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Teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being in Finland: educational and legal insights into preservice teachers' conceptions

Anne-Elina Salo^{1,2}, anne-elina.a-e.salo@jyu.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4112-0071>

Virve Valtonen³, virve.valtonen@uef.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0823-1775>

Anu Kajamies², anukaja@utu.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9304-3568>

Marja Vauras², vauras@utu.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0043-9975>

¹University of Jyväskylä, Finland, ²University of Turku, Finland, ³University of Eastern Finland, Finland

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Teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being in Finland: educational and legal insights into preservice teachers' conceptions

Anne-Elina Salo^{1,2}, anne-elina.a-e.salo@jyu.fi

Virve Valtonen³, virve.valtonen@uef.fi

Anu Kajamies², anukaja@utu.fi

Marja Vauras², vauras@utu.fi

¹University of Jyväskylä, Finland, ²University of Turku, Finland, ³University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Abstract

Students' diverse needs and right to receive support encompass not only academic dimensions but also their broader well-being. This study aims to provide educational and legal insights into how strongly, and for what reasons, preservice class teachers (PSTs) in Finland perceive teachers to be obligated to address threats to students' well-being. To this end, a legal perspective was incorporated into the Diverse Situations and Social Inclusion questionnaire. A mixed-method analysis was conducted (N = 114), comprising 1) Likert-scale ratings on the degree of teachers' obligations in diverse situations threatening students' well-being, and 2) Responses to an open-ended question about the basis of these obligations. The majority of the PSTs held that teachers were strongly obligated to address threats to well-being, particularly bullying. The most referred themes of the basis of teachers' obligations were 'teachers' tasks or roles' and 'children's needs', while the themes 'children's rights' and 'written frameworks governing teachers' work' were more seldom mentioned. For class teacher education to cultivate PSTs' expertise to realize children's rights, it is vital to enhance their knowledge of these rights and written frameworks and to help them combine this knowledge with their pedagogical skills to build inclusive school communities.

Keywords: teacher obligations, student well-being threats, student rights, diversity, socially sustainable schools, teacher education

Introduction

Building socially sustainable schools calls for a holistic approach to promoting children's well-being, tackling any threats to it, and securing children's rights. At the heart of these efforts is teacher education that prepares future class teachers, as part of multiprofessional school communities, to respond sensitively to students' diverse needs (Salo and Kajamies, 2024; Valtonen, Salo, and Kajamies, 2024). High-quality teacher education can help to meet the function of education as "the bedrock of just, equal, and inclusive societies and a key driver of sustainable development" (United Nations, 2020, p.21). In this study, social sustainability is approached through every child's right to well-being, in particular, to feel safe and included and to be protected from situations that can cause feelings of unsafety and social exclusion (Salo and Kajamies, 2024; Weckström, Lastikka, and Havu-Nuutinen, 2022). Contextualized in Finnish class teacher education, this mixed-method study combines educational and legal perspectives and contributes to deepen understanding of the building blocks for a socially sustainable teacher education and schools in the North.

Educational and legal perspectives are inextricably linked when it comes to building socially sustainable schools and teacher education. Children are active right-holders and are thus entitled to influence their own affairs. In Finland, teachers' obligations and students' rights, including students' rights to get support for learning and well-being, are based on legal frameworks including national legislation and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Legally, safeguarding children's well-being relates to safeguarding their rights according to the best interests of the child (UNCRC Article 3[1]; UNCRC/C/GC/14). Education research has emphasized children's well-being as a multidimensional construct built through interactions between individuals and environmental factors at different levels (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, and Osher, 2019; Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, and Rose, 2018). In a legal sense, as well, safeguarding children's well-being broadly covers their material, physical, educational, and emotional needs, as well as their need for affection and security (UNCRC/C/GC/14).

Uncertain times and crises have challenged children's and their families' well-being, and thereby preservice class teachers (PSTs) also face increasingly diverse situations when supporting their students, many of which they do not feel prepared to address (Salo and Kajamies, 2024). The changing nature of teachers' work can lead to tensions between what PSTs believe teachers should do and what they can do, thereby causing stress (Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024). In Finland, teachers are civil servants, so they must be familiar with the laws and regulations that are the basis of their work (Act on Civil Servants in Local Government). The law and teachers' obligations, as well as the eligibility requirements for teachers based on regulation, are the same throughout Finland, from the southern archipelago municipalities to the northern Sámi homeland area. All future teachers should be prepared to encounter students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. Amongst the cornerstones of sustainability is that the provision of support is of equally high quality for every student in Finland; According to the Finnish Constitution, students have the right to equality (Section 6) regardless of where they live in Finland.

According to previous research, PSTs in Finland see teachers' work as multifaceted by nature, feeling that they are responsible for students' socialization and well-being in addition to teaching (Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024). However, PSTs' conceptions of teachers' responsibility (Lauermann and Karabenick, 2013) to address diverse threats to students' well-being remain scarcely understood and this current study aims to close this gap in the research literature. Lauermann and Karabenick (2011) suggested that teacher responsibility includes the following components: (a) who is responsible? (b) for what? (c) for/to whom? (d) who is the judge? (e) in relation to what criteria of responsibility? and (f) in what realm of responsibility? (p.124). Thereby, responsibility reflects a teacher's "sense of internal obligation and commitment to produce or prevent designated outcomes, or that these outcomes should have been produced or prevented" (Lauermann and Karabenick, 2011, p.127). Teachers' conceptions of their responsibilities can further be reflected in how they respond to student needs—such as through the effort that they invest—but they can also come "at a personal cost" to well-being (Kettunen, Lassila, Lutovac, and Uitto, 2023; Lauermann, 2014). Thus, deeper understanding of teacher responsibility – in this current study, namely PSTs' conceptions of their obligations – is of importance for the efforts of promoting both students' as well as teachers' own well-being. This study advances understanding of the degree of obligation that PSTs perceive teachers have in situations that can threaten student well-being and provides unique educational and legal insights into PSTs' understanding of supporting student well-being and securing their related rights in diverse situations in Finland.

An ecosystemic approach to students' well-being and related threats

Schools do not operate in isolation from society. Building on the bioecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), we illustrate a framework (Figure 1) through which we reflect on the significance of the intertwined levels of the environment in how (i) each child's support needs could be met equitably, and in how (ii) to ensure that every (future) teacher has the expertise to provide support and/or refer the student to support services in situations where the student's well-being is threatened. The understanding that supportive environments and relationships are at the heart of promoting children's well-being and resilience further aligns with the developmental systems theory (e.g., Osher et al., 2018). Figure 1 was designed to illustrate the intertwining of educational and legal perspectives. It focuses on the most crucial support elements in this study and includes arrows to concretize the attention required across the system levels to respond to a student's needs and to realize their rights: to build a safe and inclusive learning environment, as well as to address threats to student well-being and safeguard every student's rights.

The system levels are next discussed from the macrosystem to the microsystem, and finally the chronosystem, through both educational and legal lenses. This is done to highlight that meeting students' needs and securing their rights are interconnected and require concrete actions and sufficient resources to ensure real opportunities for their implementation (Valtonen et al., 2024).

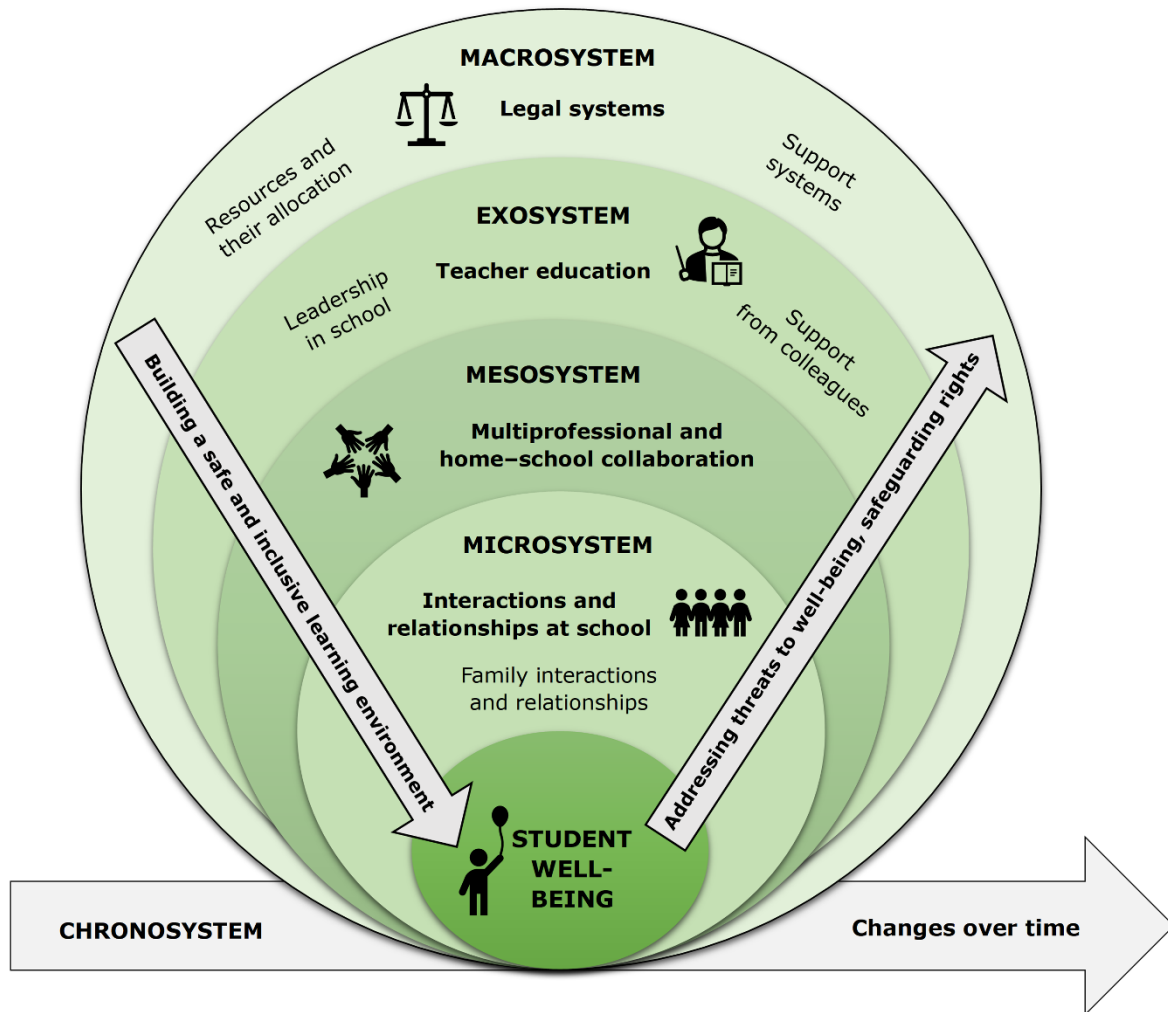


Figure 1: an ecosystemic approach to student well-being and related threats: educational and legal perspectives (building on the bioecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006)

Legal systems governing children's rights and teachers' obligations in Finland

This study contributes to our understanding of PSTs' awareness of legal systems governing children's rights and teachers' obligations. From a legal perspective, teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being are about safeguarding students' rights. A safe learning environment is a prerequisite for the full realization of a child's right to basic education (e.g., UNCRC/GC/2001/1; UNESCO, 2017). In Finland, according to Section 29 of the Basic Education Act, students have the right to a safe learning environment, which is safeguarded through various preventive measures:

Students have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, as stated in the UNCRC (Article 12) and the Basic Education Act (Section 47a). Every student has the right to inclusive education—the opportunity to be part of the school community and receive support tailored to their individual needs. This is affirmed in Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its General Comment No.4 (UNCRPD/C/GC/4). In Finland, the Basic Education Act emphasizes that education must be appropriate to the student's age and abilities (Section 3), and that teaching arrangements should support effective learning conditions (Section 20b). Under the Pupil and Student Welfare Act (Section 4), students are entitled to community-based student welfare. This includes

creating a school environment that promotes well-being, anticipates risks, and provides timely support. All activities must promote students' healthy growth and development to their full potential (UNCRC, Article 6). This reflects a holistic approach to education, which includes supporting children's social and emotional development alongside their cognitive growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; OECD, 2021).

Safeguarding these proactive efforts are essential to ensure safety, but they also help to respond to situations where concerns arise about a student. A student's right to basic education includes the right to receive support for learning and schooling when needed. Once a need is identified, the law outlines the services available: learning support (Basic Education Act, Sections 20a–20i); student welfare services such as access to a school nurse or psychologist (Pupil and Student Welfare Act, Section 5); and multidisciplinary cooperation between education, social services, and health care (Pupil and Student Welfare Act, Section 19). According to the Finnish Constitution and the UNCRC, alongside the right to basic education (Section 16; Articles 28, 29), the child has the right to social and health care (Section 19; Article 24), which together aim to safeguard the overall well-being and development of the student. It is the responsibility of the multiprofessional authorities at different system levels, as illustrated in Figure 1, to ensure the well-being and development of the child in support of the family (Constitution, Section 19; UNCRC, Article 18). Access to support is essential to ensure the equal realization of these rights (Valtonen et al., 2024).

Class teacher education in Finland: cultivating future teachers' competencies

In Finland, teacher eligibility is based on the Decree on Qualification Requirements for Teaching Staff throughout the country. Class teachers teach grades 1 to 6 in primary education (7-12-year-olds), and they qualify at the MA level (a five-year program). Those willing to become class teachers have freedom to apply, through a single entrance exam, to any of the universities in Finland (Helsinki, Eastern Finland, Jyväskylä, Lapland, Oulu, Tampere, Turku, and Åbo Akademi) that provide education to qualify for this highly esteemed profession. Due to the multiple universities that offer class teacher education and the national requirements for the profession, teachers who start their careers in the Arctic region have received a similar education than those who work in other parts of the country.

Teacher education does not only consist of academic studies but also involves pedagogical studies and guided teaching practicums. According to Metsäpelto, Warinowski, Poikkeus, and Mikkilä-Erdmann (2024), Finnish teacher education “[...] strives to produce highly competent, reflective, and research-informed educators who are well-prepared to meet the diverse needs of students and contribute to the improvement of education as a whole” (p.191). The Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2022) emphasizes the cultivation of teachers' 1) broad-based core competence (e.g., pedagogical, supporting diverse learners), 2) expertise and action that create new outcomes (e.g., responding to “wicked problems”, collaboration), and 3) developing one's own competence and those within the educational institutions (e.g., continuous learning, creating collaborative practices).

In Finland, teachers have broad pedagogical freedom and responsibility (Juvonen and Toom, 2023). The legal responsibilities of teachers in the exercise of public authority—as protectors of student's rights

and public officials who also have rights in their relation to their employer—are key elements of teachers' professional competence (UNCRC/GC/2001/1). However, laws and regulations are typically seen as contextual information of the education system (Metsäpelto et al., 2021) rather than core professional competencies. Some universities' curricula (e.g., University of Turku) present the ability to master laws and regulations governing the teaching profession among the learning objectives, but courses on the legal content that forms the basis of teachers' work and student's rights are not compulsory (Valtonen, 2025). Without such mandatory content, much of the responsibility falls on individual PSTs to take the initiative to learn about students' rights and teachers' obligations on their own, although such understanding is necessary for all future teachers.

The increasingly multidimensional nature of teachers' work and their multiple roles, not limited to teaching, can cause a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty among PSTs (Körkkö, Lutovac, and Korte, 2024). Expertise in diversity and social inclusion provides an essential basis for professional practice and development in different contexts and areas. In a study by Salo, Kajamies, and Vauras (in press), many PSTs emphasized that they needed concrete tools for dealing with diverse situations. Moreover, the skills that they felt needed to be cultivated to support students in challenging situations included creating a supportive climate, observing and balancing diverse needs, addressing peer difficulties, and supporting students' socioemotional skills. This study contributes to our understanding of PSTs' support needs during teacher education in mastering laws and regulations governing their future teaching profession.

Multiprofessional school community and home–school collaboration

The mesosystem level highlights the broader shoulders that are needed instead of teachers having to respond to students' diverse needs alone (Körkkö and Lutovac, 2024; Salo et al., in press). Our study provides insights into PSTs' awareness of the role of collaboration in responding to the students' needs. While learning support may be provided at the discretion of the teacher, in many situations of concern, the teacher does not act alone. From legal and educational perspectives, student support should be a systematic activity in which the teacher has the support of the school community to ensure that the detection, identification, and response to the need for support are carried out jointly between the school and the professionals involved in student support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Valtonen et al., 2024). Multiprofessional support is implemented as a collaboration between teachers and student welfare professionals, with each responsible for promoting the well-being of the student while safeguarding the student's participation throughout the process (Valtonen et al., 2024).

Mesosystem level also includes home–school collaboration. Indeed, home and school are two of the primary contexts in which a child's development occurs (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Teachers must cooperate with parents in matters related to a student's education (Basic Education Act, Section 3). Ideally, home–school collaboration is built on trust, thereby helping to identify a student's needs and collaboratively supporting the student (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Körkkö and Lutovac, 2024; Salo, Sorkkila, Upadyaya, and Aunola, 2025). Well-functioning home–school collaboration is a valuable resource for the well-being of both students and teachers (Hascher, Beltman, and Mansfield, 2021).

However, it requires both time and expertise: PSTs may feel unprepared to engage in such collaboration effectively (Salo et al., in press), and challenging interaction situations with families can also cause strain for teachers (Hascher et al., 2021; Körkkö and Lutovac, 2024).

Supportive interactions and relationships in day-to-day life at school

At the heart of socially inclusive and safe learning environments are supportive interactions with teachers and peers at the microsystem level (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Salo et al., in press). As described above, a safe learning environment is a prerequisite for the full realization of a student's right to basic education. Although a safe learning environment and support system are regulated by law, actions to secure students' feelings of safety and responding to their diverse needs cannot be solely legally determined. It is at the microsystem level that adults, including teachers, can observe situations that may threaten a student's well-being. Observing and responding to threats to students' well-being and securing each and every student's rights in day-to-day life at school ultimately takes place through the support, skills, and resources that are accessible at higher systemic levels under the guidance and obligation of legal systems (Figure 1).

For example, creating a sense of belonging, with students "[f]eeling safe to be [themselves] in and through relationships with others in the school setting" (Craggs and Kelly, 2018, p.1423), requires that teachers have expertise to build an inclusive, safe classroom community (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Salo et al., in press). Previous research suggests that PSTs' understandings of what it means to be a safe adult pertains to, for example, being easily approachable and trustworthy, caring, creating a safe classroom climate, and making sure that all students feel joy when learning and feel safe to be themselves (Kettunen et al., 2023; Salo et al., in press). Our study provides insights into PSTs' awareness of the role of daily interactions in responding to students' needs.

Changes and development over time

At the chronosystem level, relevant themes include children's developmental phases, which need to be understood to respond sensitively to their needs (Osher et al., 2018) and to secure their rights (UNCRC/C/GC/14). In addition, children's individual situations, such as difficult family circumstances, and broader societal changes, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or wars, can reflect on children's well-being in diverse ways. Teachers' professional development can also be seen as a dynamic outcome of an ongoing process that results from reflective and meaningful interactions between the individual teacher and the social, cultural, and structural conditions that constitute their professional learning and working contexts (Kelchtermans, 2009). Changes can also take place at the macrosystem level, including the legal system and resources. For example, the legal status of the child and the need to safeguard a child's rights have only been identified in Finland since the 2000s (Hakalehto, 2020). Our study reveals PSTs' developing understanding of multiple dynamic aspects of their future work.

Research aims

The aim of this study is to provide innovative insights into building socially sustainable teacher education and safe school communities in Finland. This study contributes by adding a unique perspective: PSTs' conceptions of teachers' obligations to address diverse situations that can threaten student well-being. PSTs are among the builders of socially sustainable schools (Salo and Kajamies, 2024). However, their conceptions of teachers' obligations to address diverse threats to students' well-being, along with what these are based on, remain unmapped. The following research questions are targeted at understanding PSTs' conceptions of promoting students' well-being and securing their rights:

RQ1. To what extent do PSTs perceive teachers as obligated to provide students with support or refer them to support services in situations where the student's well-being is threatened?

RQ2. What kinds of conceptions do PSTs hold regarding the basis of teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being?

Listening to PSTs is vital to developing teacher education in ways that prepare them effectively for the rapidly changing and increasingly demanding work of a teacher (Lutovac and K rkk , 2024; Salo et al., in press).

Method

Participants and data collection

The data were collected during 2022–2024 as part of a larger project, the EduRESCUE—the resilient schools and education system consortium. The aim of this multidisciplinary project was to seek solutions to strengthen the resilience of the Finnish education system to cope with crises. Solutions were related to, for example, teacher education to strengthen PSTs' interaction and legal competencies to support students and address inequality. Ethical approval was received prior to data collection [University of Turku, Research Ethics Committee].

PSTs were asked to fill in an online Webropol questionnaire at the beginning of a course on teachers' interaction skills. The participants included 114 second-year PSTs (women $n = 97$; men $n = 15$; other $n = 1$; prefer not to say $n = 1$) who gave their informed consent for participation in the study. The age of the PSTs ranged from 19 to 46 years ($M = 23.04$; $SD = 4.45$; $Med = 22$), and teaching experience ranged from 0 months to 5–6 years ($Med = 1–2$ months).

The questionnaire

A legal perspective was added to The Diverse Situations and Social Inclusion (DivSoc) questionnaire (Salo and Kajamies, 2024). The modified DivSoc: Educational and Legal Perspectives questionnaire was used to collect data. The following parts of the questionnaire were included in the analysis:

The PSTs were asked to rate *the degree to which they perceived teachers as obligated to provide support or refer a student to support services* in diverse situations that could threaten a student's well-being. The 15 situations (Figure 2) were rated on a three-point Likert scale, reflecting the degree of perceived obligation in each situation: 1 = not at all; 2 = to some degree; 3 = strongly. The situations

capture key threats to students' well-being, addressing of which is critical to sensitively respond to student diversity and to promote the social inclusion of all students (Salo and Kajamies, 2024).

The PSTs were further asked to answer the following open-ended question: "*What is the teacher's obligation to provide support or refer to support services based on?*" The length of the response was not limited.

Analysis procedure

A mixed-method analysis approach was used. The PSTs' ratings for the degree of the teachers' obligations were analysed by descriptive analysis using SPSS version 28.0. To analyse responses to the open-ended question, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted to identify the PSTs' conceptions of the basis of teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being. The analysis process was collaborative to ensure that the educational and legal perspectives were meaningfully intertwined throughout the process, as described below (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the analysis process

Steps	Description
1	All responses were carefully read by the first (with educational expertise) and second (with legal expertise) authors. Initial codes were individually assigned, keeping them close to the PSTs' writing. Three PSTs were excluded: one did not respond, and two merely repeated part of the question. Thus, responses from 111 PSTs were included.
2	The initial codes were discussed by the two authors, which resulted in combining them into themes. Then, the two authors independently used these themes to identify the conceptions of obligations from PSTs' responses.
3	The first author carefully went through all the codes, paying specific attention to ensuring meaningful themes and reducing overlap between them. This resulted in eight final themes, and their descriptions and illustrative excerpts (see, Table 2). Using this coding framework, the first author coded all responses using ATLAS.ti 25.0 software. Altogether, 200 codes were identified within the data.
4	The eight themes, along with their descriptions and several example data excerpts, were then carefully examined by the second author. No disagreements emerged.
5	To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the third author independently coded 25% of the PSTs' randomly selected responses with the coding framework. The overall agreement was 94.0%, yielding a Cohen's kappa $\kappa = 0.84$, $p < .001$, which indicates a very high level of consistency between the two raters (Landis and Koch, 1977).

Thematic analysis was conducted as a systematic, joint endeavour: the authors provided provisional interpretations and reached a consensus about meanings. This was intended to ensure that the research question was addressed faithfully from the standpoint of the PSTs' responses. The unit of analysis was a meaningful idea: the length of the coded parts ranged from one word to several sentences. A sentence could be assigned several codes. The original language of the responses was Finnish, and for the data excerpts presented in this study, translations were made into English. Co-occurrences between paired themes (Table 3) were analysed with the help of ATLAS.ti 25.0.

Findings

The degree of obligation to address students' diverse well-being threats

Overall, the PSTs rated teachers to be strongly obligated to provide support or refer students to support services in all 15 situations (see Figure 2). The number of PSTs who rated the degree of teacher obligation as strong was highest for bullying and learning difficulties: for bullying, all except for four PSTs, and for learning difficulties, all except for eight PSTs. Of the 15 situations, the lowest number of PSTs (but still half) perceived teachers to be strongly obligated to address addiction issues. Only a few PSTs perceived teachers to have no obligation at all for addiction issues (3 PSTs), health and mobility limitations (2 PSTs), mental health problems (1 PST), and difficult family circumstances (1 PST).

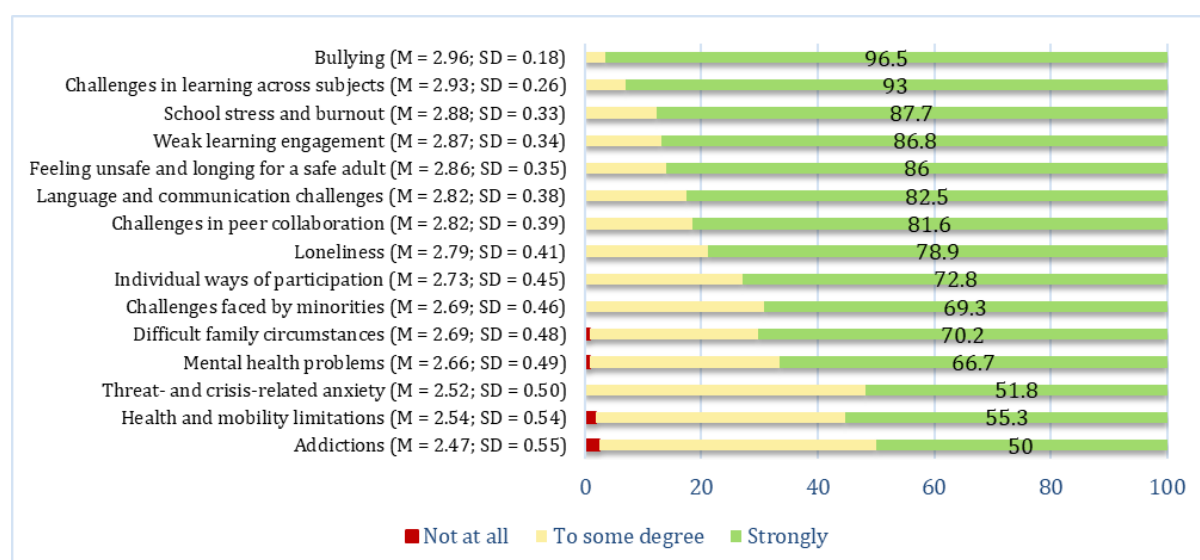


Figure 2: PSTs' (N = 114) ratings for teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being. Note. The distributions of PSTs' ratings for "not at all," "to some degree," and "strongly" across the situations are given in percentages of all PSTs. M = mean; SD = standard deviation

PSTs' diverse conceptions of the basis of teachers' obligations

The PSTs' conceptions of the basis of teachers' obligations to address threats to students' well-being are summarized in Table 2. The most typically referred themes, by more than half of the PSTs, were "teachers' tasks or roles" and "children's needs". The themes "children's rights" and "written frameworks governing teachers' work" were mentioned by less than one-fifth of the PSTs.

Table 2: PSTs' (N = 111) conceptions of the basis of teachers' obligations

Obligations are based on...	Example data excerpts	n (%) ¹
teachers' tasks (e.g., to teach, take care of and support students' well-being, and observe and compensate for risks to students' learning and/or well-being) or roles (e.g., a safe, caring adult), along with their related limitations.	<p>"The teacher has a responsibility to act as a safe adult in the child's growth journey."</p> <p>"A professional duty to observe students' development in learning as well as factors that impact learning."</p> <p>"[...] it is not a teacher's task to be a parent. However, I think that I do take responsibility, and there is a strong obligation to provide support."</p>	74 (66.7%)

<p>children's needs (e.g., development, learning, well-being, future competencies, and feeling cared for and/or heard).</p>	<p><i>"Situations where a student struggles mentally must be addressed early on and in an effective manner, to make the situation easier to change."</i></p> <p><i>"All students should have a feeling that they are important and that they are listened to."</i></p> <p><i>"A person is a whole being, so it is difficult to set clear boundaries of whether a problem is, for example, related to teaching or to health."</i></p>	<p>61 (55.0%)</p>
<p>teachers' opportunities (e.g., spends a lot of time with students and therefore is able to notice things; related limitations) or willingness (e.g., should at least try, has a desire to help, does one's best).</p>	<p><i>"That the teacher does their best to support the student's school attendance and well-being."</i></p> <p><i>"[...] it is easy for the teacher to quickly see if the child or adolescent is in some kind of distress."</i></p> <p><i>"It feels that you must help. You don't want to leave the student alone in the situation [...]"</i></p>	<p>28 (25.2%)</p>
<p>teachers as part of the school community (e.g., multiprofessional collaboration, diverse professionals, school at large, parents and families).</p>	<p><i>"Teachers and the school are responsible for their students, and the school aims to promote students' well-being."</i></p> <p><i>"The more the question is about health or other kinds of problems, it belongs to other professionals, although it is good for teachers to collaborate with these professionals and to keep up with the situation."</i></p> <p><i>"[...] to guide parents to get support for their children in case of mental health problems, for example."</i></p>	<p>21 (18.9%)</p>
<p>explicit mentions of children's rights (e.g., regarding learning and/or well-being) and descriptions related to "equality/equity" and/or "the best interest" of the child.</p>	<p><i>"You must always think about the child's best interest."</i></p> <p><i>"[...] they [teachers] must safeguard the fulfilment of children's rights from different angles."</i></p> <p><i>"Everyone must be treated equally, and all must have equal opportunities to learn."</i></p>	<p>19 (17.1%)</p>
<p>written frameworks governing teachers' work (e.g., laws, regulations, curricula, ethical guidelines).</p>	<p><i>"The obligation is also legally regulated."</i></p> <p><i>"[...] I think that they are based on both law and curricula."</i></p> <p><i>"Some of these are legally governed obligations, such as making a child welfare notification if there are concerns about the child's family circumstances."</i></p>	<p>16 (14.4%)</p>
<p>every adult's responsibility to help a child who needs support (e.g., general human kindness, moral duty).</p>	<p><i>"That someone reacts if a child has problems [...]"</i></p> <p><i>"If a human being needs support, you must help if you can."</i></p>	<p>6 (5.4%)</p>
<p>things not known or uncertain.</p>	<p><i>"I honestly don't know."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't know if there are some regulations governing these, I answered based on my own view."</i></p>	<p>4 (3.6%)</p>

Note. ¹Number and percentage of all PSTs who mentioned the theme.

Table 3 presents the number of themes mentioned by individual PSTs in their responses, along with pairwise comparisons of the co-occurrences of themes. PSTs most typically mentioned two themes. The highest number of co-occurrences were identified for the theme "teachers' tasks or roles", co-

occurring with “children’s needs” (n = 49), “teachers’ opportunities or willingness” (n = 19), and “teacher as part of the school community” (n = 16). The theme “children’s needs” was discussed in combination with the theme “teachers’ opportunities or willingness” by 15 PSTs, and the theme “teachers’ opportunities or willingness” was mentioned with “teacher as part of the school community” by 12 PSTs. Co-occurrences between the following themes were not identified in the PSTs’ responses: “children’s rights” with “teacher as part of the school community” and “teachers’ opportunities or willingness” with “written frameworks”.

Table 3: The number of themes and their pairwise co-occurrences

Number of Themes Mentioned by Individual PSTs								
Number of Themes	1 theme	2 themes	3 themes	4 themes	5 themes	6 themes	7 themes	8 themes
Number of PSTs (% of all)	36 (32.4)	43 (38.7)	20 (18.0)	12 (10.8)				
Pairwise Comparisons of Co-Occurrences ¹								
Themes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Tasks/roles		49	19	16	8	6	2	0
2 Children’s needs			15	13	8	6	3	0
3 Opportunities/willingness				12	1	0	1	0
4 School community					0	1	3	0
5 Children’s rights						5	1	0
6 Written frameworks							2	1
7 Every adult’s responsibility								0
8 Not known or uncertain								

Note. ¹Number of responses in which the two themes co-occurred.

The following excerpt presents an example of how the co-occurrences were reflected in individual PSTs’ responses (themes: “teachers’ tasks or roles,” “children’s needs,” and “children’s rights”):

A teacher’s obligation to provide support or refer the student to support services when needed is based on striving to ensure every student’s equal opportunity for well-being and success. The teacher is obligated to identify and react to students’ needs, such as learning difficulties or bullying at school.

Another PST discussed four themes in their response: “teachers’ tasks or roles,” “children’s needs,” “teachers’ opportunities or willingness,” and “teachers as part of the school community”:

For many [students], they [teachers] can be the only adults who see the challenges faced by the student and who are able to address them. If the teacher doesn’t react in these situations, who does? Families may have problems, and they may not have the resources or otherwise lack the ability to influence things.

To conclude, most PSTs mentioned more than one theme. Themes related to teachers’ tasks and children’s needs were most often mentioned and co-occurring in the PSTs’ responses. Written

frameworks governing teachers' work and children's rights were each mentioned by less than one-fifth of the respondents, and only five PSTs combined the two in their response.

Discussion

This study provides novel insights into PSTs' educational and legal understandings related to teachers' obligations to support student well-being and secure their related rights. More specifically, it explores Finnish PSTs' ratings of the degree of teachers' obligations across diverse situations and their conceptions of what the teacher's obligation in these situations is based on.

Most PSTs held teachers as strongly obligated across all situations

The vast majority of PSTs felt that teachers have a strong obligation to address bullying and learning difficulties. Legally, learning support is primarily provided by teachers at their own discretion (Basic Education Act, Section 20b), and each school must have a plan to prevent and address bullying (Pupil and Student Welfare Act, Section 13). The majority of the PSTs also reported the teachers' obligation to address feelings of unsafety and loneliness as strong. Legally, teachers are obliged to act if a concern about a student arises and to safeguard an atmosphere of confidentiality to communicate one's situation. Warm teacher–student relationships may encourage students to share their worries, and teachers' sensitivity helps to ensure that students' needs do not go unnoticed. For example, loneliness may stem from relational forms of bullying, such as ostracism, which may be difficult for teachers to observe. If such situations go unnoticed, this threatens the realization of students' right to support.

Our findings point to a trend in which the more the situation requires concrete action from the teacher as a part of day-to-day life at school (e.g., bullying), the higher the number of PSTs who reported teachers to be strongly obligated. In contrast, the more likely the situation was related to support referrals (e.g., difficult family circumstances, addiction issues), the higher the number of PSTs who reported that teachers were responsible "to some degree". Only a few PSTs reported that teachers had no obligation at all in some situations, including addictions and mental health problems. Legally, responding to these situations is the responsibility of student care professionals, but teachers are still responsible for referring the student to a support provider (Pupil and Student Welfare Act, Section 11). Teachers thus play a key role in collaboratively securing student well-being and creating safe and inclusive schools.

PSTs emphasized teachers' tasks and roles and children's needs

The PSTs typically viewed teachers' obligations through the role that a teacher has in students' lives and the tasks that they perceived to be part of the teachers' work. Our findings align with previous research suggesting that being a safe adult for students emerges as a key aspect that PSTs refer to. This indicates that their understanding of their future work is multifaceted (Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024) and focuses on interactions at the microsystem level (Figure 1). PSTs' descriptions often pertained to children's needs (e.g., developmental, feeling heard), with some PSTs emphasizing the importance of seeing a student as a whole person with multidimensional, interrelated needs. This aligns with the current global understanding of how children's well-being is best supported (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; OECD, 2021).

Interestingly, teachers' opportunities or willingness were not discussed in combination with written frameworks governing teachers' work and only once in combination with children's rights. This theme, then, may reflect PSTs not necessarily knowing about the legal basis of obligations (although not explicitly stating it) and, instead, sharing what they perceived as either ideal, or at least the best possible, practices. Some of these descriptions reflected potential conflict between the ideal and what the PSTs believed that they could do or have the resources for. Thus, this theme was closer to "can do" rather than the "should do" or "must do" that would reflect deeper understanding of teachers' professional responsibilities (Lauermaann and Karabenick, 2013) and legal systems at macrolevel.

Less than one-fifth of the PSTs discussed teachers as part of the school community. Exploring and addressing the reasons underlying this scarcity is vital because whole-school approaches are suggested to be effective (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Well-functioning collaboration between teachers and student welfare services not only protects the rights of students but also the well-being of teachers. Multiprofessional support must effectively respond to students' and their families' needs so that addressing these needs is not left to teachers alone anywhere in Finland (Valtonen et al., 2024). The PSTs did not describe families as partners with whom to respond collaboratively to students' needs. Instead, most indicated concerns regarding some families' lack of resources or ability to respond to their children's needs. Some wrote that a teacher could sometimes be the only one to observe a child's difficulties or the only safe adult in a child's life. These findings highlight urgent need to strengthen PSTs' awareness of the role of collaboration in responding to students' needs and the importance of meso- and exosystems in the realization of students' right to support.

Even fewer PSTs discussed written frameworks. While recognizing the meaning of the law behind one's actions is important, descriptions typically entailed brief mentions that were often not specified (e.g., "laws") and that were rarely employed to explicitly justify responding to children's needs. This may indicate that the understanding of lawful action remains detached from practice revealing gaps between the macro- and microsystems. Those PSTs who discussed children's rights did so mainly through the lenses of equality and a safe learning environment. Although there is currently no mandatory legal content in teacher education, the ongoing juridification processes in educational spheres in Finland (as in other Nordic countries; Novak, 2019) may strengthen awareness of student's rights. However, only about 17% of PSTs discussed children's rights, and many of these descriptions may also reflect the PSTs' educational (e.g., the importance of a safe learning environment for learning) rather than strictly legal understanding.

Implications for socially sustainable schools and teacher education

Our findings have implications for building socially sustainable schools and teacher education. For students to get the support that they are entitled to, and for their rights to be realized – regardless of their backgrounds and where they live – actions are needed at all levels (Figure 1).

It is vital that all PSTs will have opportunities to cultivate their expertise related to diversity, inclusion, and social sustainability already early on and throughout their studies, to create a continuum of professional development that is embedded in theory, pedagogy, and practicum experiences.

Cultivating future teachers' well-being and interaction competencies, including emotional support expertise, is critical for them to be able to observe and sensitively respond to children's diverse needs (Salo and Kajamies, 2024; Salo et al., in press). Noting that children's rights are not systematically implemented within schools, the Committee of the UNCRC has recommended that Finland must strengthen the teaching of human rights, specifically children's rights, and the principles of the Convention in the training of teachers (UNCRC/C/FIN/CO/5-6). Teachers should be able to act both in accordance with the law and the rights of the student but also in such a way that the action is pedagogically appropriate (Valtonen, Ylisaukko-oja, and Kajamies, 2025). This should be implemented equally throughout Finland.

Equipping future teachers with a legal understanding has received surprisingly scarce attention (Valtonen et al., 2024). We suggest that legal understanding is best approached and cultivated as something that essentially guides all actions and the realization of which—in day-to-day life at school—requires diverse competencies and actions at all levels (Figure 1). Teacher educators need diverse competencies, including the sensitivity to recognize PSTs' diverse developmental needs at all times, even amid crises. For example, in a study by Salo and Kajamies (2024), PSTs felt least prepared to observe students' threat- and crisis-related anxiety. These forms of anxiety were also perceived as among the most challenging when it came to providing support or referrals. Combined with the understanding acquired in this study, PSTs perceive teachers as strongly obligated to address students' threat- and crisis-related anxiety but may not feel prepared to handle these situations when encountering them. Particularly amid the overlapping crises and overall uncertainty, this might provide a viewpoint for the source of PSTs' insecurities (Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024). Moreover, although our findings suggest that PSTs considering teachers to have no obligation at all appears to be a marginal phenomenon, it is critical that each and every teacher has a strong understanding of their obligation to act and resources to do so in every school in Finland.

The PSTs in this study mostly discussed families through concerns rather than as partners with whom to respond to children's needs. In their recent report on bullying prevention in Finland, Rumpu et al. (2023) found that some guardians felt that they were left in a rather passive role. This emphasizes the need to create ways to strengthen home–school collaboration and to encourage PSTs to engage in building mutual trust with families. When it comes to difficult family circumstances, ensuring (also preventive) support for families at the community and societal levels is critical (Salo et al., 2025). If families do not receive the support they need, it is negatively reflected in children's well-being and places a burden on schools and teachers. Moreover, surprisingly few PSTs mentioned the role of multiprofessional school communities. In a study by Salo et al. (in press), PSTs discussed the importance of such collaboration, but many felt unprepared to engage in it effectively. These findings emphasize the need to place competencies related to collaboration—with colleagues and families, as well as part of multiprofessional teams—at the core of teacher education.

Ultimately, these questions relate not only to students' but also to PSTs' own well-being in their future profession. Some PSTs may struggle to balance students' diverse needs while maintaining their own well-being (Salo et al., in press). In addition, it may be difficult for early-career teachers to embrace the

multiple expectations that being a teacher involves, which may be reflected in intentions to leave the profession (Juvonen and Toom, 2023). Finding ways to collaboratively support teacher well-being is vital, particularly when future teachers are taking their first steps (Hascher et al., 2021). The importance of multiprofessional school communities, including families, in promoting students' well-being and tackling related threats cannot be overstated (Salo and Kajamies, 2024; Valtonen et al., 2024). Ensuring that there are sufficient resources (e.g., time) and support (e.g., from principals) for professionals to collaboratively respond to students' needs at all times is crucial (Valtonen et al., 2024). Discussions on how to safeguard student's rights in diverse situations without burdening teachers would be valuable in society as a whole.

Limitations and future directions

While our findings offer valuable insights, some limitations need to be considered. First, PSTs may feel pressure to respond in socially desirable ways. Second, it was beyond the scope of this research to explore how PSTs' understandings were built. They could be based on, for example, societal expectations (e.g., public discussions, surrounding culture) (Juvonen and Toom, 2023), experiences of substitute teaching (Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024), or their own active efforts to develop one's understanding (e.g., voluntary courses). Caution should be taken when generalizing these findings: legal obligations are nationally determined, although legal frameworks such as children's rights regulated in the UNCRC define the work of teachers more broadly. The identified themes for the PSTs' conceptions can serve as a framework for subsequent investigations, but they need to be adapted to specific contexts.

Moreover, we aimed to cover diverse situations that have raised concerns, and which teacher education will increasingly need to recognize (Salo and Kajamies, 2024), instead of going into details of specific situations. This aligns with the teachers' work, which is multifaceted and takes place in multiprofessional teams. Professionals in schools have diverse roles, and in many situations (e.g., mental health problems), the teacher's role lies in referring the student to an appropriate professional (Salo and Kajamies, 2024; Valtonen et al., 2024) and creating a safe learning environment for all students. Although the sample was relatively small (N = 114), it allowed us to gain diverse insights into PSTs' understandings, which is at the heart of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Conclusions

In this study, we listened to PSTs who were taking their first steps toward becoming teachers. Based on our findings, it is vital to increase PSTs' legal knowledge in order for them to be aware of students' rights and the role that they, as future teachers, have in securing them. Legal understanding also means identifying the boundaries of one's and other professionals' responsibilities. Cultivating future teachers' legal understanding could even help alleviate insecurities that can stem from the multifaceted responsibilities perceived for teachers and contribute to the prioritization of teachers' own tasks and abilities to cope with their work (Kettunen et al., 2023; Lutovac and Körkkö, 2024). It is also critical to help PSTs effectively combine this knowledge with their pedagogical and developmental understanding and their skills to build a safe and inclusive school community. Moreover, PSTs' awareness of and skills

to collaborate as part of the school community, including multiprofessional teams and families, need to be strengthened. A teacher's obligation can only go so far, and broader shoulders are needed to respond to students' diverse needs and realize their rights in a socially sustainable manner. This is critical to sustain and enhance future teachers' own well-being and to avoid burdening them in the increasingly complex and uncertain realities of schools.

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