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# Educating for Wicked Problems—Rethinking Social Work Education Through Care Ethics and Complexity

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**Abstract**

This article examines how social work education can prepare students for professional practice in situations characterised by wicked problems, where uncertainty, competing interpretations, and changing circumstances challenge linear models of problem solving. The article integrates Joan Tronto's ethics of care, Annemarie Mol's logic of care, Donald Schön's reflective practitioner, and Gert Biesta's framework of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. The analysis suggests that care-oriented social work in contexts characterised by wicked problems requires professional capabilities such as interpretation, judgement, responsibility, attunement, reflexivity, humility, solidarity, and responsiveness. These professional capabilities are cultivated through the interaction of qualification, which develops professional knowledge and the interpretive resources on which case knowledge depends; socialisation, which fosters participation in professional and collaborative communities; and subjectification, which supports independent judgement and responsible action under conditions of uncertainty. The article argues that preparing students for wicked problems requires educational experiences that expose them to complexity, ambiguity, competing values, and difficult judgements rather than relying solely on the transmission of knowledge and skills. It further suggests that social work education is itself a wicked problem, requiring ongoing reflection and adaptation. The paper concludes that qualification, socialisation, and subjectification must be integrated across all phases of care, and that educators must model the openness, reflexivity, humility, and engagement with complexity expected of future social workers.

**Keywords:** social work education; wicked problems; complexity; care ethics; Tronto; Biesta; welfare services

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## 1. Introduction

According to Tronto (1993, 2015), care encompasses the activities through which people maintain, sustain, and repair their world so that life can be lived as well as possible. Viewed from this perspective, social work education may itself be understood as a form of care, as it prepares future practitioners to provide care and assume responsibility for supporting and responding to the needs of others in ways that contribute to maintaining, sustaining, and repairing their worlds. This raises a common pedagogical question that cuts across differences in educational traditions, policy environments, welfare systems, and institutional arrangements: how can future practitioners be prepared not only to know what to do, but also to exercise professional judgement and responsibility in practice?

As practitioners, social workers have a responsibility to challenge social conditions, policies, and practices that contribute to injustice, exclusion, and oppression while promoting empowerment, liberation, and social change (IFSW 2014, 2018). Social work education must therefore prepare practitioners who can engage critically with social problems and act responsibly in support of social justice. This expectation is reflected in international standards for social work education, which emphasise critical reflection, ethical practice, and responsiveness to social contexts as central educational concerns (IASSW and IFSW 2020). These educational demands become particularly evident when social workers encounter service users experiencing multiple, interconnected problems that cut across different domains of life and require coordinated responses from several services and professions (Houston 2020). Such complex situations highlight the educational challenge of preparing students to respond to social problems in informed, responsible, and context-sensitive ways, a capacity that lies at the core of social work education (Araque and Cholico 2023).

Given social work's distinctive commitments, preparing students for such complexity acquires particular significance within social work education. Yet this raises the question of how such complexity can be made teachable. To prepare students for professional practice, social work education necessarily simplifies a complex reality. Theories, methods, and interventions provide important tools for making practice intelligible and actionable, and educational approaches thus often emphasise how such knowledge can be translated into practice (e.g., Araque and Cholico 2023; p. 30). This reflects a broader tendency within professional education to conceive learning as a process in which knowledge, values, and ethical principles are first acquired and subsequently applied in practice settings (Fook et al. 2000). As a pedagogical strategy, this is important because it provides students with an accessible entry point, enabling them to develop the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate its inherent complexity.

However, while pedagogical simplification serves an important educational purpose, it may also foster a view of practice in which professional action primarily involves selecting appropriate means to achieve desired ends. This understanding is further reinforced by approaches such as evidence-based practice, which assume that professional decisions should be guided by the best available evidence (McNeece and Thyer 2004), although more recent research highlights the importance of interpretation, reflection, and organisational learning in making evidence actionable (Schwartz and Tilling 2023). The appeal of such approaches is also strengthened by broader developments in the governance of welfare services, where increasing emphasis on accountability, performance, and standardisation favours approaches in which problems can be clearly defined, interventions specified, and outcomes evaluated (Mol 2008; Tronto 2015). Consequently, professional situations are often approached as involving identifiable problems, definable goals, and discernible courses of action. Problems are thus understood as capable of being clearly defined and effectively addressed through appropriate professional interventions. This understanding closely resembles what Rittel and Webber (1973) describe as *tame problems*: challenges that can be clearly defined and addressed through the application of established knowledge, procedures, and professional expertise. Such a framing reflects not only particular assumptions about knowledge and expertise but also organisational and political pressures to render uncertainty, ambiguity, and contestation amenable to professional management (Zacka 2017).

The complex challenges encountered in welfare services often take the form of what Rittel and Webber (1973) describe as *wicked problems*. Such problems are characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, competing interpretations, and the absence of agreed-upon solutions and rarely lend themselves to straightforward professional intervention. Examples include child abuse (Devaney and Spratt 2009), social isolation (Hunter et al. 2023), and young

people who are not in employment, education, or training (Thøgersen 2025). Although these issues extend across professional and organisational boundaries, they are a recurring feature of social work practice. Preparing students to engage effectively with such situations therefore requires forms of education that go beyond the application of predefined solutions.

In this article, we argue that, while pedagogical simplification provides an important foundation for learning, it is insufficient for preparing students for care-oriented social work practice under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. To develop this argument, we draw on Tronto's (1993, 2015) ethics of care, Mol's (2008) logic of care, and Schön's (1987) concept of the reflective practitioner. We develop this argument further through the lens of Biesta's (2006) educational theory.

## 2. Wicked Problems in Social Care

Youth social exclusion provides a useful illustration of a wicked problem in social work. Young people who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) have received considerable political and professional attention across Europe. Nevertheless, between 6 and 10 per cent of young people in the Nordic countries continue to be classified as NEET (Højbjerre et al. 2025). This population is highly heterogeneous and includes young people experiencing mental health difficulties, low educational attainment, social isolation, limited social networks, and a range of other social and structural challenges (Stea et al. 2019; Øydgard et al. 2024). Despite extensive policy initiatives and professional efforts, interventions have generally yielded modest outcomes, and evidence regarding effective measures remains limited (Frøyland et al. 2022; Haug et al. 2023; Pesquera Alonso et al. 2022; Simões et al. 2022; Van Vugt 2023).

The challenge of youth social exclusion is not simply that it is difficult to address. More fundamentally, there is no single, agreed understanding of what the problem is. Social exclusion may be interpreted as a consequence of labour market barriers, educational inequalities, mental or physical health difficulties, family circumstances, social marginalisation, structural disadvantage, or a combination of these factors. Each interpretation foregrounds particular causes and points towards particular forms of intervention. Consequently, uncertainty concerns not only how professionals should understand and respond to the situation, but also which objectives should be prioritised and what should count as a successful outcome.

As Goodwin's (1994) concept of professional vision suggests, different professions may understand the same situation in different ways, each highlighting particular aspects while obscuring others. For example, when working with a young person categorised as NEET, one professional may focus on family relationships while another emphasises educational participation or social inclusion. Each perspective may contribute important insights, yet none is sufficient on its own to capture the situation in its entirety.

Further, professional practice does not simply interpret reality but helps shape it, as practitioners engage in an ongoing process in which understanding and action develop together through reflection and intervention (Schön 1983). Professional interventions influence how situations are understood and experienced, thereby shaping the conditions under which subsequent actions are taken. Consequently, professional practice becomes part of the process through which problems are interpreted, negotiated, and defined.

The fact that professional practice becomes part of the process through which problems are interpreted and defined illustrates a defining feature of wicked problems: understandings of situations, goals, and possible responses must remain open to revision. In this sense, the challenge lies not merely in identifying effective solutions, but in determining how the problem should be understood and what goals ought to guide professional action.

As Conklin (2006) argues, addressing wicked problems involves a jagged rather than a linear process of problem solving. Assessment, intervention, evaluation, and reformulation evolve together through ongoing cycles of interpretation, action, reflection, and revision. Solutions are therefore best understood as provisional achievements rather than definitive resolutions. This has important implications for the development of professional capacity, challenging conceptions of practice grounded in the application of specialised knowledge to clearly defined situations.

These conditions raise important questions for social work education. As argued in the introduction, preparing students for wicked problems requires more than equipping them with established knowledge and predefined solutions. It requires cultivating the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility under conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and ongoing change.

## 3. Understanding Social Work as a Practice of Care

The preceding discussion suggests that preparing students for wicked problems requires more than equipping them with established knowledge and predefined solutions. A central question, therefore, is what forms of judgement and professional capability are required when problems, goals, and courses of action remain open to revision. To address this question, we begin by examining the literature on reflective practice, reflexivity, and critical engagement. Within this literature, reflective practice is understood as the capacity to question assumptions, critically examine established forms of knowledge, consider how social contexts shape action, and explore alternative ways of understanding professional situations (Brookfield 1998). Similarly, Houston (2020) identifies reflection, reflexivity, mentalisation, and critical thinking as central capacities for engaging with complexity in social work.

Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner provides a useful account of the forms of judgement required in complex situations. He argues that professional understanding emerges through engagement with situations rather than preceding action. Reflection therefore becomes an integrated part of professional practice, as practitioners continuously interpret situations, evaluate possible responses, and revise their understanding in light of experience. This emphasis on reflection remains central to contemporary social work education, where reflective learning activities are used to support students' development of professional judgement and reflective capacity (Christensen and Wärnsby 2023), an emphasis that aligns with international standards highlighting critical reflection, ethical practice, and responsiveness to social contexts as central educational concerns (IASSW and IFSW 2020).

Schön's account closely parallels Conklin's (2006) description of addressing wicked problems. In both perspectives, understanding emerges through engagement with situations rather than serving as a prior foundation for action, and solutions are best understood as provisional accomplishments rather than definitive resolutions. Professional capability therefore depends on the capacity to interpret complex situations and exercise judgement under conditions of uncertainty. While professional knowledge, evidence, and standardised procedures remain important resources, their use requires interpretation and judgement. This is particularly evident when problems are contested, evolving, or resistant to straightforward solutions. Recent research on evidence-based practice points in the same direction, suggesting that evidence becomes actionable through reflection, interpretation, and organisational learning rather than through direct application alone (Schwartz and Tilling 2023).

As Mintzberg (2024) argues, organisations facing complex challenges depend on forms of productive inefficiency, where activities such as dialogue, reflection, and the exploration of alternative interpretations are not optional extras but necessary conditions for effective

action. The exercise of professional judgement under conditions of uncertainty therefore depends not only on professional capability but also on organisational conditions that support reflection, collaboration, and professional discretion. Reflective supervision, for example, has been identified as an important organisational mechanism for sustaining reflection and professional judgement in social work practice (Ravalier et al. 2023). Yet time pressures, resource constraints, and performance demands often encourage reliance on routines and standardised responses (Lipsky 1980; Zacka 2017). Such tensions sit uneasily with Schön's (1987) conception of the reflective practitioner.

Under such conditions, professional practice requires a source of orientation that extends beyond procedures and routines. Tronto's (1993, 2015) ethics of care offers one way of understanding such orientation. Since social workers engage professionally in activities intended to sustain and improve the conditions of people's lives, care is not merely one aspect of social work but constitutes its central purpose, providing a framework for understanding the demands of professional practice.

Tronto conceptualises care as a process consisting of five interconnected phases: (1) *caring about*, (2) *taking care of*, (3) *care-giving*, (4) *care-receiving*, and (5) *caring with*. Together, these phases encompass (1) recognising needs, (2) assuming responsibility, (3) providing support, (4) responding to how care is experienced, and (5) engaging with broader questions of justice and collective responsibility. In relation to wicked problems, this framework highlights that care is not the application of predefined solutions but an ongoing process of interpretation, judgement, action, and adjustment requiring attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and civic engagement (Maurana et al. 2026).

Mol (2008) develops this perspective through her notion of the *logic of care*. She argues that good care is not primarily a matter of selecting and implementing the correct solution. Rather, care emerges through continuous efforts to align professional knowledge, technologies, interventions, and relationships with the realities of people's lives. Because needs, priorities, and circumstances change over time, care depends on ongoing adaptation rather than the execution of predefined plans. Professional practice is therefore inherently situated, collaborative, and responsive. Good care requires practitioners to draw on both professional knowledge and case knowledge developed through engagement with particular people and contexts.

The ethical challenges of care become particularly apparent in complex situations. As Lundberg (2018) demonstrates, care work frequently involves tensions between safety, autonomy, and dignity. Efforts to protect vulnerable individuals may conflict with their wishes and self-determination, requiring practitioners to exercise judgement in situations where competing values cannot be fully reconciled. From the perspective of the *logic of care* (Mol 2008), such situations require continuous adaptation rather than adherence to fixed plans. Similarly, Tronto's (1993, 2015) phases of care should not be understood as a simple sequence of activities. Practitioners move repeatedly between recognising needs, assuming responsibility, acting, evaluating responses, and reconsidering goals as circumstances evolve. Effective practice therefore depends on judgement, humility, attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that care-oriented social work depends on professional capabilities that extend beyond reflection and judgement to include attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, empathy, and civic engagement. Table 1 synthesises these insights by linking Tronto's phases of care to the forms of professional capability and practice required when social workers engage with wicked problems. This raises a further question: how might social work education support the development of such capabilities for care-oriented social work under conditions of complexity?

**Table 1.** Care, professional capabilities, and professional practice.

| Tronto's Phase | Professional Capabilities | Professional Practice |
|---|---|---|
| Caring about | Interpretation and recognition of needs | Assessing, empathising, and defining needs |
| Taking care of | Responsibility and judgement | Deciding, prioritising, and collaborating |
| Care-giving | Attunement, case knowledge, and professional knowledge | Acting, collaborating, and engaging authentically |
| Care-receiving | Humility, open-mindedness, and sensitivity | Listening, learning, and engaging in reflexivity |
| Caring with | Moral and ethical awareness and solidarity | Partnering, negotiating, and revising practices and arrangements |

## 4. Educating for Wicked Social Work

The preceding discussion suggests that care-oriented social work under conditions of complexity depends on capabilities that cannot be reduced to professional knowledge alone. Understanding how such capabilities are developed requires an educational perspective that extends beyond questions of qualification and technical competence. To address this challenge, we draw on Biesta's (2006) framework of educational purpose.

Biesta distinguishes between three interconnected educational domains: *qualification*, *socialisation*, and *subjectification*. Together, these domains provide a way of understanding how the capabilities and forms of practice identified in Table 1 may be cultivated through social work education. In the following sections, we examine how each domain contributes to preparing students for care-oriented practice under conditions of complexity.

### *4.1. Qualification*

Qualification concerns the development of the knowledge, skills, and capabilities required for professional practice (Biesta 2006). Because these capacities are exercised within organisational and institutional arrangements that shape how care is organised and enacted (Lipsky 1980; Mol 2008; Tronto 2015; Zacka 2017), qualification must also prepare students for the contexts within which professional judgement is exercised. As contemporary welfare services are increasingly characterised by coordination across organisational and professional boundaries (Head and Alford 2015), professional qualification must prepare students to use knowledge as a basis for interpretation, judgement, and responsible action in organisational and interprofessional contexts.

As argued in Section 2, wicked problems require forms of judgement that extend beyond the application of predefined solutions. Professional qualification must therefore develop the capacity to recognise how alternative courses of action may prioritise different needs, responsibilities, and values. This emphasis on judgement in context resonates with moral particularism, which holds that sound judgement cannot be determined through the application of universal principles alone but requires attention to the particular features of each situation (Dancy 2004). Similar concerns are reflected in social work approaches that emphasise situated ethical judgement and responsiveness to context (cf. Banks 2021). From a care perspective, such judgement is required throughout the process of recognising needs, assuming responsibility, acting, and responding to how care is received. Tronto's (1993, 2015) phases of care therefore provide a useful framework for understanding how professional qualification contributes to the development of care-oriented capabilities.

Viewed through Tronto's framework, qualification should contribute to all phases of care by developing the knowledge and interpretive resources required for care-oriented practice. In relation to *caring about*, qualification should enable students to recognise and interpret needs and to develop informed understandings of service users' circumstances. In relation to *taking care of* and care-giving, qualification should develop knowledge of professional responsibilities, welfare systems, methods, and interventions that support informed and accountable action. In relation to *care-receiving* and caring with, qualification should develop knowledge of evaluation, participation, collaboration, and social justice that enables practitioners to learn from experience and engage constructively with others. Qualification should therefore enable students to move between recognising needs, assuming responsibility, acting knowledgeably, learning from experience, and engaging constructively with others under conditions of complexity.

The knowledge developed through qualification provides an important foundation for attunement, enabling practitioners to recognise and respond sensitively to service users' emotions, needs, and experiences. In turn, attunement can foster trust, strengthen relationships, and support more effective interventions and outcomes. However, knowledge alone is insufficient. Qualification must also prepare students to develop case knowledge in professional practice, which emerges through engagement with the particular histories, relationships, experiences, and circumstances that shape individual situations. Empathy constitutes an important resource in the development of such case knowledge.

Empathy can be taught (Englander 2014; Rockwell et al. 2019; Spiro 1992), is highly valued by both social workers and service users (Engelberg and Limbach-Reich 2015; Gerdes and Segal 2009), and plays a crucial role in establishing effective helping relationships (Shulman 2016). As an other-oriented practice, empathy supports the development of case knowledge by enabling practitioners to understand how situations are experienced by those receiving support. This is particularly important when addressing wicked problems, where professional judgement depends on attentiveness to multiple perspectives and competing interpretations. By fostering deeper insight into service users' experiences and the experiences of others involved in care and support, empathy contributes to more nuanced understandings of need, more responsive professional judgement, and care practices that uphold dignity and participation. Empathy is therefore not merely an interpersonal skill but a moral resource that supports care-oriented social work practice.

Taken together, qualification provides an essential foundation for engaging with wicked problems through the development of professional knowledge and the interpretive resources upon which case knowledge depends. However, qualification alone is insufficient. Preparing students for situations in which values, goals, and interpretations remain contested requires attention not only to qualification, but also to the educational domains of socialisation and subjectification.

### *4.2. Socialisation*

Socialisation concerns how education introduces students to professional traditions, values, norms, and practices (Biesta 2006). Through this process, students become members of professional communities and develop the interpretive frameworks and dispositions that shape how professional knowledge is understood and enacted in practice. In social work education, socialisation occurs through classroom teaching, interactions with educators and peers, and practice placements, where students participate in professional cultures and observe how social workers enact professional responsibilities in everyday practice.

In this process, students are introduced to the professional communities they will enter as practitioners, together with the shared languages, values, traditions, and ways of interpreting situations that help professionals make sense of complexity, coordinate

their actions, and learn across professional boundaries (Wenger 1998; Wenger and Snyder 2000; Wenger et al. 2023). The educational value of such communities is also evident in social work, where communities of practice have been found to support learning, practice development, and organisational change (Boetto et al. 2022).

At the same time, the very traditions and interpretive frameworks that make professional communities valuable may also constrain professional action. Professional communities shape what practitioners notice, how situations are defined, what forms of knowledge are regarded as legitimate, and which responses appear appropriate (Wenger 1998, 2000). As discussed earlier, different professions may interpret the same situation in different ways and prioritise different goals and interventions. In the context of wicked problems, where multiple interpretations coexist and no single perspective can claim complete authority, strong identification with a particular professional framework may make alternative perspectives more difficult to recognise, appreciate, and engage with. Under such conditions, commitments to dignity, participation, inclusion, and social justice provide important points of orientation when professionals encounter uncertainty and competing demands (Tronto 2013). These commitments may also help guard against reducing complex social situations to the characteristics of individual service users, thereby resisting tendencies to locate wickedness in people rather than in the situations they face.

The capacities associated with socialisation emerge through interaction with others. The values and dispositions required for practice are communicated not only through the formal curriculum but also through the ways educators engage with students. By modelling empathy, attentiveness, collaboration, and responsiveness, educators demonstrate how care is enacted in practice. Social work education therefore becomes more than a process of transmitting knowledge and skills; it is itself a caring practice through which students experience, interpret, and learn how professional values are embodied in everyday interactions and relationships.

Through collaborative work on complex cases, students encounter different perspectives, negotiate competing interpretations, and experience the challenges of communication, coordination, disagreement, and shared responsibility. Communities of practice can provide important settings for such learning across professional and organisational boundaries (Boetto et al. 2022; Wenger et al. 2023). Such experiences help students recognise both the value and the limits of their own professional assumptions, while also developing the capacity to engage constructively with alternative perspectives. Socialisation thus involves learning not only how to become a member of a profession but also how to participate in the relationships through which care is accomplished.

Taken together, socialisation prepares students to participate in the professional and collaborative relationships through which care is accomplished. Yet participation in professional communities alone is insufficient when values conflict, interpretations remain contested, and no established norm provides a definitive course of action. Such circumstances require practitioners to exercise independent judgement and assume responsibility for their actions, directing attention to the educational domain of subjectification.

### *4.3. Subjectification*

Subjectification concerns how education supports students in becoming unique and responsible subjects, capable of exercising independent judgement (Biesta 2006). It refers to the capacity to act and judge independently, including the ability to take positions that may challenge or depart from the knowledge, norms, and expectations acquired through processes of qualification and socialisation. In social work education, this involves developing critical thinking and critical reflection: the capacity to question assumptions, evaluate competing perspectives, and critically examine established knowledge and practice (Reid et al. 2024). Educational experiences may also broaden students' understanding of themselves

and others, supporting the development of empathic capacities and greater awareness of how personal assumptions shape professional judgement (Stokken et al. 2024, 2025). Subjectification therefore concerns students' capacity to exercise independent judgement when established knowledge, norms, and expectations no longer provide sufficient guidance.

Subjectification is particularly important in social work education because social workers must exercise critical judgement when policies, organisational demands, professional norms, and service users' interests conflict. As Zacka (2017) argues, frontline practitioners often work under pressures that can foster dispositions towards excessive caregiving, indifference, or procedural rigidity. Professional practice therefore requires both the capacity to resist such tendencies when they undermine the needs, rights, or dignity of others and the flexibility to move between different roles and responsibilities in response to the demands of a situation. Subjectification thus concerns students' capacity to exercise independent judgement when established roles, routines, and expectations no longer provide sufficient guidance.

Such judgement is not merely a cognitive accomplishment. It involves taking responsibility for one's judgements and actions, particularly when this requires questioning dominant assumptions, challenging established practices, or resisting expectations that conflict with professional and ethical commitments. This includes recognising how prejudice, discrimination, and both implicit and explicit biases contribute to the reproduction of inequality, as well as learning to translate commitments to social justice into practice (Enrile et al. 2023; Araque and Cholico 2023). It also requires attention to outcomes rather than merely outputs. As Devaney and Spratt (2009) argue, professional action should ultimately be judged by its consequences for service users rather than by procedural compliance. Critical thinking is therefore, as Hunter et al. (2023) argues, a prerequisite for ethical, responsible, and effective social work practice.

If critical thinking is to contribute to social justice, it must involve more than recognising injustice. It must also support action in situations where competing values and interests are at stake. This is particularly important in democratic societies, where questions of responsibility, participation, power, and collective decision-making are central to the pursuit of justice (Tronto 2013, 2015).

From an educational perspective, subjectification is reflected in students' developing capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility when questions of participation, power, and justice are at stake. Tronto's (1993, 2013, 2015) phases of care help illuminate how these capacities are expressed in practice: openness to alternative understandings of needs and problems (*caring about*), responsibility and judgement amid competing values (*taking care of*), sensitivity and adaptation to particular situations (*care-giving*), humility and reflexivity in response to feedback (*care-receiving*), and solidarity and commitment to justice (*caring with*). Taken together, these capacities are essential when practitioners encounter organisational and political pressures that conflict with the needs, rights, and interests of those they seek to support.

From the perspective of subjectification, social work education must prepare students to resist organisational and political pressures that may shift practitioners' loyalties towards the system rather than the people it is intended to serve. Without this capacity, practitioners may be more likely to overlook or avoid the dilemmas, tensions, and conflicts inherent in practice (cf. Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa 2022). Resisting such pressures also requires social workers to act in solidarity with others, engage constructively with competing interests and perspectives, and contribute to the ongoing revision of the practices and social arrangements that shape people's lives.

The importance of cultivating such capacities becomes particularly evident when considering the educational challenge posed by wicked problems. Although social work ed-

ucation places considerable emphasis on developing value-driven professionals grounded in ethical frameworks (Reamer 2024), ethical frameworks alone cannot determine appropriate courses of action in advance. Rather, they must be interpreted and enacted in relation to the particularities of each situation. Under such conditions, reflexivity and independent judgement become central features of professional practice. The cultivation of these capacities is the central task of subjectification.

The extent to which university systems facilitate subjectification varies across educational cultures. Whereas some systems predominantly emphasise qualification through the assessment of subject mastery and technical competence, others place greater value on students' capacity for independent judgement and critical reflection. The Norwegian university grading scale (NTNU 2026) is notable for making this dimension unusually explicit, defining performance at each grade level in terms of the student's judgement and degree of independent thinking. Similar qualities are valued in higher education systems elsewhere, including Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where institutional assessment criteria frequently emphasise independent judgement, critical thinking, and the capacity to develop and defend one's own position.

Regardless of these variations, subjectification should remain a defining feature of social work education. Preparing students for wicked problems therefore requires educational opportunities to take positions, justify judgements, and reflect on the consequences of action in situations where neither knowledge, professional norms, nor ethical principles determine a single correct response. Fostering such capacities is thus a central task of subjectification in social work education.

## 5. Implications for Social Work Education

The preceding analysis suggests that preparing students for wicked problems requires educational approaches that extend beyond the acquisition and application of professional knowledge. Viewed through Biesta's (2006) educational domains and Tronto's (1993, 2015) phases of care, this requires educational programmes that cultivate the capabilities required for care-oriented practice under conditions of complexity.

From the perspective of *qualification*, social work education should provide students with a strong foundation in social work knowledge, including theory, law, ethics, welfare systems, intervention methods, professional responsibilities, and research. Such knowledge remains indispensable, not because it provides ready-made solutions, but because it enables practitioners to recognise relevant dimensions of a situation, evaluate competing interpretations, anticipate possible consequences, and make informed judgements under conditions of uncertainty. Qualification should therefore provide opportunities for sustained engagement with complex cases that require students to work with ambiguity, incomplete knowledge, and multiple possible courses of action.

An equally important aspect of qualification is the development of case knowledge. Educational programmes should therefore create opportunities for students to engage closely with complex and evolving cases and to move between general knowledge and the particular circumstances, relationships, and experiences that shape individual situations. Such learning helps students develop the interpretive capacities required when professional judgement depends on understanding the particularities of a situation rather than the application of established categories alone.

From the perspective of *socialisation*, social work education should help students develop the collaborative capacities required for engaging with wicked problems. Because such problems rarely admit a single authoritative interpretation, practitioners must learn to work with multiple forms of knowledge, negotiate competing perspectives, and participate in collective processes of judgement. Educational programmes should therefore create

learning environments in which care-oriented forms of collaboration are practised rather than simply discussed. This requires students to work together on complex cases, negotiate disagreement, and respond constructively to uncertainty.

At the same time, collaboration should not be understood as implying equal participation in all matters. Different actors possess different forms of expertise, responsibility, and knowledge, and may be affected by a situation in different ways. Students therefore need to learn how to assess who should be involved in a particular process, for what purpose, and to what extent. Learning to facilitate meaningful participation is particularly important when addressing problems in which questions of responsibility, legitimacy, and representation are contested.

From the perspective of *subjectification*, social work education should create opportunities for students to exercise judgement and assume responsibility in situations where knowledge, procedures, professional norms, and ethical principles do not determine a single correct course of action. Educational activities should therefore expose students to uncertainty, conflicting values, competing interpretations, and difficult decisions. Students should be expected to justify their judgements, examine their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and reflect on the consequences of professional action. They should also learn to revise their understandings in light of new information, criticism, and feedback from those affected by their decisions.

Particular attention should be given to reflexivity. Students should learn to examine how their assumptions, values, relationships, and decisions shape professional practice and its consequences. Such capacities are essential when practitioners must act despite uncertainty, ambiguity, and the absence of definitive solutions. For this reason, reflexivity cannot be reduced to any one educational domain but depends on the interplay of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification.

In preparing students for wicked problems, social work education should prioritise the development of the capabilities required for care-oriented practice. The capabilities required for care-oriented practice emerge through the interplay of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Preparing students for wicked problems therefore requires educational experiences that cultivate these capacities through sustained engagement with complexity, uncertainty, and contestation.

Table 2 synthesises the preceding discussion by showing how the capacities associated with each phase of care (Tronto 1993, 2015) can be cultivated through processes of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification (Biesta 2006). In doing so, it illustrates how the capabilities required for care-oriented practice emerge through the interaction of these educational domains.

**Table 2.** Educating for wicked problems through Tronto's phases of care and Biesta's educational domains.

| Phase of Care | Qualification | Socialisation | Subjectification |
|---|---|---|---|
| Caring about | Knowledge of needs, assessment, and social problems | Learning how needs are recognised and interpreted in practice | Openness to alternative and competing understandings of needs and problems |
| Taking care of | Knowledge of responsibilities, services, and professional roles | Learning how responsibility is negotiated and shared | Exercising judgement amid conflicting responsibilities, values, and interests |
| Care-giving | Knowledge of methods, interventions, and professional practice | Learning how care is enacted in relationships with others | Adapting actions to uncertainty, particular situations, and changing circumstances |
| Care-receiving | Knowledge of evaluation, feedback, and reflection | Learning to attend and respond to feedback | Reflexivity, humility, and willingness to revise judgements |
| Caring with | Knowledge of participation, collaboration, and social justice | Learning to work with others in professional and community settings | Acting in solidarity and taking responsibility for collective responses to complex social problems |

## 6. Conclusions

A central implication of Biesta's (2006) framework is that qualification, socialisation, and subjectification should be understood as intertwined dimensions of educational practice rather than as separate educational objectives. Preparing students for professional engagement with wicked problems therefore requires educational practices that simultaneously support the development of knowledge, participation, and responsible agency. Such practices must help students develop professional and case knowledge, work across professional boundaries, and exercise judgement when neither knowledge nor professional norms provide definitive guidance.

There is, however, a further implication of the argument developed in this article. Preparing students to engage with wicked problems is itself a wicked problem. Social work education must balance competing educational purposes while responding to changing societal expectations, professional requirements, and circumstances that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. Rather than seeking definitive pedagogical solutions, educators may therefore need to embrace experimentation, reflexivity, feedback, and continuous revision. The question is not whether social work education can resolve the challenge of preparing students for wicked problems, but how it can engage productively with the uncertainties that such preparation inevitably entails.

Our assessment of students' responses to an examination task on wicked problems revealed that the question had inadvertently encouraged idealised and theoretical responses. Rather than assessing students' capacity to navigate uncertainty, competing interpretations, and difficult judgements, we had largely assessed their ability to reason about tame problems. The experience highlighted how difficult it is to design educational activities that engage students with uncertainty, ambiguity, and competing interpretations without simultaneously reducing them to more manageable forms.

Seen in this light, Antonovsky's (1987) concept of a *sense of coherence* offers a useful way of understanding the challenge of preparing students for wicked problems. While uncertainty and complexity cannot be eliminated, they may become more manageable when students are able to understand situations, identify resources for action, and experience their efforts as meaningful. Qualification contributes to *comprehensibility* by providing conceptual and professional resources for understanding complex situations. Socialisation contributes to *manageability* by connecting students to professional communities and collaborative practices. Subjectification contributes to *meaningfulness* by fostering responsibility, commitment, and purpose in situations where uncertainty cannot be resolved.

The value of social work education therefore lies not in reducing engagement with wicked problems to a set of techniques or procedures, but in preparing students to engage with them responsibly through qualification, socialisation, and, crucially, subjectification. This places a particular responsibility on educators. If students are to become professionals capable of exercising judgement under conditions of uncertainty, educators must create opportunities for them to engage with complexity, disagreement, and ambiguity rather than merely learning about them. In this sense, preparing students for wicked problems requires educators not only to teach about uncertainty but also to model a willingness to work with it.

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