

Conceptualisations of theses in Swedish primary teacher education:

A study of programme curricula and course syllabi

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Thesis** work is a significant part of the Swedish primary teacher education programmes. The aim of this study is to examine the orientations and conceptualisations of theses programme syllabi in Swedish primary teacher education. The empirical material consists of curricula for Swedish primary education programme at 20 universities and university colleges, and course syllabi for thesis courses at five universities. They were analysed using four orientations of teacher education based on previous research. The results showed that the academic orientation, characterised by a focus on subject knowledge and subject didactics, was most prominent in the programme curricula, while the educational sciences orientation was most prominent in the course syllabi. The study identifies substantial variation in thesis structures across Swedish primary teacher education programmes, with most institutions requiring two separate theses rather than a single, comprehensive thesis. These findings highlight ongoing tensions in teacher education between subject expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and research-informed practice, reflecting broader debates about the aims and orientations of Swedish teacher education in the 2020s.

Keywords: Theses, primary teacher education, teacher education orientations, teacher education curriculum, teacher education course syllabus.

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**Thesis refers to “final thesis” students write in primary teacher education programmes at bachelor’s level.

Introduction

The prominent place given to theses in Swedish primary teacher education is the result of continuous teacher education (TE) reforms in 1988, 1992, 2001, 2007, and 2011. Each of these reforms had different aims, but one consistent goal was to make primary teacher education a university-based education, with an emphasis on research, analytical skills, and theses (Furuhagen et al., 2019; Stolpe et al., 2021). This development of Swedish TE is part of a larger international trend toward professionalisation of primary school teaching, which can be understood in relation to increasing societal demands on school education in a more complex society (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Kärköö et al., 2024).

Many aspects of Swedish TE have been thoroughly researched (Alvunger & Wahlström, 2018; Andersson, 1995). However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how theses in TE have been conceptualised in relation to various goals (Råde, 2016). In Swedish education policy during the 2000s, primary TE has been seen as a professional education that integrates knowledge and skills belonging to both academic and vocational domains (Råde, 2016). As such, theses in primary teacher education should be relevant to both these domains. Using documents – programme curricula and course syllabi – as empirical materials, this article seeks to highlight how theses have been conceptualised in primary teacher education. In 1977, Swedish primary TE was integrated into the higher education system (SFS 1977:218). This can be seen as part of a longer transformation of primary TE from a vocational education to a university-based education with a greater focus on theory and research (Erixon & Wikberg, 2024).

The 1988 reform introduced the requirement that student teachers must write a final report. The 1992 reform of higher education, which regulated the final thesis for 13 professional programmes, it was established that a thesis should be included in TE programmes (Råde, 2016). The amount of ECTS allocated to the thesis was not regulated until the 2001 TE reform, when the thesis was allocated 15 ECTS (Prop. 1999/2000:135). The larger significance given to theses in TE was connected to the 2001 reform emphasised that teachers should be prepared for doing research and eligible for postgraduate education. In connection with the Bologna reform of Swedish higher education in 2007, the TE thesis in the first cycle (three years) was regulated to 15 ECTS, and in the second cycle (after three years) a requirement for a thesis of either 30 ECTS or two theses of 15 ECTS each (Prop. 2004/05:162). Following this, the 2011 TE reform stipulated that 30 ECTS (one 30 ECTS thesis course or two 15 ECTS thesis courses) should be allocated to thesis courses in the four-year primary teacher education programme (tracks K–3 & 4–6).

Considering that the method courses in TE mainly prepare students for thesis work, one could argue that theses, and courses related to theses, constitute a large part of the Swedish primary TE programme (Mattsson, 2008; Råde, 2016). The argument that theses have played a prominent role in Swedish TE since the 2000s is also supported by the fact that the quality of theses was seen as the main indicator of TE quality in governmental evaluations (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2006; Svärd, 2014). In recent years, the final thesis has not been the only quality indicator in these evaluations, as they are supplemented by self-evaluations conducted by universities; however, it is still the case that if theses are deemed to be of low quality in government evaluations of TE, and this is not improved satisfactorily, the university can lose the right to operate the programme. This has created strong incentives for TE to focus on scientific literacy and research skills during the 21st century (Råde, 2014, 2016).

Thesis work allows aspiring teachers to explore a specific aspect of teaching in greater depth, for example, knowledge about a particular topic, and research methods skills, such as data collection and analysis, and academic writing. By conducting empirical studies or literature reviews, student teachers can gain deeper insights in areas related to core education courses in Swedish TE, such as classroom practice, curriculum development, and special education (Börjesson & Nyman, 2023; Skau et al., 2025). Furthermore, Erixon and Erixon Arreman (2018) have shown that thesis work can contribute to teacher students becoming more reflective practitioners, which can enhance educational practices and improve school students learning. Although previous research has highlighted the benefits of thesis work for student teachers' professional development, policymakers and researchers have held differing views on which aspects of teachers' work should be the focus in relation to theses.

One view has been that theses should provide student teachers with in-depth knowledge about educational science, as an understanding of research is seen as a basis for teacher professionalism (Beach & Bagley, 2013). Another view has been that theses should have a connection to teaching and vocational aspects of the teaching profession (Karlsudd et al., 2017; Mattsson, 2008; Wernersson & Orwehag, 2016), while others have emphasised the benefits of integrating vocational aspects and educational science in relation to thesis work (Erixon & Erixon Arreman, 2018; Råde, 2019b). The aim of this study is to identify different orientations and conceptualisations of theses in programme curricula and thesis course syllabi in Swedish primary teacher education. Addressing this aim, the specific research question is: *What orientations in relation to theses can be identified in 20 programme curricula and 5 course syllabi in Swedish primary teacher education?*

Previous research

Many facets of thesis work in Swedish Teacher Education (TE) have been thoroughly researched (Gustavsson & Eriksson, 2015; Råde, 2016). One observation derived from previous research, which is of importance for this article, is that in professional programmes such as TE, the role of theses is more complex than in education centred on developing disciplinary knowledge. This is because, in professional education, it is necessary to integrate disciplinary and vocational dimensions in relation to thesis work. In the case of TE, theses need to adhere to disciplinary knowledge, academic standards, and be relevant to the teaching profession (Eklund et al., 2019; Råde, 2016, 2019a, 2019b). This can be challenging, which has been highlighted in previous research concerning the experiences of supervisors and student teachers in relation to thesis work (Gustavsson & Eriksson, 2015; Karlsudd, 2018; Lendahls Rosendahl, 1998; Råde, 2016, 2019a, 2019b). Several studies have shown that supervisors play a central role in guiding thesis work, but that student teachers, despite this support, often struggle with meeting academic standards, such as coherent structure, accurate citations, and conducting an independent investigation based on a research problem (Ekholm, 2012; Emsheimer, 2007; Eriksson & Gustavsson, 2016; Holmberg, 2006; Zackariasson, 2018). Due to these demands, teacher students frequently experience high expectations, negative emotions, and stress related to project work (Zackariasson, 2018, 2019).

According to Wernersson and Orwehag (2016), vocational implications are often lacking in TE theses. This finding is further supported by Mattsson (2008), who also em-

phasises the importance of considering the vocational implications of theses in TE. Many theses lack practical implications for teacher practice, often due to insufficient critical reflection and vague research problems (Karlsudd, 2018). Despite these challenges, some models of TE have enabled students to produce high-quality projects. TE theses can be framed in such a way that they contribute to teacher students' development of scientific literacy and deepen their knowledge and skills related to the vocational aspects of teacher work; however, the same studies have also shown that this integration can be challenging and is often not achieved (Eklund et al., 2019; Jansson et al., 2019; Maaranen, 2010; Råde, 2019a, 2019b).

Theory: Teacher education orientations and theses

Previous research on TE orientations provides the basis for the theoretical framework of this article (Furuhagen et al., 2019). Different and shifting TE orientations – that is, influential conceptions of the overall goals of TE and the characteristics of the ideal teacher – have been identified in the history of Finnish and Swedish TE. These orientations are connected to different visions of society; in relation to a certain vision, it is seen as central that the teacher possesses certain knowledge, skills, and attributes – an ideal teacher who can contribute to that societal vision (Furuhagen et al., 2019; Hansén et al., 2015). From this perspective, conflicts over the purpose and content of TE are primarily viewed as political, reflecting different values and visions of society, and as such, they are part of political struggles in society.

Furuhagen et al. (2019) identified five orientations in Finnish and Swedish TE: vocational, with a focus on teaching practice; academic, with a focus on subject knowledge; educational sciences, with a focus on education as a discipline and analytical skills; progressive, with a focus on education for social change; and personal development, with a focus on teacher students' identity. In a similar study of Finnish TE, Hansén et al. (2015) identified four orientations: individual, with a focus on educational psychology, which is seen as providing essential tools for teachers to promote student learning; social, with a focus on social relationships and dynamics between individuals and groups to promote cooperation in schools; societal, with a focus on the relationship between school and society and the role of schools in promoting knowledge and values, as well as preparing students for citizenship; and research, with a focus on knowledge about research and analytical skills, which can enable teachers to conduct research and a research-based teaching practice. In both articles, orientations were used to understand the shifting societal aims of teacher education from a historical perspective. Together, these studies illustrate how orientations function as analytical tools for capturing dominant views of the ideal teacher and the purposes of teacher education at different points in time. They also show that orientations are not mutually exclusive but often coexist and interact within teacher education programmes. As discussed in more detail in the current issue (Yildirim et al., 2026), there exists many different models for mapping orientations of teacher education, although there is a high degree of overlap between them. The orientations presented here were chosen because they were relevant for Swedish TE in general and theses in particular.

Building on the orientations identified in Furuhagen et al. (2019) and Hansén et al. (2015) and drawing from our previous understanding of theses in primary teacher education (Bö-

rjesson & Nyman, 2023; Råde, 2016), we constructed four orientations of theses in teacher education: academic, educational science, vocational, and applying research (Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher education thesis orientations

Orientation	Focus	Ideal teacher
Academic	Subject knowledge and subject didactics.	Subject expert
Educational science	Scientific quality and research skills.	Independent researcher
Vocational	Relevance for teaching practice.	Expert on teaching practice
Applying research	Knowledge about research and research-based teaching methods.	Research competent

In the history of Swedish TE, the academic orientation has been dominant in TE for secondary school teachers, which historically had a strong focus on subject knowledge, while the vocational orientation was dominant in TE for primary school teachers. The educational sciences orientation has been prominent since the 1990s, especially since the 2001 TE reform, with a focus on educational research and analytical skills in relation to thesis work. The 2011 TE reform likewise emphasised analytical skills, but compared to the 2001 reform, showed a stronger influence of the academic orientation, with a focus on subject knowledge and subject didactics and less on educational science. The applying research orientation has been less prominent historically, but we hypothesise that it has become more influential in the 2020s, with the increasing focus on research literacy, theses in the form of literature reviews, and the demands for evidence-informed teaching. The vocational orientation was weakened with the increasing emphasis on analytical skills and research competence. However, with the resurgence of practice-based research and an increasing emphasis on the vocational aspects in Swedish TE in the 2010s, we consider it likely that this orientation may have been strengthened in the 2020s.

Method

In Sweden TE programmes are regulated by the national Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) and additional national examination goals, which are more specific and detailed for TE than for most other Swedish higher education programmes. Additionally, every university or university college must have a programme curriculum (in Swedish *utbildningsplan*) for each teacher education programme. These curricula must include the national education goals but allow for a local focus. A programme curriculum for primary TE must include the national examinations goals and cover the entire programme.

The programme curriculum states the main purpose and content of TE, and specifies which courses are included in the programme. Furthermore, each course within a TE pro-

gramme must have a course syllabus (in Swedish *kursplan*). Course syllabi are much more detailed than programme curricula and includes, inter alia, description of content, learning goals and examinations. The empirical materials analysed in this article consist of programme curricula and course syllabi from 2021–2025. As the programme curricula and course syllabi have been revised during different years at different universities and university colleges, the empirical material covers various years. We selected the programme curricula of all the 20 universities or university colleges that offer primary TE tracks F–3 and 4–6 in Sweden (U1–U20). Course syllabi for thesis courses were strategically selected to cover Sweden geographically from five of these 20 universities or university colleges (U1, U2, U3, U5, U13). To limit the empirical material covered, we only selected five course syllabi. Programme curricula and course syllabi are public documents and were accessible at each university or university college. In total, 20 programme curricula and 5 course syllabi were included in the empirical material. Most universities or university colleges (17 out of 20) adopted a model where the 30 ECTS allocated for thesis courses were divided in two 15 ECTS thesis courses: Thesis 1 in the first cycle at basic level (Independent Work 1, 15 ECTS), and thesis 2 in the second cycle at advanced level (Independent Work 2, 15 ECTS). One university (U7) offered a model with a single final thesis, worth 30 ECTS, at the advanced level in the second cycle and final year of the programme. At two universities (U5 and U16), students could choose to complete either two theses (15 ECTS each) or one final thesis (30 ECTS).

A content analysis was conducted using the four orientations described above as analytical lenses to identify the orientations present in the documents (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). As programme curricula cover the entire primary teacher education programme, we analysed only the sections related to the independent work (in Swedish *självständigt arbete*) courses in the documents. The five selected course syllabi were all final thesis courses in primary teacher education programmes, and they were analysed in their entirety. These five courses were chosen because they were offered at universities with large primary teacher education programmes in different regions of Sweden.

Both programme curricula and course syllabi include learning goals, presented under separate headings that follow the Swedish national model for curricula texts in higher education: “Knowledge and Understanding, Competence and Skills, and Judgement and Approach.” In some programme curricula, an additional heading, Local Goals, exists. Each programme curriculum provides a brief description of the knowledge and skills that should be emphasised in TE under each heading. The course syllabi feature the same headings, but the content described under each is more detailed. Consequently, syllabi texts are longer and more detailed than the programme curricula. To analyse these differences, we counted the number of sentences and learning outcomes related to each orientation in the course syllabi. In contrast, for the programme curricula, we focused on whether orientation could be identified, without counting sentences. The quotes in the results section were translated from Swedish into English by the authors. Regarding the analysis procedure, it began with a holistic reading of the documents. In the first step, we identified keywords in the documents that related to the orientations (Table 2).

Table 2. Keywords for thesis orientations

Orientation	Keywords
Academic	Subject matter, subject disciplines, subject didactics, subject expert.
Educational science	Independent research, analytical skill, theoretical understanding, scientific approach to education and teaching.
Vocational	Vocational relevance, professional education, relevant to teacher work, contribute to teacher and school development, practice-based teaching.
Applying research	Skill in finding relevant research, applying research to education and teaching, literature review.

During the second step of the analysis, sentences and learning outcomes relevant to thesis courses were analysed and categorised according to one of the orientations. For the five course syllabi, we counted how many sentences and learning outcomes had been categorised for each orientation. If two orientations could be identified in a learning outcome or sentence, each was counted as half. In the third step of the analysis, we presented the results of the quantitative analysis in Table 3, using descriptive statistics (Fischer & Marshall, 2009). This was followed by the fourth step, in which we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the relevant text sections identified in programme curricula and course syllabi. Together, these analytical steps allowed us to identify both the prevalence of different orientations and the ways in which they were articulated in the documents. This combined approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of how theses are framed across different policy texts. By integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses, we were able to find patterns across institutions while examining how orientations were expressed in context. This methodological design strengthens the validity of the findings by capturing both breadth and depth in the analysed material.

Since the analysis involves official documents in primary teacher education, one can assume that the results indicate what knowledge and skills are considered important for future teachers to master in relation to thesis work. As only publicly available documents are analysed in this article, the ethical issues involved were minor. However, we anonymised all the documents to avoid any inconvenience for the universities, and we have attempted to present the documents as impartially as possible.

Results

The quantitative and qualitative results are presented below in respect to final thesis orientations discussed above.

Quantitative analysis

The analysis revealed that the academic orientation was the most prominent, with 18 programme curricula containing items emphasising subject matter or subject didactics (Table 3). This was followed by the vocational orientation: half of the curricula (10 of 20) included items highlighting that theses should have relevance for teaching practice. The educational science orientation was identified in about one third (7 of 20) of the programme cur-

ricula, emphasising knowledge and skills related to research, such as theory and analysis. Two programme curricula (2 of 20) highlighted aspects of the applied research orientation, such as the ability to find relevant research related to a specific problem.

Conversely, the five syllabi showed a different profile. In these documents the educational science orientation was the most prominent, followed by vocational, applied research, and academic, in order of the number of items categorised for each orientation. This indicates that course syllabi emphasise research-related competencies to a greater extent than programme curricula. Such differences suggest that the two types of documents may serve partly different functions in articulating expectations regarding thesis work. The most striking result, when comparing orientations identified in programme curricula and course syllabi, is the discrepancy between these documents. The dominant orientation in the programme curricula, the academic, was the least, together with the applying research orientation, prominent in the course syllabi. Likewise, the most prominent orientation in the course syllabi, educational science, was the second least prominent in the programme curricula. Only the vocational orientation was approximately equally prominent in both programme curricula and course syllabi.

Table 3. Orientations identified in programme curricula and number of sentences or learning outcomes identified in course syllabi in relation to thesis courses.

Orientation	Academic	Educational science	Vocational	Applying research
Programme curricula	18 (all except U2 & U14)	7 (U2, U9, U10, U11, U12, U16 & U19)	10 (U1, U2, U4, U6, U7, U8, U10, U11 & U12 & U16)	2 (U2 & U11)
U1 course syllabus	2	3	3	0.5
U2 course syllabus	0	7.5	2	0.5
U3 course syllabus	2	7	3.5	0.5
U5 course syllabus	2	22	2.5	1.5
U13 course syllabus	2	5	3	5
Total	8	44.5	14	8

Of the five universities, only U2 demonstrated complete consistency, in that the same orientations could be identified in the programme curriculum and the course syllabus. U2 also had the only course syllabus, among the five analysed, that contained no sentences or learning outcomes relating to the academic orientation. In only one programme curriculum, at U11, were all four orientations identified; however, in nearly all the course syllabi, all orientations could be identified (except for U2). Since course syllabi are more detailed than programme curricula, it was not surprising that more orientations could be identified in them.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative results are presented below.

Academic orientation

The academic orientation, as mentioned above, can be identified in almost all programme curricula in relation to thesis courses (except U2 & U14). Both subject knowledge and subject didactics are emphasised as important in relation to the final thesis. Programme curricula with an academic orientation often contain generic wording, seemingly derived from the national examination goals for primary teacher education, for example, “Independent work [thesis] should be done within the subject studies. At least one thesis should have a focus on subject didactics” (U9, Independent work section). However, there is some variation regarding whether subject matter or subject didactics is emphasised in programme curricula. For example, at U1, the programme curricula highlight subject matter in relation to five possible main areas: language didactics, subject didactics, mathematics didactics, or natural science didactics. The programme curriculum for U3 stresses the importance of the thesis as an “in-depth work” within a subject, such as Swedish or mathematics. In the course syllabi, the academic orientation is often identified in brief passages that emphasise subject matter studies and subject didactics research, for example at U5:

In the choice of research question, consideration should be given to the relation between subject content and subject didactics. (U5, course syllabus)

These brief passages have similar wording and seem to have been inspired or copied from the programme curricula at the universities.

Educational science orientation

The educational science orientation can be identified in seven programme curricula in relation to thesis courses. These curricula emphasise that thesis work should be based on research, produce knowledge, and equip students with the necessary skills and abilities to conduct research. At two universities, the curricula highlight that students should become independent researchers; at U9 thesis work is seen as preparation for doctoral studies, while at U2 the curriculum emphasises that the thesis can be connected to an ongoing research project. In relation to the course syllabi, the educational science orientation is dominant, with more than half of the categorised sentences and learning outcomes aligned to this orientation. Numerous forms of knowledge and skills critical to educational science are mentioned in the syllabi. For example, the U2 course syllabus underscores understanding theories and being able to apply relevant research methods. It also emphasises academic writing and the ability to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of scientific work.

The ability to critically evaluate research is also mentioned in the U3 syllabus, which additionally stresses that students should be able to draw conclusions from their own studies. The U13 syllabus, like U2, emphasises research methods but also incorporates research ethics:

To conduct a scientific investigation, apply foundational ethical principles in research; use relevant methods for data collection; analyse data with appropriate methods; summarise the investigation and answer the research questions. (U13, course syllabus)

Compared to the relatively brief and generic wording when identifying the academic orientation, the knowledge and skills related to the educational science orientation are elaborated in greater detail in the syllabi.

Vocational orientation

The vocational orientation is the second most common, identified in 10 of the 20 programme curricula in relation to thesis courses. These curricula explicitly state that theses should, for example, be “relevant to teachers’ work” (U1) or “relevant to the teaching profession” (U7). However, there are differences in what is emphasised regarding relevance to teachers’ work. For instance, the U8 curriculum states that the knowledge contribution of the thesis should pertain to teaching. The U4 curriculum mentions that the university has a specific “vocational” research profile, focusing on vocational learning and, in the case of TE, learning from vocational teaching practice. Several curricula (U1, U2, U4, U6, U7, U8, U16) state that the thesis should be relevant to teachers’ work, and four explicitly mention that theses should primarily connect to the practicum (U2, U10, U11, U12).

Regarding the course syllabi, similarly to the curricula, a recurring theme is that the thesis should be relevant to teacher work and/or the teaching profession. For example, “Identify a problem relevant to teaching or learning in the subject” (U13). Additionally, the U13 syllabus states that student teachers should describe how their thesis contributes to school practice and identify the knowledge that needs to be developed concerning their research problem. The U3 syllabus explicitly states that the thesis can be written as a development project related to established practice.

Applying research orientation

The applying research orientation is the least prominent, identified in only two programme curricula (U2 and U11). This contradicts our hypothesis that this orientation would be strongly represented. However, this orientation appears in all five course syllabi. In U2’s curriculum, it is mentioned that Independent Work 1 should focus on “seeking, analysing, summarising, and presenting scientific literature” (U2). Similarly, U11 states that the thesis can be a literature review grounded in research relevant to the teaching profession.

Despite variations in definitions across the syllabi, all emphasise the importance of evaluating and summarising previous research. Both U13 and U2 highlight that students should learn to critically evaluate research and identify relevant studies related to specific problems. The U13 syllabus emphasises that the thesis should enhance teacher students’ ability to exchange knowledge, while U5 states that the thesis should enable teacher students to reflect on others’ experiences.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the orientations reflected in the programme curricula and course syllabi of Swedish primary teacher education programmes with a focus on the final thesis courses. The main result is that 18 of 20 TE programme curricula contained formulations related to the academic orientation, including subject knowledge and subject did-

actics. The second most common orientation was the vocational orientation, focusing on teaching practice. The emphasis on subject knowledge and subject didactics can be seen as a weakening of the role of educational science in TE following the 2011 Swedish teacher education reform. The strong focus on subject knowledge in Swedish TE during the 2010s and 2020s has been criticised as a weakening of teachers' professional knowledge base and their ability to critically reflect on educational practices (Beach et al., 2014). At the same time, the prominent position of the vocational orientation in the programme curricula indicates a shift towards a more practice-oriented view of the ideal teacher, emphasising applied knowledge. This shift suggests a growing recognition of the importance of linking theory to practice, which can enhance teachers' ability to apply their research in the classroom. It also implies that teacher students and teachers perceived lack of relevance of learned research methods and analytical skills in TE for teaching practice (Wernersson & Orwehag, 2016; Mattsson, 2008), are more likely issues related to the enacted curriculum rather than the official curriculum.

The different profiles of orientations identified in programme curricula indicates that these are conceptualised differently at various universities. This could be seen as problematic in relation to the intended common structure of Swedish TE (cf. Andersson, 1995). Regarding the course syllabi, the educational sciences orientation and the vocational orientation were the most common. The focus on both educational science and vocational aspects can be seen as an attempt to integrate the disciplinary and vocational learning goals in TE. Such combinations are central to professional education programmes like TE. A potential didactical implication for teacher education could be to allow for different types of final theses, such as portfolios, intervention studies, and development projects (Eklund et al., 2019; Råde, 2019a). By diversifying approaches to final thesis projects, educators can better prepare future teachers to address the complexities teaching. Furthermore, this diversification can enhance the overall quality of teacher education by providing a more comprehensive understanding of pedagogical theories and subject knowledge. Ultimately, this could equip educators with the necessary skills to navigate the multifaceted demands of the teaching profession; however, it may be difficult to find the right balance between focus on subject knowledge, theory, and relevance for teaching in thesis work (Maaranen, 2010). For example, Kärkkö et al. (2024) highlighted that integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills in TE can negatively affect teachers' professional practice by creating a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty about the nature of teachers' work.

One limitation of this study is that we have not focused on the differences in how primary teacher education programmes are structured in relation to thesis courses. For instance, at some universities or university colleges, a prospective teacher may undertake two theses: Independent Work 1 and Independent Work 2, each with distinct focuses. The syllabus at U11 characterises the first thesis as “consumption work”, emphasising the use of research as relevant for the teaching profession. However, overall, the applying research orientation had a weaker presence in programme curricula and course syllabi than expected. Considering that teachers are often more consumers than producers of research, there may be room to develop knowledge and skills related to interpreting research and understanding its relevance in specific

educational contexts within Swedish TE. In contrast, the final thesis at U11 has a research orientation, emphasising scientific knowledge and the scientific method. While many universities typically base final theses on empirical studies, some promote literature reviews. It would be interesting to explore whether the variation in thesis course structures influences the skills teachers acquire, presenting another avenue for further research.

One key finding is the strong emphasis on subject knowledge and subject didactics in programme curricula, alongside a focus on analytical skills and research methodology in course syllabi. Based on our experience as teacher educators, the course syllabi tend to be more influential in shaping the enacted curriculum in TE than the programme curricula. This suggests that the educational sciences orientation might have a more significant impact on Swedish TE than this study indicates. This could also explain the previously identified lack of relevance of learned research methods among teacher students (Eklund et al., 2019; Maaranen, 2010). Further studies examining the content, teaching, supervision, and assessment of thesis courses are necessary to clarify which orientations are most prevalent in the enacted curriculum. This also points to another limitation of this study: the lack of insights into process-related aspects of thesis work, such as student experiences and supervision (Emsheimer, 2007; Jansson et al., 2019), and how policy documents are implemented at various universities.

The national programme goals of Swedish TE allow for variations in thesis structures across universities, with some institutions requiring a single, comprehensive 30 ECTS thesis, while most have two theses: one of 15 ECTS, often a literature review in the first cycle, and another of 15 ECTS, typically, an empirical study in the second cycle. Since only 3 of the 20 investigated primary teacher programmes allow students to write a 30 ECTS thesis, it would be worthwhile to investigate the opportunities and limitations of opting for one larger thesis instead of two 15 ECTS theses.

In conclusion, the goals and aims of teacher education, its curriculum and the concept of the ideal teacher are evolving in response to societal changes and global challenges (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The analysis in this article provides insights of influential views in Swedish teacher education – primarily the view of the ideal teacher as a subject expert, with vocational expertise as a secondary attribute, in the 2020s. Ongoing debates in Sweden emphasise the need for a stronger focus on teaching practice, research-informed teaching, and subject knowledge. It will be interesting to see how the next Swedish teacher education reform, likely to be implemented in the coming years, will balance these goals and orientations – that is, the knowledge and skills that will define the ideal teacher in the 2020s and beyond.

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