

Chapter 8

Teachers' Expectations and Expectations of Teachers: Understanding Teachers' Societal Role



Sara Juvonen and Auli Toom

Abstract Being a teacher is an esteemed position in Finland. Finnish class teachers are academically educated professionals in five-year masters level programmes, where only a small percentage of applicants are accepted. However, in recent years, more teachers have reported having intentions to leave the profession, and there has been a slight decline in the number of applicants to teacher education programmes too. In this chapter, we elaborate Finnish expectations of teaching as a profession, set by society on the one hand, and teachers themselves on the other. Society sets both explicit and implicit expectations for teachers: teachers' work is defined by a national curriculum as well as current policy aims, but is also moulded by the surrounding culture and norms. Teachers themselves are likely to have expectations of a personally fulfilling career; expectations that have begun to form already in their years as students in school, observing and learning what teachers and school are like. Schools, ideally, function to both maintain and reform society. We argue that expectations concerning teachers—normative expectations learned through observation in particular—act as part of the way schools maintain society. We ask whether Finnish teacher education today does enough to help teachers to assume their teacher role in society broadly and navigate the constantly changing field of education.

Being a teacher is charged with expectations from many directions.¹ Societal expectations of teachers maintain they should uphold national demands for education and schooling, meet requirements presented in the curriculum, carry out new educational policies, and serve the needs of students. Societal expectations entail implicit expectations as well: assumptions arising from often long-held norms about what a 'good' school and teacher are like, and who can be a teacher to begin with. Prospective teachers themselves are also likely to have professional ambitions and expectations of what being a teacher will be like. Margaret Buchmann² approaches this in her

S. Juvonen (✉) · A. Toom

Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 9, 00014 Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: sara.juvonen@helsinki.fi

A. Toom

e-mail: auli.toom@helsinki.fi

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thorough analyses of people holding a teacher's role; fulfilling professional responsibilities and, at the same time, utilising personal strengths. In his famous book, *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*, Dan Lortie³ coined the concept *apprenticeship of observation*, suggesting that unlike most professions, socialisation into being a teacher begins already in the early years we spend at school as students. Aspiring teachers bring with them experiences from their years in school. Deborah Britzman⁴ has written about the cultural myths of being a teacher, concluding that common understandings of the profession—such as being a role model—might become an unnecessary burden and prevent the chance of teachers undoing what they have learnt during their years as observers in school.

In the aftermath of Finland's PISA fame, both the Finnish comprehensive system and teacher education have attracted international interest. The Finnish primary teacher education programme has been widely analysed and some of its key elements have even been adapted internationally. Being a teacher is an esteemed position in Finland, requiring a university degree from a study program with an exceptionally low entrance acceptance rate. Yet even though Finnish teachers and teacher education rank highly both in Finland and internationally, there are indications of growing numbers of Finnish teachers having plans to leave teaching,⁵ some even at the very beginning of their career.⁶ In very recent years, the number of applicants to the primary teacher education degree programmes has declined slightly.⁷ Internationally, a proportion of teachers switching careers is a well-known phenomenon, but not in the Finnish context. Nevertheless, some weak signs of it are emerging which might indicate that early-career teachers in Finland are finding it challenging to embrace a teacher's role and all the expectations that it involves.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at Finnish teacher education in light of current trends and research, together with classic texts about teaching. The chapter aims to provoke ideas about the current Finnish teacher education and its relevance to teachers' work.⁸ Our main question is whether Finnish teacher education today serves to educate teachers that are able to assume a societal role, and through that role work towards schools' societal tasks: both maintaining *and* reforming social and cultural structures in individuals' lives and society. We approach the subject through expectations that teachers themselves have, and expectations that society sets for teachers. By culture and the expectations arising from it, we refer to the ways of being and doing of specific contexts into which people are socialised and contributing to, through living within and interacting with their surrounding social communities. Our interest is in teacher education, as it is where existing expectations should be recognised, critically explored and, ideally, reconciled. Unlike studies on teacher-student interaction or the classroom, there is still relatively little research on the Finnish teacher in their social and societal context.⁹ We contextualise our argument by first discussing current trends in Finnish teacher education and schools. We then elaborate different expectations concerning teachers, and propose how these expectations work as part of schools' (re-)productive or societal maintenance function. We argue for a teacher education that enhances critical professional agency, to scrutinise and reconcile different expectations towards schools and teachers and, in the end, to enact the school's societal tasks with purpose and consideration.

Teacher Education in Finland

Finnish teachers are academically educated in five-year master level programmes. Teacher education was placed in the universities according to a political decision in 1979, soon after the reform of Finnish basic education. Since then, it has been the requirement that every primary and secondary school teacher must earn a master's degree to receive a formal teacher qualification. The five-year primary teacher education programme comprises basic, intermediate and advanced studies in educational sciences including bachelor's and master's theses, as well as studies in minor subjects and teaching practice periods in teacher training schools and regular schools. It qualifies teachers to work as primary school class teachers with students of 7–13 years of age. Subject teachers typically complete a master's degree in their chosen subject and, in addition, one year of pedagogical studies in educational sciences including teaching practice periods. This qualifies them to work as subject teachers in both primary and lower and/or upper secondary schools. The research-orientation as an organising theme of teacher education and the broad aim to educate pedagogically thinking teachers¹⁰ have been developed gradually. The main aim is to learn key knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as an inquiring orientation.¹¹ Inquiry-oriented teachers are thought to have capabilities to work in complex everyday settings at school and have both a theoretical understanding and practical capabilities for the key phenomena—education, teaching and learning—at both classroom and school levels.

A concrete determinant of who can become a teacher comes in the form of the application process, and the recent decreasing number of applicants has been noted and investigated.¹² In recent years, Finnish teacher education has also taken steps towards a more nationally unified student selection process. The previous, university specific entrance examination model was criticised for a lack of evidence-based methods and for bias.¹³ To avoid these issues, a government funded project *Student Selection to Teacher Education in Finland—Anticipatory Work for Future* (OVET/DOORS) has created a conceptual framework¹⁴ based on a model of teacher competencies developed by Sigrid Blömeke and colleagues.¹⁵ The model aims to enhance cohesion between Finnish university study programmes and help universities to implement more uniform and transparent student selection practices. These developments seek more equal treatment and selection of applicants, and also aim to focus the entrance evaluation on the elements of teachers' work that have been found relevant. However, most of the teacher education programmes in Finland are structured around subject-specific didactics studies, and societal and contextual questions of schooling often receive less attention during the actual studies.

Current Educational Trends and Challenges in Finland

Current issues concerning Finnish schooling, such as growing segregation amongst residential areas and how this is reflected in schools and student demographics,¹⁶ challenge the aspiration of equality and influence school life. School choice also affects school segregation both among and within schools.¹⁷ Finnish media debate concerning inclusive education has been lively after a change in legislation in 2010 that aimed at providing special support for students in need in general education classes rather than in a separate special education class.¹⁸ The Teacher Education Forum, established by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in 2016, lists the characteristics of an ideal future teacher, and raises growing differences among educational institutions and a growing competence gap “between boys and girls” as possible challenges for attaining these teacher ideals.¹⁹ A growing competence gap in the Finnish PISA evaluations between students is also tied to socio-economic background, and the possibility of its connection to growing segregation within the biggest Finnish cities is considered in the preliminary Finnish PISA case report.²⁰ Constant societal change and changing discourse also mould expectations towards teachers, and teacher workload is a subject of ongoing public discussion.

It is well recognised that through observation, students only see a fraction of what it is to be a teacher, meaning that students who enter teacher education rarely have a comprehensive understanding of what the work entails and what is expected of them.²¹ Societal change, as described above, can be expected to widen this gap between expectations further. This makes learning to understand the school as an institution, one’s own expectations towards it and towards themselves a key task of teacher education. The challenge is how to make future teachers’ own perceptions of school visible and convey society’s expectations to teachers, whilst also allowing for critical scrutiny of these expectations. To assume a societal teacher role, teacher education could provide student-teachers with possibilities for testing their ideas and ideals, and thus, enacting their professional agency²²—instead of educating them strictly in line with the current basic education curriculum and structures, as the curriculum is likely to change many times over a teacher’s career. In the following, we elaborate teachers’ own expectations and societal expectations towards them.

Teachers’ Personal Expectations for the Profession

Compared internationally, teaching is still an exceptionally popular career choice amongst young people in Finland. The teaching profession is relatively autonomous, and the professional framework provides possibilities to fulfil one’s own ideals and potential. But as a tool of self-realisation, it is only partial: Teaching requires strong commitment to support students’ growth and learning, an altruistic attitude and willingness to work for the best of the students. Teachers strive to accommodate their personal needs and interests to the profession and for the best of student-learning and

growth.²³ Agentic teachers who are personally committed are able to build good relationships with their pupils, enhancing their learning and favourably impacting their schooling experience.²⁴ The relationship between teachers and students is always asymmetric, and sets the main responsibility for education, learning and development on the teacher's side. The relationship is future-oriented, temporary, and imperfect, and it hopes for the best of students' growth and development. In the end it is voluntary: students cannot be forced to commit to the pedagogical relationship offered by their teachers, even though schooling is compulsory.²⁵

These core characteristics steer teachers and strongly influence their willingness to work as teachers. They are strong motivating factors for investing in the work, and challenge teachers to build functioning and trustful relationships with their students. Teaching expects strong personal investment, but still, it is not only for realising one's own visions and ambitions, but rather to realise them by fulfilling the teacher's role.²⁶ As Buchmann emphasises, schools are firstly for students, and students' autonomy and self-realisation depend on what they learn at school. As a result, "self-realisation in teaching is not a good in itself, but only insofar as pursuing self-realisation leads to appropriate student learning".²⁷

Empirical research on Finnish student-teachers shows that their learning includes a variety of meaningful phases and critical experiences throughout their studies. Agentic capabilities for reflection and building a collaborative learning environment and pedagogical competence develop gradually—but not linearly—during the studies.²⁸ Student-teachers constantly construct their professional identity, which should be intentionally challenged and supported in teacher education. Compared internationally, the Finnish context allows teachers to utilise and develop their own personal interests and strengths: the education system, formal qualification requirements, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC), and related decrees²⁹ set the professional norms and space in which teachers do their work, perform their teacher roles and bring in their personal qualities as teachers.³⁰ Within the legal framework, Finnish teachers have relatively broad freedom to, for instance, emphasise pedagogical approaches and utilise such materials and tools that they perceive relevant for students' learning.³¹ They may initiate developments, collaborations and innovations at schools with their colleagues, that benefit both students' and teachers' learning.³² Yet although the teaching profession allows for personal aspirations and self-realisation to an extent, in practice, teachers' work is delimited by societal expectations, which we turn to next.

Societal Expectations Towards Teachers

There are both explicit and implicit societal expectations towards teachers ranging from legal, binding requirements to normative assumptions which are less conscious cultural understandings of the social world and the roles of the people within. Explicit, rather ambitious, expectations are stated in the National Core Curriculum for basic education (NCC), which sets guidelines for the aims of comprehensive education:

each comprehensive school is to provide children with certain academic skills and support them in their growth, well-being and building of positive identities.³³ The NCC, adapted into local curricula to better suit municipalities and individual schools, is a binding document setting the fundamental frame of expectations for all schools and teachers' work. It is renewed in Finland in every 10–15 years through a highly collective process involving teachers, researchers, policy makers, and even parents. It reflects the collective understanding of the core characteristics of school education that are seen as important to promote, both intellectually and pedagogically.³⁴ The NCC is an example of not only explicit expectations, but as such a shared effort it also reflects implicit norms; all who take part in the process are apprentices of observation and carry with them cultural ideas and values.

The role of teachers in education policy is twofold: their profession and everyday actions are objects of continuous policy development, but they are also expected to act as the individual and reflective professionals 'implementing' educational policy in schools. Finnish teachers are traditionally highly autonomous actors and enjoy a high level of trust, there being no high-stakes accountability model such as school inspections or teacher evaluations based on student outcomes.³⁵ The Teacher Education Forum has formulated development goals for teacher education, viewing teachers as "future-oriented and broad-based" experts who, among other things, will actively develop, experiment with and implement pedagogical innovations as well as continually develop their own competence as a teacher. To do this, teachers are to utilise the "latest research and evaluations" and seek and provide support in national as well as international networks.³⁶ These strategic guidelines set high and perhaps unrealistic aims for teachers to pursue. It may be recalled that as well as constantly evaluating and developing pedagogical strategies along with their own competence and being active in teacher-networks, teachers are expected to teach.

Like all social systems, schools are also filled with implicit expectations of how to be and behave—after all, a central task of institutional education is socialisation and thus cultural (re-)production.³⁷ These mostly tacit, historically constructed norms, and assumptions that arise from them are tied to cultural traditions and social hierarchies that are present in the overarching society, and are an inherent part of the school. They concern more what is seen as natural or normal and involve less conscious reflection and decision.³⁸ What is abnormal in school is always constructed in relation to what is viewed as normal.³⁹ Discourse and cultural perceptions of normality thus mark off the possibilities of a 'proper' teacher's action. Historically, in the official steering documents of Finnish basic education through 1860s to the 1990s, the ideal teacher was first portrayed as a model citizen, setting an example both in and outside of the school, reaching to requirements of their health, appearance and overall conduct beyond teaching. Approaching the basic education reform in the 1950s, explicit expectations of impeccable behaviour and reputation were removed from the written discourse, and after the reform of basic education, a middle-class teacher ideal of model citizenship faded—however, talk of teacher ideals going beyond teaching did not fully disappear from state discourse until the beginning of the 1990s.⁴⁰

The current legal requirements for a qualified teacher strictly concern academic and language qualifications.⁴¹ Implicit expectations concerning teachers' moral character and ethical behaviour are still present today,⁴² which is understandable due to the characteristics of teachers' work. Some studies imply that the expectations extend to teachers' cultural characteristics and conduct, or even appearance.⁴³ Analysis of the front covers of the OAJ Trade Union of Education's magazine *Opettaja* [Teacher] from 2013 to 2017 shows a visual representation of a Finnish teacher as "highly homogenous in terms of ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, age, and physical appearance",⁴⁴ suggesting that cultural ideas and ideals of teachers still persist. These traits have little to nothing to do with the core tasks of teaching and teacher profession, as the focus should rather be on how teachers are committed to students' growth, or how teachers are able to develop their school, for instance. Even though change in policy reflects cultural change, expectations arising from norms do not necessarily instantly go away when modifying steering documents, since discourse and the practices they shape are continuously socially reproduced in people's actions, speech, and experiences,⁴⁵ unless consciously and actively challenged. New ideals and policy aims for teachers' work emerge, but instead of altogether replacing the previous ones, live side-by-side with their antecedents, and not always harmoniously.⁴⁶ Having had a teacher role model is reported as one of the pull-factors to teacher education by Finnish secondary school students,⁴⁷ and so for students—and future teachers—it matters whether teachers represent a homogenous or a diverse group of people, since through observation, students learn what a teacher is and can be like.

Working with and Around Cultural Ideals of School—a Societally Sensitive Teacher

Finnish primary school teachers are sometimes argued to be more often traditional than critical in their relationship with society,⁴⁸ despite the policy ideal of a critical, research-oriented teacher.⁴⁹ Dan Lortie⁵⁰ suggests that students who find school-life pleasant are more likely to consider a teaching career, which, to him, naturally maintains a less critical and more perpetuating relationship between teachers and the school institution. Cultural expectations of school and normality begin to form already in our years in schools as students, and like all people, teachers are through socialisation products of their culture and their actions reflect what is viewed as culturally normal. Skills learned through observation and a strong motivation for entering the field of teaching may mean that student-teachers are eager to complete their degree efficiently, and to that end, adapting to, rather than pausing to criticise teacher education seems logical. But as Kai Kallas and colleagues⁵¹ have argued, the readier a student-teacher is to adapt to, versus criticise, the status quo during their studies or after, the fewer their possibilities for professional learning.

If teachers truly come to teaching with a more conservative than critical mind-set, we argue it may crucially impact teachers' work: without suitable tools to question the institution and its inherent normative assumptions, teachers may end up questioning their own adequacy as teaching professionals, or the adequacy of their pupils when facing difficulties in their everyday practice. A study of Finnish student-teachers' challenging experiences in their trainee phase lends some support to this proposition: while navigating through situations that student-teachers felt ethically difficult, they were more likely to be critical of themselves rather than openly criticise their supervising teachers or the training school's practices, even with situations that caused them emotional frustration or distress.⁵² In another Finnish study, teachers who had a more traditional, adaptive orientation towards society were found to understand the aim of institutional education and thus their own role as a conforming agent, socialising students into society, with less critical scrutiny of societal issues and problematisation of their role as a teacher. The study found this traditional orientation to be connected with more stress and a troubled relationship with growing demands towards teachers, both curriculum-based demands as well as expectations from parents.⁵³

It is equally important to study whether teachers who may lack a critical perspective towards the institution are more likely to be critical of not just themselves but of the students when facing challenges in the classroom. In media debate, students who need special support or who are not proficient Finnish speakers, for example, are sometimes named as challenges in schools,⁵⁴ thus problematising the student rather than the normative institutional structures (see Jahnukainen and colleagues in this book). Research also shows that students who are pushed to the margins in terms of ethnicity, social skills, or otherwise, are not always heard by school adults when facing troubles in school.⁵⁵ Normative expectations of students may lead to fewer opportunities for children to be socially accepted in schools: Ina Juva and colleagues⁵⁶ demonstrate how school adults, too, may take part in the exclusion of students that do not fit the cultural construction of normal. A recent national student well-being survey⁵⁷ found that secondary school students of 13–17 years of age who are in marginalised groups based on their gender identity or sexual orientation encounter more troubles in school overall, and more often report feeling like outsiders in the school community than students who are not in marginalised groups. An expectation of a certain kind of normal⁵⁸ positions some children as out of the ordinary, with—likely unintended—consequences for their experience in school and with teachers. If a teacher's relationship with the institution and the surrounding society lacks critical nuance, it is all too easy to view social norms as natural.

Through these normative expectations, we see one cycle of the school's function of maintaining society: Succeeding academically and socially in school may come more easily to students who meet the school's cultural expectations,⁵⁹ and the students who have had a pleasant time in school are typically more likely to seek a career in school. Thus, when working in a school, they hold a less critical relationship with the institution,⁶⁰ making it easy to view the institutional structures that again contribute to some students' success and others' adversity as natural rather than socially constructed. Thus, we wonder whether a lack of criticism towards the school

institution and its social structures may in fact work as one mechanism of reproducing exclusion. We suspect that without the means to critically analyse and understand the institution and without problematising implicit expectations of what is normal in school, the remaining options for teachers are to be critical of themselves or of the students when facing problems in their work. There is a need to examine whether teacher education truly offers space and time to explore the school as a social and societal institution critically, enabling teachers to assume an active, societally sensitive role in this system.

Constructing Societal Sensitivity and Critical Professional Agency

Promising changes are being made in the admissions to teacher education,⁶¹ but in terms of skills for critical contextual knowledge to understand and manage with the intersecting expectations and social issues presented above, the work continues. In a conceptual model for teacher agency and social justice, aimed specifically to countering issues such as exclusion, Nataša Pantić⁶² combines skills that involve critical thinking, analysis of social structure and culture as well as developing a strong ethical basis for teaching, and helping teachers realise their own potential as transformative agents. In Finland, there have been experiments of university study programmes aiming at developing teachers' critical transformative agency,⁶³ developing cultural diversity among teachers,⁶⁴ and allowing teachers to attain the required qualifications while already working in schools.⁶⁵ For instance, the Critical Model of Integrative Teacher Education (CITE) specifically aims at developing teachers' transformative agency, learning critical reflection of one's own subjectivity and position in social structures and society, with positive outcomes in terms of skills of critical thinking and analysing school communities.⁶⁶ However, taking these skills from teacher education to the field has been found to sometimes clash with the existing work cultures of schools, and may be difficult to bring into action.⁶⁷ To allow for scrutiny of societal and cultural structures and the school's role within them, sensitivity and distance is required in the field of education as a whole.⁶⁸

To understand schooling as a social system and one's own role in it, student-teachers would need to study educational sciences broadly, and the question remains whether the mainstream of current programmes provides enough space and time for student-teachers to develop skills of critical thinking based on the broad spectrum of educational sciences. There is a need for research on the effectiveness of the programmes and possibilities that new approaches could offer. Newly graduated teachers do not always view their academic studies as useful in the job market,⁶⁹ and Kallas and colleagues⁷⁰ wonder whether understanding teaching as a profession of craftsmanship emphasises the perceived relevance of practical over theoretical studies. A cultural myth of the teacher as a self-made, natural professional serves

against the idea that teaching could be learned or improved through teacher education.⁷¹ In doing so, it does not serve in unlearning the perceptions that have been internalised during one's years as a student observing teachers. Learning to become a teacher in teacher education should challenge student-teachers' personal orientations and conceptions of teaching as well as construct their professional identity based on a broad understanding of being a teacher. For a teacher to be able to truly act altruistically for the best of their students, they need to be provided with the means and skills to understand the complex life situations and societal contexts of others and their own. In principle, the philosophical idea of educative teaching in a broad sense is written into the NCC, but in day-to-day practice is probably less emphasised, as it may be easier to focus on measurable academic skills.

Conclusion: Reconciling and Challenging Societal and Personal Expectations

We have argued that maintaining existing values as well as reforming them are at the core of schooling, visible in the expectations set for and by teachers in Finland. Reforming values requires continuous critical thinking and active professional agency in an institution that is laden with tradition and not always easy to change. We have questioned whether the current Finnish teacher education provides enough tools for teachers to assume their societal role as both maintainers *and* reformers. The notion of learning teaching through years of observation, and what aspiring teachers bring with them to teacher education and eventually classrooms is not new,⁷² but without actively committing to reform as well, there is a danger of mainly reproducing the existing values and societal structures, not all of which are equitable. In the Finnish context, considering recent research on school segregation in particular, it is of critical importance to focus on what can be done in schools to not act as a reinforcing mechanism of structures that tend to marginalise some students. To use apprenticeship of observation as an ally of change rather than continuity⁷³ and avoid reproducing exclusion, schools need active, critical, and societally sensitive professionals.

Enhancing teachers' critical professional agency could help ensure two things: First, it could work towards maintaining the personally rewarding nature of teaching—most often teachers are motivated by being truly able to positively influence young people's lives. Seeing norms as what they are—social and thus changeable—could mean being able to actively engage with the institution rather than leaving it when experiencing challenges in school. Second, professionally agentic teachers could ensure that schools have what it takes to truly work with both individual and societal change, and continue to enact school's societal tasks. These all require that teacher education allows and challenges student-teachers to be actively and critically engaged in their studies. Constructing active and critical teacher's professional agency ultimately comes down to understanding the institution, one's

own potential role in it, and which elements of the profession may be negotiated and which ones may not. To be able to support all pupils in their learning and growth, develop professionally throughout their careers, develop their schools together with their colleagues, and have a chance to respond to the negative effects of school segregation while also pursuing personally fulfilling teacher careers, future teachers need to be supported in working their way through these questions.

Notes

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Spring 2020 brought a slight upward change in the number of applicants, but it should be noted that at the very time of higher education's joint application period in March 2020, unemployment in Finland grew substantially due to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among people with no higher education degree (see Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. 2020. *Työllisyyskatsaus maaliskuu 2020*. <https://www.ely-keskus.fi/documents/10191/40073516/Maaliskuu+2020.pdf/07e62a9a-fd70-4ce2-b4bb-c4369db522b1>. Accessed 20 Jan 2021), and an increase of applicants was seen across the field of higher education study programmes, not in teacher education alone.
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Sara Juvonen is Doctoral Researcher in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. Her background is in the sociology and politics of education, and she has worked in several research projects dealing with Finnish basic education policy and practice. Juvonen's research interests concern social justice and equality in education, teaching and teacher education, and the social norms of school life in general. Her current study is examining education and socialisation and the relationship between school and society.

Auli Toom is Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Centre for University Teaching and Learning (HYPE) at the University of Helsinki. She is also Vice-Dean responsible for research at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki and Fellow of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. Toom's research interests include teacher knowing, competence, expertise and agency among students and teachers which she investigates in basic education, teacher education and higher education contexts.

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