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# **School in society**

*Teachers enacting the purposes of education*

Sara Juvonen

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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# Abstract

This study examined the relationship between school and society, focusing on teachers' role in this relationship. Schools are places for learning and growing, but they also have societal functions. Schools' societal tasks create a paradox: on the one hand, schools have an important reproduction function for society, maintaining societal structures and culture. On the other hand, schools are meant to give the growing generations the potential to make societal change—in other words, to scrutinize the existing structures. The study is set in the context of Finnish comprehensive education, where schools' task is traditionally seen as giving equal educational opportunities to all and leveling differences that stem from students' diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, all societal goals for schools are realized in the teacher's choices in the classroom, which is where the empirical focus of the study lies.

The study combined the Bourdieusian research tradition with Gert Biesta's conceptualization of the purpose of education. Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is used to discuss the relationship between an individual and their social surroundings and to understand the normative expectations inherent in a school. Bourdieu's key concepts used in this study are doxa, field, habitus, and capitals. These are enriched by Biesta's concepts for three domains of the purpose of education: socialization, qualification, and subjectification, with the intent to study teachers' choices between different purposes in the classroom. The aim of the study was to apply theoretical concepts to empirical data in order to examine the relationship between school and society, to analyze how teachers enact these societal tasks in their everyday work, and to develop these concepts further.

The study comprised three original articles, two of which analyzed ethnographic data produced in three projects in 2014-2020. The dataset included 215 days of field notes, 56 school staff interviews, and 37 student interviews, used in different combinations for analysis. The analyses followed abductive reasoning and practices of reflexive thematic analysis.

Three main conclusions were drawn. First, educational aims are interpreted through the doxa of school. This means that the underlying implicit expectations of what is normal create the framework through which explicit policy goals, such as pedagogy that appreciates students' diverse languages, are applied in practice. The explicit goals and implicit normative expectations can be in conflict, as seen in how the policy goal of a multilingual school is challenging to enact in practice.

Second, teachers inevitably enact the school's societal tasks in their everyday work with students. The teacher profession always includes a societal aspect, regardless of whether teachers perceive this as part of their role or are aware of it. The relationships among the concepts of socialization, qualification, and subjectification were explored, and a new concept, the logic of qualification, was proposed. This concept refers to the phenomenon observed in the data, where teachers and schools tend to prioritize the logic of the qualification domain over the domains of socialization and subjectification. However, for

the school's task of reproducing and reforming society in an equitable manner, the latter two domains are equally vital, linking the work in classrooms to a wider societal context.

Third, emphasizing the logic of the qualification domain over other purposes of education weakens the school's potential for societal change and providing equal opportunities to students. The dominance of the qualification domain and its logic can lead to the evaluation of socialization and subjectification domains akin to qualification, thereby diminishing space for students' diversity and the cultivation of critical agency. This approach may invite evaluation on how well students perform their subjectness, rather than actually cultivating being an independent subject. Similarly, when applied in the socialization domain, this logic may invite evaluation on students' proficiency in the school's normative world, but their opportunities to navigate it well is dependent on their available capitals. Teachers' societal sensitivity is crucial in recognizing that students possess varying resources to navigate school expectations, or in Bourdieu's terms, that some students' habitus match the field of education easier.

The results can inform discussions within Finnish education as well as contribute to conceptual discourse in the sociology of education. For schools to enact the dual responsibility of reproducing and reforming society, teachers must find ways to balance the three domains of the purpose of education within the classroom.

*Keywords:* Pierre Bourdieu, Gert Biesta, teacher role, purpose of education, socialization, subjectification, qualification, Finnish comprehensive school

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In Helsinki, May 8, 2024  
Sara Juvonen



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# List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications:

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The publications are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.



# 1 Introduction

This dissertation focuses on teachers as professionals who pursue the purposes of education in the everyday practice of schools. Schools are places of learning and growth; with the help of teachers and schools, new generations are cultivated and initiated into society. Following the lead of other Nordic countries, the history of institutional comprehensive education in Finland is an integral part of the story of building the welfare state, striving for equal education for all (Ahonen 2003; Antikainen 2006; Hansen et al. 2020). Schools perform a dual function: on the one hand, their task is to maintain and reproduce the existing culture, its values, norms, and social structures. On the other hand, schools are places where scrutiny of that culture becomes possible through developing critical thinking, new ideas, and subjects of action. Schools are inseparable from the surrounding culture, its normative structures, and current societal developments, but, ideally, through education, it is possible to challenge that culture. (Biesta 2006, 2010.) In addition, schools do not only serve society; they also support students' individual processes and aim to fulfil all students' learning potentials (Kontio, Pikkariainen & Siljander 2016). One of the paradoxes of education in general is the paradox of socialization: education is intended to prepare students not only for the world around them, but also for a world that does not yet exist (Siljander 2002; Biesta 2006).

Nevertheless, schools are not only places of grand, elevated goals—they are also places of qualification, selection, and hierarchy, places where students are evaluated, and places of “the daily grind” (Jackson 1968, 1). Functionalist sociology considers that the societal role of school institutions is to maintain the social order by emphasizing “integration, adaptation, and selection of the talents needed to manage industrial society” (Izquierdo & Mínguez 2003, 22; see also Broady 1986; Pickering & Walford 1998; Antikainen, Rinne & Koski 2006). School performs functions and entails features that it cannot escape, as it is organized as a mass institution: it is required to perform selection among students, and, in most cases, students are not there purely from choice (Simola 1995, 2015a; see also Tyack & Cuban 1995). Both the written and hidden school curricula represent values and choices that are not neutral (Apple 1979; Broady 1986).

Society also colors schools in other ways: a social reality and dominant normative expectations guide schools' everyday life implicitly—in ways that are not necessarily discussed or consciously considered by either teachers or society at

large. This social reality creates a variety of lived experiences for students, since they come from different social contexts, and not all lived contexts align seamlessly with the social life of the school. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examined these social-historical realities and individuals' relations to them through the Theory of Practice, where social contexts are seen as *fields* with their own natural truths, uncontested beliefs, and self-evident valuations, in other words, *doxa*. Individuals, in turn, come to these fields with a set of *capitals* that allow them to adopt their rules and act accordingly—or, if these capitals do not easily match the *doxa*, that set them at a disadvantage in relation to other individuals in the field. From Bourdieu's perspective, some students will have an easier time navigating the field than others (Bourdieu 1986, 1990a; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), making schools places not only of inclusion but also of exclusion and marginalization.

In other words, the social-historical context surrounding the school plays a part in life in classrooms. However, this context is not always recognized in the discourse on, around, and within schools: the Finnish education discourse is claimed to be *decontextualized* (Simola 2015b, 2021; Heikkinen et al. 2021). Decontextualization separates school further from its social and historical roots, in other words, society, a phenomenon that has been found in the official Finnish education discourse since the 1970s (Heikkinen et al. 2021), almost since the introduction of the comprehensive education system. The quietening of questions about society and democracy in schools may have resulted from the school-political struggles of the 1970s, after which the focus in the 1980s was directed more toward individual students (Rautiainen 2022). Nevertheless, among teachers enacting schools' societal purposes, a clear understanding of the social-historical context of school would presumably help in connecting their everyday work—and its challenges—to the broader societal context.

If context is erased, what is left is discourse mainly focused on the individual student and their learning, but, as a result, this learning is portrayed as if it occurred in a socio-historical vacuum instead of in a school in society. What can be discussed, instead of the social or historical context of education, is learning; the *language of learning*, so named by Gert Biesta (2006, 2009), addresses the needs of an individual learner, the effectiveness of learning processes, and teachers and institutions as facilitating and fulfilling individual processes and needs. "The more important questions about the content and purpose of education become virtually impossible to ask, other, that is, than in response to the needs of the learner," Biesta (2006, 32) writes. Even though the latest Finnish curriculum is built on a constructivist view of learning and recognizes the role of collaboration and community in this process (FNBE 2014), it focuses on how these activities serve the learning and growth of the individual (Valli 2022; Männistö, Fornaciari & Tervasmäki 2017).

Biesta (2006, 2015) proposes that the purpose of education be examined through three separate but overlapping domains: qualification, socialization, and subjectification—all of which, ideally, contain their own carefully formulated aims, the value of which is not instrumental but intrinsic. By contrast, the decontextualization or learnification of education reduces school's relationship to society into an instrumental one. In the latter line of thought, the purpose of education is to work as a source of economic competitiveness, eventually measured in global rankings such as PISA or TIMSS conducted by the OECD.

Still, as proposed at the beginning of this introduction, schools are places of learning and growth: students attend school; it affects them one way or another; and, in that process, it also impacts the development of society. In this dissertation, I am interested in this relationship between school and society and teacher's role in it, and the implications of this relationship for both individuals and society more broadly. What difference does it eventually make to society what teachers do in their classrooms? I aim to theorize the process of how schools enact their dual societal task of reproducing as well as reforming society and, in the end, discuss how current phenomena, such as the focus on measurable learning outcomes, may affect school's societal function. My focus throughout is on teachers in the Finnish context: even though students also influence the way everyday life in a classroom turns out, the teacher holds considerable power over how educational aims are enacted in practice.

## **1.1 Diversification and inequalities of Finnish comprehensive education**

Empirically, this dissertation is set in the context of Finnish comprehensive education. The story of comprehensive education in Finland is often narrated as an aim to provide the means to level differences stemming from students' backgrounds and to offer equitable opportunities for every student to study to as high a level as they wish. Since the introduction of the comprehensive education system in the 1960s, the influence of family background on students' educational outcomes steadily diminished—not least due to the expansion of education—but despite the equality narrative and universalist values, differences have never been fully erased (Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen 2012; Härkönen & Sirniö 2020). In turn, most recent studies show growing differences between educational outcomes in recent years (Leino 2019; Bernelius & Huilla 2021; Kalenius 2023; Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski 2019), and, statistically, these differences are extremely difficult to level after students leave secondary education (Härkönen & Sirniö 2020). Compared internationally, Finland still performs well in terms of overall educational outcomes, but since the effect of changes in the education system occurs with a delay, such a turn in the development of differences warrants

attention. One can also question the overall fruitfulness of evaluating school systems through an international ranking system, as this tends to oversimplify complex systems (Thrupp et al. 2023, 2–3).

An important aspect to consider in the diversification of Finnish comprehensive education is the connection between residential and school segregation. Studies have shown that since the 1990s, Finnish comprehensive education has been increasingly affected by residential segregation, leading to the social, ethnic, and linguistic segregation of schools in urban areas (Bernelius 2013; Seppänen et al. 2015; Kosunen et al. 2020; Bernelius & Kosunen 2023). In practice, residential segregation affects schools' student demographics, resulting in very different-looking schools within the same city, which is further reflected in educational outcomes (Bernelius 2024). In many large Finnish cities, schools that statistically face the greatest challenges from urban segregation often receive needs-based funding to better answer students' diverse needs, and there is some evidence to support the effectiveness of this policy (Silliman 2017; Ramos Lobato & Bernelius 2023). Recent research shows, however, that needs-based resources are increasingly used to fill the holes left by budget cuts to basic funding (Ramos Lobato, Kosunen & Bernelius 2024).

Research has shown that a middle-class background makes it easier for families to work together with schools (Metso 2004; Berg & Peltola 2015; Huilla, Peltola & Kosunen 2021), suggesting that a such a background is more aligned with expectations arising from the school institution. In addition, families from middle-class backgrounds possess more resources to affect their children's school paths by either choosing a place to live or choosing their school through other means, such as applying for a specific class with a special emphasis on certain subjects (Kosunen 2016; Seppänen et al. 2015; Bernelius & Vaattovaara 2019). Despite the educational discourse aiming at educational equality, students whose parents hold a higher education degree perform better in the field of education than those whose parents have a lower level of education, and the connection between family background and educational outcomes has grown in recent decades (Kalenius 2023, 198–211). In addition, students whose parents have migrated to Finland tend to attain a lower level of education than children of non-migrants (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al. 2020, 93–114), even though a so-called migrant background is not one uniform category. Even when motivated and successful in meeting their students with an ethos that emphasizes equality and is unbiased towards social class, schools and their staff face dilemmas that challenge this ideal: merely appreciating the diverse social and class backgrounds of their students does not erase the present hierarchies in surrounding society (Huilla 2022).

Diversification is a question not only of educational outcomes but also of everyday life in school. In the Finnish context, some studies have shown that schools and teachers sometimes struggle to meet all students' needs, a concern

especially for students who lack the necessary written or spoken skills in the language of instruction (Alisaari & Heikkola 2020; Alisaari, Kaukko & Heikkola 2022; Suuriniemi 2023; Repo 2023; for upper secondary education, see Kosunen, Niemi & Laaksonen 2022). Everyday life can appear very different depending on whether and how one fits into the social world of the school: For instance, a narrow definition of “Finnishness” may result in the exclusion or othering of students who do not fit this norm (Souto 2011; Juva 2019; Riitaoja 2013; Kurki 2018; Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023). Students who are marginalized may experience greater difficulties getting their voice heard by school adults in situations where they require those adults’ intervention and help—situations like bullying, which they are also more likely to encounter than students who are not in marginalized groups (Halme et al. 2017; Riitaoja et al. 2017; Zacheus et al. 2019; Huilla & Juvonen 2020; Hummelstedt et al. 2020). Being part of a marginalized group in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation has also been found to increase students’ risk of experiencing exclusion in school and decrease their overall experience of well-being (Jokela et al. 2020; Taavetti et al. 2020; Majlander et al. 2022; Lehtonen 2013, 2023). For the most part, these phenomena are presumably not the result of conscious exclusion or discrimination; instead, they indicate deep-rooted cultural understandings of *what is normal* or ordinary, which molds the everyday expectations held by people who work in schools.

At the policy level, the need for a culturally and linguistically diverse school and equal treatment of all students has been acknowledged, for example, in the key principles for organizing comprehensive education in Finland (FNBE 2014, 15–16). The National Core Curriculum has been developed to account for all students’ needs regardless of their background and to support multicultural work in schools (Zilliacus, Holm & Sahlström 2017; Zilliacus, Paulsruud & Holm 2017). The challenge remains how these policy-level aims are enacted and realized in the everyday life of schools—as Jantunen and colleagues (2023, 230) argue concerning Finnish principals’ conceptions about diversity, “a positive attitude about an idea does not necessarily indicate what happens at a practical level.” Recent research on teachers’ and teacher educators’ expertise in working in a multicultural school shows that their understanding of questions of social justice may remain superficial (Hummelstedt 2022) and that, for example, textbooks or subject-specific curricula do not always reflect the core values of the curriculum (Mikander 2023; Kohvakka 2022, 2023), leaving it up to the teacher to frame their instruction in a societally sensitive and critical way.

Ultimately, school-life is influenced by myriad other factors in addition to political steering, the curriculum, and funding instruments: schools and the individuals within are always products of the surrounding society, which, in turn, has implications for the social life of schools. When starting their teaching career in a school, novice teachers already possess years of experience about school-life and

studying (Lortie 1975), likely affecting their beliefs about and expectations of school and students. Finnish teachers themselves still come from quite homogenous backgrounds, which can sometimes contrast with the heterogeneous backgrounds of the students they teach.

Simultaneously, recent studies have indicated an increase in teachers' turnover intentions in Finland after remaining steady for many years after years of steady numbers (Räsänen et al. 2020), and that early-career teachers sometimes experience difficulties in building sustainable agency, leading to them questioning their career as teachers (Heikonen et al. 2017) and increasing the likelihood of burnout (Pyhältö et al. 2021). The experience of life as a teacher can differ depending on whether one is teaching in a large urban school with over a thousand students or a small rural school with a staff of six, creating a segregated experience of the profession (Inkinen & Juvonen, *manuscript*). This also challenges teacher education: the task of the degree program required for obtaining a teaching qualification is to offer key competences for teachers to begin their career in schools and continue to develop their professional expertise further through work in classrooms—but what are the key competences teachers require in the diversifying reality of comprehensive education, especially when the early stage of their career is so important for building their professional agency?

One of the latest development programs for teacher education, OVET, defined teachers' key competences with a Multidimensional Adapted Model (Metsäpelto et al. 2020), which maps out dimensions of teacher competences from pedagogical, cognitive, and social skills to personal orientations and well-being. This model leans more towards the psychology than the sociology of education (Metsäpelto et al. 2021, 166), but it nonetheless recognizes the need for teacher competences in diversity, inclusion, and cultural awareness—in other words, skills for working with a diverse student body. When comparing their model with existing Finnish teacher education curricula, Metsäpelto and colleagues (2021) found that competences in diversity, inclusion, and cultural awareness as well as critical thinking receive considerably less attention than competences related to study content and pedagogical skills (see also Kinon et al. 2015). This is not necessarily surprising, considering that the main focus of teacher education is learning to teach and developing pedagogical thinking (Kansanen et al. 2000), but it raises the question of how and at what cost teachers are to develop their professional skills for working in diverse school environments if these competencies are underemphasized in teacher education programs (Metsäpelto et al. 2021; see also Kuusisto & Rissanen 2023).

Teacher education is not the focus of this dissertation; rather, I approach teachers from the perspective of the social life of school and the meaning of this social context for the teacher's role and everyday work. Understanding this role (Buchmann 1986; Toom & Husu 2018) from a societal perspective and being able

to critically examine the more tacit aspects of the everyday life of school can be seen as an increasingly important skill in teachers' work.

## 1.2 Aim of the study

This dissertation is an ethnographic study analyzing the relationship between school and society, both theoretically and empirically, and focusing on teachers in the context of Finnish comprehensive education. My main research interest is how school could function as an institution of societal progress and change, where socialization into the existing culture is balanced by renewal and reform of current social structures. The actual reality of school is affected by all the people that form the school community, including the staff, students, and their families. In this dissertation, the term *school* refers to the school institution that is put into practice by the staff. Therefore, my focus is on how teachers enact, affect, and produce the school and its goals, and less on students' agency in shaping the school they attend. In the end, teachers are responsible for education and instruction, organizing their class, monitoring behavior and rules, officially evaluating students, and so on—thus, teachers possess significant power over students in schools.

Teachers' work in schools is steered by legislation, in other words, explicit societal requirements and expectations. It is also steered by the implicit aspects of society, that is, social expectations or (tacit) norms that often escape words and conscious thought. My understanding of school as a social, normative institution draws mainly on the Bourdieusian research tradition, where social contexts are examined as fields that contain their own built-in power structures and relations. Individuals navigate through these fields with varying sets of resources and tools, i.e., capitals. In the analyses of this dissertation, the Bourdieusian tradition is complemented with Biesta's conceptualization of the purpose of education, allowing for an even more detailed analytical approach to teachers' choices in the classroom. Together, these concepts tie in the main interest of this dissertation: they allow the connections between societal phenomena and the everyday life of school—the structure and the individual—to be theorized by asking how teachers' work in their classroom is related to enacting school's societal tasks.

In the three articles that comprise this dissertation, referred to by their Roman numerals I–III, I concentrate on this question from different viewpoints. Article I is a theoretical article that investigates being a teacher in the Finnish context. In this article, my coauthor, Auli Toom, and I elaborate the variety of expectations connected to teachers and teaching—expectations towards teachers, and expectations that teachers themselves set for teaching and school-life in general. Both explicit and implicit societal expectations steer teachers' work. Explicit expectations are stated in national pedagogical documents and other (political) steering instruments. Implicit expectations arise from the cultural norms that

teachers—and every other person—already internalize through socialization during their years as students observing teachers. Through attending school, we learn the social representations of what schools, teachers, and students are “normally” like. For this reason, teacher education plays a significant part in challenging teachers’ existing conceptualizations and making room for teachers to critically evaluate the school system and their own role in it (Lortie 1975; Buchmann 1986; Toom & Husu 2018; Nieminen & Mankki 2019; Husu & Toom 2021).

The primary empirical data of this dissertation, analyzed in articles II–III, consists of ethnographic data produced in the project *MAPS—Mixed classes and pedagogical solutions* (funded by NordForsk in 2018–2021), which is complemented by two different sets of ethnographic data in these two articles. In article II, the data is analyzed together with data from the project Local Educational Ethos, LEE (funded by the Research Council of Finland 2018–2022), where we (Riikka Oittinen, Heidi Huilla, Sonja Kosunen, Marja Peltola, Tiina Luoma, and I) analyze language in the field of comprehensive education through Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts and examine the role language plays in terms of class and the cultural capitals available to students from diverse backgrounds. Article II concludes that despite official policy, which aims for a linguistically diverse comprehensive school, the cultural norm of speaking Finnish is strong, creating contradictions and challenges for teachers to instruct children who lack fluency or any level of competence in that language, and functioning as part of the selective mechanisms of schooling.

In article III, the ethnographic data from MAPS is complemented by ethnographic data produced in the project *Toimiva lähikoulu* (TOLU, ‘Well-functioning primary school,’ 2014–2015). Here we (Heidi Huilla, Sonja Kosunen, Martin Thrupp, Auli Toom, and I) investigate the purpose of schooling and proceed to answer this question using Gert Biesta’s conceptualization of the domains of purpose (socialization, qualification, subjectification) of education. Article III aims both to develop Biesta’s conceptualization by theorizing the interrelations among the domains and to understand how “purpose” is understood and enacted through teaching in the empirical data. Article III concludes that an over emphasis on the domain of qualifications detracts from other domains such as cultivating students’ subjectivity, meaning that, theoretically, school’s socializing or maintaining function may override the need for reform and critical scrutiny of social norms and structures (connecting this dissertation to the broader context of supranational educational policy).

Together, the three articles respond to the research task of examining and understanding the complex relationship between school and society, and how teachers enact school’s dual task of both maintaining and reforming society. The articles demonstrate why it is easier to reproduce norms than to reform them in schools. They also highlight where this process of reproducing unequal norms can

be disrupted and challenged: teachers (and institutions of teacher education) play a unique role in this cycle of socialization, making them fundamentally societal actors.

This dissertation proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the study and what is meant exactly when school is referred to as a normative space. This is discussed through, first, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, second, the field of Finnish comprehensive education and teachers, and third, Biesta's conceptualization for studying the purpose of education. Chapter 3 presents the research task and related research questions and explores the everyday life of actual schools, presenting the empirical data and how the ethnographic observations and analyses proceeded. Chapter 4 provides a short overview of articles I–III and their findings. Chapter 5 answers the research questions of this dissertation and mirrors them with the theoretical discussions laid out in chapter 2. The final chapter 6 discusses the implications of the results.



## 2 Schooling—the conflict of normativity and reform

Schools are normative places: first, school is a societal institution and thus reflects implicit values and understandings of what is seen as “natural” in a set societal context; second, it is explicitly normative in the sense that it is built around the knowledge and values that are considered worth pursuing and passing on. My interest is the former as well as the contradiction between the two—both empirically and theoretically. A central element of schooling is the socialization of new generations in society’s ways of being and doing. The challenge for school is that while socializing new generations to live in the current society, school should also provide students with the means to enact societal change and the skills to navigate a society that does not yet exist (Biesta 2006, 2009; Siljander 2002).

This chapter presents the theories and concepts used in this dissertation. I approach the school as a normative place through Pierre Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice*, where I lean on the concept of *doxa* to discuss the social expectations inherent in the school institution. I then discuss the Finnish school as a field and Finnish teachers as actors navigating this field. The chapter ends with Gert Biesta’s theorization of the purpose of schooling to elaborate everyday school life further.

### 2.1 Normative expectations through Theory of Practice

To explore the dynamic nature of a social place like school, I apply Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice*, a theory of the relationship between individuals and social structures, mainly utilizing the concepts of *doxa*, *field*, *capitals*, and *habitus*. Following Harker (1990, 86), I rely less on Bourdieu’s writings on education (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) and more on his theorization of the connection between structure and individual, since the link between the individual and the social is essential when discussing the topic of maintaining or reforming society. In short, in the Theory of Practice, the social world consists of fields, overlapping social contexts that contain their own set of valuations and beliefs, *doxa*. Individuals navigate fields with the capitals available to them, which constitute their *habitus*. Some capitals are perceived as more valuable in a specific field than others, meaning, that some *habitus*es will also match the field and its social reality better. Then again, a *habitus*

can match one field well and be ill-fitting in another—in other words, the value of different capitals is dependent on the context (Bourdieu 1977, 1985a, 1986).

In the context of this dissertation, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and related concepts are useful for two reasons: first, they are a way to verbalize the mechanism and logic by which individuals tend to view the social world and the fields within it as natural. Second, they offer vocabulary to discuss the social reality of school, how this social reality is reproduced, and whether and how societal change through education could be possible. School's social reality can be seen as a social space that consists of individuals' social relations, hierarchical positions, and struggles over them, and the dynamics that these social relations form (Bourdieu 1985b). Reality is complex, and some of the complexity remains beyond the best conceptualizations, but Bourdieu's concepts provide one analytical tool to examine individuals' relations to the social world around them and their resources and opportunities to affect that world.

### 2.1.1 Applying Bourdieu

Bourdieu's (1977, 1990a, 1990b) work was built around studying the relationship between individual action and surrounding social structure. He saw the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism as both an insolvable and false problem—an issue that is inseparable from sociology (Bourdieu & Chartier 2015)—and rather worked towards a sociological theory and method that encompassed both structure and agency, their dialectical relationship, and an analysis of everyday social practices (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990). He defined his work as “*constructivist structuralism or structuralist constructivism*” (Bourdieu 1990b, 123, emphasis in original), recognizing that there exist objective structures that organize the everyday social world but that these objective structures themselves are socially-historically constructed (ibid.). Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Chartier 2015) sums up this double reality by stating that humans are both objects of the world and subjects that produce their own representations of the objective world, and this interrelation is the focus of sociology. In addition, as objects, humans are both (tangible) objects of the physical world and also objects of the social world: they are inevitably the objects of the representations of others.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1995) urges that the concepts of field, habitus, and capital be put to work in practical research settings. In turn, Harker (1990) observes that Bourdieu's Theory of Practice works as a framework for analysis but that it requires “active participation on the part of anyone” (ibid., 98) who wishes to apply it elsewhere than the original context of Bourdieu's work: French society. Assigning Bourdieu's work to a pre-determined context narrows down the potential

of his concepts, as Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I approach Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as a more abstract conceptual tool that depicts the dynamics of the social world and relations between individual and structure. For instance, in article II, the boundaries of the capitals appropriate in the context of the study are analyzed with abductive reasoning rather than fixing them beforehand.

Another critical discussion concerning the application of Bourdieu's concepts concerns the possibility of agency and the extent to which Bourdieu's understanding of social reproduction is deterministic. His work has been criticized for placing excessive focus on how the field affects individuals' behavior and dispositions rather than emphasizing the fact that individuals also affect the field and thus can aim to alter their positions in the social world (e.g., Giroux 1982; Bohman 1999). The present study is aligned with Harker's (1984) argument that Bourdieu's writings on social reproduction should not be read as a mechanical process: the possibility for change lies in the fact that "[r]eproduction is never perfect" (Harker 1984, 121; see also Mills 2008).<sup>2</sup> The possibility of individuals modifying their surroundings is key if one wants to imagine teachers as agents capable of reforming educational thought and transforming their own core beliefs (see Matikainen 2022) about schooling, and therefore effecting change in the field of education.

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<sup>1</sup> Lareau and Weininger (2003) analyze the definitions of cultural capital used across empirical English language studies for two decades starting from the 1980s and claim that the dominant definition of Bourdieu's cultural capital is tied to elite culture, equating cultural capital with cultural practices understood as prestigious or upper class. However, in this way, cultural capital becomes tied to a certain aesthetic context, narrowing understanding of the concept and the analytic potential of Bourdieu's theory (Lareau & Weininger 2003). Instead, Lareau and Weininger suggest examining institutional standards in an abstract manner, and thus "the prospect that teachers reward students' competence in highbrow aesthetic culture becomes merely *one* empirical possibility among many others" (ibid., 586, emphasis in orig.). Their position is that all studies on cultural capital and education should focus, firstly, on identifying "the particular expectations—both formal and, especially, informal—by means of which school personnel appraise students", and secondly, documenting "variations among students and parents in their ability to meet the standards held by educators," and studying who hold the power to influence said standards of evaluation (ibid., 588).

<sup>2</sup> Harker (1984) recounts Giroux' criticism, which states that Bourdieu's theory "displays no faith in subordinate classes and groups, no hope in their ability or willingness to reinvent and reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work, and learn" (Giroux 1982, quoted in Harker 1984, 121). Harker shows how this criticism is more or less based on a misunderstanding: social change occurs through the imperfection in the process of social reproduction. To add to Harker's clarification of Bourdieu's understanding of agency, what Bourdieu's Theory of Practice succeeds to demonstrate is why social change is, in fact, so difficult and slow: Bourdieu's concern in developing the Theory of Practice was not to show how the social world should operate but to propose an explanation for how structure and agency tend to interact. Thus, demanding that individuals take action to improve their social positions on their own, with no regard to the structural constraints their actions face, is individualistic and unrealistic. In showing how social mobility is not only in the hands of individual people, Bourdieu does not strip individual humans of their agency. Instead, he makes grounds for an argument for why individuals themselves cannot be held solely responsible (or praised) for the outcomes of their life, and that social change in general takes time.

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu describes the concept of *doxa*, which represents the non-conscious rules and beliefs that organize communities' lives beyond verbal, explicit agreement. In a community, it is useful to express and reassert solidarity with other members through collective behavior: there is "an implicit definition of the fundamental virtue of conformity, the opposite of which is the desire to stand apart from others," and actions going against the expected are "suspicious forms of behavior" (Bourdieu 1977, 161). Expectations like these are essentially normative: possessing a quality of *oughtness*, in other words, a sense of the *right thing to do*, which is not always the same as the most convenient or advantageous action for the individual (Poggi 2000). I interpret *doxa* as signifying a system of non-conscious or tacit normative expectations that organize individuals' interaction with each other. In this interpretation, the non-conscious *doxa*, shared beliefs about what is natural and normal, precedes norms that can either remain tacit, internalized ways of being or emerge into the realm of discussion as explicit laws and regulations. I use the term *normative expectations* to describe the social and cultural expectations of behavior and being—what ought to be—that people hold towards each other in a certain context.

Bourdieu developed the theory of practice and related concepts over decades and later introduced the concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence to describe the effortless match of the dominant class habitus with the field, and in turn the mismatch of the field and non-dominant class habituses and the adversity this structure upholds. In this dissertation, I do not adopt these concepts, as my focus is more the state of the social world which is seen as "natural," and the concept of *doxa* serves this purpose. The conceptual choice to focus on *doxa*—or at least pinpoint it as the starting point for approaching Bourdieu—is an application of his theory and originates from the assumption that any social interaction or struggle over capitals relies on there being a shared reality to struggle or agree over.

It would be a favor to the reader to define the following concepts separately before combining them or describing their relations, but they are tied to each other by their definitions, so some overlap in the following is inevitable. I will, however, focus mainly on one concept at a time, starting with *doxa*, and then moving to field, capitals, and finally habitus.

### **2.1.2 Individuals in a social world**

Schools, in practice, are central places of societal reproduction as one inherent goal is to pass on knowledge and culture to the next generations. I utilize Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to understand social change and how the social world of the school functions, as it is relatively independent of individuals but nevertheless subject to change through individual agency. The Theory of Practice underscores the importance of socialization in the process of social reproduction without

reducing its definition to either the simple transmission of culture from one generation to the next or to individuals simply learning social norms and rules. Habitus is a predisposition for what is possible and desirable for an individual, but it is not a totally deterministic construct either; Bourdieu emphasizes the nature of social reproduction as resembling not a mechanical process, like making a photocopy, but rather a system of cycles in which individuals' habituses interact with different fields, culture, history, and so on (Bourdieu 1990a, 52–55; see also Harker 1990). This is what allows for social change, even if that change is always somewhat limited and slow. That Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is irreducible to either objectivism or subjectivism becomes apparent in the concept of habitus and the question of social reproduction; an individual's action and agency can never be explained by just structure or individual, instead, both play a part in the process.

Social contexts function according to their own logic and objective normative structure, the basis of which can be examined with the concept of *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977, 1985a, 1990a, 1990b). Doxa is the realm outside discussion and conscious thought, where a social order's arbitrariness (i.e., its social genesis) is not recognized but the social is instead seen as self-evident. Beliefs and values that originate from the social world are assumed to be natural and are taken for granted. Article I discusses this along with the concept *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie 1975), where, through attending school for years, students learn a great deal about what is natural in schools. Through socialization, living in a social community, beliefs are internalized as individuals' own beliefs, which affects how existing social divisions and positions are perceived: as natural. Bourdieu (1977, 163–164) writes that the most important mechanism that makes the social world seem natural is the “dialectic of the objective chances and the agents' aspirations, out of which arises the sense of limits, commonly called the sense of reality”. In other words, when an individual's mental structure and the objective social structure are in harmony, the false impression arises that the social is indeed natural and unquestionable—to challenge the social order or explicitly support it, or indeed discuss it, would require awareness of it, and doxa is beyond discussion (Bourdieu 1977; see also Deer 2008).

Beliefs about what is natural can be made visible and contested if they are brought into the realm of discussion. The limits of what is normal can then be either challenged (*heterodoxy*) or preserved (*orthodoxy*): practices and discourse that are orthodox attempt to maintain “the innocence” (Bourdieu 1977, 169) of doxa; that is, orthodox discourse aims to strengthen the line between what can be discussed and what is natural. By contrast, practices and discourse that are heterodox attempt to challenge the doxa by questioning what is seen as natural, discussing things which typically go without saying, stretching the discursive limits of what is natural or normal, or at least making the limits visible. Doxa itself is undisputed and undiscussed, and the orthodox and heterodox discourse together form the universe of discourse or argument that contests what can and cannot be discussed.

Orthodoxy exists primarily in relation to heterodoxy (rather than doxa), in that there is no need for an orthodoxic discourse or “straightened opinion” (ibid., 169) without heterodoxic discourse that attempts to challenge the natural and self-evident. “The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of *doxa* and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of the doxa or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, *orthodoxy*.” (ibid., 169).

### **2.1.3 Socialization as internalizing the *rules of the game***

A social space encloses several *fields* that have some objective “points of contact” (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990, 9) but consist of their own structure of social positions, objective relations, and practical beliefs (Bourdieu 1985b, 1990a). A field is a site where social life is played out, where “players” occupy different dynamic positions and struggle over valuable capitals and also the boundaries of the field (Thomson 2008, 67–70). Fields are relatively autonomous, governed by their own set of beliefs: Deer (2008, 121) argues that doxa is the “cornerstone of any field”, meaning that any field requires a shared reality and rules that organize what individuals can do in that field (Bourdieu 1985a). Fields inevitably overlap: for instance, the school as a social space entails the field of the school institution—the focus of this dissertation—but the same social space can contain other fields as well, like the fields of sports or fashion that students use for making distinctions and enforcing hierarchies among themselves (Peltola 2020). Teachers may be required to balance between the expectations of the institutional school and the expectations internalized from a critical view of education (Nikkola et al. 2019). Fields can also be in hierarchical relation to each other: doing well in the field of the school is most often seen as more beneficial in society than doing well in the field of crime.

Bourdieu (1990a, 67) compares learning the *rules of the game*, i.e., the tacit rules or doxa of any and all social fields, to learning a language: “In the case of primary learning, the child learns at the same time to speak the language (which is only ever presented in action, in his own or other people’s speech) and to think *in* (rather than with) the language” (emphasis in original). Like learning a first language through being thoroughly immersed in it, we internalize the seemingly natural order and shared beliefs of the social world that surrounds us through a process of socialization that is mostly non-conscious and unintentional. Entering a specific field requires internalizing and accepting—at least to some extent—its rules, a “compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field which is the very definition of doxa” (Bourdieu 1990a, 68). This unavoidably comes most effortlessly to those who have access to the capitals and subsequent habitus that best correspond to the doxa of the field. Thus, “[e]xplicit physical force is replaced by implicit social habits, mechanisms, differentiations and assumptions” (Deer 2008,

121), and its legitimacy is not questioned even by those that are subjected to it (Bourdieu 1977).

The struggle over social positions in the field is a struggle over capitals (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990, 8–9), the appropriate capitals being those that are believed to be valuable in a specific field. In *Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu proposes that in addition to economic capital, cultural and social capital hold significance for the reproduction of power, even though all capital originates from available economic resources. Cultural capital can be either objectified (placed in tangible cultural objects that are seen as valuable), embodied (incorporated over time in individuals, as is the case with language) or institutionalized (placed in institutionalized qualifications, like academic degrees), and it is hidden in the sense that it is more difficult to recognize than economic capital. This is particularly true for the embodied form of cultural capital, accumulated over a long period of time during the process of socialization and essential in making up the habitus. The kind of cultural capital that is valuable and can be mobilized as economic capital is dependent on the field and the way capital is distributed to begin with. (Bourdieu 1986; see also Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990, 13–14.) Linguistic capital, a conceptual tool used in article II, is an apt example of the contextual nature of the field and the value of different capitals: the value of any language as capital is dependent on the field and whichever language is viewed as legitimate in that context. The usefulness of any language is highly contextual and highlights the arbitrariness of aspects of the social world that are nevertheless viewed as natural. The amount of this embodied cultural capital possessed by students tends to differ, tacitly contributing to the success of some and failure of others in navigating the field of education. (Bourdieu 1986, 1991.)

Finally, the interconnection between individual and structure is played out through *habitus*. For the process of reproducing the social world, habitus is crucial, since it embodies the historical, cultural, and social norms in the individual, and, as they become incorporated, they in turn structure individuals' "thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (Bourdieu 1990a, 55). The structures of habitus are "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (ibid., 53), "structured" referring to their being non-arbitrary but inherently tied to a social and historical context, and "structuring" referring to their ability to steer individuals' thoughts and actions in a non-conscious manner. Habitus develops in interaction with fields and becomes a set of "incorporated possibilities" (Harker 1990, 91), meaning that individuals tend to internalize objective possibilities which affect their subjective desires and needs: "The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue out of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable" (Bourdieu 1990a, 54). How an individual's habitus develops (what is internalized

as (im-)possible or inevitable) comes down to the capitals (economic, social, and cultural) that are mobilizable and available to them, the kind of capitals that are valued in a given field, and the match or mismatch between an individual's available capitals and those that are valued in this context.

What complicates things further is that the system of fields, doxa, habitus and capitals functions as an objective structure and therefore, in part, independently of a single individual. Bourdieu (1990b, 135) emphasizes that maintaining societal hierarchies does not necessarily require the “deliberately biased action of propaganda or symbolic imposition,” since it results from the inherently dialectical relationship of structure and individual. This is important to keep in mind in the discussions on inequalities in education that follow: exclusionary practices in the field of education are unlikely to have been deliberately created by the people currently working in this field. Rather, the social world is historically and socially constructed, and simultaneously individuals’ “structures of perception and appreciation . . . have emerged from these objective structures and tend therefore to see the world as self-evident” (ibid., 135). The self-evident beliefs about schools, students, and teachers are the focus of the next subsection when discussing the field of school.

#### **2.1.4 The school as a field**

Schools can be examined as part of the field of education, meaning that schools feature a doxa that organizes their everyday life via tacit, non-conscious beliefs. It matters what these self-evident beliefs are, since this will affect which capitals are perceived as valuable in the field of education and which individuals—students as well as teachers—navigate this field with the greatest ease.

Bourdieu's argument is that educational institutions, by default, tend to favor those individuals who possess the right kind of (embodied) cultural capital (style, language, taste, etc.) from the institution's perspective (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). This favoring originates from enough teachers seeing a certain kind of habitus as natural, thus treating “all children as if they had equal access to it” (Harker 1990, 87). The key here is *enough* teachers, since individual teachers can possess beliefs and engage in actions that challenge the doxa. However, even though some individuals' ideals might clash with the dominant beliefs of the field of education (see Nikkola et al. 2019; Huilla 2022), their collective power may not be sufficient to surpass the threshold for overturning the dominant view. For Bourdieu, the “right” kind of capital in schools corresponds to that of the dominant groups in society. Access to the right habitus that matches the doxa of the school makes it easier for some students to navigate the school as a field (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Bourdieu 1986; see also Harker 1984, 1990). The kind of cultural capital or habitus that is viewed as natural or normal among individuals working in schools and

toward which students are cultivated, then, is one that the dominant groups already possess or can at least more easily acquire—in this way, schools tend to legitimize existing societal power relations and act as an institution of social reproduction (Harker 1984; Mills 2008).

What is perceived as natural or as the doxa of the field of education is by definition non-conscious and internalized, acquired through the process of socialization among the actors in the field. The illusion of the naturalness (Bourdieu 1990a) of the habitus that matches the school's expectations produces a problem: the normative expectation of what is, for example, the right kind of habitus becomes a yardstick for all students. Nevertheless, not all students possess equal amounts of different capitals to be able to assume the right kind of habitus, and when some students do not reach this standard, which is mistakenly perceived as natural and not social, it easily becomes viewed as an individual shortcoming instead of something produced by societal structures. This is defined as deficit thinking (Valencia 1997, 2010), where “poor schooling performance is rooted in students’ alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory” (Valencia 1997, 9).

For instance, throughout the history of Finnish education, “school for all” has always been conditional, where some students are defined as beyond the norm (Rinne 2012; Pitkänen et al. 2021; Jahnukainen et al. 2023, 402–403). In other words, the field of education is built on beliefs about what is natural in this context, and these norms organize what is seen as normal and what is not. In the Finnish context, recent research paints a picture of the normative expectation of a student as a white, middle-class, Finnish-speaking child without special education needs or behavioral problems (Niemi 2008; Souto 2011; Riitaoja 2013; Juva & Holm 2016; Riitaoja et al. 2017; Kurki 2018; Riitaoja, Helakorpi & Holm 2019; Juva 2019; Hummelstedt et al. 2020; Repo 2020; Huilla, Peltola & Kosunen 2021; Huilla 2022; Kohvakka 2022; Liukko, Viljaranta & Hakkarainen 2022; Suuriniemi 2023; Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023; Niemi & Mietola 2023)—a frame in which it is impossible for everyone to fit.

Schools themselves also react to changes in surrounding society's changing conditions; however, as Harker (1990, 102–103) argues, they may often do this by attempting to get all students to assume the dominant habitus constituted by valuable capitals: “For example, the reaction of many schools to rising levels of unemployment is to run courses on how to apply, to be interviewed, for a job – in Bourdieu's terms, to transmit the ‘style’, language and behavior of the dominant habitus” (see also Mills 2008). Schools are thus easily stuck in between the goal of providing equal possibilities and outcomes for each student—which they attempt to achieve by striving to provide every student with the skills to emulate the right kind of (middle-class) habitus—and the goal of pursuing equality by actively questioning

the dominant habitus and making the limits of the doxa of schooling visible (see also Forbes & Lingard 2014; Watkins 2018; Huilla 2022).

This tendency is obvious in the findings of article II, which shows some schools attempting to respond to the needs of a multilingual student population by trying to bolster the Finnish language skills of students whose first language is not Finnish, rather than exploring ways to support their learning in a genuinely multilingual way—this would challenge the doxa of the field. In other words, the goal remains that all students learn and study in the dominant language, rather than the utilization of the variety of languages that the students already master through their family. This is demonstrative of how language works as embodied cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1991).

Schools play a central role in reproducing societal norms and the hegemonic beliefs behind them. If schools are to do more than simply reproduce the social positions arising from students' and their families' unequally distributed capitals, it is critical for enough educators to recognize the role of social reality in students' success in school and to have the tools to critically examine the origin of their own social expectations (see section 2.2; also Matikainen 2022). Reproduction in education is not a mechanical process but rather a system of cycles in which individuals' habituses interact with different fields, culture, history, and so on (Harker 1990). This interaction between the individual, the social structures around them, and time, is what creates the possibility of changing the relatively objective social reality.

## **2.2 Teachers enacting reproduction and reform**

School's tasks, both maintaining and reforming society, take their practical form in classrooms: in teachers' pedagogical choices and everyday interactions with students. Teachers are strongly steered by the National Core Curriculum (NCC), a framework that specifies the relevant study contents and aims, as well as the values and conceptualizations of Finnish comprehensive schools. Municipalities and schools are to use the core curriculum to develop their own local curricula. The NCC functions as an administrative, intellectual, and pedagogical document for the comprehensive education system: it is a national steering document laying out the responsibilities of education providers, defining concepts that are deemed relevant for knowledge and learning, and providing pedagogical and assessment tools for schools and teachers (Vitikka, Krokfors & Hurmerinta 2012). The NCC consists of two parts, one with more abstract aims and values to steer education providers' pedagogical ethos, and the other with more specific learning aims for each study subject. The national curriculum has traditionally been quite content specific and arranged according to study subjects, and the degree of integration between these subjects in the curriculum has been a regular topic of discussion (Vitikka 2009).

The NCC is renewed approximately once a decade, with the newest version published in 2014 and implemented in 2016. The NCC combines the structure and philosophy of the German *Lehrplan* tradition with elements of the Anglo-American *curriculum* approach. The *Lehrplan* tradition emphasizes the role of (cultural, historical, political) knowledge in the process of human growth or *Bildung*, whereas the curriculum tradition focuses on the process of learning as something that can be standardized and measured. This means that the NCC defines distinct and relevant contents and aims for different study subjects and comprehensive education at large, but, according to the *Lehrplan* tradition, it does not prescribe specific pedagogical solutions but leaves these up to schools and individual teachers. On the other hand, the curriculum tradition has introduced to the Finnish education discourse overall elements of standardization and measurement, and an interest in the individual learner. In the NCC, this is visible perhaps in conceptualizations of learning and assessment and in the overall value base, which emphasizes meeting the needs of each individual child. (Vitikka Krokfors Hurmerinta 2012; Krokfors 2017; Saari, Salmela & Vilkkilä 2017.) Everyday interaction follows a different logic, though, and teachers' ability to realize the curriculum's aims is affected by a wide range of factors, including teachers' life experiences, previous educational and social background, teaching expertise, and the context of each individual school.

From the perspective of this dissertation, of particular interest is the kind of relationship that Finnish teachers have with society, since the school's societal tasks are ultimately enacted in everyday pedagogical actions, that is, teachers' choices. Kansanen (2014) emphasizes the role of decision-making as a constitutive element of teacher's work as they inevitably "take a stand" (ibid., 284) combining normative and descriptive thinking. In turn, Biesta (2015) terms teachers' situational decision-making *teacher judgment*, similarly a constitutive part of the profession. Teachers' ability to take a meaningful stand is affected by the amount of support they receive for the development of societal thinking during their studies and the opportunities they are provided for using and developing their critical thinking tools while studying and eventually working in schools (see also Nikkola et al. 2019). In the following subsections, I discuss Finnish teachers and their societal role in the context of Finnish education.

## 2.2.1 Finnish teachers and teacher education

Finnish teachers are university-educated professionals whose work is guided by the National Core Curriculum (NCC). Teacher education programs are essential in modifying the practice of schools, as they are places where teachers form the basis for their profession and role as educators.

To gain a qualification as a class teacher, pre-service teachers complete an academic degree that includes basic, intermediate, and advanced courses, bachelor's and master's theses, both theoretical and practical courses on educational sciences and instruction, and training periods in teacher training schools. Subject teachers, who most often teach in the higher grade levels of comprehensive school, gain a subject teacher's qualification by attaining a master's degree in their chosen field and completing pedagogical studies and teacher practice periods (60 ECTS). The aim is that during their studies, pre-service teachers acquire broad expertise for their future work: in this way, ideally, their pedagogical choices will eventually be based on research and educational theory (see, e.g., Kansanen 2004, 2014).

A key organizing principle of Finnish teacher education is indeed its research orientation: teachers are to be equipped with practical and theoretical skills that allow them to adopt an inquiring stance to develop their own teaching while in the profession. Teacher educators are expected to conduct their own research, and a research orientation is appreciated among teacher educators as well as pre-service and in-service teachers (E.g., Kansanen et al. 2000; Jyrhämä et al. 2008; Byman et al. 2009; Kansanen 2014; Toom et al. 2010; Toom et al. 2017; Koski et al. 2022; cf. Sitomaniemi-San 2015; Sääntti, Puustinen & Salminen 2018.) Nonetheless, in international literature, teachers have been reported to view educational research as separate from their classroom practices (Allen 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak 2010). Similar findings have also been made in the Finnish context, suggesting that in-service teachers may view the role of research as instrumental or irrelevant to their work, even when they hold generally positive attitudes towards research and academic teacher education (Koski et al. 2022; see also Sääntti, Salminen, Koski & Puustinen 2023). Furthermore, a study by Puustinen and colleagues (2018) showed that the terms *teacher as a researcher* or *personal practical theory*—concepts associated with goals of research-based teacher training—were unclear to many pre-service teachers, thereby questioning the success of connecting theory and practice in teacher education.

Tying teacher education to academia has likely influenced the way the profession is perceived in Finnish society: for example, contrary to many other countries even in the Nordics, Finland is still free of a heavy school inspection mechanism, which can be partly attributed to general trust in Finnish teachers, their high level of education, and professional expertise (e.g., Krokfors 2017; Niemi et al. 2018; Hansen et al. 2020). Nonetheless, university-based teacher education is not necessarily a saving grace in itself, since it matters greatly what that education entails and how a research orientation is eventually translated into everyday pedagogical action when pre-service teachers begin teaching in schools (Sitomaniemi-San 2015; Puustinen, Sääntti & Simola 2022; Koski et al. 2022; Sääntti, Puustinen & Hansen 2023).

The theory-practice gap represents a problem if teachers are expected to make meaningful judgments or take considered stands in the field of education—a field that will inevitably change many times over their careers. However, the theory-practice gap is also a discussion of *which theory*: Finnish teacher education has been criticized for placing greater emphasis on the psychological and subject-specific aspects of learning than on the philosophical, societal, and contextual aspects of schooling. The decontextualization of education extends thus to teacher education and can be seen, for instance, in the smaller role of courses on the social, cultural, and political aspects of the school compared to courses on didactics and the details of the current core curriculum (Arola 2012; Simola 2015b; Kinos et al. 2015; Nieminen & Mankki 2019; Juvonen & Toom 2021; Puustinen, Sääntti & Simola 2022; Sääntti, Puustinen & Hansen 2023). The research orientation of Finnish teacher education has also been criticized for being built around methodological studies (Sitomaniemi-San 2015): the emphasis on methodology is thought to develop pre-service teachers' skills of scientific thinking, but this means there may be less space for studying the broad spectrum of educational sciences, including sociology and the philosophy of education, which, in the degree programs, are often narrowed down to one mandatory course of 5 ECTS (Kinos et al. 2015; Puustinen, Sääntti & Simola 2022; see also Metsäpelto et al. 2021).

Studies have shown that the orientation of novice pre-service teachers towards the societal aspects of teaching is weaker than to the personal aspects of building a career as a teacher: Kuusisto and Rissanen (2023) report that at the beginning of their studies, pre-service teachers are most motivated to enter teaching as a form of personal fulfilment; supporting students' learning only comes second, and societal questions are mentioned by just a few (see also Tirri & Kuusisto 2019, 67–70). While finding personal fulfilment in one's work is undoubtedly important, an inherent property of teaching is providing support for *another's* learning and growth, making teaching a fundamentally altruistic profession (Buchmann 1986), as is discussed in Article I. To develop pedagogical thinking that also addresses the societal and philosophical questions of education, pre-service teachers would likely benefit from study content in these areas of educational sciences (Nieminen & Mankki 2019; Juvonen & Toom 2021).

## **2.2.2 Teachers and Finnish society**

When discussing Finnish teachers in relation to society, two perspectives should be examined: first, how society views teachers, and second, how teachers view society.

First, teachers are highly valued and esteemed actors in Finland, which also means society holds high expectations for teachers' professionalism, morality, and behavior (Husu & Toom 2021). Historically, society's view of teachers has been understandably linked to perceptions of the task of school, and therefore it has

changed over time (see, e.g., Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010). Jukka Rantala (2010, 105–109) argues that prior to the introduction of comprehensive school, teachers were, or at least are portrayed as having been, a politically uniform group neutral or supportive towards the government, as the purpose of folk education and later compulsory schooling was to cultivate a unified nation. Teachers selected to teacher seminars were expected to be model citizens; thus, these seminars were a way of cultivating teachers' (political) views further as well as strengthening their middle-class status (Rantala 2010, 121; see also Rinne 1986).

A change occurred in the goal of compulsory education and therefore teacher ideals in the mid-1900s: after the second world war, teachers' task became tied to the welfare state project that included the ideals of the new comprehensive school (Rantala 2010, 131; Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010), although the exact nature of these ideals was the subject of intense debate in the 1950s–60s (Rautiainen 2022). After the introduction of the comprehensive education system, teacher education was transferred from seminars to universities at the end of the 1970s. By this time, the Finnish schooling discourse had shifted toward support for the growth of the individual. This further modified teacher ideals: rather than emphasizing teachers being model citizens, teachers were expected to commit to the school institution and its goals and curriculum (Kemppinen 2006, 39–40; Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010). The individualist discourse was further strengthened by the neoliberal turn of the 1980s–90s, emphasizing the role of school and education in enhancing economic competitiveness. Vuorikoski and Räisänen (2010) analyze the change in the governance of teachers, arguing that over time, the overt governance, characteristic of the folk education period, has evolved into self-governance, where internalized goals related to education as well as external pressures govern teachers' work. Consequently, society has not broken its hold over the teaching profession; rather, the strategies have changed (*ibid.*, see also Lindén 2010).

Although some argue that the requirements and narrative of the teacher as a model citizen had faded by the 1950s (Rantala 2010, 131; Kemppinen 2006, 35), implicit expectations towards teachers beyond their ability to teach can be found lingering far after (Syrjäläinen et al. 2006a). The official requirements for teachers no longer mention a teacher's health or their able-bodiedness, for example (see Simola 1995), and instead only concern teachers' academic and language qualifications (Asetus opetustoimen . . . 1998/986). Still, the cultural, discursive construction of what a teacher can be like can include expectations about their characteristics and appearance (Kamila 2012; Fornaciari & Männistö 2017; Lanas 2017; Martikainen 2020), in other words, qualities beyond teaching and the classroom. According to Martikainen (2019), the visual representation of the Finnish teacher on the covers of the trade union's magazine *Opettaja* ("Teacher") is homogeneous and as such fails to challenge normative expectations about a teacher's gender, age, or ethnic background (see also Kamila 2012). Through living

embedded in a culture, cultural expectations become individuals' expectations, and a narrow normative frame of a good teacher can exclude those that do not fit the cultural ideal or norm—or in Bourdieu's words, *doxa*—even if they had the potential qualities of a skillful teacher. As discussed in section 2.3, an individual's *habitus* and the extent to which they fit in the field in question will either motivate them to pursue a certain kind of future, such as a career in teaching, or exclude certain trajectories as something impossible or undesirable.

Second, it is equally important to discuss how Finnish teachers view society and their role within it. Studies on Finnish teachers' orientation towards society have found that teachers tend to hold more conservative than progressive views (Syrjäläinen et al. 2006b; Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010; Fornaciari & Männistö 2017). This is understandable considering that, historically, the profession has been tied to governmental goals, as discussed above. Throughout the development of the Finnish compulsory school system, the norm has been educating students to adapt to existing society—with the possible exception of the struggles over school democracy in the 1970s (see Rautiainen 2022)—and this orientation is still highlighted in studies on Finnish teachers' view of their own societal role (Syrjäläinen et al. 2006b; Räisänen 2014; Fornaciari 2020).

A further reason for teachers' orientation to society may be the organization of teacher education: in their study from the early 2000s, Syrjäläinen and colleagues (2006b) found that class teachers viewed teaching as societally influential, but, at the same time, teacher education was not always seen to provide the tools necessary for becoming a societally active teacher. In addition, they reported that subject teachers were more careful about their societal role and viewing it as a less important part of their teacher studies (see also Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010). Furthermore, in their study, Fornaciari and Männistö (2017) found that teachers did not always consider teacher education to have been particularly influential in the development of their professional agency, not even when teachers exhibited a critical societal orientation—in these cases, this societal agency had been formed elsewhere. In addition, Nikkola and colleagues (2019) report that even when pre-service teachers had acquired a critical outlook on the school institution through their studies, they were not necessarily able to bring these skills to the school communities in which they went on to work, since the existing school culture was not always open to critical discussion and reflection (see also Riihinen, Nikkola & Rautiainen 2012; Lanas & Hautala 2015). Thus, there is an obvious contradiction between teachers' perception of themselves as societal actors and the difficulty to gain the necessary tools for assuming a societal teacher role.

### 2.2.3 Teachers in the *field* of education

The teacher's role as a mediator between individuals and society is crucial; however, simultaneously, they themselves are individuals in the field of education navigating the social world and its "natural truths" with the capitals available to them. When pre-service teachers enter teacher education and eventually schools, they have already accumulated experiences from school as students—they have internalized what a normal school is like. As discussed in subsection 2.1.3, the field of education, like all fields, contains its own doxa. Like all fields, individuals come to interact in the field of education with the economic, cultural, and social capitals that are available to them. Some capitals and the habituses constituted by them will correspond with the capitals valued in the field better than others. As university-educated professionals, teachers are already a select group who are likely to possess the appropriate capital for navigating the field of education (Nori 2011).

Change in the field of school would require that the natural truths are recognized and challenged and that they are brought into the realm of discussion. What complicates recognition of the internalized expectations of the natural truths in school is that teachers themselves are more likely to represent a habitus that typically corresponds largely to the expectations of the institution: the illusion of normality is perpetuated if a person's experience seldom clashes with the normative expectations around them (Bourdieu 1990a; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; see also Razfar 2011; Flynn 2013; King & Scott 2014, see also previous subsection chapter). Of course, there are teachers who are critical and challenge established ideals concerning themselves, schools, and students, but this is not always easy, as Nikkola and colleagues (2019) found. If a teacher's habitus matches the field of school well, their own experience of navigating it is more likely to be unproblematic, making it difficult to detect the limits of the doxa.

There may be many reasons for this match: one, discussed and developed in article I, may be that students who effortlessly fit into the school environment are more likely to want to continue to work in schools as adults, causing them to be less critical of school as an institution (Lortie 1975). Teachers are former students, and, through socialization, they have accumulated a large amount of information about what school, students, and teachers are like; in other words, they have internalized the normative structures of school. Lortie (1975) called this kind of teacher socialization *apprenticeship of observation*: pre-service teachers are not in any way blank slates; rather, they already hold beliefs about what normal school-life is like, even if their understanding of teaching is limited to teacher interaction in the classroom and does not include the tasks teachers perform outside lessons. What article I suggests is a cycle of reproduction that is perpetuated particularly through teachers: school as a field contains beliefs and "truths" that are viewed as natural, which tend, however, to favor students with a middle-class background (Harker 1984; Crozier 2015; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Students who find it easy to

navigate this field and live by these natural truths are more likely to consider school a possible future workplace, whereas students who are less fluent in the legitimate ways of being and doing are less likely to want to work in schools (Lortie 1975). Pre-service teachers attend teacher education that does not sufficiently challenge their views about school accumulated during their years as students (see also Britzman 1986). Then pre-service teachers enter schools with their existing normative expectations of schools, teachers, and students, accumulated through socialization. If these normative expectations of school are not challenged at any point of this cycle, it is extremely difficult for the school to function as a place of societal reform.

## **2.2.4 Teachers' tasks in today's schools**

To act towards social reform, teachers would ideally assume their societal role and tasks inherent to it through their teacher studies. School's societal tasks are enacted through instruction and interaction with students, and it matters how teachers understand the purpose of education, in respect to both society and students. When elaborating the tasks of schools and teachers, I lean on the writings of Gert Biesta: he proposes that the purpose of education can be divided in three domains: qualification, socialization and subjectivation (e.g., Biesta 2006, 2015). In article III, these domains offer a way to study the everyday life of schools more closely. They offer a detailed means of examining the everyday choices teachers make and thus supplement Bourdieu's concepts. As shown in article III, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and Biesta's domains of purposes of schooling work together in elaborating the task of school in relation to both individuals and society.

Biesta (2006, 2010, 2015) considers the purpose of education and problematizes the way it is understood in the "age of measurement." In short, he argues that the purpose of education should be understood as more than mere learning; instead, it is a multifaceted concept. However, so he argues, global educational policy trends and the international league tables provided by organizations like the OECD have narrowed the view of the purpose of education in the global discourse to producing educational outcomes (Biesta 2010). The global discourse of education as a producer of learning outcomes affects, in turn, local educational policy. Biesta (2010, 12) writes that the "rise of the measurement culture in education has had a profound impact on educational practice, from the highest levels of educational policy at national and supranational level down to the practices of local schools and teachers."

This means that the purpose of education is not viewed holistically, and important aspects of educational practice are not considered, even among educators: "if we do not know what it is we are seeking to achieve with our educational arrangements and endeavours, we cannot make any decisions about the content that is most appropriate and the kind of relationships that are most

conducive” (Biesta 2015, 77). To counter this, Biesta proposes a three-dimensional model of the purpose of education, where not only the content of instruction, but also the surrounding cultural context and the growing subjects themselves are accounted for. This view of education goes beyond learning and recognizes that “we always need to engage with content, tradition *and* the person” (Biesta 2015, 78, emphasis in original). These domains of purpose are briefly presented here and further examined in the results of article III.

## 2.3 Three domains of “purpose” of education

As an educational domain, *qualification* concerns issuing students with qualifications to function as part of the workforce and society more broadly (Biesta 2010, 2015). In the context of Finnish comprehensive education, the aims of the qualification domain work towards transmitting the knowledge and skills laid out in the National Core Curriculum. In this domain, the aim is to provide the student with an official qualification, concretely a report card for completing their comprehensive education, which is required to apply to upper secondary school.

The domain of *socialization* concerns being initiated into a culture, and it is reflected both in the implicit and explicit aspects of schooling (Biesta 2010, 2015). Explicitly it is manifested in collective choices concerning which parts of culture are considered valuable enough to be transmitted to the next generation in the National Core Curriculum. Implicitly, it lies in learning the tacit knowledge of the right ways of doing and being. In Bourdieu’s (1977) terms, the implicit aspect corresponds to learning what the doxa of the social context is like (see section 2.1). While socialization is an essential function of education, it also serves, in part, to reproduce existing social structures, hierarchies, and divisions, hindering individuals’ movement in these structures. As a more general concept, socialization has been employed in much research in sociology, social psychology, and psychology to examine, inter alia, the historical and social conditions of the socialization process and the conditions of individual development and identity building (Siljander 1997). While my interest is the socialization produced and aimed for by schools, it is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to school: socialization occurs through other communities and institutions as well, family being a central one, and starts before and continues after an individual’s time in education. However, for many years, children spend a significant part of their week attending school and learning from its social world and surrounding society, which makes school a central arena for socialization.

The third purpose of education, *subjectification*, concerns cultivating students’ growth into active agents capable of carefully considering the possible consequences of their own actions. Subjectification is the domain of action, initiative, and choice: it is a balance between providing space for students’ own

initiatives and ideas and helping them learn to make responsible choices in terms of their environment and other people. (Biesta 2015, 2020.) It is not only freedom in the sense of removing all limits: the world is not limitless, but rather a network of other living things who all possess freedom. Instead, education as subjectification enables students to encounter the limits themselves and come to terms with them. Nor is it responsibility alone: responsibility without freedom will only produce self-objectification, where the student remains a self-monitoring object of initiatives and activities defined by teachers. In order to truly allow students to encounter the limits in their action, the teacher must relinquish some of their control—this is the inherent *risk* in education. (Biesta 2020.) Cultivating subjectification means balancing between freedom and responsibility: supporting students so that they maintain the energy and motivation to return to the “middle-ground” (Biesta 2020, 97), which, to Biesta, lies between world-destruction (doing only what one wants without considering others and the world) and self-destruction (abandoning one’s own wishes and desires for the sake of others).

In every pedagogical moment, the teacher faces a choice: which domain of education requires their attention in that particular instance, with that particular student (Biesta 2015; see also Kansanen 2014)? Balancing between these domains of purpose is challenging, since they are not easily distinguished in everyday life, which in a school is often fast-paced and where the teacher’s attention is required simultaneously in more than one direction. Teachers may not have time to analyze situations in depth before making a pedagogical decision, but they nonetheless end up working towards the aims of one domain, sometimes at the cost of other domains. To make considerate pedagogical choices consistently amid school life, a teacher would presumably benefit from creating their own pedagogical ethos which they can draw on in those situations (van Manen 1991; Toom 2006; Huilla et al. 2024).

Combining two separate conceptualizations in an analysis can create challenges, but here I have found that Bourdieu’s ideas about the relationship between structure and individual and Biesta’s domains of purpose supplement rather than challenge each other. Biesta’s work on the purpose of education contains a built-in understanding of the school as a place of social reproduction and the fact that this process is not necessarily always fair. For example, in a 2009 article, he writes, “the absence of explicit attention for the aims and ends of education is the effect of often implicit reliance on a particular ‘common sense’ view of what education is for. We have to bear in mind, however, that what appears as ‘common sense’ often serves the interests of some groups (much) better than those of others” (Biesta 2009, 37). This notion contains parallels with Bourdieu’s understanding of the doxa of the field of education, which provides an easier match for some individuals than others. However, Bourdieu’s concepts offer tools beyond the classroom or education in general to discuss the ways in which and reasons why individuals act to uphold the

doxa in the first place, and *why* social structures, like normative expectations in schooling, work the way they do.

Then again, while Bourdieu's concepts function well when analyzing discourse or, for instance, the normative expectations and valuations of linguistic capital in the field of school (article II), they only go so far when analyzing teachers' pedagogical choices in the classroom (article III). By contrast, Biesta's conceptualization of the purpose of education is translatable to the life of classrooms and thus more useful in this respect. Thus, in the analyses presented in this dissertation, the work of both is utilized: Biesta's to examine the details of classroom life and Bourdieu's to broaden my understanding of social reproduction in education.

## 3 Research task and methodology

This chapter discusses the research task and methodological choices of the dissertation and presents the empirical context and data. More specifically, it describes the study's onto-epistemological underpinnings, the way the data was produced and, lastly, the process of the analyses in empirical articles II and III.

### 3.1 Research task

Schools are complex social settings with a doxa that guides people's expectations towards each other in that context. These beliefs are passed on through the process of socialization, which may also influence who aspires to become a teacher to begin with, resulting in the self-exclusion of those who do not fit the school's ideals as effortlessly as others. However, school also performs a more open-ended task: to provide skills to the next generation for agency in a society that has not yet come to be; in other words, school also functions as a resource for societal reform.

In this dissertation, I examine the relationship between the school institution and society from the perspective of its two societal tasks: reproduction and reform. Theoretical concepts are applied to the context of Finnish comprehensive education with the goal of refining these concepts through examining them with empirical data. I focus on teachers who enact this institution in practice: the expectations they hold and are required to fulfil, the way they enact the official school with students, and the kind of purposes they work towards in their work. Using empirical data, I discuss the conditions under which schools both reproduce and reform societal structures. I study these topics through the three research questions (RQ) presented below. Each contains a slightly different focus: RQ1 concentrates on the societal level of schooling, RQ2 deals with the relationship between teachers or the teaching profession and school and schoolwork, and RQ3 focuses on school's societal tasks in relation to individual students.

*RQ1: What kind of societal expectations are imposed on schools and teachers? How do these expectations meet reality in the everyday life of school?* The findings from articles I and II are used to answer these questions.

*RQ2: What is expected of teachers in terms of the task of school? What is the relationship between the societal task of school and work in classrooms?* The

findings from article III are complemented with discussions from article I and II to answer this question.

RQ3: *How does the societal task of school or teachers relate to individual students and their school path?* To answer this question, I refer to findings from articles II and III.

## 3.2 Onto-epistemological position

This dissertation starts from the assumption that reality is both material and social. Social reality would not exist without living individuals, the historical and cultural contexts they inhabit, the meanings they make, and the relations they form. To transcend the debate over subjectivism and objectivism, Bourdieu called for a relational sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1995), a mode of thinking which attempts “to affirm or show that so-called social structures, societies, or institutions are relations between social actors” (Dépelteau & Powell 2013, xv). Ontologically, Bourdieu prioritizes these relations rather than the objects or subjects of the field. Simultaneously, culturally and historically molded relations and social structures have real, material consequences for individuals and their lives, and these social structures are not fully dependent on an individual person’s existence, i.e., they are not fully subjective. Moreover, despite accusations of determinism (see subsection 2.1.1), to Bourdieu, social structures are not fully objective either, since, through heterodoxy, these structures can be altered, making room for social change. Through lived history, a reality that originates from the social gains legitimacy as objective and independent of individuals (see also Berger & Luckmann 1994/1966).

Bourdieu’s writings contain some inherent tensions or even contradictions that require a researcher to make choices. As Simon Susen (2011, 74–75) writes, for example, even though Bourdieu considers sociology both an explanatory *and* an interpretive project, for practical reasons, research will probably lean more in one direction than the other. This dissertation tends more towards the explanatory project approach and thus a realist ontology, since the focus is on understanding relations and interactions between individuals and their surroundings and less on the meaning-making of individual actors in the field (see Susen 2011). Even though I have certainly been interested in and make great use of, for example, what individual people view important or essential for schooling and what their views are in general, my aim is to use that information to understand the social context that may modify these individuals’ interpretations and actions rather than to focus on the interpretations themselves. Following the idea of socialization and Bourdieu’s claim that through living in a social environment the social becomes embedded in the individual, people’s understandings of the world are never fully individual. As norms are part of the social world and therefore organize individual people’s actions, observing those actions and seeking to understand what individuals

consider good or desirable and how they justify their actions and opinions can provide some clues about the social world and the norms of school.

While the ontological position of this dissertation is closer to realism, the epistemological position is not. As Willig (2016, 33–38) claims, “most qualitative research is actually based upon a position of ontological realism together with epistemological relativism.” Willig argues that epistemological relativism is a form of “intellectual self-awareness,” in other words, something that is key for qualitative research to be reflexive. One can adopt a realist ontological position without the assumption that it is possible to know what this objective reality is “truly” like (ibid.). Consequently, this study is aligned with epistemological relativism: even though the focus is an objective social world that has real consequences for individuals, I do not claim that it is possible to observe or describe it with certainty or that all the aspects of this reality could be revealed to me—or, if they had, that I would be able to comprehend every aspect without being influenced or limited by my own subjective experience and capacity. In Willig’s (2016) terms, I attempt to combine a “realist aspiration” with “epistemological modesty”. (See also Komulainen 2014, 247–248.) I do believe that ethnography offers the potential to form a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation than many other methodologies, but my analyses are nevertheless my epistemic constructs, and at best they can only resemble a reality rather than flawlessly represent it.

Henni Alava (2016, 131–132) suggests that instead of definitive knowing, the goal of ethnography is *hunching* (“*aavistelu*”), as the social world is complex and layered, and it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the researcher and the field. Below, I have attempted to describe the context and production of data in a transparent and reflexive manner, enabling the reader to understand and critically examine my choices and, therefore, the “hunches” I propose in this dissertation. It is typical of ethnographic research that the lines between formulating the research question, producing data, and performing the analyses are porous, and fieldwork already represents an analytic process where the researcher’s gaze is continually redirected and refocused based on observations. This means the research question and focus evolve throughout the study. (Butler-Kisber 2018; Gordon et al. 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007.) For this reason, this chapter is also written porously, where the goal is to describe my process, along with the principles of ethnographic methodology and related ethical considerations about the choices made in the study. I first provide a short introduction to how I have approached ethnography in section 3.3. In the sections that follow, I discuss the process of fieldwork—negotiations, observations, and writing—and present the primary data. In section 3.4., I discuss the analyses—reading and re-reading my own and other researchers notes—and present in more detail the data used to complement, question, and enrich the primary data.

### 3.3 Ethnographic knowing and data

To study the social reality of a school, I have adopted an ethnographic approach. According to Martyn Hammersley (2006), attempting to define ethnography precisely is probably not a particularly useful pursuit; instead, the focus should be on providing an account of what the researcher means when they claim they are doing ethnography and how the methodology is used. Ethnography is characterized by a longer period of immersion in a certain context and a reflexive relationship with the ethnographic field<sup>3</sup> the researcher is studying. One of the more common ways to characterize ethnography is Geertz' concept of *thick description*, which the ethnographer aims to provide about a chosen social context. (E.g., Lappalainen et al. 2007; Atkinson et al. 2001; Gould & Uusihakala 2016.)

Ethnographic methodology suits the purpose of this dissertation well since my aim is to analyze the relationship between schools' societal tasks and everyday school life. To achieve this, it is necessary to observe what occurs in classrooms. Ethnographic knowledge is highly experiential, as the researcher enters the field as a complete and complex person and interacts with that field even when they are mainly observing at the back of the class (Palmu 2007). The researcher's own experience and feelings related to those experiences are part of being in the field: "The researcher is not just the originator and narrator of the ethnographic script" (Hannabuss 2000, 101), instead, they are an active actor who both makes and unravels meanings. This is why I prefer the terms producing or generating data to data collection, since there is no data that a researcher simply collects; rather, the data is the outcome of choices and observations and the way those observations are experienced and written down. The ethnographer can be thought of as a craftsperson, putting together various pieces of a puzzle to form an understanding of the field (Atkinson 1992; Fingerroos & Jauhki 2014; Denzin & Lincoln 2018). As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001, 358) write, "fieldnotes present a *version* of a world that functions more as a filter than a mirror reflecting the 'reality' of events."

Of course, this means that the researcher brings with them their own history, societal position, life situation, and physical body (see Gordon et al. 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2018) which all affect their interpretations in more or less conscious ways, making the demand for reflexivity key (Gould & Uusihakala 2016). This is especially true for educational ethnography, where the field is never fully new to the researcher (Atkinson & Delamont 1995; see also Lortie 1975). Nevertheless, being present is a way to gain insight into the everyday life of schools that other methods cannot achieve. For example, one needs to *be there* to sense and distinguish one silence from another: the soft quiet of the morning feels worlds away from the

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<sup>3</sup> The ethnographic field, discussed throughout chapter 3, is not to be conflated with Bourdieu's field.

frozen silence that falls over a class when the principal unexpectedly steps in the classroom and takes over an unruly class (see also Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001).

This dissertation combines data that my colleagues and I produced in one school during one project with data produced by other researchers in four other schools in two other projects. Combining data in this way echoes the combining of a relativist epistemology with realist ontology: my lived experience and observations in one field were crucial for formulating and posing the questions in empirical articles II and III. These experiences and the way they guided my gaze in the field were a starting point for this dissertation, which is why they are the focus of this section. Later, when writing the articles, the research interest and questions were applied to other data, enriching the existing data with experiences of other researchers and fields.

### **3.3.1 Entering the field – gatekeepers, compromises, and clues**

*“Negotiation here takes two different but by no means unrelated forms. On the one hand, explicit discussion with those whose activities one wishes to study may take place, much along the lines of that with sponsors and gatekeepers. But the term ‘negotiation’ also refers to the much more wide-ranging and subtle process of manoeuvring oneself into a position from which the necessary data can be collected.”*  
(Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, 61–62.)

Negotiating entry to a field entails not only discussions with the appropriate authorities to obtain a research permit but also the process of familiarizing oneself with the community and “negotiating” one’s way into observing the life of the people in the field and gaining their trust.

I was hired to do ethnographic observations in one elementary school in the project *Mixed Classes and Pedagogical Solutions* (MAPS, funded by NordForsk for 2018–2021) during the academic year 2018–2019. We had sought a school that would meet certain criteria: that it was situated in a neighborhood close to the municipality’s average in measurements of social segregation (i.e., families’ language and socio-economic background), that the school participated actively in pedagogical development and received needs-based resource allocation from the municipality, and that, despite the mixing of more well-off and disadvantaged families, it faced the risk of increasing segregation through middle-class families’ school choices (see Bernelius 2013; Bernelius & Vilkkama 2019; Kauppinen, van Ham & Bernelius 2022). After consulting the local educational administration and locating such a school and a nearby pre-school,<sup>4</sup> we could begin negotiating entry

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<sup>4</sup> The MAPS project also included a group in pre-primary education. Some of the initial negotiations were conducted jointly with both the elementary and preschool administration, which is why I have

to the field. The initial invitation to participate in the study, where the study and its research interests were briefly presented, was sent by Sirpa Lappalainen on behalf of our group in March 2018. We received responses within days: the principal of the school expressed their interest in participating and invited our group to a meeting. The principal of the pre-school also responded that they would attend the meeting with the teacher responsible for the pre-school group in the upcoming year.

Within two weeks of our initial message, Sirpa Lappalainen, Heidi Huilla, and I met with the principals and the pre-school group's teacher to present the study in more detail, describe the role of the ethnographic observations and interviews, and make space for any concerns or questions the schools might have. We emphasized that we were seeking a research site that was diverse in terms of students' backgrounds and study needs because the focus of the project was educational inclusion. We also underlined that the aim was to not evaluate the schools; rather, we were curious about the kind of pedagogical solutions these schools implemented when working with a diverse student body.

We discussed the practicalities of ethnographic observation and the possibility of having one of the 6th-grade classes as a "home class" for the researchers. The school representatives expressed few concerns, and in the meeting, we received a positive response from both principals and were able to proceed with applying for written permission from the municipal administration. We agreed that the principal of the school would discuss our study with the school staff in the spring, and we would present the study to them at the opening meeting of the academic year.

Obtaining a research permit is only the first step of negotiating entry to the field: even though initial negotiations to gain access and obtain a research permit for the chosen field are crucial, entering and then being in the field is an ongoing process of negotiations that continues until the end of data production. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), negotiating access is not simply a practical question of forming relationships with people in the field; in addition, it can also be a relevant part of the analytical process, as identifying and overcoming obstacles to access also provides information about the field, its reality, and relationships. (See also Feldman, Bell & Berger 2003.) The friction encountered during the negotiations and fieldwork in general can be informative of the research context.

We were invited to join the teachers' start-of-year meetings on two days before the first school day in August 2018. The entire research group had previously met with the preschool staff and parents, and we decided that I would present the project to the school staff by myself. In retrospect, it might have been useful for the

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included mentions of the preschool as well. However, my main focus in the fieldwork was the elementary school, which is the focus of the dissertation as well.

whole group to have been present, as the teaching staff seemed slightly more reserved towards the study than we had anticipated. Some teachers expressed concerns about participating in our research, and, in the first meeting, I had the sense that I had not been able to fully dispel their worries.

During these first two days, I spent time at the school acquainting myself with the staff and the building. I also held discussions with the 6<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers about whether one of their groups could be a home class for our study, as we were especially interested in the life of students who would be finishing elementary school, and the practice of having a class where the researcher could always go had proved convenient in the group's previous experiences of ethnography (e.g., Huilla 2022). The reason for our focus on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade was related to the goal of producing similar data across the three countries of the MAPS project. In the initial discussions with the teachers, I assured them that participation in the study would not require any extra work; rather, a researcher would simply be present in their class every now and then. I also emphasized that our purpose was not to evaluate the school or the teachers and that it was important they felt comfortable participating in the study. I also underlined that they were entitled to ask the researcher to leave their class. On the second day, after discussing the matter among themselves, they suggested that instead of picking one home class, we include the whole 6<sup>th</sup> grade level to divide the study between the classes, and this is what we agreed. From an ethical perspective, it was important that this solution came from the teachers, as I would not have felt comfortable persuading them to participate.

Generally, the teacher community was relatively difficult to gain access to, most likely for reasons unrelated to the study itself. To reassure the staff more, Heidi Huilla and I attended another teachers' meeting in September where we talked about conducting and reporting research, and I noticed that after this meeting the mood was slightly less reserved. As the school year progressed, I felt that the teachers with whom I spent most time became more relaxed about me sitting at the back of their class. The relative slowness with which the teachers warmed to me is perhaps indicative of this specific context. One interpretation of this friction or reluctance could be that the presence of an extra adult in the class was taken as a distraction to schoolwork—perhaps the staff felt spread too thin with their existing work and adding a researcher to the mix was seen as more work. This interpretation is supported by some teachers' repeated queries about whether they could utilize me as a helping hand in the classroom for either teaching or disciplining the class, as in the conversation below, which I had with a teacher before the start of the lesson:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Here, the excerpts from the fieldnotes have been translated from Finnish to English and edited for easier reading where necessary. All the names are pseudonyms. The students' pseudonyms are written in lowercase and teachers' pseudonyms in uppercase.

*VILJA asks me if I have keys; could she use me to send me to the hallway with a student if she needs to send someone out? . . . A bit awkwardly, I reply that of course I can do it, but I don't know if it's a punishment to sit with me in the hallway. She thinks for a bit and says, "well if I give you the keys, maybe you can take them to the principal's office."*  
(Fieldnotes)

Some teachers did not ask but simply gave me assignments if I was present. I have interpreted this as the staff's strong focus on instruction, learning, and responding to academic pressures, which eventually became the topic of article III.

In the end, I did not only spend time with the 6<sup>th</sup> graders; instead, I also attended also other classes when possible, and, in all, I observed all grade levels at least once. To attend these lessons, I would most often ask teachers in the staff lounge whether it was possible to be present in an upcoming class. When following the 6<sup>th</sup> graders to a lesson with a teacher whose class I had seldom attended, I would ask the teacher before starting the class if they were comfortable with my presence in the lesson—if they were not, I would return to the staff lounge to find another place to go.

### **3.3.2 Mind the gap**

The field can be considered a construction, but not necessarily a place that can be outlined on a map (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001): sometimes when leaving the school after a field day, a staff member would take the same public transport with me and initiate a conversation about the school—in this way, the field was not limited to the school walls but could literally follow me outside. A school is a strange site of ethnography overall, as the researcher must negotiate their way into two communities: that of the staff and the students. Becoming too close to some people in the field can “close off certain avenues of inquiry” (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, 59): in the case of a school, an excessive affiliation with the teachers' community can affect the researcher's ability to negotiate entry to or gain perspectives on the students' lives, or vice versa. The difficulty is that in the school institution, there is no pre-existing position for a researcher; rather, they must *create it* for themselves (Epstein 1998; Gordon et al. 2005; Lappalainen 2007b; Holland, Gordon & Lahelma 2007). The ease with which the researcher can navigate between the two communities inevitably depends on the context and the proximity of these communities.

It required effort to avoid being pulled into the teachers' community, as I sensed it would make me less approachable to some of the students. I felt it challenging to resist when I was positioned as part of the teaching staff by some teachers, as in the example provided in the previous subsection. Moreover, some teachers seemed less open towards me when they realized my role in the school was not that of an authority figure; rather, my task was to learn what the students' life was like as well. Indeed, my friendly communications with the students provoked some comments:

*Talking with MISA about the upcoming student interviews and getting to know the students, MISA says, “yeah, you can tell that they approach you; you’re a safe adult. Or maybe a bit like a sort of friend.” (Fieldnotes)*

In fairness, many teachers did not seem to care about my existence or camaraderie with the students at all, but I did not necessarily feel more trusted because of getting along with the students. In some sense, this is understandable: the presence of an adult in the school who is not part of the *adults of the school* may be seen to undermine the staff’s efforts to, for example, enforce the school rules (see also Gordon et al. 2005; Lappalainen 2007b). Gordon and colleagues (2005, 115–116) argue that the issue also relates to self-consciousness about being seen and observed by the researcher: if a researcher gets close to one community, it can make members of the other community extremely aware of being observed from another perspective.

Then again, becoming acquainted with the students was also challenging—whether it be because of their age, 12–13 years, or something in their experience of school that made them more reserved towards a new adult. In practice, I attempted to distinguish myself from the “adults” in the eyes of the students by, for example, the use of space (see also Lappalainen 2007b): I would often wait for the teacher with the students as they gathered in the hallway before class instead of arriving from the staff lounge with the teacher as the lesson began. I would move around with the students rather than follow other adults, resulting in feedback from teachers, in a way, re-positioning me as part of the adults:

*I follow a group of students to the cafeteria. It’s very noisy; I stay and queue behind the students. REIJA comes after a moment and says to me instructively, “the queue for adults is over there.” I give a small laugh and say, “oh, okay.” For a moment I consider not moving, but her tone of voice is so pastoral that I go to the adult’s line. (Fieldnotes)*

Nevertheless, I mostly sat with the students in the cafeteria even though some teachers probably expected me to sit at the adults’ table. On fieldtrips with more than one class, I would go around with the students instead of attending the program meant for the teachers. I did not ask for a key to get around the school, and I was dependent on teachers letting me in and allowing me to move from one corridor to another, as were the students. In the school hallways, some younger students seemed less reserved and often approached me to either eagerly ask when I would be in their class or to interrogate me about who I was and what exactly I was doing there. Epstein (1998) has interpreted this type of interrogation as a sign of successfully creating a previously non-existent position in the school, since the students cannot assign a role to the researcher but demand answers from them.

However, it took some time for the students with whom I spent most of my days to decide and communicate to me that I was “OK.” I felt I was being tested on how

I reacted to their jokes or mischief, which I interpreted as them attempting to determine whether I was on their side:

*Adam has gotten up from his seat and is at the door. He is looking at me as he slowly opens the classroom door, maybe to see if I will react somehow? SAARA notices him from the back of the class: "Where are you going!" Adam: "I'm having a drink!" SAARA: "You can't go anywhere in the middle of a lesson." Adam returns to his seat. (Fieldnotes)*

A group of 6<sup>th</sup> graders seemed astonished when I once found them hiding in the hallway during recess, which was obviously against the rules, and I did not reprimand them. This did not help my relations with the teachers, but when spending time with the students in situations other than teaching, they became more relaxed around me.

I have thought about how my own position as a Finnish-speaking white person affected my navigating among a group of students from heterogeneous backgrounds, including both white and non-white Finnish students, with a variety of first languages and varying skills in Finnish language. In the hallways, I was approached and interrogated by students regardless of their gender or ethnicity, but who all seemed to be otherwise very confident in their linguistic expression. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, I was "taken in" first by a group of white girls, as can be seen in a situation on a field trip that I attended alongside the students:

*The students are instructed to get a work coat and sit in groups of three. I'm a bit lost about what to do; should I take a coat or sit in the back? Jenna looks at me and says, "take a work coat." With another student standing next to us, she says, "are we a group?" So, I take a coat and we sit at a table. (Fieldnotes)*

Regarding interviews, Luomanen and Nikander (2017, 291–294) write that working with vulnerable research participants, such as children and young people, requires extra care from the researcher to create a safe environment for speaking. The same care should be given to working with a group of children when doing ethnography. Although I attempted to be mindful about my openness and interaction with the students in order to treat them as equally as possible—for instance, paying attention to where and how I stood in the school hallways to avoid accidentally excluding someone through my use of space—connecting with the researcher is probably easier for those who share a similar background.

### 3.3.3 Gazing and writing

In ethnography, it is typical that the observations themselves direct the research interests and guide the ethnographer's gaze (Gordon et al. 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Atkinson 2015; Butler-Kisber 2018). Ethnographic observations require openness and the absence of too many predefined guidelines since it is

difficult to see beyond the expected if the frame of observation is narrowly delineated in advance (Baszanger & Dodier 1997). One challenge for the ethnographer—especially in the context of school, which, as mentioned, is a relatively well-known institution to all of us—is how to tune one’s gaze to seeing beyond the familiar (Delamont & Atkinson 1995; Gordon et al. 2007; Lappalainen 2007a). The starting point for the observations came from the project’s focus, which was educational inclusion and student grouping: the initial interest was how students were grouped and moved around in the everyday life of classrooms, and how policies of educational inclusion were transformed into teachers’ pedagogical solutions in the everyday lives of socially mixed urban schools. In practice, the observational frame was relatively open as we also simply wished to understand the way everyday life worked in a socially and linguistically heterogeneous school.

Writing that my observations focused on the everyday life of the school may not be particularly informative, since that everyday life probably means different things to a student, a teacher, or a principal. Many educational ethnographers distinguish between the physical, formal, and informal school—the physical level referring to the school space and movement, sound, and time in that space, the formal level referring to instruction and the curriculum, textbooks and other teaching materials and documents, such as school rules, and the informal level referring to all interaction, informal hierarchies, and the application of rules (Gordon et al. 2005; Palmu 2007). While I did not adopt this approach in a strict manner for my observations, it nonetheless helps to elaborate what I did observe. On the physical level of school, I observed how students were placed and moved around in the class, or how they moved in the classroom by their own choice, and how the teachers responded to this. This moving around of students and dividing them into small groups during class was the initial spark for the questions posed in article II.

On the formal level of school, I paid attention to the lesson content and teaching materials. Many of my observations focused on the formal level or somewhere between the formal and informal; during the lessons, I concentrated on the way teachers interacted with and instructed the students, which would probably be considered the formal level of school, as well as interactions among the students themselves, which are part of the informal school. As the overarching research focus is the reproduction of societal norms in school, it follows that the formal school, classroom interaction, and instruction received greater attention than, for instance, students’ interactions among themselves. Nonetheless, these three levels very often overlap, as can be seen in this small scene from my fieldnotes, where a class prepares for a group assignment in the classroom:

*Four girls have formed a group and they ask the teacher if they can go into the hallway. ANNIKA: “Yes . . .” ANNIKA says to me that maybe she will need the table where I am sitting. I get up and move to another table next to me. A group of four boys goes and sits down at the now empty table. ANNIKA had, however, thought that another group would*

*sit there: "That table was for a different group." Mikko, one of the boys sitting, says, "whatever! We're sitting here now." ANNIKA doesn't respond, goes into the hallway, comes back in a moment, and says to the group sitting, "you sit in here then." Mikko says to his group, "darn it! Next time, don't join my group; that way you can get to go sit in the hallway." (Fieldnotes)*

Gordon and colleagues (2005, 128) write that while the researcher's gaze is an intentional act that is directed to certain things by choice, it is also *drawn* to things whether the researcher intends it or not—in school, very often, noise and movement rather than stillness in the class. It is difficult to focus on the silences and record what does *not* happen, but this eventually became easier as my own focus sharpened, and it was also helped by the relatively small size of the student groups. The short interactions between teachers and students drew my attention early on, and many of my notes include depictions of small encounters and dialogues between teachers and students, both in the classroom and outside it: what was said, in what tone, to whom, how was it received, what the atmosphere was like, and so on. In addition to being present in the classrooms, I went to lunch with the students, sat with staff in the staff lounge, attended fieldtrips and school events, and spent time in the school yard during breaks.

My gaze was also guided by the practical-ethical aspect of research permits: at the start of the year, we informed the families of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students about the study and obtained written permission from the families for their child to participate in the study. We also enquired about the families' willingness to take part in interviews. Not all students or their families were willing to participate; thus, these students were excluded from the observations and fieldnotes. This also meant that when attending another grade level's class, I would focus on the teachers' perspective, action, talk, and way of interacting with, grouping, and organizing the class.

There are probably as many techniques for writing ethnographic fieldnotes as there are ethnographers: pen on paper, typing, video, photographs, to name but a few (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001; Lappalainen et al. 2007; Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto 2014). I first wrote my notes by hand in a notebook and transcribed and complemented them during the same or the next day. As the students seemed accustomed to the presence of digital devices, I switched to typing notes, which allowed me to write more and thus include more detail in my notes. Altogether, the data includes 38 days of observation at the school, five of which were conducted by Sirpa Lappalainen or Heidi Huilla, either individually or together with me. The observations were focused on the fall semester. I wrote anywhere from 2000 to 8000 words on each day of observation, with the average being around 3500 words. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, we had agreed within the project on pseudonyms for all the staff members and students who participated in the observations, and these were used when writing the fieldnotes.

In addition to the various ethnographic techniques, there are also different styles of writing: some ethnographers strictly distinguish between recording what occurs in the field and recording the researcher's own thoughts about and reactions to these events; some view fieldnotes primarily as a record of the researcher's thoughts and interpretations, as an initial stage of analysis, rather than the logging of events (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001, 353) distinguish between the different values and purposes that fieldnotes are assigned: at one end of the spectrum, rich, detailed fieldnotes are seen as the core or essence of ethnography, providing "the foundation and inspiration for subsequent writings and analyses;" at the other end, fieldnotes are seen as secondary data or even a disturbance to the interactions between the researcher and the people in the field, and writing notes is considered more a means for the researcher to work through difficult emotions that may arise in the process than an opportunity to log events in detail. Most often, practice probably falls somewhere between these extremes, as the researcher's emotions can provide one viewpoint on the field even when the focus is logging events and interactions.

Ultimately, I wrote down many direct descriptions of events, and less frequently and less straightforwardly about my own interpretations or emotions. First, I found it difficult to switch my focus between logging what I observed around me and logging or even noticing what I thought or felt about it during the field days—in some ways, switching my attention between what was occurring outside versus within me in the hectic life of the classroom was impractical. After the field days, when finishing and writing out the notes at the office or at home, I was often too tired to cultivate conscious analytical thoughts about what I had just written—(self-)reflexive reading and writing was possible only after I had gained some distance from the process. Then again, I did not necessarily strive to provide a neutral representation, since an individual's gaze cannot be neutral: traces of confusion, frustration, embarrassment, and humor can surely be found between and sometimes in the lines of text—but these emotions were not the main focus when making and writing down my observations. Second, the fieldwork was part of a project, and I knew other people would read and utilize the data from their own perspectives; for the data to be useful to others, it was necessary to include rich descriptions of events. This way of writing also originates from the philosophical stance of the study: even though all the observations were always filtered through my own lens, I still wanted the notes to provide a window into what had *occurred* from my perspective—leaving room for subsequent readings and interpretations by myself and others (see also Atkinson 1996; Gordon et al. 2006).

### 3.3.4 Interviewing students and staff

Qualitative interviews are typically used to gain insights into the interviewees' understandings and meaning making of the phenomenon under investigation. One can distinguish between a constructionist and naturalist stance towards interviews, the former emphasizing the situational and performative aspects of interview data and the latter seeing interviews as a means to capture the lived experience and understandings of research participants as they are (Edwards & Holland 2020). To Miller and Glassner (1997), interviews are always stories, and instead of treating them as images of reality, of as much interest is the context in which these interview stories arise. In line with relativist epistemology, this dissertation approaches interviews more as co-constructed and performative acts where the interaction matters to what is said and where "interview talk" is seen as a "topic" to be studied rather than as an explanatory 'resource'" (Silverman 2017, 148; see also Hughes, Hughes & Portier-Le Cocq 2020; Edwards & Holland 2020). Interviews are co-constructed and situational, where what is said is affected by the lived reality of both the interviewer and the interviewee and the interaction and relationship between them (see Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2017; Miller & Glassner 1997; Hughes, Hughes & Portier-Le Cocq 2020).

Heyl (2007) distinguishes between ethnographic interviews and "regular" interviews by what occurs beyond the interview situation: ethnographic interviews are characterized by the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, which is often on-going for a longer period and based on established respect and trust. In a regular interview, this relationship and the trust required to participate in the interview must be established in a much smaller space and time. Even though an interview is co-constructed in collaboration between the researcher and interviewee, Heyl (2007, 376) underlines that, ultimately, the researcher exercises "considerable control over the 'reporting' and the outcome," emphasizing the need to understand the lived context around the interview and interviewee, which is the aim of ethnography. This power imbalance is even more obvious when interviewing children and young people, some of whom, in the context of this study, come from a vulnerable societal background vis-à-vis the interviewer's position (see Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008; Luomanen & Nikander 2017; see also Ruusuvuori 2010; Solberg 2014)

The interviews of staff and students<sup>6</sup> were conducted in the spring term, closer to the end of the school year, by Heidi Huilla and Sonja Kosunen. We had already discussed the interviews with the staff and students at the beginning of the observations, and the students had been asked whether they wished to participate.

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<sup>6</sup> Parents of students were also interviewed, but as this study focuses on daily events inside school, the parent-interviews are not included in the data.

A few students who had originally declined, eventually wanted to participate when the interviews were discussed with the classes in the spring. The student interviews were scheduled with the class teachers, and they were conducted during the school day in the empty offices of the school nurse and counselor. The students who participated could choose whether they wanted to attend the interview alone or with a friend. Altogether, 26 students participated in the interviews. In turn, the staff interviews were conducted with seven members of staff, including school administration personnel and teachers. Separate interview agreements were made with each interviewee, and all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Because of the division of labor in the project, the interviews were conducted by researchers who had not spent as much time observing at the school, and there were probably both benefits and disadvantages to this arrangement. In a sense, the interviews were a mix of ethnographic and “regular” interviews (Heyl 2007): Heidi Huilla had spent time at the school at the start of the year and had met most of the staff and students participating in the study. I had made my notes available for the group to read, and I had discussed the experiences in the field throughout the year, especially with Heidi, with whom I shared an office during the field period. In this way, the social context of the field was not completely foreign within the project. While it is possible that I would have been able to ask more detailed questions about the everyday life of the school, the staff interviews may have benefited from this relative distance. As discussed above, I felt that the teachers did not always respond positively to me not taking the position as one of the “school adults,” for instance not taking part in disciplining students. Therefore, by not interviewing the staff myself, some friction was probably also avoided. In addition, as Heidi and Sonja are qualified teachers, it is possible that some of the teacher interviewees were able to establish a connection with them more easily through a shared professional perspective.

As for the students, because they seemed rather reserved towards new adults, it is possible that I could have begun the interviews from an easier, more familiar position. Then again, we emphasized that participation in the interviews was voluntary, and relatively many nonetheless decided to take part, even though the interviews were presented to the students by somewhat less familiar researchers. It is also possible that because the interviewer was less familiar with the students and the school, they asked the interviewees to explain and verbalize some thoughts that could have otherwise been passed over as obvious or already known.

The data is presented in table 1 below, including information on both the MAPS data discussed above and the complementary data from the projects LEE (article II) and TOLU (article III), which are presented in more detail in the next section, as I discuss the analyses and reading the data.

**Table 1** Research data, article foci, and organization of the research questions.

|     | Article focus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Primary data                                                                                               | Secondary data                                                                                             | Research questions |     |  |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----|--|
| I   | What expectations are held towards teachers by society, and teachers themselves? Where do these expectations stem from, and how are they manifested?                                                                                                                       | -                                                                                                          | -                                                                                                          | RQ1                |     |  |
| II  | How is language used as cultural capital in the field of comprehensive education? What is the relationship between language, social class, and school? What differences, limitations, and possibilities does language draw into the everyday life of schools and students? | Ethnographic observations: 1 school, 38 days<br><br>Staff interviews: N=7.                                 | Ethnographic observations: 3 schools, 156 days.<br><br>Staff interviews: N=41.                             |                    |     |  |
| III | How can Biesta's conceptualization of the purpose of education be applied empirically to ethnographic data? What are the interrelations between the domains of socialization, subjectification, and qualification in ethnographic data?                                    | Ethnographic observations: 1 school, 38 days.<br><br>Staff interviews: N=7.<br><br>Pupil interviews: N=26. | Ethnographic observations: 1 school, 21 days.<br><br>Staff interviews: N=8.<br><br>Pupil interviews: N=11. |                    | RQ3 |  |
|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                            |                    |     |  |

### 3.4 The analyses

In the analysis phase, the primary data was complemented with the data from two other projects, as shown in table 1 above. There were many reasons for using multiple sets of ethnographic data, the main one being the similarity between the projects in terms of focus and background. Therefore, they could genuinely complement each other and produce better analyses. The topics of interest originally surfaced during informal discussions with colleagues (see also Gordon et al. 2006; Lahelma et al. 2014.) In addition, analyzing data produced in more than one school context adds another layer of anonymity to the participants, as the empirical findings are not tied to one school alone. Below, I briefly describe these two projects. I also discuss the benefits and drawbacks of combining data from several projects and the way we combined fieldnotes from several fields. Finally, I describe the process of analysis.

### 3.4.1 Reading and re-reading: complementing the data

The complementary data originates from two projects, *Local Educational Ethos*, LEE (funded by the Research Council of Finland, 2018–2022) and *Toimiva Lähikoulu*, TOLU (2014–2015). These were sister projects: they began from a similar premise, with the difference being that TOLU, chronologically the first of these projects, focused on elementary schools, whereas LEE continued with lower secondary schools. Their focus and thus choice of schools was similar; the starting point for these projects was the finding that students' learning outcomes could be predicted by socio-economic data about the school neighborhood (Bernelius 2013). However, some schools beat the odds; in other words, they produced better learning outcomes than expected. The goal was to discover how everyday life functioned in these schools—hence the name of the first project, *Toimiva lähikoulu: Well-functioning primary school*.

All three projects were run under the research unit Social Studies in Urban Education. Consequently, despite individual researchers having their own theoretical focus, the data in these projects was produced by researchers who shared an interest in disadvantage and social justice in the everyday life of schools. These projects followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity on the ethical principles of research with human participants (TENK 2019) and shared an ethical approach to doing ethnography developed through joint discussion. Moreover, there were similarities in the fields, for instance in terms of student demographics and urban locations that enabled the data to be analyzed side by side. The individual features of each field were then used to enrich, contrast, and question each other. (See also Lahelma et al. 2014; Palmu & Lappalainen 2012; Clerke & Hopwood 2014; Gordon et al. 2006.) I had participated in planning the project Local Educational Ethos (LEE) and knew the premise and goal of the project well; therefore, I was interested in how my observations and questions about language in the MAPS' field would resonate with the observations made in LEE by other researchers. This became the topic of article II. In turn, when Heidi Huilla and I discussed our observations in MAPS, we noticed how the observations in her PhD data in TOLU concerned the themes of the purpose of education and what teachers considered the aim of their job, which gave rise to the research questions in article III.

The act of reading and re-reading one's own notes after some time creates a certain distance to the lived experiences of the field (Atkinson 1992, 1996; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2001). Nevertheless, even from a temporal distance, reading one's own notes is less foreign than reading another ethnographer's notes—one can never completely grasp the knowledge that is inscribed in another ethnographer's own embodied experiences (Lahelma et al. 2014; see also Aromaa & Tiili 2014). Relatedly, Lappalainen (2007a) writes about the researcher's knowledge and the research participants' knowledge, stating that even after immersing themselves in

the field, researchers can never fully know the participants' perspective. Similarly, when I read other researchers' ethnographic fieldnotes, the embodied knowledge experienced and produced by them in other fields could never be fully my knowledge, regardless of how detailed these records were.

When working on both articles II and III, it was important that the people who produced the data were involved in the process. According to Atkinson (1996, 128), “[t]exts – literary or academic – do not unequivocally contain and constrain their full ‘meanings’. The reader constructs meaning through conventional acts of reading and interpretation.” Even though the purpose of combining several datasets is to develop thinking that is more than the sum of its parts, it matters that the interpretations of others' notes are also accepted and supported by the ethnographers' own interpretations and understandings, especially when analyzing complex social events. This also relates to the onto-epistemological basis of this dissertation: fieldnotes are the construction of each ethnographer, but rather than constructing my own interpretation of the notes from an outsider's perspective, I would rather understand as much of the reality of each field—even though this reality is experienced and filtered by the researcher.

Collective thinking (Lahelma et al. 2014; Gordon et al. 2006; Palmu & Lappalainen 2012) occurred somewhat differently in articles II and III. The groupings and moving of students based on their language had intrigued me during the fieldwork phase, and we became interested in what other fields could add to the subject. Therefore, when planning the work on the article II, we decided that each ethnographer, Tiina Luoma, Riikka Oittinen, Marja Peltola, and I, would comb through their own research material (produced in 2019–2020) to locate data that suited the research questions, which had been formulated together. The interviews were also divided among the authors. This was also a matter of work ergonomics—it was easier to work with the large volume of data once it had been narrowed down according to the focus of the article. We then discussed this data together among all the authors to ensure a shared understanding and interpretation of the fieldnotes and interviews.

In the case of article III, I searched through both my own MAPS fieldnotes and Heidi Huilla's fieldnotes produced in 2014–2015 from one school in TOLU. Sharing ethnographic fieldnotes is not a given, but, in this instance, several factors made it possible: first and foremost, trust and a good rapport (Lahelma et al. 2014). Importantly, TOLU's research context was well-known to me: I had previously utilized the interview data from another TOLU school in my master's thesis, and Heidi and I had already written an article together using this data (Juvonen 2017; Huilla & Juvonen 2020). My familiarity with the data and research project and the fact that we had discussed it previously when working together allowed me to read and contextualize Heidi's fieldnotes in a shared frame (see Atkinson 1996). Nevertheless, as these notes had not necessarily been originally written for others

to analyze, it was necessary for me to ask for clarification about some notations to ensure I understood what the notes had originally meant. In addition, we discussed some events and the way they had been experienced and interpreted at the time.

### 3.4.2 Process of analysis

As previously mentioned, typically, ethnographic analysis already begins in the field: time spent in the field is already an analytic process, starting from decisions on what to pay attention to and how the researcher's gaze is tuned as the fieldwork progresses (Baszanger & Dodier 1997; Gordon et al. 2005; Lappalainen et al. 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the analyses began or when they were concluded; for instance, the question “what is the purpose of schooling” was already present during the fall of 2018 in my conversations with Heidi Huilla. Then again, it took almost two years after leaving the field to produce the first version of the analysis on this question; in the end, it required some distance to analyze the data more thoroughly. Butler-Kisber (2018) distinguishes between the phases of *coarse-grained* analysis and *fine-grained* analysis, which serve a different purpose in the analytical process. The former is required for becoming acquainted with the text under analysis and reflecting on and organizing the material; the latter is a process of closer reading, categorizing, and refining, often with help of coding (see also Braun & Clarke 2006, 2019).

I spent most of the 2019–2020 academic year mulling over the data, studying the fieldnotes, interviews, and literature side by side, and attempting to grasp the material as a whole and identify interesting theoretical angles to approach the data. This coarse-grained phase of analysis, in other words time spent thinking with the data and theory, was essential for what Butler-Kisber (2018) calls fine-grained analysis. Ultimately, the more detailed analyses and reporting for articles I–III overlapped considerably. Article I was mainly written in autumn 2020 and article II in the following summer and autumn 2021, while article III developed in the background—over several years—and was finalized in autumn 2023.

The analyses of the field notes and interviews for both articles II and III follow a pattern that is best described as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). As the empirical articles were written with a group of co-authors, “analysis through discussion” (Palmu & Lappalainen 2012, 13) was a key element of the process—in other words, collective reflection in each phase was essential. Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data.” In a 2019 article, the writers refine their definition to *reflexive* thematic analysis and emphasize the researcher's active role: “[t]hemes are creative and interpretive *stories* about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves” (ibid., 594, original emphasis). According to

Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), the phases of reflexive thematic analysis roughly move from familiarizing oneself with the data, through organizing the data with the help of coding, to generating, reviewing, and naming themes, and finally to reporting, which is not merely writing out results but is part of the analytical process. These phases are not clear-cut, but, as is typical for qualitative research (see also Ruusuvuori, Nikander & Hyvärinen 2010), the researcher will most likely go back and forth between reading data, coding, and thematizing. I have also drawn on the techniques of qualitative content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), mainly regarding how to handle, organize, and take in large amounts of data.

Braun and Clarke (2019) claim that, ideally, sense-making in reflexive thematic analysis should include elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning, as qualitative analysis can rarely be either purely inductive or deductive. My analyses follow the logic of abductive reasoning, where I moved back and forth from studying existing theory to analyzing the data and using one to make sense of the other (see also Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). To me, such reasoning or analysis mostly involves creating an amalgam of data, theory, and one's thoughts, as the goal is to produce a synthesis that is more than the sum of its parts. This goal leans on Jackson and Mazzei's (2013, 2018) argument that "analysis does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life" (2013, 261). Instead, they argue that theory and data should be "plugged in" to one another to make them "work." In the same way, texts, or theory and data, give each other life and a new use and meaning. In a similar vein, Hammersley & Atkinson (2007, 158) state that "[d]ata are materials to think with" and emphasize the researcher's movement between theory, ideas, and data when conducting analyses. Below I describe in more detail how I applied these principles in empirical articles II and III.

In article II, the primary data appeared to emphasize the role of language in the everyday life of the school. Consequently, we decided to enrich the MAPS data with ethnographic data from the project LEE at three schools and examine all four schools with the same question in mind: How is language realized as one form of cultural capital in the field of comprehensive education? The analysis proceeded iteratively by dividing the data among the writers and then discussing observations related to our research question. In the first phase, already possessing a good sense of what each set of data entailed and Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field as a theoretical lens (see section 2.1), we formulated questions for narrowing down the material to data related to language. This allowed us to focus our attention on the way language was present in the interview talk and field observations (initial coding). The relevant data was located by concentrating on the staff's views on their own relationship with families' and students' language skills, the role of language in grouping practices, class divisions, or instruction, and the cooccurrence of language and social class in the data. This phase produced a large amount of data

on how different languages were discussed, which languages were considered useful or disadvantageous, what was presented as “normal” or desirable, and, in turn, what was described as challenging the school and instruction (generating, defining, and naming themes). We produced a synthesis by discussing these findings together, and, based on our notes and discussions, I summarized these findings for more theoretical reading with Bourdieu’s concepts, focusing on linguistic capital. In the last phase of the analysis—reporting—we focused on analyzing how our findings could be interpreted through a Bourdieusian lens: what the “expected” or “normal” was in the field of education in terms of students’ language skills and which languages were seen as valuable capital and which ones less so.

When beginning the analysis of Biesta’s domains of purpose (see section 2.3) for article III, it transpired that few other empirical articles had used this conceptualization (although several were published during the process; see, e.g., Joris & Agirdag 2019; Elmersjö 2021; Larson & Cort 2022; Lomsdal, Lyngstad & Lagedstad 2022). The research task in article III was to examine the purpose of education and the way Biesta’s theory of purpose could enrich ethnographic data on the lived reality of schools, and vice versa. With the group, we travelled back and forth between data analysis (which I conducted) and joint group discussions on the results of the analysis and how to proceed. The first phase of analysis involved generating a framework that would capture the theoretical ideas in the empirical material and allow us to focus on relevant data for this article. In quantitative analysis, this would be called operationalization, in other words, turning theoretical concepts into empirical language. This was achieved by combining a theoretical reading with a general understanding of what school-life is like. Based on these definitions, the domain of *qualification* was located in talk, action, and events related to study subjects, assignments and instruction, homework, the curriculum, and learning and evaluation. The domain of *socialization* was located in data related to culture, language and religion, school rules and sanctions, and instructions concerning students’ behavior. *Subjectification* was located in data related to action and students and teachers taking active roles, taking or lacking initiative, and continuing, resisting, or blocking others’ initiatives.

After producing this framework and locating relevant data in both the preliminary and secondary data sets, the data were organized using coding to summarize it with a shorthand label that represented the content of a longer “meaning unit.” This phase of inductive reading and coding was followed by theoretical reading to categorize the data. Finally, after arranging the data into thematic categories, the overlaps were studied to analyze the interrelations between the three domains. The results reported in article III are built on the interplay of the domains of purpose.



## 4 Summary of articles I–III

This chapter provides a short overview of articles I–III. Here, the focus is the aims and findings, as the methodology and analyses are presented in the previous chapter.

### 4.1 Article I: Teachers’ expectations and expectations of teachers: understanding teachers’ societal role

The aim of article I, “Teachers’ expectations and expectations of teachers: understanding teachers’ societal role,” is to examine the external expectations that teachers face and teachers’ own expectations towards their profession. The article consists of a theoretical discussion analyzing the kinds of expectations that are present, the individuals or institutions that set them, the reason they are set, and their outcomes.

In brief, teachers’ work is steered by both explicit and implicit expectations. Explicit societal expectations are stated, for example, in the National Core Curriculum (NCC). A binding document, the NCC steers the work of municipalities and schools by laying out the value-base and content of comprehensive education. It sets guidelines for overall goals and more specific evaluation of study contents. Explicit expectations for completing a teaching degree are also governed by law. Implicit expectations towards schools and teachers concern less conscious cultural understandings, in other words, normative assumptions. The understanding of what is natural in that field creates expectations for people’s behavior; it creates expectations of what constitutes a normal school, teacher, or student. In part, the NCC also reflects these implicit expectations, since the core curriculum is the product of a collective process that involves teachers, researchers, policy makers, and parents: thus, it reflects a collective understanding of what is seen as good, important, or normal in terms of comprehensive education.

Since implicit, normative expectations arise from the culture surrounding an individual, they are societal, but, through the process of socialization, they become individual expectations as well. Implicit cultural expectations are learned not only through a curriculum, but also through living immersed within a culture. Therefore, people who become teachers already learn what school is like before they apply to study for their degree: teachers, like everyone else, spend time in schools for

thousands of hours as observing students. Article I discusses this with Dan Lortie's (1975) concept of *apprenticeship of observation*, which signifies that teachers gain an understanding of being a teacher through their years in school. This understanding is, however, only partial: students are not privy to what occurs outside the classroom and do not witness the hours that teachers spend planning lessons, grading papers, or reflecting on their teaching.

The theoretical contribution of article I is the presentation of a possible cycle of reproduction, drawing on the work of Lortie (1975) and Bourdieu (1977, 1986). Lortie suggests that students who aspire to become teachers are likely to exhibit a more positive attitude towards the social life of school. In Bourdieu's terms, students who find it easy to navigate the field of the school, and whose habitus is not in conflict with the social expectations of school, are more likely to want to work in schools. Article I suggests that if people who tend to work in schools find it easy to accept the social world as natural, a cycle can be created where the natural truths of school continue to be reproduced rather than contested. It matters what teachers expect to be normal in schools because such expectations create the social context for students and further shape the field.

## **4.2 Article II: Language as cultural capital: The making of social class in the everyday life of school**

The aim of Article II, "Kieli kulttuurisena pääomana: Yhteiskuntaluokan tekeminen koulun arjessa" ('Language as cultural capital: The making of social class in the everyday life of school'), is to investigate how social class comes to life in the classroom when analyzing ethnographic data from four schools. The conceptual tool used in article II is Bourdieu's theory of capitals, particularly the concept of linguistic capital as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1991).

Acknowledging that language is ubiquitous in human interaction and school, article II focuses on the role of language in instruction. It identifies instances where language plays a particular role in everyday situations and talk among staff, where it is explicitly raised as a topic of conversation, or where it produces contradiction or conflict. The data is approached through an examination of staff perceptions of their relationship with the families' and students' linguistic skills, the role language plays in the classroom and grouping practices, and the delineation of the relationship between language and class in the data.

Having competence in the language of instruction, in the case of article II Finnish, is important capital that is distributed unevenly among students in schools containing relatively many students with a first language other than Finnish. While the schools studied in article II exhibited much competence and confidence in working with a multilingual student body, nonetheless, knowing the Finnish language was not recognized as capital; rather, it was considered a self-evident

requirement for studying. Thus, it was expected that students would have had attained a certain proficiency level in the language of instruction, and the level of proficiency would be often tied to their age. When it inevitably occurred that some students had not acquired the linguistic skills required for studying, teachers lacked the resources or skills to support them. When teachers recognized this, it was framed as an impossible task:

*[A]nd my Russian is poor, and my Estonian is poor, and I don't speak Arabic or Albanian or Somali, so, in a way, that is something that could be developed infinitely, but we can't have an on-call interpreter who speaks eight languages. That would be lovely, but that's not a possibility for us. (Teacher interview)*

A multilingual school was seen as positive and inherently valuable in talk among school staff, but students who did not speak Finnish nonetheless posed a challenge to instruction and school practices. Moreover, teachers who displayed more positive attitudes towards students requiring more support in learning the language of instruction in general were still not always able to provide support due to time constraints or lack of teaching material, such as books in different languages. One teacher also mentioned that after the initial shock of having a Finnish-learner in their classroom, they had eventually accepted that they may not be able to support to such students in the classroom and had simply carried on regardless:

*But I think, little by little, as their [students without proficiency in Finnish] number increases, then you kind of start thinking that it's also valuable that they are sitting in on the lesson, and hearing, and I can, for example, go ask a couple of times, "have you understood or do you want to ask something?" That is already an important message, that they are allowed to be there even if they don't understand everything. It used to be a big concern earlier, what I do with this one. (Teacher interview)*

Conveying acceptance to students who do not necessarily understand Finnish is probably an important starting point, but teachers accepting that they are unable to provide adequate support to these students also means that some cannot truly receive the instruction the school is committed to providing.

There was also a tendency to mention families of lower social class and families with a migrant background (and thus with less of the legitimate linguistic capital of the field) in the same breath, implicitly positioning these families as an equivalent challenge and in need of extra effort from the school. Schools and staff have varying protocols and stances towards families that require more attention and support. This was also evident in the pedagogical and grouping practices in the schools studied in article II, which also had different protocols. The practices of teaching Finnish as a second language and literature (a specific syllabus for non-Finnish speakers) varied, and in non-language-focused lessons, it was not always possible to support students whose first language is not Finnish. The need for support across

all study subjects is broadly recognized in the findings of article II, as is the staff's own lack of resources and skills to provide it.

*I don't know how to teach [my subject] in a way that . . . [laughs] eight, ninth grade, for example, the contents there, if students don't speak Finnish . . . The terminology is difficult for Finnish people, Finnish speaking people. So, it just feels a bit stupid. Finding the balance, how to . . . I need to spell out many things in plain language, so then others get bored. So, what can you do? (Teacher interview)*

Students studying Finnish as a second language are of varying skills and backgrounds, yet in teacher talk they are often portrayed as a homogeneous group. Moreover, students without proficiency in Finnish are often portrayed as a challenge to teaching, making visible the normative expectation that for teachers to teach and the school to work, students must speak Finnish.

The conflict between explicit and implicit expectations regarding language in school is the key finding in Article II: While the explicit expectations towards teaching, set in the NCC, state that pedagogical practices should appreciate, consider, and make use of students' various first languages, the implicit expectation among school staff of a Finnish-speaking student body concerning the language of instruction hinders the realization of these ideals in practice. The normative expectation of students' proficiency in Finnish guides the work of schools alongside the explicit requirements stated in the NCC. Students that lack the necessary language skills to take part in instruction are expected to gain those skills to fully participate in classroom activities. As schools and teachers are simultaneously tasked with assessing students and issuing them with qualifications for continuing their study path, article II concludes that schools may end up reinforcing rather than reducing differences between students' backgrounds.

### **4.3 Article III: Conceptualizing socialization, qualification, and subjectification as purposes of education in life in classrooms**

The aim of article III, "Conceptualizing socialization, qualification, and subjectivation as purposes of education in life in classrooms," is to explore the purpose of education. Gert Biesta's conceptualization of the purpose of education is applied to ethnographic data and developed further. The findings of article III connect classrooms to society—they demonstrate how teachers' everyday choices are not just choices inside the classroom; rather, they also matter for how schools are able to perform their societal tasks: maintaining and reforming society.

First, the aim of article III is to find a way to apply the concepts socialization, qualification, and subjectification to ethnographic data. The findings of article III are built around three *pairs* of domains, since the analytical interest is how these

different domains of purpose intersect, overlap, or sometimes overshadow one another in the everyday moments and choices made by teachers. Through analyzing these domains in pairs, article III maps out their interrelations. The article proposes that socialization provides a framework for both subjectification and qualification. For subjectification, the domain of socialization is essential: to grow up to be a “subject” who can make choices in the social world, students must know how the community around them functions, what is expected of them, and so on. This social framework is necessary regardless of whether students eventually decide to follow the social expectations or not—to make mindful, considered decisions regarding the world and communities around themselves, either to submit to or to challenge them, students must possess an understanding of that surrounding (social) world. In the study data, one example of such consideration can be found in a situation from a later-than-usual lunch in an almost empty cafeteria, where I was the only adult with a handful of students:

*The students quickly finish their meals; some are already leaving; [a student] gets up to get seconds but then sees that the students’ tray line has already been cleared away. I say, “there’s more behind you.” She looks at the teachers’ tray line for a moment and then says, “that’s for the teachers.” (Fieldnotes)*

Socialization creates the framework for the domain of qualification and also plays an essential part in decisions around what knowledge is valuable and should be transmitted to the next generations. It is also partly instrumental in qualification in the sense that when students learn the kind of behavior that is expected in schools—listening to instruction, raising one’s hand to speak, and so on—it is easier for the teacher to teach, in other words to work in the domain of qualification. In everyday choices, the domain of socialization is often seen as instrumental in the two other domains, and it is viewed as something occurring in the early school years:

*Then one, or two [older students], they just ramble on, talk over you when you try to explain something. Just those basic things, first or second grade stuff. It feels really strange. (Teacher interview)*

However, socialization should not be seen as *only* facilitating subjectification and qualification. Rather, learning in the domain of socialization progresses throughout students’ school years as their interaction with their community continues. Students learn what is culturally valued, socially expected, or “normal,” and this process of learning continues even after they learn the rules of the school.

While the relationship between socialization and both subjectification and qualification is, by default, overlapping, the relationship between subjectification and qualification is more a question of balance. However, the findings of article III show that, instead of balance, conflict sometimes occurs in the everyday life of school. In article III, this is discussed in terms of the responsibility to study and

providing students with space for their own initiatives. The conflict between qualification and subjectification is this: On the one hand, qualification is a domain centered on “getting things right”—becoming qualified according to predefined standards. It can be and often is measured by metrics in the curriculum. Subjectification, on the other hand, is a domain that concerns cultivating considered freedom (see Biesta 2020). Cultivating students’ subjectivity means providing them with opportunities to practice taking the initiative and making choices of their own, to be independent subjects. To achieve this, however, the tasks assigned to students must be truly open-ended. This means that the teacher cannot set a desired choice for the student to make; otherwise, students do not learn to make their own choices; rather, they learn to attempt to make the “right” choice they feel is expected of them. This contradiction is present in the following situation, where a teacher first instructs students not to ask for help but to think for themselves but then later scolds one student for not asking for help:

*[Teacher, to everyone]: “Now that you think about the next step, do not ask me what you should do. Think for yourself, look, and ask a friend and come and suggest to me what would be a good next phase . . . [a little later] Do you know what you’re supposed to do? [To one student] Do you? If you don’t know, you need to ask.” (Fieldnotes)*

In Biesta’s (2020) words, when expecting a pre-defined outcome, the student remains an object of other people’s action and not truly a subject. In the findings of article III, the imbalance between these two domains sometimes produces a contradictory atmosphere. For example, some students are encouraged to voice their need for help when studying, but, when doing so, they sometimes receive feedback that they should have already known this:

*A student says, “teacher, teacher, teacher!” Teacher: “Yeeees?” Student: “You make these [assignments] too hard.” Teacher: “We already had these in the fourth grade.” (Fieldnotes)*

A teacher’s choice to interpret the situation through the lens of qualification (the student should have learned this already) instead of the lens of subjectification (the student is voicing their need for more instruction) is symptomatic of the dominance of the domain of qualification in schoolwork. In the findings, some teachers recognize this and underline that students deserve and may require extra support in becoming accustomed to school depending on their background and life context. Without this consideration, the encroachment of qualification upon the domain of subjectification can mean that students are essentially evaluated based on their ability to performing their “subjectness.” Article III broadens the conceptualization of the domains of purpose and suggests a new concept, the *logic of qualification*—a way of thinking where there are predefined, measurable outcomes in all schoolwork—to depict the spread of the domain of qualification over the domain of subjectification and thus the creation of an imbalance between these two domains.

The key finding is that evaluating students on their “proficiency” in socialization or subjectification sets some students at a disadvantage in navigating the field of school, presumably reinforcing the differences between students’ backgrounds rather than leveling them.



## 5 Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to analyze the relationship between school and society, focusing on teachers putting this relationship into practice, based on the three articles summarized above. This chapter provides answers to research questions (RQ) 1–3. The chapter is organized according to the research questions presented in section 3.1, where the first section (5.1) deals with societal expectations towards schools and teachers in general, the second (5.2) focuses on the relationship between schools' societal tasks and teachers' classroom practices, and the third (5.3) examines schools' societal tasks in relation to the lives of individual students.

### 5.1 Educational aims are interpreted through the *doxa* of school

Summarizing articles I–II, school is a normative place with its own set of shared social expectations which influence how everyday life is organized. These are non-conscious, unspoken rules—tacit expectations of what is normal or natural. Based on the findings of this dissertation, I claim that teachers, enacting school's tasks, interpret educational aims through the *doxa* of school. In other words, there is an existing frame of non-conscious thought that works as a lens for people working in school through which new educational aims, such as the aim of accommodating students' many languages, are filtered.

RQ1 focuses on societal expectations towards schools and teachers and the way they meet the reality of the school. Even though explicit expectations, such as the core curriculum, can reflect implicit societal expectations by stating the key values of education, the two are not necessarily congruent—if explicit expectations perfectly represented implicit ones, there would be no implicit expectations. Explicit policy aims are interpreted through implicit expectations, uncontested “truths” arising from the *doxa*, which is beyond the realm of discussion and perceived as self-evident and natural. The implicit expectation of what students are like, for example, the kind of language competencies a student is expected naturally to possess, steers the everyday life of classrooms and the way students from various backgrounds are received in schools. It is possible that teachers' own *habitus* often fits the field of school well (see article I; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Flynn 2013; King & Scott 2014; Razfar 2011; also subsection 2.2.3), emphasizing the need for

critical teacher education in challenging internalized normative assumptions and in developing teachers' societal sensitivity (see also Nieminen & Mankki 2019; Matikainen 2022; Rissanen & Kuusisto 2023).

The key finding is that implicit and explicit expectations can create contradictions in the everyday life of schools: While the explicit expectations of the national curriculum advocate for a multilingual school and state that students' varying languages should be supported and utilized in teaching (FNBE 2014), the overarching implicit expectation in the field of school is that everyday life and instruction are organized in Finnish. As is typical of doxa, this normative expectation of being able to study in Finnish is not recognized as the possible root of issues in the classroom, even when its consequences—such as the lack of multilingual teaching material or teachers' own language skills—are described in detail. This tacit, normative expectation severely hampers the ability of schools and teachers to truly enact the explicit aim of a multilingual school, since on the level of normative expectations, the school is monolingual (see also Suuriniemi 2023; Repo 2023). Schools are thus left with the option of attempting to ensure that every student meets the normative expectation of speaking fluent Finnish while simultaneously teaching the contents of various study subjects, which, in the findings of article II, some teachers describe as a near impossible task.

Failure to recognize that this normative expectation is socially generated also means that the doxa remains unacknowledged as something that produces this impossible task; one implication of this may be teachers feeling that the only place to seek the reasons for classroom difficulties is in their students or themselves (see also Valencia 1997, 2010; Pitkänen et al. 2021; Juvonen & Toom 2021). It follows that responsibility is easily placed on individual students to voice their troubles and study harder than would be necessary if they were learning in a language they already spoke well. However, being active in their studies and in the classroom is presumably extremely difficult if they do not master the language (see also Huilla & Juvonen 2020).

## **5.2 Teachers inevitably enact schools' societal tasks in their everyday work with students**

The purpose of education can be understood from many perspectives; I have approached it through Biesta's (2006, 2010, 2015, 2020) concepts, focusing on the tasks of school as being both to reproduce what is valuable and also to make space for reform, connecting Biesta to the Bourdieusian research tradition of social reproduction. Based on the findings, I claim that teachers cannot step out of their societal role in the sense that school's societal tasks are always enacted in everyday practices, instruction, and interaction, continuing the argument of the previous section. This means that working in the teaching profession is always a societal

activity, irrespective of whether teachers themselves are aware of and have pondered this aspect of their role.

RQ2 concerns the relationship between the teaching profession and school and schoolwork and the way school's societal tasks relate to teachers' work in classrooms. Article I raises the question of teachers' own previous experiences in school as part of the process of social reproduction through education, as teacher ideals might tend to support a non-problematic or non-critical stance towards school if such a stance is not challenged in the process of becoming a teacher. Article II demonstrates how the societal permeates all schooling through the normative structures that surround schools and the individuals within them. This is also seen in article III, in which the everyday life of school is examined through the domains of purpose, i.e., socialization, qualification, and subjectification (Biesta 2015, 2020).

In the everyday life of schools, the domain of qualification is sometimes emphasized in such a way that its mode of thinking encroaches on the domains of socialization and subjectification. Article III broadens the conceptualization of the domains of purpose and suggests a new concept, the *logic of qualification*—a way of thinking where there are predefined, measurable outcomes in all schoolwork—to depict the spread of the domain of qualification over the domain of subjectification, creating an imbalance between them. This imbalance can have implications for schools' performance of their societal tasks if insufficient emphasis is placed on educating people who are able to make their own considered choices—a skill that is required to pursue societal change with consideration and to navigate a future world that does not yet exist. Teachers' choices in the classroom are reflected in society as students grow up and become independent citizens. If, on the classroom level, the logic of qualification continuously overshadows the domain of subjectification and students are evaluated on the way they *perform* being a subject, they are not taught how to be active subjects, but, in essence, they learn to observe and attempt to fulfil teachers' expectations. Importantly, knowing and interpreting what is expected of them is easier for some students than others, as their habitus matches the field of education better (Bourdieu 1977, 1986).

Emphasizing the logic of qualification over subjectification reduces the opportunity to question the “natural” in the classroom if students are more often encouraged to meet the expectations of the world around them. As stated in article III, “this approach may largely reproduce the existing culture rather than provide new generations with the means to constructively and critically engage with the world.” This means that teachers' choices in the classroom are connected to the societal tasks of school in that schools will educate students either to conform or to reform. Teachers are always societal actors, and seemingly trivial choices in the classroom are not unimportant for or separate from societal structures. This dissertation is in line with previous research that emphasizes the

decontextualization of the education discourse in Finland, including teacher education (Sitomaniemi-San 2015; Heikkinen et al. 2021; Puustinen, Sääntti & Simola 2022; Koski et al. 2022; Sääntti, Puustinen & Hansen 2023) and that calls for societal questions and teachers' societal and critical orientation to be better addressed and developed already in their studies (Syrjäläinen et al. 2006b; Rähä, Nikkola & Rautiainen 2012; Fornaciari & Männistö 2017), thereby allowing them to enact their societal role with conscious consideration.

### **5.3 Emphasizing the *logic of qualification* weakens school's potential for societal change and the provision of equal opportunities**

Finally, students possess different kinds and amounts of capitals for navigating successfully in the field of comprehensive education. Capitals become embodied as a habitus, and some habituses are better aligned with what is valued or seen as natural in the field (Bourdieu 1977, 1985a, 1990a). Previous research on the Finnish field of comprehensive education shows that students from a more middle-class or higher socio-economic background perform better on their school paths than students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kosunen 2014; Seppänen et al. 2015; Leino 2019; Bernelius & Huilla 2021; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al. 2020; Kalenius 2023). Based on previous research, it can be argued that the Finnish field of comprehensive education is easier to navigate with a middle-class habitus, an appropriate background, and linguistic capitals (Article II; Riitaoja 2013; Juva & Holm 2016; Riitaoja et al. 2017, Riitaoja, Helakorpi & Holm 2019; Kurki 2018; Juva 2019; Hummelstedt et al. 2020; Repo 2020; Huilla, Peltola & Kosunen 2021; Huilla 2022; Suuriniemi 2023; Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023; Niemi & Mietola 2023). In other words, the norms of school favor some students over others.

RQ3 focused on individual students, examining how teachers mediate their societal task through their everyday interactions with students when everyday life in schools is likely to be affected by the alignment between students' habitus and that of the field. As seen in article II, sometimes the explicit expectations directed towards schools can collide with the implicit, normative expectations of the people working in schools. Article III, on the other hand, proposed that the *logic of qualification* may overshadow other purposes of schooling. Moreover, it suggested that interpreting subjectification through the logic of qualification has implications for schools' performance of their societal tasks and their ability to educate citizens who are able to make considered, critical choices. Over-extending the logic of qualification such that it encroaches on subjectification may mean that students become evaluated on their ability to perform the right way of being a subject, as discussed above.

In addition, extending the logic of qualification such that it overshadows the domain of *socialization* has implications for schools' ability to reduce or eliminate differences arising from students' families and their available capitals. Interpreting socialization through the logic of qualification may mean that students are evaluated on their ability to absorb and perform socially acceptable ways of being and doing, that is, the normative expectations of the field. This places students in unequal positions in terms of their capacity to navigate school, since students' ability to emulate the ways of doing and being in school is affected by their families' different capitals (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986; Harker 1984).

The findings in article III show that in the everyday life of school, the domain of socialization is emphasized in the lower grade levels, while the focus of schoolwork gradually shifts to emphasize qualification as students mature. Similarly, skills related to self-management are often seen as serving the domain of qualification and it is often assumed that they will be mastered by older students. Understanding the domains of socialization and subjectification as merely serving the domain of qualification can steer teachers to inadvertently assess whether students' ways of being and doing meet the school's standards. In practice, this way of thinking does not account for the fact that students come to school with different capitals, and only some will possess the types of capitals that are valued, or even seen as the norm. By evaluating socialization and subjectification with the means of qualification, schools may ultimately favor individuals who already possess the right kinds of capitals for the field—whose habitus matches the field effortlessly—and who can adopt the school culture with ease (see section 2.1). Because the logic of qualification implies there is a right and wrong way, failure to acquire the skills in the domain of socialization and subjectification can be interpreted as an individual failing (Valencia 2010) rather than recognizing that, in fact, the capitals available to students “failing” in these domains just may not fit the school field as effortlessly as those capitals that are seen as more legitimate (see also Huilla 2022).

Tying together articles I–III, it is difficult for school to function as an agent of soci(et)al reform if the logic of qualification is seen as the logic of all schooling. Teachers' understanding of the purpose of education and their understanding of the field and students' varying capitals for navigating it ultimately affect students' chances of succeeding in school. Normative, implicit expectations play a role in everyday life, as demonstrated in the findings of article II. Moreover, teachers' understanding of the purpose of school and their own task plays a part in what they emphasize in their choices in the classroom, as shown in the findings of article III. Teacher education constitutes an important environment for challenging and (de-)constructing teachers' existing ways of thinking and their normative expectations related to schools, as discussed in article I. However, to perform this task, Finnish teacher education would require a more contextualized orientation (Arola 2012; Kinon et al. 2015; Nieminen & Mankki 2019; Juvonen & Toom 2021; Puustinen,

Säntti & Simola 2022; Koski et al. 2022; Säntti, Puustinen & Hansen 2023; Kuusisto & Rissanen 2023). It is crucial that teachers widen their understanding of purpose to encompass more than measurable learning outcomes, as a narrow focus on qualifications may weaken schools' ability to effect societal change and to provide students with equal outcomes.

## 6 Discussion

The aim of this dissertation was to elaborate the relationship of school and society and the way teachers enact the purpose of education in this relationship. The starting point was the relationship between school's task of maintaining society on the one hand, and reforming it, on the other, and the way schools can work towards both societal goals. I approached the institution of school through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to unravel the interrelationship between individual and structure in the context of schooling, and I complemented this approach with Biesta's purposes of education, employing these concepts in the empirical context of Finnish comprehensive school. In this final chapter, I discuss the limitations of this dissertation and possible future research avenues. Here, two main points of discussion are raised regarding teachers' societal role.

While this dissertation is built on the assumption that there is an objective reality, I recognize that this reality cannot be observed completely as it is. Ethnography represents a means of getting close to one context and its individuals, closer perhaps than other methodologies, but this view is always relative and shaped by several unobservable factors (see section 3.2–3.3). The collective aspect of the empirical work in the dissertation provided a tool for collective reflection and researcher triangulation. Nonetheless, in a different school context, combined with other kinds of data, the research questions, observations, and subsequent interpretations may have appeared different. Therefore, the results presented here are intuitions or “hunches” (Alava 2016, see section 3.2) rather than definitive truths, and they invite more empirical research on teachers' societal role in the everyday life of schools in other contexts. I also recognize the possible contradiction of calling for critical teachers to challenge the normative expectations of schools—that teachers *should do* something is already a normative claim. The premise of this dissertation is undeniably normative in assuming that education should aim for equity and provide students with equal opportunities—then again, this is already explicit in the National Core Curriculum and a rather uncontested norm in the context of Finnish comprehensive education. Calling for teachers to be critical of normative expectations does not mean striving for a norm-free school: a school can never be free of norms since it is based on teaching future generations what is seen as important and valuable and what they *should* know; school is always and inevitably normative.

A limitation of this dissertation is that it did not focus empirically on teacher education. Previous studies show that the role of societal or philosophical questions is, in most teacher education programs in Finland, notably smaller than that of didactics and learning the specifics of the various study subjects elaborated in the curriculum (Kinos et al. 2015; Metsäpelto et al. 2021). Teachers themselves recognize shortcomings in the societal aspects of their education, also resulting in feelings of personal inadequacy when being unable to respond to the needs of all students (Alisaari, Kaukko & Heikkola 2022). More research is required on Finnish teacher education and the way new teachers are taught to address and analyze societal questions and assume the societal aspects of their teacher role (see also Hakala, Maaranen & Riitaola 2017; Hummelstedt 2022; Metsäpelto et al. 2021; Kuusisto & Rissanen 2023), especially as increases in residential and school segregation will presumably create greater differences between the workplaces of future teachers.

The application of Bourdieu's and Biesta's concepts in the context of Finnish education was crucial for understanding the subtle, tacit mechanisms of reproduction and reform, since the Finnish system remains, in international comparisons, one of the more equitable systems. Within the Finnish education discourse, the values of equal educational opportunities are still broadly shared—at least on the explicit level. Economic barriers to equal education have been traditionally seen as negative, hence the free textbooks and school meals available in Finnish compulsory education. Examining these concepts and mechanisms of reproduction and reform in such a context indicates that even in an equitable system, schools tend to reproduce inequalities, and I have suggested this is enabled by the doxa and norms of school combined with the domination of schoolwork by the logic of qualification.

This dissertation can participate in at least two discussions on teachers and schools in the context of Finnish education and, further, in the field of the sociology of education.

First, teachers' ability to look beyond the customary, or the norms upon which everyday school life and interaction are built, is crucial if school is to be an institution that does not just reproduce the existing system but also reforms it. If the normative level of schooling is continuously uncontested and taken for granted, even implementing new values stated in the curriculum will be a struggle, as is shown in the empirical findings of this dissertation. As described in section 2.1, societal change is difficult and slow, but it is possible: individuals affect social structures, and, through heterodoxy, the limits of doxa may be challenged or even altered (Bourdieu 1977). I have demonstrated that the explicit and implicit expectations directed towards schools and teachers can be in conflict, influencing the way reforms and the National Core Curriculum, the main steering mechanism of comprehensive education, are turned into pedagogical practices. I have argued

that education policy is always interpreted by the uncontested, underlying “truths” about reality to which individuals adhere, the *doxa* of school, and these underlying truths are learned in large part through the process of socialization, and through attending school. Only by recognizing and bringing the tacit assumptions regarding school into the realm of discussion can the underlying truths about schooling be altered. Thus, the paradox of school both maintaining society and reforming it comes down to the conflict between explicit and implicit expectations: truly reforming the lived reality of school requires that the tacit normative structures are recognized and the limits of *doxa* are made visible.

This call for heterodoxy among teachers is a challenging demand, since university-educated teachers generally come from backgrounds that fit the *doxa* effortlessly to begin with (Nori 2011; article I; see section 2.2.3). This call also breaks away from the historical view of Finnish teachers as model citizens who represent orthodoxy rather than heterodoxy for the next generations to emulate, as discussed in section 2.2. The ease with which teachers navigate the field makes these uncontested truths seem even more “natural” while their social-historical origins are further obscured, as teachers’ own *habitus* is seldom in tangible conflict with the expectations of their surroundings. This call is not helped either by the decontextualization of education and the increasing focus on individuals and measurable learning processes, as one cannot be critical of a context without first becoming aware of it. (Simola 2015b; Heikkinen et al. 2021; Biesta 2006, 2015.)

This dissertation underlines that teachers cannot escape their societal role and the responsibility it comes with. Rejecting this role—either knowingly or unknowingly—may mean that school is unable to reform its own practices in a societally meaningful and socially equitable way. This is indicated in empirical studies of schools and teachers struggling to provide instruction to students with Finnish as a second language (article II; Suuriniemi 2023; Repo 2023) or in research that makes visible the exclusion and othering of students from marginalized groups (see section 1.1 and subsection 2.1.4) who challenge the implicit expectation of a “normal” student. Maintaining an impression within the profession and teacher education that teachers neutrally serve the state (see Vuorikoski & Räisänen 2010; subsection 2.2.2) may reduce the chances of building a teacher ethos that consciously and seriously considers societal questions like school segregation and the diverse social backgrounds of students. The challenge is that schools must simultaneously provide students with instruction and possibilities for learning while also fulfilling their responsibility for assessing students and providing them with official qualifications like report cards. If the societal aspects discussed in this dissertation are not recognized in the everyday practices of teaching, schools may fail to provide these qualifications to students in an equal way. Consequently, schools may promote instead of combat social

segregation and inequality—challenging the universalist ideal of Finnish comprehensive education.

The second argument is, however, a defense of teachers, since how teachers perceive their role is contingent on the prevailing discourse. If the educational discourse surrounding teachers narrowly perceives schools as producers of measurable qualifications rather than thoroughly societal institutions, left alone, teachers will probably struggle to create an equitable and societally sensitive school. Teachers' understanding of their own role is created in relation to the broader education discourse, which, currently, revolves around national rankings of educational outcomes (Thrupp et al. 2023, 2–3). Activities in the classroom echo the values of society, and what seems to be currently valued are measurable qualifications, which may partly explain the dominance of the logic of qualification over other purposes of education. Challenging this aspect of the educational discourse, the drive for measurable outcomes and producing students that can provide the “right” answers, is important not only in staffroom conversations but in societal discussion as well. To strive for the basic values stated in the curriculum for Finnish basic education—humanity, *Bildung*, equality, and democracy—the field of education requires discussion on the way these values are manifested in pedagogical practices and choices in the classroom and the kind of tools and space teachers are actually given to perform their work within this framework. These values extend beyond gaining qualifications to becoming a member of one's community and society and growing into an active, considerate subject.

Through the devaluation of the other purposes of education and the maintenance of the illusion that all education concerns working towards a pre-defined outcome, the logic of qualification dominates schoolwork and thus creates problems for both individuals and society. It leaves less space for trying, failing, and learning from one's mistakes, or attempting something unexpected and succeeding, or simply resisting unreasonable expectations. The true cultivation of subjectification is required if the task of school really is to equip new generations with the skills to cope with unforeseeable societal changes. To consciously enact the societal purposes of education, teachers must be given the space to expand their focus beyond simply “getting things right.” Schools are often assigned the task of solving all societal issues, large and small, be they social segregation, the marginalization of young people, or the climate crisis. This seems an unrealistic demand if schools must simultaneously work towards producing measurable outcomes or, indeed, towards *producing* something beyond students' learning and growth, the most basic task of education. This dissertation calls for a broad conversation on the purposes of education—especially on the manifestation of those purposes in classroom interactions between teachers and students.

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