are those that are listened to". Another teacher reflected on that she has no say in decisions because she had "no opportunity nor time to participate in discussions".

The participants also expressed a recurring wish for being part of a culture where they get feedback from supervisors or colleagues. The participants reported experiencing a constant

lack of time for communication and feedback with colleagues or supervisors. One teacher expressed the frustration over not getting any supervision in handling students with emotional or psychological difficulties:

We need more supervision on how to deal with the psychosocial environment of our students, we should be offered the same kind of coaching as you are entitled to when working in social services or other institutions involving care of human beings.

Examples having to do with different aspects of perceived lack of support were often coupled with the sense of frustration, hopelessness, sadness, and feeling like a failure.

Theme three: Leadership

This theme conveys the importance of having a competent and caring school leader. In this study, teachers described their experiences related to leadership in three categories, dealing with *unclear tasks*, *leader-co-worker relations*, and *managing change*.

In terms of *unclear tasks*, many participants alluded to experiencing unclear responsibilities and a lack of clear guidelines. For example, they mentioned school leaders who sent e-mails after work hours regarding next day's tasks implicitly expecting teachers to read them. The participants re-counted how confused and frustrated they felt because of lack of timely information. Furthermore, several teachers claimed that they often were expected to perform tasks that are not part of their role as teachers such as financial management and handling of invoices. The general sentiment was that they were expected to handle *ad hoc* tasks principals don't have time for. In addition, participants talked on several accounts about the lack of structure. They linked this to missing lunch breaks, unregistered and unpaid overtime hours, and a general lack of respect for their need for time and planning. The participants used both idiomatic phrases like "Nothing is sacred" and broad but more neutral descriptions as in the following quote:

There is no structure. ... A lot of unpredicted things with the students can happen in a day which forces us to re-schedule and prioritize acute matters, this is also very much the reason it can be hard to plan ahead.

The relationship with the principal was discussed in all focus groups and the teachers agreed on their central importance. Regarding *leader-co-worker relations*, in the teachers' opinion, having a good relationship with the principal was considered pivotal. The physical presence of the principal was described as essential for most teachers in the focus groups. Many, however, described that they rarely had a chance to meet up with the principal. The teachers instead described school leaders as absent. Several teachers claimed they wished to build a better relationship with the principal but described the principal as unavailable. Furthermore, the teachers expressed a need for better relations both on a personal and a professional level. Those who claimed not

having any kind of relationship with the principal often stated they would like to get to know him/her better e.g., "I would have liked to know my boss better". Others wished to have a better, deeper, more personal, and regular professional contact with the school leader.

Teachers in all focus groups expressed their longing for a trusting relationship with the principal. Trusting relationships were described from both personal and professional aspects. From a personal aspect, they expressed a need for being recognised, appreciated, and respected. From a professional point of view, they expressed a need for feedback, need for having more transparency, and a wish for a competent leader with authority. In order to for them to accept principals as leaders with authority, being professional was described as fundamental. A vital element of being professional, according to the participants, was that principals must be educational leaders. At the same time, they described their experiences regarding the principal's lacking competency and lacking experience as educators.

Turning to the third subtheme, when it comes to *managing change*, the participants identified several factors that made their dealing with, as they described it, the ever-changing demands of the school environment seem difficult. The concept of principals failing to communicate a vision and not providing direction for the teachers was pivotal. The teachers had a wish for principals to set the direction for work and to communicate it clearly. Involving the teachers in decision-making was also considered as important for the teachers. The following quotation from one of the participants exemplifies an important aspect:

I believe the largest problem is not the demands the school has on us but the changes the school board has made which changes the characteristics of the job. The assignments have changed but the working conditions have not.

The general sentiment was that for them to adapt to new requirements they need clear leadership.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the beliefs and experiences of teachers regarding organisational processes which could influence the sustainability of the teaching profession. The findings suggest that the primary and lower secondary school teachers participating in this study have addressable unmet needs possibly influencing their professional sustainability. The results reveal a complex interplay between work hindrances, cultural norms and expectations in the schools, as well aspects of leadership which jointly influence the teachers' work situation.

Hindrances

The results indicate that several aspects of work hinder the participants from performing their tasks in an efficient way. These hindrances include organisational aspects such as bureaucracy and technology as well as parental

and societal distrust in teachers' authority and expertise. Increased bureaucracy can be exemplified as keeping up with administration and reporting. The participants further reported an increased workload due to an increase in digital tasks such as e-mail correspondence with parents and supervisors as well as administrative tasks previously carried out by administrative staff. These results are in line with previous research by Boone and Boone (2007) conducted on American teachers, in which it was reported that lack of administrative support is a common problem for teachers and the most frequently cited reason for attrition.

The teachers in this study furthermore reported feeling judged and mistrusted by parents and society, something they described as frustrating. Due to modern technology the threshold to contact teachers is much lower today and the fact that teachers are reachable through e-mail may expose them to a greater external pressure. This could in turn hamper their sense of autonomy and encompass negative consequences such as bias in relation to some students.

The participants found it difficult to adapt to new demands. These results are in line with ideas from Boone and Boone (2007) who argue that the learning environment has changed due to advancements in technology, constituting a concern affecting the teaching profession. Specifically, the challenges include creating a balance between optimizing technology integration and meeting teaching/learning objectives (Boone & Boone, 2007). In line with this idea, teachers in this study shared a view of having no common ground on how to deal with these tasks, leaving them with inventing personal strategies in order to handle the increased workload.

Culture

The results reveal that the participants experienced a clash between different expectations of how to work and collaborate. They further reported being dissatisfied with the lack of time and financial resources to develop professionally. In addition, the teachers experienced that they must take on too many roles in the course of a working day. Teachers furthermore were expected to be flexible, and have competence for working with various tasks, although they experienced little influence on decisions being made regarding schoolwide policies and practices. The results portray a school culture to which teachers struggle to adapt.

Team-cooperation and organisational support can be viewed as dimensions of shared experience part of the organisational culture (James & James, 1989). Indeed, the current study reveals that teachers' experienced lack of cooperation is caused by both organisational and individual factors. The organisational factors include that teachers simply do not have scheduled time to meet with colleagues. In addition, there seems to be individual preferences among the teachers, as many teachers prefer to work alone while others want to cooperate and learn from each other. A key solution to these contrasting needs for autonomy versus collaboration could be, as pointed to in previous studies, to involve teachers in how collaboration is structured in their school (Vangrieken et al., 2017).

Many participants reported that they do not receive continuing education because of lack of organisational and

financial support. Management thus leaves them with the responsibility to themselves take actions for professional development without financial support. There appears to exist an established norm that management can rely on teachers' solitary awareness of why, when, where, and how pedagogical skills need to be developed in their teaching practice. One might ask oneself what the consequences long-term will be if schools depend on individual teachers' capacity for self-directed learning?

Leadership

The results indicate that the participants experienced several unresolved issues with three aspects of school leadership: unclear tasks, relations, and managing change. When it comes to allocation of tasks, two aspects - structuring and monitoring - seem to be particularly important for the participants. Teachers in each group appeared to struggle with a lack of structure and lack of clear guidelines. For example, school leaders who send e-mails after work hours, were perceived as causing confusion and frustration. Despite the advantages of connectivity, being online after work can cause stress. Indeed, supervisors benefit from clearly communicating workplace norms and expectations (Derks et al., 2015). For example, there is a need for clear guidelines regarding communicating with parents after work hours and when they can expect employees to be available online. Otherwise, there is a risk of blurring boundaries between work and spare time, involving negative consequences.

One possible explanation for the findings regarding unclear guidelines might be the phenomena on "organisational gap". Being, as Tyrstrup (2014) suggested, a sort of grey area with unclear responsibilities. Tyrstrup's findings also pointed to the importance of practicing both indirect and direct leadership: leaders shall provide a framework, such as routines or guidelines, while being available and have regular contact with the co-workers at the same time. The phenomena of organisational gap might be related to expressions in this study such as that the teachers are expected to perform tasks that are not in line with their role as teachers. It could also be linked to unregistered and unpaid overtime hours or missing lunch breaks as brought forth by the participants. The results are in line with previous research suggesting that high levels of job autonomy are very important (Evers et al., 2017). Autonomy alone, on the other hand, as suggested in a study by Italian researchers (De Carlo et al., 2019), will not keep teachers healthy and growing in the long run. In line with our results, De Carlo et al. (2019) presented two resources as particularly important for teachers: support from supervisors and participation in decision-making. Leaders could thus effectively help teachers cope with job demands through tailored and contextually anchored support.

Another issue that arose concerning the teachers' relation to the school leaders was the expressed need for a trusting and more supportive relationship with the principal. Remote and invisible leaders who failed to show an interest towards the teachers was a particularly prominent topic. The results are unfortunate since several studies suggest that it is fundamental that teachers and principals trust each other (Bandura et al., 2019; Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016). The

importance of leaders' support as a resource is furthermore a well-researched area (Canrinus et al., 2012) was exemplified in our study by teachers complaining that they did not really know the principal or that they wished to have better contact with the leader.

The principal's competency as pedagogical leader was also questioned on several occasions. Our results suggest that many teachers experience difficulties collaborating with the principals, possibly because of a missing crucial building block - a solid relationship. To counter teachers' lack of workplace connection and help leaders to prioritize easy-to-solve problems and improve social structures in the organisation management by walking around could be employed (Vänje & Brännmark, 2017).

Our study supports the notion that when it comes to planning and introducing new processes in the school, the concept of principals providing a vision and direction is essential. A growing body of literature acknowledges that leadership is a relational process where communication processes are crucial (Leithwood et al., 2020; Schad, 2019). The teachers in this study wished for principals setting the direction for future work, communicating it, and involving teachers in decision-making. These findings are consistent with the results of contemporary educational research underlining the importance of distributed leadership, with a focus on social authority (Woods, 2016). Principals' inspiration and help, or how they fail to enhance adapting to change has been shown to be essential for teachers' ability to deal with the new demands of the ever-changing school environment. Leading schools today, seem to require something that Holmberg and Tyrstrup (2010) described as event-driven everyday leadership rather than intention-driven, highlighting skills such as being able to balance between planning and improvisation.

Practical implications

Facing a modern technological society with rapid change, teachers are struggling with adapting their practices in healthy ways. In summary, the study reveals that an interplay of sets of values and different cultures are present in the school organisation (Hartnell et al., 2019). We found that teachers have conflicting beliefs about why they experience a lack of cooperation. One belief system is teachers' wish for and habit of working alone, while on the other hand there is a belief system claiming that organisational conditions that encourage cooperation don't exist. The results reveal how cultural aspects of work relate to teachers' possibility of professional sustainability, limiting collegial learning which could otherwise be a resource.

As we have seen examples of in this study, teachers' problems are largely centred around the need for common strategies to cope with demands. A work climate which fosters sustainable routines would indeed benefit teachers. Consequently, there is a need for leadership and management to collaborate with the teachers in creating sustainable working conditions. Considering that the teachers in this study expressed a lack of shared responsibility and a lack of time for reflection, involving them in decision-making and

organisational changes is also crucial. In addition, to improve teachers' professional practice, there is a need for continuous development programmes.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate how a lack of cooperation and support among teachers counteract professional development. This is in line with previous ideas from Molway (2019) who means that being part of a culture of peer support for professional learning is crucial for teachers' professional development and efficacy. Consequently, lack of financial support for development, not having time to collaborate, or simply preferring to work in an autonomous manner seem to act counterproductively on the sustainability of the teaching profession. Our results are in line with earlier research urging school leaders to optimize the balance between job demands and resources.

Limitations

Qualitative research utilizing focus groups can result in an exchange of ideas between participants and provide a rich data material to draw upon (Wibeck, 2010). On the other hand, focus group research relies heavily upon the participants feeling at ease and comfortable enough to share their thoughts and experiences of the topic at hand. Our impression was that the conversations flowed freely and based on the lively discussion, that the participants felt comfortable. We can however not guarantee that all participants felt comfortable enough to voice their opinions unreservedly. In addition, although care was taken to let the data speak for itself through careful listening, re-reading and ample discussions in the research team, data analysis could also be skewed due to biases by the researchers.

Future research

The themes revealed in this study, could after validation in a representative sample be at the centre for organisational and educational interventions. Parallel with this there is a need for new studies on how bottom-up innovations and development could counter job demands and increase resources. For example, what personal resources in combination with team resources could help counter job demands. In addition, future studies could look closely at teacher preferences for collaboration versus autonomy. In summary, further investigation utilizing the Job Demands-Resources Model in educational settings might be beneficial in future research.

Conclusion

In the present study the participating teachers lack the structural support necessary to thrive in their work. Several factors add up to a difficult professional situation with possible consequences for the participants' health. For the participants to thrive there needs to be a better balance between demands and resources in order to improve the sustainability of their work lives. An increase in resources available could mean that teachers handle the intrinsic demands of teaching better. Specifically, there is an urgent need for school-level policies and guidelines to protect teachers from undue requests and

pressures from caregivers. In addition, School leader need to support teachers in a contextually anchored way, by being aware of the needs and demands put on teachers in their specific school and by doing their best to provide the necessary resources.

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