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"I do not want to shatter their dreams of becoming teachers." Mentors' use of professional judgement in suitability assessments

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ABSTRACT

The practicum is a significant contributor to the qualification of teachers; however, mentors experience uncertainties due to the use of professional judgement in the process of assessing pre-service teachers' suitability. The research question is: *What dilemmas do mentors experience in the field of tension between support and recognition on the one hand and judging on the other when performing suitability assessments in teacher education?*

The data were collected from in-depth interviews with 16 mentors at 15 different primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. The purpose of the study was to address a gap in the existing knowledge about mentors' use of professional judgement in the process of assessing pre-service teachers' suitability.

The following five topics emerged from content analysis of the collected data, and these are discussed in light of the research question and previous

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research: 1) the pre-service teacher's self-insight, 2) the perspective of power, 3) interpretation of the criteria, 4) critical reflection and professional judgement, and 5) how to prioritise professional tasks. Implications of the findings are of importance for mentors' and teacher educators' suitability assessment practices.

Keywords: Suitability assessment, practicum, mentoring, judgement

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teachers' suitability is continuously assessed in Norwegian teacher education programmes, and when the pre-service teachers receive their diplomas, they are considered qualified teachers. The definition and criteria for the assessment is stated by the Regulations Relating to Suitability Assessment in Higher Education (hereafter referred to as the Regulations) (Department of Education, 2006a). There are eight specific criteria in the guidelines, one of which states that pre-service teachers are not suitable if they show too little self-insight related to tasks in teacher education or to their future professional role (§ 3f).

The suitability assessment of pre-service teachers in Norwegian teacher education programmes is performed by teacher educators, and in the practicum mentors play a key role. They balance two differing purposes – to support the pre-service teacher's development and to continuously evaluate the pre-service teacher's suitability. However, there has been little research connected to the mentor's role in the practicum relating to suitability assessment (Munthe et al., 2020) or to the use of professional judgement in this process.

Discretion and judgement are described as the core of the professional's work (Wallander & Molander, 2014), and teacher educators use professional judgement to give the assessment criteria the flexibility to include context and differences among individual pre-service teachers (Hvalby, 2022). There is a need for more knowledge about how mentors and teacher educators can develop good practices in suitability assessments, and the purpose of this study is to address a gap in the existing knowledge about mentors' use of professional judgement in the process of assessing pre-service teachers' suitability. Based on research on the topic and in-depth interviews with mentors, the challenges in the process are analysed and discussed in light of the research question: *What dilemmas do mentors experience in the field of tension between support and recognition on the one hand and judging on the other when performing suitability assessments in teacher education?*

The first part of this chapter describes the literature background of the study. Then the methodology is justified, and the findings from the analysis are presented. The findings are discussed based on the initial theory, and, in conclusion, the implications of the study are pointed out.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

There is a call for encouraging educational wisdom in teacher education, and Biesta (2017) claimed that teachers need to develop the capacity to make wise educational judgements. This practical wisdom is described by Aristotle (2009) as *phronesis*, an approach which is depending on the ability to use judgement and expand experience over time. *Phronesis* is connected to everyone's presence, beliefs, ethical and moral standards. In my understanding, professional judgement involves the ability to reason and critically reflect when making good decisions professionally.

Teacher educators have a dual role in using professional judgement at the same time as they support the pre-service teachers in developing their critical thinking and judgement skills (Bjelland & Haugsgjerd, 2019). The concept of professional judgement relies on previous research and theories of judgement as well as the understanding that practical wisdom must be founded on a knowledge base related to the profession in order to be perceived as professional (Irgens, 2021). In the practicum, the mentor's actions therefore must be based on the individual's professional competence when facing the pre-service teachers. This involves creating good relationships and deals with the mentor's ability to take the pre-service teacher's perspective in order to recognize their point of view, to better interpret and understand each situation, and furthermore to be able to assess the pre-service teacher. The quality in the relationship and a basic factor in professional judgement is related to recognition and the pre-service teacher's experience of the meeting.

Recognition is a facilitator of the possibility of self-realization, which is important for each individual and furthermore is a foundation for social criticism and change (Honneth, 1995). Social identity is realized in relation to others and must also be recognized by others. In teacher education, this perspective can be seen in the context of subjectification (Biesta, 2017), which is the professional formation of the person. In the practicum, the mentor's ability to support and challenge the pre-service teacher is considered an important principle for the pre-service teacher's learning and their development of a professional identity.

To become a professional teacher, society's values are defined and expressed in the criteria of the Regulations, and, according to Honneth (1995), these criteria govern whether a recognition of solidarity can be achieved.

Recognition is a premise for each individual to achieve autonomy; therefore, the individual has a need to be valued as a subject that also has a value to the community (Honneth, 1995). For recognition to be authentic, Honneth (1995) claims that conflicts of interest and contradictions must be included in the understanding of recognition. This can be related to power, which is pointed out by Foucault (1991) to be expressed in all relations where one party can influence the other. This involves transforming the power into authority by allowing the other person to figure out how that person can and will exist. Therefore, there is a similarity between Honneth (1995) and Foucault (1991) in the understanding of power as discourse, which makes power a premise in the practice of suitability assessment. Despite having a good relationship, there will still be an imbalance between the mentor and the pre-service teacher because the mentor has the power to assess and approve the pre-service teacher. However, an absence of recognition may reflect illegitimate power.

To develop professional judgement, the actors must practice this judgement (Biesta, 2017). This involves more than just experience in making decisions regarding ethical dilemmas, and it requires the capacity for continuously making professional judgements as its reference point. Regulations and requirements for standards come with a possibility for interpretation based on each mentor's beliefs, values, and attitudes. Teachers' professional room for manoeuvre can be understood based on their previous experiences and their present and future situations: "Teachers make their own choices and decisions within what they perceive as their room for action. This room does not exist physically and cannot be measured. It is defined by the teacher's own experience of the situation" (Helleve et al., 2018, p. 2). The mentors' experience of their room for manoeuvre is also related to frame factors and how to prioritise the different professional tasks. Biesta (2015) pointed out the necessity to gain space for teachers' professional judgement because educational policy highlights the effect of accountability. There might be a concern if mentors feel compelled to downgrade suitability assessments due to other professional tasks.

Risk is a fundamental factor in all pedagogical practices in order to avoid instrumental behaviour (Biesta, 2014). The risk exists because pupils and teachers are subjects of action, which comes with responsibilities. In the context of

the practicum, this is about the mentors who are supporting and challenging the pre-service teachers in order to contribute to their professional development. These dynamic processes cannot be programmed, and the pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to try and to fail and then to reflect on their actions. When the subject's uniqueness is referred to as "irreplaceable", Biesta (2015) claims that the peculiarity of a person, in the capacity of being a subject, has a rare value that no one else can replace. In suitability assessment, when a pre-service teacher is acting differently it may lead to a common perception of "that's who he or she is."

Kahneman (2012) problematized that sometimes wrong decisions are made because of emotions, prejudice, or lack of knowledge. The outcome of such hasty decisions is often simplified and irrational. To avoid these results, the mentor needs to emphasize knowledge and competence, in which professional judgement is applied by taking the context and the individual pre-service teacher into consideration. For developing competence in independent actions and in making choices, it is necessary for mentors to develop the ability to analyse their actions and attitudes through critical reflection, both individually and with others. These processes are related to a reflective practice, where the basis for reflection is experiences, theories, and preconceptions (Søndenå, 2004). This implies an understanding of connections and what, why, and how we do something (Biesta, 2017). For reflection to contribute to developing professional judgement, the premises for the actions and theories in which the actions are anchored must be explored. This involves a risk of living in uncertainty; however, only by thinking about or by meeting something new can we develop knowledge (Søndenå, 2004).

The term "criticism" has a Greek etymological meaning that might be translated to "judgement" (Kvernbekk, 2021). Criticism can be related to normative values and to assessing whether an action is correct, credible, and accepted. Critical reflection requires the ability to overview a situation and to bring in different perspectives, and in this space between theory and practice Kvernbekk (2021) points out that there is a possibility for critical reflection, and thus an opportunity for development.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Suitability assessment is a stamp of quality in teacher education, and the assessment is an assurance that pre-service teachers are qualified for professional practice. Mentors have knowledge of the competence required in this practice,

and in the practicum, they observe and assess the pre-service teachers' work. In contrast to findings in other countries, Norwegian pre-service teachers' suitability is assessed by teacher educators throughout the programmes. There are considerable variations in these suitability assessment practices (Caspersen & Kårstein, 2013; Hvalby, 2022; Naustdal & Gabrielsen, 2015), and the implications of holding back the reporting of questionable suitability has been problematized.

In Ireland, eligible applicants for the teacher education programmes are interviewed in order to assess their suitability to teach in addition to evaluating their communication skills, motivation, and capacity for leadership (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Something similar exists in New Zealand, where pre-service teachers are assessed through interviews in order to evaluate the individual's communication skills and community engagement (Alcorn, 2013). There is a set of standards for both graduated and registered teachers, and a teacher's suitability is assessed by their principal every three years in order to renew their teaching certificates (Townsend, 2014). In Finland, the teacher education programmes are highly selective, and pre-service teachers' suitability is assessed through entrance interviews to measure academic competence and personal aptitude (Izadi, 2019; Malinen et al., 2012).

Requirements for admission to teacher education varies, but regardless of the standards they all relate to suitability assessment. The Norwegian model, which continuously assesses the pre-service teachers during the education programmes, is based on criteria in the Regulations (Department of Education, 2006a). There have been claims, however, that the criteria for the assessment are vague (Caspersen & Kårstein, 2013; Langørgeren et al., 2018; Naustdal & Gabrielsen, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The background of this study was a project that mapped the complex role of mentors in suitability assessment in Norwegian teacher education (Hvalby, 2022). One of the findings showed that many mentors experience uncertainties in assessing pre-service teachers' suitability. The uncertainty was related to the use of professional judgement in this process, which provided motivation for conducting in-depth interviews with 16 mentors at 15 different primary and lower secondary schools in Norway.

To answer the research question and to go thoroughly into the topic of using professional judgement in suitability assessment, qualitative in-depth interviews

were performed to elicit the participants' experiences, perceptions, and thoughts (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The interview guide was semi-structured with open questions and was developed to gain insight into what dilemmas mentors experience in the field of tension between providing support and recognition on the one hand and making judgements on the other when performing suitability assessments. The guide was also developed with the intention to provide input into how good practices are shaped in this assessment. The interview guide was revised after a pilot and then further developed after the first round of interviews. The final topics were suitability assessment, factors that might influence the assessment, and the perspective of power.

The Sample

The study took a phenomenological approach, with mentors' experienced dilemmas related to support, recognition, and judging in suitability assessment being the phenomenon (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Criterion sampling was conducted to obtain a mix of participants with regards to gender, age, professional experience in mentoring, and experience with suitability assessment (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). An invitation was emailed to all 163 mentors that were involved in the previous study (Hvalby, 2022). The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data, and all information was processed in accordance with regulations regarding personal data. The participation was voluntary, and a total of 16 mentors accepted the invitation and confirmed participation in the individual interviews. Of these, 12 of the participants were formally qualified mentors, while four of the mentors had professional experience in mentoring without certification.

Data Analysis

The inductive content analysis process was exploratory and was characterized by a bottom-up approach with no predetermined codes, and it started with the specific and proceeded to the general. There were three main phases: preparation, organizing, and reporting (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). First, the transcripts from the interviews were read separately several times, and units of meaning were searched for based on the study's purpose and the research question. Open coding in NVivo identified 812 codes, and we searched for patterns, code frequencies, and factors that might influence the suitability assessment (Saldaña, 2014). The relationships between codes were also explored at this stage, and

this collection of units of meaning with related content from each of the interviews generated sub-categories that addressed the research question. However, some adjustment was needed, and there were units of meaning that had to be split into several meaning units in order to express another core meaning. To move forward in the process, the list of sub-categories was grouped to minimize the number of categories by merging those that were similar or overlapping. Identifying the different categories and deriving the concepts from the data required interpretation, the purpose of which was to enable describing the phenomenon experienced by the mentors. Constant comparison and abstraction of the categories was a circular and reflective process that generated main categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The main categories involved individual concepts that were read and interpreted in light of the connections the mentors created through their statements and finally the analytic process developed 30 main categories. Several of these categories had similar underlying meaning and were abstracting into topics. This required a definition of each topic, which expressed what elements of data every topic captured related to the research question (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Each topic consisted of four to eight categories, and altogether five overarching topics were identified. These expressed the content of the mentors' descriptions of their experienced dilemmas in the field of tension between providing support and recognition on the one hand and making judgements on the other when assessing suitability. The reporting phase in the content analysis involved a structured presentation of the results; thus, a summary of the derived categories and topics is shown in Figure 10.1.

The pre-service teachers' self-insight	The perspective of power	Interpretation of the criteria	Critical reflection & professional judgement	How to prioritise professional tasks
Self-confidence	Support	Flexibility	Reflection	Obligations
Pre-requisite	Trust	Autonomy	Reasoning	Stress
Personality	Confidence	Uncertainty	Discretion	Workload
How to come across to others	Vulnerability	Lack of ability or will	Act professionally	Time management
	Guilty conscience	Immature vs. unsuitable	Various perspectives	
	Failing		Knowledge	
	Confronting		Ethical values	
	Demanding		Uniqueness in the individual	
			Uniqueness in the situation	

Figure 10.1 Summary of the derived categories and topics.

Trustworthiness

The determination of the purpose of the study provides information regarding analysis and interpretation, and in order to establish credibility five validation procedures were used during the research process, namely disconfirming evidence, having prolonged engagement in the field, using thick, rich description to create transparency, member checking, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Evidence is crucial to justification, and there were 2189 minutes of audio recordings in the data material. In addition, constant reflexivity throughout the research process was necessary to reduce biases and beliefs that might influence the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). To create credible data, a professional distance was established between the participants and the researcher. In this study, with a teacher educator interviewing mentors in the teacher education, a hierarchy may have been formed. The roles seemed complementary, but the researcher was leading the interviews and therefore had control, which also could have created an imbalance in the relations of power. This asymmetry may have affected the participants' answers to the questions; however, to balance the power, the fact that the interview situation facilitated mutual learning was

highlighted (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). In addition, there was a striving for openness, recognition, and trust.

Evaluating the quality of the responses in the interviews and reflecting on whether it might be necessary to develop and revise the interview guide further made it clear that more than one round of interviews was needed (Kvale, 2006). A prolonged engagement with the participants that lasted from May to December 2021 added credibility to the study and involved three rounds of interviews in order to create depth. All interviews were conducted at each participant's workplace, except for the last round that, due to Covid-19 restrictions, was organised digitally through Zoom.

The intentions of the first round of interviews were to establish trust, to make the participants familiar with the interview situation, and to make sure they understood the questions being asked. In the second round, the purpose was to encourage the participants to elaborate on the topics, to be an active listener, and to use probes and prompts to get as much detail as possible (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For the researcher, this also meant listening for what was *not* told. The purpose of round three of the interviews was to clarify, go further in depth, and follow up on eventualities that were interesting in the second round. In addition, there was an experience that some of the participants held back on information in the previous interview rounds, but they were more comfortable in sharing in the end.

The researcher's background as a mentor and teacher educator made the context familiar, which gave the opportunity to register nuances in the answers. On the other hand, the professional background may have affected the researcher's preconceptions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). To establish trustworthiness and minimise biases that may have influenced the interpretation due to the researcher's subjective stance, the next step in the process was to bracket the presumptions of having a peer familiar with the phenomenon being investigated.

The final validity procedure was member checking, where the participants read the transcriptions and interpretations and commented on their correctness to ensure credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). However, the researcher cannot rely on the participant's narrative exclusively because the research question, the method of approach, reflexivity, and the quality in the data also must be considered when it comes to trustworthiness. Furthermore, credibility is linked to the researcher's ability to meet dynamic challenges in the interview situation.

A limitation of this study is the lack of combinations of methods in the data collection, where observation may construct knowledge in understanding the

interaction between the mentors and the pre-service teachers in the practicum. Analysing this interaction in relation to suitability assessment might be an avenue for future research. The findings cannot be generalised; however, the study intends to provide a contextualized understanding of the mentors' experienced dilemmas in the field of tension between providing support and recognition and making judgments when performing suitability assessments in teacher education.

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethical guidelines and principles were helpful; however, each interview situation had close interaction and required experience-based judgement and proper attention to the particularities (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005). Therefore, generalizations cannot be made without taking the context into consideration. The topics of suitability and professional judgement may have been perceived sensitively by some participants without this being explicitly expressed in the interviews. Suitability was linked to professional judgement in general in the interviews, but how the individual mentor related to suitability in particular is unknown, and the questions and preparation of the interview guide took this into consideration.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The five topics that emerged from the content analysis of the interviews are presented as follows and provide answers to the research question and which topics attracted the most interest. The 16 mentors are referred to as M-1 to M-16.

Pre-Service Teachers' Self-Insight

Section § 3f in the Regulations states that pre-service teachers who show too little self-insight related to their future professional role might be unsuitable. The development of self-insight is a process, but the mentors' experienced difficulties in assessing pre-service teachers with too much or too little faith in their own professional skills. M-12 said: "There is an expectation that pre-service teachers have some knowledge of how they come across to others." The statement was related to supervision, where a pre-service teacher always blamed others for her own inadequacy. She had a notion of herself as "perfect" and was not able to reflect on her own negative actions. Most of the participants talked about the importance of supporting the pre-service teacher; however, too much support might become a burden on the pre-service teacher if such support is related to

suitability. M-7 pointed out: “No one had previously reported any doubts about this pre-service teacher’s suitability. This was his third year, and in the practicum, I experienced that he had no self-insight in his role as a teacher.”

The Perspective of Power

All the mentors talked about the perspective of power related to failing the pre-service teachers in the practicum. M-10 said: “The pre-service teachers should feel safe and have confidence in me as a supervisor. The relationship of trust is shaken if I have to fail them. M-2, M-8, and M-14 claimed that they were bothered by “shattering the pre-service teacher’s dream of becoming a teacher”. In their experience, suitability assessment was demanding, and thus they were aware of the responsibility. However, several of the mentors felt uncertainty about making the right decision and therefore they waited. M-6, M-11, and M-16 also expressed that they had experienced a sense of guilt on behalf of the pre-service teachers they had considered to be unsuitable. M-4 and M-15 talked about the challenge in confronting pre-service teachers because of unacceptable behaviour; however, they both emphasized that they had experienced support from school leaders at their workplace and from partners at the university.

Interpretation of the Criteria

The mentors talked about how the purpose and values of the eight criteria in the Regulations can be specified in the meetings with each pre-service teacher. Eleven mentors expressed that they in some way had experienced uncertainty about the expression “lack of ability or will” that is stated in four of the criteria. Some participants claimed that professional judgement is related to the fact that there is no given truth, and interpretation of the criteria provides flexibility and autonomy. However, most participants highlighted the uncertainty this creates relating to *whether* to report doubts, *when* in the period of practicum, the doubt should be reported, and *how* these procedures should evolve. A consequence of reporting doubts about a pre-service teacher’s suitability would be to initiate a conversation with the particular pre-service teacher. Several mentors expressed concern for this matter.

Critical Reflection and Professional Judgement

Critical reflection, reasoning, and discretion were frequently seen in the data material in the context of using professional judgement and developing attitudes. “I try to shed light on all aspects of the case and reflect critically on a number

of factors when reasoning," M-12 stated. Some participants pointed out that professional judgement is related to the uniqueness of each pre-service teacher, and M-6 said: "I look at the criteria; however, before my decision I consider the specific situation and the actual pre-service teacher. I reflect to find the big picture but have to use discretion." In the assessment the participants talked about how their decision is based on knowledge, where they take the context and person into consideration. Several mentors mentioned bringing in various perspectives on similar situations.

How to Prioritise Professional Tasks

Even though the participants reflected on various perspectives regarding suitability assessments, only three of them had experienced reporting doubts about pre-service teachers, and these participants were all certified mentors. All of the participants talked about a hesitation to fail pre-service teachers in the practicum or doubting their suitability. Time was a factor highlighted by most of the mentors as a challenge in their practices, and the dilemma lay in how professional tasks should be prioritised. M-1 pointed out: "Both as a mentor and a teacher, I have many professional tasks and obligations. It is extra hectic in the practicum, and what is most important?" M-13 mentioned that there is not enough time to build relationships, to carry out good supervision, or to get a sufficient basis for assessment of the pre-service teachers during the practicum.

DISCUSSION

Pre-service teachers want to become teachers for various reasons, and even though their intentions are good, becoming a teacher is not suitable for everyone. The mentor facilitates the development of the pre-service teacher's learning, and this also contributes to the development of their self-insight. The pre-service teachers need self-insight related to professional tasks and their upcoming professional role, and they also need to be able to gain insight into the pupils.

Dilemma 1: Shattering the Dream of Becoming a teacher or Creating New Opportunities?

As shown in the findings on the topic "Pre-service Teachers' Self-Insight" the participants support the pre-service teachers and recognize their diversity. But where do they draw the line regarding the pre-service teachers' suitability when the factors apply to self-insight or personality? In the supervision, reflection

and critical thinking are emphasized (Carrol, 2010), and these are prerequisites for self-insight. To support or challenge the pre-service teacher, the mentor can bring in new and various perspectives in the reflections. A premise in critical reflection is to have an overview and to be able to analyse actions and attitudes (Kvernbekk, 2021; Sødénå, 2004). There is a need for critical thinking and reflection to understand the use of professional judgement in suitability assessment. In the topic “Critical Reflection and Professional Judgement” the findings show that when the mentors expressed critical reflection and reasoning, they related these factors to internal processes reflecting one’s own preconceptions, attitudes, and values. However, they also related to external processes through the actions they performed, hence the mentors’ abilities for critical thinking and reflection as well as their assessments vary across contexts. To develop professional judgement, the mentors should be practising this judgement (Biesta, 2017), which requires room for manoeuvre (Biesta, 2015; Helleve et al., 2018).

The findings in the topic “How to Prioritise Professional Tasks” show that the mentors experienced a lack of time as a barrier, and all of the professional tasks with strict requirements in the practicum left them with little space. A consequence may have been that very few participants failed pre-service teachers or reported doubts about their suitability. The mentors were aware of their responsibility, but due to feeling sorry for the pre-service teacher or being afraid of losing trust and shattering someone’s dream of becoming a teacher, the suitability assessment might have been downgraded by some mentors. Kahneman (2012) pointed out the complexity of decisions based on emotions and the importance of emphasizing knowledge and competence when decisions are made. Most of the mentors used their knowledge, experience, and ethical values and took the context and individuals into consideration when assessing suitability. However, out of fear of choosing the wrong option, some mentors seem to have suffered from decision paralysis, which might have had an impact regarding both the pre-service teachers and pupils, hence accountability in the assessment involves recognizing both groups.

Dilemma 2: Is There too Much Room for Interpretation in the Criteria?

Accountability is also about the perspective of power, in which contradictions and conflicts of interest are included in order to understand how recognition develops (Honneth, 1995). The findings in the topic “The Perspective of Power” indicate that if normal conflicts are approached with full standardization in

order to avoid uncomfortable confrontations or to use illegitimate power, the pre-service teacher's development may be prevented. An imbalance in the power is inevitable (Foucault, 1991); nevertheless, trust can be maintained through recognition and open and proactive communication.

Recognition is a need that mentors are obliged to meet in their practices; however, it may be naïve to think that pre-service teachers always can be recognized in any context. One of the criteria in the Regulations states that pre-service teachers who lack the will or ability to change unacceptable behaviour in accordance with supervision may be unsuitable (§ 3g). As shown in the findings in the topic "Interpretation of the Criteria", the question is what preconceptions the mentor has when interpreting this criterion. Thus, there are many nuances and meanings of the term "unacceptable". Are we talking about acting aggressively or exhibiting abusive behaviour, or are there other ethical values and experiences that are used as the basis for the assessment? In terms of suitability assessment, Honneth's theory (1995) is one perspective that can provide insight into how opportunities for recognition are related to dominant values. To achieve autonomy, each individual has a need to be appreciated as a subject with value to the community.

In addition to knowledge about recognition, the mentors should reflect on their own preconceptions and articulate their tacit knowledge. To understand a phenomenon without any assumptions or to escape bias or preconceptions might be impossible (Kahneman, 2012), and for mentors this involves avoiding taking a position where they are seemingly ignorant. They should be aware of how the complexity of their own subjectivity may affect their judgement, and they should keep in mind that the pre-service teachers in the practicum are not meant to turn into copies of the mentors. The teacher education needs to facilitate development of critical thinking and judgement for both the educators and those who attend the programmes (Bjelland & Haugsgjerd, 2019).

There is a standard procedure in suitability assessment, but there is room for interpretation. Is there too much room or do the criteria need to be clearer? According to Biesta (2014), attempts to strengthen education by turning it into a well-oiled machine may lead to the education becoming a threat to itself. This is an argument against having fully instrumental standards and extreme criteria, which can limit the mentor's autonomy and room for manoeuvre (Biesta, 2015; Helleve et al., 2018). The actors must endure living in uncertainty to

some extent, and this uncertainty can be the starting point for critical reflection (Sødenå, 2004).

Developing critical thinking and reflection involves both theory and practice (Kvernbekk, 2021) and can support the mentor in making suitability assessments. However, the uncertainty should not prevent failing pre-service teachers or reporting their lack of suitability. The risk (Biesta, 2014) appears in the assessment, where the pre-service teachers should not be considered as objects shaped by the mentors nor as being adjusted to the criteria in the Regulations. Pre-service teachers whose suitability is questioned will get additional guidance and support to be able to develop in the teacher role. However, if there still is no development, the person may use their qualities in other professions. In the context of subjectification (Biesta, 2017), unsuitable pre-service teachers lack basic elements in a professional identity and have a deficient subjectification, which also relates to their limited qualifications as teachers. Nevertheless, each individual has a uniqueness, and they should be recognized for who they are (Biesta, 2015; Honneth, 1995). Recognition from the mentor is therefore necessary despite reporting doubts about the pre-service teacher's suitability. Even though the person is not fit to become a teacher, they can find new opportunities elsewhere.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this article was to explore mentors' experienced dilemmas in the field of tension between providing support and recognition on the one hand and making judgements on the other when performing suitability assessments in teacher education. These experienced dilemmas appear as five topics: 1) the pre-service teachers' self-insight, 2) the perspective of power, 3) interpretation of the criteria, 4) critical reflection and professional judgement, and 5) how to prioritise professional tasks.

The criteria for suitability are relevant and indicate the premises for becoming a professional teacher. However, they cannot become totally standardized and must instead be seen in the context of the individual pre-service teacher. This involves the use of professional judgement in the process of suitability assessment, which is the core of the professional's work (Wallander & Molander, 2014). A premise for judging regarding academic and practical issues in suitability assessments is the qualifications of the mentors. The findings did not, however, indicate any significant difference in the experiences of the participants who were

certified as mentors versus the participants without qualifications. Nevertheless, there were only three participants who had reported doubt about pre-service teacher's suitability, and all three were qualified mentors.

A challenge in suitability assessment both as a research field and as a practice is that there is no agreed upon perception of what constitutes the knowledge base for suitability assessments. As professional practitioners, the mentors have a pedagogical knowledge base related to their work as supervisors and teacher educators. However, there is a challenge in defining a collective knowledge base linked directly to suitability assessments. If the standards and criteria in the regulations of suitability are used as an action template, this will prevent autonomy and it might be difficult for the mentors to relate professionally to their practices. This implies the need for a knowledge base related to suitability assessment that can contribute to professional judgement in reasoning and critical reflections. Achieving competence as a mentor involves theoretical and practical knowledge in education, including the role of different actors in suitability assessments. To assess pre-service teachers' suitability, mentors need knowledge and insight from several disciplines, and the education programmes for mentors should be designed with this in mind and in relation to the main mandate, which is to ensure the quality of teacher education in order to support pupils' learning and development.

Time management is a key element when prioritising professional tasks, and the findings in this study imply that the mentors should be released from other professional tasks, when possible, when they are assessing pre-service teachers in practicum.

This study is limited due to the lack of theoretical foundation and empirical data in the Norwegian field of suitability assessment. However, this article is a small step into an unexplored area, and the implications are of importance for mentors' and teacher educators' suitability assessment practices.

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