

Merja Paksuniemi

# The Historical Background of School System and Teacher Image in Finland



PETER LANG  
EDITION

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# 1. Introduction

The basic factors of a Finnish teacher's professional identity are defined by society<sup>1</sup>. Teaching is bound by culture and is moulded both through the skills required for daily work and a society's expectations of the task of a teacher. As society changes, so does the role of a teacher.<sup>2</sup> A teacher's task is not only to impart the prevalent social and cultural values to his or her pupils, but also to act as a force for societal reform. A teacher should be a critic and a reformer, guiding pupils toward critical thinking concerning the prevalent conditions. Criticism and reflection make societal reform possible.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier research focusing on the Finnish teacher training system has focused mostly on the subjects taught at teacher training colleges<sup>4</sup>. Practical skills and other college activities, on the other hand, have received less attention. How should the teacher image be studied from an historical perspective? What factors influence the teacher image? In this study, the teacher image will be examined from the following perspectives: the first step toward the teaching profession; the development of the teacher personality; and the process factors that strengthen the teacher image. With the help of the source material, I will study the requirements of entrance tests for teacher training programmes, the selection of applicants, the teaching of practical skills, and what is emphasised in college supplementary activities.

The aim of this research is to clarify the teacher training process and to focus on the following perspectives: What kinds of abilities do practical

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1 Värri 2001, 37.

2 Lauriala 2000, 89; Luukkainen 2005, 17–19; Värri 2002, 56.

3 Heikkinen 2001, 124.

4 Halila 1950, 78–79; Heikkinen 2003, 130–131; Hyyrö 2006, 5; Iisalo 1989, 236–237; Kuikka 1978, 104; Lahdes 1961, 7, 28–32; Nurmi 1989, 20; Paksuniemi 2009; Stormbom 1991, 119–121; Tamminen 1998, 19–20.

skills and supplementary activities provide for the formation of the teacher image and its development? The study also aims to clarify the Finnish teacher image and how teachers mature into the profession from an historical perspective. Teacher training provided at Finnish colleges is somewhat uniform. Textbooks, learning requirements, and the skill and knowledge required of students are mostly similar.<sup>5</sup> This study investigates the traditional teaching at teacher training colleges by closely examining the activities of the Teacher Training College of Tornio during the years of 1921–1945. It was a college for women.

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5 Halila 1963; Heikkinen 1995; Isosaari 1961; Nurmi 1995; Paksuniemi 2009; Rinne 1989.

## 2. Theoretical starting points

### 2.1. The Finnish teacher image—requirements and changes

The actions and work of a teacher are shaped by curricula as well as various guidelines and desires as to the kind of behaviour that teachers are expected to emulate<sup>6</sup>. Curricula form a model for teachers to follow since social goals and influence are transferred into the curricula during the planning stage<sup>7</sup>. Before the development of curricula and the various processes of reform that have been undertaken, teaching was primarily a top-down, book-centred system. The textbook acted as a practical curriculum in the absence of any official material.<sup>8</sup> Behind the textbooks, on the other hand, is an operationalized curriculum that can be adjusted by the authorities. Textbooks are controlled either by the state or some other entity that decides on the approval or rejection of the material.<sup>9</sup> Due to reforms in 1985 and 1994, responsibility for teaching was transferred to the teachers and schools. The role of the teacher in the Finnish school society changed. The teacher became a supervisor, planned his or her own work, and was expected to work in cooperation with various parties, such as the students, parents, and other teachers. Today, teachers must work in an atmosphere of dynamic change, which increases pressure and expectations concerning teachers.<sup>10</sup>

A teacher's ability to influence his or her school's society is minimal until he or she establishes a sufficiently strong position within the working

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6 Lapinoja 2006, 155.

7 Kujala 2008, 48–49.

8 Ropo & Huopainen 2001, 78, 86.

9 Kuikka 2001, 90–92.

10 Lauriala 2000, 89–90; Ropo & Huopainen 2001, 78, 86, 90; Syrjäläinen 1997; Syrjäläinen 2002; Syrjäläinen 2009, 145.