Ethical dilemmas at work placements in teacher education

Henrik Lindqvist, Robert Thornberg and Gunnel Colnerud

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT
Teacher education involves encountering ethical dilemmas connected to teaching. Student teachers’ ethical dilemmas sometimes occur when ideals clash with experiences. The current study focuses on the challenges experienced by student teachers during work placement education. The aim of the study was to investigate ethical dilemmas student teachers experienced during work placement education, using the sensitising concept of the notion of care. The data consist of semi-structured interviews from 22 student teachers and were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory framework. The findings show that the ethical dilemmas reported by the student teachers regarded two influential agents in work placement education: pupils and teachers. Concerning pupils, the dilemmas involved encountering pupils living in poor circumstances as well as experiencing aggression from and among pupils. When it comes to teachers, dilemmatic experiences stemmed from teachers who were disillusioned and derogatory talk in the teacher lounge.

Teacher education typically involves an extended period of time spent being an active part of a school, visiting a supervising teacher to learn about professional teacher work. Participating in a work placement (or field training, practicum) also commonly includes practising teaching. The objective of the work placement is to enable student teachers to learn about teaching and working as a teacher from a skilled teacher in a master-apprentice relationship (Hultman, Wedin, & Schoultz, 2007). In this relationship, the supervising teachers assess the student teacher’s performance during work placement education. This assessment has an impact on the student teachers’ success in completing their studies to become a teacher. During work placements, student teachers recount concerns, conflicts and critical incidents that they experience (Lindqvist, 2019; Lindqvist, Weurlander, Wernerson, & Thornberg, 2017, 2019a). These concerns and conflicts are commonly described as having limited means of action as a student teacher (Lindqvist et al., 2017). In addition, student teachers use highly emotional language, including words such as ‘worry’, ‘shock’, ‘excitement’, ‘love’ or ‘panic’, when describing their experiences of work placement education (Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007).

In the literature, teaching is described as a moral activity or practice, where it is not apparent what the best solution might be at all times (Colnerud, 2006; Jackson, Boostrom,
might been the theoretical education before, comes. Dilemmas 2013). Student teachers experience dilemmas at schools (Deng et al., 2018; Ulvik, Smith, & Helleve, 2017). In reaction to encountering emotional challenges and a moral practice that is in part tacit, student teachers try to find the desired emotions, such as resilience and commitment, when they meet more experienced teachers (Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers, & Bilica, 2016).

In the micro-political setting of a school (Achinstein, 2002), interactions with supervising teachers, pupils and other stakeholders involve a process of student teachers adapting to the school, and conforming to the school’s ethical and pedagogical principles and status positions (Lindqvist, Weurlander, Wernerson, & Thornberg, 2019b). Emotional challenges and ethical consideration could occur when student teachers’ ideals clash with their experiences (Golombek & Doran, 2014).

In the current study, we have further focused on the ethical dilemmas that student teachers experience in their work placement education. There is a growing body of research on teachers’ ethical dilemmas (e.g. Campbell, 1996; Colnerud, 1997, 2015; Husu & Tirri, 2001; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011, 2016; Tirri, 1999), and a few studies describing the ethical dilemmas student teachers encounter (Davies & Heyward, 2019; Deng et al., 2018). We add to previous research, further conceptualising ethical dilemmas in work placement education and using a sensitising concept of the notion of care. A sensitising concept is here understood as a loose theoretical framework that enabled the use of a tentative theoretical idea during analyses (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014). Here the concept of care was utilised to further enhance the analyses. The notion of care offers a framework that might be at the heart of understanding why newly qualified teachers experience what has been described as a ‘reality shock’ (Veenman, 1984), even though they previously experienced schools during work placement education.

**Ethical dilemmas of work placement education**

Dilemmas are full of ethical considerations. A common conceptualisation of ethical dilemmas is that they are spurred by a critical incident that creates a situation that forces the participants to make choices according to competing alternatives (Flett & Wallace, 2005). Based on this definition, a dilemma cannot be resolved using the right course of action. The competing alternatives commonly involve both negative and positive outcomes. Even though there is a potential to create a situation that could be worse than before, the individuals experiencing a dilemma have to make a choice. Therefore, they must define an action that they consider to be morally right, even though it might create a negative outcome for others. To understand dilemmas in education, Fransson and Grannäs (2013) discuss the dilemmatic space that a person can be a part of. A dilemmatic space does not include a typical end and beginning, but dilemmas are construed in the setting – the space – that a person participates in.

Applying the conceptual frame of dilemmatic space means an emphasis on the social constructions that result from the structural conditions and relational aspects of everyday practices.
In this way, an ongoing dynamic flow of negotiation, positioning, construction and reconstruction is emphasised between the competing forces. (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 11.)

Thus, dilemmas are ever-present in people’s lives, and a dilemmatic space is positioned as a part of the context of teachers’ work and lives (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). Ethical dilemmas also influence their relationships with pupils.

In this study, we defined ethical dilemmas as experiences that construe challenging emotions where there are several options of actions, involving both negative and positive outcomes. Concerning teacher education, the emergent teacher identity has been found to be impacted by experiencing dilemmas. In this way, ‘the emergent professional identity framework highlights social interactions and the way engagement with collaboration is influenced by participation in particular communities of practice’ (Turner, 2016, p. 583). Conflicting ideologies are a major source of student teachers’ experienced dilemmas (Davies & Heyward, 2019; Ding & Wang, 2018; Lindqvist et al., 2019a). Samuelsson and Colnerud (2015) exemplified dilemmas in experiences of classroom management during work placement education. These dilemmas included exercising authority, distance and domination versus being personable, creating relationships versus not being too private, students as individuals versus leading students in groups, being flexible versus being well-prepared, and knowledge goals versus social goals. In connection with experiencing ethical dilemmas in work placement education, Richardson, Watt, and Devos (2013) conclude that student teachers have not yet developed the appropriate skills to establish, negotiate and manage relationships with teachers, supervisors and pupils.

In work placement education, a number of ethical complexities and dilemmas are ever-present. For example, the notion of care is common as an ethical complexity among teachers (Colnerud, 1997). Nodding (2012) points out that care can only be practised when it is accepted by the receiver. This complexity is a part of the ethical dilemma of student teachers’ clashes between ideal conceptions and what can be achieved in practice.

We investigated what influences student teachers’ challenges during work placement education. The aim of the study was to investigate ethical dilemmas that student teachers experienced during work placement education, using the sensitising concept of the notion of care. To our knowledge, this has not previously been explored in relation to student teachers’ work placement education in an exhaustive manner. Thus, this study adds to the literature on the ethics involved in teacher education.

**Method**

A qualitative research design based on a grounded theory approach was adopted. Grounded theory is a suitable method when studying social processes, meaning and interaction (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978), and is thus appropriate when studying experiences of ethical dilemmas during work placement education. We used a constructivist grounded theory because we were interested in the meaning co-constructed by the student teachers during semi-structured interviews and how they represented an ethical dilemma. Twenty-two student teachers participated in the study. The student teachers were studying to become elementary school teachers at Swedish compulsory school for children aged six to 12, which includes kindergarten/preschool class (K) to grade six. Nine
of the participants were studying to become K–3 teachers, and 13 were studying to teach grades four to six. Fifteen of the participants were women and seven were men, and their ages ranged from 22 to 39. The student teachers were asked to participate via e-mail, and every student teacher who volunteered was interviewed. All interviews were conducted by the first author. The interviewer and participants were not known to each other prior to the interviews.

All participants in the current study were completing their last semester of teacher education at the time of data collection. The teacher education programme involved a total of 20 weeks of work placement education distributed throughout the teacher education programme, with the longest placement consisting of ten weeks during the last semester. During their work placement education, student teachers shadow and assist a supervising teacher and their teaching responsibility progresses over the course of the programme.

**Data collection and analysis**

The study received ethical approval from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (Dnr 2014/1088-31/5). Informed consent was collected from all individual participants in the study. The participants were informed that they would be treated with full confidentiality and had the right to withdraw their participation at any point in the research process. The interviewer aimed to achieve a non-judgmental approach and an open climate of conversation during the interviews by being attentive to the participants’ tones and facial expressions. Using follow-up questions and returning to previous statements were used as strategies so that the participants could feel open to discuss matters and elaborate on their narratives with the interviewer (Hiller & Diluzio, 2004).

The interview questions focus on (a) reasons for working as a teacher, (b) perceived challenges during teacher education, and (c) worries about working as a teacher in the future. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms have been used in the transcriptions and findings. In the paper, pseudonyms and the teaching range of the student teachers’ educational programme are listed in brackets after the excerpts. The length of the interviews varied from 31 to 68 minutes.

When analysing data, grounded theory tools were used to navigate close to the data material. Initial, focused and theoretical coding was conducted, not in a linear way but in a flexible way. The stages were intertwined and complemented each other as the analysis progressed. The first set of codes was constructed through initial coding (Charmaz, 2014). The process of initial coding started as soon as the data material was transcribed, and coding was carried out close to the data material, word by word, line by line or segment by segment, with curiosity and an open mind. This produced a vast number of codes that were grounded in the data. During focused coding, the most common and significant codes that were identified during initial coding guided further data collection and coding (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes were attached to categories by constructing working definitions. Theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) took place more or less in parallel with focused coding. In theoretical coding, possible relationships between categories were examined in order to integrate them into a coherent story (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). By using constant comparison of data, categories, theoretical codes and memos, a working theory of student teachers’ ethical dilemmas in work placement education was constructed.
Memos were written during the process (Charmaz, 2014). Memos of analytical thoughts and intuition allowed for a degree of playfulness when trying out clusters of codes and actively engaging in asking the data questions about what the student teachers were talking about, and different theoretical ideas were tried out. Memo writing created an opportunity to be sensitive to the material, and to encourage creativity in the analysis process (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the analysis, we maintained an open mind but did not attempt to analyse the data without preconceptions. Instead, we adopted an informed grounded theory approach that involved theoretical agnosticism and theoretical pluralism, enabling us to be open and sensitive to data while at the same time reviewing and consulting literature (Thornberg, 2012). Through this process, the ethical dilemmas and the notion of care were introduced in the analysis as they fitted with the data and earned their place in the analysis.

**Findings**

In the interviews, when student teachers discussed emotional challenges, work placement education was the most common space. They talked about these challenges as ethical dilemmas without inherent solutions. They navigated the dilemmas, and their identity was influenced in the reciprocal relationship between the student teacher and the dilemmatic space (cf. Ding & Wang, 2018). The ethical dilemmas reported by the student teachers regarded two influential agents in work placement education: pupils and teachers. Concerning pupils, the dilemmas involved encountering pupils living in poor circumstances and experiencing aggression from and among pupils. When it comes to teachers, dilemmatic experiences stemmed from teachers who were disillusioned and derogatory talk in the teacher lounge. The main concerns of the student teachers revolved around their desire to care for pupils and protect them from harm, in contrast to the available options for action.

**Dilemmas involving pupils**

In relation to pupils, student teachers sometimes described an idealistic understanding of their responsibilities as teachers. These understandings were contrasted with possible actions for a student teacher to undertake. Coming into contact with pupils during short periods of work placement education might serve as an illustration of future dilemmas faced by student teachers. Even so, the student teachers acted upon their dilemmas in the present, during their work placement education as student teachers.

**Encountering pupils who lived in poor circumstances**

Student teachers frequently described being approached by pupils who they believed were living in poor circumstances. Their understanding of the parents’ situations was not commonly discussed with their supervisors. Their descriptions could not be seen as objective views of living under poor circumstances, and Ingrid (see below) did not inquire further into the pupil’s lack of pencils at home. The experienced care for pupils was instead a typical example of how a person’s perspective or definition of a situation is real since it results in real consequences (Charon, 2006). It also exemplified manifesting
a sensitivity to different needs weighed up against a value for all learners (Davies & Heyward, 2019). Ingrid described the following example:

Ingrid: ‘Take some of these papers and you can use them at home.’ And she started crying and was really sad, and I asked her if she wasn’t okay with taking the papers home to draw on. ‘Yes,’ the student said, ‘I want to take them home, but I don’t have any pencils at home.’ And then I was also really sad and wondered, what do I do? Because she’s probably not the only one. I know she’s not the only one in Sweden, but she’s probably not the only one in the class, either. That was something that hit me pretty hard.

Interviewer: What did you think about that?

Ingrid: Yes, well, I met the child’s mother and then I thought that I wished she had used the 50 Swedish crowns she had spent on her pack of cigarettes to buy pencils for her child instead. [...] Well, I felt so much sympathy for the child, and at the same time I feel that you should be professional as a teacher, and I guess I wasn’t. It was my first work placement and what I did was I went and got the class pencils and took out ten crayons, or pencils, and gave them to her and said: ‘Here, take these home, and then you will have pencils at home you can colour with.’ And you shouldn’t do that, but at the same time maybe there is no right or wrong. (Grade F–3 student teacher)

Ingrid did intervene, having experienced a dilemma in the relational space of work placement education. It was a dilemma she did not anticipate. She said: ‘I felt almost as if no children are poor living in Sweden. And of course, that happens. That was a bit of sadness and I felt I couldn’t do enough.’ The feeling of being inadequate in relation to the good you want to do as a teacher was shown to be complicated. Ingrid thought she could do good, caring for children, but she did not anticipate encountering poor children. Ingrid did what she knew was wrong (giving away pencils that belonged to all the pupils) to cope with the dilemma of care and possible actions. Vendela discussed something similar with regard to buying shoes for a child, or spending time with the child at the weekend.

Vendela: Before it was because I felt sorry that there are many pupils at this school whose lives are a little rough. I would think their home situations are tough and feel sorry for them maybe, but now I noticed I can shield myself from that, and not think about their home situations and stuff like that, because unfortunately I can’t. Instead you have to do what you can. And if I notice that something isn’t good, I’m going to warn someone and talk to the counsellor or something. But I worried about that.

Interviewer: Being able to shield yourself?

Vendela: Yes, that I would have a hard time, if there were problems at home or if they didn’t have shoes, I imagined buying shoes for them and stuff like that. But now I understand I can’t. But I thought: ‘That boy will not go to the Lego exhibition because his mother doesn’t go out.’ And then I actually wanted to take him, but now I understand I can’t do that. But I have those thoughts that I want to take care of them. And I understand it’s not possible.

Interviewer: Why not?

Vendela: Because then I think there is no stopping it. And I think it would be seen as weird for a class teacher to be meeting a pupil at the weekend.

Interviewer: Who would think that was weird?

Vendela: Other teachers I think, and maybe, I don’t think the children would think it was weird. But maybe it would be a little too strong a relationship. If I want to help someone who
I know doesn’t get to go out, because his mother can’t cope. Or that someone doesn’t have any sneakers, I thought that once, well, I’ll buy shoes and pretend I found them, but I can’t do that either. Because then you might never stop. I thought at the beginning that it might be like that, but now I can shield myself better. Sometimes I feel a little cold instead.

Interviewer: In what way?

Vendela: I know when they don’t have an easy time at home, like I have a pupil now who doesn’t really know where she lives, whether she lives with her mother or her father or with her brother, and I think I can’t care about that, but really, I probably do. (Grade F–3 student teacher.)

Vendela wanted to care for the children who, from her perspective, lacked adequate care. Here Vendela described an ethical dilemma that appeared to be wrapped into perceived custodial conflicts about who owns the child and who holds the right or correct view of the child. From the view of the school, it seems common that there is a one-sided communication, where the parents should live up to the teachers’ perception of adequate parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaæ, 2011). Vendela did, however, realise that this might appear inappropriate. She considered her options for acting in an ethically more justifiable way according to her notion of care. In addition, she interpreted the nuances of the ethics of care, where intervening in the family might be considered weird by others. Vendela did not relate this experienced dilemma to being able to get support from other professional realms, either at school or away from the school context. She concluded that she would probably be affected less by pupils living in poor conditions over time. The boundaries of the education space have been crossed here, and the notion of meeting the pupil at the weekend transcends the ‘school space’, leading to an acute dilemma: Do I only care for the pupil during school hours? Other interventions in relation to pupils included the actual harmful spaces of pupils at school, where aggression and violence were perceived to construe acute dilemmas.

**Aggression from and among pupils**

Aggression from pupils involved distinctions between aggression towards other pupils and aggression towards the student teacher. The dilemma involved experiencing the school’s inability to handle aggression. The student teachers were not content with their experiences, but did not discuss being able to change or deal with this aggression. Again, the values of care and protection and possible actions were challenged. The values that did not match involved not being able to act in a way they considered to be morally right, and not being able to use their own moral compass (cf. Davies & Heyward, 2019). Ella discussed encountering pupils she considered to be mean to each other in a way she had not anticipated and faced the dilemma of dealing adequately with a pupil’s behaviour and maintaining a safe learning environment (cf. Davies & Heyward, 2019). She also concluded that she thought the way the school, including her supervisor, handled the problem was inadequate.

Ella: I have found it really hard to see how mean they are to each other, hitting each other. Fights almost every day, and that’s like, of course they quarrel, I did as a child too. My class did too, but this is more. They scratch and have fist fights and wrestle on the floor, and it doesn’t matter what you do, they just keep doing it.
Interviewer: So, what do you do?

Ella: Well, we try to separate them, tell them to try to work out the problem. That’s not easy because they blame each other all the time. A note is sent home. Well, it doesn’t feel like they have any strategies to handle it. And I think it’s even more frustrating coming from the outside. What do we do, what do I do really? I want to call their parents, but when the teachers don’t do that it feels hopeless to me.

Interviewer: How do you handle the hopelessness?

Ella: Well, I go home and cry. (Grade F–3 student teacher.)

Richard reported having seen pupils bullying others, without teachers intervening.

Interviewer: What did you think when they said that, and how did that make you feel?

Richard: Well, it was hard, because you notice that some pupils get hurt and they also commented on teachers a lot, and on me when I had lessons too. You felt that it was, I don’t think the teacher should have authority over them, but it felt like they could pressure anyone and they tried to, and I don’t know why they wanted to.

Interviewer: What were their comments like?

Richard: [...] If someone was up in front of the class and talking, all of a sudden, they wouldn’t listen but make faces and stuff like that. Well, some obscene words were shouted out too, that pupil displayed a weird view of women and called them different names.

Interviewer: In the classroom?

Richard: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: What did the teacher do then?

Richard: Well, she sent a note home, but I’m not sure, she didn’t talk to him in a way I actually would have considered to be the best way. (Grade F–3 student teacher.)

Pupils who were behaving in an aggressive manner were commonly depicted by the student teachers as the problem. They referred to pupils’ offensive comments to teachers as well as offensive conversations and other forms of aggression among pupils. The student teachers tried to understand (‘read’) the dilemma in the relational space of these encounters.

Janet: Well, spontaneously I think about work placement education and if you talked to pupils who might not have the best home situation. I was at a school where a girl started to fight with some other girls in the class, and then she ran away and I went after her and talked with her. And we went back to the school and I asked if it was okay if I told her teacher. And then she said, “Yes, but she [the teacher] doesn’t care”. And when I talked to the teacher, it was like she didn’t really care. She was just: “Yeah, yeah, it happens every day, it doesn’t matter.”

Interviewer: That the pupil ran away?

Janet: Well, that she felt hurt about what the others said.

Interviewer: Okay.

Janet: And instead of dealing with the problem and talking to the pupils involved, she put this on the pupil who felt alone and rejected. And then it was a little tough as a student teacher to
go against this teacher who had worked for 40 years and say: “You can’t do that.” (Grade 4–6 student teacher.)

In their descriptions of aggression, student teachers were taken aback by their experiences, adding to their feelings of inadequacy. The student teachers commonly described the inadequate actions of teachers in their surroundings. Ultimately, they wanted to protect and care for the children suffering from other children’s aggression, as exemplified by Ella, Richard and Janet. Trying to protect pupils was complicated. An ethical dilemma occurred when they left them behind and moved on. Leaving the work placement education offered no relief; rather, it presented an example of how work placement is a dilemmatic space, with an ever-present threat of aggression among and from pupils.

**Dilemmas involving teachers**

Student teachers’ idealistic perceptions of care and their eagerness to protect pupils from harm sometimes clashed with the teachers they encountered. This clash involved limited options for actions. Student teachers portrayed their relationships with an individual teacher or a limited number of teachers to be an important aspect of work placement education. They described wanting experienced teachers to show them how the work is done. Sometimes they experienced negative role models who contrasted with this ambition. Ethical dilemmas then arose that influenced their notion of care in schools. The dilemma involved upholding notions of care when they were subjected to a relational space that was thought of as being negative. When they experienced this relational ambiguity, student teachers wanted to protect pupils from teachers. From a student teacher’s position, there were limited options to care for pupils by protecting them from harm.

**Encountering disillusioned teachers**

Although they also encountered competent teachers, one relational ambiguity in relation to teachers was highlighted when they met teachers who were described as disillusioned. The student teachers described being questioned by the teachers they encountered, and experiencing negative assumptions among teachers.

  Gunn: Well, most teachers you meet are pretty negative towards their profession actually, I would say.

  Interviewer: How?

  Gunn: Well, they say, ‘No it’s so hard, we have so much to do and there are so many children with problems and we don’t have time, and parents are hard because they don’t want to cooperate,’ and there’s so much negativity when you get to your work placement that you’re almost met with: ‘Why did you choose this occupation?’

  Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

  Gunn: It’s a bit depressing, because you want to get there and have a positive experience when you meet teachers, but you understand because they’re totally dejected. (Grade F–3 student teacher)
One important work placement relationship is with the supervisor. Helen, however, was assigned to a supervisor who she felt was no inspiration to her:

I hoped I would get a good supervisor so that I could just absorb everything and learn a lot. Instead it was, well, I learned nothing at all during the weeks I was out there. On the very first day, during our first morning break when we were on playground duty, he said he didn’t want to be a teacher anymore because it wasn’t worth it and you work too much for too little pay, and I thought that was really hard. (Helen, grade 4–6 student teacher.)

In the ambiguity of their relationships with teachers, student teachers identified what they perceived to be a negative environment. The ever-present threat of having to listen to negativity, complaints and hopelessness left the student teachers with an ambiguity towards teachers. In addition, they were left with limited means of action.

Tom: At my second work placement it was worse, because it felt like the teachers who worked there had been there a while and they sit and sigh and say that maybe you should apply for another job. It feels like there’s some hopelessness in a way.

[...]

Tom: I think first and foremost that you shouldn’t be a teacher if you have those thoughts at all. Because if you start thinking that the teacher is probably not that engaged in working as a teacher and if you think is that it’s really boring, then you should absolutely not do it, especially not if you want to inspire children to learn something. [...] I also feel a little, well yeah, you can understand why they think like that. It’s a job with low pay, and there’s a lot of responsibility, but it’s like, you can always apply for another job, you can always train for something else if you are unhappy with your situation. I feel like, don’t sit there and complain, if you’re unhappy with your situation do something about it instead.

Interviewer: Right.

Tom: Because I think that people who whine ruin morale at work, and it’s easily contagious.

(Tom, grade 4–6 student teacher)

The negativity towards the profession experienced by the student teachers brought feelings of ambiguity, but most of all added to the ever-present threat of finding oneself in an environment that was considered to be unproductive, repressive and potentially harmful for pupils. In this relational space, the direct actions of teachers also added to the complexity of work placement education.

**Derogatory talk in the teacher lounge**

Chrissy discussed a dilemma where her limited means of action (Lindqvist et al., 2017) and her position as a student teacher (Ding & Wang, 2018) prevented her from speaking up. Chrissy tried to find an appropriate course of action in accordance with her ideals, which included not using derogatory language about pupils. When she experienced talk that she thought of as derogatory she faced a dilemma, which added to her new understanding of schools. She experienced a dilemma, which added to her understanding of what could go on in a teacher lounge, where she would have to make a choice in future: Do I speak up or keep quiet? Being a student teacher, with limited means of action, the choice is compromised. But what happens when she starts work and the threat of hearing derogatory talk about pupils might arise again?

Interviewer: What exactly are you thinking about?
Chrissy: In the staff room, they often complain or they talk about students at the students’ expense in a way that I don’t think is okay.

Interviewer: Like what?

Chrissy: It could be that you have had a, they have had a lesson and then they talk to each other like: ‘Well it was this student again, he was sitting there like a question mark and didn’t follow.’ ‘Well that’s not unusual. What did you expect?’ Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Chrissy: That they make fun of the students, and simply disparage them, and I don’t think that’s okay.

Interviewer: No. What do you do then?

Chrissy: I don’t know. I react, but I don’t feel I have the authority to put my foot down, so I avoid being a part of the discussion and maybe just walk away, go and get water or a coffee or something. (Chrissy, grade 4–6 student teacher.)

Ella shared Chrissy’s experiences. In addition to describing the teacher lounge solely as a space for derogatory talk, Ella reflected upon what these teachers might also be doing against the pupils, having voiced so many negative comments about them. She thought this might influence their actions. In the dilemmatic space of the school, Ella thought it would be morally problematic to have negative thoughts about pupils.

In the same way as all teacher lounges I’ve been in. I was at two schools before. There was a lot of gossip and talk about pupils and their parents. Like a lot of the stuff that’s hard to listen to and there are a lot of teachers who should not have to hear about other pupils, it should stay between them. […] At other schools I have heard, well it has been noticeable that some teachers don’t like some children. Then I think it’s hard if you sit in the teacher lounge and gossip about the pupil or say stuff like that, it must be hard to be nice to that pupil too, or act as you should towards a pupil. Because even though there are complicated boys in this class, it’s important not to hold a grudge against them, or in any way disparage them, but instead realise why they are the way they are. (Ella, grade F–3 student teacher.)

Typically, student teachers thought it unlikely they would ever take part in these discussions in teacher lounges, where ‘a lot can be said about the pupils, and it’s discussed in an unnatural way, I would never do that. […] And it’s always about problems, never about how good they are’ (Amanda, grade 4–6 student teacher). Jörgen added aspects of the derogatory talk in the teacher lounge linked to problematic collegiality (cf. Löfgren & Karlsson, 2016).

Interviewer: You said something about gossip? What do you talk about in the teacher lounge?

Jörgen: Well, they breach confidentiality, they do that a lot. They talk about pupils, and like, about their parents and ‘His mother is like that, you don’t have to care’, and yeah or gossip about colleagues and try to criticise other teachers’ teaching methods. (Grade F–3 student teacher.)

Experiencing the derogatory talk in the teacher lounge placed the student teacher in an ethical dilemma. They had to partake in, dispute, turn against or contest the dilemma that they experienced: some teachers did not seem to care for pupils, even though they considered caring for pupils to be of the utmost importance and central to the profession.
Being in a dilemmatic space of care, inadequacy and negativity shared common ground. The dilemmas arising from these relations with teachers pave the way for a future of adversity among colleagues if the objective is to maintain ideal notions of care as an ethically correct guideline for teachers.

**A grounded theory of ethical dilemmatic space of work placement education**

The main concern of the student teachers was the desire to protect the pupils in the dilemmatic spaces of schools against harm. In order to do so, ethical dilemmas concerning care depended on experiences in the work placement education with pupils and teachers. In this way, student teachers described the relational aspects of work placement education and the complicated notion of care. The student teachers identified care as problematic in the school setting, in relation to encountering pupils from poor homes, disillusioned teachers and/or derogatory talk in the teacher lounge. To resolve the main concern, student teachers sometimes described a refusal to participate, avoidance, influencing or taking matters into their own hands. These experiences resulted in worries about experiencing the same phenomena in the future. In this light, the ethical dilemmas offered no solutions; instead, the work placement education adds to student teachers’ experiences of a lack of care in schooling. Another result of the ethical dilemmas is the relational ambiguity with teachers that might impede collaboration with teachers and/or supervisors, or in a worst-case scenario lead to negative role modelling. The student teachers identified critical ethical dilemmas and moral considerations from observations unrelated to teaching practice, and used their personal standpoint to guide their actions, related to an idealised notion of care.

**Discussion**

In work placement education, the actors involved in the dilemmas described in this study included pupils and teachers. In the context of this study, student teachers’ understanding of the dilemmas they might encounter is important (cf. Ingrid’s surprise at encountering what she perceived as poor pupils), or trying to understand the reasons why teachers act the way they do in teacher lounges or in relationships, before being too judgmental about their actions. Even so, teachers seem to be somewhat unaware of the ethical consequences of their actions (Colnerud, 2006; Sockett & LePage, 2002; Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013). There is a potential risk of coming to a workplace loaded with relational ambiguity about teachers, as this might result in conflicts (Lindqvist et al., 2019b). A main finding in the study is the importance of the notion of care (Noddings, 2012), here related to protecting pupils from harm from other pupils or teachers. The notion of care is contrasted against the limited means of action that student teachers identify. This ethical dilemma of not being able to act in accordance with convictions (e.g. protect pupils from harm) could result in moral stress. Moral stress is defined as troublesome emotions that arise when a professional identifies an appropriate action but is unable to act accordingly due to external or situational obstacles (Colnerud, 2015; McCarthy & Deady, 2008). Moral stress is described as contributing to teachers experiencing their work as a burden. In Sweden there is an ethical code of conduct distributed by
professional teacher associations (Lärarnas yrkesetiska råd, n.d.). This code of conduct could be of use when discussing ethical dilemmas in teacher education.

Another issue in relation to pupils is connected to the ethics of care (Noddings, 2012). Student teachers described a dilemma about care and their options for actions. Student teachers have commonly been described as having unrealistic notions of caring (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009). Caring is a complex matter. For example, a caring relationship can only be complete if the recipient accepts the care. Laletas and Reupert (2016) found that student teachers studying to teach at secondary schools described caring as essential in order for discipline and teaching to be effective. Caring involves no principles, as the actions derive from the needs of the recipient of care (Colnerud, 2006). Caring also gave rise to actions that could control care, using boundaries and barriers in order not to be overwhelmed (Laletas & Reupert, 2016). In teacher education, teaching or discussions of care were limited to observations during work placement education (Laletas & Reupert, 2016). The objective of the work placement is for the student teachers to encounter what teachers’ work involves. Work placement could be based on a model of learning through cooperation with their supervising teacher. However, work placement is often described as focused on technical aspects of teaching being passed on to the student teacher, and not explicitly on educative mentoring (Trevethan, 2017). Student teachers who experience disillusioned supervising teachers or derogatory conversations among teachers might suffer from such experiences, as they could compromise their learning during their work placement education altogether. In relation to care, student teachers made decisions based on their position as a student teacher, which also involved doing things that went against their moral compass, for example not speaking out or avoiding being in the teacher lounge. Being a student teacher and meeting a supervising teacher involves a power imbalance. The supervising teacher assesses the student teacher, and this power imbalance influences interventions towards supervising teachers and how student teachers try to find their opportunities to engage in their work placement education (Zhu, Waxman, Rivera, & Burlbaw, 2018).

In teachers’ work, care is determined by certain aspects. For example, care should only be experienced and enacted during school hours. Therefore, coping with encountering children who seem to need more care than teachers can give leads to a need for a boundary around emotions of sympathy (Lindqvist et al., 2019a). In light of experiencing emotional challenges or tensions, the impact on the teacher’s identity might be explored further. For example, Ding and Wang (2018) describe related findings, since they found student teachers to be:

... caught in the dilemmatic tensions with different stakeholders, including colleagues, mentoring teachers and students, the teacher candidates constantly needed to consider and reconsider their personal beliefs and practices, as well as their identities, and to make decisions about what actions they should take in response to the dilemmas. (p. 243)

In our study, we have focused on teachers (viewed by student teachers as future colleagues) and pupils, and have further distinguished the ethical dilemmas of these relationships in relation to the notion of care. The limited means of action that the student teachers discussed were negotiated against the main concern of caring for students, protecting them from harm and staying idealistic in order to be able to do so in the future. To do so, student teachers need analytical tools (cf. micro political literacy, Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) to understand the dilemmatic space in which they find themselves in
schools. Another pertinent aspect could involve the teaching profession enhancing the language of professional ethics and establishing a moral vocabulary that could influence how teachers describe and discuss the ethical practice of teaching (Colnerud, 1997; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011).

Limitations

Some limitations to the findings should be noted. The small sample limits the transferability of the findings and the interview data were used to create the grounded theory. Furthermore, this sample of Swedish student teachers may or may not differ from other groups of student teachers. The sample is limited to experiences of teacher education intended to teach grades from preschool class to grade six (K–6). Moreover, the data consisted of reported events, and did not include observational or performative data, and the analysis relied only on the narratives of the participants. The participants may have portrayed an idealised narrative of themselves. Even though that might be true, the participants also discussed their weaknesses, worries, self-doubts, and their future in teaching. In order to assess the generalisability of the findings, we would like the reader to consider what Larsson (2009) calls the recognition of patterns and context similarity as a means for generalisation.

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Notes on contributors

Henrik Lindqvist, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University in Sweden focusing on student teachers learning from, and coping with, emotionally challenging situations in teacher education

Robert Thornberg, PhD, is Professor of Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University in Sweden. His main focuses are on (a) bullying and peer victimization among children and adolescents in school settings, (b) values education, rules, and social interactions in everyday school life, and (c) student teachers and medical students’ experiences of and dealing with emotionally challenging situations during their training.

Gunnel Colnerud, PhD, is professor emerita in education at Linköping University, Sweden. Her research includes professional ethics especially ethics in teaching and teachers’ ethical dilemmas. Besides those subject she has published on the topics of research ethics and teachers’ leadership.

ORCID

Henrik Lindqvist http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3215-7411
Robert Thornberg http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9233-3862
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