

Bridging or jumping? Student teachers' negotiations of theory and practice in work-integrated teacher education programs

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This article explores the formation of professional identity among student teachers enrolled in a work-integrated teacher education (WIT) program and examines how their experiences and expectations influence their choice to pursue education through the work-integrated teacher training program. Drawing on qualitative data from focus group interviews with WIT students in Sweden the aim of the study is to enhance understanding of what the WIT education program offers student-teacher training and how WIT education shapes professional identities. The findings reveal that professional identity is shaped through relational dynamics, emotional labor, and role modeling by experienced teachers. WIT facilitates strong emotional and professional connections but may offer limited opportunities for critical reflection and theoretical engagement, elements often emphasized in campus-based programs. For WIT to fulfill its transformative potential, practice and theory must be integrated in a way that enables student teachers to become both effective practitioners and reflective professionals.

Keywords: student teachers, work-integrated teacher education, professional identity, practice

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an educational approach in various fields and countries that combines academic studies with practical work experience. The main goal of WIL is to give students the chance to apply the theoretical knowledge they gain in the classroom to real-world professional settings. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice, helping students develop the essential skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to succeed in their fields (Zegwaard et al., 2023). While WIL is widely valued for bridging theory and practice, it also introduces new forms of responsibility and potential vulnerability for students and institutions. For example Fleming and Hay (2021) highlight that WIL activities entail operational, ethical, and reputational risks for universities and host organizations, underscoring the importance of clear role definitions and supervision. In teacher education, these shared responsibilities become particularly salient as students assume professional duties within schools. In WIL programs, students typically spend a significant portion of their academic coursework working in a professional environment closely related to their field of study. This experience allows them to connect the theoretical concepts learned in class with practical applications in the workplace. This integration aims to deepen their understanding and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Research related to teacher education in Sweden and other countries indicates that there is often a gap between theory and practice in teacher training (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hegender, 2010; Richmond et al., 2019).

The identified gap prevents student teachers from developing a professional approach towards a future teacher profession. As traditional teacher education programs are criticized for being too academic and not adequately preparing students for the practical aspects of the profession, a variety of practice-integrated teacher education programs are now being launched. To address the shortage teacher

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education is more often conducted in an increasingly 'practice-oriented' collaboration with municipalities, schools, and working teachers. An example of a WIL program in Sweden is the introduction of work-integrated teacher training, abbreviated as WIT. In 2021, WIT was being offered or planned at 15 of the country's 28 higher education institutions with teacher education programs (Michaelsson, 2021).

At one of these universities, two new teacher training programs have been launched to further connect theory with practice, focusing on helping students become teachers and develop their professional identity in both employed and student teachers' roles. The first program is "Middle School Teacher Training with Field Days." In this program, student teachers receive education on campus, alongside their training at a school one day a week (the field day), under the supervision of one or more experienced teachers. The other program is a WIT program where, after a preparatory year that includes theory and subject studies on campus, students receive most of their training at a specific school, working 3 days a week as assistant teachers under the guidance of one or more experienced teachers. In this teacher education model, principals, schools, and teachers play a more central role, and students' experiences within the school's organization are given greater emphasis than in traditional teacher education. At this described university in Sweden, a case study has been conducted to gain knowledge about students' experiences and beliefs when entering a WIT program. The fact that students enrolled in a WIT program in addition to studying on campus, will be employed as paid teachers in a school signifies that they will already take on extensive responsibilities and gain a deep understanding of the teaching profession through practical experiences during their training. We hypothesize that these students enrolled in a WIT program will navigate negotiation processes between different contexts and positions, sometimes facing conflicting logic. This dual role—student and employee—requires navigation between the logic of academic training and the demands of professional practice, a tension central to identity formation. This navigation can be seen as a learning process for constructing a professional identity.

This raises the question: How does the professional identity development of teachers unfold in a WIT program? The aim of our conducted study is to enhance understanding of what the WIT education program offers student-teacher training and how WIT education shapes professional identities. To better grasp how these teacher candidates develop a professional teaching identity within a WIT program, this article explores how their experiences and expectations influence their choice to pursue education through the work-integrated teacher training program. The study uses the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of student teachers' descriptions of a professional teacher identity?
- How do student teachers reflect on becoming a teacher within a work-integrated teacher education?

STATE OF THE ART

WIL can be seen as part of an international trend that shifts the focus of teacher induction from the early stages of the profession to the clinical practice component of teacher education. This 'practice turn' in teacher education is evident in educational models such as school-based teacher education or practice-based teacher education (Reid, 2011). Research on this phenomenon often highlights a problem arising from the disconnect between theory and practice in teacher education. This gap is described in various ways, primarily as a lack of integration or coherence between school practice and academia (Darling-Hammond, 2006), or as a divide between experience-based and research-based

knowledge (Hegender, 2010). Part of the issue is that students frequently find themselves independently integrating what they learn across these different arenas (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Hammerness, 2006; Korthagen et al., 2006;). Moreover, research highlights the significance of various stakeholders and sectors in teacher education sharing a common vision, ensuring that education is consistent in content and form (Hammerness & Klette, 2015). However, achieving such coherence can be challenging. Findings from research suggest that examining coherence should not be viewed as a desired end state but rather as an ongoing process involving constant negotiation among different stakeholders across various sectors (Floden et al., 2021; Richmond et al., 2019). The presence of multiple and sometimes conflicting signals to students is not framed as a problem to be resolved but as a reality that fosters continuous negotiations through which new meanings can emerge.

In line with these assumptions, a new research front has emerged that portrays learning in an educational context as characterized by individuals moving between different activities during their education and that these movements give rise to discontinuity or gaps (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Bouw et al., 2019; Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). Although WIL education students sometimes may find themselves in uncomfortable gaps during their education, these gaps at the same time can promote their professional learning, through the creation of opportunities for these students to make use of the dual positions they hold in two different social practices (Tanggaard, 2007). Hence, the student can be seen as a broker, translator, or mediator who moves between different practices (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Much research on teacher education design has overlooked how professional identity is negotiated within these programs and how such processes shape students' professional learning. Many existing studies, often conducted internally by the institutions themselves, function more as evaluations, risking superficial analysis and self-fulfilling conclusions (Clift & Brady, 2005; Jensen et al., 2018; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008). In Sweden, evaluations of WIT programs at Dalarna University (Dimenäs, 2019) and Karlstad University (Enochsson, 2020) describe WIT students as motivated and high performing, although their exam outcomes align with those in traditional programs. At the same time, these students face tensions between their dual roles as employees and students, leading to workload-related stress.

A pilot study at a Swedish university shows that WIT education students view teachers' work as predominantly practical, while theory is seen as a potential tool for practice but not necessarily suitable for conducting, understanding, or evaluating teaching (Asp & Jonsson, 2021). These findings indicate challenges in verbalizing informed knowledge about teaching, leading teacher-students to primarily concentrate on practical teaching issues. Results from another research project, which also examined the relationship between university-based and practice-based components of teacher education, reveal that efforts to strengthen this relationship are often undermined by integration practices, where the expressions of the different components are shifted to and assumed to function in, new contexts (Jederud et al., 2022; Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2007; Nordänger & Lindqvist, 2012). When key aspects of knowledge are transferred between the university-based and practice-based elements of teacher education, there is a risk that important aspects may be lost in the translation process itself. Furthermore, the results of these studies suggest that it is important to acknowledge and utilize the differences between university-based and practice-based courses, recognizing them as complementary. The courses contribute in various ways to developing a professional identity by moving students between two different social practices, university, and school, during their education. This highlights the need in WIT education to assist students in integrating the theoretical components taught in campus courses with the practical work at the schools where they are placed. Additionally, Ehrlin and Gustavsson (2015) emphasize that it is crucial for students to have opportunities to develop their theoretical and practical didactic knowledge in formal university classes as well as during clinical

training as part of their journey to identify themselves as full participants in their future profession. The study reported in this article contributes to the body of research describing learning as movements between different social practices, focusing on WIT students' experiences and beliefs at the beginning of their studies in WIT education in Sweden.

Although active partner engagement is widely recognized as essential for university-workplace collaboration, research still shows gaps in how such cooperation is understood. Lasrado et al. (2024) highlight the need to examine motivation, role clarity, and relational factors – issues also central to teacher-education partnerships. Ademuyiwa et al. (2024) further note that, while learning outcomes dominate current WIL research, fewer studies examine how students and practitioners develop professional identities in work-integrated settings. In the field of initial teacher education, Nakar et al. (2025) identify a similar imbalance, observing a concentration of studies in the southern hemisphere and calling for stronger conceptual frameworks and broader stakeholder perspectives. Together, these studies underscore the importance of investigating how university actors and student-teachers in Swedish WIT programs negotiate their professional roles—an area that remains empirically and geographically underexplored. Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith (2021) demonstrate that work-integrated learning fosters students' emerging professional identities not in isolation but through their perceived self-interest – such as employability and meaningful work – suggesting that motivation and identity formation are deeply intertwined processes across WIL contexts.

Recent research highlights that WIL has often been positioned as a response to the enduring gap between theory and practice in higher education. Sunnemark et al. (2024) identify this divide as institutional, spatial, epistemological, and pedagogical, noting that WIL aims to bridge it by fostering dialogue and mutual learning between universities and workplaces. Their analysis, however, shows that while WIL is framed as a synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge, in practice it frequently prioritizes employability and utility over critical or theoretical reflection. This tension highlights how WIL operates within the broader pressures of academic capitalism, where higher education is increasingly aligned with market demands and knowledge is valued for its practical usefulness rather than its theoretical depth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As previously noted, a major challenge with traditional campus-based teacher education programs is their limited capacity to adequately prepare student teachers for the complexities of real teaching practice. As a result, various teacher training programs have been developed to connect academic theory with practical experience. In this study utilizing Merton's (1968) socialization theory, we see how secondary socialization and anticipatory socialization play a role in shaping professional identities within institutional settings. Entering the workforce is an integral part of the secondary socialization process, where new ideas and norms become embodied in individuals. The notion of anticipatory socialization highlights the proactive involvement of student teachers as they adopt attitudes, values, and interests that correspond with the expectations of their future professional roles, thus effectively equipping them for future membership and engagement in their selected professional community. Campus-based teacher education and elementary schools, however, embody distinct—and at times competing—logics. While academic institutions emphasize theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, and pedagogical principles, elementary schools prioritize practical teaching skills, classroom management, and immediate educational outcomes. Within such frameworks, elementary schools serve as significant institutions where student teachers engage in practical, work-integrated learning experiences, interacting directly with institutional actors—including headmasters, supervisors, and

experienced teachers. These interactions embed students within the school's logic, characterized by distinct norms, ideals, and beliefs, thus shaping their emerging professional identities.

Building upon this institutional perspective, the construction of professional identity among educators can be conceptualized as a dynamic negotiation process (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Flores & Day, 2006). The professional identities of novice teachers do not solely arise from institutional interactions; they are also significantly shaped by personal histories, contextual workplace factors, and future-oriented anticipations. Consequently, identity is continuously deconstructed and reconstructed as educators engage in ongoing interpretation, justification, and positioning within their professional contexts. Antecedent experiences and pre-existing beliefs profoundly influence prospective teachers' perceptions of teaching and the essential attributes it should embody (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This dynamic negotiation process encompasses norms, values, and conflicts, particularly when the negotiation intensifies (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Michaelsson, 2021; Tanggaard, 2007). Therefore, handling the different and sometimes conflicting logics of different institutions can be seen as boundary crossing, where student teachers cross invisible boundaries when they develop new professional identities in different institutions like academia and work in schools. In this study, we draw on Merton to conceptualize dual socialization and complement this with boundary crossing theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to understand the negotiation of identity across contexts.

METHOD

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were chosen for data collection and a panel of 17 students admitted to the WIT teacher education program for primary education at a Swedish university in the fall semester of 2021, consented to participate in focus group interviews (n=5) during the fall of 2021 and in the spring of 2022. It was 5-6 months between the focus group interviews. Students who participated were informed of the study at a campus course and told that it was voluntary to participate. Both female and male students decided to participate. At the time of recruitment and conducting of the focus group interviews, none of the researchers that moderated the interviews were involved in teaching, grading or supervision of the participating students.

All participants had opted to enrol in a WIT teacher education program rather than a traditional one. This WIT program is a 12 semesters long compared to the traditional one which is 8 semesters long. Students at WIT are, as said earlier, after one year employed at a school and work as assistant teachers 3 days a week and meet up in courses at campus two days a week. These students have a mentor at the school they work in from the start of their education. That is in comparison to students in the traditional program who study at campus 5 days a week except for 20 weeks, divided into 3 occasions of school-based practical training in which they observe teaching and conduct teaching with support of a supervisor. Our study is not a comparison between these different teacher programs but in the focus group interviews the students sometimes compared their choice of program with their view on a traditional teacher program. As teachers we also have our view of what differs in a WIT program in relation to a traditional one, but the focus of our study is not to compare them as teacher programs.

Focus group interviews as method for data collection is supported by research literature and well-suited for research studying individual group members' perceptions and interactions (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997; Wibeck, 2010). Our focus group interviews were designed as group conversations (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Wibeck, 2010) and conducted via Zoom, with one of the researchers acting as the moderator who initiated the topics for discussion. The focus group interviews

lasted for about one hour each and were recorded in Zoom. After each focus group interview, the recordings were uploaded to a GDPR-approved storage SUNET, provided by the university. An actualized transcriber transcribed the recordings, and these are also stored at SUNET.

The structure of the focus group interviews was inspired by participatory research approaches (Brookfield, 2017). This means that while the conversations were guided by preformulated thematic questions developed by the researchers, particular emphasis was placed on being attentive to topics that the students themselves considered important to discuss. However, focus group interviews carry the risk that dominant individuals may take over the conversation at the expense of more reserved participants (Wibeck, 2010). Therefore, the moderators took responsibility for facilitating the discussion in a way that ensured all participants had the opportunity to contribute. There is also a risk that participants in a focus group may stop thinking critically and instead attempt to conform to others in the conversations (Bryman, 2018). Our impression is that the focus group interviews conducted were characterized by an open conversational climate in which differing viewpoints were expressed, and the rationale for choosing focus group interviews over individual interviews was to enable students to find support in one another, even when they had differing perspectives or starting points (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Wibeck, 2010).

The first focus group interview aimed to introduce the students to the study and to explore their perceptions of the teacher education they had chosen and the professional qualification it leads to. The subsequent focus group interview sought to deepen the understanding of the students' views on the teacher education and their expectations regarding their future professional roles, after having completed a little more than one semester of their studies. In this article, data were generated on how WIT students identify themselves in relation to the teaching profession at the start of their education.

Analysis

Initially, a thematic analysis program (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cornish et al., 2013) was conducted to illuminate and critically examine the student teachers' experiences of their professional identities, as well as their reflections on the process of becoming teachers within a WIT. The analysis was carried out collaboratively by the researchers (Cornish et al., , 2013), with each researcher first independently reviewing the transcripts of the collected data and identifying relevant themes. These themes were color-coded individually by each researcher. The individual thematic coding was then compared in a joint analytical process aimed at ensuring inter-coder reliability.

Bryman (2018) emphasizes that when multiple researchers independently code qualitative data and subsequently compare their interpretations, it enhances the credibility of the analysis by reducing individual bias and increasing inter-coder reliability. At this stage of the analysis, consensus was reached on four themes, which were labeled: close to practice, role models, relationships, and teaching. In the next step, the researchers reconvened to once again critically examine the identified themes, compare them, and reveal underlying similarities and patterns. During this phase, quotations from all students were selected that corresponded to each theme. In the subsequent writing of the results section, each theme was exemplified with selected quotations that were specifically representative of the theme. Finally, the themes were contextualized in relation to relevant theoretical concepts such as anticipatory socialization, secondary socialization (Merton, 1968) and with concepts from boundary crossing theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to understand the negotiation of identity.

Ethical Considerations

In Sweden, ethical review is regulated in several laws, of which the main law is the *Swedish Act on Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans*. Research involving humans need ethical review and permission if the research aims to impact the participants physically or mentally or if it puts participants at risk of physical or mental harm. Further, the Ethical Review Act states that research which gathers data on sensitive personal information needs ethical review. This is in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation, an EU directive, which states that racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation is considered sensitive information. Information about committed crimes and past convictions are also considered sensitive. Research involving humans that doesn't fall under any of these categories mentioned does not need ethical review which is the case regarding the study presented in this article. In a Swedish context, it is up to the individual researcher to follow standards of good research practice. The responsibilities for good research practice are codified in the *Swedish Act on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and Investigation of Research Misconduct*, and in addition researchers are expected to follow the ALLEA code of conduct, a European codex, and *Good Research Practice*, a codex edited by the Swedish Research Council, another government agency. We have followed the Swedish Research Council's ethical principles (Swedish Research Council, 2024) regarding information, consent, confidentiality, and use were considered when conducting this research. Personal data has been processed concerning GDPR (2016/679), which means that no personal data have been used and that participants have been given numbers in the result presentation. All those involved in the study have been assured that unauthorized people will have access to collected data material and that the data will be treated confidentially. This means that audio recordings of the focus group interview, and de-identified transcripts are kept in a GPDR-approved storage SUNET, provided by the university. After the study has been completed, all data will be stored for 10 years in the storage area of the university before it is culled.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the results from the thematic analysis are presented first, then a theoretical analysis informed by the concepts of socialization, negotiation of a professional identity, and boundary crossing. Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus group interviews: close to practice, role models, relationships, and teaching. Below, excerpts from the data support each theme.

Close to Practice

In comparison to a traditional teacher education program, the student teachers in our study place a high value on both practical experience and insights from teachers and other role models who have a strong understanding of the practice. The opportunity to directly translate theoretical concepts into practical actions is emphasized as valuable. Even if there are economic and other practical incentives for student teachers to choose a WIT teacher education program, other experiences are also valued:

My first choice was to apply for regular teacher education if you can call it that, but then I ended up here. Then you start thinking about the advantages. Yes, you get paid, but what we're most excited about is that you get to try out what you learn right away, so you don't have to wait until you have your exam. (Student 13)

The reverse is also highlighted as important. Every week on campus, students and teachers can reflect on the experiences provided by their classroom work.

When I'm out at school, your questions come up, so I can bring them back to the university and get answers different from what I would receive if I were just there. Because we are work-integrated student teachers, we can also take our work back to the university, test it, bring it back, evaluate it, and do it in a new way. This approach helps us become more complete teachers. (Student 5)

Some of the students also highlighted the importance of close contact with their supervisor. By attending a WIT education, they see that they can learn from their supervisor differently through continuous collaboration and reflection together.

You should have the courage to ask questions; you have a supervisor with whom you can think, inquire, and develop. I've read about collegial learning, and I understand that a colleague is also a valuable resource, and we learn from each other. (Student 16)

This chance of learning serves as a direct pathway to understanding what it takes to be a teacher and is, for example, expressed as follows:

But it's just that you gain more experience while studying. I think that if... yes, but when you work simultaneously, you meet experienced colleagues, and you can ask them about various things. Then, you build on your knowledge base. I find it very interesting to observe how others work. You can model your approach if you think something appears effective. (Student 3)

On-campus education is seen as abstract and difficult to implement in the classroom:

You sit on a bench at the university, and you have all the theories. But when you're in the classroom, it's different. I chose this education because it allows for practicing during my studies, which is the most important aspect. (Student 7)

The reflections of student-teachers reveal their desire to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching profession, foremost through practical experience. Additionally, the students believe supervisors possess expertise in teaching that on-campus education cannot provide to the same extent.

Role Models

It became clear that several students were inspired by others in their decision to pursue a career in teacher education. Many of these students connect their choice of a WIT program to previous experiences they found significant in their lives. Inspiration comes from both close family members and the teachers they have had. Two of the students emphasize their mothers as role models, noting both the reason and the possibility behind their desire to become a teacher.

My mom worked as a special education teacher for 20 years, and during events or similar occasions, she always wanted me to accompany her and see what it was like. You could say that I was inspired. (Student 7)

In the students' descriptions of what it means to be a role model; this is closely tied to teachers' relational competence. While the possibility of support from the supervisor is acknowledged, one of the students

expresses the understanding that, as active teacher-students, they must also take responsibility for themselves, as the supervisor has their teaching obligations to manage for:

However, I think my supervisor, with whom I will work closely, may not have as much time as I would like. (...) I feel that the two of us won't have much time together, especially since she has her own responsibilities. (Student 14)

In the focus group interviews, it emerged that students expect the experiences and knowledge of their teachers and supervisors at work to be significant for them. They recognize that the WIT education they have just begun is organized to allow them to learn from more experienced teachers. They view the opportunity to work closely and collaboratively with seasoned educators as an important source of knowledge development.

It will be fun to see what it's like behind the scenes, and I'm excited to be in school and participate in the lessons instead of just receiving homework and reading about it in books. (...) It will be enjoyable to view it from the teachers' perspective. (Student 14)

Limited evidence from the focus group interviews indicates that teachers on campus could serve as positive role models or sources of support for professionalism.

Relationships

Students emphasize that a stimulating aspect of the teaching profession is building strong relationships with their students. They recognize that fostering these connections is essential for making teaching meaningful, enjoyable, and fulfilling. This sentiment is echoed by several students like:

"It's a fun job that feels less like work and more like enjoyment. Every day is different, and it's incredibly rewarding" (Student 7) and "It's so fulfilling, and what you give, you receive back abundantly when you see the children" (Student 5).

The students discuss several factors that affect teachers' ability to recognize each student and their unique circumstances and to respond to them with sensitivity. The teachers' presence is especially important regarding the connection between teachers and their students. One of the students mentions:

I believe a good teacher is someone who is present and sees you for who you are and where you are. They should have a positive attitude, be kind, hopeful, and expectant, and build trust, among other qualities. These are the traits I think a good teacher should possess. (Student 1)

Students also relate teachers' relational competence to discipline issues, highlighting the need to establish boundaries while preserving trust with their students. This requires sensitivity, and one student exemplified this:

First and foremost, you need to understand the situation a bit more, particularly how the children are as individuals. I often take an approach of joking with them, but I also make it clear that I am the one in charge and that they should listen to me; I want them to do that. (...) It's important to be clear and fair as well. (Student 3)

Teaching

The dialogues in the focus group interviews also prompted the students to reflect on what they believe will be expected of them regarding teaching, subject knowledge, and pedagogical skills. These excerpts serve as examples of their reflections:

“I would like to adapt my teaching to effectively plan and structure it. You want everyone to have the opportunity to grow during your lessons, whether they are struggling or excelling” (Student 3); “It’s essential to connect with students’ thoughts and understand their perspectives. What is it that the student is not seeing? What can be done to help the student recognize this if they don’t?” (Student 1); and “I look forward to teaching children and addressing the different needs in the classroom while pedagogically explaining concepts” (Student 5).

The students express their eagerness to develop their pedagogical skills, believing this ability is essential for supporting all students in their learning journey. They do not take this lightly; several highlight that teaching competence evolves and thrives through collaboration with colleagues and students.

Nonetheless, the students are enthusiastic about becoming teachers: “Collaborating with colleagues and students to influence educational processes is something I believe will be both exciting and rewarding. Yes, it’s wonderful to share knowledge with others. I find it enjoyable and eagerly anticipate it” (Student 3).

Several students are eager to embrace their responsibilities as teachers and to see their teaching improve significantly. “It’s all about finding your place in everything, building a strong classroom environment, and helping students achieve heights they never thought possible” (Student 1).

The discussions in the focus groups indicate that several students are aware of many aspects of the teaching profession. None of them express that it seems particularly easy to develop the knowledge and skills they consider necessary to become competent teachers. They all recognize that it will be demanding, even for those with experience working as a teacher. Most students acknowledge the need to develop their subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding, as well as their relational competencies and leadership skills.

What are the Characteristics of Student Teachers’ Descriptions of a Professional Teacher Identity?

The analysis shows that the prevailing institutional logic within a WIT education system situates student teachers within a dual process of socialization, as theorized by Merton (1968). On one hand, students engage in anticipatory socialization, drawing upon personal role models, past school experiences, and emotional investments in education to shape their future teacher identities. On the other hand, they are simultaneously subject to secondary socialization, internalizing institutional norms through their employment as assistant teachers in real classroom settings. Within this structure, student teachers are expected to acquire pedagogical knowledge not through critical examination but through tacit assimilation—observing supervisors, collaborate with supervisors and other colleagues, adapting to workplace norms, and translating these into their practice. This process privileges experience-based learning over theoretical inquiry, reinforcing a conception of teaching as practical mastery rather than critical professionalism. Furthermore, the tensions between these two socialization processes may challenge student teachers’ sense of agency, particularly when idealistic aspirations (anticipatory) meet the constraints of school-based routines (secondary). Yet, in navigating these

tensions, student teachers negotiate and construct their professional identities, reflecting alignment with and resistance to prevailing institutional logic.

How do Student Teachers Reflect on Becoming a Teacher Within a Work-Integrated Teacher Education?

The findings reveal significant moments of boundary crossing between academic and practical domains, particularly in student teachers' identity formation. Within Merton's (1968) framework, anticipatory socialization in traditional teacher education differs from the experiences expressed by the participating students in the WIT program. WIT students, situated within schools from the outset, form expectations and professional attitudes grounded in practice rather than abstract theory. These students have the opportunity to collaborate with a supervisor and colleagues at the school they are employed at every week and in addition reflect on this at the campus course they also attend every week. This contrast exposes the limitations of conventional academic preparation, which, according to participants, often lacks relevance to the immediate demands of classroom management and pedagogical decision-making. Several students enter teacher education with idealized or simplistic notions of the profession—viewing the teacher as an omniscient figure—suggesting that early anticipatory socialization may be based more on personal experience than critical engagement. Instead of conceptualizing theory and practice as mutually reinforcing, participants often describe the transition from university to the classroom as a disjunctive leap, privileging real-world mentorship and emotionally resonant relationships over theoretical learning. Trust in experienced practitioners, collaboration and a strong emphasis on relational competence emerge as a central theme in their evolving teacher identities. Instead of promoting anticipatory socialization grounded in academic ideals, WIT participants have the opportunity to undergo simultaneous anticipatory and secondary socialization, shaped by immediate workplace immersion, collaboration and guided mentorship every week of their education.

DISCUSSION

The persistent gap between theory and practice in teacher education—widely noted in prior research (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hegender, 2010)—is clearly reflected in this study. Participants consistently describe theory and practice as disconnected domains, with practical engagement emerging as the most influential factor in their professional development. Unlike earlier studies that emphasize coherence between academic and practice-based learning (Floden et al., 2021; Richmond et al., 2019), our findings suggest that student teachers value experiential learning, particularly that gained through observation of and interaction with experienced teachers. This prioritization of practical experience signals a shift away from traditional anticipatory socialization—where academic ideals shape future roles—toward a model in which professional identity is forged primarily through immersion in school-based routines. Within Merton's (1968) framework, WIT students engage in anticipatory socialization through emotional alignment with role models, while simultaneously undergoing secondary socialization within institutional settings. Here, trusted mentors serve as normative anchors, rendering academic knowledge secondary to relational, embodied, and often tacit forms of learning. While earlier literature highlights the importance of integrating university-based and school-based learning (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Hammerness, 2006; Korthagen et al., 2006), WIT students in this study rarely describe such integration. Instead, they depict their learning trajectory as a transition or leap from academic study to professional reality, favoring supervisors' practical insights over theoretical constructs. This aligns with Asp and Jonsson's (2021) findings that student teachers in WIT programs often regard theory as a tool to support practice rather than as a framework for critical understanding or evaluation.

Although some scholars have emphasized the potential of a shared professional vision among institutions and practitioners (Floden et al., 2021; Hammerness & Klette, 2015), the findings of this study indicate that WIT students are more influenced by localized, immediate contexts than by broad pedagogical or theoretical frameworks. In this sense, professional identity formation becomes relational, affective, and situational, rather than critically reflective or conceptually driven. This practical emphasis may suggest a vocational drift in teacher education, where teaching is likened to a craft—developed through modeling and repetition—rather than a profession demanding theoretical engagement and reflective inquiry. Such a model risks marginalizing critical pedagogical discourse and may limit student teachers' ability to interrogate assumptions about learning, equity, and institutional norms (Clift & Brady, 2005; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008). As several studies have noted, without a culture of critical reflection, experienced teachers may reinforce practices that go unexamined and unchallenged (Jederud et al., 2022; Nordänger & Lindqvist, 2012). In line with Sunnemark et al. (2024), these results indicate that during school placement, students often orient toward the 'getting-the-job-done' logic of daily routines rather than explicitly mobilizing university-taught concepts. This seems driven less by lack of interest than by context: mentors' workload, time pressure, and local assessment practices rarely create space for guided, theory-linked debriefing, which constrains opportunities to connect coursework with situated classroom events.

The findings cast the move from university to school as a boundary-crossing process marked by discontinuities rather than a seamless bridge. Consistent with prior work on transitions across learning arenas (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016), students describe a shift in normative center of gravity: once embedded in schools, local routines, assessment logics, and mentor modeling become the primary reference points, while theoretical frames risk being sidelined as 'abstract.' This resonates with Sunnemark et al. (2024), who show that WIL is often framed as integrating theory and practice, yet, in practice, can privilege utility and employability over critical or conceptual engagement. This study adds mechanism-level detail from a Nordic context by identifying program conditions that shape the transition's direction: integration is strengthened when workplace learning is coupled with scheduled, theory-linked debriefs and mentors who explicitly problematize routines; it is weakened when modeling remains unquestioned, and assessment aligns only with local practice. By specifying how mentor–student relations and assessment design mediate the transition from university to workplace, earlier reviews are extended and conceptual accounts with empirical evidence on when WIT enables genuine integration, and when it risks reproducing a narrow enculturation into existing school logics.

Prior reviews call for closer attention to partner motivation, role clarity and relational dynamics in university–workplace collaborations (Lasrado et al., 2024) and for more work on how professional identities form in WIL, beyond cataloguing learning outcomes (Ademuyiwa et al., 2024). This Swedish WIT case directly addresses these gaps: students articulate clear motives (paid employment, immediate practice), experience ambiguous role boundaries as employee–students, and describe mentorship, collaboration and relational competence as the main engines of learning. Framed through anticipatory and secondary socialization, it shows how identity is negotiated in situ and how perceived self-interest (employability, meaningful work) intertwines with identity development, echoing Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith's findings (2021). The geographic and conceptual imbalance noted for initial teacher education was also responded to (Nakar et al., 2025) by contributing evidence from a Nordic context and specifying program conditions that shape theory–practice integration (e.g., mentor-facilitated, theory-linked reflection versus unexamined routine modeling). Finally, the results align with Sunnemark et al. (2024) in showing that WIL can drift toward utility and employability; mechanism-level detail is added by identifying when the university-to-workplace transition sidelines theory and

when structured debriefs and shared assessment rubrics keep theoretical frames in active use. Together, these contributions clarify how Swedish WIT partnerships negotiate roles and identities and when they bridge, rather than widen, the theory–practice divide.

Nonetheless, the WIT model's focus on emotional grounding, relational competence, and embedded mentorship appears highly valued by students. They associate their emerging teacher identities with the ability to build trust, manage classrooms, and support individual pupils. While these relational dimensions are sometimes overlooked in academic coursework, students see them as foundational to their growth and professional belonging (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Flores & Day, 2006). Interestingly, while earlier evaluations of WIT (Dimenäs, 2019; Enochsson, 2020) raised concerns about workload and stress, these issues did not dominate in our findings. Rather, students appreciated the structure and salary of WIT, viewing it as a supportive, immersive path to teaching. That said, some ambivalence remained toward theoretical coursework, with students perceiving it as less directly applicable to their daily teaching responsibilities. These findings suggest that practice-based identity formation does not necessarily conflict with academic learning, but rather that university programs must work harder to bridge the gap. As Ehrlin and Gustavsson (2015, 2016) stress, meaningful teacher preparation depends on combining practical experience with structured theoretical and didactical reflection opportunities. Without such integration, the profession risks privileging imitation over innovation and conformity over inquiry.

This study draws on five focus-group interviews ($n = 17$) with WIT student teachers at a single Swedish university (2021–22). Findings should therefore be read as context-bound rather than statistically generalizable. Voluntary participation and the self-selection of WIT entrants may have introduced selection bias toward particular motivations or views. Focus-group dynamics (e.g., peer conformity, dominant voices) and moderator effects may also have shaped what was said; where quotations were translated from Swedish, some nuance may have been lost. The design captures experiences at one point in the program and cannot speak to change over time or to causal processes. Reliance on self-reported accounts without triangulation (e.g., classroom observations, reflective journals, or interviews with mentors/principals) limits interpretive depth. The researchers sought to enhance trustworthiness through independent coding and consensus discussions, but interpretations remain situated. Future research should follow cohorts longitudinally, include multiple institutions and comparison groups (e.g., campus-based programs), and triangulate student accounts with other data sources to strengthen credibility and transferability.

CONCLUSIONS

In WIT, the emphasis lies in learning to teach by teaching—an approach that prioritizes the theorization of practice over the traditional academic model of theorizing about practice. This study illustrates how students in WIT programs begin constructing their professional identities through immediate immersion in school environments, where learning is shaped by relational dynamics, role modeling, collaboration and context-responsive practice. The insider perspective gained through this embedded structure offers student teachers access to tacit knowledge and situational expertise that conventional, campus-based education alone often struggles to provide.

However, while WIT offers a compelling alternative to traditional teacher education, its practice-oriented socialization process is not without limitations. Drawing on Merton's (1968) concepts of anticipatory and secondary socialization, our findings suggest that WIT fosters alignment with the norms of the school setting early in the professional journey—but may risk under developing the

critical, reflective capacities typically nurtured through academic engagement. Without intentional integration of theoretical frameworks and structured opportunities for critical inquiry, WIT runs the risk of shaping teachers who are competent implementers rather than critical professionals capable of questioning, adapting, and innovating within complex educational contexts.

Thus, while the WIT model effectively supports relational and experiential dimensions of teacher identity, its long-term success depends on ensuring that practice does not replace theory but interacts with it.

To prevent theory from being sidelined during workplace immersion, we recommend three concrete steps. (1) Program leaders and school mentors schedule a protected 45-minute, weekly theory-linked debrief during practicum, using shared prompts that require students to name and apply at least one course concept to a classroom incident. (2) Appoint school supervisors as adjunct co-teachers to co-run university seminars and co-assess practicum using a common rubric with criteria such as 'evidence of theory-in-use' and 'problematizing local routines.' (3) Monitor impact through a simple audit each term (e.g., sample of practicum reflections for explicit concept use; mentor/student surveys on critical reflection). These steps operationalize our finding that mentor–student relations shape whether WIT integrates theory or defaults to routine reproduction, while remaining low-cost and scalable across sites. For WIT to realize its full potential, teacher education must move beyond the binary of academic vs. practical knowledge and foster spaces where critical reflection, emotional intelligence, and pedagogical knowledge can develop in tandem. Teacher preparation can only cultivate the adaptive, ethical, and independent educators that contemporary education demands. Future teacher education programs might consider reimagining WIT models to include scaffolded theoretical integration within school-based practice.

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The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

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Reference

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