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**To cite this article:** Harri Jalonen, Miia Laasanen & Jaanet Salminen (27 Feb 2026): Coping with Tensions That Arise from Professional Collaboration Among Street-Level Bureaucrats in the Context of Public Sector Reform, *Public Performance & Management Review*, DOI: [10.1080/15309576.2026.2633272](https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2026.2633272)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2026.2633272>



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Published online: 27 Feb 2026.



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# Coping with Tensions That Arise from Professional Collaboration Among Street-Level Bureaucrats in the Context of Public Sector Reform

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the tensions arising from collaboration among street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in Finland's nationwide reform of social and health services, with a particular focus on student welfare. While the reform aims to integrate services, it risks creating gaps between education and health professionals across different jurisdictions. We employed mixed methods, including document analysis, surveys, and a Delphi panel, to explore how collaborative tensions manifest and how SLBs utilize discretionary practices to cope. Our analysis identifies four key tensions: the balance between privacy protection and effective collaboration, the hierarchical structuring of welfare planning versus local discretion, sectoral boundaries versus shared responsibility, and children's rights versus ensuring support. The findings indicate that coping strategies based on an *either-or* approach, which separates competing demands, offer limited capacity for addressing the complexities of the implementation of reform. A *both-and* approach enables SLBs to acknowledge competing demands and balance them in practice, but may stabilize tensions without transforming collaboration. The study underscores the relevance of a *more-than* approach as a reflexive and generative mode of coping. The approach enables SLBs to further student welfare by interpreting their responsibilities, negotiating meanings, and co-producing support across organizational and sectoral boundaries rather than merely adhering to rules.

## KEYWORDS

Reform; tension;  
street-level bureaucracy;  
discretion; coping

## Introduction

The promise of public sector reform is predicated on the assumption that something erroneous, inefficient, or unsatisfactory will be rectified, enhanced, or transformed (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). However, numerous studies have documented how reforms have led to unintended or undesirable outcomes (e.g., Margetts et al., 2010; Carey et al., 2018). The reasons for these outcomes are diverse, but a recurring issue is that the

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implementation of a reform is a complex process (Hill & Hupe, 2022), as reforms typically involve the coordination of various stakeholders, each with differing priorities and perspectives.

Michael Lipsky's (1980) notion of street-level bureaucracy strongly influenced work on implementation. Lipsky asserted that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) have the discretion to make decisions and, to a certain extent, act based on their own judgment. He posited that "the decisions of SLBs, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out" (Lipsky, 1980, p. xii). Subsequent research has demonstrated that SLBs play an important role in shaping how public administration reforms are implemented (e.g., Klemsdal et al., 2022; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

This article is situated within the context of a comprehensive nationwide reform encompassing all social and health services in Finland. Since the beginning of 2023, these services have been organized by well-being services counties (WSCs), and it was hoped that the reform would ensure the integration of all services. However, the initiative has faced challenges, which have attracted less attention, and now there is a concern over the gaps in services that the reform engenders. The responsibilities of the new WSCs are extensive; however, municipalities retain responsibility for areas that necessitate collaboration among SLBs (e.g., school nurses, psychologists, and school social workers) from both WSCs and municipalities. Following Finland's reform, student welfare remains under the jurisdiction of municipalities, but some professionals have transitioned to WSCs. Consequently, there is a risk that rather than providing broader support, the administrative reform may create new divides or exacerbate existing ones, thereby hindering collaboration among SLBs in the domains of education and social and health services. The reform could thus disrupt collaboration among SLBs (Cohen & Cohen, 2023).

Although there is an implicit assumption that collaboration yields improved outcomes (e.g., Schot et al., 2020; Vigoda, 2002), we propose a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in collaboration among SLBs. We suggest that while collaboration presents a range of perspectives and expertise, it also creates tensions related to coordination, communication, and the harmonization of goals and methods among SLBs from diverse organizational and professional backgrounds. These tensions have the potential to impact SLBs' actions and decisions in the realm of student welfare, regardless of their well-intentioned and legitimate objectives. We adopt the perspective that tensions among SLBs can manifest in various forms. Such tensions represent challenges that SLBs encounter in their professional roles, reflecting the complex interplay between the objectives of the reform and the practical realities of its implementation.

Utilizing mixed methods and empirical data obtained from legal documents, a survey, and a Delphi expert panel, we address the following question: *How do various forms of tension manifest in collaborations among SLBs, and how can these tensions be managed through discretionary practices?*

While collaboration among SLBs is invariably influenced by multiple logics, public sector reforms alter the context in which those logics interact. Reforms reshape the mechanisms through which discretion is exercised. In addition to altering expectations directed at professional roles and the organizational structures of work, reforms redefine the parameters within which professional judgment and cooperation can be mobilized to reconcile competing objectives. An expanding body of research indicates that reforms do more than create new tensions; they can amplify existing ones. They modify chains of accountability and the boundaries of discretion by introducing new political and administrative signals that redefine what constitutes legitimate action (May & Winter, 2009). Welfare reforms aimed at reducing public expenditure exacerbate moral and operational dilemmas, compelling professionals to navigate the tensions between legality, efficiency, and compassion (Alden, 2015). Furthermore, reforms transform discretion from an individual professional capability into an organizationally controlled instrument that simultaneously constrains agency and increases responsibility. The result is the emergence of multi-actor discretion spaces in which SLBs must continuously negotiate overlapping logics and ambiguous expectations (Edri-Peer & Cohen, 2025). Reforms can thus be understood as *amplifiers of tension*, as they expose the structural contradictions of professional practice by compelling the reconciliation of conflicting principles. These tensions thus do not signal failure and instead reflect how reforms reshape the exercise of discretion.

We contribute to both research and practice as follows. We deepen our understanding of the implementation challenges associated with reforms by framing collaboration among SLBs as a tension-laden activity. By integrating the concept of discretion with the everyday tensions that emerge in practice, this study builds on and extends recent discussions of SLBs' coping mechanisms (e.g., Chang & Brewer, 2023; Edri-Peer & Cohen, 2025; Tummers et al., 2015).

Earlier research has predominantly examined how SLBs cope with pressures arising from their interactions with citizens. In contrast, more recent work has begun to highlight the organizational and interprofessional dimensions of coping (Edri-Peer & Cohen, 2025). The study's contribution lies in advancing this line of inquiry by examining how coping unfolds in peer-to-peer collaboration under *reform conditions*, where discretion is negotiated across professional, organizational, and jurisdictional boundaries. That examination responds to calls for research exploring the dynamic relationship between discretion, coping, and collaboration in complex governance environments (Peters et al., 2022).

We show how SLBs exercise “embedded agency” (Hupe, 2022, p. 5) by actively balancing multiple logics of accountability and professional judgment within reform-induced networks. Accordingly, our article aligns with relational (Hill & Hupe, 2022) and realist (Hawkins, 2022) perspectives on the everyday practice of discretion. Additionally, we provide insights into the managerial implications of addressing these tensions, drawing on the paradox literature to explore *both-and* and *more-than* approaches as strategies for navigating competing demands and fostering effective collaboration.

We argue that reforms function as catalysts that render latent contradictions visible and reshape the exercise of discretion among SLBs. To capture how these processes unfold in practice, we develop an analytical framework that integrates two conceptual layers. The first concerns the different forms of tension (dualities, contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes) that describe how reform-induced pressures manifest in SLB collaboration. These are interpretive devices that help identify key tensions emerging from the data rather than as mutually exclusive categories. The second layer concerns the (rule-based, value-based, and task-based) discretionary practices that describe how SLBs handle these tensions. Whereas tensions represent structural and relational conditions, the different dimensions and combinations of discretion illustrate how coping responses are produced in practice.

### **Tensions in public sector reform**

The implementation of public reforms is intrinsically tied to a specific institutional context, which is a complex amalgam of rules, norms, and beliefs (Hill & Hupe, 2022; Scott, 1995). This historical context can create tension between the desire for innovative change and the constraints imposed by previous policy decisions and practices (Wynen et al., 2017). That can lead to complex implementation processes whereby achieving one aim may inadvertently undermine another (Aberbach & Christensen, 2014).

Reforms amplify tensions by transforming how discretion, accountability, and collaboration are enacted in practice. They compress time horizons, increase interdependencies, and intensify the contradictions between professional ethics, managerial control, and scarce resources (Alden, 2015; Edri-Peer & Cohen, 2025; May & Winter, 2009). In this context, SLBs play a paradoxical role, acting as “subtle enablers of reform implementation while navigating a variety of situational contingencies to sustain viable working orders and ensure service delivery during public reforms” (Klemsdal et al., 2022, p. 737).

In public administration research, tensions are viewed as inherent components of governance, arising from the coexistence of multiple, often

competing, logics and values. Studies of the public sector demonstrate that such tensions manifest notably in the interplay between bureaucratic, professional, political, and ethical logics. Tensions, as constitutive and enduring features of public administration, cannot be eliminated but are continuously negotiated through everyday practices of coordination, interpretation, and boundary work that illuminate both stability and change (see e.g., Trondal, 2023).

While tensions in public administration are often discussed in substantive terms (e.g., the balance between centralized and decentralized governance), such framings risk reducing tensions to policy dilemmas or competing preferences. This study approaches tensions as analytical constructs rather than as empirical oppositions to capture their constitutive nature. To account for this complexity, tensions are categorized into four interrelated types (dualities, contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes), which together offer a conceptual framework for analyzing how tensions emerge, persist, and are managed in reform processes and everyday administrative work. Each form of tension has its own causes, manifestations, and consequences.

In a *dualistic* interpretation, tensions arise when various actors perceive aspects of a subject as being in opposition to one another. In public service contexts, such dualistic tensions typically emerge when institutional arrangements necessitate the simultaneous pursuit of standardization and situational adaptation. Despite their opposition, in dualism, the differing sides of a matter are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Bisel, 2009). The opposites can be distinct yet often appear complementary. Tension, therefore, arises from the need to balance two polarities. That tension stems from employing discretionary practices in different situations rather than choosing one over the other. That is evident at street level when an SLB must follow standard documentation procedures while simultaneously exercising professional judgment to tailor support to the specific needs of individuals.

In an approach emphasizing *contradictions*, opposites are perceived as mutually exclusive and negating while simultaneously being dependent on each other (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In practice, contradictory tensions often surface when limited resources compel professionals to prioritize one legitimate objective (e.g., cost control) at the expense of another (e.g., service accessibility or equity). Tensions manifesting as contradictions may arise from historical factors, resource scarcity, or differences in values. Because the opposites are exclusive, such tensions are inherently challenging to reconcile. That can occur when SLBs working for different organizations compete for scarce resources, whereby the strengthening of one service area directly constrains another. In such scenarios, contradictions generate

*either-or* dynamics (Lewis, 2000), wherein actors strive to secure their primary interests, for instance, by prioritizing fiscal prudence over social equity.

In *dialectical* tension, the opposites are interdependent and in constant flux. In public organizations, such tensions become apparent when reforms produce solutions that temporarily reconcile competing demands but simultaneously give rise to new challenges requiring further adjustment. According to Langley and Sloan (2011), dialectical tensions “emerge and evolve, dissolve or reproduce themselves in the context of ongoing social interaction within and among social systems” (p. 262). Dialectical tension has been characterized as a process in which the struggle between thesis and antithesis results in a synthesis, which lays the groundwork for a new tension (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In other words, a constructive effort from one perspective (thesis) generates justified opposition elsewhere (antithesis), culminating in a solution (synthesis) that satisfies neither the proponents of the thesis nor those of the antithesis. Dialectical tension produces solutions that create new problems. For instance, a shift toward digitalization may encounter resistance due to concerns regarding accessibility for marginalized groups, leading to a compromise that partially addresses both aims yet sparks new challenges related to implementation and equitable access. For this reason, Nagel (2025) suggested that SLBs have a critical role “as potential ‘eliminators’ of dysfunctional policies and drivers of digital change in the public sector” (p. 154).

Paradoxes, in turn, refer to states of tension arising from conflicting factors (Gaim et al., 2024; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In paradoxical tension, opposites always manifest in relation to each other; their occurrence is inherent, and the opposition is a permanent state. Resolving paradoxes has been described as a compulsive need to maintain the illusion of unity, often resulting in seemingly absurd outcomes (Putnam et al., 2016). This paradox is evident in public services, where professionals must continuously uphold conflicting imperatives, for example, transparency and confidentiality, that cannot be reconciled without undermining one another. Lipsky’s (1980) analysis of street-level bureaucracy similarly highlighted its paradoxical nature, as it is simultaneously rooted in professional expertise and discretion while constrained by dense rules and client demands (Chang & Brewer, 2023). Importantly, paradoxes should not be understood solely as problems to be resolved or as expressions of stabilizing power dynamics (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). While paradoxical tensions often reinforce existing institutional arrangements, they can also create conditions for learning, adaptation, and resilience. Paradoxical tension thus eludes definitive solutions, but it may foster ongoing sensemaking and experiential learning as actors are compelled to operate in situations where conflicting values, facts, and institutional logics cannot be fully reconciled (Autioniemi

& Jalonen, 2025). For example, it surfaces when SLBs' efforts to promote transparency clash with the need to safeguard confidential information, forcing actors to engage in ongoing sensemaking as they adapt rules and practices to manage competing demands.

Each type of tension introduces distinct challenges in balancing competing goals, resources, and perspectives. While dualities and dialectics may allow for adaptive balancing, contradictions and paradoxes often resist resolution, highlighting the inherent complexity and potential for conflict in reform contexts. The exploration of tensions underscores the delicate balancing acts necessary when competing values and priorities intersect. These dynamics are particularly evident in the exercise of discretion, where professionals must navigate institutional demands, ethical commitments, and situational constraints.

### **Coping and discretionary practices among SLBs**

Michael Lipsky (1980) argued that *discretion* is indispensable in public administration for several reasons. First, real-life interactions between professionals and citizens are often so complex and nuanced that they cannot be entirely foreseen or regulated through legislation. Second, effectively navigating and understanding these situations requires human judgment, which allows professionals to interpret and adapt to specific contexts. Third, the judicious use of discretion has the potential to enhance the legitimacy of the welfare state by fostering responsiveness and trust in the system, as decisions are tailored to the unique needs of individuals rather than rigidly following predetermined rules.

Following Lipsky's seminal work, several scholars have highlighted that SLB interpretations of government policies affect how they are implemented, and those decisions profoundly affect people's lives (Chang & Brewer, 2023; Hupe, 2022). Professionals are capable of creating policy at the street level but also of impacting national policy through joint efforts (Laffin & Entwistle, 2000). According to Peters (2022), the street-level bureaucrat is "in the position of crafting solutions as well as merely implementing" (p. 41). Discretion has been analyzed as a multifaceted concept. It is, for instance, associated with ethical decision-making (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010), linked to the meaningfulness experienced by clients and the willingness of SLBs to implement policies (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014), characterized as a creative and collective process (Visser & Kruijten, 2021) shaped by the professional identity of SLBs (Jensen & Pedersen, 2023), and shown to be enhanced through transformational leadership and organizational learning practices (Zhang et al., 2022).

Discretion can be divided into several dimensions, each reflecting different aspects of decision-making authority in professional practice. First,

*rule discretion* relates to the constraints imposed by legislation and organizational policies (Taylor & Kelly, 2006). The rules that SLBs are required to adhere to frequently fail to align with the specific circumstances of the citizens involved (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Visser & Kruyen, 2021). From this bureaucratic perspective, SLBs' discretion consists of the ability to explore alternative solutions and make choices among them. Street-level bureaucrats act as gatekeepers, determining who is eligible to receive services. Rules often necessitate interpretation in situations where they cannot be directly applied, which has been observed to increase the employee's responsibility and discretion in individual client situations (Evans & Harris, 2004).

Second, *value discretion* stems from an employee's capacity to implement the values of justice and the professional code of ethics in their work (Taylor & Kelly, 2006). This form of discretion encompasses the notion that employees should have the freedom to act according to professional knowledge and ethical objectives (Evans & Harris, 2004). Discretion related to professional values includes the idea that professional work is at its most effective when the client participates from their own starting point. The discourse surrounding discretion addresses the extent to which employees have genuine opportunities to exercise professional discretion based on ethical values (Karmsteen, 2025). This constriction of discretion is attributed primarily to an increase in various forms of steering activities.

Third, *task discretion* refers to the genuine possibility of executing work in accordance with prescribed instructions and objectives (Taylor & Kelly, 2006). It has been posited that managerial goal orientation influences the degree of discretion available in the completion of work tasks (Gassner & Gofen, 2018). However, the tasks assigned to professionals today may be complex (Maijala et al., 2025) and necessitate the application of discretion at the street level, which is not easily managed by higher authorities (Chang & Brewer, 2023). This complexity is illustrated by an SLB (e.g., a teacher) who must instantly decide how to de-escalate a potentially volatile situation, weighing legal protocols against the immediate safety of all parties involved.

Each form of discretion presents unique challenges and opportunities for SLBs, yet these categories should not be perceived as mutually exclusive. Discretion operates along a continuum rather than as a binary condition (Evans & Harris, 2004). Rules do not merely constrain professional judgment; they also generate it. The application of rules in complex and ambiguous situations requires prioritization, interpretation, and ethical reflection. Accordingly, rule discretion involves more than mere compliance; it encompasses the translation of abstract prescriptions into workable practices that uphold both fairness and practicality. This form of discretion arises from the inherent incompleteness of formal regulation, as SLBs must address the interpretive gaps within rules to render them functional in

practice (Thomann et al., 2018). Discretion is seldom exercised in isolation; rather, it emerges within relational and collaborative contexts where professional norms, inter-organizational expectations, and considerations of social equity converge (Rivera & Connolly Knox, 2023).

Similarly, value discretion encapsulates professionals' efforts to reconcile institutional requirements with ethical and professional commitments. It resonates with what Pedersen and Pors (2023) describe as an "ethics of office", in which professional judgment is anchored in care, responsibility, and attentiveness to citizens' lived experiences. In these contexts, discretion is both a matter of ethical reasoning and central to sustaining legitimacy and trust among partners and service users (Chang & Brewer, 2023). Reforms have reshaped this domain of discretion, as managerial metrics and evaluation systems tend to curtail ethical reasoning while simultaneously heightening demands for accountability (Taylor & Kelly, 2006). Street-level bureaucrats must continually navigate these external expectations alongside their internal professional conscience.

Task discretion, in turn, embodies the capacity to act amid uncertainty; however, it is not merely an issue of individual decision-making; discretion is structurally embedded within organizational functioning (Evans, 2013). Task discretion is exercised not despite organizational structures but through them. Increasingly, it has evolved into a collaborative practice that requires negotiation among professional groups, organizations, and administrative levels (Evans & Harris, 2004).

Public administration reforms have increasingly linked discretion to systems of managerial accountability (Brodkin, 2011), transforming it from an individual attribute into a relational and collectively negotiated practice (Choi et al., 2025). Reforms related to digitalization have further reshaped this form of discretion. While automation and standardized procedures constrain certain decisions, they simultaneously create new opportunities for situational judgment when systems fail to capture social complexity (Busch et al., 2018). For instance, artificial intelligence has been associated with automating decision-making in ways that shape discretionary aspects of tasks (De Boer & Raaphorst, 2023; Peters, 2022). Collectively, these dimensions illustrate that discretion operates as an emergent and interdependent process. Decision-making at the frontline involves the continuous negotiation of legal rules, ethical commitments, and task-related constraints within dynamic organizational and relational contexts. Interactions inherently serve as arenas where professional, managerial, and citizen perspectives intersect, producing both individual and collective value (Gofen et al., 2025; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024). In such encounters, discretion becomes a situated practice of balancing fairness, care, and efficiency (Pedersen & Pors, 2023), shaped by institutional conditions as well as individual attitudes and coping repertoires (Baviskar & Winter, 2017).

Many researchers have noted that the operating environment of public services has become so complex that navigating it requires meaningful discretionary power (e.g., Peters, 2022). Consequently, SLBs are perceived as architects of the political and organizational systems in which they operate, altering rules and provisions, reorganizing work, and shaping policy development through their actions (Visser & Kruyen, 2021). Hupe (2022) drew an important distinction between formal and “discretion as granted” and realistic and “discretion as used” (see also Choi et al., 2025). The former refers to discretion granted by higher authorities, highlighting a top-down approach, while the latter points to how discretion is actually employed on the ground, aligning with bottom-up practices. Coping is essential for SLBs who operate under unsustainable cross-pressures, navigating client demands from below, legislative mandates from above, and the expectations of their own professional standards (Torfing et al., 2024).

To understand how SLBs navigate the tensions inherent in public service work, Lipsky (1980) introduced the concept of *coping*, drawing on Lazarus’s (1966) work on psychological stress. Building on Blumer (1954), Tummers et al. (2015) argued that coping functions as a “sensitizing concept”, offering researchers “a general sense of reference and guidance in empirical instances” (p. 1100). This stands in sharp contrast to “definitive concepts” (Suddaby, 2010); however, the justification for employing coping as a flexible framework becomes evident when considering the complexity and unpredictability of collaborative contexts. As Lindblom (1979) observed, attempts at holistic problem-solving often fail to provide comprehensive solutions, resulting instead in “ill-considered, often accidental incompleteness” (p. 519). Tummers et al. (2015) distinguished three primary categories of coping strategies and labeled them moving toward, away from, and against clients. Collectively, those forms illustrate how SLBs utilize discretion to balance competing and often contradictory demands. These strategies reflect whether discretion is employed empathically to assist clients, defensively to withdraw and protect oneself, or coercively to reinforce institutional authority. Edri-Peer and Cohen (2025) expand that typology by introducing a fourth category, *moving with clients*, which emphasizes the collaborative and interactive nature of coping. In this form, discretion becomes a shared and dialogical practice; that is, SLBs and clients engage in deliberation, negotiation, and the joint construction of workable solutions.

Within this framework, coping emerges as a practical and moral expression of discretion, offering a means to manage the tensions that arise when the everyday reality of public service work compels professionals to reconcile conflicting demands and values. Coping is always embedded in how SLBs interpret the purpose of their work and the position of their clients (Baviskar & Winter, 2017). Attitudes, institutional structures, and

conceptions of professional responsibility shape whether discretion is used to defend rules or to interpret them flexibly. The moral dimension of discretion acquires a social form in studies such as that of Davidovitz and Cohen (2022), which highlights the role of trust in shaping the direction of discretion and coping. When trust is weak, officials may become defensive and limit collaboration, whereas higher levels of trust enable responsible risk-taking and more open interaction. Coping thus becomes a subtle act requiring navigation between power and responsibility. The *relational* interpretation proposed by Edri-Peer and Cohen (2025) is particularly relevant in collaborative environments where discretion is distributed across organizational and professional boundaries. In such contexts, coping appears less as an individual reaction and more as a socially constructed process through which shared understanding is created and adaptation to changing conditions becomes possible.

## Research design

### Research context

Finland provides a distinctive context for examining reform-induced tensions in public service collaboration. The Finnish social and health care reform, implemented in 2023, represents one of the most comprehensive structural reorganizations of welfare governance in Europe (Tynkkynen et al., 2023). The reform transferred responsibility for health and social services from municipalities to newly established WSCs, with the explicit policy aim of strengthening both vertical integration within service systems and horizontal integration across health and social care sectors. Rather than incremental adjustment, the reform constitutes a large-scale institutional reconfiguration, making it analytically well-suited for studying how ambitious integration-oriented policy designs are translated into everyday practices.

Previous research on the Finnish reform highlights a persistent gap between structural integration and practical coordination. While governance arrangements and administrative structures have advanced toward integration, studies suggest that the enactment of integration at the operational level remains uneven and contested across regions and service domains (e.g., Karreinen et al., 2025; Pesonen et al., 2024). This makes the Finnish reform a theoretically informative case for examining how integration is implemented but also illustrates how the legislation is interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped through professional practices and discretionary action.

WSCs have broad responsibilities, but municipalities will continue to bear responsibilities that require collaboration between professionals from WSCs and municipalities. We use student welfare as an illustrative example

to illuminate the tensions among SLBs that emerge from the implementation of the reform. Student welfare is inherently multi-professional and multisectoral, situated at the intersection of education, health care, and social services, where collaboration relies on continuous coordination among professionals operating under different institutional mandates, professional norms, and accountability structures. As a result, it constitutes a dense interactional space in which reform-induced tensions are likely to emerge (cf. Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Student welfare encompasses work conducted in schools and educational institutions that promotes, maintains, and creates conditions for students' learning, mental and physical health, and social well-being. Student welfare is categorized into two main areas: communal welfare that benefits the entire student community and welfare tailored to individual needs. It is implemented through multidisciplinary collaboration among teachers, school psychologists, school social workers, public health nurses, and school doctors, each contributing to the promotion of students' learning capacity, well-being, and safety. The system integrates educational and health expertise, aiming to provide both preventive and individualized support through communal initiatives, such as well-being plans and early intervention programs. Coordination and joint assessment meetings are central practices through which these professionals identify risks, monitor students' needs, and ensure continuity of care across institutional boundaries (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2025). The operational model emphasizes early support, confidentiality, and collaboration between schools, families, and WSC professionals, reflecting Finland's broader commitment to equity and inclusion in education (Chong, 2018).

In practice, however, this interprofessional structure often reveals tensions related to jurisdictional boundaries, resource allocation, and shared responsibility between municipalities and WSCs. Despite the primary responsibility for student welfare residing with municipalities following the administrative reform, the reorganization has been implemented at two administrative levels. The municipalities continue to employ some professionals, while others now operate under the WSCs. The reform was intended to strengthen interprofessional collaboration; however, in practice, it has resulted in fragmented lines of authority, differing supervisory structures, and challenges in information sharing. Consequently, rather than fostering closer collaboration among SLBs, there is a risk that the reform produces parallel systems of responsibility and undermines the coherence of student welfare provision.

Finland provides a particularly interesting setting for examining these dynamics, as it is widely recognized as a high-trust society where both interpersonal and institutional trust form the foundation of public governance (Bäck & Kestilä, 2009). This strong trust culture has traditionally

facilitated cooperative problem-solving and professional autonomy within the public sector. Furthermore, the Finnish education system operates within a broader societal structure of trust, where accountability is predicated on professional competence rather than control. Accordingly, teachers, principals, and municipal officials are expected to act responsibly without external inspection, illustrating how social trust sustains institutional effectiveness (Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023). However, the recent reform introduces uncertainty regarding whether such trust-based governance can be maintained amid increasingly fragmented administrative arrangements.

Taken together, the Finnish social and health care reform and the case of student welfare present an analytically rich and theoretically generative research setting. They allow for the examination of collaboration as a dynamic process shaped by reform-driven tensions and professional discretion at the street level rather than as a static organizational arrangement.

### ***Data collection***

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining document analysis, a survey, and a Delphi panel to capture reform-induced tensions at policy, organizational, and experiential levels. The purpose of combining methods is both complementary and developmental (e.g., Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017): different data sources illuminate the phenomenon at distinct but interrelated levels, while insights from earlier phases inform subsequent stages of data collection.

Data were gathered from March 2023 to March 2024 as part of an ongoing research project in Finland. First, the Student Welfare Act (377/2022) came into force on January 1, 2023. From August 1, 2021, to March 15, 2022, 150 expert statements on the bill were provided, which are available on the Lakitutka.fi service. Among the contributors of expert statements were education providers (e.g., municipalities and joint municipal authorities), WSCs, ministries and authorities, representatives of trade unions, and researchers. After excluding statements made in support of the committees and removing documents recorded twice in the service, we utilized 127 statements as material for this study. The text material totaled 549 pages, with the briefest statements being one-page summaries, the longest spanning 11 pages, and the median length being three pages.

Second, 124 experts from school-specific student welfare teams across the two WSCs completed a survey. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section comprised an adapted version of the PINCOM-Q survey (Ødegård, 2006), tailored to the student welfare context to evaluate collaboration among SLBs. The second section concentrated

on the impact of the well-being services reform on professionals' involvement in student welfare. We utilized the 290 open-ended responses provided in the survey. Additionally, we conducted a two-round Delphi panel involving 25 experts from the two WSCs. In the first round, the panelists discussed the findings from an analysis of expert statements. The second round was dedicated to envisioning the desired future of student welfare. The total text material amounted to 48 pages.

Data collection was organized as a partly concurrent and partly sequential process, reflecting both the scope of the research questions and the need for cumulative interpretation. The survey and document data were collected with temporal overlap, enabling parallel insights into policy-level framings and practitioners' experiences. However, the analysis of expert statements and survey responses subsequently informed the design and thematic focus of the Delphi panel. This sequential dependency ensured that the Delphi process functioned as an interpretive and reflexive extension of the earlier empirical phases rather than as an independent data source.

The utilization of multiple data sources was justified by the need to examine tensions among SLBs at both formal and experiential levels. Data integration was conducted iteratively, such that the findings from one dataset informed the analysis of the next. The document analysis provided a policy-level perspective on how student welfare was framed in legislative preparation and expert statements, revealing institutional expectations and latent sources of tension. The analysis of expert statements also enabled an assessment of how the welfare services reform was anticipated to reshape interprofessional collaboration and either mitigate or exacerbate the tensions experienced among SLBs. The survey data expanded that perspective by illustrating how the tensions impacted professionals' routine collaboration. Building on these analyses, a Delphi panel was employed to refine and validate the interpretations elicited from the document and survey analyses. The data integration process was a means of ensuring theoretical coherence and constructing a multi-layered understanding of the reform-induced tensions shaping collaboration and discretionary practices in student welfare.

### **Data analysis**

We analyzed the data according to the principles of qualitative theory-guided content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) in four interconnected phases (Figure 1). The analysis proceeded through within-dataset analysis and cross-dataset integration. This structure reflects the mixed methods design by making explicit both the independent analytical contributions of each dataset and their subsequent integration.

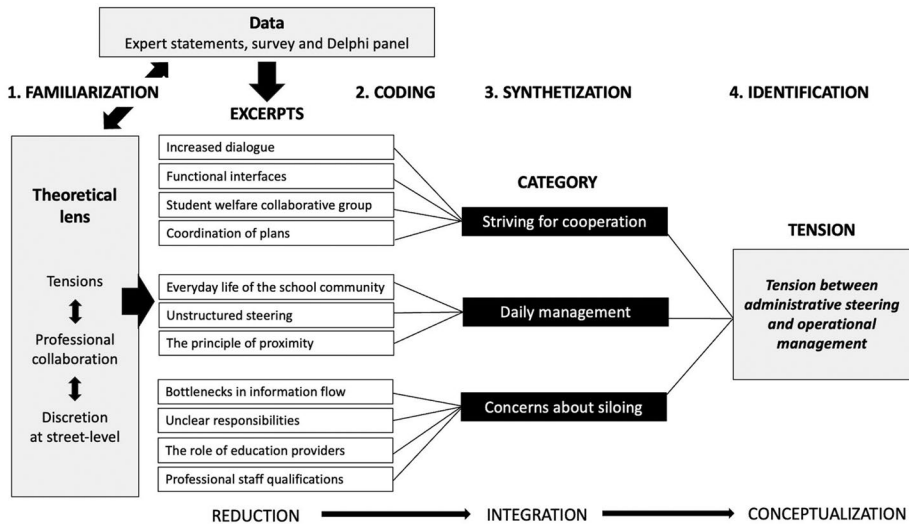


Figure 1. Theory-guided content analysis.

First, we initiated the content analysis process by evaluating the relevance and applicability of the tension perspective to the study, as revealed by the dataset. This assessment facilitated an understanding of the underlying dynamics and potential theoretical frameworks that could elucidate the analysis.

In the second phase, we engaged in an intensive reading period. This collaborative approach ensured a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the material, enriching the analysis through diverse insights. We established a preliminary coding framework to systematically organize and interpret the data. This framework was developed through note-taking during the data-reading process, which enabled us to identify key themes, patterns, and categories within the data. We conducted the coding using NVivo software. The initial coding step involved distilling observations from the dataset that described specific aspects of multidisciplinary student welfare, emphasizing those observations with shared characteristics. Our methodological approach aimed to capture the multifaceted nature of student welfare services and the various dynamics at play. The coding process yielded over 100 excerpts illustrating the potential benefits and challenges associated with multidisciplinary student welfare. These excerpts highlighted opportunities such as enhanced dialogue among stakeholders and the development of effective functional interfaces, as well as obstacles such as the lack of structured guidance and the presence of information bottlenecks that impede efficient communication and service delivery. We utilized short phrases or combinations of words as the primary units of analysis, which enabled us to focus on the essence of the observations. We aggregated similar words and expressions to ensure a coherent analysis

that illustrated the interconnectedness of themes such as the coordination of educational plans and regional student welfare strategies.

In the third phase, we synthesized the excerpts into over 20 distinct categories. Each category encapsulated critical aspects and focal points pertinent to the implementation and realization of collaborative student welfare, including efforts to foster cooperation, the daily management of services, and concerns regarding the compartmentalization of services. We allocated certain excerpts to multiple categories, reflecting the complex interplay and overlapping nature of themes within the realm of student welfare.

In the fourth and final phase of the analysis, we identified four distinct forms of tension that emerged from the categorized data. We leveraged a previously established framework for categorizing tensions into types, such as duality, contradiction, dialectic, and paradox. This categorization facilitated a deeper understanding of the challenges and dynamics within collaborative student welfare, offering insights into the underlying tensions that have shaped its implementation and effectiveness. Additionally, the flexible categorization approach allowed for certain categories to be associated with more than one form of tension, underscoring the multifaceted and interconnected nature of the challenges facing multidisciplinary student welfare.

Integration thus occurred primarily at the analytical and interpretive levels. The document analysis illuminated institutional framings and anticipated sources of tension; the survey data captured how these tensions were experienced in everyday collaboration, and the Delphi panel enabled the refinement, validation, and future-oriented interpretation of these findings. Rather than seeking convergence in a narrow triangulation sense, the integration aimed to deepen understanding by juxtaposing policy-level expectations with professional experiences and expert reflections. The structured format of the survey supported comparison across professional groups and organizational settings, thereby strengthening the qualitative analysis. The Delphi panel further enhanced interpretive validity by providing a forum for collective reflection on emerging findings. Together, these analytical steps produced a multi-layered understanding of reform-induced tensions and the discretionary practices through which SLBs cope with them.

## Findings

Four tensions were identified concerning collaboration among SLBs in the context of student welfare: i) tension between teaching and promoting health and well-being, ii) tension between information flow and privacy protection, iii) tension between administrative steering and operational

management, and iv) tension between individual agency and professionals' accountability. These tensions reflect what many scholars (e.g., Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Peters, 2022; Visser & Kruyen, 2021) have observed: Street-level bureaucrats do more than implement policy; they exercise discretion within their systems. Below, we report on a comprehensive examination of the tensions facilitated by utilizing the various datasets simultaneously.

### ***Tension between teaching and promoting health and well-being***

This tension emerged most clearly in the expert statements, which emphasized policy-level expectations of joint responsibility. It was further illustrated by the Delphi panel responses describing the practical challenges of balancing educational and preventive goals. National and cross-sectoral guidance on student welfare conveys a dual message. A number of statements underscored the central role of the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), emphasizing that student welfare is fundamentally embedded in the everyday life of schools and educational institutions. This school-based implementation context was repeatedly cited as a key justification for assigning EDUFI a leading role in steering student welfare. Among others, the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (KARVI) noted in its statement that *“communal student welfare is a central part of the school’s operational culture, which is primarily guided through the curricula.”* KARVI stated that EDUFI introduces an educational perspective to student welfare, supporting the idea of communal student welfare as preventive work that supports the entire school community.

Participants in the Delphi panel emphasized that communal student welfare is primarily the responsibility of schools. They also acknowledged that SLBs, such as school nurses, psychologists, and social workers, have limited opportunities to influence the operational culture of their schools or the overall well-being of the school community. Preventive work conducted by teachers was frequently highlighted as having the greatest impact on the well-being of children and youth. As one representative of the education sector stated in their response to the legislative reform: *“The most important and by far the largest group involved in student welfare is teachers, and the amount of communal and preventive work they do is immense.”*

By contrast, multiple statements underscored the need for a stronger role for the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) in steering student welfare policy. The rationale was that responsibility for student welfare services has shifted to WSCs, which are under the direction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. An informant from the Preventive Substance Abuse Network reminded us that *“THL is also responsible for promoting well-being and preventive substance abuse work, both of which are linked to student welfare in both regions and municipalities.”*

However, statements opposing the enlargement of THL's guidance responsibility speculated that this could lead to an emphasis on health-oriented and individual student welfare at the expense of preventive and communal student welfare within school communities. The open-ended responses to the survey included speculation that emphasizing the roles of school social workers and psychologists at the expense of principals signifies the distancing of student welfare services from everyday school life. Some even feared the "medicalization" of student welfare.

Participants in the Delphi panel emphasized the importance of understanding the normative and regulatory frameworks guiding the actions of different actors. Viewing student welfare too narrowly from a limited perspective was identified as a problem. Concerns were raised about job descriptions that prioritize individual-level interventions over communal approaches, potentially undermining the broader objectives of student welfare. Although collaboration among SLBs was believed to improve the precision of service needs, it might also endanger swift access to help and, at worst, deepen problems. A problem commonly identified among survey respondents was captured in the following response from a school principal: *"Not all schools yet understand the range of issues that the student welfare team has to address ... It is rare for the team to discuss various phenomena occurring within the school and to utilize the various professional expertise."*

### ***Tension between information flow and privacy protection***

A key prerequisite for student welfare is the efficient flow of information among SLBs. Challenges arise particularly in the varying interpretations of confidentiality regulations, disparate recording practices among professional groups, and information systems that are ill-suited to the nature of the work. The confidentiality dilemma was particularly evident in the legislative documents, while the Delphi discussions and survey responses helped clarify how professionals manage that balance daily. Expert statements frequently noted that work on student welfare involves sensitive information, necessitating detailed legislation regarding the collection, storage, and sharing of data. For instance, the statement from EDUFI expressed concern that the legislation was not specific regarding to whom confidential information about a student's welfare could be disclosed.

Several statements referenced studies highlighting a growing need for student welfare services and noted that children and youths are facing increasingly complex challenges. These statements also emphasized that mental health issues are particularly sensitive, making confidentiality and the duty to maintain secrecy essential for effective support and care. For example, the Finnish Psychological Association's statement suggests that

*“information exchange should be enabled only for data necessary for organizing education,”* and even then, *“legislation concerning healthcare professionals should be considered.”*

Nevertheless, the statements often recognized issues around interpreting the relevant legislation, which complicated the promotion of student welfare. Recording practices were found to vary, and locating information within information systems proved challenging. Many experts found it problematic that those working in schools and educational institutions do not have the right to contact student welfare services professionals without the child or youth’s consent. For instance, the Finnish Parents’ Association emphasized *“the right of guardians to information”* and noted that *“assessing the best interest of a minor is demanding for individual [student welfare] workers and always requires careful consideration.”*

Anonymity in consultations emerged as a salient theme in relation to the broader tension between privacy protection and effective interprofessional collaboration. While the Student Welfare Act expressly anticipates various modes of consultation, including those safeguarding anonymity, several statements emphasized that professionals may still seek expert advice on a child’s or youth’s situation without disclosing personal identifiers. This provision was frequently interpreted as an important enabler of timely support within the boundaries of legal and ethical confidentiality. Implementing consultations was also emphasized. A municipal director of education participating in the Delphi panel stated: *“It is difficult to recruit school psychologists to the public sector, especially in areas with many small schools and long distances ... In some well-being services counties, there are already consulting school psychologists working, including remotely, and even such a service is better than no service at all. Of course, only a consultative role can be undertaken remotely, but perhaps it is time to consider various alternatives alongside the ideal, or as part of the regular statutory work of school psychologists.”*

The Delphi panel identified information system challenges as an important structural constraint to student welfare collaboration. Participants highlighted concerns regarding fragmented data flows, slow bureaucratic processes, and the disappearance of critical information, all of which delayed timely intervention. A recurring theme was uncertainty over who ultimately benefits from strict data protection, particularly when inadequate information transfer between education providers and student welfare services impedes student support. The following quotation from the school principal reflects the views of several survey participants: *“It is assumed that information is provided by the school, yet the school does not receive information from those who are part of the interprofessional student welfare team but are not part of the school staff.”*

The Delphi panel noted that challenges related to information flow and student privacy often stem from differing interpretations of legislation among

professionals. The issue was also linked to a tendency to exercise caution in uncertain situations. Several Delphi panel participants shared the following concern expressed by a school social worker: “Ultimately, the flow of information is largely a matter of attitudes and the ability to share information in accordance with the law... data protection is not usually an obstacle, but professionals often lack the skills to handle it appropriately.” These reflections underscore the importance of trusting professional judgment when making decisions in complex and sensitive cases.

### ***Tension between administrative steering and operational management***

Expert statements included concerns regarding the emergence of overlapping responsibilities, while Delphi panel participants critically examined how the structures created by the reform generate managerial and operational tensions. Survey responses from student welfare professionals also reflected contradictions inherent in their daily work routines and concerns about the reform’s practicality. The data revealed critical perspectives on the hierarchical structure of student welfare plans issued by regional bodies and education providers. Opinions were divided: while some statements welcomed the proliferation of plans for promoting consistency, others criticized them as excessively detailed and top-down, thereby constraining local discretion in daily student welfare work. A recurring theme was the call to redefine regional plans as strategic and flexible frameworks, to ensure they are living documents rather than operational directives.

Concerns were also voiced by municipal representatives, who emphasized that regional guidelines should not override effective local practices or create unnecessary conflicts at the municipal level. Echoing this, the Delphi panel underscored the importance of local adaptability, noting that student welfare objectives are difficult to achieve without adjusting guidance to the specific needs and resources of individual schools. As one school principal reflected: *“The pace of societal and everyday change often outstrips the ability of planning processes to keep up ... by the time a plan is finalized, circumstances may already have shifted, while local decision-making structures adapt only gradually.”*

The majority of the expert statements described student welfare services as a concern at the intersection of well-being services at both county and municipal levels. Experts underscored the need for effective dialogue between WSC and education providers; that is, municipalities and educational consortia. Student welfare was described as a cross-administrative and functional entity. A priority that emerged consistently was ensuring student welfare was protected. Respondents indicated that the broader welfare strategies of WSCs and municipalities must reflect that priority alongside student welfare plans.

The statements directed expectations toward regional student welfare collaboration groups. For instance, the Ministry of Education and Culture articulated the proposal that “*student welfare should constitute a comprehensive multisectoral student welfare plan of the education administration and the WSC*” and that its “*implementation requires effective collaboration between the education administration and social and health services.*”

In addition to the positive expectations related to collaboration among SLBs, expert statements expressed concerns regarding the role of student welfare in the everyday operations of WSCs, defining the local organization of student welfare in regional plans as problematic. For example, municipal representatives emphasized that a municipality’s student welfare plan cannot encompass directives that fall under the jurisdiction of the WSC. The situation is a result of the desire that municipality plans are based on the WSCs’ welfare plan, which collates information from municipalities pertaining to community work and the organization, implementation, and development of services.

The data highlighted a robust demand for greater local discretion in the implementation of student welfare. Specifically, clarification was sought concerning the hierarchical relationship between student welfare plans and other strategic frameworks, such as municipal and regional well-being plans. A failure in this regard was perceived as leading to an increase in unnecessary work. Expert analyses consistently underscore that, while the law delineates the fundamental frameworks for regional cooperation in student welfare, the true efficacy of student welfare is most apparent in the everyday functioning of schools and educational institutions.

The new legislation allocates much of the responsibility for steering to WSCs, thus complicating the operational management of student welfare. Some experts noted the risk that WSCs become detached from municipal education and the daily realities of school communities. In the open-ended responses to the survey, numerous respondents expressed concerns regarding collaboration between the school community and school psychologists and social workers, who would be subject to oversight by county well-being services’ management.

The following excerpt from a school psychologist’s questionnaire response encapsulates the sentiments of many: “*Some communities perceive WSC staff as outsiders who want to dictate to them.*” Some respondents were afraid that the student welfare service provider had begun to distance itself from the everyday life of schools. Similarly, the Finnish Association of Local and Regional Authorities stated that “*there is a need for WSCs and municipalities to define the authority of the school principal responsible for the school’s operations in relation to student welfare personnel.*”

Members of the Delphi panel also raised concerns regarding the administrative changes instituted by the reform. Various practical matters had

been delegated to employees, necessitating the allocation of time that could have been used to advance communal student welfare. Many participants perceived that the changes obscured responsibilities in a manner that did not serve the best interests of children and young people. The need for coordination and collaboration becomes more important because many municipal consortia providing secondary education operate across several WSCs. Additionally, it was deemed essential for employees to engage in development work, as they possess the most comprehensive understanding of effective practices. However, participants cautioned that coordination might, paradoxically, exacerbate the challenges associated with collaboration. A psychologist participating in the Delphi panel articulated the sentiments of many, stating, “*The title ‘student welfare cooperation coordinator’ gave the impression that yet another new actor is being introduced into the field to ‘streamline’ collaboration. Cooperation is becoming overly multi-layered, and the actual ‘working together’ easily turns into the preparation and updating of various plans.*” Numerous statements underscored the perspective that, to avert fragmentation, education providers must retain the authority to organize and develop community-based student welfare in the future. These statements directed attention to national issues, the varying positions of experts, differing knowledge bases, values, and cultures, and contributed to the tension between perspectives.

### ***Tension between individual agency and professionals’ accountability***

A majority of expert statements emphasized the importance of recognizing children and young people as participants and active agents, rather than as mere subjects within the realm of student welfare. For instance, the Ombudsman for Children in Finland referenced the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that “*children have the right to be heard in matters concerning them.*” Several statements proposed that children and young people should be apprized of the outcomes of the process and how their perspectives had been considered. It was noted that the objective is to enhance children’s and young people’s experiences of participation and influence. A challenge related to children and young people’s agency arises when a child or young person entitled to student welfare waives that right. Members of the Delphi panel deemed it essential to encourage children and young people to pursue agency. It is important not to treat students as passive objects of policy but as active subjects with agency.

Nevertheless, the Delphi panel experts emphasized that children and young people should not be burdened with excessive responsibility. Many participants felt that even with self-direction, there had to be limits, as children and young people may not necessarily be prepared for such responsibilities. A deputy headteacher articulated a concern shared by many Delphi

panel participants as follows: *“The phenomena affecting the lives of children and young people are changing very rapidly. We should be able to think beyond the present moment and consider the next five to ten years. Are we now making the right decisions for the future of children and young people? It feels that, due to the rigidity of our service system, we are unable to respond quickly enough to emerging issues. By the time we do, the phenomenon has already taken on a new form, and our proposed ‘solutions’ are no longer relevant. Emphasizing the activity of children and young people must not mean diminishing professional responsibility; quite the opposite, in fact.”*

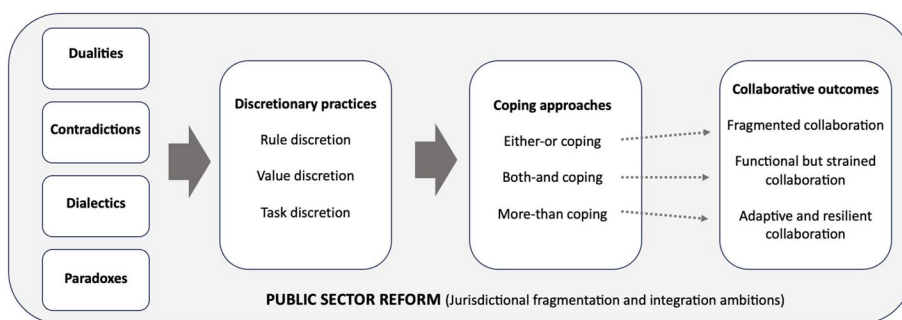
Although the statements supported strengthening children and young people’s self-determination, they also expressed concerns regarding issues of responsibility. Several statements called for consideration of ways to implement student welfare in situations where a child or young person refuses contact with student welfare. For example, the Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training reminded us that *“obtaining consent in situations of violence or substance use can be difficult, even though the need for student welfare or health services is acute.”*

The open-ended responses to the survey included concerns regarding the consequences of an overly strict interpretation of privacy. This was perceived to hinder the allocation of roles and responsibilities and familiarity with other professionals’ work. Many respondents endorsed the teacher’s comment derived from the questionnaire: *“Teachers lack information about who receives visits from a counselor or psychologist when everything is justified by confidentiality.”* The relationship between roles and responsibilities also concerned the experts on the Delphi panel. Clear responsibilities and guidelines were called for in the discussion. Experts emphasized that student welfare practitioners need to know who is responsible for what and whom to contact to promote the well-being of the child in question. The following comment from a school social worker captures the thoughts of many: *“No more new actors in student welfare: What we need is proper investment, commitment, and clearer roles for the existing professionals.”*

Across the different datasets, the tension between individual agency and professionals’ accountability appeared both as a normative question and a practical dilemma: expert statements articulated value-based expectations regarding participation and rights, Delphi discussions revealed the challenges of applying these principles in everyday decision-making, and survey responses demonstrated how unclear responsibilities and strict confidentiality regulations complicate professionals’ ability to act consistently.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to examine how tensions arising from professional collaboration among SLBs unfold in the context of public sector reform



**Figure 2.** From tensions to collaborative outcomes.

and how these tensions are addressed through discretionary practices in student welfare. Rather than treating tensions and discretion as separate analytical domains, the discussion foregrounds their dynamic interrelationship. In doing so, the study positions coping as a relational approach that links the reform context, discretionary practices, and collaborative outcomes. [Figure 2](#) synthesizes how different types of reform-induced tensions activate forms of discretion, which in turn shape coping approaches and collaborative outcomes. The figure should be interpreted as an analytical heuristic rather than a linear causal model, emphasizing relational dynamics.

Given the inductive nature of the study, the primary contribution lies in theory-building. The findings refine existing understandings of street-level bureaucracy by demonstrating how different types of tensions activate distinct forms of discretion and give rise to patterned coping approaches. By making these linkages explicit, the discussion aims to clarify how SLBs navigate competing demands in collaborative governance settings and with what consequences.

### ***From reform context to experienced tensions***

The reform context plays a central role in shaping the tensions experienced by SLBs. In the case examined here, the separation of responsibilities between WSC and municipalities, combined with the ambition to integrate services, creates a dense interactional space in which collaboration becomes both necessary and challenging. These institutional arrangements amplify tensions related to coordination, accountability, and professional boundaries. Within this context, four types of tensions, namely dualities, contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes, become salient. Rather than appearing as abstract categories, these tensions are embedded in everyday collaborative practices, such as information sharing, resource allocation, and responsibility-taking across organizational and professional lines. The findings underscore that tensions are not merely background conditions of

reform but are produced and reproduced through interaction in specific governance contexts.

### ***Tensions and forms of discretion***

A central insight of the study is that discretionary practices and coping approaches constitute the key mechanisms through which tensions are translated into action (Figure 2). When confronted with competing demands, SLBs are not expected to respond mechanically to formal rules or organizational mandates. Instead, they exercise discretion in interpreting rules, prioritizing values, and organizing tasks in ways that are sensitive to situational constraints and relational considerations.

Different types of tensions tend to spur different forms of discretion. First, the tension between teaching and the promotion of health and well-being reflects a *dualism* in which *rule discretion* is a critical aspect. Teachers and school health care professionals and social workers approach student welfare from different, sometimes competing but potentially complementary perspectives. When professionals are granted discretion to interpret and apply rules creatively (Visser & Kruyen, 2021), service delivery can balance educational objectives with health and welfare needs. However, discretion is not always experienced as empowering; it may instead be perceived as a burdensome responsibility that professionals seek to avoid (Liodden, 2022). Conflicts are often linked to concerns about substantive expertise, anticipated changes in guidance-related resources, and difficulties in meeting staffing requirements. Shortages of qualified street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) constrain opportunities for collaboration, while power asymmetries and status differences between professions (Gofen et al., 2025) further undermine integrated working practices. Overly detailed plans may narrow discretion, producing rigid services detached from everyday school realities and, consequently, from the reform's aim of adaptive and responsive student welfare. This resonates with Peters's (2022, p. 41) observation that public policies ultimately take shape through implementation rather than formal documentation.

Second, the tension between efficient information flow and the protection of privacy exemplifies a *paradoxical* tension, characterized by enduring and mutually opposing demands (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Street-level bureaucrats must reconcile ethical obligations related to confidentiality with the practical necessity of information sharing in integrated service provision (Karmsteen, 2025). Here, *value discretion* becomes crucial, enabling professionals to enact principles of justice and adhere to professional ethical codes in their daily work (Trappenburg et al., 2020). When exercised thoughtfully, value discretion supports innovative solutions that respect privacy while maintaining effective coordination. Conversely,

insufficient or poorly exercised discretion may lead either to privacy violations or to fragmented services that fail to meet students' needs (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

Third, the tension between administrative steering and operational management reflects a *dialectical* relationship in which *task discretion* is central. SLBs operate at the intersection of top-down directives and the practical demands of frontline service delivery (Karmsteen, 2025). Task discretion allows professionals to adapt their work to individual cases and local contexts, potentially bridging the gap between managerial control and everyday practice (Zhang et al., 2022). However, excessive managerial oversight and rule proliferation can restrict this discretion, resulting in standardized services that fail to respond to diverse student needs, while insufficient oversight may allow task discretion to expand to the point of producing inconsistent practices, underscoring the need for a carefully calibrated balance.

Fourth, the tension between the agency of children and young people and the duty and responsibility of SLBs illustrates how *rule*, *value*, and *task discretion* are intertwined in managing *contradictory* tensions. In such contradictions, opposing demands are simultaneously interdependent and mutually limiting (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Street-level bureaucrats must protect the best interests of the child (Klemsdal et al., 2022) while also empowering students as active participants in their own welfare. This requires interpreting rules in ways that support the agency, exercising ethical judgment to promote meaningful participation, and tailoring interventions to individual circumstances. Effective management of this tension depends on the integrated use of all three forms of discretion, highlighting the complexity of aligning frontline practice with the citizen-centered ambitions of reform.

### ***Coping approaches as patterned responses to tension***

Building on the discretionary practices observed, the analysis identified three distinct coping approaches: *either-or*, *both-and*, and *more-than* (see e.g., Abdallah et al., 2011; Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016). These are patterned responses that emerge in relation to specific tensions and contexts rather than individual traits or stable strategies.

The *either-or* approach simplifies contradictions by separating opposing demands and favoring one over another, offering short-term control but limiting adaptability. It manifests as prioritizing one policy objective over another, though such separation often deepens institutional fragmentation (Abdallah et al., 2011).

The *both-and* approach accepts that opposites coexist. Putnam et al. (2016) noted that *both-and* responses utilize paradoxical thinking,

vacillation, and integration. Paradoxical thinking legitimizes the pursuit of contradictory goals (Gaim et al., 2024; Putnam et al., 2016), facilitating tension reconciliation through cognitive flexibility. In student welfare, it assists in navigating between individual autonomy and professional accountability by demonstrating how they reinforce each other. Vacillation involves alternating between priorities based on situational demands (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). This approach enables “holding both poles together, meeting antithetical goals, and iterating between opposites” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 126). Street-level bureaucrats navigate dual roles as “state agents” and “citizen agents” (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000), managing tensions between standardized protocols and individualized needs by adhering to guidelines during high-demand situations while adopting flexible approaches during routine periods. Integration combines conflicting perspectives into coherent practices. Tensions between educational priorities and health promotion can be addressed through joint intervention plans incorporating both perspectives. Teachers and health and social care professionals may collaboratively design activities that support learning objectives and student well-being, fostering a unified approach that aligns goals while enhancing efficacy.

However, maintaining equilibrium through *both-and* strategies can institutionalize tension without transformation. The *more-than* approach reframes tensions as drivers of learning and innovation, transcending opposites by questioning assumptions and constructing new shared meanings (Lewis, 2000). Three practices exemplify *more-than* coping (Putnam et al., 2016). First, *reframing* addresses the tension between educational and well-being aspects by promoting a holistic view (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012) that advances overall well-being. It allows SLBs to merge educational and well-being initiatives while addressing information flow and privacy concerns. Second, *creating “third spaces”* encourages dialogue and integrated student welfare models. This aligns with Liodden (2022), who found that SLBs collaboratively managed discretion through dialogue to develop shared approaches. Forums among educators, health and social care professionals, and legal experts can establish guidelines protecting privacy while facilitating information sharing (Gofen et al., 2025; Visser & Kruyen, 2021). Finally, *encouraging reflexivity* and serious playfulness promotes innovation in student welfare practices (Karmsteen, 2025). Street-level bureaucrats must navigate the challenge of ensuring equality while addressing individual differences, which Peters (2022) referred to as “squaring the circle of difference within the context of equality” (p. 45). This reflexivity is vital in developing information-sharing methods that protect privacy.

These *more-than* strategies emphasize engaging with paradoxes as opportunities for creative development rather than merely problems to solve.

By adopting these approaches, SLBs in student welfare can explore solutions that embrace tensions, thereby enhancing children's well-being and learning outcomes. These coping approaches progress from defensive separation to adaptive balancing and reflexive transformation. Discretion becomes generative when tensions are viewed as productive rather than problematic, allowing SLBs to transform complexity into professional learning and development.

### ***Outcomes of coping for collaboration***

The different coping approaches can be associated with distinct collaborative outcomes. *Either-or* coping frequently results in fragmented practices and reinforced organizational silos, as actors seek to secure their primary interests under pressure. *Both-and* coping supports functional collaboration by maintaining workable balances between competing demands, but often at the cost of ongoing strain and limited innovation.

In contrast, *more-than* coping is associated with more adaptive and resilient forms of collaboration. By engaging with tensions predominantly reflexively rather than seeking to suppress them, SLBs can co-produce solutions that cut across professional and organizational boundaries. Although there may be elements of conflict, the process fosters learning, trust-building, and the gradual reconfiguration of collaborative practices in ways that align with the integrative ambitions of reform.

### ***Theoretical implications for street-level bureaucracy***

The findings contribute to street-level bureaucracy research in three inter-related ways. First, the study extends the analysis of coping beyond interactions with citizens to peer-to-peer collaboration in reform contexts, thereby responding to recent calls to better understand discretion, coping, and collaboration as dynamically intertwined processes. This study integrates different types of tensions with forms of discretion and thus refines existing coping research by demonstrating how professional judgment is exercised in both service delivery and in the negotiation of collaborative arrangements across organizational and jurisdictional boundaries.

Second, the findings advance a relational and realist understanding of discretion by illustrating how SLBs exercise embedded agency when navigating reform-induced tensions. Rather than treating discretion as an individual attribute or a residual category beyond rules, the analysis highlights how discretionary practices are shaped by structural conditions, professional norms, and interactional contexts.

Third, the identification of *either-or*, *both-and*, and *more-than* coping approaches contributes conceptually by clarifying how different ways of

engaging with tensions shape collaborative outcomes. In particular, the *more-than* approach underscores the generative potential of coping, suggesting that collaboration can function as a site of learning and innovation rather than merely enabling coordination. In combination, these insights advance a more nuanced understanding of how reforms are implemented in practice and how SLBs contribute to shaping their outcomes under conditions of complexity.

## Conclusions

We advance SLB theory by explicating how different forms of tension activate specific forms of discretion and patterned coping approaches in reform contexts. While tensions often manifest as negative developments, they can also be understood as dynamic experiences that evolve into learning opportunities through reflection (e.g., Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021). Whether this leads to alignment with or divergence from the reform's intended outcomes largely depends on how professionals cope with these tensions through discretionary practices.

We conclude that discretionary practices, which encompass rule, value, and task discretion shaped by dualism, paradoxes, dialectics, and contradictions, enable professionals to navigate tensions that arise between competing priorities. In particular, the findings highlight that *more-than* coping is a qualitatively distinct mode of discretion, one through which tensions can be managed but also actively transformed into opportunities for professional collaboration. Rather than resolving tensions through rigid approaches, discretion enables SLBs to reconcile opposing demands without compromising service quality. Discretionary practices highlight the importance of dynamic, adaptive responses that support integrated and responsive student welfare services. Importantly, these practices also influence how the agency of children and young people is recognized and fostered in welfare encounters, as professional discretion determines when and how students are considered active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, support. These discretionary practices can also be understood through a realist perspective (Hawkins, 2022) on “professional dealing,” which is deeply embedded in the complexities of day-to-day practices (Noordegraaf & Kuiper, 2022, p. 150). *Either-or* coping tends to reinforce fragmentation, while *both-and* coping sustains professional collaboration under strain, and *more-than* coping enables adaptive and resilient forms of inter-professional collaboration.

As with all studies, this research has certain limitations. While the combination of diverse data sources enhances the reliability of the findings, the material focuses on a Finnish public administration reform and its implications for collaboration among student welfare professionals.

Any generalization of the results should be undertaken with caution owing to national specificities. The integration of multiple datasets provided a multidimensional perspective on tensions and coping practices; however, the analysis was based on textual material rather than, for instance, ethnographic observation of professionals' everyday interactions when engaged in student welfare.

While this study has certain limitations, it also opens avenues for further inquiry. First, our findings could be integrated with studies that examine the *diverse roles* of professionals (e.g., Maijala et al., 2025), particularly within the framework of *public service logic* (Osborne, 2020). Given that many services are co-created and co-produced (Voorberg et al., 2015) in collaborative settings, it is crucial to explore the discretionary practices that professionals employ when navigating their various roles. Such an investigation would complement existing research on coping mechanisms between professionals and citizens (e.g., Tummers et al., 2015) by offering insights into the underlying factors that may lead to unintended outcomes of co-creation (e.g., Engen et al., 2021; Jalonen et al., 2020).

Second, future research could examine how SLBs reconcile with, adapt to, and compromise with tensions through *institutional work* (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For instance, integrating the concepts of selective coupling (Pache & Santos, 2013) and loose coupling (Misangyi, 2016) could provide valuable insights into how SLBs navigate public sector reform. Building on this, it might be useful to investigate how discretionary practices interact with these coupling strategies, which would offer a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that enable SLBs to balance competing institutional demands.

Third, tensions could be examined through *complexity theory* (see, e.g., Jalonen, 2025). Tensions often materialize at the individual level in encounters among SLBs (the micro level). Nevertheless, their causes and effects manifest in organizational-level operations, such as different plans, structures, and management practices (the meso level) and policy objectives and legislative projects framing multidisciplinary collaboration (the macro level). The street level can be perceived as an integral element within "the whole system" (Hupe, 2022, p. 301). At the heart of complexity theory is the idea that development emerges from interactions between actors, which cannot be deduced from the characteristics of individual actors alone. The actors' characteristics alone are unlikely to reveal solutions to enhance professional collaboration, but delving into the relationships between them may do so. The issue involves developing new and useful models of operation while ensuring that effective practices are not jeopardized in the name of development.

Considering the intricate role of SLBs in policy implementation, the fourth potential area for further research could be the concept of *policy entrepreneurship* at the street level (e.g., Cohen & Aviram, 2021).

Such research might explore how SLBs both implement public policy but also actively shape it through innovative practices and applying discretion. This perspective could be extended to examine how SLBs enable and support the agency of young people in co-producing learning and student welfare outcomes. Understanding policy entrepreneurship through the lens of shared agency between SLBs and young people could provide new insights into how discretion contributes to citizen empowerment and participation. Building on the distinction between “discretion as granted” and “discretion as used” (see Hupe, 2022), future research could analyze how policy entrepreneurship manifests as well as the factors that enable or constrain it. Researchers could then parallel Lipsky (1980, p. 12) and explore how professionals might become “street ministers” of student welfare.

In writing this article, the artificial intelligence application Microsoft Copilot supported language editing and enhanced the fluency of the text.

## Funding

This study was funded by The Finnish Work Environment Fund.

## Notes on contributors

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