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# **Gørill Warvik Vedeler**

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#### **ARTICLE**

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# Practising school-home collaboration in upper secondary schools: to solve problems or to promote adolescents' autonomy?

Gørill Warvik Vedeler

Department of Education, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores school-home collaboration as a pedagogical phenomenon and contributes to a rationale for collaboration between school and parents in upper secondary education. The theory of practice architectures is used as an analytical lens. It sheds light on arrangements that enable or constrain the semantic, social, and physical spaces where students, parents, and teachers encounter each other as collaborative partners. Six upper secondary schools participated in the study; the dialogue café method was used to facilitate conversations between stakeholders to explore and verify this phenomenon. The study revealed three key aspects that require attention when developing collaborative practices: (a) clarification of the teaching profession's obligations; (b) engaging and empowering students' agency; and (c) moving beyond a firefighting approach. In addition, the need for further research to operationalise the safeguarding of students' and parents' rights, and support for students' agency, in the context of schoolhome collaboration.

#### KEYWORDS

School-home collaboration; collaborative autonomysupport; upper secondary education; practice architecture; dialogue café

#### Introduction

Adolescents gradually become more independent as they progress through upper secondary school. They also attain increased legal rights and are expected to act more autonomously. Despite an increase in autonomy both legally and cognitively, collaboration between parents and teachers is still expected. Research has shown that parent autonomy-support predicts autonomous regulation of students' academic endeavours and career decisions (Katz et al. 2018; Wong 2008), and that students who experience teacher autonomy-support tend to be more motivated and engaged in their schooling (Ruzek et al. 2016). However, research has only rarely looked at how to conduct collaborative autonomy-support through school-home collaboration at this level of education.

Collaboration between schools and parents from different demographic backgrounds is crucially important to the discussions and decision-making in any adolescent's life. If parents are overlooked, by contrast, 'many adolescents are left with an incomplete support system on school matters' (Epstein 2008, 18). The need for adolescents to



complete school in order to live decent lives means that schools have gained increased influence, with the implication that school-parent collaboration is more important than ever (Drugli and Nordahl 2016). In their review of current knowledge related to school-home collaboration, Drugli and Nordahl (2016) inferred that school-home collaboration had become a figure of speech rather than a genuine method of practice, and that this was causing parents to be excluded from collaborating with their child's school. Indeed, the scope of collaborative practices between home and upper secondary school is limited compared to primary school: with lower levels of developmental work and experimentation with new collaborative practices (Helgøy and Homme 2012).

Helgøy and Homme (2012) found that this lack of collaboration was explained by both parents' and teachers' beliefs that students should be given greater freedom and responsibility when they start upper secondary school. It is reasonable to ask, then, if this explanation is based on the underlying assumption that parents ought to withdraw support if students are to become independent. In this way, this research focuses on whether and how practising school-home collaboration can support student independence and autonomy.

This study takes a phenomenological and site ontological view of educational practices. Participants from six upper secondary schools were invited to explore how the phenomenon of school-home collaboration was practised in their everyday school life. Hence, the central research question was: How is school-home collaboration practised in upper secondary school as a pedagogical phenomenon? To discuss the conditions and preconditions of such practices, I use Kemmis et al.'s (2014) theory of practice architectures by as an analytical lens. This theory sheds light on the various arrangements that enable or constrain the semantic, social, and physical spaces in which students, parents, and teachers encounter each other as collaborative partners.

#### **Practice architectures**

A key objective of this study was to explore actual practices enabled by parent-teacher collaboration on the subjects of both student wellbeing and academic endeavours. In a philosophical sense, phenomenology of practice considers professional as well as everyday practices as lived experiences at particular sites (Van Manen 2016, 15). The driving force in phenomenology of practice is the search for living meanings and reflexivity in the human world. The recognition that 'we live our lives in practices' and that practices happen when actors encounter each other (Kemmis 2019) forms the starting point for this study, applied specifically to upper secondary education. Practice-based research approaches turn to practice as the place of study (Schatzki 2001), accounting for perceptions of work and activities, agents and agencies, the role of objects in social affairs, knowledge, meaning, and discourse, as well as power, conflict, and politics, as constituents of these practices (Nicolini 2012).

The theory of practice architectures has emerged to identify and describe preconditions for educational practices and to critically identify ways in which educational (and other) practices can be harmful, wasteful, inefficient, unproductive, or unsustainable (Kemmis et al. 2014; Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). When practices take place at particular 'sites,' actors encounter each other, and the practice of each actor affects and creates the practices of the others (Kemmis et al. 2014). In educational settings, this means

that the way teachers conduct their practices influences parents' approach to and practice in school-related matters, and vice versa. A 'site' in this context refers to where such practices take place and can be understood as their specific location, the wider area or sector in which it exists, or the phenomenon in which it is intrinsically placed (Schatzki 2003, 2005). In this study, the site is the specific location in Norway where practices occurred and the sector is the Norwegian school system in which they exist as educational practices; finally, the phenomenon of school-home collaboration is itself a site for kinds of practices.

Exploring how a given phenomenon is understood at a particular site, specifically by turning to real-life experiences, is what Schatzki (2003, 2005) has called the search for site ontology. The purpose of such a search is to discover and understand both concealed and revealed truths related to how the phenomenon is realised on a day-to-day basis (Malpas 2012). How do we come to know the happenings that constitute practices? This ontological phenomenology contains a dualistic tension, between the subjective and objective, between the ontological and the epistemological. Kemmis conclude these as 'false' dualisms threatening to re-emerge and to disrupt the primacy, for him, of the intersubjective (Kemmis and Mahon, 2017). The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) was chosen as a theoretical lens to identify, describe, and discuss the complexity of what happens when the practices of parents, students, and the teaching profession coalesce in support of student outcomes in upper secondary education. These collaborative practices play out in intersubjective spaces and are kept in place by arrangements that are either found in or brought to the site, and which enable or constrain the way in which practices unfold (Kemmis et al. 2014). The semantic space ('sayings') is where the actors share or do not share a common language; the physical space ('doings') is where work or activities more or less meet the expectations of what should or needs to be done; and the social space ('relatings') is where the distribution of power or solidarity more or less empowers the actors involved. These 'sayings,' 'doings,' and 'relatings' occur simultaneously, but for analytical purposes, it is useful to draw attention to each in turn.

According to the theory of practice architectures, the semantic space is affected or kept in place by cultural-discursive arrangements (Kemmis et al. 2014). Actors encounter each other by using languages (oral, body, emotion, social, etc.) influenced by experiences, traditions, theoretical and research-based knowledge, codes of ethics, legislation, and so on. Given that semantics are played out in real-life settings, these cultural-discursive arrangements may contribute to legitimatising or delegitimising teachers' professionalism. Accordingly, the social space where actors encounter each other is kept in place by social-political arrangements. Actors' roles and responsibilities are enabled or constrained by the dynamics of power and solidarity, moral and ethical issues, and traditions and values. Such arrangements affect the tripartite relationships between students, parents, and teachers. The physical space, meanwhile, is kept in place by material-economic arrangements. This refers to the activities and work of the actors and how these 'doings' are affected by, for instance, financial and human resources, school facilities, time management, information, practical tools, and procedures.

The intention of this article is to investigate how site-specific arrangements are constituents of the particular architectures that keep everyday practices in place and to discuss the preconditions that steer practice of school-home collaboration in the context of upper secondary schooling.

#### **Methods and material**

#### **Context**

Norwegian upper secondary schools are non-compulsory but regulated by national curricula. They are governed by regional administrators and cover years 11 to 13, when students are between 16 and 19 years old. Students have the right to attend/complete school until the age of 24. Although not compulsory, all young people in Norway have the right to 13 years of public schooling; only 8.2% of students attend private schools. In 1998, the two Norwegian school system levels (one for compulsory school years and one for upper secondary) were merged under the same Education Act, which also brought in new regulations regarding school-home collaboration in upper secondary schools (previously only applied to primary schools). The national target is for all children to complete upper secondary school within a five-year period, yet these numbers admittedly show variation across the country (70.5% in the case of the region of study here).

Norwegian schooling is part of the Nordic Education Model and influenced by social democratic ideology (Telhaug, Mediås, and Aasen 2006). It values 'a school for all,' democratic participation, and equity by educating students in citizenship (Carlgren et al. 2006; Imsen and Volckmar 2014). Crucially, the overarching mission statement of the 1998 Education Act declares that schools are 'to conduct schooling in collaboration and understanding with the student's home' (Education Act 1998, § 1–1). This legislation also demands systematic school-home collaboration until students turn 18 (Regulation Education Act 2006, § 20–4).

#### Research design and methods

The research approach has been to explore and discover the phenomenon under study as it occurred at particular sites. Dialogues within the teaching profession, and between university and the teaching profession, inspire fruitful development of knowledge and action, and theory and practice (Kemmis 2005)The dialogue café, a suggested methodology when many participants collaborate in the exploration and verification of themes (Löhr, Weinhardt, and Sieber 2020), was used to facilitate dialogic qualitative research. The intention was to uncover the specific site ontology and to reveal insights into how the phenomenon was experienced and described by those who engaged in it (Schatzki 2005; Malpas 2012). This method, also called 'World Café' (Brown 2010), invites participants to explore, enquire, and discover questions and problems relevant to understanding, rationalising, and developing practices.

During the study, a 90-minute café-style session proceeded as follows (see Figure 1): the researcher gave a 20- to 30-minute plenary introduction to the topic and described the dialogue café process. Participants were then split into four mixed groups, spread across four tables before the 60-minute conversation process began. Each table was given one unique question for discussion. The participants rotated three times, resulting in a total of four 15-minute conversations. One person was chosen to chair at each table: this person stayed at the same table throughout the session, welcomed new groups by introducing the question, shared what previous groups had talked about, and facilitated

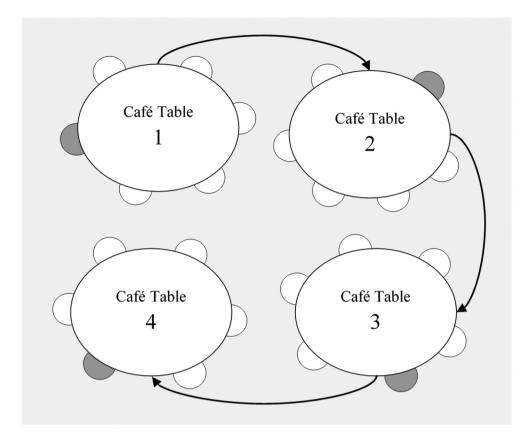


Figure 1. The explorative process in the dialogue café.

the conversation. Dictaphones recorded the conversations; each question/table generated a 60-minute audio file capturing 4 x 15-minute conversations, giving a total of 240 minutes of recordings. This process was conducted slightly differently over three cafés (see Table 1).

The general topic for the conversations was collaborating with parents in upper secondary school. The sub-themes discussed at the different tables were as follows: (1) a school's annual plan for school-home collaboration; (2) the students' right to guidance from subject teachers, contact teachers, and the parents conference; (3) collaboration when students had psychosocial difficulties; (4) the impact of socio-demographic differences; and (5) legislative requirements for school-home collaboration. The need to discuss this fifth question was raised during the first café and was included in cafés two and three. The first café involved three schools, who discussed themes 1 to 4; the second café involved a full collegium at one school and discussed themes 1, 2, 4 and 5; and the third café repeated the themes from the second café with representatives from three additional schools (see Table 1). Between the first and second cafés, a group conversation with six teachers from one school is included in the data as they discussed the same issues/questions as the first dialogue café and provided a significant contribution to the material.

Table 1. Participants involved in dialogue cafés and the group conversation.

Date	Method	Institutions	Participants		
			Total – Male – Female	Roles	Audio Minutes
2017.05	Dialogue café (Themes 1–4)	A, B, C, O	22 – 7 – 15	7 teachers 6 students 5 managers/leaders 4 teacher educators	270
2017.11	Group conversation (Themes 1–4)	Α	6 – 2 – 4	5 teachers 1 social worker	79
2018.03	Dialogue café (Themes 1, 2, 4, 5)	Α	43 – 17 – 26	40 teachers 3 social workers	216
2018.05	Dialogue café (Themes 1, 2, 4, 5)	A, D, E, F, O	12 – 4 – 8	5 teachers 1 student 4 managers/leaders 2 teacher educators	193
			83 – 30 – 53a		758

aParticipants from institutions A (1 manager) and O (2 teacher educators) attended both the first and third dialogue cafés, and participants in group conversation attended the second café.

# **Participants**

This research project emerged out of a teacher education programme for secondary schools and drew on an established partnership between the university and the schools sector. Participants from six upper secondary schools (institutions A, B, C, D, E, and F in Table 1) and the teacher education programme (institution O in Table 1) took part in three dialogue cafés and representatives from one school (institution A) took part in one group conversation. Schools A, B, and C were newly appointed university schools; school A had proposed the phenomenon of school-home collaboration as a priority for school improvement. Additionally, five nearby schools were invited to one dialogue café hosted by school A, which added schools D, E, and F to the study (schools that accepted the invitation). The appointed university schools were identified after a call for proposals; the researcher was not involved in the assessment or recruitment of the schools.

The participating schools were located in urban and rural settings governed by the same regional administration. The schools in this region ranked at the lower end of the national school's contribution indicator (Markussen, Flatø, and Reiling 2017; Falch, Bensnes, and Bjarne 2016). The schools had an average of 450 students, with the smallest having 193 students and the largest 641 students. The composition of students at each school and the goals set for activities were naturally affected by regional and local conditions. The 83 participants (see gender, organisation affiliation, and roles in Table 1) represented schools' leadership, teachers, teacher educators, and students. Participation was voluntary, information about the research project was shared beforehand, and each participant signed personal consents. The project attained ethical approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data before data was gathered.

# **Coding and analysis**

The phenomenology of practice approach considers meaning-making methods and analysis, and questions the meaning of lives and responsibilities of personal actions and

decisions (Van Manen 2016, 13). By asking 'what does this mean?' and 'how did this happen?', phenomenological research increases consciousness about phenomena. This approach strives to recalibrate the theoretical using the experiences and the dynamic changes in time and place that make up real life.

The analysis itself used NVIVO (qualitative analysis software) to create and organise nodes (themes, categories, and concepts) and to establish a branching network of connected tree nodes (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). I first listened to the café table and group conversations, then listened again while transcribing into text files, before conducting a thematic coding procedure (an act of interpretations). The process of NVIVO coding was empirically driven without particular theoretical strategies. It resulted in the following themes: the teaching profession's obligations (76 references to laws, regulations, and the national curriculum); student agency (120 references to students' agency, needs, and participation); teachers' beliefs (82 references to how school representatives shared assumptions about parents' role in schooling); implementation issues (194 references addressing practicalities); and theoretical grounding (26 references to signs of theorisations). I decided to explore the first three nodes in depth, renaming the third from teachers' beliefs to a firefighting approach.

I subsequently recoded all nodes and conferred the material several times to capture the branching tree-nodes (Saldaña 2015, 9). In the resulting analysis, I draw on certain aspects from the implementation-issues-node, but have left most of this node for another research piece; similarly, the theoretical-grounding-node is not sufficiently covered here, allowing for further exploration. This reduction process is a process of phenomenological reflections (Creswell and Poth 2018, 77), which gently breaks through the taken-forgrantedness of everyday practices in search of structures of meaning (Van Manen 2016, 215). After the empirical coding procedures, I turned to theory to interpret the findings, specifically the theory of practice architecture. This process of theorisation informed the discussion section of this article.

#### Results

This section presents the results of the study, including quotes that I have translated from Norwegian to English and edited to ensure anonymisation.

In general, participants expressed that collaborative efforts between students, parents, and teachers are necessary. However, many felt that expectations around the actual practice of school-home collaboration in upper secondary schools had changed over time. One teacher, for example, said that 'parents are very demanding when it comes to actions needed to customise their child's education, far more than just a few years ago' and another stated that parents had 'become aware that these rights exist.' Three central themes emerged from the conversations: the teaching profession's obligations, student agency, and a fire-fighting approach.

#### The teaching profession's obligations

The participants discovered that collaborative efforts differed within and across school settings and became aware of a lack of knowledge about their schools' obligations in school-home collaboration. It became evident, moreover, that none of the schools met the minimum legislative requirements (e.g. conducting a coherent systematic approach, treasuring students' and parents' rights, sharing information, and facilitating student's consent). One teacher shared his concern as follows:

It is a question of who has the rights. I had a difficult situation recently, with a student who had different challenges and different diagnoses. Her parents had supported her thoroughly during lower secondary school, spending many hours with her before every exam. They were very dedicated to her getting the best results she could manage. But it might be the case that continuing like this is not to the student's advantage. Now the parents are very worried. The student has started upper secondary school, and the parents have less access and insights into the student's matters. The student has now chosen not to bring books home to prepare for the tests. The student experiences that she gets positive feedback from her teachers: she is doing everything she is supposed to do, but her academic grades have gone down. She got a three [out of a possible six] instead of a four, which is what the parents would like her to get. She is a student who is starting to show that she is doing well and keeps track of everything that needs to happen. She needs to access adult life! As opposed to being the student who throughout lower secondary depended on her parents controlling everything and keeping track of her, I encouraged the student to continue on her new path, but her parents really want to take back control. I think it is a bit difficult. Do I have a say in this? Can I say to them: 'Let her try on her own'?

This teacher's concern raises two important legislative tensions. The first relates to the student's rights versus the parents' responsibilities, and the second to the shared responsibility between teacher and parents. These tensions are explored in detail below.

# Student rights versus parental responsibilities

The teacher in the above story raised the issue of 'who [parents or student] has the rights' and shared how he chose to focus on the student's right to increased self-determination rather than her parents' right and responsibility to take part in decision-making related to their child. This perspective recurred several times in the material, whereby teachers advocated a core value in Norwegian society (and legislation): adolescent independence and self-determination. In particular, this teacher interpreted the student's actions against the will of her parents as approval of his advice to increase her independence by detaching herself from parental control, even if this resulted in poorer academic outcomes. The parents, on the other hand, seemed to argue that their child, who already faced disadvantages due to health issues, would benefit from extended parental support throughout upper secondary school. It is likely that both her teacher and her parents would agree over the overall objective – to promote the student's independence – but, according to this story, they may disagree on the timing.

Another challenge uncovered was that parents' access to information in upper secondary school (from school via student) differed significantly from lower secondary school (from school direct to parents). In the example above, when the teacher indicated that the time had come to detach the students' parents from the flow of information ('I encouraged the student to ...'), he interfered with the student's perception of the validity of parental support. If the teacher had acted differently, he could have suggested appreciating the parental support, while at the same time informing and guiding the parents to promote the student's independence and concurrent academic outcomes.

In another example, a different teacher confirmed the school's strategy to keep parents at a distance: 'It is not me - the school - who should give parents access to information. The parents should communicate with their child and ask him/her to show them.' Access to information was a repeated topic of conversation across the cafés and it became evident that teachers found the sharing of information to be a difficult prospect. Teachers discussed when and when not to share students' personal information with parents, for example. They also acknowledged that adolescents' access to selfdetermination increased at the ages of 15, 16, and 18, at which they gradually gain legislative rights to control information about test scores, absence, dropout, or health issues. No consensus was observed as to what kinds of rights should appear at which age. The most difficult issue was what happens when students turn 18: Should the school disconnect their contact with the parents completely? What is the formal role of the parents between when the child turns 18 and when he/she finishes school (between the ages of 19 and 24)? What are the support needs of 18- to 19-year-old students through school-home collaboration? Clearly, the table discussions produced more questions than answers; tellingly, one teacher reminded her fellow participants to 'be aware that the owner of the information is the student.'

Issues relating to student consent were widely discussed. One topic, for instance, was when to contact parents without student consent. How worried is 'worried enough' to go beyond getting the student's consent? Is a minor concern over health issues or the threat of dropping out of school a good enough reason? In addition, when should the teacher convince the student that 'it is a good idea for you to involve your parents in your struggles'? Some teachers talked about students asking them for help to tell their parents about their problems because they were afraid of their parents' reactions. At one table, teachers expressed the assumption that the best thing for students' independence would be to keep parents at a distance. During this discussion, one teacher voiced that, in her experience, the parents 'want to get involved, and they have information that we often should have accessed earlier.' Similarly, one highly experienced school leader said, 'In my experience, every time I reach out to parents about such issues, they want to collaborate. They really want to get on board,' before sharing that it is rare that students do not want support from their parents. At another table, one student advocated the parents' need for information: 'I don't know, but if the information is available and parents receive sufficient information, then it is easier for them to adapt to the student's needs, so that they do not take over and try to control. It is much easier for them if they understand what it is all about. I think this is quite important.' Several students talked about how students need to involve their parents, for example: 'You feel like you've grown up. But we want to at least we think we're grown-ups and independent and don't need help, but we still want our parents there.' Others negotiated parental interests with responses such as 'I don't think my parents think like that,' or showed empathy for parents: examples include 'it was not easy for his parents, they were a long way from the school' or 'her mother was alone and did not cope with the situation.' Students also described and to a certain extent protected the parents' roles and contributions, similar to how teachers were seen to protect their students' rights.

Participants notably struggled with how to address students' rights alongside their parents' rightful responsibilities and described how this caused tensions among the actors in everyday practices. The conversations noted the schools' obligations to school-



home collaboration and implied how underestimating parental responsibility and contribution in their child's education could alter, impair, or degrade the level of support from parents.

#### Shared responsibility between teachers and parents

Participants discussed how the relationship between teacher and parent responsibilities had changed over time, due to the 'arrival of new demands related to collaboration.' One teacher said, 'We spend more time on upbringing, teaching manners, hygiene, how to wait to take turns, and how to show respect for peers and teachers; upbringing has become a larger part of our working day.' A school leader added, 'If you move more of the upbringing to the school, then the school's mandate increases.' An outburst from one teacher further illustrates this point:

Yes, I expect the parents to follow up on their own children, just as I am responsible for my children. I expect that they are there for them, and show interest in them, and, well, show the slightest understanding when I contact them about a problem, that they'll take care of it and do something about it at home. Because I refuse to be such a nurturer. It's not my job to raise their kids; they must do that themselves. But I can give them some advice on what they can work on. Last night, I wrote a long email about a student who had an outburst in the canteen, using language I will not use here, but which they must talk about at home, about how to talk to people. And the parents should take care of it, so that these are actual things he must work on. I expect that from the parents. And, if they don't understand that, or won't do it, then it's no wonder the kids are becoming who they are. That's my opinion.

Teachers also shared their concerns that adolescents learned helplessness at home: one observed that 'now a generation is coming that is not used to having weekend jobs. They are used to having things put into their hands. They are used to parents sweeping their path. How can we make them sweep the path for themselves?' Across the conversations, the teachers expressed a sense of increased responsibility for the students' upbringing and wellbeing, alongside their academic outcomes, and that 'the responsibility that parents are allowed to shirk comes onto our shoulders.'

The schools involved in the study acknowledged that many of their students had personal difficulties and social challenges, meaning that the goal for most students was simply to complete school. Given these circumstances, they commented on the parents' agency, for example: 'It is rare, but it does happen, that parents have higher expectations than the student has.' When such agency became apparent, the teachers felt they had to guide parents towards lowering their expectations; they recounted how some parents would become emotional, even aggressive, when they felt that the teachers were hindering their efforts.

These examples show how an unclear division of responsibility can sow tensions between teachers and parents and result in ambiguous messaging to parents. While teachers would encourage parents to 'let go of the adolescent, [and] let him become more independent,' school principals (through information leaflets or at public parent meetings) would express the opposite: 'Don't let them go; now is the time when they need your support the most.' Despite often troubled relationships with parents, teachers seemed to want the parents to collaborate with them and wished the parents trusted them more. In the words of one teacher: 'Parents have to trust us. We know their child is doing well and that he or she has lots of good qualities.' Other teachers, meanwhile, felt



anxious about or overwhelmed by their professional obligations, asking questions like 'What is reasonable to expect from us teachers?' and 'How does the system protect and take care of us?'

# **Student agency**

An underlying assumption for this research project is that the purpose and validation of school-home collaboration lies in support of the students' agency. While the participants did not allude explicitly to this need, they implicitly addressed the issue with sayings like 'we are going to create an autonomous and independent student' or 'how to engage the students seems unclear,' or by highlighting how 'the students are absent' when teachers plan and prepare for parent conferences.

School-home collaboration at this level of schooling is an extremely sensitive area for the students, in that it puts their personal needs and interests at risk. Students who participated in this study problematised their sense of agency, voicing how difficult it was to show agency when not being included or held accountable: 'This is important. The fact that you need to be part of the conversation. That you are not just a third person, just the listener who listens to what the others [parents and teachers] think about you.' As another student stated, 'I think that if the student gets to decide a bit more, by herself, then she will grow as a person, in a way.' Students felt excluded, for example, when teachers prepared for, planned, and performed most of the activities related to parent conferences. One student questioned this: 'It is the teacher who takes the lead, who talks and comments. The student only gives input when asked, 'Right?" Another student asked: 'Before the parent conference, should the students prepare themselves, should they have to do anything beforehand, or is everything handled there and then?' A teacher confirmed that 'it is handled there and then' and acknowledged the passivity of the role given to students in the school's collaborative practices when engaging with parents.

Another topic of discussion related to student self-efficacy in educational matters and their thoughts about their own capabilities, skills, and decision-making. Teachers recounted incidents where students avoided attending, or expressed embarrassment or shame around, practices involving both teachers and parents. In turn, teachers experienced that students became silent, passive, or showed a lack of confidence during these interactions. By contrast, others pointed to examples of students who displayed greater engagement or felt a boost in motivation after attending the parent conferences. Nonetheless, as one teacher summarised, 'managing to involve students in conversations about their learning processes is perhaps what we struggle with the most.'

In the Norwegian context, the legislation demands a systematic approach to supporting student agency and personal development. The café conversations revealed that both students and teachers experienced the schools' efforts related to this obligation as piecemeal. One teacher, however, argued that the legislation reflects 'a nice chain of feedback loops – the students have the right to feedback from their subject and contact teachers [...] and to prepare themselves for the parent conference. If implemented, the student would become more self-conscious about their own needs and how to keep on working.' The overall impression from the teachers was that they were not consciously neglecting their students' agency in school-home collaboration or actively resisting the demands of legislation. It nevertheless became apparent that the schools had not discussed or thought through how to implement changes to their collaborative practices in line with legislative amendments and in a way that empowered their students. In one plenary session, when closing a café-session, the professional participants confirmed that they rarely discussed in their collegium how to approach parents or how to conduct systematic school-home collaboration.

# A fire-fighting approach

In various ways, the participants expressed how collaborative efforts were mostly bound up in student-related problems: for example, 'every phone call from the school [to the home] is about something negative' or 'you don't have time for all the students; students with fewer needs are not prioritised.' One student reaffirmed this fire-fighting approach by saying that 'I see the purpose [of school-home collaboration] when the student is struggling [but not otherwise].' Another student challenged this view by saying that 'if they [the teachers] only talk with the students who are struggling and doing poorly, then they never talk with the strong students ... They should support the high-achieving students too. They must not forget them. [...] This is very sad.' In this way, the participants problematised how the phenomenon of school-home collaboration was apparently 'adjusted to the level of the weakest' and where the priority was to help students to complete school. One school leader confirmed this, stating that, in the context of parent conferences, 'we have no such meetings with students and their parents if everything is going just fine.'

Furthermore, the conversations revealed that school-home collaboration 'is practised very differently from teacher to teacher,' and that 'it is not written down how we are supposed to do it, and also [...] only half of us are actually doing it.' The schools lacked secure administrative systems for collecting, documenting, and sharing information about their students' development. Teachers described making up their own tools, routines, and documentation procedures, and being left to their own devices; indeed, many maintained that the school's approach was 'business as usual' despite new legislative demands. Significantly, school management did not systematically gather information relating to the implementation of school-home collaboration plans (e.g. recording the number of students getting parent conferences), nor was this being done at the regional administration level (e.g. identifying which schools were not fulfiling their legislative demands).

Another recurring topic related to this problem-solving approach was how to deal with parents' questions about and/or critique of school management or staff. One teacher said, 'I don't like that students and their parents talk badly about my colleagues and I will not invite them to do so.' Another said that 'if students begin to denigrate other teachers, it's something I will not be comfortable with. What will the teaching team look like in front of the parents?' Participants did not address the consequences of students and parents not having a proper and ethical procedure for reporting problems. On the one hand, the schools seemed to focus on the students' problems; on the other hand, they were apparently uncomfortable when parents identified problems within the school. One participant challenged the problem-solving approach, saying that 'I am not sure that this is consistent with what the parents are most interested in,' while another questioned whether problem-driven practices could cause the schools to 'never gain the professional



level we want in the school.' Ultimately, the fire-fighting approach seemed to undermine the schools' legal obligations, harm students' access to support, and exclude parents from their rightful position in the schooling of their children.

#### Discussion

Site-specific arrangements steer actors in collaborative practices by affecting 'how to know," 'how to do," and 'how to relate.' In the following discussion, I will exemplify how such arrangements encompass the three main themes that emerged from the dialogue cafés - the teaching profession's obligations, student agency, and a fire-fighting approach – and discuss key aspects for consideration when developing school-home collaboration in upper secondary settings.

# **Cultural-discursive arrangements**

A web of cultural-discursive arrangements constitutes the semantic space that enables or constrains the actors' meaning-making process and their sense of coherence when practising school-home collaboration. This section profiles how legislation, professional knowledge bases, and personal beliefs affect collaborative efforts, as mediated through language choices.

Jurisdiction and the Teaching Profession's Obligations

The Education Act (1998) regulates school-home collaboration across primary and secondary schools in Norway. The dialogue cafés revealed discrepancies between teachers' descriptions of their obligations and the actual wording of the legislation. For instance, by law, parents have the right and responsibility to protect and care for their child's interests (Child Act 1982, § 30), and the state/society (including school) is expected to support the parents' responsibilities (Child Convention, Article 3 & 5). The participants in the cafés, however, did not consider the teaching profession's obligations in light of supporting parental responsibilities; on the contrary, they talked about protecting the students so that their parents did not violate the students' right to self-determination. This raises the question as to whether keeping parents at a distance promotes students' independence and whether schools are in fact hindering students' access to parental support through their practices.

The position of parents in education has been strengthened through legislative amendments since the late 1990s (Imsen and Volckmar 2014). As of 1998, upper secondary school has been obliged to collaborate with parents (Education Act 1998, § 1–1), while a 2010 amendment prescribed the content of systematic collaboration at this level of schooling (Regulation Education Act 2006, § 20-4). In addition, paragraph 9A was added to the Education Act in 2017, giving parents the right to complain to the county governor if their child did not experience a good school environment. Conversely, in the dialogue cafés, one experienced teacher responded to increased legislative demands by saying that 'this is not the way we do it [at our school].' It is telling that the professional participants did not apply the semantics of these recent legislative amendments to their sayings; their choice of language instead confirmed the practical stance of 'business as usual.'

Knowledge Bases and Student Agency

Throughout their conversations, the participants shared implicit academic rationales for why and how to promote and support student needs, agency, and integrity in schoolhome collaboration. These cues include phrases like 'to enter the adult world' and 'building the holistic student.' The professional participants did not refer to established research when constructing these rationales, perhaps because the topic had not been sufficiently theorised in their teacher education programmes or because they deemed the language of research and theory inappropriate to the context of the dialogue cafés. Weak theorisation is described by Nicolini (2012, 12) as a 'weak practice-based programme' that suggests (incorrectly) that practice is self-explanatory. Promoting a lack of awareness and common understanding about the complexity of operations and qualities necessary to practise school-home collaboration successfully. Specifically, if teachers are to operationalise how to support students becoming autonomous, they need to theorise, describe and reason the relevant strategies for making this happen. Striving to explain, within context and time, is about establishing a 'strong practice-based programme' (Nicolini 2012).

Teachers could, for example, look to self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2017) when describing their students' needs. Self-determination theory provide a clear rationale for adolescents' psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy and warns against detaching parents. Empirical research drawing on this theory, moreover, has shown how adolescents who experienced parental autonomy-support functioned more autonomously and with higher levels of self-regulation (Katz et al. 2018; Fousiani et al. 2014). By theorising in this way, the teaching profession could find data-driven anchorage in theoretical and empirical knowledge bases. Theorisations towards deeper understanding is a continuous process for professional educators working alongside their personal experiences; when used actively, it can enrich the semantic space of collaborative practices. In the context of this study, the operationalisation of how to promote student agency and autonomy seemed significantly under-theorised.

Though important to their collaboration, the knowledge bases of parents and teachers are also fundamentally different. Teachers are academically educated and develop their understandings within a professional collegium. Parents' knowledge, meanwhile, may also draw on academic knowledge but should be understood as relational, bodied, embodied, intuitive, and intimate, as well as uncertain (Pushor 2015). Despite this disparity, both actors affect the meaning-making process if they allow each other to bring the other's perspectives into the semantic space.

Teacher Beliefs and a Fire-Fighting Approach

Buehl and Beck (2015) have highlighted the importance of the reciprocal relationship between teachers' beliefs and their 'sayings' in and about their own practices. Significantly, teachers' beliefs differ from their knowledge: they exhibit features such as being existentially presumptive, alternative, affective and evaluatively loaded, or episodically structured (Pajares 1992). Personal beliefs are important because 'beliefs are the best indicator of the decisions individuals make' (Pajares 1992, 307). Beliefs affect the way teachers interpret information, frame a task, or guide an action (Buehl and Beck 2015). Teachers' beliefs may align with or contradict how professional arrangements – such as pedagogical theory, educational research, educational jurisdiction, or the profession's code of ethics - influence the semantic space of a particular practice. How did a firefighting approach develop when jurisdiction and knowledge bases alike suggest systematic, proactive, and supportive collaborative strategies that promote student agency and wellbeing? There is no single or simple answer to this question. In order to collaborate with parents in school, it is argued that teachers have to believe that all parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them, that parents have the capacity to support and help their children, and that parents and school employees are equal partners (Mapp, Carver, and Lander 2017). If, on the other hand, teachers doubt the parents' ambitions and their position in school, or they do not believe in the strategies they are expected to implement, the implementation may not succeed. In the dialogue cafés, some teachers described how they managed to work systematically: calling all parents at the beginning of each school year, inviting all parents to planned parent conferences, and so on. These teachers also expressed how systematic and relational collaboration with parents improved their relationships with their students and how they sincerely believed in school-home collaboration. Others, by contrast, voiced how they felt overwhelmed with problems and how their efforts towards a systematic approach had not turned out as planned. Instead, they spent most of their available time on fire-fighting and did not have the capacity to change from a problem-oriented approach to a more systematic one. Other teachers described how it used to be easier to be a teacher when they did not have to collaborate with parents; it seemed an accepted choice in their collegium to maintain the tradition of keeping parents at a distance, except when solving student problems.

In this way, the semantic space contains the language used by actors when approaching each other in intersubjective practices. By having ongoing dialogues about legislation, theory, ethics, and so forth, the teaching profession can proactively theorise and thereby enrich this space in order to develop their practices.

# Social-political arrangements

The tripartite relationship between students, parents, and teachers in school-home collaboration is also influenced by social-political arrangements. Legislation affects not only the semantic space, but the intersubjective social space as well: by outlining the teachers' and parents' formal obligations, the students' rights, and by giving schools the responsibility to ensure collaboration between school and home (Vedeler 2020). In real life, however, the setup of social-political arrangements is more complicated, and legislation itself does not quarantee clarity in these social relations. For instance, in upper secondary school, students have a legal right to participate when the teacher invites parents to collaborate (Regulation Education Act, 20060, § 20-4). Specifically, the regulation declares that: 'The conversation [at the parent conference] will clarify how the student, the school, and the parents will collaborate to facilitate the learning and development of the student.' By contrast, the café conversations revealed that the students' agency was not sufficiently prioritised in the collaborative efforts. At this level of schooling, the relationship between parents and their adolescent children is also changing: the unequal relationship becomes more egalitarian as students achieve increased autonomy (Noom, Deković, and Meeus 2001), with resulting impacts on the tripartite relationships entrenched in school-home collaboration. Here, this social space, as described by the participants, seemed to lack the necessary strategies to empower the students' role.

Equally, parents' engagement and participation in school may be disrupted by diverse emotional, linguistic, physical, and cultural aspects (LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling 2011), including distrust in the invitation to collaborate or a sense of divergent expectations as partners (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Teachers may also be disrupted by experiences of stress, high risk, or unpleasant emotions when collaborating with parents (Bæck 2013; Prilleltensky, Neff, and Bessell 2016). The stories shared in the dialogue cafés reinforced this ambivalent relationship between and across the three actors involved.

# **Material-economic arrangements**

Participants in the dialogue cafés shared stories about how their schools very practically approached parents in new ways, working on the material-economic arrangements. For instances, by setting up and informing all parties about an annual plan for school-home collaboration, by calling all parents during the first two weeks of each school year, by customising information for parents on the school's website, by trying out different ways of conducting the public parent meetings, or by introducing new consent procedures when students turn 18. These new ways of doing, even if not implemented in full, show how schools adjusted, initiated and piloted novel tools and gradually added a more systematic and comprehensive physical space into their professional practices. Previous studies have underlined the importance of evaluating and adjusting material-economic arrangements in school-home collaboration. Faugstad and Jenssen (2019) found that the legislative demands on how to conduct parent meetings and conferences were characterised by formalities that seemed to stand in the way of real collaboration. Another study by Bæck (2010) observed that statutory parent meetings tended to engage parents with higher levels of education. Similarly, the students in the dialogue cafés here expressed concerns about teachers scheduling parent conferences during regular teaching hours (causing them to miss compulsory classes) and about teachers not incorporating digital video technologies (such as Skype or Facetime) as a means to reach parents who were unable to visit the school in person. It is important to monitor the side effects of these new ways of doing.

Schools facilitate school-home collaboration by allocating time, developing tools, establishing routines, and overseeing procedures. In this way, they steer parents and students into how to follow the collaborative practices required at their school. Statutory guidelines outline the minimum required work and activities to implement, and schools are expected to cover this and more in a comprehensive physical space adjusted to local conditions and to their particular students' needs.

#### Limitations

This study was limited to the perspectives of teaching professionals and students; further research could extend to include parents' experiences and reflections. The research method is novel, and the material is rich in potential for exploring the various participants' contributions through other theoretical lenses. Still, triangulating this kind of research material with observational data would strengthen the ontological approach.



#### **Conclusions**

School-home collaboration is about more than information sharing and parent meetings. As a pedagogical phenomenon, it is in professionals' interest to explore more fully the purpose of practising collaborative efforts between students, parents, and teachers. Site ontological processes of theorisation are required to develop a meaningful rationale for why and how the teaching profession should approach parents at the upper secondary level. This study has revealed three main themes pertinent to processes of theorisation, insights that might be relevant to explore outside this immediate site as well. Each school site, when developing their 'strong practice-based program' for school-home collaboration should in particular discuss their students' needs.

The first theme is the need to clarify the teaching profession's obligations, particularly how to deal with tensions between student rights and parental responsibilities and the shared responsibility between teachers and parents. The second theme is how to engage and empower the students' agency within the tripartite relationship between students, parents, and teachers. The third theme is how to move beyond a fire-fighting approach in order to implement systematic, proactive, and supportive collaborative practices for all students. It is paradoxical to discover that student agency is not being sufficiently safeguarded in these kinds of practices at this level of schooling, since independence and democratic participation represent cornerstone values in this particular site's ontology.

Theorising pedagogical practices involves a process of deep enquiry. It is a search for living meaning and reflexivity, in relation to students' education, to discover and become aware of how to know, how to do, and how to relate when conducting school-home collaboration. The landscape of educational practices differs across sites; therefore, each school needs to explore the particular practice architectures that maintains how they conduct their ways of saying, doing, and relating. In each milieu, the challenge is to reveal the taken-for-grantedness that characterises their everyday practices and to ensure that their collaborative practices actually meet their students' need for support during their time in upper secondary education. The participants in the dialogue cafés here expressed their concerns about how schools' collaborative practices were not systematically addressing such needs. In particular, the student representatives shared examples and concerns showing a lack of student involvement. This study has revealed the need for further research to continue to theorise and operationalise how school-home collaboration can safequard the rights of both students and parents and support student agency as it relates to their education.

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