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Primary School Teachers' Perspectives on the Relationship Between Students' Learning and Work-Related Skills

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Abstract: Primary school teachers play a significant role in preparing students to meet the demands of the 21st century. Balancing the integration of work-related skills into classroom learning while maintaining student motivation presents considerable challenges. This study explored teachers' perceptions of the relationship between student learning and the development of work-related skills through 13 narrative interviews. Data were analysed using phenomenographic and content analyses, revealing three key themes: competence-building, relatedness-focused, and autonomy-related views. Teachers highlighted the importance of developing students' general competencies and cross-contextual skills while fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting a sense of relatedness. Notably, their perceptions were more influenced by past experiences than by current contexts. These findings suggest that teachers recognise the importance of integrating real-world phenomena into classroom learning to prepare students for future challenges. The implications for teacher training include fostering reflective practices to help educators critically examine the influence of personal history on their teaching approaches.

Keywords: teacher perceptions; primary school education; work-related skills; student competencies

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1. Introduction

Education faces numerous contemporary challenges, particularly in terms of aligning with future societal and economic needs (European Council 2019; OECD 2019). The demand for 21st-century skills is increasingly reflected in curricula worldwide, framed in extensive and ambitious terms. This places teachers in a dual role: balancing curricular objectives while addressing students' individual needs.

Teachers play a critical role in fostering student learning and development across all educational levels. They help students acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and resources necessary for daily life and active participation in society (Wentzel 2009). Primary school teachers, as the first key guides in students' educational journeys, are particularly influential in cultivating a positive attitude towards learning and openness to future capabilities (Bower 2021). However, they face challenges in motivating students to engage in tasks that may seem personally irrelevant or require persistence and flexibility, especially when these tasks appear mundane. Such situations test teachers' patience and creativity (Vansteenkiste et al. 2018).

Teachers are thus expected to prepare students for future challenges while fostering engagement and motivation. However, heightened expectations for academic outcomes often increase teacher stress (Timoštšuk et al. 2018), leading to a more controlled classroom environment where curricular and societal expectations hinder student development. Furthermore, the broader context in which teachers operate significantly influences their perceptions and practices (Hase and Blaschke 2022).

To explore primary teachers' perspectives and classroom practices, we adopted self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2017), which posits that individuals are by nature active and engaged (Ryan and Deci 2000). Research on SDT suggests that teachers

can create learning environments that foster student motivation and goal achievement (Ryan and Deci 2009). It also highlights how teachers' personal and external contexts shape their perspectives on students and work (Ryan and DeHaan 2023).

In practice, teachers are not only facilitators of academic content but also mentors in developing work-related skills. These formative experiences promote fundamental social and practical abilities (Paniagua and Istance 2018). Since learning is inherently related to students' interactions with tasks that reflect real-world responsibilities, primary education often introduces students to basic work-related skills (Bower 2021). By work-related skills, we do not refer to formal employment competencies but age-appropriate abilities such as responsibility, perseverance, and collaboration. Examples include completing assignments on time, performing classroom chores, and participating in class or school projects. These activities foster attitudes and competencies that shape students' openness to future roles and responsibilities (Dweck 2006).

However, Ryan and DeHaan (2023) pointed out that while SDT has been applied in primary education research, the alignment between teachers' classroom practices and their understanding of students' readiness for future work-related responsibilities remains underexplored. This gap highlights a critical area of research that this study aims to address.

As the integration of student learning with early work-related skills begins in primary school, our focus is on primary education. Considering the nuanced interplay between teachers' attitudes, beliefs about teaching, and their practices—especially in contexts where national policy shifts demand changes in existing methods (Tangney et al. 2023)—it is essential to examine teachers' narratives about their work. While these shifts are not directly explored in our study, they form part of the background to the problem, as teachers often find themselves in a dual position—balancing the demands of changing policies with their role in fostering foundational skills in students. By *doing* so, we can gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of the relationship between learning and the development of work-related skills (Goodson 1992).

SDT and narrative methodological approaches have previously been used to study various educational contexts, including early school leavers (Pikkarainen et al. 2023), the lived experiences of adolescents (Johnston and Marie 2016), and the motivational factors for becoming a teacher (Holme et al. 2016). While Estonian teachers report having significant autonomy over their teaching content, surpassing the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average, many still feel a strong sense of responsibility for their students' learning outcomes (OECD 2020). However, Erss (2023) highlighted a gap between the autonomy granted by the curriculum and the practical constraints imposed by centralised assessments. This underscores the importance of understanding how teachers perceive their roles in supporting students' learning and development.

Given this context, the aim of our study is to explore teachers' perceptions of the relationship between student learning and the development of work-related skills. To achieve this objective, three research questions were formulated:

1. How do teachers perceive the relationship between student learning and the development of work-related skills?
2. What key influences shape teachers' perspectives?
3. How do teachers describe their approaches to integrating student learning with the development of work-related skills?

2. Theoretical Overview

2.1. Teachers' Perspectives Through the Framework of Self-Determination Theory

Teachers' perspectives on their work significantly influence their teaching practices, engagement with students, and commitment to supporting student development beyond academic outcomes (Watt and Richardson 2008). SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000) offers a valuable framework for exploring these perspectives by focusing on how personal contexts, work conditions, and learning environments support or hinder three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers' need for autonomy is satisfied

when their choices, ideas, and actions in teaching originate from within themselves. Competence is satisfied when teachers feel proficient and effective in their work. Relatedness is achieved when teachers feel connected to colleagues and students (Ryan and Deci 2002).

When these needs are met, teachers experience autonomous motivation (Reeve and Su 2014) and foster autonomy in their students (Roth et al. 2007). Thus, SDT highlights the idea that fulfilling these psychological needs enhances motivation and professional commitment. In educational settings, teachers' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can either support or hinder their engagement with students, ultimately affecting the quality of teaching and its long-term impact on students' potential (Ryan and Deci 2000).

When teachers' needs are satisfied, they are more likely to engage positively with their students, creating a learning environment where students feel valued and motivated to engage with the learning content (Lee and Reeve 2012). Many teachers enter the profession with a strong sense of purpose, driven by a commitment to make a meaningful and lasting impact on students' lives and development (Näkk and Timoštšuk 2021). When teachers experience fulfilment in their roles, they often perceive their influence as extending beyond academic outcomes to shaping students' attitudes and skills for future success (Klassen et al. 2012).

For instance, a narrative study demonstrated that supportive learning environments positively influence teachers' attitudes towards their work (Altan and Lane 2018). In such environments, teachers perceive their students as capable learners and invest additional time and energy in improving teaching quality (Rubie-Davies 2007). Teachers who feel professionally competent also take the time to understand their students and develop meaningful strategies to support their growth (Pianta et al. 2012). These teachers are more likely to recognise their role in shaping students' attitudes towards learning, fostering both immediate and long-term success (Reeve 2009).

However, when teachers feel that their actions are controlled by external forces and their psychological needs are unmet, they may adopt a controlling approach in the classroom, prioritising compliance over fostering independent thought or long-term development in students (Soenens et al. 2012). Such constraints can lead to inner conflicts, as teachers' initial sense of purpose may no longer align with their daily experiences (Taylor et al. 2009). Teachers who feel constrained and under pressure often begin to perceive work-related relationships as sources of stress (Reeve and Su 2014).

A common source of teacher stress is the perception of being held accountable for their students' outcomes (Timoštšuk et al. 2018; Taimalu et al. 2019). Taylor (2023) examined teachers' narratives on accountability and found that while teachers expressed consistent criticism of their circumstances, these experiences shaped their understanding of personal responsibility. Similarly, a recent narrative study of Finnish teachers (Lutovac et al. 2024) identified recurring themes such as constant change and relational challenges, illustrating the pressures faced in today's educational landscape.

These situations may cause teachers to perceive their daily tasks as burdensome, reducing the time and energy they dedicate to supporting students (Vansteenkiste and Ryan 2013). This suggests that when teachers' needs are unmet, they are less able to engage in future-oriented practices that foster student development, as their focus shifts to coping with immediate pressures. Consequently, they have fewer resources—such as time and energy—to invest in their students' long-term growth.

2.2. Classroom Practices Linking Students' Learning and Their Work-Related Skills

In classroom settings, teachers must balance support and control in their practices (Timoštšuk and Näkk 2019). Supportive teachers involve students in meaningful decision making, communicate openly, remain patient, and provide constructive feedback to encourage active participation (Reeve 2009). When teachers' psychological needs are met, they are more likely to foster student autonomy and competence (Vansteenkiste et al. 2019). Supportive practices help students gradually take on greater responsibility as they mature and become more independent (Zimmerman 2002).

Empowered teachers often link classroom learning to broader contexts, such as the home environment, extracurricular activities, and future societal roles (Meece and Eccles 2010). This integration equips students with a versatile skill set, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration, which are essential for developing skills such as participation in classroom projects (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). By connecting academic content to real-life situations, teachers enable students to both better understand the subject matter and lay a foundation for future success (Niemi et al. 2015).

Conversely, teachers facing external pressure may adopt a controlling teaching style, prioritising their agendas over fostering student autonomy (Reeve 2009). Under such conditions, teachers may feel deprived of autonomy, competence, or supportive relationships, leading them to rely on teacher-centred practices instead (Pelletier and Sharp 2009). This approach often limits opportunities for students to make choices, take initiative, engage in discussions, or receive detailed feedback. Instead, these teachers may enforce rigid time limits or use external rewards to manage behaviour (Reeve 2018; Soenens et al. 2012).

Without clear goals, controlling teaching practices can create chaotic and inconsistent learning environments that hinder student development (Aelterman and Vansteenkiste 2023; Reeve 2009). While such teachers may still aspire to support their students' futures, they may lack the tools or training to do so effectively (Haerens et al. 2015). For example, a study in Ireland found that teachers required in-service training to effectively implement new methods; simply providing resources or introducing new techniques proved insufficient for meaningful change at the classroom level (Tangney et al. 2023).

Research grounded in SDT indicates that teachers whose needs are unmet often focus on immediate behaviour management, limiting students' engagement in activities that build responsibility, collaboration, and perseverance (Ryan and Deci 2020). Increased awareness of one's teaching biases and the use of evidence-based instructional strategies can help ensure that teaching practices align with the developmental needs of all students (Hattie 2009).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sample and National Context of the Study

Estonia's education system is recognised for its strong emphasis on learner equality, high academic standards, and innovative use of technology in classrooms (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2021). Primary education in Estonia spans grades 1–6 and serves students aged 7–12 (Republic of Estonia 2010). Teacher autonomy is a key feature of the Estonian education system, which grants educators considerable freedom in selecting classroom practices, designing lesson plans, and adapting the national curriculum to meet students' needs (Erss 2023). This autonomy aims to support teachers' professional growth and enhance their ability to create responsive, student-centred learning environments (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2021).

The sample for this study consisted of 13 primary school teachers, all women, from various regions of Estonia, ensuring diverse representation within the context of the national primary education structure. All participants were employed at public general education schools, reflecting the typical Estonian school setting. The mean age of the participants was 40.2 years (SD = 9.1), ranging from 25 to 50 years, with a mean teaching experience of 16.4 years (SD = 9.7), spanning 1 to 30 years. Of the 13 teachers, 12 had completed a university-level primary school teacher education programme, while one had completed a subject-specific teacher education programme. One teacher worked in a combined class, while the remaining 12 taught homogeneous classes.

3.2. Data Collection and Instruments

This study explored teachers' perceptions of the relationship between students' learning and the development of work-related skills. Data were collected through individual narrative interviews (Goodson and Sikes 2001), which allowed teachers to share their personal stories and perspectives on their daily work and professional growth. Narra-

tives enable teachers to express their views in their own words, ensuring their voices are authentically represented in discussions about educational practices (Goodson 1992). Moreover, narrative interviews offer a comprehensive understanding of teachers' professional contexts, capturing nuances central to understanding their experiences and challenges (Wengraf 2001).

The interview guide was designed to address each research question with open-ended prompts, encouraging teachers to reflect on their experiences and perspectives.

RQ1. Teachers were asked to elaborate on their understanding of students' learning and their roles as facilitators in supporting development. This discussion was introduced chronologically during the working phase of their narratives. To avoid bias, teachers were not explicitly prompted to consider students' future roles or short- or long-term goals.

RQ2. Teachers were invited to reflect on their perceptions of student support and their roles in the process. They were encouraged to discuss key influences on their teaching perspectives, such as memorable teachers, experiences as student teachers, or personal experiences.

RQ3. To explore how teachers approach the relationship between students' learning and the development of work-related skills, follow-up questions were posed. Teachers were asked to elaborate on what they prioritise during lessons, their overall approach to teaching, their strategies for supporting student learning, the aspects they consider important in this process, and how they provide feedback.

The narrative approach enabled us to gather rich, contextually grounded insights into teachers' lived experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how they perceived their roles in fostering students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness in preparation for future roles and responsibilities (Creswell 2015; Rau and Coetzee 2022). By focusing on teachers' personal journeys and their stories of becoming and being teachers, we were also able to explore how their past experiences shaped their current practices.

Teachers were invited to choose their preferred location for the interview, ensuring they felt comfortable and at ease sharing their perspectives in familiar environments. This approach aimed to facilitate open and candid responses while reducing any potential discomfort associated with the interview process.

Interview lengths varied considerably, ranging from 27 min to 2 h 33 min, depending on the depth of the participants' responses. These variations were influenced by the teachers' willingness to elaborate on their answers, share specific details, or reflect on examples, as well as their availability. This flexibility was essential to allow each teacher to engage with the topics at their own pace. While teachers were encouraged to reflect deeply and provide examples, not all participants chose to do so or wished to elaborate further.

At the start of each session, the researcher provided an introduction to the study's background to ensure participants clearly understood the research context. Each participant was given a consent form, which was thoroughly explained before proceeding to the formal interview and starting the audio recording. Before recording began, the researcher confirmed that participants felt comfortable being recorded. While only one participant expressed discomfort once the recording started, they chose not to withdraw from the study. As a solution, the recorder was placed out of sight.

The interview prompts, as previously described, were designed to encourage teachers to reflect on their journey to becoming teachers and to describe their roles in the classroom. Some participants required more guiding questions to elaborate on their responses, while others expressed their views and experiences without providing much detail.

3.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with participants for confirmation. Participants were excluded from the final transcription process only if they had changes to their original narratives. However, none of the participants requested revisions. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 and involved two distinct steps, as detailed below.

3.3.1. Phenomenographic Analysis

In this step, we followed the guidelines for phenomenographic data analysis outlined by Marton (1981, 1986) and Kettunen and Tynjälä (2018) to explore the varying ways in which participating teachers perceived the relationship between students' learning and work-related skills. The analysis involved the following steps:

1. Immersion in the data: We began by thoroughly reading the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the content.
2. Extraction of relevant segments: Segments where teachers discussed the relationship between students' work-related skills and learning were extracted, along with the contextual background of these perceptions as described in the narratives.
3. Grouping of similar conceptions: Similar perceptions were grouped to identify common themes.
4. Contrasting conceptions: Different conceptions were contrasted to highlight qualitative variations in the teachers' perspectives.
5. Refinement of groupings: The groupings were continuously refined through comparison and reflection, culminating in the development of categories of description that captured the varying ways teachers perceived the relationship between students' learning and work-related skills.
6. Construction of the outcome space: Finally, we mapped out the structural relationships among these categories creating an outcome space that illustrated the interconnections between different conceptions.

3.3.2. Content Analysis of Approaches Linking Student Learning and Work-Related Skills

The second step involved conducting a content analysis to explore teachers' approaches to supporting students in learning and developing work-related skills. Given that the study is grounded in SDT, we adopted a deductive approach, feeding the data into pre-established categories derived from the SDT framework: student-supportive, controlling, and chaotic (uncertain) practices.

These categories align with SDT's core principles: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This structured framework enabled us to interpret teachers' behaviours and perspectives in relation to students' skill development and their readiness to take on age-appropriate responsibilities.

Using a deductive approach ensured a comprehensive response to the research questions by employing consistent, theory-based coding structures aligned with key SDT concepts. By systematically applying these categories, we explored how teachers perceive and implement practices that either support or hinder students' autonomy and competence in ways that promote engagement in real-world tasks, such as responsibility, collaboration, and perseverance. This approach aligns with Schreier's (2014) guidelines for qualitative content analysis, which advocate for the use of structured coding frameworks based on theoretical concepts to systematically interpret data. The structured framework enhanced consistency across the analyses, improving both the reliability and depth of interpretation by anchoring the findings within an established theoretical foundation.

4. Results

In this section, we present the results of the study in alignment with the research questions and analytical methods described in the previous sections.

4.1. Teachers' Perceptions of the Relationship Between Students' Learning and Work-Related Skills

The phenomenographic analysis identified three key themes regarding teachers' perceptions: autonomy-related view, competence-building view, and relatedness-focused view.

1. Autonomy-related view: Teachers perceived learning as an opportunity for students to exercise choice and take initiative. They emphasised that fostering autonomy helps

students develop self-management skills critical for future responsibilities, such as independently completing tasks and making informed decisions.

2. Competence-building view: Teachers highlighted the role of experiences in helping students develop skills and gain confidence to prepare for future challenges. Through this lens, fostering confidence was seen as fundamental for equipping students with the abilities needed to tackle real-world challenges.
3. Relatedness-focused view: Teachers highlighted the importance of learning experiences in enabling students to connect with others beyond the school environment. They believed that emphasising relatedness could build students' interpersonal skills, enhancing their capacity to navigate diverse social contexts and fostering a sense of belonging in various communities.

Participants varied in the emphasis they placed on these views. All participants expressed competence-building views, making it the most common perspective. Relatedness-focused views followed in frequency, while autonomy-related views were mentioned the least. In some descriptions, teachers simultaneously expressed two perspectives, such as a combination of competence-building and relatedness-focused views or competence-building and autonomy-related views. Teachers often regarded competence-building and relatedness-focused views as complementary, while autonomy-related views were sometimes described as dependent on the mastery of skills developed through competence-building.

In one teacher's account, all three views were present; however, this was an exception, as autonomy-related views were generally less representative compared to competence-building and relatedness-focused views. Based on these results, we constructed an outcome space to visually map the structural relationships among these categories (Figure 1).

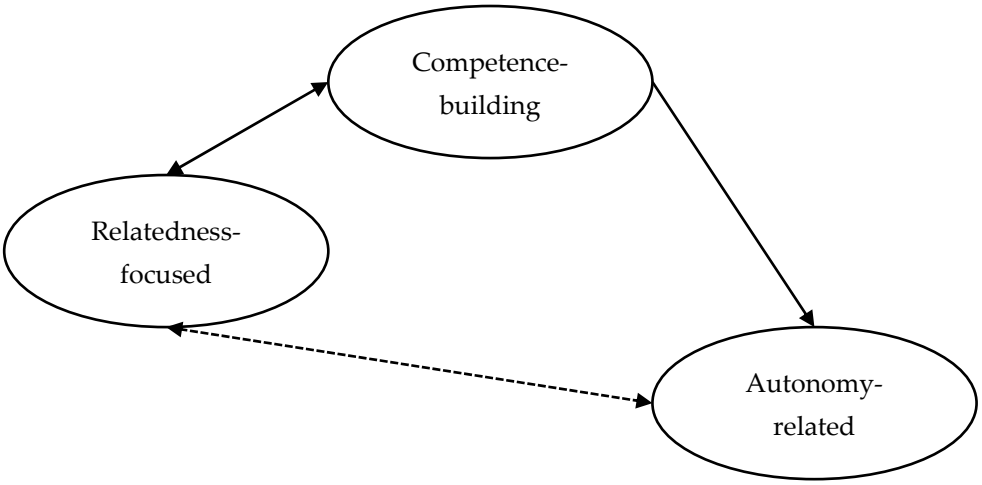


Figure 1. Structural relationships between identified categories.

Under the competence-building view, teachers frequently emphasised skill development in primary school grades, highlighting its importance for both immediate and future student growth. For example, Teacher 3 described how classroom activities contribute to students' learning experiences:

> "Let us say in art lessons that a student is drawing. They are working—it does not matter how the drawing turns out; they have done their work, and I will not give them bad grades. If they worked and tried their best, that is what matters."

Teachers often interpreted classroom work as a precursor to real-world work experiences, where effort is valued, skills are practised, and task completion leads to opportunities for rewarding social interactions. Teacher 4 illustrated this perspective:

> "All of my students knew that I would never scold them for making mistakes. However, I do ask sternly why they are not working because school is a workplace.

> In the 45 min we have, we must complete our tasks. Once that is done—or if the topic allows—we can engage in fun activities such as group work, pair work, or creative exercises. But achieving the goal must come first".

Other teachers with competence-building perspectives also commented on the broader purpose of learning, emphasising skills relevant to students' future lives. Teacher 1 combined competence-building and relatedness-focused views in the following statement:

> "The essence of learning should be approached calmly. It does not just fulfil workbook requirements; it is broader. We learn to be together with others. I learn to be creative and do things with my hands. At school, we sometimes forget the skills necessary for life. Some excel at higher math but do not know how to fry an egg or light a candle. Therefore, coping skills should not be forgotten."

More than half of the teachers expressed relatedness-focused views. These teachers highlighted the importance of out-of-school experiences, such as museum visits, excursions, and field trips, as vital for broadening students' perspectives and fostering deeper connections with their communities. Teacher 5 illustrated this view:

> "A child can learn much more from a trip to the theatre than they might during the entire week. Sometimes, we touch them deeply or give them something that we might not even notice at first glance. I am convinced that we should broaden our children's horizons. I believe that such excursions and hikes enrich their lives."

Teacher 9 further elaborated on the relatedness-focused view, explaining how out-of-school experiences also help students develop practical life skills in real-world contexts. She stated:

> "To cultivate a sense of community, students must step out of their usual environment. And we want this because some children do not have these experiences. For example, they may not know how to behave in a theatre or cinema or navigate public transport. Some only travel by car and have no idea what it is like to use public transportation—like me. We learn together. Sometimes, we even discover that the bus or trolley will not take us where we expect, and we must get off to avoid ending up in the wrong place."

Autonomy-related views were less commonly expressed and often linked with competence-building views rather than discussed as standalone concepts. Teachers with autonomy-related perspectives focused on helping students understand their learning processes so that they could take independent steps towards improvement. For example, Teacher 5 demonstrated a combined approach to autonomy and competence-building:

> "We provided feedback for each task. This is why I consider promptly correcting written work and returning it important, especially for learning something such as the multiplication table, which requires reinforcement. I have always added comments at the end of these quick in-class assessments, noting which multiplication areas still require work. In this way, students knew what they needed to review. To progress steadily, they must understand their challenges."

Similarly, Teacher 3 described an upcoming project that emphasised student autonomy by allowing them to lead activities, thereby supporting their competence development through self-directed tasks:

> "We have an exciting project where students from neighbouring schools will join a four-hour program. Our students will lead workshops, such as a fishmonger examining fish or a witch working with medicinal herbs. The aim is to prepare students to take charge rather than rely on the teacher, though much work remains in gathering materials and guiding them on how to manage them."

As these examples show, teachers perceived that developing skills, building relationships, and eventually fostering autonomy are integral components of primary education.

Teachers often described out-of-school events as opportunities to strengthen relationships and broaden students' perspectives, while autonomy-focused practices were primarily associated with the development of competence and tended to emerge later in the skill-building process. Overall, the teachers suggested that once students have developed essential skills and a sense of belonging, they could be granted greater autonomy to take initiative in their learning.

4.2. Key Influences on Teachers' Perspectives

To address RQ2, we explored the narratives of teachers to uncover the influences that shaped their perspectives on supporting students. Teachers were asked to reflect on key past figures, formative experiences, and insights from their personal lives. Some teachers explicitly noted that a particular individual or experience had significantly shaped their perspectives, while others reflected that their views were shaped more by personal life experiences than their educational journey. Half of the participants related their understanding of student support to their own positive experiences as students, while the other half attributed their perspectives to their experiences as parents, which deepened their understanding of children's development.

Teachers who drew on their experiences as students often highlighted the significant impact of their primary school years and their first teacher. Some participants vividly recalled specific traits of their teacher, such as their appearance and demeanour. For example, Teacher 1 shared:

> "However, my first teacher remains an impressive woman. We girls used to argue, standing in the corridor and saying, 'We have the most beautiful teacher!' We'd argue, 'That's it—my teacher is the most beautiful'. She had long, jet-black hair, and long red nails, and was always very well dressed. And that primary school teacher of mine, the one I truly thought, 'I want to be like her'. Well, we all wanted to be like her because we had the most beautiful teacher, right?"

Other teachers recalled memorable out-of-school experiences, such as field trips and group activities, that fostered a sense of community and belonging. These experiences often inspired their teaching approaches, particularly in creating a sense of unity within their classrooms. Teacher 10 recounted their primary school memories:

> "I went to a very small primary school where there were only a few students across all four grades. With these students, it was almost as if we had private lessons. It was a rural school, and we had great teachers. We got a lot of attention; we went on so many hikes, and we'd take the bus 15 kilometres to go swimming. . . well, everywhere, really. Primary school was wonderful. By the time we finished, it really felt like a family; you knew all the children and their backgrounds."

Some teachers recalled how their first teacher's structured yet warm approach influenced their perception of teaching as a value-based profession. Teacher 9, for example, described how their first teacher's manner of speech, structured lessons, and high expectations shaped their views:

> "She was simply the kind of teacher that made me think, 'I could be like that'. She has clear expectations. In the first lesson, she explained the rules of behaviour in class, what recess should look like, what we would be learning, and how we should grow into responsible and hardworking individuals. She was, in my opinion, a firm believer that leading by example was the best method of teaching. She was a role model not just for children, but also for adults. Even during parent meetings, she would thoroughly explain things in ways parents later remembered—how the teacher imparted values or something adults could reflect on without fully realising it. She often built lessons around proverbs and traditional values."

Teachers' narratives revealed the enduring impact of these early experiences, with many teachers expressing a desire to embody the same values and qualities as their role models.

The other half of the participants, who connected their perspectives to their experiences as parents, often described how parenthood shifted their understanding of children's needs and emotions. Teacher 11 shared how having a child of their own influenced their relationships with students:

> "My relationship with my students has changed. They used to feel closer to me, but now, after having my own child, I find physical contact with students less comfortable. I even had a first-year boy who wanted to hug me five times a day, which became exhausting. I can now better distinguish when a tantrum is genuine or manipulated. The biggest shift is that my focus has changed—work is no longer my primary priority. If everything is fine at home, work becomes easier. However, it is much more difficult to work if there is worry at home."

Other teachers noted that becoming a parent prompted them to rethink approaches to learning, as they observed firsthand how different strategies might influence their children's development. Teacher 8 shared their experience:

> "My child spends little time in kindergarten because she is mostly at home with me. In a recent discussion about her development, the teacher mentioned starting phonics and suggested she lacked phonemic awareness. However, at home, I have observed that she can hear sounds—we have just been teaching them differently. She knows her letters by associating them with the names of people we know, but the kindergarten teacher is unaware of this, leading to redundant work. It feels like a waste of resources. Having both worked as teachers, we see the absurdity of grading systems and question why we have placed her in a system that assigns arbitrary grades."

Teacher 2 described how having children gave them greater empathy and patience, reshaping their approach to foster a more positive learning experience:

> "Having a third child completely changed me. I began to understand the meaning of personal growth. I started to feel what the children thought and felt. I grew emotionally, and this was a major development for me. I stopped forcing my children to do things and let go of all compulsions. Now we take on tasks because we want to learn. School is just a part of life, and I hope most of my students enjoy attending school because I can now shape their experiences positively."

These narratives highlight two primary influences shaping teachers' perspectives on supporting students' learning and development. Some teachers were inspired by early positive experiences with teachers who served as role models, while others were deeply impacted by the eye-opening experiences of parenthood, which helped them better understand children's developmental needs.

4.3. Teachers' Approaches to Relating Students' Learning and Work-Related Skills

This section provides an overview of how teachers' perceptions of the relationship between student learning and the development of work-related skills (explored in Section 4.1) and the key influences shaping these perceptions (explored in Section 4.2) translate into classroom practices. Specifically, it examines how teachers implement strategies and make decisions to support students in developing work-related skills, such as responsibility, collaboration, and perseverance. These approaches were categorised based on SDT into three primary types (student-supportive, controlling, and chaotic (uncertain)), providing a framework to analyse the diversity in teachers' practices and their alignment with student-supportive principles.

Most teachers shared student-supportive examples, demonstrating how they integrated student learning with work-related skills. They emphasised addressing individual

needs, fostering social–emotional skills, offering diverse learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom, and guiding students toward becoming independent learners. However, one teacher expressed uncertainty in their approach, while another focused primarily on teacher-defined, short-term achievements, reflecting a controlling practice.

A recurring theme among student-supportive teachers was the emphasis on addressing individual students' needs, although their approaches varied. Teacher 3, for instance, highlighted the value of detailed, individualised feedback in Grade 1, particularly for parents:

> "This is especially true in the first grade, where a lot of feedback needs to be given so that parents can understand whether more reading practice is needed at home or how their child is progressing with math."

Similarly, Teacher 5 stressed the importance of understanding each student and identifying ways to support them:

> "When children enter first grade, they must be ready to meet their basic needs, such as eating or using the toilet. If they are tired or hungry, that is your priority. Some children seek help openly, but their struggles often manifest through learning or interaction, and you need to notice these signs."

Teacher 9, however, adopted a more collective approach, emphasising the additional responsibilities involved in organising events where students could practice communication skills in real-world situations:

> "I think that primary teachers definitely need to organise events or gatherings where students can learn to communicate and consider each other outside of school. The first small class evening, where they start to take responsibility and begin organising things themselves, is important. Of course, there are also educational trips like museum lessons. We might assume that these would be free, but at the same time, the teacher has to collect money again to go. There are all those class diaries and events that are financially tied, so collecting money can sometimes be inconvenient. But. . . you can manage all of them."

All of the teachers acknowledged that students come from diverse backgrounds when entering Grade 1, underscoring the importance of tailoring their support to meet each student's unique needs.

More than half of the teachers prioritised students' social–emotional development. Several studies have highlighted the importance of managing group dynamics and creating secure, open learning environments. Teacher 2 explained their approach to addressing students' fears:

> "In my opinion, the most important thing at school is that students never come to class out of fear, whether it is fear of themselves or the subject. If I see a student is anxious, I avoid asking them to answer. I call on those who are ready so others can see how it goes. Creating a fear-free classroom environment is a top priority."

Many teachers connected social skills to future work-related contexts, explaining that students must learn to collaborate even with peers they may not like. Teacher 1 explained:

> "No one remembers the grades you received. No one remembers this, but everyone remembers how you treat others. Yes, kindness. We had a story today, and they said it was so sweet that it brought tears to their eyes—that someone can notice such things [what others are going through], because not everyone can."

Additionally, more than half of the teachers recognised the value of providing students with experiences both inside and outside school that mirrored real-world contexts. Within schools, teachers organised events such as winter markets, where students sold handmade goods and simulated a marketplace. External experiences included visits to educational and recreational sites, such as museums, theme parks, and nature reserves. Teacher 6 reflected on the benefits of a visit to a bog and how such experiences supported students:

> "We went to the bog. I must look at every leaf and tree branch. In this sense, it is cool because you can offer all types of things. I enjoy doing that and believe that emotional intelligence is very important. Of course, the academic side is the foundation, but for some reason, I think emotional intelligence is even more important. Smart people can become stuck in emotions, which can turn life in completely different directions."

Teachers who prioritised these experiences noted that without such opportunities, many students might never visit these places and, as a result, might not discover their interests. Teacher 12 emphasised this point:

> "It is one thing to learn about electricity from a book or video, but it is an entirely different experience to visit the workplace of electricians."

Approximately half the teachers also highlighted the importance of developing students' independence and learning habits. They viewed it as their responsibility to introduce tools and skills for independent learning, which could later support students in work-related contexts. Teacher 6 elaborated:

> "Learning, or learning how to learn—if I can put it that way—what does learning mean? What does it look like? This involves listening, writing, and studying quietly. You read something carefully, review the questions, and think about what they meant. We often say, and parents at home also say, 'Start learning'. What, however, does this mean? What does 'start learning' actually entail?"

Another teacher linked these skills to adult challenges by comparing the discipline required to complete online courses with students' learning habits:

> "For students to learn how to work independently and develop study habits, it is essential to have primary teacher support at the beginning. Even adults who start an online course often struggle to finish it. That is why I think that, especially in the early stages, learning how to learn is crucial. Once this skill is acquired, the students can move forward independently."

However, not all teachers share this perspective on long-term skill development. Teacher 13, for instance, expressed uncertainty:

> "I don't know. They worked (laughter). Different types of methods and tools exist. I do not really think about how this happens. I do not know where it originated. It just does."

Another teacher described their focus on short-term achievements, explaining how they provided feedback primarily on task completion and adherence to instructions. They noted that grading creative subjects could be challenging, as it often required explaining grades to parents based on how well a student followed the teacher's guidelines and completed their work within a specified timeframe.

These varied responses suggest that while many teachers prioritise helping students develop work-related skills through real-world learning experiences, others emphasise short-term progress. Most teachers highlighted the importance of building learning habits and fostering a positive environment, linking these to long-term development. However, some expressed uncertainty or focused on immediate academic outcomes.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored teachers' perceptions of the relationship between students' learning and the development of work-related skills. Using SDT (Ryan and Deci 2017) as a framework, we explored how primary school teachers interpret and approach this relationship. Narrative interviews were employed to capture teachers' perspectives, highlighting how personal and external experiences shape their perceptions and teaching methods (Goodson 1992; Hase and Blaschke 2022).

Our results revealed three main themes regarding how teachers perceive student learning and its association with work-related skills. The first theme, competence-building views, emerged prominently in the teachers' narratives. As educators are increasingly tasked with preparing students with skills relevant to the 21st century (OECD 2019), primary school teachers view their role as foundational, focusing on "learning to learn" as a critical skill (Bower 2021). This aligns with Estonia's national guidelines on competence-based education, which emphasise foundational skills and competencies as a preparation for lifelong learning and societal participation (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2014). Teachers' narratives reinforced this perspective, illustrating their commitment to bridging basic competencies with real-world contexts. Our findings extend prior research by underscoring how teachers link foundational competencies to broader societal engagement, highlighting their role in fostering students' long-term preparedness for life and work (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020).

The second theme, relatedness-focused views, was closely tied to the competence-building perspective. Many teachers emphasised the importance of social skills, highlighting their relevance in future work and social settings. Teachers are expected to create safe and inclusive learning environments, as fostering a sense of belonging is essential for students' social–emotional development (Reeve 2009). This perspective aligns with research indicating that strong classroom relationships positively influence both current and future learning (Meece and Eccles 2010). Several teachers described how integrating relatedness with competence-building can help students apply new knowledge and skills across various contexts. Our findings support existing literature, suggesting that social connectedness serves as the foundation for students' ability to transfer learning and skills across different contexts.

Teachers' perceptions also reflected autonomy-related views, though these were relatively limited. This suggests that primary school teachers may prioritise skill-building and creating a supportive learning environment before focusing on fostering autonomy (Aelterman and Vansteenkiste 2023). As one teacher explained, fostering independence requires a step-by-step approach. This indicates that teachers might believe strong guidance is necessary initially, with autonomy gradually introduced as students develop competence (Zimmerman 2002). Such a gradual-release approach aligns with SDT principles, which emphasise that structured support lays the groundwork for future autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2017). Together, these themes underscore the unique role of primary school teachers as foundational guides in students' educational journeys. The majority of participants in this study appeared to recognise this responsibility, viewing themselves not only as facilitators of academic knowledge but also as mentors in fostering critical life skills. This perspective aligns with broader educational goals that emphasise preparing students for lifelong learning and societal participation (European Council 2019; OECD 2019).

Teachers' narratives also revealed how personal experiences significantly shaped their teaching practices, particularly formative experiences as students or parents. These results suggest that personal contexts heavily influence teachers' perspectives, potentially outweighing the impact of their current teaching environments (Creswell 2015; Goodson 1992). Consequently, teachers may replicate methods that were effective for them or their children, sometimes at the expense of addressing diverse student needs or integrating updated, evidence-based practices (Hattie 2009). However, Lutovac et al. (2024) have suggested that teachers' personal stories should be more deeply incorporated into pre- and in-service training programmes, as these experiences can shape daily teaching practices. In addition, providing teachers with new concepts and tools alone is insufficient to drive meaningful changes in education (Tangney et al. 2023), reinforcing the importance of reflective practices that address personal experiences in teacher training.

In this study, teachers' perceptions of student learning and work-related skills translated into their classroom practices in varied ways. While most participants described approaches that emphasised student support and fostering foundational skills, there were indications that strategies they adopted were influenced by their personal experiences

and professional contexts. While some teachers linked this support to the long-term goal of helping students become independent learners, many focused primarily on ensuring students felt supported. These findings align with SDT, which underscores the importance of providing student support (Ryan and Deci 2000, 2002). Moreover, teachers' emphasis on positive engagement with students suggests they must manage their own work-related tasks and stress effectively (Lee and Reeve 2012).

Some teachers linked social–emotional development to students' futures, viewing diverse experiences both inside and outside the classroom as opportunities to expose students to real-world environments and help them discover their interests. This aligns with research emphasising the importance of broadening students' perspectives and linking academic learning to future societal roles (Meece and Eccles 2010; Niemi et al. 2015). Overall, while teachers recognised the significance of fostering independence, not all explicitly connected it to long-term learning goals.

The findings reveal how teachers' perceptions of student learning and the development of work-related skills are closely connected to the personal and professional experiences that shape their views, as well as to the teaching practices they employ in the classroom. For instance, the competence- and relatedness-focused perspectives teachers shared appear to be strongly influenced by their personal experiences, such as memories of impactful teachers or their own parenting experiences. These perspectives, in turn, inform their approaches to fostering foundational skills, social connectedness, and gradual independence in students. Together, these findings highlight how teachers' personal histories and professional contexts intersect to shape their current teaching practices, underscoring the need for reflective practices that help them connect past experiences with present-day teaching approaches.

Although this study reveals important findings, it has some limitations. The relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of teachers. While storytelling provides natural and in-depth responses, a few interviews were shorter, potentially limiting the depth of insights (Rau and Coetzee 2022). Furthermore, the findings may be influenced by the Estonian educational system, cultural context, or local policies, which could restrict their applicability to other educational contexts.

In conclusion, this study contributes new insights into how teachers' personal experiences, both as students and parents, shape their perspectives on teaching and student support. These findings expand existing research by revealing the significant role of personal narratives in shaping teachers' approaches, which has been underexplored in prior studies applying SDT in education. This perspective adds a deeper understanding of how personal contexts interact with professional demands to influence how teachers foster student competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

The results also indicate that training programmes should offer more explicit guidance on relating classroom learning to students' personal and real-world contexts, with a focus on preparing them for future roles and responsibilities. This study highlights the importance of reflective practices in teacher training, which can help educators critically examine how their own experiences shape their teaching, address potential biases, and adopt more inclusive and evidence-based methods. Future research should explore the long-term effects of incorporating teachers' personal narratives into professional development programmes, particularly regarding the cultivation of broader contextual awareness in the classroom.

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