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Psychological Contract - Tool for Dialogue and Relationship- building Between Teachers and Students

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We present a research project examining the psychological contract as a tool for dialogue and relationship-building between teachers and students. While the term psychological contract is commonly used, our study adopts the concept of mutual expectation alignment to better capture its application in educational contexts.

Research on psychological contracts in European school settings remains limited. The concept has primarily been developed and applied within organizational and business contexts. Originally introduced by Chris Argyris (1960), the psychological contract refers to implicit mutual expectations between employer and employee, which influence work performance. Within organizational psychology, the concept has been further developed to describe perceived reciprocal obligations between actors in an organization (Denise Rousseau, 1995; Edgar Schein, 1980).

In an educational context, the overarching aim of applying psychological contracts or mutual expectation alignment is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

The present study builds on our previous research on psychological contracts in education. Earlier work has explored teacher-student relationships in higher education and teachers' experiences with psychological contracts in upper secondary school. In this study, we investigate students' experiences with the use of psychological contracts in school settings.

Expectations between teachers and students are often implicit and insufficiently articulated, which may create uncertainty in communication and lead to misunderstandings or conflict. This project enables a comparison of teachers' and students' experiences, as both studies were conducted at the same school.

We conducted four focus group interviews with a total of 16 students from two upper secondary schools in Norway, representing both vocational and academic study programs. The main research question is whether psychological contracts or mutual expectation alignment can regulate and strengthen the teacher-student relationship,

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and how students perceive its impact on dialogue and interaction.

Preliminary findings suggest that students consider mutual expectation alignment to be important, as it highlights the fundamental role of dialogue quality in shaping teacher-student interaction. Students emphasize that teachers' contributions to dialogue and relationships influence how students themselves engage in interactions with both teachers and peers.

Dialogue is central to this interaction, and it has been argued that dialogue cannot function effectively unless power relations are clarified or explicitly addressed (Amitai Etzioni, 1961). A critical perspective on psychological contracts concerns the extent to which they are genuinely voluntary and democratic.

How can dialogue be conducted when expectations are assumed to be mutual, yet embedded within asymmetrical power relations?

Clarifying roles and power dynamics within the learning community appears essential for creating predictability and a sense of security. Students report that when teachers demonstrate respect, understanding, and recognition of students as autonomous individuals, this helps bridge tensions between conflicting needs. Such recognition may foster relational development and contribute to students' sense of equality and self-respect.

These findings underline the importance of examining how dialogue between teachers and students is enacted in practice, and how it may be further developed.

Keywords: student participation; teacher-student relationship; dialogue; psychological contract.

Literature:

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