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# Being, becoming and sustaining: learning professional learning in teacher education

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we are exploring the development of professional learning of nearly qualified teachers, here referred to as prospective teachers, during their subject teacher education at a Finnish university. From a teacher educator stance, we aim to understand how teacher education practices can support prospective teachers' professional learning. The research question guiding our study is: How are prospective teachers portraying their professional learning by making use of a self-reflective portfolio? The data analysed consists of self-reflective learning portfolios written by prospective subject teachers as a course assignment in a course in general didactics. Drawing on a practice theoretical perspective, the analysis highlights how activities and assignments supporting both individual and collegial learning can be arranged during pre-service teacher education, and how prospective teachers can achieve a sense of collaborative and dialogic professional learning. The results contribute to discussions about promoting sustainable professional learning for both prospective and in-service teachers.

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## Introduction

The sense of constantly being in motion can be seen as a characteristic part of being a teacher – always becoming, never being complete. To counterbalance this sense of constant motion, teachers may benefit from taking time to reflect on their work and role, both individually and in dialogue with others (Karlberg-Granlund 2021, Korthagen and Nuijten 2022). Reflection can be seen as a core competence of a professional teacher. One ideal of the Finnish research-based teacher education is to educate reflective practitioners (Schön 1983) with an extensive competence to analyse and develop their own teaching, continuously and autonomously (Tirri 2014, Niemi 2015). Being a reflective teacher is a process of continuously becoming.

In this article, we set out to understand how teacher education at a Finnish university can provide a setting for reflection and dialogue to support learning of professional learning. Attention is drawn to processes of professional learning as deliberate actions to interrupt and contemplate the flow of taken for granted habits of teachers' professional life. In relation to what could be referred to as the regime of 'learnification' (Biesta 2015), this attention is meant as a critique of accounts emphasising only individual learning. Instead, focus needs to be laid on the complexity of the learner, the teacher, the content and the wider social context. Developing an ability for continuous reflection is an essential part of teacher students' professional learning (Korthagen and Vasalos 2005). This professional reflection needs to be active and distinct, and

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developing with guidance from descriptive to dialogic and critical (Hatton and Smith 1995, Karlberg-Granlund 2021). When supporting professional learning, the aim is to provide perspectives for observing and tackling dilemmas by reflecting *on* action as well as reflecting *in* action, choosing between different viewpoints and actions (Hatton and Smith 1995, Karlberg-Granlund *et al.* 2016, p. 259).

We understand professional learning to be an ongoing and supported process of individuals' critical professional self-reflection, initiated during teacher education, unfolding in dialogue and collaboration with colleagues. In this sense, professional learning is encompassing both individual professional learning and attributes sometimes ascribed to the term professional development, which often has more guiding, even controlling, connotations (Francisco *et al.* 2021). Traditional professional development initiatives for teachers have often been programmatic, carried out with focus on top-down implementation and limited scopes and timeframes with an aim to improve teachers' teaching and better student outcomes (Opfer and Pedder 2010, Forsman *et al.* 2014, Olin *et al.* 2020, Woodford *et al.* 2023). It has been argued that there can be a difference between professional development practices in working life, which could be emancipatory, grounded in learning from everyday work, and professional development programmes that tend to reproduce controlled frameworks found in undergraduate studies (Webster-Wright 2009). Informed by a Nordic didactic tradition (Olin *et al.* 2020), we are hesitant to define planned, curriculum-based educational endeavours as simply focused on efficacy and inherently subjugating. Instead, we propose that already undergraduate studies can be informed by an emancipatory agenda and an attitude towards teacher education as a phase of commencing professional learning. We aim to give the teacher students an experience of what professional learning can be like by practising in a collegium consisting of teacher student peers.

In this article, we refer to teacher students as 'prospective teachers'. This is grounded in both the theoretical considerations of this study as well as the intentions of the course studied. In the course, the teacher educator consistently refers to the students as 'blivande lärare' in Swedish, i.e. 'prospective teachers' or 'becoming teachers'. Inspired by Penney and Leggett (2005) who refer to 'nearly qualified teachers' as also 'prospective', we use this notion in this article. If we see the process of teacher education as that of being and becoming human beings *and* teachers (compare Biesta 2015, p. 4), we consider it pivotal to address the students as equal amongst each other and with the teacher educator. By using the term 'prospective teachers', the teacher educator shows that she sees the teacher students as equal colleagues already during their studies, including them in the teacher profession rather than viewing them as yet-to-be.

Through this study, drawing on the considerations above, we intend to focus on the professional learning by prospective teachers during their teacher education. From a teacher educator stance, we aim to understand how teacher education practices can support prospective teachers' professional learning. The research question guiding our study is: *How are prospective teachers portraying their professional learning by making use of a self-reflective portfolio?* We aim to illuminate how individual students' professional learning can be understood in relation to the teacher educator's intentions and the aims of the course, and an emerging sense of collegiality among prospective teachers.

### **Professional learning in teacher education – fostering reflection and collegiality**

Our approach to professional learning draws on a practice theoretical perspective (Kemmis 2021). Informed by this stance, interventions, consisting of practices, carried out with the intention of supporting professional learning should be regarded as embedded in discursive and socio-material arrangements supporting and constraining the practices (compare Schatzki 2001). We consider the processes of professional development and professional learning as initiated already during teacher education, as prospective teachers are initiated to become part of different practices of being a teacher (compare Kemmis 2021). As practices and people undergo 'ontological transformation' (*ibid.*), individuals engaged in related activities are learning. Thus, in this study, we put *learning*

identified by the individuals to the fore, however also assuming that the *arrangements*, set in place to support such learning, should be considered. In this view, the individual professional cannot be separated from the surrounding professional practices.

We understand practices to be consisting of three types of dimensions, namely utterances and forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world (relatings) (Mahon et al., 2017). Furthermore, there are three dimensions to the structures, or arrangements, that enable and constrain the unfolding of certain practices (Kemmis 2019). ‘Sayings’ unfold in cultural-discursive arrangements: semantic space, through the medium of language (discourses), in encounters between ‘interlocutors’. ‘Doings’ unfold in material-economic arrangements: physical space (space-time/site), through the medium of work/activity, in encounters between embodied beings. ‘Relatings’ unfold in social-political arrangements: social space (site), through the medium of power/solidarity, in encounters between social beings (Kemmis 2019, pp. 13–14.). We will return to these concepts in the elaboration of the analytical considerations of this study.

We consider teacher education as structured education aimed at promoting longstanding knowledge and an ability to continuous learning in professional life. By giving a free space within safe and well-structured frameworks, the experience of professional learning in teacher education can even be empowering. In teacher education, Korthagen and Vasalos (2005, p. 68) especially highlight the importance of ‘core reflection’ as a mean to enhance professional growth and promote an awareness of emotions, needs, and values, shedding light on underlying issues in teaching and education instead of just focusing on rapid solutions. They propose that issues regarding identity and mission are at the core when becoming aware of ideals and constraints in teachers’ work. Teachers have got both qualities and competencies. Core qualities are strengths that are developed from within, while competencies come from the outside (Korthagen and Vasalos 2005). Teachers’ support needs to vary during different phases of the career, to sustain their professional commitment and ability to cope, and promote school development (cf. Fessler and Christensen 1992, Karlberg-Granlund 2019).

Professional learning relies on self-reflection as well as dialogues in a professional collegium. For professional learning to potentially be meaningful and powerful, the interplay between the individual and the collective needs to be supported for reflection on action and learning from experiences (Penney and Leggett 2005, Francisco et al. 2021). This potentially provides a necessary ‘free space’ (Berg 1981, p. 116) or professional freedom of action for the prospective teachers to identify professional strengths and constraints by establishing ‘safe professional arenas’ (cf. Forsman et al. 2014, p. 128) where the teacher educator acts as a facilitator, providing meaningful tasks within a clear framework, similar to site-based professional development work with in-service teachers (Olin et al. 2016). However, it might be challenging to open such supportive professional arenas for open-ended collaborative processes with an aim of supporting professional learning through new teacher education practices, since this may differ from the usual ways of arranging university teaching and studies. By supporting learning as a ‘process of coming to practise differently’ (Kemmis 2021, p. 289) already in teacher education, learning can take place that even can lay a ground for similar initiatives among colleagues in the future, when the teacher students enter their professional working contexts.

### **The course design – an invitation to the teacher profession and professional learning**

In this article, we are analysing a General Didactics course arranged the last semester of subject teacher education during Spring term 2022 at a Finnish University. Being a subject teacher has traditionally been a solitary work, being an expert of one or two subjects and teaching groups of pupils without collaboration with other teachers on didactical (instructional) matters to a larger extent. With the current Finnish core curriculums for basic education (2016) and general upper secondary schools (2019), there is a shift towards more

interdisciplinary collaboration to promote students' generic competencies. While other courses in subject teacher education mainly focus on how to teach and support pupils' learning and development, this course is aiming to shift the focus to the prospective teachers' own professional learning. By additionally widening focus from the classroom to the school as a community the aim is to give a preparedness for the subject teachers' various responsibilities in the school community.

The course syllabus covers teachers' responsibilities and multifaceted tasks in the school community, collegial and professional development in schools, and collaborative and multidisciplinary work. The aims of the course include '*showing the ability to work with colleagues and across disciplines*', '*identifying one's competences and potentials of development, and to create a plan for continuing learning* [...] and *showing ability to develop and evaluate both one's own teaching and pupils' achievements* [...]'. The course has been arranged in this form since 2016, then shifting focus from the individual teacher's learning to collaborative learning, parallel with the new national Finnish core curricula for basic education (2016) (For a more extensive overview of Finnish teacher education in general, see for instance Hansen *et al.* 2023.).

During the course, the teacher educator intends to invite the course participants to view both themselves and their coparticipants as teachers and colleagues rather than students. 'Sharing is caring', and 'Learning from and with each other', are two sayings that the teacher educator uses to introduce the course programme, the collaborative work and arranging of a workshop. One inherent aim of the course design is to interrogate the persistent idea of a gap between 'theory' and 'practice'. During their shared path as colleagues, the teacher educator wishes to provide the prospective teachers with tools and concepts to make visible both the aspects of being and becoming a teacher as part of a professional collegiality, as well as giving an experience of what collegial support and professional learning may embrace.

The course participants are at the end of their studies for a master's degree in their teaching subject(s). This General Didactics course (5 ECTS) is arranged during their last semester in subject teacher education, an intensive period of alternating theoretical studies and practicum periods, which comprises in total 30 ECTS of in total 60 ECTS for a teacher qualification (ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). During their practicum periods during this last semester, supervisors guide the prospective teachers in a dialogic process of learning how to analyse, reflect on and develop their teaching. The intentions of practising reflection and dialogue are also interwoven in the design of the Didactics course and assignments. The supervising teachers from the practice schools also lectured in the course and invited the teacher students to different forms of out of classroom activities, with an aim of inviting them into the broad duties that relates to subject teachers' work.

The restrictions of the corona pandemic in Spring 2022 affected the course arrangements, the course being mainly arranged through online meetings. The course was however not a traditional online course with anonymised self-paced anytime learning (cf. Bayne *et al.* 2020) but followed a fixed schedule of activities. The overall course design comprised webinars and lectures, interactive group meetings, and collegial group collaboration, as well as arranging interactive distance workshops. These arrangements included a process of collaborative work, where the small groups could choose to meet online or face-to-face when planning their contribution to a workshop. The course assignment was a pre-designed self-reflective portfolio, referred to during the course as a learning diary (Swedish 'lärdagbok'), consisting of different parts as outlined below:

- (1) I as a teacher: Where am I, and where would I like to arrive: Who am I as a teacher, what competences do I have, what am I good at, and what would I like to improve?
  - Analysis of individual SWOT (T1 January 2022 and T2 May 2022)
  - Individual and collaborative analysis of competences (teaching methods and digital tools)
  - Individual formulation of questions and planning how to find answers
  - Plan for continuing learning

- (2) Individual and collegial learning about distance education (collaborative work and arranging a workshop for teacher colleagues)
- (3) Preparing for my work as a teacher: Analysis of own leadership profile (in dialogue with literature)
- (4) Traces of gold from the course (10 –12 notes)
- (5) Evaluation of own process and progress during the course (self assessment with grades 1–5 using Blooms taxonomy)

The collaborative part of the course lasted three weeks, but the self-reflective part continued the whole term. When starting the collaborative part with individual and collaborative analysis of competences, the prospective teachers learn to know themselves and each other. Building on that analysis they chose a topic to analyse and develop together in small groups, and then lead a workshop in Zoom for their colleagues. The SWOT-analysis (highlighting Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and other parts of the self-reflective portfolio were personal.

### Material and method – approaching professional learning through narratives

The invitation to be part of research focusing on teacher education practices was accepted by 38 of 43 course participants, providing their course assignments described above for confidential analysis. The empirical material of this study consists of 617 pages in total, addressing the different parts of the course portfolio as outlined above. Most of the portfolios consist of written text in Times New Roman, font size 12 and line spacing 1,5, accompanied by SWOT-tables and sometimes other illustrative elements. The length of the portfolios varies between 11 and 26 pages.

The ethical considerations of this study are in line with the recommendations by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2023). During the course, the teacher educator informed about her intent to use the self-reflective portfolios as confidential research material. The course participants expressed their written consent to use their assignments for research purposes when submitting their assignments. Participation in this research was voluntary and did not affect the grading of the course. The material has been treated confidentially throughout the research process. The teacher educator (first author) anonymised the material which was then shared with the second author. The citations chosen as examples in this article were translated to English by the authors.

The analysis is guided by the research question: *How are prospective teachers portraying their professional learning by making use of a self-reflective portfolio?* With Kemmis (2021, p. 289) we understand professional learning as ‘a process of coming to practise differently’, which may include both ‘acquisition of knowledge’ and ‘coming to participate differently in practices’. Through the analysis, we strive to identify transformations where knowledge has been acquired or it can be noticed that practitioners’ identities has become transformed by learning (Kemmis 2021, pp. 290–291). The portfolios are designed to be an invitation to the students to analyse and tell narratives about their personal experiences and views on being and becoming as teachers during the Spring term. Drawing on the idea of learning as doing or seeing practices differently, our analysis is guided by an interest in instances, or narratives (Heikkinen 2002, Heikkinen *et al.* 2012), of change or transformation as expressed by the prospective teachers, as these are being enabled and constrained by different practice arrangements. In other words, our analytical interest focuses on, in light of the narratives in the portfolios, how the prospective teachers are changing their professional ‘sayings’, ‘doings’, and ‘relatings’, as they are navigating cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements (Kemmis 2019, 2021; Mahon *et al.*, 2017). The first author (teacher educator) has got an inside perspective of the interplay and emerging collegial dialogue during the three weeks of collaborative work in the course, while the second author serves as a critical friend focusing primarily on the ‘sayings’ in the written accounts. Our analysis was realised through a collegial dialogue, as the reflections of the teacher educator met the considerations and analytical reflections of a prospective teacher educator.



## Results – being, becoming, and sustaining

The portfolio is used by the prospective teachers to *discover* and *understand their own identity as a teacher*, especially in relation to questions of being good enough and being committed enough. These questions are linked to issues of being able to fulfil one's own requirement of what a teacher should be able to do. The ideals (sayings) about the characteristics of a good teacher are sometimes even too idealistic:

During my practicum, I have found that I have been too hard on myself. I have constantly demanded the best of me and thought that if my lesson was not absolutely perfect then it was completely bad. This mindset is not sustainable in the long run and this Spring I have realized that not everything has to be perfect – sometimes okay is good enough. Even if everything is not perfect, I should still trust that I am a competent teacher and know what I am doing. (Self-reflective portfolio 5, task 1, analysis, May)

The person cited above reflects on the insight of being a professional is not equivalent to being perfect. In relation to inner, personal traits, others too *reflect on changed attitudes* from previously having been 'too hard on themselves' (sayings and relatings). A reasonable amount of idealism is however required, as a reoccurring perception in the portfolios is that the teacher profession cannot be simply performed but must be guided by a calling of some kind, a sense of mission of serving others (sayings and relatings). Another recurrent issue is then, if their calling is strong enough, as expressed by one prospective teacher in the quotes below:

The biggest question I have for the Spring is how much I really want to work as a teacher. Is it something I'm passionate enough about to do a good enough job in the long run?. (Self-reflective portfolio 9, task 1, formulation of questions, January)

My internal weaknesses in January included that my motivation was quite low and that I wonder if I have enough enthusiasm for the teaching profession. Unfortunately, these are two weaknesses that I believe remain. My motivation to work as a teacher has not increased during the Spring, but neither has it decreased to any great extent. I'm still at the stage where I think I could enjoy being a teacher just okay, at least well enough to work as a teacher for a while. At the same time, my feeling remains that I will not/shall not work as a teacher. I don't have a similar fire for being a teacher that I have for some other things. That, as I see it, is my biggest weakness now. Still, teaching is a job that at least I believe you need to have an enthusiasm for in order to do it really good, at least for a longer period. I'm still open to the possibility that this could change in the future, maybe it's a matter of working with other things for a while and then coming back to the school. (Self-reflective portfolio 9, task 1, analysis, May)

This question of whether one is motivated enough for continuing as a teacher for the whole career will be explored further as we discuss aspects of sustaining within the teaching profession. Another prospective teacher *identifies changes in the personal pedagogical competences*, noticing that he/she has developed new teaching competences (doings) and become more confident in the relationship with the pupils (relatings), which gives him/her a sense of safety in the teacher role:

A big difference compared to the first SWOT is that I have redirected pedagogical competences in a broad sense to my strengths. During the practicum, my pedagogical competences have developed which includes a variety of things which I will go into below. In short, I would say that I feel more confident in my teacher role and how I communicate knowledge as well as interact with students (Self-reflective portfolio 13, task 1, analysis, May)

Further down in the portfolio, this prospective teacher reflects on having embraced new methods for organising the teaching, by encouraging student activity and differentiating. Being a good teacher in different ways is another question some of the prospective teachers focus on. Is there room for my kind of teacher within the teacher profession and collegium, how do I fit in, and how do I relate to my students and colleagues, are questions that connect to teacher identity and diversity. One prospective teacher reflects on this during the Spring term and *concludes that there is a need for different personalities* in a school, and also for him/her (relatings):



Notes [Swot 1, January]: I would like to discuss with a teacher or supervisor that I am a rather introvert person. I like spending time with people, but sometimes need quite a lot of time for recovery. Sometimes I feel that I don't have the 'typical teacher personality' – how should I find my role? My teacher told me in grade 8 that I am too shy. That statement has stayed with me.

Notes [Swot 2, May]:/. . .I have also learned that different personalities are needed in a school and that different personalities are a strength and not a weakness. I don't have to be like everyone else. My personality has to take place in my teaching. Being thoughtful is not a weakness but a strength. The fact that pupils are exposed to different personalities is a good thing. A good leader is also someone who can listen to others and take in what others are saying. Just because you're a good speaker doesn't mean you're a good leader. Giving pupils and students space is important. There is also a lot less pressure when I have started to focus more on student learning in the classroom rather than how I am perceived as a teacher. I thank my fellow students and supervisors for their support regarding this development. (Self-reflective portfolio 23, task 1, analysis, May)

This prospective teacher concludes that 'my personality has to take place in my teaching'– finding that the personality and his/her competences are intertwined in the profession, something that also Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) put forward, when addressing the importance of core reflection in teachers' work.

### Continuously becoming as a teacher

In addition to the identified themes above about discovering and understanding teacher identity, the portfolio seems to have provided useful tools for *seeing one's own progress and reflect on continued development*. The SWOT tool is used to *reflect on experiences beyond the course*. For example, when comparing their SWOT 1 (January 2022) to SWOT 2 (May 2022), some prospective teachers mention how their nervousness has gradually eased and compare their first practicum lessons to their last. They also reflect on the dialogues they have had with supervisors:

Before my first lesson, I woke up several times during the night wondering how it would go and once the lesson started, my hands were shaking in nervousness. Lesson by lesson, the nervousness and fear of failing went away, and the results got better and better, as both I and my supervisor noticed. (Self-reflective portfolio 7, task 1, analysis, May)

In the portfolio the prospective teachers *distance themselves and analyse their own development from new perspectives* (relatings). Rönnerman (2021) also highlights how tools such as journaling (doings) can help teachers to reflect on their teaching activities in action research. Task 1, when the prospective teachers are challenged to create questions and consciously seek answers, builds on an action learning approach (cf. Penney and Leggett 2005, Karlberg-Granlund *et al.* 2016). Their questions usually touch upon teacher identity and how to conduct teaching, for example as portrayed in the quote below:

Questions I'm looking for answers to during the Spring semester: What kind of teacher am I and what kind of teacher do I want to become? What kind of teaching do I like best and am I brave enough to try new teaching methods? (Self-reflective portfolio 19, task 1, formulation of questions, January)

The nature of the questions (sayings) formulated in the self-reflective portfolio above are quite existential, asking 'what kind of teacher am I', and 'what kind of teacher do I want to become', linking teaching competences to core qualities: 'Am I brave enough to try new teaching methods?'. Other prospective teachers *formulated questions they would like to explore* directly in their teaching (doings), like asking about 'structure and routines – how should I start and end the lesson?', and planning to find answers:

I will actively test different ways of starting and ending the lesson. In my previous practicum lessons, I have always gathered the students standing in a standing circle, but now I want to try a sitting circle. I could also identify which way works best for me and the group. (Self-reflective portfolio 35, task 1, analysis, January)

The tasks in the portfolio helped the prospective teachers to *formulate their own questions* (sayings) and make them explicit, and *search for answers* (doings). The tasks also helped them to see their own progression and growth, and to *become aware of changed thinking* regarding oneself and one's professional tasks, by *widening their focus* to new things (relatings) they had not thought of before and would not have thought about without *taking the necessary time to reflect* (doings).

There are a lot of things that I would like to include in my analysis, because I didn't think about it until now when I started reflecting on it. There is a lot of competences that are forgotten or not perceived as something important before we have given it extra thought, so that it can mature.../ (Self-reflective portfolio 22, task 1, analysis, May)

It has been intense and many things to keep track of and hard to find a moment to reflect on your own development. At least that's how it has been for me. My first thoughts when comparing the two SWOTs were 'wow, there are fewer weaknesses', which I wouldn't realise if I hadn't filled in the first SWOT in the start.../ (Self-reflective portfolio 25, task 1, analysis, May)

The self-reflective portfolio supported *capturing the growing awareness of one's identity*, in being and *becoming increasingly aware of both strengths and weaknesses*, and at the same time *accepting* them and seeing them as something to be continuously explored and developed (relating).

As I critically review my SWOT analyses, I can see a difference in my level of awareness and reflection skills. In the latter analysis, I have listed more things, because during the practicum I got to know myself as a teacher and my professionalism in a more conscious way. The first analysis is rather narrow and short, although it contains quite right things. The strengths of the first analysis have developed into even more solid strengths. Some weaknesses from January have developed and others are still present. I have also identified new weaknesses. I have also had a small 'reality check' regarding the degree of my strengths. In January, I thought I was using student-centred teaching very diversely, whereas in May I realised that this is not the case. The opportunities and threats are relatively similar in both analyses, I have only added the threats related to the large and heterogeneous student groups. (Self-reflective portfolio 33, task 1, May)

It has also become so much clearer to me what it means to be a teacher, and that it is really always about constant development, you can always learn something new or get inspired by your colleagues and find new ways of approaching problems – which is important in the teaching profession (Self-reflective portfolio 22, task 1, analysis, May)

Lifelong learning seems to have become integrated in the prospective teachers' thoughts about themselves. Some of the teacher students also build on the given literature in the course, apparently *agreeing on the professional and personal aspects of being and becoming* a teacher (relatings).

Karlberg-Granlund (2021, chapter 9) writes that competence and existence are two words that capture what it means to be a teacher. I agree, competence reflects the studies I have conducted, as well as will conduct, and existence describes me as a person. My leadership style has definitely become clearer during the Spring term. (Self-reflective portfolio 24, task 1, analysis, May)

The prospective teachers used the self-reflective portfolio for *reflections about changing and continuously learning from others*, both from their students and colleagues (relatings), and from society, or as one prospective teacher puts it; 'taking on the task of becoming and being a teacher means accepting that you will never be finished':

Being a teacher = constantly being in development: This is a point that has been raised many times during the course, but at the same time something so important that it probably cannot be mentioned too many times. Taking on the task of becoming and being a teacher means accepting that you will never be finished. I believe that as a teacher you learn at least as much from your students and colleagues as they do from you. You develop continuously both individually and with others, such as colleagues and the whole school community, pupils and pupils' parents. (Self-reflective portfolio 1, task 3, traces of gold from the course, May)

Looking forward to my new mission as a teacher, I am humble and aware that I am by no means a complete teacher. There is much to deepen, improve and develop. We live in a changing society and the school world is part of that. The rapid development of society brings new ways of working and it is important to be flexible and open to new solutions. (Self-reflective portfolio 11, task 1, analysis, May)

## Sustaining within practices in transformation through collegial learning

The sense of continually evolving together with others (relatings) may cause a feeling of exhaustion. However, most of the prospective teachers embraced the idea of continuous development and learning as something positive, even giving long term strength and motivation. One of them especially *connected embracing learning to the collaborative workshops in the course* where they worked, taught and learnt from each other.

*Workshops, and being on the move:* As my final ‘trace of gold’, I have chosen to include Tomas Tranströmer’s quote ‘I’m never finished and that’s the way it should be’ as I think it sums up the message of the course nicely. In the past, I have felt impatient to first get my bachelor’s papers out, then graduate, and then work as a teacher until I retire. Now, however, I have found that there is something beautiful about daring to admit that you are never finished, either as a person or as a teacher. I think our workshops fit well with the quote, in that they are undeniably a form of collegial learning and a great opportunity to learn from your future colleagues. That is why I have chosen to put them together. (Self-reflective portfolio 1, task 3, traces of gold from the course, May)

Many of the prospective teachers saw reflection and analytical competences (doings) as something important, parallel with *valuing learning from and with colleagues* through different forms of collegial learning (relatings). Colleagues are not seen as threats or competitors, rather as companions that complement each other. Colleagues additionally widen and challenge one’s own perspectives, helping in seeing and understanding things differently and from new angles (relatings):

Presentation of own group work is on the schedule [in workshop]. We will all deal with distance education. A group [of teacher students] presents a framework for good distance education. The group in charge divides us into break out rooms and asks us to discuss three questions. One of the questions is in what ways we can use the local environment in our own teaching subjects when we do distance teaching. A very good question. I realise that I have never thought along these lines before, nor do I feel that any of the teachers who have done distance teaching for me have done so, and several course mates point out the same in their feedback to the group. A fairly obvious thing really, why couldn’t the local environment be used in teaching, but still something I had never thought of before. In my discussion, I suggest that as a religion teacher I could, for example, ask students to take a picture or describe a local church. (Self-reflective portfolio 15, task 4, traces of gold from the course, May)

One last, but nice and important gold grain from the course: Friends. Thanks to interactive sessions during the course, there has been space for discussions among us student teachers, which has resulted in new friendships for me. At the same time, with a view to the future and working as teachers, we student teachers can be an important network of contacts for each other, and possibly even future colleagues. It can give a feeling of confidence to have previous acquaintances in your teaching collegium. (Self-reflective portfolio 31, task 4, traces of gold from the course, May)

In the portfolio one prospective teacher *expresses her/his gratitude of finding new friends* because of the interactive sessions during the course, and now seeing all subject teachers as a collegial support network, although they will teach different subjects (relatings). In addition to such hopeful accounts, also *questions about managing with the workload* (doings) come to the fore. This worry can even overshadow a strong commitment to being a teacher:

I love being a teacher, but how can I cope with everything outside of this? I’ve been following the teacher strike discussions on Svenska Yle [News site] and can understand why. If I, as a new and prospective teacher, support these, it is a sign that something is wrong. (Self-reflective portfolio 16, task 1, May)

This prospective teacher *expresses concerns regarding teacher strikes* (doings and relatings) and is worried about problems concerning the teacher profession, however without explicating the problems or potential solutions. Others *expressing similar workload concerns* focus on what they can do themselves to alleviate the situation (doings), such as in the citation below:

In my swot analyses I talk a lot about such threats as ‘will I be able to cope with the teaching profession’. My own experience is that studying is already very stressful for me, and I am therefore also afraid that working life will be even more stressful. I have understood from many people who have finished their degree and started working that they have had a very hard time with all the work outside of teaching and these people have not felt particularly stressed during their studies. I personally plan to try to get such working hours in the

beginning that I can cope with everything, and so gradually increase the number of hours I work. I can't influence this too much myself because it depends a lot on what kind of workplaces I can get into. At the same time, I have the feeling that I have now become better prepared for different things outside of teaching and in this way the threat has to some extent also been reduced but is still there in the SWOT, because we never know what will happen to the teachers' workload. (Self-reflective portfolio 20, task 1, analysis, May)

This prospective teacher plans to work part-time to ease the professional responsibilities of being a teacher, *expressing worry* (sayings) about not being able to handle what has become the norm of fulltime teacher workload. Others again have plans for compartmentalising their professional and private lives, in that way limiting the workload and finding time for recovery (doings). Other aspects of coping, connects to the more existential dimension of being and becoming a teacher, stressing emotions, beliefs and values in turn, including a sound awareness of the limitations and challenges of one's work – still with glimpses of hope. In addition to searching for sustainable ways to cope with what is portrayed as the stressful realities of the teacher profession, the prospective teachers also pose questions in relation to finding a balance within their personal teacher identity. To sustain such a balance can for example be portrayed as trusting in having both a solid knowledge foundation and a will to develop:

In conclusion, although there are many things that I have learned during my pedagogical studies, there are still many things that I need to learn to do well. Teaching is a very diverse profession, where those who practice it constantly need to learn new methods and ways of doing their job. No one who works as a teacher is finished learning, so you shouldn't aspire to that either. But with a solid foundation and a willingness to develop, you will go far. (Self-reflective portfolio 17, task 1, analysis, May)

Others again are not yet certain about how they can find ways of balancing the many questions and demands of being a teacher:

Several of the questions raised in the Spring are related to what I wrote in the SWOT-analysis in May in the box for weaknesses: a feeling of uncertainty whether I as a teacher will be sufficient for the important task of teaching. The Spring lectures have alerted me to the importance of the mission we face as prospective teachers and how important people we can become in students' lives. – Will I be enough? Will I be able to connect with students and create a trusting relationship? On what basis can this be built in our rapidly changing society? How can I ensure that everyone learns what they are entitled to learn, when pupils in the same class may have such different circumstances? How can I establish a good framework for assessment – is it something I should already know, or is it something that teachers create a system for as they gain more experience?

The lectures have also made me aware of the many different dimensions of teaching - it is not only about learning, but also about creating a safe environment for pupils. Can I cope with everything that comes with teaching? Am I able to deal with bullying or support pupils who are struggling because of something in their personal lives? While these questions are big and important, I believe that identifying the issues is an important first step. It provides a starting point for how I should and can work further. (Self-reflective portfolio 31, task 1, analysis, May)

Even though the line of reasoning above is not ending in a concluding answer, there is an expression of *hope that by identifying and formulating questions, some solutions can eventually be found* (doings). The question is then, where can the prospective teacher start to search for answers to these kinds of pressing matters. Sustaining a balance amidst insecurities and conflicting demands is portrayed as potentially happening through dialogue within the teacher profession, in a collegium, or in other collective settings.

We have talked a lot about collegial learning, and also had our interdisciplinary workshops where we benefited a lot from the knowledge and special interests of others. I am sure the best way to learn is to be brave enough to ask for advice. Especially as a new teacher, you can get so many tips and advice from more experienced teachers – and at the same time you can give them new ideas and new motivation. (e.g. regarding activation and learning by moving, which not all older teachers are familiar with) (Self-reflective portfolio 1, task 1, May)

This prospective teacher *sees collegial learning as an issue of 'daring to ask for advice'* (relatings). At the same time, learning with colleagues is also an opportunity to share expertise and learn to know one's own strengths. But collegial support is not only understood as a matter of giving and taking. Another prospective teacher points to the situatedness of some challenges as a teacher:

The external strengths I perceive to be very much the same as they were in the winter [in Swot 1], however I have noticed that there have been a lot of changes in how important I think the external opportunities are. Still, it is important relationships that I perceive to be the greatest external opportunity. The biggest change is that I have noticed that collegial support is much more important than I thought before. Previously, I perceived that the support of family and wife was the most important. However, this is more complicated than I thought; it is difficult for them to understand the challenges you face as a teacher. This ultimately means that the support that you get is not as great as it could be, even though the intention may be good. Some of the challenges you face are so contextualised to the school that you almost need other teachers to understand you. That's why I've found that it's often particularly nice to seek support from colleagues, or in this case especially other student teachers. I value the support of sitting with other teachers to talk and listen to each other much more highly now than before. In the great community we have had with each other, it has been easy to talk about both the things that have gone well and the things that have failed. Hopefully it could be the same in my future workplaces. (Self-reflective portfolio 9, task 1, analysis, May)

In the analysed material, the prospective teachers widely recognise the promise of learning as part of a collective. They often mention positive experiences of the collegial work within this didactics course, in that sense embracing the idea of professional learning being initiated already during their teacher studies. In the course assignment, the self-reflective portfolio, as well as in the activities during the course, such as workshops, the prospective teachers had a chance to act and behave in teacherly manner, practising both collegial dialogue and individual reflection.

## Concluding discussion

In this article, we have explored how teachers can handle the complexity within their profession through professional learning, by illuminating and practising professional learning during teacher education. The aim was to understand how *teacher education practices* can support prospective teachers' professional learning. The research question guiding the study was: *How are prospective teachers portraying their professional learning by making use of a self-reflective portfolio?* We were interested in tracing reflections of prospective teachers as they navigate their emergent professional roles and potentially are laying the fundament for future bottom-up driven, practice-based, autonomous, and sustainable professional learning. Throughout this study, emphasis has been put on both individual, collegial and collective dimensions. Acknowledging the limitations of studying self-reflective texts written as a course assignment, there might be a risk of the students writing to please an examiner of the course. However, the richness and qualitative value in the analysed texts points towards most of the prospective teachers taking the challenge of self-reflection seriously.

As researchers working and teaching in initial teacher education, we aim to support teacher students' professional growth and learning by connecting theory and practice in meaningful ways and opening for trustful dialogues and reflective learning processes. How certain ideals of action research and action learning, where teachers are empowered to study their own working contexts and learning (Olin *et al.* 2016), may get translated into teacher education contexts needs more research (Olin *et al.* 2020, Bendtsen *et al.* 2021). In line with Biesta's (2015) stressing of content, purpose and relationships in education, we see that the contents and contexts of the course are intertwined with the prospective teachers' own reflections and lives mirrored in their self-reflective portfolios. The results show how the prospective teachers engage in their professional learning through their self-reflective portfolios in versatile ways. Concisely we identify three aspects of what it means to be a teacher through their narratives:

- Being: Finding your identity as a teacher and to be good enough.
- Becoming: Learning, changing, developing and preparing for future continuous learning and change.
- Sustaining: Finding the balance between being and becoming through reflection and collegial learning in dialogue.

The support of co-students and future colleagues is given an important role in sustaining. Over-emphasising the state of becoming might on the one hand lead to being overloaded, dissatisfied and never 'good enough' as a teacher, and over-emphasising the state of being on the other hand, might lead to stagnation. The promise of the collective and collegiality in sustaining the balance between being and becoming is tangible in the portfolios. The dimension of sustaining is inherent in 'a praxis stance' (Smith 2008, p. 65) characterised by caring both for the self and the other. The portfolios supported the prospective subject teachers 'to notice, name and reframe' their learning, in a narrative practice that nurtured an inquiry stance (cf. Ibid).

We identify important 'traces of gold' in the prospective teachers' reflections, which we have analysed through the lens of practice architectures. The *relating-dimension* is most apparent in the narratives, showing that being, becoming and sustaining in teachers work considers webs of relationships; both inner relationships in the thoughts about who am I as a teacher, and who do I want to become, and outer relationships, with students, colleagues, parents and society. In all these relationships learning through reflection and dialogue comes to the fore, as the prospective teachers are beginning to see a learning potential in all challenges and changes and start building their practical wisdom as teachers. Finding ways to go forward and solutions to dilemmas, such as meeting societal demands and idealistic views of good teaching, is then connected to both the *doing-dimension* and the *saying-dimension*. Societal threats considering teachers' workload, low salaries etc. are discussed as pressing issues affecting professional conditions, but these questions are not possible to solve on the collegial level, as they are connected to larger societal issues and policies regarding teachers' work. Identifying threats and formulating questions are already opening a way forward, as one prospective teacher states in portfolio 31: 'While these questions are big and important, I believe that identifying the issues is an important first step. It provides a starting point for how I should and can work further'.

Through the narratives analysed in this article we have learnt that teacher education indeed can support professional learning by supporting prospective teachers to find their own voice, and identify their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as finding hope for the future. The arrangements of the course studied in this article opened a free space for collaborative dialogue and development (cf. Forsman *et al.* 2014), which seemed to have given the prospective teachers a positive experience that hopefully will help them to be, become and sustain in their future work.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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