

# How to Make the Small Indigenous Cultures Bloom? Special Traits of Sámi Education in Finland

**Pigga Keskitalo**

*Sámi University College, Norway*

**Satu Uusiautti**

*University of Lapland, Finland*

**Kaarina Määttä**

*University of Lapland, Finland*

*This article discusses smallness from the point of view of the Sámi, an indigenous people of the Arctic, and describes today's Sámi education in Finland, the factors that have affected its formation and the challenges in strengthening it. The purpose of the article is to provide ideas to develop Sámi education and encourage discovering methods that emanate from indigenous peoples' own cultural premises. This article is based on our previous studies and data that we further analyzed into theoretical tools. Here, we discuss what it would mean to the Sámi to have a sovereign educational system. The challenges are viewed especially from the point of view of the Sámi being a small assemblage that inhabits four countries.*

In *The Language Garden Analogy*, Ofelia García (2011) uses powerful words to portray language planning and refers to “sustainable languaging”: language planning must maintain a future-orientation, becoming dynamically situated in social context. Language diversity makes for a richer, more interesting, and more colorful world. Small (indigenous) languages need careful language planning and protection to preserve linguistic diversity in the world. Sometimes radical action may be taken to make small cultures and languages bloom (Garcia, 2011).

In this article, we present a small indigenous population as adding cultural and linguistic diversity and address issues associated with smallness as experienced by those indigenous populations when it comes to education. We will present the challenging historical-cultural background of the Sámi followed by a description of the present educational situation of the Sámi people. Then, we discuss the importance of finding ways to implement the Sámi culture in education. Finally, we argue that the Sámi should be seen as a small assemblage that would benefit from having (educational) sovereignty and language revitalization. We will discuss what it means for a small indigenous population to be considered a ‘small assemblage’– and how this viewpoint could contribute to the discussion of challenges that indigenous peoples face. This article is based on our previous studies on Sámi education in Norway and Finland (see Keskitalo 2010; Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011, 2012; Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) that is now expanded through the theoretical analysis on the Sámi as a small assemblage. In this study, we ground our analysis on the data from Finland. The first study in Finland was carried out in 2005–2008: it was a school ethnography in elementary instruction at five schools in Finland including the analysis of the Finnish core curriculum for comprehensive education and interviews among ten teachers. The objective was to understand and present the state of Sámi education in Finland. Our latest study was conducted among teachers from the schools and daycare centers of the Sámi Domicile Area, local school authorities and representatives of the Finnish and Norwegian Sámi Parliaments and higher education (n=64, including people from all of these groups) who participated in the Sámi Pedagogy Conference in 2011 and were asked to share their experiences of Sámi education.

In this article, we will view the Sámi's position as a small jurisdiction by focusing on Sámi education, as education can be seen as the means of strengthening a small assemblage's autonomy. Godfrey Baldacchino (2006) suggests that “autonomies” should be recognized as viable politico-economic units in their own right. He also uses the concept of “nations without states” (p. 854) to refer

a small assemblage under the governance of a modern nation-state. Furthermore, researchers suggest that in the future, the recognition of small jurisdictions is likely to be a rule instead of an exception as small jurisdictions are emerging (Baldacchino, 2006; see also Anckar, 2003). This viewpoint provides the starting point of viewing an indigenous people as an example of a small assemblage. However, the case is not that simple. For example, Anckar (2003) claims that cultural diversities and strong regional traditions create pressures for decentralization and a dispersal of power. Anckar (2003) refers to federalism as an institutional response to societal divisions and diversities, but simultaneously points out that the extent to which small assemblages enjoy sovereignty can vary significantly. In this article, the special focus is on the Sámi as an indigenous people. The Sámi are a historically and culturally distinct community, a small assemblage (cf. Anckar, 2003) but a scattered one. Namely, there are approximately 70,000–100,000 Sámi – depending on country-based criteria – of whom about 40,000–60,000 live in Norway, about 15,000–20,000 in Sweden, about 2,000 in Russia, and about 10,000 in Finland.

When it comes to educational issues, small populations encounter specific challenges, threats and opportunities (Mayo, 2008). Bacchus (2008) argues that small assemblages experience problems achieving economies of scale in the provision of educational services:

Other concerns related to the internal features of their educational systems such as the challenges that they faced in developing culturally relevant curriculum materials, conducting examinations on a cost-effective basis, and providing appropriate higher educational opportunities to meet their limited demands for personnel with such education. (p. 127)

In fact, providing all students with equal educational opportunities and removing obstacles to learning, especially among the least successful students, have been the leading principles in Finnish educational policy since the 20th century but there are still issues to be reconsidered and improved, for example, concerning education for national minorities (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Education would be an effective way to remedy the situation and should be seen as a counterforce against the colonization of the mind and heart. Implementing uncolonized pedagogy, a pedagogy that does not carry the dominating culture as given, but requires taking various cultural logics seriously (Mohanty, 1994). Yet, developing Sámi education is challenging: on the one hand it is affected by outer factors, like the pressure to assimilate, and on the other hand it is affected by inner factors such as the specific features of Sámi education. These factors reveal the difference between the majority and minority culture and their logics within an educational system. In uncolonized pedagogy, the Sámi culture is taken in the center to develop Sámi education successfully.

### **The Historical-Cultural Background**

The Sámi belong to the Finno-Ugric people, whose first settlements arrived in Europe and northern Eurasia about 40,000 years ago. As a group, the Sámi are genetically different from other Europeans (Pimenoff, 2008). Permanent settlements in the North were created about 10,000 years ago. The Sámi have certain western characteristics and are partly descended from people who moved along the west coast of Europe during and after the Ice Age. The Sámi region was at its widest from the start of Common Era until the 11th century, when it included all of modern-day Finland (Carpelan, 2000). Historically, the Sámi have been divided by livelihood and region into reindeer herders, fishermen, and forest Sámi (Halinen, 2011). The traditional Sámi lifestyle, dominated by hunting, fishing and trading, was preserved until the Late Middle Ages, when the modern structures of the Nordic countries were established (Hansen & Olsen, 2004). The present state borders that divide Sámi regions were defined between the middle of the 18th century and

the Second World War. Due to the western settlement in the Nordic countries, the Sámi became a minority in most of their traditional areas.

The regions in which the Sámi live, *Sápmi*, expand from Central-Norway and Central-Sweden through the northern parts of Finland to Russia's Kola Peninsula. The Sámi's current situation involves moving from their official regions. For example, in Finland, the majority of the under-10-year-old Sámi-speaking pupils (75%) live outside the Sámi Domicile Area in other parts of Finland (Aikio-Puoskari, 2009). This fact poses new kinds of demands on teaching, services, and information distribution both in the Sámi language and about the Sámi people. Furthermore, the Finnish legislation on Sámi education supports education only within the Sámi Domicile Area (The Sámi Parliament, 2008).

The Sámi culture is diverse, with nine different languages spoken, each classified as endangered (Magga & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001). The Sámi languages differ from each other to the extent that speakers of one language do not necessarily understand speakers of another (Carpelan et al., 2004). However, the Sámi have attempted to maintain a unified culture by creating a national flag, celebrating Sámi People's Day, and instituting the Sámi parliament. Across Norway, Sweden and Finland, the parliament serves as the authoritative advisory agency in issues regarding the Sámi people, but has no legal or executive power. The purpose of the Sámi Parliament is to take care of the Sámi language, culture and issues regarding the Sámi's position as an indigenous people. Assimilation pressures and the history of colonization affect the Sámi's efforts to become uniform. According to Valkonen (2009), the goal of decolonizing practices means that the Sámi would be recognized as people that have the right to self-government. A salient purpose of decolonization is to disengage from colonialist practices and reach and implement self-determination in indigenous peoples' regions (Smith, 1999). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (1989), indigenous peoples are

peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (Article 1, Section 1b)

The Sámi are recognized as an indigenous people in the Constitution of Finland. The Sámi as an indigenous people are allowed to develop their language and culture. However, Finland has not ratified the aforementioned ILO convention. Furthermore, according to the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008), indigenous people have the right to autonomy and therefore to educational self-determination, for example the right to establish their own schooling institutions. The Sámi's education has been neglected or implemented along the Finnish mainstream guidelines (Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012). By viewing the Sámi as a small jurisdiction, the possibility of implementing a Sámi curriculum becomes more likely.

The church was introduced to the Sámi early, first in the 12th century and more powerfully again in the 17th century. The Christian church played a major role in western oppression and assimilation pressures targeted at the Sámi. The confrontation between the western and Sámi cultures was problematic (Kylli, 2005). The Second World War had ruinous effects to the Sámi education and language. The War's legacy left the Sámi without education in any language for several years, which negatively affected their literacy rates and ability to transfer their language

to future generations (Anaya, 2011). Another powerful era of assimilation began around the 1950s and continued to the 1970s. In each country where the Sámi resided, the Sámi populations were subjected – through education and other means – to pressures of assimilation. The Sámi were forced to give up their native language and start using the dominant language, change their values and lifestyle. The Finnish culture and language dominated schools, and children were taught only the Finnish language and cultural tradition.

The history of assimilation affects the Sámi to some extent even today, in both practice (e.g., limited chances to use and study the Sámi language) and in lack of appreciation for the Sámi culture. Thus, many Sámi's contact with traditional livelihoods disappeared because of school and boarding house arrangements. Eventually, some Sámi children grew away from their own culture, language and costume tradition (Rasmus, 2008). A distinct awakening of the Sámi identity did not take place forcefully until the 1960s. The awakening of the Sámi's consciousness and the political activity was an important counter-reaction to nationalism (Kontio, 1999). In the 1970s, Finnish educational authorities started taking the Sámi's opinions into account for the first time since the missionary era (Aikio-Puoskari, 2001). The Sámi school culture is molded according to the premises brought from outside the Sámi culture. The Sámi school culture is molded according to the premises brought from outside the Sámi culture—that is the influence of colonization. The counter process of colonization is decolonization, which is closely connected to the concept of self-determination (Kuokkanen, 2009). These concepts are worth considering when aiming at realizing the Sámi's rights to educational self-determination as a small assemblage. When discussing educational self-determination as a small assemblage, we talk about – instead of economic values and affectivity – cultural values and cultural capital.

However, indigenous peoples' education is closely connected with the concepts of power and democracy and the questions of human rights because the way their education is implemented depends of the status as a people given to them within the nation state they inhabit (King & Schiermann, 2004). Educational *self-determination* is limited: at the moment, the Sámi do not have much influence on the Finnish national educational policy.

### **The Implementation of Sámi Education**

In addition to the outer factors, historical-cultural background of Sámi education, more attention must be given to the actions inside classrooms and schools in order to practically develop Sámi education. In this paper, we discuss the inner factors, the practices in the classrooms, because our studies have focused on them while the outer factors make the framework where the inner factors can be developed. The quality of teaching depends on how well pedagogy is grounded in the Sámi culture. Therefore, it is important to (1) develop the curriculum, (2) strengthen the position of the Sámi language, (3) create culturally-sensitive local teaching arrangements, and (4) diversify the wide-ranging co-operation of parents, teachers, school authorities and Sámi communities (Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011b). Similarly, the cultural features of traditional Sámi upbringing must be given an important position in schools (see Balto, 1997).

The Sámi curriculum must be the foundation of educational development within a small jurisdiction like the Sami (e.g., Bacchus, 2008; Crossley, Bray, & Packer, 2009; Levin, 1998). Composing a functional Sámi curriculum requires information about its multiple dimensions. In functional indigenous education, the curriculum combines indigenous peoples' culture, knowledge, and language with the best parts of western educational tradition and research (e.g., reform pedagogy and other pedagogical innovations and the latest research findings about teaching and learning and indigenous people,) has to be developed through active co-operation with the indigenous

community. A good example of the efforts of combining indigenous and western knowledge is a project where the purpose is to develop and implement traditional Sámi upbringing at school (see Balto, 2008; Jannok-Nutti, 2012).

Respect and appreciation of one's own and others' cultures should be an essential and cross-sectional feature of the curriculum. The most important goal is to increase understanding, tolerance, and solidarity between various groups. In addition, the diversity and cultural value of the learning materials, such as textbooks, must reflect cultural diversity. Yet, it has been shown that, in addition to the quality of teacher preparation and instructional time, "the availability of textbooks and reading materials are all empirically related to higher achievement levels" (Fuller & Clarke, 1994, p. 134).

Small languages must endeavor to gain new speakers in order to mend the history of assimilation. This kind of language revitalization can also help the Sámi, who have lost part of Sámi cultural and linguistic characteristics because of assimilation. Using the Sámi language in various situations can help Sámi children learn to appreciate the Sámi culture and language, thus developing and advancing the continuity of the Sámi culture and identity. Sámi children must also learn about indigenous knowledge, which is local and unique to each culture. It has been the basis for agriculture, food preparation, health care, education, conservation and the wide range of other activities that sustain societies in many parts of the world. Indigenous people have a traditional knowledge of how to live sustainably. Whereas, formal mainstream education systems have disrupted the practical aspects of indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, replacing them with abstract knowledge and academic ways of learning (UNESCO, 2010).

Language and the right to use it is the most essential part of cultural heritage distinguishing minority groups from each other (García, 2011; Ghai, 2003). Likewise, the Sámi language is an endangered but salient part of the Sámi identity. It is therefore important to include the Sámi language not only as a school subject, but also as a language of instruction. Because of the variation in pupils' Sámi language proficiency levels, teaching it can be challenging in addition to the fact that there are not many Sámi pupils per school class. Some pupils speak the Sámi language fluently and can read already when starting school. The challenge in teaching is to cater to those pupils whose Sámi language knowledge is weak. One way of teaching and revitalizing the Sámi language is using various language immersion methods to strengthen children's language proficiency before they go to school (see Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012). Language immersion is a model for learning a second language in its natural environment, learning from meaningful experiences in co-operation with the surrounding community (Buss & Laurén, 1997). It is important to engage the whole Sámi society – students, parents, and teachers – in language revitalization. Moreover, language revitalization must engage Sámi elders, master craftsmen, artists, authors, and other bearers of the language and culture to cooperatively strengthen the Sámi language.

Even if indigenous languages and multicultural programs were widely used in teaching, many problems could occur. Not only is there a lack of culturally sensitive learning material in the indigenous language, but there is also a lack of bilingual or Sámi-speaking teachers. Furthermore, due to their previous experiences, Sámi pupils' parents may be afraid that their children will not learn the dominant language well enough if they learn in Sámi. Therefore, value work is crucial: people in the field, educators and other stakeholders, need information about language revitalization. Even today, not all Sámi people appreciate the Sámi language and culture or find them valuable. Changing that attitude is essential for fully implementing a Sámi curriculum.

### **Implementing the Sámi Conception of Time, Place and Knowledge in the Curriculum**

In any society there is a dominant worldview held by most members (Hart, 2010), including a shared conception of time, place, and knowledge. The learning environment of a Sámi school should lean on the Sámi conception of place, time and knowledge (Keskitalo, 2010; see also Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011b). The Sámi see time as sun-centered and bound to nature (Helander & Kailo, 1999). A Sámi pedagogy can put the Sámi conception of time in the center in planning and implementation of learning. Teaching could be arranged flexibly and in a pupil-oriented manner by giving up the standard 45 minute class schedule. Likewise, the Sámi's eight seasons could be utilized so that school work is adjusted to seasonal duties of the community. By taking this perspective as a part of educational arrangements, pupils will learn to respect and become aware of the rhythm with the local-Sámi culture. This would be a natural way of making the school function as a part of the surrounding community and nature (Rasmus, 2004).

Sticking to the linear scheduling typical in the dominant culture may constrict Sámi pupils' cyclic time conception, which is bound to seasons and season-related duties. For example, the starting point of Sámi reindeer herding is to function according to sustainable development and flexibility (Helander & Kailo, 1999). The Sámi conception of space is not bound to square feet but is symbolically circular because the traditional dwelling places, *goahhti* and teepees, have been roundish and closely connected to nature. That should also be the approach at school: to perceive learning environments extending outside the school building. When it comes to teaching arrangements, the Sámi conception of space requires understanding the school within its wider environment. Instead of staying inside the classroom, pupils should also learn outside, in the surrounding society and nature. Certainly, the challenge of indigenous pedagogy is how to pay attention to the connection with nature in school subjects and study modules (Kuokkanen, 2009). However, these approaches support the Sámi pupils' identity encouraging them to make choices that are bound to their Sámi identity.

The central element of the Sámi fund of knowledge is that knowledge itself does not have a goal but is valued for its utility. People participate directly in producing and distributing information. Cabins, lean-to shelters, practical real-life working situations, and camp-fires function as scientific seminars, where the Sámi people discuss knowledge and share information based on their mutual conception of knowledge. Epistemological truth is revealed through narratives, discussions, negotiations, and by evaluating actions and recalling memories and experiences. Knowledge is also tested in various concrete situations in life and work (Helander & Kailo, 1999). When applied in the school context, it means that authorities do not possess knowledge, but it is held in common and results from negotiations.

### **Defining Teaching Arrangements That Follow Sámi Pedagogy**

Hindmarsh (1996) suggests that "the concepts and tools of analysis should be shifted from a focus on smallness as the key organizing concept to that of the maintenance of cultural authenticity, self-determination and identity, chieftainship and sovereignty." Certainly, respecting and maintaining traditions while adapting and developing traditional knowledge are vital features for modernizing Sámi culture. The curriculum and teaching arrangements can affect these because they are founded on the wider goals and value base set for education (Mayo, 2008). Table 1 presents the special characteristics of Sámi pedagogy.

The outer change of administrative structures does not solely guarantee learning nor will the reconstruction of education alone change work in the classroom. Administrators and educators, and everyone who has something to do with education including, for example pupils and

**Table 1. Teaching Arrangements Based on Sámi Pedagogy versus Ordinary Teaching**

| Teaching components     | Sámi pedagogy                                                           | Ordinary teaching                                                      |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The pupil's role        | Active, autonomous, flexible                                            | Passive, responsive                                                    |
| The teacher's role      | Advising, guiding, trusting                                             | Dominating, distributing information                                   |
| The curriculum          | Local, appreciates and strengthens Sámi culture                         | National                                                               |
| Educational goals       | Cultural-sensitive, based on co-operation with the indigenous community | National                                                               |
| Conception of time      | Cyclic, flexible                                                        | Linear                                                                 |
| Conception of place     | Connected with nature, wider than the classroom                         | Classroom-bound                                                        |
| Conception of knowledge | Holistic, constructivist idea of learning                               | Subject and time allocation divided according to textbooks and lessons |
| Interaction             | Communality and co-operation                                            | Formal, controlled by teacher                                          |

parents, must adopt new kind of thinking and new methods before the action can change permanently. Developing the inclusive multicultural Sámi school for all in the Sámi Domicile Area is a comprehensive process that concerns the entire school body and requires cooperation between families, community and society. A comprehensive school development forms the basis of teachers' work and motivation to commit to the change.

In addition, the implementation of indigenous curriculum challenges teacher education and supplementary education. It is crucial that teachers exhibit the necessary information, skills, attitudes, motivation and ability to work as a teacher in the rapidly changing world. Increasingly, teachers are expected to bring the best out in pupils regardless of their cultural background (see e.g., Uusiautti & Määttä, forthcoming). In addition to general pedagogical skills, good teaching calls for special cognizance of indigenous people's language and culture.

Teacher education plays key roles in the development and implementation of Sámi education. Fallona (2000) suggests that rather than giving teachers "a bag of tricks," teacher-education programs should encourage future teachers to understand teaching from a wider perspective. University-based teacher-education programs should explicitly instruct pre-service teachers in the cultural knowledge necessary for teaching diverse learners (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996). Indeed, the development of Sámi pedagogy hinges upon skillful teachers. Many Sámi teachers act as pioneers in renewing Sámi education, but they should be systematically supported in

Finland (Määttä, Keskitalo, & Uusiautti, 2012). On the other hand, since the number of Sámi-speaking pupils is low: the smallness can be considered a reason for regarding the Sámi language as unimportant. However, the language garden analogy presented in the beginning of the article suggests seeing smallness otherwise, that languages are connected to the well-being and diversity of the world.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we contemplated the Sámi education and its meaning for the Sámi people as a small assemblage. Smallness can be considered a strength when it comes to educational issues. In small jurisdictions, single institutions can have a much greater impact in small systems than would be the case in large systems (Crossley, Bray, & Packer, 2009). Therefore, Sámi education should be developed by drawing from its own special characteristics, such as the Sámi conception of time, place, and knowledge (Keskitalo 2010; Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011, 2012). The purpose of education in indigenous contexts should aim at pupils' "wholistic success" (Richard, 2012). In other words, their development as whole human beings includes their identity. In order to better meet the northern indigenous people's cultural needs, the Sámi should further develop the Sámi pedagogy. Sámi curriculum should acknowledge the Sámi's historical-cultural burdens while strengthening the unique features of Sámi culture. The salient question is how to make good use of the Sámi cultural heritage and philosophy to find models for realizing Sámi education and to conceptualize pedagogy that would strengthen the Sámi culture and identity.

Smallness is, however, a challenge, too: the reality is that there are not many Sámi-speaking pupils. On the one hand, smallness can be seen resulting from asymmetric power relations. Children need support to guarantee their success at school and in life overall (Armstrong, Kimmerer & Vergun, 2007). Furthermore, since the "territories and populations are divided into two or more sections, they may in fact have to manage severe physical diversity problems that are related to distance and remoteness" (Anckar, 2003, p. 110) because the Sámi do not live within the Sámi Domicile Area but also other parts of the countries inhabited by the Sámi. This truly challenges the realization of education but for example Internet can function as a tool for institutions in small jurisdictions as "people can have the same access through this medium as households and institutions in large states" (Crossley, Bray, & Packer, 2009, p. 732).

In order to further implement Sámi pedagogy, it is essential to develop an education paradigm that aligns with the needs of the Sámi community. Transforming the Sámi community's own culture and tradition, its values, stories, expectations, norms, roles, ceremonies, and rituals into school knowledge would improve multiculturalism and the inclusion of Sámi culture in schools where Sámi curriculum would be utilized. Here, we need to look further than just inside the borders of one modern nation state, for example Finland. The Sámi live in the area of four countries, and the Sámi Domicile Area expands beyond state borders. Understanding this special feature challenges the prevailing administrative and educational systems. Levin (1998) calls for educational practices that must be locally and contextually specific. Indeed, we would like to emphasize that the Sámi when regarded as a small assemblage that is scattered in the wide area across Scandinavia need to have educational sovereignty to adjust the Sámi curriculum in various practices. Language and cultural revitalization and pedagogies that further it through indigenous people's educational self-determination could foster the bloom of the small.



**Pigga Keskitalo**, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the Sámi University College, Norway. Her doctoral thesis studied cultural-sensitivity of the Sámi School. She has published numerous articles and books about the cultural and linguistic special traits of Sámi Education. Her next book *Sámi Education* (authored with K. Määttä and S. Uusiautti) will be published in 2013 by Peter Lang Publishing. Email: Pigga.Keskitalo@gmail.com.

**Satu Uusiautti**, Ph.D., works as a Specialist at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her personal research interests are in positive psychology, human strengths and happiness, success, and well-being at school and in life overall. Her latest book (edited with K. Määttä) *Early Education and Care in Finland* was published in 2012 by Routledge. Email: satu@usiautti.fi.

**Kaarina Määttä**, Ph.D., is Professor of Educational Psychology at the Faculty of Education, University of Lapland and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Lapland. Her latest personal research interests have focused on love, attachment, and social relationships during the course of life; early education; guidance on and processes of doctoral theses; and on positive psychology and human strengths. Her next book, *Many Faces of Love* (authored with S. Uusiautti), will be published in early 2013 by Sense Publishers. Email: Kaarina.Maatta@ulapland.fi.

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