

Constructing collaboration: How communities of practice shape interprofessional learning in education and social work programmes in higher education

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Abstract

This article focuses on how higher education in four degree programmes engages in collaboration within a context where contemporary welfare and education systems presuppose interprofessional collaboration. The aim is to analyse how collaboration is conceptualised, enacted, and becomes embedded in the programmes, and how interprofessional learning (IPL) is oriented in relation to higher education's role in sustaining a democratic and sustainable society. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews with program coordinators. The communities of practice (CoP) and democracy perspectives conceptualise collaboration and IPL as social practices and democratic processes. The analysis shows that collaboration in higher education is divergently conceptualised, indicating the absence of a shared conceptual basis, enacted in different ways, and serves distinct professional functions. The opportunities for IPL vary considerably. Some programmes integrate structured collaborative activities, while others rely on traditional teaching or postpone collaboration until professional practice. The embedding of collaboration in programmes signals democratic potential, yet requires alignment with programme visions, professional identities, and institutional structures that enable communication, autonomy, and shared responsibility for a sustainable democratic welfare society.

Keywords: collaboration; communities of practice (CoP); democratic welfare society; higher education; interprofessional learning (IPL)

Received 31 December 2025; revised version received 28 March 2026; accepted 15 April 2026. Corresponding author: Charlotta Pettersson, Örebro University, Sweden (charlotta.pettersson@oru.se)

Introduction

Higher education is increasingly expected to prepare future professionals to face welfare-related challenges that require interprofessional collaboration. These

expectations have been reinforced by recent policy and legislative reforms. Sweden is a relevant context in this regard. It has well-established social welfare structures (Esping-Andersen, 1993; Kangas & Kvist, 2018), with a long history of collaborative practices, while the education and welfare sectors are undergoing significant changes.

Revised policy documents and legislation governing teacher education, special needs education, and social work programmes emphasise, to varying degrees, the need for collaboration across professional boundaries (Dir. 2025:93; SFS 2022:1315; SFS 2025:400). Collaboration is also a fundamental component of education, social work, and the health-care counselling profession (Almendingen et al., 2021; Kallio et al., 2023; Wan et al., 2024). The Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) stipulates that higher education should contribute to sustainable development and promote social, economic, and ecological welfare. UNESCO (2017) identifies competencies such as collaboration, systems thinking, and critical reflection as central to addressing future societal challenges. National degree ordinances further specify that professional programmes in education and social work should develop students' collaborative competence (SFS 2017:1111). Particularly in professional fields, higher education has a responsibility not only to develop students' competences but also to support their personal formation and their capacity to participate in democratic life (Biesta, 2012).

Research on *interprofessional learning* (IPL) has primarily been conducted within medicine and health care, where interprofessional education is often justified in terms of patient safety and quality of care (Çınar Tanrıverdi et al., 2025). The concepts of IPL, *interprofessional collaboration* (IPC), and *interprofessional education* (IPE), inspired by Barr et al. (2008) and the World Health Organization (2010), describe learning and collaboration across professional boundaries based on the assumption that individuals learn with, from, and about one another. Previous studies have shown that IPL can strengthen students' understanding of their roles as well as their communication and collaboration skills (Aladwani et al., 2025; Homeyer et al., 2018; Karlsson et al., 2024; Patel et al., 2025). However, research also highlights organisational and cultural challenges in interprofessional work (Hall, 2005; Kvarnström, 2008; Wei et al., 2022). Common pedagogical strategies include simulation-based teaching, e-learning, and problem-based learning (Aldriwesh et al., 2022). IPL is increasingly emphasised in other professional fields, including social work, teacher education, and therapy-related disciplines (Amato et al., 2020). Despite these developments, research within education and welfare remains comparatively limited (Amato et al., 2020; Garnweidner-Holme & Almendingen, 2022; Testa & Renwick, 2020). Existing studies primarily address student and teacher perspectives and specific learning activities (Bruce et al., 2025; Jung et al., 2020; Kallio et al., 2023). There is limited knowledge about how collaboration is conceptualised, organised, and positioned at the programme level.

This constitutes a first research gap: the lack of analyses drawing on *communities of Practice* (CoP) theory (Wenger, 1998) to examine how degree programmes shape collaboration and interprofessional learning at the institutional level. A second research gap concerns the absence of democratic and normatively oriented analyses in IPL research. Studies have predominantly focused on efficiency, role clarity, and professional boundaries, while questions of democracy, participation, and power have received little attention.

Integrating Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective with CoP theory (Wenger, 1998) allows IPL to be examined as both a social and a democratic practice. The theoretical integration contributes to a more nuanced understanding of participation, communication, and shared responsibility in professional education, an area that remains largely unexplored in international research. The Swedish context offers a Nordic perspective that remains underrepresented in international IPL research. Characterised by a strong public welfare system, high levels of societal trust, and a close linkage between education, professional practice, and democracy (Kangas & Kvist, 2018) this context contrasts with the predominantly Anglo-Saxon health and social care settings. Moreover, Swedish legislation and policy explicitly emphasise collaboration as a professional competence, positioning the study as relevant for comparative research and theoretical development.

Against this background, the study aims to examine how collaboration is conceptualised, how it is enacted, and how it becomes embedded within four degree programmes in Swedish higher education: teacher education (TE), special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), social work (SW), and health-care counselling (HCC). Drawing on CoP theory (Wenger, 1998) and the work of Dewey (1916), the study is guided by two research questions: *(1) How is collaboration conceptualised in the communities of practice of the four programmes? (2) What trajectories does interprofessional learning take in relation to higher education's role in sustaining a democratic and sustainable society?*

Theoretical framework

By combining Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice with Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective, the study examines collaboration and interprofessional learning as both social practices and democratically significant processes. Collaboration can further be understood as a *boundary object* (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that is, as sufficiently flexible to accommodate different meanings across social worlds while maintaining enough stability to enable coordination. Interprofessional learning, as emphasised by Barr et al. (2008), is when professionals learn with, from, and about one another. This enables an

analysis of how these practices are coordinated across different professional, institutional, and educational contexts. The approach provides a deeper understanding of how collaboration is organised within and across programmes, the values that are upheld, and the democratic implications of these practices.

The theory of CoP provides an analytical framework for understanding how social learning emerges in specific contexts and how knowledge develops through participation in shared practice. This approach has proved productive in research on interprofessional education (Barr, 2013). The CoP framework centres on three interdependent concepts: *domain*, *practice*, and *community*. Domain refers to the shared area of knowledge that gives a practice its purpose, meaning, and legitimacy: ‘a shared domain of interest [...] and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.2). Practice captures how this knowledge area is enacted in course activities, policy documents, work-integrated learning, teaching formats, language use, and routines: ‘shared historical and social resources [...] sustaining mutual engagement in action’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.5). Community describes the relationships and interactions through which shared interests are maintained, knowledge is negotiated, and social belonging is established: ‘members engage in joint activities [...] and build relationships that enable them to learn from each other’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.2). Together, these concepts provide a structured account of how social learning and collaboration evolve within a practice.

However, CoP pays only limited attention to the normative, value-based, and democratic dimensions that shape social practices. To address this gap, the study incorporates Dewey’s (1916) conception of democracy, which offers an understanding of democracy as both a lived social practice and an ethical ideal grounded in participation, communication, and mutual growth. Dewey’s perspective facilitates analysis not only of how communities of practice function, but also of the qualities of participation, relational conditions, and democratic values that shape, enable, or constrain collaboration and interprofessional learning. Dewey draws attention to issues of power, inclusion, and exclusion, and to the question of whose experiences and competencies are legitimised within shared practice dimensions not explicitly addressed in CoP theory.

Drawing on Dewey’s contributions, the analysis conceptualises collaboration as a democratic practice rather than merely an organisational or relational mechanism and examines its democratic consequences. Using Dewey allows for a deeper understanding of how programme structures and practices may support the development of social responsibility, communicative competence, and reciprocity, dimensions that are viewed as central to democratic life. By conceptualising collaboration as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989), collaboration remains flexible enough to hold different meanings across

communities of practice, yet stable enough to allow joint work across programmes. The meanings, purposes, directions, and forms of resistance associated with collaboration arise within each community and become visible in encounters between differing professional logics and interests. In this study, direction refers to the agendas, goals, and conditions that shape collaboration, and is analysed using the concepts of domain, practice, and community. The concept thus provides an analytical lens for examining how collaboration is shaped in relation to different practices and contexts (Leigh Star, 2010; Star & Griesemer, 1989; Wenger, 1998).

By integrating CoP (Wenger, 1998) with Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective, the study analyses collaboration and interprofessional learning as both social practices and democratic processes. This combined theoretical perspective is applied to how joint work is organised, which values are upheld, and the democratic implications that follow.

Method

Research design and context

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design, using semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The design was chosen to address the study's aims to examine how collaborations and IPL are conceptualised, enacted, and embedded in four degree programmes in Swedish higher education: the subject teacher (ST) programme, the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) programme, the social work (SW) programme, and the health-care counselling (HCC) programme.

The four programmes were selected because they have experienced an increased demand for collaboration with other professions, particularly in relation to pupils' education, clients in vulnerable situations, and the maintenance of the welfare state. The HCC programme's profession also functions as an external partner for schools, particularly regarding child and adolescent psychiatry and habilitation services, which is relevant to understanding the collaborative interfaces between the education and welfare sectors.

The ST programme comprises 300 ECTS and includes an educational science core course, work-integrated learning in the form of a school-based practicum, and two subject areas. It is primarily an undergraduate programme, though with some advanced-level courses. The SENCO programme is a postgraduate qualification for preschool and school teachers, requiring at least three years of professional experience. It comprises 90 ECTS at the master's level and focuses on special needs education at individual, group, and organisational levels, primarily within school settings. The SW programme provides a basic professional qualification and comprises 210 ECTS, including 30 ECTS on advanced-level

courses and one term of work-integrated learning in the form of field placements. The programme is offered at nineteen universities. All were invited to participate in the study, and nine agreed to do so. The HCC programme is a postgraduate specialisation in Sweden, as eligibility requires completion of a degree in social work. It comprises 60 ECTS at master's level and targets qualified social workers with at least one year of professional experience. The programme focuses on psychosocial support for clients and their relatives and includes work-integrated learning in the form of field placements in social work within health care.

Participants

The study was conducted at 21 higher education institutions, and a total of 30 programme coordinators participated, of whom 10 were from ST, 6 from SENCO, 9 from SW, and 5 from HCC. Participants were recruited through a strategic selection process. Subject teacher education (ST) is offered at 27 universities in Sweden, of which 20 were invited to participate in the study, and 10 agreed to do so. The SENCO programme is offered at 9 institutions, all of which were invited, with 6 agreeing to participate. Social work (SW) is offered at 19 universities, all of which were invited, and 9 agreed to participate. The HCC programme is offered at 7 institutions, of which 5 were invited and all agreed to participate. Programme coordinators were selected because they occupy central positions in relation to programme design, coordination, and implementation, and thus have insight into how collaboration and IPL are articulated and organised at the programme level. Their roles included responsibility for coordinating courses within the programme, ensuring the quality and content of the education, and, in some cases, managerial tasks. Managerial responsibilities as such were not addressed in the interviews. All interviewees had teaching experience within their respective programmes. Most had either completed the programme themselves or conducted research in the relevant disciplinary field. Many were relatively new to their positions. To maintain consistency, the term programme coordinator is used for all interviewees, regardless of their formal title at each institution.

Table 1. *Interviews with programme coordinators*

Programs	Number of Interviews
Subject Teacher (ST)	10
Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)	6
Social Work (SW)	9
Health-Care Counselling (HCC)	5

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to enable the programme coordinators to describe and reflect on collaboration in education in their own words, while giving the interviewer the flexibility to ask follow-up questions. The interviews were conducted digitally and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) was used to address how collaboration and IPL were expressed in the programme, how collaboration was enacted in organisational and pedagogical practices, and what collaborative competencies were considered necessary for students' future professional roles. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Data collection was divided between the two authors, each conducting approximately half of the interviews. To reduce the risk of bias, when one author had a closer collegial relationship with a participant, the other conducted the interview.

Data analysis

The data analysis process was guided by the research questions. While the individual steps focused on organising, comparing, and interpreting the data (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991; Johansson, 2007), the research questions were addressed cumulatively and synthesised in the final stages of the analysis. Specifically, the CoP dimensions (domain, practice, community) were used to examine how collaboration is conceptualised within each community of practice of the four programmes (RQ1) and what trajectories interprofessional learning takes in relation to higher education's role in sustaining a democratic and sustainable society (RQ2).

Four types of communities of practice

The concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) functions as the analytical unit. The objects of study, collaboration and IPL, are examined within each programme's community of practice. The five HCC programme coordinators, the nine SW coordinators, the six SENCO interviewees, and the ten from ST constitute each programme's community of practice.

Despite differences in structure, disciplinary traditions, and institutional conditions, the CoP framework enables a systematic analysis by focusing on comparable dimensions within each context. The interviews provide accounts of programme content, organisational arrangements, developmental processes, and the social learning that characterises each educational setting. These accounts include descriptions of meetings, activities, and interactions involving teachers and course coordinators, offering insight into the meaning-making processes specific to each programme.

Analytically, variation between programmes is handled by identifying how each programme's community of practice expresses its shared knowledge and interests (domain), how these are enacted through activities and educational components (practice), and the forms of belonging and participation that the collaboration exhibits (community). This approach makes it possible to treat differences between programmes not as noise, but as intrinsic features of distinct communities of practice, while still allowing comparison across programmes through the shared analytical categories of domain, practice, and community. Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective informs the interpretative stage of the analysis.

Sequential analysis

Data were analysed using a seven-step sequential analysis (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991; Johansson, 2007) guided by the research questions.

1. Initial reading: Both authors read all transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the material.
2. Identification of significant content: Key content relevant to collaboration and interprofessional learning was coded in each transcript and compiled into a shared document for each programme. Each interview was assigned a unique identifier.
3. Comparison: Similarities and differences were compared within and across interviews for each programme.
4. Grouping: The data were grouped according to Wenger's (1998) community of practice (CoP) framework.
5. Articulation of meaning: The essence of each programme's material was identified using the following analytical questions: What constitutes the knowledge and interest area of collaboration (domain)? How is collaboration enacted (practice)? What forms of belonging and participation does the collaboration exhibit within the programme (community)?
6. Category naming: Categories were named based on the most salient features of the material in each programme.
7. Final comparison and refinement: All sequences were re-examined to determine whether the categories were exhaustive and coherent, and whether any required merging, removal, or refinement.

Throughout these steps, the authors jointly discussed and reviewed the coding and interpretation to enhance credibility and consistency. Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective informed the final interpretative phase, in which the categories were examined in relation to questions of participation, inclusion, and the democratic functions of collaboration in higher education.

Ethical considerations

The study adheres to established ethical principles concerning informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants received written and oral information about the project and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent. All participants are anonymised, and the higher education institutions are treated confidentially – the data are used exclusively for research purposes. Audio files and transcripts are stored in a secure research database and do not contain directly identifiable information. A code key is stored in accordance with the data protection officer's guidelines. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2024-02454-01). As researchers, we assume responsibility for the content, implementation, and consequences of the study by acting transparently, adhering to good research practice, protecting participant anonymity, and minimising the risk of harm.

Results

The findings demonstrate how collaboration and interprofessional learning are conceptualised as areas of knowledge and interest, enacted in practice, and embedded in communities within and across the four degree programmes.

Knowledge and interest area of collaboration

Within the SENCO programme, there is a shared understanding that collaboration constitutes an essential skill and an action-oriented professional competence. As one coordinator put it, 'A big part of the SENCO's role is working together with others.' Another emphasised the importance of maintaining the special educational core so as not to 'lose direction.' Opportunities to engage in collaborative situations during students' education are described as crucial for preparing them for professional practice. This shows that collaboration is conceptualised as an action competence.

In the HCC programme, collaboration is understood as a key competence and an advanced specialisation within social work, and as the primary professional expertise developed in the postgraduate training. There is a strong awareness of the importance of collaborating with other professions to achieve positive outcomes. Coordinators highlight that it 'can matter a great deal. To gain an understanding of another profession before beginning to work with them.' These findings imply that collaboration is conceptualised as a specialist skill within the programme.

Similarly, in the SW programme, which provides the basic qualification required for social work, collaboration is described as central to the profession and a necessary competence for practice. One coordinator noted that 'social work has a

core of collaboration, cooperation, and coordination.’ This statement signals that the domain of knowledge and interest constitutes collaboration as the core of education.

In the ST programme, collaboration is conceived primarily as a matter of content rather than professional practice. ‘We take all our students to the museum during the subject course.’ Visits to museums and other institutions with specialised subject knowledge are framed as collaboration within the wider society. Here, collaboration is understood as content-based knowledge rather than relational competence. This suggests collaboration is conceptualised as a content skill within the programme.

In summary, when collaboration is viewed as a moving boundary object across the four programmes, the boundaries of the knowledge domain are broad, and collaboration orientations vary. Understandings of collaboration range from action competence, specialist knowledge, or the core of the profession to solely content knowledge.

Enacted collaboration

Within the SENCO programme, the enactment of collaborative practice primarily concerns teacher collaboration and takes three main forms. There is a long tradition of inviting external lecturers from special education services, the National Agency for Special Needs Education, child habilitation units, and residential care homes for young people. These lecturers contribute practice-based examples to the programme. It is also common for lecturers from other programmes to teach based on their areas of expertise, such as leadership or specific disabilities. Another well-established form of collaboration involves the sharing of courses between the SENCO and specialist teacher programmes. In this arrangement, students from both programmes take the same courses but are assigned different course literature and examination tasks linked to their professional profiles. This implies practice can be understood as teacher collaboration.

In the SW programme, considerable time and resources are devoted to developing and implementing interprofessional learning activities to foster students’ collaborative action competence. These include mock trials conducted jointly with law students, their lecturers, and professional actors who, for example, portray a psychotic person or a child at risk. Another example is a dedicated day during field placement during which students from various programmes, such as psychology, policing, teacher education, and special needs education, participate in interprofessional learning activities. These components have been developed to ensure that social work students receive an introduction to the professions with which they will collaborate in practice. Similarly, the HCC programme provides designated opportunities for interprofessional education within the programme and across educational fields. For instance, during field placements, two-day events are

organised in which students of medicine, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and speech-language pathology work in interprofessional groups using case-based learning. The programme also includes written and oral assignments that require students to adopt the perspectives of other professions. This signals practice as an interprofessional learning activity.

In the ST programme, the enactment of collaboration involves shifting the responsibility of supervisors during the school-based practicum. Supervisors can allow students to participate in authentic situations of interprofessional collaboration. Students are viewed as not yet ready to engage in structured, planned IPL activities during the programme. Rather, such engagement is expected to occur later in their professional careers. Collaboration also takes place through co-teaching, for example, when courses offered by subject departments are common to both ST students and students of the discipline itself, such as biology. It shows practice as handling authentic situations during school-based practicum and co-teaching.

In summary, the enactment of collaboration practices takes four main forms across the programmes, although the emphasis varies in each community of practice. Teacher collaboration, including co-teaching, external lecturers, and joint courses, occurs in all four programmes. However, external lecturers are more prevalent in the SENCO and SW programmes, and joint courses are more common in SENCO and ST. Interprofessional learning activities are most prominent in HCC and SW, though such activities are described as having been more common in SENCO in the past. Interviewees from all the programmes mention collaboration during school-based practicum or field placement, whether in the context of planned educational components or authentic situations. In the ST programme, collaboration is even more strongly oriented towards students' future workplace, the rationale being that students may only be ready for genuine collaboration once they have entered the profession.

The inclusion of collaboration in the programmes

Within the SW community, collaboration is achieved through participation. Interacting and building relationships foster a sense of community with students and teachers from other programmes, as well as with social work practitioners. As one coordinator stated: 'I am very proud that we also have the interprofessional component in our programme.' These findings suggest including collaboration in the programme as participation.

In the SENCO programme, collaboration is included by tradition, it is 'the way we've always done things.' Course coordinators and teachers are described as having a low level of engagement in change or development, partly due to their reluctance to modify courses or allocate time and space for planning and implementing IPL activities. Formerly, the programme allowed greater flexibility

for such activities, but this has diminished over time, which indicates that collaboration is embedded as a tradition within the programme.

In the ST programme, collaboration is characterised by adaptation. Experiences of collaboration suggest that the programme adapts to the conditions of other courses rather than reinforcing its own identity. The organisational structure of the ST programme demands a high level of collaboration due to its numerous subject combinations across several departments. Within the community, there is a perception that student teachers often do not get what they need to practise their profession. Instead, they become accustomed to adapting to the conditions of other subjects and courses. This can sometimes result in important aspects of their teacher training becoming vague and unclear, including subject-specific and didactic components, as well as professional identity as a teacher. The HCC programme also exhibits adaptation, albeit in a different form. IPL activities fit well within the programme, but faculty boards and deans decide which programmes are allowed to participate. One coordinator expressed concern about not being able to make such decisions independently with regard to the programme's goals: 'We had to get the dean's approval to participate. It worked out fine, but it depended on those leading the collaboration arguing the case well.' This shows that collaboration has been included as adaptation within the programme.

In summary, collaboration is included in the programmes in three main ways: as participation, with a strong emphasis on creating and implementing interprofessional activities; as tradition, where collaboration is maintained because that is what has always been done, and as adaptation, where programmes adjust to the conditions of others or depend on decisions made at higher organisational levels.

Overall, the analyses indicate that, within the SW community of practice, collaboration is conceptualised as a core knowledge and interest area of the programme. Responsibility is taken for implementing interprofessional learning activities both during work-integrated learning and on campus. Collaboration is brought to the programme through active participation with colleagues, students, and practitioners.

In the SENCO community, collaboration is viewed as an essential skill and action competence, with an emphasis on maintaining the special educational needs perspective. Collaboration is enacted primarily through teacher collaboration, for instance, by inviting external lecturers and offering joint courses with the ST programme. Its inclusion in the programme is based on tradition, 'the way we've always done things.'

In the HCC community, collaboration is conceptualised as specialist competence. Interprofessional learning activities are emphasised both during field placement and on campus. Collaboration is included as a form of adaptation since decisions about such activities are made at higher organisational levels. In the ST community, collaboration is conceptualised as content knowledge. It is enacted in

“authentic situations” during school-based practicum or is postponed until students enter professional practice, when they are considered knowledgeable enough to engage in genuine collaboration. Collaboration is shaped by adaptation to other subjects and programmes, at times to such an extent that the teaching profession’s specific subject matter and didactic identity become obscured.

Discussion

This study contributes to extending the research field on interprofessional collaboration beyond the previously dominant medical domain to include education and social welfare. It does so by examining how programmes for students in higher education who are training to be subject teachers, special educational needs coordinators, social workers, and health-care counsellors understand, enact, and position collaboration within their programmes. The research questions were: *How is collaboration conceptualised in the communities of practice of four programmes? What trajectories does interprofessional learning take in relation to higher education’s role in sustaining a democratic and sustainable society?*

Regarding the first question, the analysis shows that each programme’s community of practice ascribes distinct meanings to collaboration. It is not a unified concept, but is instead shaped by the domain, practice, and community that define the traditions, roles, and educational aims of each profession. These programme-specific constructions also generate the boundaries and orientations within which collaboration operates as a form of social learning in higher education. Collaboration as a boundary object and different forms of resistance are further discussed below.

The findings related to the second research question indicate that the dimension of community is especially crucial. How programmes interact with their institutional surroundings, position themselves in relation to other programmes, and construct collaboration shape the extent to which higher education can contribute to democratic sustainability. Drawing on Dewey (1916), this is understood as communication within and between groups. The democratic dimensions of collaboration are discussed even further below.

Collaboration as a boundary object and forms of resistance

Across the four communities of practice, collaboration as a boundary object demonstrates a flexibility that does not mainly generate consensus, but instead enables each programme’s interpretations and assumptions to both shape meaning and reveal different forms of resistance (cf. Star & Griesemer, 1989). The forms of resistance that are expressed within the programmes’ communities of practice echo research findings on barriers to interprofessional collaboration. Wei et al. (2022)

emphasise that obstacles and opportunities are closely intertwined in interprofessional processes of relationship-building across individual, group, and organisational levels. Similar dynamics are described by Reeves et al. (2010), who show that layered organisational structures, professional cultures, and interpersonal relationships contribute to shaping interprofessional collaboration.

The analysis identified four forms of resistance that occur within and between the four communities of practice, as well as across the three analytical levels. Organisational resistance appears in all the programmes to varying degrees. This includes resource limitations such as staffing, time, and funding, which are widely recognised as structural barriers to interprofessional collaboration (D'amour & Oandasan, 2005). The findings show that organisational structures and routines are insufficient on their own. Unless those involved in interaction and relationship-building sustain these structures in practice, collaboration will not become embedded. Organisational prerequisites alone are insufficient to ensure social learning. Relational conditions such as trust, communication, and opportunities for interaction must be fostered. Collegial resistance emerges among colleagues.

Disagreements within communities about course content, learning activities, and pedagogical approaches can hinder collaboration around interprofessional learning and collaboration-oriented course components. This aligns with previous research showing that incompatible professional identities, competing epistemologies, and unclear role boundaries can cause tension and conflict in collaborative work (Hall, 2005). Collegial resistance often manifests as subtle forms of hesitation, avoidance, or scepticism toward joint teaching or shared pedagogical responsibilities. Habitual resistance ("the power of habit") is shaped by habit and institutional inertia. Established routines such as inviting external lecturers or visiting museums are considered adequate spaces for collaboration in education and social welfare programmes. This reflects what Levitt and March (1988) describe as organisational learning through established routines, whereby past practices come to be taken for granted, and alternative ways of working are perceived as unnecessary or too demanding. This kind of path dependency reinforces existing practices and reduces the perceived need for more robust forms of interprofessional collaboration.

Content-related resistance arises when collaboration is perceived as incompatible with existing curricular demands. Coordinators expressed that collaboration does not fit within the programme's learning objectives. Others described negative experiences of collaboration, resulting in a sense of having to adapt to other subjects or programmes at the expense of their own profession-specific course content and developmental trajectory. This is consistent with findings showing that interprofessional initiatives may be perceived as misaligned with disciplinary priorities or as a threat to professional autonomy (cf. Hall, 2005).

Taken together, each community of practice is marked to varying degrees by organisational, collegial, habitual, and content-related resistance. These forms of resistance reflect how collaboration, as a boundary object, is negotiated, shaped, and sometimes contested within and across professional education contexts. They also demonstrate that interprofessional collaboration in higher education is not merely a structural or pedagogical matter, but involves cultural, relational, and epistemic negotiations that shape how collaboration is realised in practice.

Democratic dimensions of collaboration

In communities of practice where collaboration is foregrounded as a core professional value and enacted through participation, students are more likely to develop an open and collaborative professional identity. Such environments cultivate relational qualities that are essential for democratic education, such as inclusion, recognition, and mutual responsibility (Dewey, 1916; cf. Edström et al., 2024). Although participation is rarely explicitly mentioned, participants' accounts of communication, dialogue, and related challenges suggest that these communicative processes significantly shape interprofessional learning. Conversely, relational dispositions such as active listening, mutual respect, and shared decision-making, as highlighted by Reeves et al. (2016) and Barr et al. (2008), can be understood as manifestations of participation in Deweyan terms.

In contrast, communities where interprofessional learning is primarily framed through professional expertise or disciplinary demarcation may encourage a more bounded professional identity. The organisation of higher education into programme-specific structures can reinforce these divisions (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009) and potentially limit students' opportunities to develop cross-professional understanding. Such conditions in professional practice often produce misaligned expectations and reduced collaborative capacity. Communities guided by tradition or habitual routines may offer stability, yet they risk inhibiting renewal, critical inquiry, and interprofessional dialogue, qualities central to democratic sustainability (Dewey, 1916).

When collaboration becomes a matter of adapting to external decisions or to the structures of other programmes, the critical and autonomous democratic function of higher education may be weakened. In such communities, collaboration risks becoming instrumental and rule-bound, rather than communicative and meaning-making. This can compromise the profession's capacity to contribute to welfare sustainability, especially when its identity and expertise are subordinated to other institutional logics (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1993).

In summary, and in line with Dewey (1916), this study shows that, to support IPL that contributes to sustainable and democratic welfare, it is not sufficient that higher education programmes include or enact collaboration. Nor is it enough that IPL strengthens students' willingness to collaborate (Patel et al.,

2025), or improves attitudes and communication skills (Bruce et al., 2025; Jung et al., 2020). Even when more profound knowledge is needed for advanced collaboration (Kallio et al., 2023), such knowledge remains insufficient unless it is connected to broader context and connected to wider educational visions.

Without grounding in the programme's purposes, values, and societal mission, knowledge risks being reduced to technical or instrumental skills rather than contributing to meaningful, responsible, and democratic collaboration. Biesta (2012) argues that the underlying purposes of education are more decisive for sustainability and democracy than the instrumental competencies emphasised in much prior research. Thus, UNESCO's (2017) key competencies are inadequate for guiding IPL toward a sustainable, democratic society.

Educational visions need to be articulated, and collaboration must be understood not only as a professional competency but also as a formative process that links action, responsibility, and democratic engagement. Understood in this way, collaboration and interprofessional learning become a site of democracy, where participation, deliberation, mutual accountability, and shared decision-making are actively practiced and reflected upon, thereby linking everyday professional action to broader commitments to democracy and the common good.

Limitations and future research

Finally, the integration of Wenger (1998) and Dewey's (1916) concepts is a novel analytical contribution that opens up further avenues for theoretical refinement. As with all qualitative studies, the findings are shaped by the specific contexts and participants that were included. This study focused on programme coordinators, whose perspectives offer insight into programme-level logic but do not capture students' or practitioners' experiences of interprofessional collaboration. Future research could therefore incorporate multiple stakeholder groups to triangulate perspectives. Another limitation concerns the national context. While Sweden serves as a relevant welfare setting, further studies in other Nordic or international contexts would enable comparative analysis of how different policy environments shape IPL. Future studies could examine how democratic participation is cultivated within the IPL activities themselves, and its impact on long-term professional identities and collaborative capacities in practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that interprofessional collaboration in professional programmes within the education and social welfare sectors is characterised by substantial variation in how collaboration is conceptualised, enacted, and embedded in programme structures. By analysing four programmes as communities of practice

(Wenger, 1998) the study shows that collaboration functions as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). It is flexible enough to take on different meanings, but also stable enough to connect the organisation of educational programmes with the formation of professional identities.

The findings extend previous research by examining collaboration at the programme level across the fields of education and welfare. They also incorporate Dewey's (1916) democratic perspective into the analysis of IPL, a dimension largely absent from earlier research on the topic. Three main conclusions emerge.

The first conclusion is that collaboration is conceptualised differently across programmes and serves distinct professional purposes. In social work, collaboration is understood as the core of the profession whereas special educational needs coordinator education conceptualises it as an action-oriented competence. In health-care counselling, as specialist expertise and in subject teacher education, primarily as content knowledge. The divergence of these domains reveals that interprofessional learning lacks a shared conceptual foundation across programmes.

Secondly, opportunities for IPL are unevenly distributed. Some programmes integrate structured interprofessional activities into coursework and work-integrated learning, while others rely on traditional teaching methods or postpone collaborative engagement until students enter professional practice. Moreover, various forms of organisational, collegial, habitual, and content-related resistance influence whether IPL becomes embedded or remains peripheral. These forms of resistance confirm that collaboration is not merely a structural or pedagogical matter, but involves relational, cultural, and epistemic negotiations within and across communities of practice.

Thirdly, the ways collaboration is included that characterise each community – participation, tradition, and adaptation – shape the democratic potential of collaboration. Only communities grounded in participation foster conditions that align with Dewey's (1916) understanding of democracy as shared inquiry, communication, and joint action. Communities governed by tradition or adaptation may provide stability, but they risk reproducing professional boundaries, inhibiting dialogue, and weakening the role of collaboration in sustaining a democratic welfare society.

Taken together, the findings show that it is not sufficient for the programmes merely to include or perform collaboration to promote IPL oriented toward democratic and sustainable outcomes. Collaboration must be embedded within the programmes' visions, professional identities, and everyday practices, both within and between groups. It must also be supported by institutional structures that enable communication, autonomy, and shared responsibility. Otherwise, interprofessional collaboration risks becoming merely instrumental, fragmented, or symbolic, rather than forming a substantive part of the democratic and societal mission of welfare professions.

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