

Sámi education in Finland – Research on Sámi teachers' work in Finnish schools

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Sámi education has a strong history of assimilation, and the Sámi school culture is colored with colonization. The educational project of folk education, schooling and school system has efficiently assimilated indigenous peoples within the mainstreaming society for centuries. In this sense, the Sámi people's situation is, in many ways, similar to other indigenous peoples' situation. Sámi languages are endangered and the Sámi traditions, skills, and knowledge differ from the mainstream culture. During the past decades, the pursuit has been to change the influence of assimilation through school systems so that schools could strongly support, maintain, and revitalize the Sámi language and culture alongside socioeconomic and other societal factors. The Finnish constitution defines that the Sámi people have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Teachers are core agents in indigenous education and fulfill the legislative goals in practice. Their work is important when heading from colonization to decolonization.

Sámi education and Sámi teachers, who implement Sámi education in Finnish basic schools, form the core of this study. The purpose was to research Sámi teachers' work in Finnish schools and their agency as teachers. In addition, their perceptions of the development and change of Sámi education and its future development were studied. Previous studies have been conducted mainly in Norway, and therefore this study is the first doctoral thesis about the state of Sámi education in Finland from the Sámi teachers' perspective.

This was a qualitative study investigating Sámi teachers' perceptions. Sámi teachers (N=10) whose mother tongue was Sámi were interviewed. The data were analyzed with the so-called sacred circle or medicine wheel that is widely used in indigenous research. According to it, Sámi teachers' perceptions could be grouped by doors opening to four cardinal points. The West Door described the influence of the history of colonialism on today's teachers' 14 | Rahko-Ravantti: Saamelaisopetus Suomessa teaching practices. The North Door illustrated Sámi teachers' experiences of inequality and otherness. The East Door pictured the development of Sámi education and its appreciation based on the Sámi teachers' experiences. The South Door led to the developmental questions and future wishes and dreams of Sámi education.

According to the teachers' perceptions, students' various linguistic and cultural backgrounds challenge Sámi education. Teachers had various strategies to solve these challenges. They considered it problematic that it was not possible to fully include contents that would be based on the Sámi culture as a part of Sámi education because of the lesson structure and curriculum-based limitations. For example, the teachers would like to emphasize the role of Sámi history in history education.

Teachers' agency appeared mainly positively. However, their work included factors that caused experiences of otherness. The teachers perceived that in some cases, their colleagues took negatively teaching that differed from the normal schooling and that was based on the Sámi life style. Proactive agency in the development of Sámi education was restricted by strict lesson structure that limited the teaching of wide entities especially when teaching two grades in the same classroom. The teachers seemed to fulfill their agency actively from their own premises. It meant that the contents of Sámi education were strongly determined by the teachers' own values and cultural skills.

The teachers work as cultural intermediaries. They support and help students to live and know their own culture by providing them with abilities to act and be successful in their surrounding western culture.

Key words: otherness, decolonization, Sámi education, Sámi upbringing, indigenous education, agency.

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