

Speaking Up and Activism Among Frontline Employees: How Professional Coping Influences Work Engagement and Intent to Leave Among Teachers

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Nina M. van Loon¹, Madelon Heerema², Marit Weggemans²,
and Mirko Noordegraaf²

Abstract

Demands that exceed time and resources place pressure on public professionals, resulting in coping behavior. This study aims to provide insight in the prevalence and consequences of taking a more active strategy, professional coping. Next to traditional forms of coping studied in public administration, studying active coping can result in more insight in when and with what consequences frontline employees speak up and resist pressures. We explore to what degree teachers use speaking out using professional norms as a way to tackle the pressures they face. Moreover, we analyze the relationship between professional coping, work engagement, and intent to leave as important indicators of how immersed frontline employees are in their work. Using survey data ($n = 1,270$) from primary school teachers, we conclude that professional coping is in general regularly but not very often applied, but that professional coping is related to higher work engagement and lower intent to leave. We conclude that studying active coping strategies can not only be important for street-level literature in gaining insight in all types of behavior and their consequences but also for public service providers aiming for an engaged workforce.

Keywords

coping, street-level bureaucracy, work engagement, professionalism

Introduction

Scholarly and public debates argue that professionals working with public services are under pressure due to increased user influence, managerial control, and performance management (Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, & Walker, 2007; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2011; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013). Moreover, public professionals are confronted with increased workload and criticism on the quality of their work (Schott, van Kleef & Noordegraaf, 2015; Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015). Stakeholders—such as direct users, citizens, regulatory agencies, and government—place high, sometimes conflicting, demands on the services of the professionals (Hupe & Hill, 2007). In such high-pressure situations, it is no surprise that employees try to find coping strategies to reduce this pressure (Lipsky, 1980; Siciliano, 2017; Tummers et al., 2015).

According to Tummers et al. (2015), coping in public service can be defined as “behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis” (p. 2). In a meta-analysis, they find that numerous studies in public administration focus on coping strategies that can be described either as

moving toward, moving away, or moving against clients. Although such coping behaviors may be most common due to the limited power of frontline employees to change their situation (Brodkin, 2012), more active coping strategies such as political activism or professional organization have been documented and described (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Still, active coping strategies, which are defined by an intention to change the situation or address the problem at the heart of the demands and conflicts, have received much less attention than traditional passive strategies such as rationing, creaming, and routinizing (Tummers et al., 2015). Such passive strategies may however be quite relevant and common in some street-level bureaucracies. Although Lipsky (1980) tends to treat various street-level service providers as similar, some of these are organizations relying on specialized—professional—staff. Frontline employees in schools and

¹Aarhus University, Denmark

²Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Nina M. van Loon, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Bartholin's Alle 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

Email: nina@ps.au.dk

hospitals may be more likely to speak up or try to change their situation because they can rely on their professional background, network, and knowledge (Evans, 2011). For instance, Hupe and van der Krogt (2013) argue that street-level workers can also react professionally by searching for support among peers, and politically by actively trying to change the situation. Building on this frame, we argue that next to passive strategies, frontline employees can also adapt more active strategies that aim to change their situation.

The strong focus on street-level behavior raises important questions regarding why, when, and how frontline employees respond to pressure arising from their public context, and the consequences of this behavior. In this study, we aim to explore how we can study the occurrence of active professional coping, which can be described as behavior through which the frontline employee aims to actively strengthen and use the professional power basis to alter the situation, for example, through training, voicing, and participating in public debates.

Moreover, we provide insight into how professional coping is related to work engagement (Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006; Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008) and intent to leave. Work engagement is seen as the opposite of burnout, indicating a state of high energy and commitment of the employee (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Active coping behavior such as professional coping can have both negative and positive impacts on public service. On one hand, it may be that those who speak up and change problems in the delivery of public service are more committed to results and perform better. On the other hand, such coping may lead to more conflict. In this study, we focus on engagement and intent to leave of employees, as alienation and its negative effects have been documented regularly among frontline employees (Tummers, 2011). Actively using and strengthening the professional basis may increase absorption in the work, as well as reduce the likelihood of wanting to leave.

Gaining insight into the occurrence and importance of active ways of coping with pressures can increase our understanding of street-level bureaucrat behavior, which forms an important link between policy and practice. We use data from a large-scale survey ($n = 1,270$) among primary school teachers in the Netherlands. Using factor analysis and regression analysis, we show how professional coping is not a commonly used strategy, but that teachers who are more likely to show professional coping behavior are more engaged and less likely to leave their job. These first explorative insights into other types of strategies in dealing with pressures provide important avenues for future research.

Coping Among Public Professionals

Professionals working in public services are facing increased output and performance measurement, procedures, and guidelines by regulatory agencies and governments who want to enhance transparency and accountability (Ackroyd et al., 2007; Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Noordegraaf, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2011; Thomas & Davies, 2005). This increase

in control is perceived as heightening the burden placed upon professionals who have to administer and account thoroughly for their actions (Siciliano, 2017). As professional autonomy is decreased, teachers and doctors struggle with the feeling that they cannot act upon their professional norms, leading to stress and alienation (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Tummers, 2011).

With such high demands, frontline employees resort to coping; that is, behavior aimed at reducing the stress response, mastering the situation, or changing the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Psychological literature on coping has a long tradition of studying ways of dealing with pressure, leading to a myriad of definitions and meanings (Brandtstädter, 1992; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Oliver, 1991; Reuter & Schwarzer, 2009; Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

In public administration literature, coping is approached from a street-level bureaucracy perspective (Tummers et al., 2015). In his seminal book on street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky (1980) focuses on the specific, demanding situation that a public context places on public servants. He argues that public service providers, by their very nature, constantly face higher demand than the resources permit, and, if resources are increased, a service provider may actually only attract more demand. The employees in the agency therefore face dilemmas regarding how they spend the available, scarce resources. He identifies several strategies that frontline employees may use to reduce demand of clients, such as picking out the clients that are most likely to succeed (creaming or cherry picking), and limiting client demand by introducing waiting time, not providing information, or referring clients elsewhere (Lipsky, 1980).

Subsequent literature within public administration on coping has also been focused at the relationship between employee and client. For instance, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) show how frontline workers' decisions regarding client eligibility are based on the employee's assessment of the client rather than on the formal policy. They sometimes try to help clients, or block clients that are too difficult to help. The field has increased insight into the behavior of public servants by identifying strategies such as creaming, gaming, breaking rules, prioritizing, rationing, and identifying which factors may contribute to or lead to coping (May & Winter, 2007; Tummers & Rocco, 2015). In a conceptualization and meta-analysis of coping in public service, Tummers et al. (2015) argue that coping in public service can be defined as attempts to master, tolerate, or reduce pressure during the interaction with the client.

Although this framework provides a good basis for studying frontline coping behavior, two issues stand out. First, the dominant focus on the employee–client interaction also has downsides. For instance, although the employee–client interaction is central in public service, the pressures that doctors and teachers face actually stem from various sources, such as parents, regulatory agencies, and managers (Hupe & Hill, 2007). By way of example, public servants have to deal not only with their

“clients” but also with relatives of the clients (family or parents), regulatory agencies, and supervisors or managers (Schott et al., 2015). The focus on the client–employee relationship therefore does not capture the complexity of the multi-stakeholder environment in which the public professional works.

Second, coping by altering the relationship with the client can be seen as a passive strategy in which the employee does not attempt to change the situation causing the pressure. For example, rationing time with students may reduce the pressure but it does not solve the underlying problem of too many students to assist during class. Most empirical research has also focused on these passive strategies because street-level bureaucrats have little power to change the situation (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 1980). This does not mean, however, that frontline employees never apply more active strategies. For example, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) show examples of employees speaking up to managers (but giving up in the long run), and Hupe and van der Krogt (2013) argue that next to individualistic coping, frontline employees can also resort to professional networking or political activism. Following Tummers et al.’s (2015) definition, active coping refers to attempts at reducing the pressure or the problem which lead to a need for coping. Such behaviors can be classified as what Hirschman (1970) calls “voice,” where employees speak up, become active, and aim for change. In psychological terms, active coping behaviors have been classified as *control*, *active*, or *problem-oriented* coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Greenglass, Schwarzer, & Taubert, 1999; Reuter & Schwarzer, 2009; Schwarzer, 2000; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Scholars studying more control or problem-oriented coping strategies argue that individuals do not only react to a stressful situation by trying to deal with the consequences, but they also try to prevent it from happening or to change the situation to reduce the pressure and the stressful situation (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

Whether frontline employees use such strategies is also likely to influence policy outcomes. For example, teachers speaking up about burdensome registration procedures may result in altered procedures. However, due to the dominant focus on passive coping behaviors such as creaming and routinizing, not much is known about such active coping behaviors. In this article, we explore the occurrence and consequences of professional coping, an active strategy in which frontline employees aim to change the situation through speaking up, shaping, and balancing interests using their professional norms and background.

Professional Active Coping

In an overview of research since Lipsky’s (1980) groundbreaking work on street-level bureaucrats, Brodtkin (2012) notes that although discretion provides possibilities for resistance to rules and pressure, this power is not often used due to resource constraints and performance demands. An

important critique on Lipsky’s and subsequent work is that it has treated various types of street-level bureaucrats as similar whereas social workers, teachers, and nurses differ not only with regard to tasks but more importantly in degree of professionalism (Evans, 2011). Hupe and Hill (2007) argue that professionals in public services may have an important source of power through being part of a profession with norms, regulation, and status. They propose that frontline professionals may opt to use their profession to argue for a certain alteration in the situation by speaking up or participating in public debates.

As opposed to lobbying or advocacy, we do not focus on behaviors in which the employee aims to put forth specific political ideas. Here, we focus on *responses to pressure* in which the employee aims to change the situation at hand using the profession. This can be done not only by voicing concerns to the manager but also by actively participating in public debates. The latter behaviors may be highly related to advocacy in practice.

What defines a professional is differently approached in different disciplines. Focusing on professions, the nature of the work and the position in society are seen as defining characteristics (Freidson, 2001; Hupe & van der Krogt, 2013). There is usually a formal and long education necessary before entering a profession and professional control on the members (Freidson, 2001). Importantly, professionals have communal associations that determine work practices, norms, and regulations. The nature of professional work implies they need a certain degree of discretion because they need to apply general guidelines on specific cases. This involves tacit knowledge that cannot be written down but is acquired through experience (Freidson, 2001; Noordegraaf, 2015).

Professionals rely on a strong set of guidelines and norms in doing their work. Their discretionary space is derived from an implicit contract with society in which the profession promises to consider the various stakeholder interests in their decisions. This implicit contract can be an important source of power to resist pressures. For instance, doctors can refer to standards for good quality when discussing new policies with hospital managers. Likewise, based on their professional background, teachers can aim to balance student, parent, and societal outcomes when making decisions to actively prevent value conflicts from arising. In this study, we focus on active professional coping behavior through which the individual aims to actively strengthen and use the professional power basis to alter the situation, for example, through training, voicing, and participating in public debates.

Although previously described, not much is known regarding the degree to which frontline employees show such coping behaviors. To this end, this study focuses on professional coping among primary school teachers. Moreover, we aim to provide insight into how such coping is related to work engagement and turnover intentions. Frontline employees are highly at risk of becoming alienated from their work and the policies they have to execute as a result of the high demands and the lack of resources (Brodtkin, 2011, 2012).

Such detachment can be detrimental for the delivery of public services (Tummers, 2011). Work engagement represents the other side of detachment as it refers to a positive, fulfilling state of mind at work. It is characterized by dedication and absorption in the work (Maslach et al., 2001). Such engagement is important in services in which the role of the employee in “making it happen” is crucial. Next to this, we may expect that professional coping reduces employee intentions to leave. Following the same lines as for engagement, we would expect that employees who cope actively will feel more committed and absorbed in their work, and, therefore, will be less likely to consider leaving their job. In the next section, we discuss these relationships further.

Professional Coping, Work Engagement, and Intentions to Leave

The high pressure on professionals in public service is seen as causing alienation and burnout among frontline employees (Brodkin, 2012; Tummers, 2011). Studies have shown high levels of policy alienation among frontline workers in health and burnout among frontline professionals. Coping is seen as a way to reduce stress, but psychological studies have shown that some strategies are more beneficial in doing so than others. In general, strategies that are seen as passive because they are aimed at controlling the consequential stress as opposed to the problem causing the stress are more likely to result in burnout and reduced well-being (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Schwarzer, 2000; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

A high engagement at work means the employee experiences a positive, fulfilling state of mind at work. It is characterized by dedication and absorption in the work (Maslach et al., 2001). Work engagement can be seen as the opposite of burnout (Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2006) and is negatively related to distress and psychosomatic complaints (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Intentions to leave, however, are reflections of the employee regarding their future work (Bright, 2008). In public services such as schools and hospitals, work engagement is important for policy outcomes as it is the frontline employee who has to “create” the policy in interaction with citizens (Lipsky, 1980). Moreover, intentions to leave can harm the services provided, not only because of a higher chance of turnover and loss of experience, but also because employees who feel they want to leave may put less effort in their job.

There are two reasons why a relationship can be expected between professional coping and work engagement and intentions to leave. First, we may expect that public professionals who show professional coping behavior are more likely to create circumstances in which they can do their work well. By speaking out and actively trying to balance various interests, they may reduce pressures and even alter their circumstances by attaining extra resources, attention, or by reducing the workload. This may lead to less stress and more absorption, and less intentions to leave. Second, employees who show professional coping behavior may

perceive a higher congruence between their internalized norms and their actions (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006). If they do not speak out when they perceive barriers to delivering good services, they may feel guilt and stress because of a lack of congruence between their own norms and their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Both reasons rely on a fit argument: Professional coping behavior may increase the actual fit with the environment by changing the situation and the perceived fit by changing the congruence between norms and actions. Especially, when the congruence between the internalized norms and the tasks employees have to do is large, it is likely the employee will feel highly engaged in their work (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998). Efforts to overcome a misfit in the form of voicing and activism may increase the employees’ work engagement because even when these efforts are not successful, the employee internally feels that he or she has done everything to do something about it. Thus, there is low incongruence between internal values and one’s own actions—regardless of the outcome of the actions (Edwards et al., 2006). In such a situation, the salient needs are satisfied by the job, leading to higher engagement and less intentions to leave (Bright, 2008).

We do not exclude the theoretical possibility of reverse causality. For example, if public employees are highly absorbed and dedicated to their work, they may be more likely to take action when pressures are impeding task execution. However, coping is seen as intentional in the sense that employees aim to try to alleviate pressure. The consequent well-being in the form of burnout or its opposite work engagement are the result of whether these efforts have been successful. Moreover, intentions to leave are the final outcome of an employee’s perception of the work situation, in which their efforts to overcome pressure and their perceptions lead to a final decision to stay or go. Although this study cannot provide insight into the causal relationship due to its design, we aim to provide insight into the relationship between professional coping, work engagement, and intentions to leave. In the following section, we introduce our methods of studying professional coping via a developed questionnaire and a large-scale study among primary school teachers in the Netherlands.

Method

Case Description

In this study, we focus specifically on teachers in the Netherlands. Here, primary education has been subject to scrutiny due to a perceived lack of good quality, which was attributed to the high workload of teachers and their inability to cope with pressure from parents, inspection, and government agencies. There has been considerable debate regarding the autonomy of teachers and the lack thereof. Teachers are perceived as being under pressure and are sometimes depicted as “victims of the system” (Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013).

However, next to this generally pessimistic view of primary school teachers, instances of activism can also be

identified, such as teachers trying to introduce an alternative to the current system by writing a book (Kneyber & Evers, 2013) and participating in policy debates. This makes primary education an interesting case to analyze, as we might expect to find considerable variation in professional coping behavior among teachers. The sector is highly dominated by female teachers, with a very high percentage of the employees working part-time.

The data on which this study is based are the responses to a large-scale survey among 3,087 teachers in 151 schools. In total, 1,270 teachers responded to the survey. The sample mainly consists of female teachers (88.3%); male teachers form the minority (11.7%). The mean age is 42 years. Most of the respondents enjoyed higher vocational education (67%) called a vocational bachelor. Of the teachers, 17% had an academic master's degree. Most respondents worked part-time (72%). The sample is quite representative for the Dutch primary school teacher population in which in 2013, 82.5% were female, 20% had a master's degree, and 73.9% had a part-time job (Van den Berg & Scheeren, 2015).

Measurement

Development of a professional coping measure. To study the occurrence of professional coping among teachers, a measurement scale was developed. Here, we provide an overview of how this scale was developed.

We took several steps in developing a scale to measure professional coping. First, we developed theoretical ideas about professional coping. Then, we tested these primary ideas by interviewing two teachers, one who expressed to be unable to handle the work pressure, and one who had found ways to cope. Moreover, these ideas were tested and discussed with three school directors who had formed a general view of their many teachers and what they thought made a teacher capable of handling the job. The interviewees were found through the authors' and their colleagues' network within the educational system.

These orientating interviews focused on the pressures that teachers experienced, how they handled such situations, and what strategies they thought were most effective. From these interviews, several keywords were derived: "balancing stakeholder interests," that is, being able to handle parents, students, and other stakeholders to pave the way for good education; "expectation management," that is, being able to manage the various expectations; "tacit knowledge defense," that is, having professional standards regarding what can and should be expected; and "actively voicing concerns" in discussions with other stakeholders.

After this explorative phase, 26 preliminary items were generated. These items were based upon the interviews, theoretical insights, and insights from proactive coping regarding measurement. For instance, items of proactive coping measures developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), Carver et al. (1989), and Greenglass et al. (1999) were studied to build upon this knowledge. All these items were put on

separate cards. The cards were administered to 10 public management scholars with the question to review each item on, first and foremost, whether it represented professional coping. Second, they could comment on meaning, understandability, and length, to describe what it measured according to them, and to group them if applicable. The analyses of the answers showed that some items were difficult to group with others, that some were difficult to understand, and that there was variation in whether the item measured an attitude or behavior—a common distinction in coping research. Based upon the comments, the items were reviewed and adjusted. For example, the scholars saw some items as measuring behavior and others as measuring attitudes. Following Tummers et al. (2015), we focus on behavioral coping as opposed to attitude because behavior is more likely to influence policy outcome. Moreover, it appeared that in measuring professional coping, multiple aspects needed to be included, such as activism, learning, and balancing interests.

The new list of items was then discussed with two experts on scale development and measurement. These experts were able to help in cutting the number and the length of the items and increase understandability. Based on these steps, a scale was designed including multiple aspects that together form professional coping, such as attempts to change the situation by speaking up or actively participating in debates, and using professional norms regarding quality and balancing interests to actively address the situation. Table A1 in the Appendix shows the full list of items.

The item answering categories were designed as a range indicating how often the respondent behaved in such a way: *never* (1), *once in a while* (2), *regularly* (3), *often* (4), *very often* (5), *almost always* (6), and *always* (7). We use templates, meaning that the items can be adjusted to the specific context by filling in the words between brackets. In this study, "organization" becomes "school" and "service" becomes "education." This allows respondents to identify themselves as being more or less like someone described in the statement.

An exploratory pilot study among teachers in one school ($n = 127$) showed that not all items were understood well by respondents. Based upon the inter-item correlations, response patterns, and face validity, the scale was adjusted (DeVellis, 2003). For example, the item "my contact with parents, students, and inspection is positive" was seen as an outcome and difficult to answer because it is referring to multiple stakeholders. In the pilot test, the correlations between the items were analyzed as well as the responses to the items. Some items which were only marginally related to the others, difficult to understand, or unable to distinguish between respondents were deleted. New items generated by the researchers were added to fill up potential gaps in the scale and to retain sufficient items for the next phase.

Items 3, 5, and 7 were removed from the scale as they were identified as having a low validity, being open for multiple interpretations, or having little connection to other items. Moreover, Item 9 was removed. It had a high overlap

Table 1. Standardized Factor Loadings, Standard Error, and Significance for Professional Coping.

	Item	Standardized factor loadings	SE	Significance
PC1	I speak up within [organization] if there are problems that form an obstacle for providing good [education].	.695	.022	.000
PC6	Even though [stakeholders] tell me how to teach, I myself make the final decision.	.570	.031	.000
PC8	I balance the interest of [stakeholders] in such a way that it contributes optimally to the quality of [service].	.686	.025	.000
PC10	I take an active role in discussions about my profession.	.764	.021	.000
PC11	I balance the importance of [output measures] with other aspects of [service].	.787	.021	.000
PC14	I communicate when accountability tasks have a negative effect on the fulfillment of other tasks.	.622	.028	.000
PC15	I use administrative systems in my work in such a way that they are useful for my work.	.601	.030	.000
PC19	I search courses or training programs for the development of my skills that may be beneficial in the future.	.544	.032	.000

with Item 10 and was felt by teachers to be “part of the job” instead of optional. Although Items 1 and 2 also had a high overlap, both were retained as they refer to different ways of speaking out. As four items were removed, new items were formulated to replace them. During validation of a scale, several items are usually dropped (Byrne, 2012; Kline, 2010). Consequently, it is important to include a sufficient number of items to end up with a scale of approximately eight to 10 items. Therefore, four new items were generated to supply the original list (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

To validate the scale in the large-scale survey, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus v7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010–2013). A CFA can show how well the items reflect the underlying construct. To assess the fit, it is recommended to use multiple fit indices (Byrne, 2012; Kline, 2010). As chi square is known to be inflated when the sample size (n) is larger than 200, other fit indices are used. In this study, the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) are used (Byrne, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2010). CFI and TLI values above .90 are indicative of acceptable fit, and values above .95 of an excellent one; similarly, an RMSEA below .10 reflects acceptable fit, and below .08 an excellent one (Byrne, 2012; Kline, 2010).

When validating a scale, it is common that the scale needs to be adjusted (Byrne, 2012; Kline, 2010). To decide how the model can be improved, we used the modification indices provided by Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2010–2013). These indices indicate how much the model is improved by alterations to the model.

A first model including all items had a very bad fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 1,248.85^*$ ($p < .01$), CFI = .749, TLI = .707, RMSEA = .119. The modification indices showed issues with items, such as overlap between some variables or too little overlap between some items and the scale. Using these indices, the model was improved step by step resulting in a final model with eight items. For this final model, we analyze the validity and reliability. Next to having a good general measurement fit

and significant factor loadings, the measurement should be valid—meaning that the variable or construct is the underlying cause of item co-variation and represents the construct of interest well (DeVellis, 2003). Finally, the scale should be reliable, which can be tested by calculating Cronbach’s alpha (DeVellis, 2003)—or more applicable when analyzing factor loadings with Raykov’s rho (Raykov, 2009).

Table 1 shows the final items, factor loadings, standards errors, and significance of factor loadings. The final items refer to *speaking up*, *focusing on quality*, *balancing interests*, and *actively developing the profession and the associated skills*. This shows that the scale does not tap into general speaking up, but speaking up regarding aspects that make it difficult to deliver quality, and to balance various interests. The scale can be seen as additive, as the items tap into different aspects that represent professional coping. Speaking up, balancing interests, actively discussing, trying to use systems, and developing skills relate to different aspects of professional coping. They are, in a sense, different behaviors but all have in common that they aim to actively strengthen and use the professional power basis to alter the situation. All factor loadings are significant. The reliability of the scale is high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .879$, Raykov’s rho = .874).

Work engagement. Work engagement was measured with six items from the Dutch Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002; see Table A3 in the Appendix). Testing the construct with CFA showed the scale to have a good fit to the data (CFI = .982, TLI = .970, RMSEA = .069). The reliability was high, indicated by the Cronbach’s alpha of .931.

Intent to leave. Intent to leave was measured with three questions from Bozeman and Perrewé (2001; see Table A3 in the Appendix). The reliability was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .845$).

Control variables. We control for gender, tenure, education, and working part- or full-time as these characteristics may both

influence coping and engagement. For example, working full-time may increase an employee's engagement to their job.

Data Analysis

We first show descriptive analyses to provide more insight into professional coping among teachers in this sample. Next, we analyze the relationship between professional coping and work engagement using regression analysis with clustered standard errors to correct for the fact that teachers are clustered in schools. This means that while running the analysis, the regression uses the information that each individual is clustered within a school for estimation and thereby deriving the standard errors and significance. In the second model, we include gender, tenure, education, and part- or full-time workers.

Results

The State of Professional Coping in Primary Education in the Netherlands

In Table 2, the responses on the Professional Coping scale, formed by the average score on the items in the scale, are shown both in numbers and percentages per category. It appears that most teachers in this sample show professional coping "regularly" (42%). The average score on professional coping is 3.6 ($SD = 1.06$). A quarter (25%) of the sample indicates that they very often or always respond with professional coping, whereas only 10% very sporadically applies this strategy.

The Relationship Between Professional Coping, Work Engagement, and Intent to Leave

Subsequently, we analyzed the relationship between professional coping and work engagement. Work engagement is seen as the opposite of burnout indicating that the employee has a high level of energy while working (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis. We use a robust regression with clustered standard errors to correct for the fact that teachers are clustered in schools.

In Model 1, only professional coping is included. We find that professional coping is positively and significantly related to work engagement. The relationship is highly significant. The explained variance by professional coping in engagement is 24.4%. This indicates that teachers who cope using professional coping are also more engaged in their work than those who are less likely to speak out and cope in such a way.

In Model 2, we included the control variables to test the robustness of the results. We find that the relationship between professional coping and work engagement does not change, although the estimate of professional coping becomes larger than in Model 1. Moreover, the results show that those with more experience and female respondents were more engaged than male respondents. It may be that those who have worked at the school longer are more devoted to their profession. Finally, it appears that those with a higher

Table 2. Responses to the Professional Coping Scale.

	n	%
1. Never	1	0.1
2. Once in a while	114	9
3. Regularly	533	42
4. Often	305	24
5. Very often	203	16
6. Almost always	89	7
7. Always	25	2
Total	1,270	100

education are less engaged in their work, which is a remarkable finding. The variance in this sample regarding education is however limited, which means that one should not draw strict conclusions from this finding. Surprisingly, whether the respondents work part- or full-time has no importance for their work engagement. Working part-time is highly correlated with gender, and if women overall have higher work engagement, it may explain this null finding.

In Model 3, the relationship between professional coping and intent to leave is analyzed. We find a significant, negative relationship indicating that employees who cope using an active professional strategy are less likely to want to leave the organization. Model 4 shows that these findings hold also when including the control variables. The model, however, only explains very little variation in intentions to leave, showing that there are other factors that may play a larger role in employee decisions regarding leaving their job.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to provide more insight into professional coping as an active strategy in addressing pressure on frontline employees. Several scholars have argued that professionals in the public domain suffer from the pressures they face from managers, users, and government (Ackroyd et al., 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2011). Studying professional coping can increase insight into the degree to which professionals counter these pressures by speaking out and more proactively by taking a stance using their profession, and it shows the degree to which individuals aim to change the system from the inside.

The results show that in the studied sample of primary school teachers, professional voicing behavior is regularly but not very often applied as a coping strategy. This reflects the image provided by the media and public debate regarding the way teachers in primary education deal with the pressures they face. It also corresponds with qualitative studies on street-level bureaucrats showing that although sometimes frontline employees try to resist pressures, they often fail and give up because they have little power to actually change the situation (Brodkin, 2012). Teachers in the Netherlands may have limited power to change their situation due to a low degree of organization. Despite their common background

Table 3. Regression Results for the Relationship Between Professional Coping, Work Engagement, and Intent to Leave.

	Work engagement		Intent to leave	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Professional coping	0.593** (0.0290)	0.603** (0.0324)	-0.122** (0.0304)	-0.115** (0.0312)
Gender (female = 1)		0.304* (0.121)		-0.169 (0.124)
Education		-0.0684* (0.0279)		-0.0113 (0.0274)
Employment (full = 1)		-0.0349 (0.0848)		-0.0261 (0.0668)
Tenure		0.00893* (0.00420)		-0.00387 (0.00388)
Constant	2.315** (0.115)	2.187** (0.224)	2.298** (0.106)	2.537** (0.210)
<i>n</i>	903	862	896	855
<i>R</i> ²	.245	.262	.019	.021
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.244	.257	.018	.015

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

and education, primary teachers are only to a limited extent professionalized. This may explain the fact that, on average, they do not apply professional coping often. However, to analyze whether the level of professional coping is high or low, additional research which compares different groups of employees is needed.

In this study, we add to the body of knowledge regarding frontline behavior by showing what the consequences can be for frontline employees themselves of coping more actively. The results showed a positive relationship between professional coping and work engagement and negatively to intent to leave. Work engagement is seen as the opposite of burnout and represents a positive state of energy at work. Such engagement may be quite important in organizations that deliver contact-intensive services such as education. Teachers who are alienated or resigned from their work while teaching are less likely to support their students well. The impact of engagement may be higher in such professions than in professions without intense contacts. Still, we also find that teachers who are more likely to use professional coping are less likely to leave the organization. Intentions to leave can be detrimental for an organization because employees may put in less effort, and it may lead to actual turnover (Bright, 2008).

Our finding that teachers who speak up, who actively participate in debating education, and who actively try to change their situation are more engaged and less likely to leave shows that such active forms of coping may help in producing good services. The positive relationship may be the result of teachers who speak out being better able to create circumstances in which they can perform their work. It may also be that teachers experience congruence between their own professional values and their actions as they actively defend and speak out for those aspects of education they feel are important. Such a high congruence has been found to be important for well-being and to reduce stress (Edwards et al., 2006; Edwards et al., 1998).

This study contributes to current literature on coping among public professionals in two ways. First, we have introduced and studied the occurrence of a more active type of coping in which the professional speaks out and actively

aims to change the situation causing pressure. Second, we found a positive relationship between professional coping and work engagement and negative to intent to leave. As the sector struggles to keep its employees in good condition, this is important knowledge for research and practice. Stimulating teachers to speak out and become active in defining norms and expectations in the profession can potentially increase their engagement and reduce intentions to leave and through that rub off positively on the services they provide.

There are also limitations to this study. For instance, we have only studied professional coping in one group of frontline employees, and therefore should be careful to generalize the findings to other groups. Future research needs to sort out whether professional coping occurs in a similar way in other groups. We may expect that groups with a higher professional status and stronger organization, such as doctors and judges, are more likely to show professional coping behavior. Another important question is to what degree professional coping is similar or different from advocacy or lobbying behaviors. Can these behaviors be separated or are they related concepts? Future research can look into the distinctive nature of professional coping versus other concepts. A second limitation is that this study is cross-sectional and relies on the self-reported behavior of employees. As an explorative test, we found that professional coping is positively related to work engagement and negatively to intent to leave, but this study cannot provide insight into the causal mechanisms for which longitudinal studies are more suitable. Although qualitative studies may be useful for observing coping behaviors in a specific situation, this set-up allowed us to study the occurrence and consequences of professional coping on a large scale. Finally, we have studied one type of coping here which prevents us from comparing the importance of this coping behavior relative to others. Future studies could include both passive and active coping behaviors to study whether these coping behaviors have different or similar consequences for the delivery of public service.

This study also raises new questions for future research. First, this was a first attempt at measuring professional coping. The scale consists of several items that tap into different

aspects that aim to use and enhance the professional power basis. However, it may be that these aspects form different sub-dimensions. There is a need to develop the ideas regarding more active coping strategies further, as well as ways in which it can be measured or studied. An important question is what influence such active coping behavior has on policy outcomes. Professional coping may, for example, also lead to more conflict due to frontline employees speaking out and showing activism. What are the consequences for the policy outcomes? At the same time, some scholars argue that frontline employees are safe keepers of social norms because they have a better understanding of what should be done than policy makers (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). They are citizen agents, and thus, more active coping may lead to more citizen-focused policy.

Furthermore, an important question is how we can explain differences between frontline employees in professional coping behavior. We argued before that the degree of organization and professionalization may matter for whether employees apply professional coping or not. Doctors may have more power and status to resist pressures than social workers. Moreover, the institutional and organizational context may also matter for professional coping. For instance, managerial practices such as organizing exchanges between teachers or stimulating participation in associations or peer-groups may increase professional coping behavior.

Finally, an important question is how resources such as discretionary space are related to professional coping. However, we may expect that more discretion reduces the need for coping professionally because employees can adapt

the policies on the work floor and do not need to try and change the policies or regulations.¹ At the same time, it might be that when employees are given more discretion, they are more likely to cope actively because they feel they can have an impact. With little discretion, it may be difficult to find time and ways to influence the situation, which may make employees more likely to cope passively. Potentially qualitative methods are most suitable for fleshing out such intricate relationships as they allow for in-depth discussion of behavior under different circumstances.

Differences in performance management may also matter for how frontline employees cope with pressures. Brodtkin (2011) argues that coping is the result of the balance between demand and resources, moderated by the incentives given to employees. Finally, personal characteristics, even personality traits, may be related to professional coping. For instance, professional coping such as voicing concerns may be related to being a more extrovert person, not being afraid to talk to others and make oneself heard.

This study has shown that professional, active coping is applied regularly among primary school teachers and that it is positively related to work engagement and negatively related to intentions to leave. As an engaged workforce may be beneficial for the delivery of public services such as teaching, public organizations may try and look for ways to increase more active, problem-oriented coping behaviors among staff. Research can aid by studying how organizational factors matter for such active coping behaviors. We have, as a first step, provided insight into the behavior and consequences of professional coping at the frontlines of public service.

Appendix

Table A1. Initial List of Items Measuring Professional Coping.

	Item
PC1	I speak up within [organization] if there are problems that form an obstacle for providing good [service].
PC2	I encourage colleagues to speak up [within the organization] when they encounter problems that make it difficult to achieve results.
PC3	My contact with [stakeholders] is positive.
PC4	I adjust my [service tasks] regularly in response to new insights.
PC5	When requirements are contradictory between [stakeholders], I myself choose the appropriate approach.
PC6	Even though [stakeholders] tell me how to [deliver service], I myself make the final decision.
PC7	I set boundaries on the amount of work that I take upon myself to maintain a balance between my well-being and my work.
PC8	I balance the interest of [stakeholders] in such a way that it contributes optimally to the quality of [service].
PC9	I am actively involved in formulating [service]
PC10	I take an active role in discussions about my profession.
PC11	I balance the importance of [output measures] with other aspects of [service].
PC12	I speak up when I consider accountability systems (such as administration systems) useless.
PC13	I guard my boundaries when it comes to accountability systems to fulfill other responsibilities of my job properly.
PC14	I communicate when accountability tasks have a negative effect on the fulfillment of other tasks.
PC15	I use administrative systems in my work in such a way that they are useful for my work.

Table A2. Added Items.

	Item
PC 16	I set boundaries on the amount of work I am responsible for, so in the long run I can continue to perform well.
PC 17	I balance extracurricular activities (like school trips) in such a way that there is still time for my own personal development.
PC 18	I speak up when work and well-being are out of balance.
PC 19	I search courses or training programs for the development of my skills that may be beneficial in the future.

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Table A3. Work Engagement and Intent to Leave Items.

Work engagement	
1.	At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
2.	My job inspires me.
3.	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
4.	I feel happy when I am working intensely.
5.	I am proud of the work that I do.
6.	I am immersed in my work.
Intent to leave	
1.	Lately, I feel like quitting my job
2.	If I could, I would quit today.
3.	Right now, I am actively looking for a job outside of education.

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Author Biographies

Nina M. van Loon is assistant professor at the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research focuses on public management and performance, with a particular emphasis on street-level attitudes and behavior.

Madelon Heerema, MSc, was a junior researcher at the Utrecht School of Governance, and now works at BMC Implementation, as a consultant in the Education unit.

Marit Weggemans, Msc, was a student assistant at the Utrecht School of Governance, and now works as project manager at the Dutch Council for Secondary Education (VO-raad).

Mirko Noordegraaf is full professor of public management at the Utrecht School of Governance (USG), Utrecht University. He focuses on public management, organizations and professionalism, with a particular emphasis on public professionals.