

What Is the Future of Village Schools?

A Case Study on the Life Cycle of a School in Northern Finland

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Abstract

This micro-historical research reveals what happened in the village of Aapajärvi located in a sparsely populated municipality in northern Finland since the school was established and since it disappeared. In this article, the following questions are studied: How was it possible to establish and build an elementary school in a remote and roadless village in poor circumstances at the time of post-war reconstruction and how did the situation of the Aapajärvi School change along the societal changes in Finland? The data of this research comprises both archival sources (e.g. proceedings of the Aapajärvi School board meetings, diaries) and interview data among former teachers and pupils of the school and villagers. In the conclusion, the significance of village schools and their development as a part of functional and equal education overall will be dissected. Small schools could offer a good option to the development of pupil-centered teaching and learning.

Keywords: Village schools, School history, Multigrade education

1. Introduction

This article tells the story of the birth and abolition of one small village school in northern Finland. Our

micro-historical research reveals what happened in the village of Aapajärvi, located in a sparsely populated municipality (986 inhabitants; 0.54 inhabitants per square km = 1.40 people per square mile, July/2011), since the school was established and since it disappeared. The village of Aapajärvi was a typical settled area in Finnish Lapland, located in the province of Lapland, in the municipality of Pelkosenniemi (see Figure 1). The village is comprised of few sparsely located households. The school was established in Aapajärvi in 1946. At that time, the school building symbolized the new and better future, stability after the uncertainty caused by the World War II. In 2011, the deteriorated school building tells what happened during those thirty five years since the abolition of the school.

In 1921, the act on compulsory education came into operation in Finland. According to the law, there had to be enough schools per municipality so that children's school commute would not be longer than five kilometers (app. 3 miles) (Viljanen, 1998). The number of children coming to school and settlement expanding in the different parts of Finnish municipalities in the 1950s increased the number of village schools. Due to the change in industrial life, people moving to the cities, and family sizes becoming smaller, the number of students decreased in the 1960s and 1970s resulting in the abolition of many village schools (Kalaoja, 1988; Kuikka, 1996; Viljanen, 1998). Economic reasons were considered as justification for the abolition of schools (Kalaoja, 1988).

For a pupil, the abolition of school means losing a natural connection to one's own village and school (Kuikka, 1996; Teirikangas and Tolonen, 2002). Therefore, when planning abolition, we should worry about village children and youngsters who are not given the opportunity to be rooted in their own village or to learn to know each other (Smith and DeYoung, 1988; Korpinen and Mielonen, 2005).

This article is a micro-historical research which is based on versatile original and archival sources. However, as a micro-historical study, it cannot produce very generalizable results. Instead, the purpose is to provide a thick description of the matter and explain its relevance from the international perspective as well. In the conclusion, we will dissect the significance of village schools and their development as a part of functional and equal education in overall. In addition, suggestions concerning teacher education and teachers' possibilities to work in small village schools will be presented.

2. Village Schools as Seats of Learning

By a village school, we refer to a grade school with grades 1-6 and where the number of pupils is less than fifty. During the last decades, plenty of village schools have been closed down in Finland. Because of sparse population, there are still numerous small schools in Finland although in practice, they work under the threat of abolition. In the study year 1990-1991, 64 % of all Finnish schools had 1-3 teachers. The most common school type was a small school with two teachers (e.g. Kalaoja, 1988; Kivinen, 1988; Pirhonen, 1993). In 2000, the most common school type was still a school with less than fifty pupils. Every third comprehensive school belonged to this group. On the other hand, when proportioned to the number of pupils, only about ten percent of children were taught in these kinds of small schools (Kumpulainen, 2002).

Usually, teaching is carried out in these schools as multigrade education which means that many grades are taught at the same time (e.g. the pre-school grade with the second grade, grades 3 to 6 together, or grades 3 and 4 together and grades 5 and 6 together). English terms for this kind of system are multigrade class, combination class, mixed-age class, split-grade class, double-grade class, and vertically-grouped class (Mason and Burns, 1997; Peltonen, 2002; Veenman, 1995).

Small multigrade schools hold a unique position in the history of education because it was the dominant model for teaching before industrialization and urbanization (Harrison and Busher, 1995). Multigrade school still is an important organizational model in many suburban and countryside areas across Finland. Because of administrative and economic reasons, multigrade teaching is necessary in developing countries as well (Augenblick and Nactigal, 1985; Peltonen, 2002). On the other hand, new multigrade schools are established for example in California pleading to their advantages in teaching children of different ages (Mason and Burns, 1995).

From an international point of view, multigrade schools are the most common in countryside but becoming more popular in population centers as well. 53 % of primary school teachers teach multigrades in Holland. The equivalent figure is 23 in Switzerland and 40 in the UK. Grades are combined because of the decreasing number of pupils. In Canada, every fifth pupil studies in a multigrade (Gayter, 1991). In Australia, over 85 % of elementary schools are multigrade schools, 25 % in Austria, and no fewer than 80 % in Portugal (Peltonen, 2002; Veenman, 1995). The number of multigrades is significant also in Asia and the Pacific countries (Hargreaves et al., 2001).

Bringing out multigrade system is necessary in this context as our purpose is to discuss the importance of village schools by using the story of Aapajärvi School as an example. The purpose is to highlight the many advantages of small villages and multigrade teaching with this particular example (see also Finn, Pannazzo and Achilles, 2003; Kandel and Hawkins, 1992; Kuziemko, 2006; van Ewijk and Slegers, 2010; Whiting and Whiting, 1975).

3. Method

3.1 Research questions

The village school of Aapajärvi is an interesting research target because its starting history with its phases of birth and development seems similar to any other Finnish school from the time of post-war reconstruction. The life span of Aapajärvi School illustrates the emergence of Finnish school system and the principles that lied behind the effort of building comprehensive education.

In this research, the following questions were dissected:

- (1) How was it possible to establish and build an elementary school in a remote and roadless village in poor circumstances at the time of reconstruction?
- (2) How did the situation of the Aapajärvi School change along the societal changes in Finland?

3.2 Research data

The data of this research comprises both archival sources and interview data. The archival data covers the proceedings of the Aapajärvi School board meetings from the year of establishment in 1946 to 1971 when the school was shut down and the building was used for other purposes. In addition, the data includes eight teacher diaries, two diaries of pupils' house of residence, two diaries about club activities, and a few diaries from the school cooking department.

The data is based on ample interview data (18 interviewees, 25 interviews) among teachers, former pupils and other people who have participated in the construction and reparation work of the school during the reconstruction period in Lapland. One of the main characters is Teacher Hellevi Viskari who lived and taught at school for 21 years told about the life of a young teacher family in the remote village school in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, one current resident of the school building was interviewed.

The school building itself (see Figure 2) is a part of data. It illustrates the circumstances of the time it was established, gradual development and improvement of the standard of living in the 1950s, the tranquil phase at the beginning of the 1960s, and finally the dark sides of an affluent society.

3.3 The reliability of the research

According to Uusitalo (2006), an interview situation is a drama where the inner stories of the researcher and the interviewee are combined. In a dialogue, both get stimulating influence in their own inner story and then the research story gets a new content. If the researcher wants to draw a conclusion about the drama of living life, he or she should ask whether the information provided by the data correspond to the actual course of events. In this research, the interview data is complemented by documentary material and observations (Hänninen, 1999).

The reliability of this research is partly supported by the fact that original sources were available—the most important of which were all of the proceedings of school board meetings from the period the school functioned. There were also other archival sources (e.g. the proceedings of municipal council meetings) which made it possible to check the course of events.

However, the most significant data was comprised of the interviews. In order to guarantee the reliability of the interview data, the same people were interviewed several times (Polkinghorne, 1995; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Saarnivaara, 2002). Furthermore, information acquired from different people was compared and found consistent. Every interviewee wanted to appear in the research with their own names. In this article, we give plenty of space to the interviewees' own voices.

It is worth highlighting that the first author started her teacher career exactly in this very school of Aapajärvi. She decided to go to Lapland for a year after having graduated from the Teacher Training College of Helsinki but stayed eventually five years at the school which had three teachers (Kilpimaa, 2009). The position of the first author can be criticized as her perceptions may be affected by her past career at the Aapajärvi School. On the other hand, this relationship can be considered an advantage: she was able to understand the interviewees' thoughts and perceptions and has a particular knowledge of the research object. The second author, Professor Kaarina Määttä, supervised Marita Kilpimaa's research and has not any connection to the school. Dr. Satu Uusiautti works in a research group at the University of Lapland and is also familiarized with educational

research; furthermore, she is a former pupil of a similar small village school in northern Finland.

The picture of the school of Aapajärvi drawn from the data is not very coherent but merely polyphonic and moving. The description presented here also involves less known, unspoken, politically charged, and even denied truths—the happenings are described in their whole spectrum.

3.4 Methodological choices

The research data was gathered through phrasing a question from a select point of view. The viewpoint is micro-historical. Micro-history belongs to the so-called new histories emerged after the World War II that have been developed as countermoves to traditional state-level writings of history. In micro-history, past events are structured in the form of a narrative. The most fundamental aim is to pay attention to the breaks and anomalies, exceptional times in history. Answers to the questions are not only searched from the sequence of events but from those clues and hints that the chains of events provide. Although micro-historical research is focused at local level, only on one case, it is possible to achieve results that have more general meaning as well (Suoninen, 2001). Furthermore, from a micro-historical point of view, the dynamics of how people create, mold, and question the structures and adjust into the surrounding circumstances appears interesting (Ollila, 2003).

The research method is narrative research. The research consists of small narratives that are sorts of small peepholes into the life of the village and school from the 1940s until today. During interviews and reading primary sources in the archives, we started to find out those themes that seemed relevant to the research. Because the question was about the history of the school and school building, we decided to approach the theme chronologically. Thus, periods following each other form an entity. Phases can be determined according to certain points of reference and turning points which make it possible to analyze the whole research through a certain chronological order.

4. Results

4.1 The municipal council suggests the establishment of school

The village of Aapajärvi was a typical settled area in Finnish Lapland located in the province of Lapland, in the municipality of Pelkosenniemi. The first inhabitants moved as farm owners to the village in the 1910s (The interview with Ylisirniö, 18 March 2006). The post-war settlement in Lapland was mostly directed in unpopulated areas that were, however, considered suitable for agriculture. These areas were not located by the sides of traffic routes and therefore, the settlement work required extensive road construction as well. Plenty of new farms were also built in the settled area of Aapajärvi. Due to post-war settlement operation, people came to hack with axes, hoes, and shovels to build new homes and a village in the middle of swamps and woods. *“It was a horrible time for my father and mother when my father was hoeing. And then the inspector came and people were scared to death of him. For example, if the ditches were not deep enough. My father’s nerves were certainly pushed at that time. I have indeed thought many times that those fiendish people were really sought for that job.”* (The Interview with Elsa Tolppanen, 30 November 2007).

Already in 1945, the villagers of Aapajärvi submitted their requisition to the municipality in order to have a school in the village (Municipal Archives of Pelkosenniemi, hereafter MAP, 28 Dec 1945). Their requisition was accepted in 1946. The school board stated in the minutes of its meeting in 12 Feb 1946 how important it was to establish the school. According to the decision of 4§: *“School work can be started temporarily in Vartiainen’s farm which has one room for rent, 7 X 8 meters by its volume. The teacher’s accommodation will be located in M. Honkanen’s farm, about 100 meters [110 yd] from the school place, where there is one room available.”* Immediately, the first board of Aapajärvi School had the most demanding job to do—to build a school building—at a time when there was lack of almost all construction material.

4.2 The school starts

In the spring semester of 1946, the school started in the rented room which was at the other end of an old logging site house (The Interview with Pentti Tolppanen, 9 February 2006). Housewife Maija Vartiainen took care of the school kitchen and the classroom cleaning. There was lack of pots, kettles, and other cooking ware as well. Pupils were even asked to bring their own tableware. Pupils sat on long benches. They did not have any desks at first; neither could they afford to a blackboard but it was made of wood and painted with green (Rantala, 1992).

“We would sit there behind the sawbucks on our knees and write. We had to have our own lunch with us.” (The Interview with Antti Honkanen, 6 February 2006).

However, the villagers wanted to have their own school building as soon as possible. There were already 34 pupils and the number was increasing. Timber for the building was already selected (MAP, 12 Dec 1946) and the

National Board of Education was asked to provide a model floor plan (MAP, 20 Mar 1946). Everyone from the village was helping when timber for building were picked up and sawed. Everyone who could use an axe worked as carpenters (Rantala, 1992).

Under the circumstances of that time, construction work required huge effort. The former pupil Tapani Vartiainen was three when the construction work started. His father's personal organizer had a note in 5 March 1947: "*We started to pick up the school timber with eight horses.*" Pentti Tolppanen remembered (the interview, 9 February 2006) how "*the gaps between logs were sealed up with moss that were collected from the woods nearby. The whole village participated in collecting it.*"

4.3 The village got a beautiful school with beautiful teachers

Eventually, the new school building was completed. It aroused admiration: "*It looked so very big. Certainly, I had not seen one before* (The Interview with Pentti Tolppanen, 9 February 2006)." Osmo Kallinen started the second grade when going to the new school building in the fall 1949. He thought that "*the school building was beautiful, big, and spacious, and the teachers were beautiful too* (The Interview with Osmo Kallinen, 11 December 2005)."

After the new school building was built, two teachers' positions starting from 1 August 1949 were declared applicable. In the advert for the positions, teachers were persuaded in the following way: "*The school has a new, modern school building. There are no cultivation land and grazing ground. The school is located 20 kilometers [12.5 miles] north from Pelkosenniemi. The main road comes up to school but thus far bus service reaches Kairala, located 10 kilometers [6.2 miles] from the school.*" (MAP, 13 May 1949.)

A young student girl, Raili Pelkonen from Helsinki and a 19-year-old boy and secondary school graduate Aatto Viskari were selected in the positions; Viskari became the head teacher. The situation was not exceptional: there was lack of teachers in Finland and the war had hindered teacher training.

In the fall 1950, the elementary school inspector chose Hellevi Mäkilä as a temporary teacher. She described her arrival at Aapajärvi: "*I walked. The bus stopped in Kairala. I walked with Esko 'the Cow' for 10 kilometers [6.2 miles]; he was coming to roadworks. He was really a nice boy. He was my first conquest. 'Have a candy!' I'll always remember it.*" (The Interview with Hellevi Viskari, 14 November 2005.)

That was the beginning of 20-year-old Hellevi's career. This secondary school graduate from southern Finland did not perceive the school as spacious and beautiful than the pupils from Aapajärvi did: "*It had log walls and I could see the stuffing in the middle of them. They had built that school with big, wet logs and that moss which they had sealed them with was wet. They used to have bedbugs but minus degrees killed them. The brick walls were flimsy but we would burn timber because we did not have to pay for it.*" (The Interview with Hillevi Viskari, 14 November 2005.)

4.4 Everyday life and romance at school

At the beginning of the 1950s, the number of school age children started to be so high in Aapajärvi that the school board decided to suggest the creation of the third teacher's position to the municipal council. The school library room was considered suitable for functioning as a classroom for the third teacher's class because it was possible to place enough desks in there (MAP, 30 May 1951).

An apartment was arranged at school for the third teacher as well because the young teachers Hellevi Mäkilä and Aatto Viskari had fallen in love, gotten engaged, and married. They took teacher studies in turn in Jyväskylä and Oulu. In July 1953, Viskaris had a boy, Juha. Father-Aatto served in armed forces and Hellevi took care of the baby. She described the young mother's life at the Lapp village school in the following way:

"We didn't have electricity when Juha was a baby. It was a concrete fact that no water came in our well. We would always take our water from that nearby ditch. Those, who lived [geographically] higher, poured their sewage there and we would drink it. Still, we managed to stay healthy although it was awful when we figured it out." (The Interview with Hellevi Viskari, 14 November 2005.)

Because they did not get electricity to school, people read and worked in the light of a petrol lamp. Head Teacher Aatto Viskari used to go and light the lamps at school in mornings. They got petrol for lamps with lamp petrol coupons that were distributed by the elementary school board. In 22 October 1948, the school was announced that it had been given five liters (1.3 gal) from the total of 70 liters (18.5 gal) given to the municipality. The secretary pointed out at the end of the letter: "*The school would certainly need more lamp petrol for the spring semester.*"

Adding petrol in the lamps required caution, told Hellevi Viskari in the interview in 30 November 2007: "*Aatto*

didn't allow anyone to touch those lamps or petrol. He would even wash all the glasses himself. And he filled them always in the same place. He didn't want it to smell and spread everywhere."

The school afforded to small reparations and acquisitions every year. An allowance for buying a new stove was reserved in the budget of 1956 (MAP, 18 October 1956). Next year, school floors were painted and desks were repaired and painted (MAP, 21 May 1957).

For all repairing, the circumstances at school were quite poor. The number of pupils increased every year. The facilities both at school and pupils' hall of residence become increasingly narrow. Those pupils who lived faraway and had difficult school commute had to live at school, in the old part of the former logging site house. Neither did all children even fit there.

Pupils were supported financially after the poor post-war times. Among other things, pupils were given shoes almost every year. In 4 November 1952, it was decided that *"29 pupils would get felt boots."* The board had to consider clothing handout applications frequently. In 14 October 1958, *"clothing handout was allowed to 30 pupils in the form of skiing shoes and pants from the allotment of 60,000 Finnish marks."*

4.5 No one could have foreseen the change

The 1960s started well. Plumbing worked and teachers had toilets inside the house; there was not central heating in the school building but that was not unusual at that time. The school had qualified and permanent teachers. It was a peaceful period in the history of Aapajärvi and the whole municipality.

Besides the actual school work, parties were organized at school and the villagers participated in them actively. Former pupils thought back to festivities: *"The school Christmas party and spring party were events that the villagers would attend even as far as from over 20 kilometers [12.4 miles]. Some immemorial performances have stuck in my mind, such as Esko Ilonen's solo singing and Antti Honkanen as Santa Claus. At the school Christmas party, every child got a bag that contained a ginger cookie and an apple. We played at being elves. We wore grey collars with bells and red costumes and Christmas hats of course"* (The interview with Maarit Mattanen, 25 October 2007.)

Board meetings were held at school. The board had given permission to use the school for having Laestadian revival meetings (MAP, 14 November 1956) because half of pupils' parents were members of this revival movement. The whole village used the school library.

The school board struggled for the enlargement of the school building in a difficult economic situation. Indeed, the National Board of Education accepted the enlargement plans but they would never become materialized. Some pupils who belonged to Aapajärvi's school district were moved to the population center as the pupils' hall of residence was located there. Therefore, the municipality of Pelkosenniemi was able to save in school expenditure as they did not have to enlarge the Aapajärvi School and they could close down the pupils' hall of residence in Aapajärvi as well.

Already in the 1960s, a radical change took place in the development of Lapland. Young men started to leave Lapland to seek job from southern Finland, Sweden, and even Australia. It was quite a common trend at that time but then the whole families started to leave. The number of pupils and the prognoses decreased and schools had to be closed down. During the period between 1958 and 1975, more schools were closed down than established. The municipality of Pelkosenniemi lost six of its eight schools; that is 75 %.

The school of Aapajärvi was closed down in 1971. The old-timer and school teacher, Hellevi Viskari, who had lived and taught at school for 21 years, was moved in Oulu to work as a teacher (her spouse Aatto Viskari had died during a fishing trip in 1967) and Head Teacher Paavo Ylisirmiö was moved to Savukoski. Ylisirmiö told (the Interview, 18 March 2006) about his years at Aapajärvi School: *"It was the happiest time of my life. The village was nice. I was young and energetic. I would have wanted to stay there longer."* The teachers with their families moved away and the school building was left empty. The school remained as villagers' meeting place and study groups organized by the local training center gathered there (The Interview with Osmo Kallinen, 11 December 2005).

4.6 The Final end of Aapajärvi School

The municipality of Pelkosenniemi was responsible for organizing housing for homeless alcoholics in the municipality and thus, the school building was used for this purpose (The Interview with Marja-Sisko Tallavaara, 13 February 2006). During the years, the villagers had plenty to say about the school and its residents. The school was commonly called *"The University of Aapajärvi"*. The school residents had even guns and gun shots could be heard in the village: *"The guy who was inside came outside from the door and the gun went off... They*

have shot and raged there. They are surely under the special patronage. They don't have to take care of anything." (The Interview with Antti Honkanen, 12 November 2007.)

Some villagers wrote even several letters and council initiatives to the municipality authorities suggesting that the school building could be turned over to villagers. They declared that they are ready to do voluntary work in order to repair the building. However, they did not get the permission.

The first author of this article went to see the school in December 2005: The ramshackle school building stood by the road like a haunted house (see Figure 3). Almost all windows were covered with boarding or black plastic. Some light came through from a couple of upstairs windows. A thick layer of snow covered the yard where—according to the inventory made by Lapland's Environmental Administration previous summer—there were 12 car wrecks, 5 washing machines, several refrigerators, a snow mobile, few chain saws, and numerous tires and other scrap and junk. In addition, it is noted in the inventory form that: There is a sauna 50 meters [54.7 yds.] to the east; next to it a drinking place with tables and seats. Furthermore, the inventory form says that: The building had almost burned a couple of times. A big blue and white sign was nailed up above the school main entrance saying: ARCTIA HOTEL.

Marita Kilpimaa's former classroom door was locked, it had a big hole made with an axe and the hole was sealed from the inside. The school porch and two big classrooms were almost filled with jumble: electronic appliances, furniture, clothes, hoods, coffee makers, a lawn mower, and even baby carriage for twins. Apparently, the classrooms functioned as a store where people did "*great business*" and "*had so good-looking ladies, too*" (The Interview with Rauli Lakso, 11 December 2005).

One former pupil wanted to buy the school and turn it into his leisure home. The villagers of Aapajärvi waited with the offer still in 2010 hoping that the municipality of Pelkosenniemi would finally hand over the school to someone who was ready to make the effort to repair the building.

On Friday 13 May 2011, newspapers in Lapland reported how the old school of Aapajärvi had gone up in flames and become useless and unworthy to repair. Kaleva-newspaper reported the accident on 15 May 2011 in the following way: "*The school building which was built after the War was owned by the municipality and its residents were alcohol abusers. The municipality has fixed the residents temporary accommodation in Pelkosenniemi. 16 units from the neighboring municipalities arrived at the place. Also, investigators from the police have visited the place.*"

5. Discussion

Getting their own school in the village demanded much on the people of the small village of Aapajärvi: plenty of will to cooperate and voluntary work at the end of the 1940s. When there were school-age or younger children in almost every house and more children coming, it was obvious that they had to get a school.

In the circumstances of that time, construction work demanded huge effort. However, people still had strength and courage because they wanted to believe in the better future. They had the lost war and guilt behind them and they were confronted with the payments of war indemnity and severe economic depression. Children were that resource through which the better future seemed achievable. But first they had to guarantee children with opportunities to better life than their parents had ever had. The very first step toward the goal was to build the village school. They had plenty of other things to build as well. Men had to start working hard at once they got back from the war. They would build homes, cowhouses, and saunas. Fields were hacked next to the new population centers. They had forest working sites and they built road, bridges, and power plants. Yet, the primary goal of people who lived in Lapland was to build and establish schools.

The school building became a center for the village. It gathered the villagers together both in feast days and daily activities. The school brought new lease of life and hope for the future. School work was connected to children's own living environment and life situations. Those families that needed help could ask for it from the school board which was especially important during the first decade after the war. In the school board, villagers could make their voices heard with their representatives and were able to participate in decision-making concerning the school.

Permanent teachers were that mainstay that people could count on and turn to when facing hardships but also smaller problems almost round-the-clock. Teachers also enjoyed their work although high demands were placed on them. It has also occurred in other studies on teachers' work satisfaction in small schools (e.g. Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2002; Sairanen, 2001).

The fast execution of the post-war reconstruction of Lapland has been considered a miracle. People had strong confidence in the future and were ready to work persistently in order to achieve their goals. By the end of the

1950s, even the remote villages of Lapland had their own schools, stores, and post offices as well as water pipe, electricity, and telephone line. Well-being seemed to increase in the whole country.

Then, the population of Lapland started to decrease and schools were closed down. The government tried to prevent the abolition of schools by lowering the pupil number of a school with two teachers from 23 to 16 in 1972 and to 12 in 1977. The lowest limit to a single-teacher school was decreased from 13 pupils to six (Lassila, 2001). It was not possible to save those schools that had already been closed down although their number of pupils would have been enough to guarantee their existence according to the new regulations.

6. Conclusions

The story of Aapajärvi School shows the importance of a school not only to pupils but its immediate surroundings as well. As stated at the beginning, small schools have plenty of advantages. In the conclusion, we will use some time dissecting the significance of village schools and their development as a part of functional, equal, and pupil-centered education.

The pedagogy and learning environment of village schools form a unique place to grow for school age children. Previous studies have shown (Arnold and Roberts, 1990; Bell and Sigworth, 1987; Stasz and Stecher, 2002) that village school teachers enjoy their work and receive enough positive feedback of their work as well. Teachers are appreciated in villages. Nowadays, their work load is increased by the fact that they are supposed to fight for the threat of closing the schools down. For teachers' professional development, it would be important to establish cooperation nets for village school teachers and utilize the social media. These issues should be noticed already during teacher education (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2002, Purokuru, 1997; Williams and Thorpe, 1997). In addition, teacher education should provide better tools for multigrade teaching which is the working environment of many prospective teachers (Harris and Sass, 2011). All in all, there is too little cooperation between small schools although special own pedagogy is created at schools (Buddin and Zamaro, 2009). Segregation is a critical feature of small schools while increasing and developing cooperation between village schools can be seen as a future challenge.

Research on pre-school education organized by small schools in Finland has shown that pre-school children enjoy themselves in a multigrade class at a village school. Their positive attitude results from being together with friends and more free activities, opportunities to play games, play, and go on excursions. Separate things make school meaningful and nice (Peltonen, 1998).

Furthermore, some studies have approached village school children's visions of the future (Hytönen and Rovasalo, 1998) and their experience on classless teaching (Ilo and Kaikkonen, 2002). Teirikangas and Tolonen (2002) have chosen children's point of view when studying the abolition of village schools and moving to the new school. In that research, village school pupils have acted as experts when telling about their feelings and experiences. Children brought out the fear of going to the new school. They worried about the environment and rules of the new school and were afraid of bullying. They also found good sides in the change: they would get new friends and the new school would have better resources (see also Davies, 1992).

It has been shown that in small schools, multigrade teaching provides pupils with more opportunities for personal guidance (Veenman, 1995). Competition and incapability of making compromises typify action of same-age children but when mixed-age children can act in a cooperative manner (Kandel and Hawkins, 1992; Kuziemko, 2006; van Ewijk and Slegers, 2010; Whiting and Whiting, 1975). As a physical environment, a village school provides opportunities for practicing motor skills and strengthening the relationship with nature and environment (Peltonen, 2002). Outdoor activities enable children to develop their motor functions and cognitive and social skills (Finn, Pannazzo and Achilles, 2003).

The idea of small village schools has, indeed, aroused interest in the U.S. as well. Tony Wagner (1997; 2001) has launched the concept of "*a new village school*". By that he refers to the collaborative creation of a focused, clearly articulated, shared sense of purpose: "*These new village schools foster the development of teacher-student relationships that are very different from those that characterize most middle and high schools today. Teachers come to know their students well—their interests, strengths, and weaknesses as learners.— At their core, new village schools encourage the creation of accountable relationships—between educators, parents, and the community; between teachers and students; and among teachers—where mutual respect and a shared sense of purpose*(see Wagner, 2011)." Wagner has even started a project to start up small village schools in the state of New York (see Wagner, 2001); although the practical realization may be different from (Finnish) village schools, the fundamental idea behind is the same.

Various school development projects have been carried out in Finland as well (Kaikkonen and Lindh, 1990;

Veenman, 1995) but more such project are needed (Kalaoja, 1990). Of those projects that are implemented, especially “*Active Village Schools*”, “*The School as a Service Center*”, and “*Equal Educational Services*” have partly tried to guarantee that educational services are provided across the country and that quality and versatile teaching is secured in every school, especially in the small ones in Finland. These projects have included, among other things, in-service education for teachers and a village school camp that gathered village school teachers, municipal policymakers, teacher students, and active villagers together. A central theme in the village school camp was paying attention to the meaning of multigrade teaching and its development as a secure and far-reaching pupils’ growing environment and including multigrade teaching in teacher education.

Diversifying the services of village schools is one means to maintain the life and position of such a school. A village school can function as a social and physical center of the village by organizing active leisure and meeting activities in addition to school work. Furthermore, a school can function as a good place for children’s day and afternoon care and geriatric services. There is plenty of evidence on the advantages of small schools to children’s development (Francis, 1992; Gregory, 1975; Jones, Toma and Zimmer, 2008). It has also been suggested that village school could be used as nature, camp, and summer school places (Korpinen and Mielonen, 2005; see also Datar and Mason, 2008).

The abolitions of small schools in Finland have led to the point that the Finnish school network has become a lot sparser in countryside. Due to it, we have been obliged to compromise the advantages that small school pedagogy could offer. At the same time, school transportations have increased abundantly. The common direction of school commutes is from the municipal borders toward the population center. No one has even thought about transportations in opposite directions. This solution strengthens the central effect of municipal centers but on the other hand, it diminishes the vividness of small villages. As we know the social and pedagogical advantages of the small schools for children, the direction of school transportation could be the opposite. In the Finnish circumstances, small schools could offer a good option to the development of pupil-centered teaching and learning.

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Figure 1. The map of Finland



Figure 2. Aapajärvi School in its heyday (Picture taken from south, Aulikki Ahonen’s archives)



Figure 3. “The University of Aapajärvi” in the fall 2007 (Marita Kilpimaa’s archives)