



## Psychological Contract in School

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### Abstract

*In this article, we present how a common psychological contract was negotiated between teachers and students at three high schools in a region in Norway. Traditionally, it can be argued that the student-teacher role is characterized by one-way communication where students are passive recipients of knowledge, and the teacher is the conveyer of knowledge. Teachers face various expectations related to the quality of the students' learning environment. The teachers' intention is to establish a good dialogue and a relationship that aims to clarify goals and expectations, define each student's role in the academic learning community, and create appropriate rules in a democratic school day where students expect structure and predictability in the teaching. The findings show that the students have a high degree of relational expectations of their teachers. Furthermore, it seems that the relationship is strengthened when the students participate in the design of mutual expectations between teacher and students. Findings also suggest that the contract helps to analyze relational concepts and, in this way, clarify expectations and regulate behavior, thus shaping the learning environment in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** *Psychological contract, An exchange agreement, Relationship quality*

### Introduction

Democracy in schools has engaged educational researchers and politicians for many years. On the one hand, it involves providing students with knowledge about democracy as an independent form of governance, and on the other, facilitating students' experiences with understanding democracy and participation in everyday school life. Dewey [4] believes that the prerequisite for achieving the ideal of a democratic and inclusive society is education for democracy for all. The Norwegian Core curriculum [26] states that student participation must characterize the school's practices where students should participate in learning communities created together with teachers. Learning environments can be developed and maintained by clear and relationship-building teachers, in collaboration with the students. A report led by Ludvigsen [15] focused on the future competence in Norwegian schools and found, among other things, that the degree of learning depended on the teachers' expectations of the students. At the same time, the report emphasized that if the expectations were too high, it could cause stress and negatively affect the student's learning, motivation, and self-perception. The concept of a psychological contract often refers to an informal and oral clarification of expectations. In an educational context, the term psychological contract is understood as a written and dynamic expectation clarification between teachers and students [20]. Rousseau [21] emphasizes that the psychological contract consists of «subjective perceptions of mutual obligations and promises». She defined psychological contracts as “The psychological contract is individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization”

Irgens [8] argues that the psychological contract is a meeting place between collective and individual interests. The psychological aspect concerns social cooperation relations that are constantly developing. DelCampo [3] claims that theory and research about psychological contracts are a growing area of interest within organizational development and social research. Schein [22] believes that the relationship between the individual and the organization is interactive and develops through mutual influence and negotiations between the parties. A functioning psychological contract changes as the parties change. We are not aware of any other research being done in this field in Norway at the moment. The current study investigates the following question: *What experiences do teachers have with the use of psychological contracts (as part of relationship building) between teachers and students in upper secondary school?*

In this article, we present how a common psychological contract as part of a school development project was negotiated between teachers and students at upper secondary schools in a



region in Norway. School development can involve developing students' teaching, teaching collaboration, learning environment, and participation. Møller [14] claims that knowledge development must be mobilized, where there is room to ask questions, identify needs for new knowledge, seek new sources of knowledge, explore, and apply findings from other studies to one's own context. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with 3 teachers about the expectations they, as teachers, have for their students, what expectations the students have for their teachers, and what expectations the students have for each other. The target audience for the study will be students, teachers, leaders, parents, and school authorities.

## **Theoretical Basis**

### ***Psychological Contract in an Educational Context***

The use of psychological contracts was first introduced by Argyris [1] as mutual expectation clarifications between leaders and employees in the business sector, where implicit expectations discovered could influence employees' work efforts. Organizational psychology has further adopted the concept to describe perceived mutual obligations between actors in a business [21]. Rousseau distinguishes between two types of psychological contracts with respect to the content of the contract; transactional and relational contracts. The transactional contract was based on an exchange relationship often linked to economics based on work effort and reward. The relational contract was less tied to a specific exchange relationship, but more dynamic and based on relational and emotional engagement. The perceptions Rousseau defined were initially about individual obligations between the employee and employer. Later research has also focused on the collective obligations that a group can agree upon together [5]. This form of psychological contract is based on a community, a class, to create the same type of contract.

In an educational context, psychological contracts are defined as democratic perceptions and implicit expectations that teachers and students have for each other in order to bridge the gap between the formal contract (school laws and education laws), working conditions including reduced conditions and noise, shaping behavior, and providing students with meaningful lessons and building good relationships [27]. Paulsen [16] points out that relational trust is the basis for psychological safety in developing learning communities. In a classroom environment, the teacher has a special responsibility to lead a community characterized by psychological safety where students experience participation without fear of sanctions. In a psychological contract, there is a two-way relationship, where the students make up one party and the teachers the other party, and both play a role in relation to each other. Ramsden [18] notes that teachers often have clear expectations regarding the achievement of learning outcomes for students, and the quality of teaching can be improved by reducing the gap between teachers' and students' expectations. This includes not only expectations regarding goals and assessments but also expectations for attendance, being prepared for classes, or participation in class discussions.

A psychological contract necessitates a clarification of the power relationship in a working community to create predictability for teachers and students so that everyone can speak freely and understand the contract. The goal of this type of contract is that it is dynamic and creates trust between the parties. Thus, the psychological contract creates a common understanding that binds the parties together through shared patterns of behavior. These aspects of the psychological contract between teachers and students can contribute to promoting students' motivation and performance [26]. Through negotiating a common psychological contract, the students may collaborate with teachers and fellow students, and they have the chance to express their expectations to the teacher.

Findings from a study [7] show that students in higher education have both transactional and relational expectations of the teacher, as well as expecting teachers to highlight the relevance of their teaching. Student learning may be optimized if student desire to build a relationship with the teacher is also met. Heimly et al. also claim, that focusing on expectations at the beginning of a new academic year, can give teachers the opportunity to reflect, and adapt their own behavior to optimize the relationship with the students. It may also provide an opportunity to show students, that teachers do listen to the students, that they may reflect on the teacher-student relationship together, and that students may take ownership and responsibility for their own behavior. The goal of using a psychological contract, in an educational context, is to enhance the quality of learning and contribute to good behavior.

### ***Expectations and Structures of Expectations***



Expectations towards school come from various parts of society, both internally within each school and in the local community, and also as external expectations, of the school as an organization, and of the teaching profession. Mausethagen et al. [11] indicate that teachers' autonomy, knowledge, and responsibility have been questioned, and teachers are now to be held more accountable for the results and performances of students. This has led to increased external control of teachers' competence, and expectation that teachers should take part in continuous professional development. In addition, schools develop internal requirements and expectations for teachers and students. These expectations will further influence the actions and relationships of teachers and students. Midtsundstad [13] defines expectations as "subjective perceptions of the future," noting that these expectations depend on both the situation and the individuals involved. The teacher's expectations significantly influence the school environment, and thus, teachers must be aware of their own expectations. Midtsundstad [13] observes that Norwegian teachers tend to adjust their expectations based on students' diagnoses and parents' educational levels, which is counterproductive as it can perpetuate inequalities in school—for instance, by giving higher status to students from academic backgrounds. Rather than contributing to social leveling, teachers' expectations can often create an unfair practice where some students are given either better or worse opportunities than others. Such entrenched expectation structures are detrimental to creating a positive learning environment.

Teachers face various expectations related to the quality of the learning environment. While some teachers encounter expectations of high results and performance, others face expectations emphasizing well-being and good relationships. The balance between results and relationships can create an uncertain foundation for the purpose of school and education, potentially leading to conflicts. Unmet expectations about what should happen in the classroom can significantly impact the employees' work environment and the students' learning environment. Traditionally, it is argued that the student-teacher role is characterized by one-way communication where students are passive recipients of knowledge, although listening and mentally processing a lecture can be an activity in itself [19].

### ***Relational Quality and Student Participation***

The Norwegian Core Curriculum [26] states that: "When students' voices are heard in school, they experience how they can make their own conscious choices. Such experiences have value here and now and prepare students to become responsible citizens." This means that teachers and students should engage in dialogue about work tasks and the development of good learning environments. Christiansen & Lorås [2] argue that relational work involves facilitating helpful professional conversational processes. Institutional support may help facilitate the development of positive relationships by people. In a school context, this means that teachers build good relationships with students, and the relationships that form provide the foundation for a positive learning environment. Thorshaug [24] suggests that relational quality indicates how the relationship itself is perceived and may influence individuals' in ability to interact with others. Schein and Schein [23] define a relationship as a set of mutual expectations about each other's future behavior based on previous interactions. The reciprocity in this understanding implies that the concept of relationship can be seen as interactive and balanced in terms of expectations [24]. Good classroom management and relational quality depend on how the teacher interacts with students at the start of the school year. Mutual expectations formalized in a contract about content and learning environment can help create good relationships and work towards a common direction and clear goals. The purpose of relational work is to be aware of the quality of interaction between teachers and students and to create equality in the relationship.

The quality of interaction between teacher and student can affect the contributions students make in a classroom and in their interactions and relationships with the teacher. Recognition in encounters with others makes it pleasant to work together. Honneth [6] believes that recognition is humans' most basic psychological need and a prerequisite for individual development, participation in the learning environment, and constructive use of resources. In a school context, recognition can bridge the gap between teachers and students based on the parties' needs and provide an experience of equality within the school's purposes and the educational law's provisions. The teacher has the primary responsibility for the learning environment in a class, but all parties have a co-responsibility to invest in and maintain good relationships. A psychological contract can be described as a quality indicator for fostering development in a learning environment.

The co-created learning model is based on the fundamental idea that learning and development are carried out through an interaction between problem owners and those who can



facilitate change processes [9]. The main idea in co-created learning is to incorporate dialogic processes in various types of arenas within the same learning process. In this context, problem owners can be students and teachers at a particular school. Klev and Levin argue that learning and development opportunities can be planned, but it is the people who participate in the learning processes, who in interaction with the environment's influence, that determine the outcome. It is the mutual learning potential that creates the dynamics for this development. Co-creation is a form of student participation where teachers and students create something new together, which did not exist before and can release energy in both students and teachers. This is based on a sociocultural view of learning where language and participation in social practices are highly significant [29]. This leads to both students and teachers experiencing more meaning and ownership of what the school sets up, the teaching, and/or the learning environment. Mausethagen & Helstad [12] explain that school development is about the school's and teachers' views on change processes and student participation. When experiences from various initiatives are highlighted, the school's values and views on students will shape the school's practices so that they can impact the operation.

### Method

This qualitative study is designed as an interview study where knowledge is understood as a social construction. Qualitative research methods within the field aim to generate new knowledge in areas where there is initially little existing research [10] as within the field of psychological contracts in educational settings. The qualitative interview will provide insights into the experiences of teachers after having tested the use of psychological contracts at three high schools in a region in Norway. Semi-structured interviews with predefined relevant themes were used to allow for follow-up questions [17]. This was to enable teachers to elaborate on their viewpoints and experiences and to develop new descriptions, concepts, or models. A strategic selection of teachers who have participated in the school's development project was used to best illuminate the research question. The goal of the empirical data was to bring forward the teachers' experiences from their professional practice. The descriptions will reveal the experiences teachers in high schools have, with psychological contracts as part of relationship building between students and teachers.

The study is inspired by phenomenology where the researcher, through the research question, seeks to bring forward teachers' experiences to obtain a rich and detailed dataset [28]. The interpretation process and analysis methods have provided insight into the data in a constructive manner and helped make various comparisons across the interviews conducted. Qualitative interviews have been conducted with three teachers at different high schools, who have participated in a decentralized skill enhancement initiative. Additionally, images and examples of forms for the psychological contract from the teachers were submitted. All the interviewed teachers have several years of teaching experience and have tested psychological contracts in their classes. The project was approved by SIKT (national committee), and all participants have provided a written, informed consent. The empirical data have been set in circular movements where coding and categorizing have provided understanding and ideas for meaningful units: *relational and transactional expectations, dialogue towards clarified goals, and a positive learning environment*.

### Analysis and Discussion

The research question has addressed the experiences teachers have with psychological contracts based on relationship building between teachers and students in high schools. Example of a psychological contract negotiated between teachers and students:

**Table 1:** Students' expectations of the teacher - relational expectations:

The teacher is clear
The teacher shows respect for the students
Arrives/meets on time
The teacher is fair
The teacher shows understanding for the students
The teacher sees each individual
The teacher is prepared for the lessons
The teacher rewards good effort
The teacher considers the amount of theory
The teacher provides adequate help





**Table 2:** Students' expectations of the teacher – transactional expectations:

The subject is relevant
New and interesting content (modern)
A mix between theory and practice
Equipment for the subject
Challenges in the subject
Effective use of technology in teaching
The teacher provides feedback that is useful and constructive
Sets high, but realistic expectations for the students
Encourages independence and creative thinking
What needs to be learned is relevant
Open to suggestions from students

**Table 3:** Teachers' Expectations of Students:

Everyone is included
Do their best in various tasks
Show respect for each other and the teacher
Contribute to a good classroom environment
Try their best
Participate actively in their own way during classes
Contact and notify when needed
Avoid unnecessary comments

The study revealed that teachers have previously experienced that their own expectations of students often were not clearly expressed, or that the students' expectations of the teacher were under-communicated. This can create an uncertain foundation for the learning environment and lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Based on the teachers' implementations in this study, they have developed concrete measures to help clarify mutual expectations between students, teachers, and the school, especially in the early phase of the school year. One of the teachers expressed it this way: "I think the students like it, the feedback I get from the students is definitely positive in terms of how we've sort of cleared a space in terms of how things should be. They also like that there are expectations both in terms of academic performance and in terms of behavior."

This statement aligns with a study in higher education [7] which found that focusing on both transactional and relational expectations between students and teachers is important especially at the beginning of an academic year. Findings in this study show that the expectations between teachers and students that were negotiated touched on both the relational plane (relational expectations) such as behavior of students and teachers, as well as transactional expectations about academic content. Van de Ven [28] also emphasizes that it can be experienced as democratic processes when the formal work and relational work between students and teachers are clarified through a written contract. The relational trust between teachers and students can be formed through democratic processes where both play a role in relation to each other [16]. Teachers experienced that the expectations the students had of the teachers were relatively consistent with the expectations that the teachers had of the students.

The psychological contract is intended to be dynamic, meaning that teachers and students reassess it regularly and upon breach of the contract. Teachers found it important to have regular meetings where the psychological contract was discussed in the class and possibly renegotiated. This was to assess whether the contract was being upheld and the possibility to adjust it. The goal of a dynamically negotiated contract is to uphold the subjective element and mutual obligations and promises [21]. Therefore, the contract must be formed in the meeting between the individual and the organization [22] [8]. The example above shows how both students individually wrote down what they expect and interacted to create a common clarification of expectations in their own classroom environment.

### ***Dialogue Towards Clarified Goals***

The intention of using the psychological contract is to facilitate a dialogue that aims to clarify goals and expectations, define each student's role in the professional learning community, and create productive rules of play. The teachers in this study thought that it may be important to focus on this early in the school year, because, in their experience, both students and teachers quickly form perceptions of each other, what they can expect, and how the school year will proceed. A sociocultural view of



learning [29] and a co-creation learning model [9] are based on fundamental ideas that the social practice that arises in the interaction between teachers and students involves integrating dialogic processes to achieve learning. A psychological contract can be part of a school development process that promotes student participation and the school's values. The school's perception of what actions are needed for development and student participation concerns how good work processes should contribute to change and quality development in relational work [12].

The psychological contracts used in the study was shaped and linked to specific goals, but the research cannot conclude, that it will be effective on its own. On the contrary, without a good process and conscious choices, there is a high risk of frustration and a poor ability to handle challenges and events that occur. The quality of the learning environment also concerns the relationships between the students and the relationship between teacher and student. A good learning environment will be characterized by engagement, participation, and motivated students. In the interviews, it emerged that the teachers felt that the negotiations and discussions around the psychological contract helped to clarify the terms used in the contract itself, as well as to make individual students aware of these. Thorshaug [25] focuses on the concept of relational quality as interactive, thus creating a balance in the expectations of each other. The dialogue can, in other words, be created by mutual and collective expectations about future behavior based on previous interactions with each other [5] [23]. The teachers' introduction has led to an awareness of relational and transactional terms, and collective actions are aimed at developing good forms of conversation [2]. It may seem that teachers in this study chose to actively work to make expectations explicit and present the psychological contract as a tool to align expectations by creating a communicative mutual written contract with legitimacy. It can be debated how democratic this negotiation process is, although the teachers saw the psychological contract as a dynamic contract that could be renegotiated. One of the teachers said:

I don't find it problematic at all. I appreciate it myself, because I like to have a good relationship with the students or like to listen to what the students themselves think. So it may be that they think something about me that does not come to expression. But when we have set this expectation, and if we have it up in a meeting, and we get to talk a little about it, then it may well come out ... So I feel that we have initiated this expectation which has also helped to open up ..."

The statement shows that the expectations between teachers and students previously have not been clearly expressed. This can create an uncertain foundation for relationship building and may lead to conflicts. This also aligns with Mausethagen's research [11] which describes increasing expectations of the school and the teachers' autonomy. Teachers are increasingly held responsible for students' results and mutual expectations can affect motivation and learning outcomes in the school.

### ***Positive Learning Environment***

The teachers we interviewed explain that they encounter various expectations related to the quality of the learning environment. While some face expectations of good results and performance, other teachers encounter an emphasis on well-being and the development of good relationships. According to the teachers, the idea of formalizing expectations in a dynamic contract between teachers and students was positively received by the students. They actively participated in shaping the contract by working in groups and in plenary sessions. The expectations were then visibly posted in the classroom as a reminder for both teachers and students. The teachers believed that this led to the students taking ownership and a stronger commitment to the psychological contract where their contributions were made explicit.

The teachers expressed that although the power relationship between teacher and student is unequal, it is important that students were invited to help shape the contract. They believed this created a trust relationship between teacher and student, which in turn had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment. A teacher expressed it this way: "Very often it is the case that the students are not really determined about what they actually think." The teachers felt that clarifying expectations contributed to a more positive classroom environment where it was clear what students and teachers could expect from each other. This affected the dynamics in the classroom. Midtsundstad [13] also explains that expectations are contextual and depend on both people and situation. The quality of the relationship can positively affect the learning environment and be an indicator that the learning environment is enduring and developing. A teacher expressed it this way: "And I think that how we have started this year, the students themselves have been involved in setting some expectations, both for me and for each other. That does something with the dynamics in terms of how the class is."



The study shows variations in how teachers work with the psychological contract, some contracts have clear traces of relational quality, while others have more transactional clarifications. This is consistent with Regan's research [19] which claims that traditional teacher-student relationships are characterized by one-way communication where students are passive recipients of knowledge. School practice should contribute to social leveling, but teachers' expectations can in many cases create an unfair practice where unclear expectation structures establish themselves and persist in the learning environment [13]. In a learning environment characterized by mutual expectations and clarifications, it can contribute to positive interactions and thus affect both relationships and results.

## Summary

The starting point for our article was to investigate the experiences teachers have with psychological contracts (as part of relationship building) between teachers and students in high school. The findings of the study show that students have both relational and transactional expectations of the teacher. Furthermore, the study indicates that the relational relationship is strengthened when students themselves participate and co-create in shaping the mutual expectations. The study also points out that the use of a written and dynamic psychological contract regulates the behavior of the students, and thus the learning environment as well. The teachers' intention is to establish a good dialogue that steers towards clarifying goals and expectations, clarifying each student's role in the academic learning community, and creating appropriate rules of play. The teachers believed that the psychological contract contributed to the students taking ownership and a stronger commitment to their own contributions to a positive learning environment. The findings show that the students have a high degree of relational expectations of the teacher, expect structure and predictability in teaching, and expect relevance between the education and the goals of education. It is interesting that the teachers' expectations of the students were relatively consistent with the students' expectations of the teachers. Thus, it becomes important to mobilize for joint knowledge development between teachers and students through a psychological contract to identify the need for new practices.

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