

# The Process of Vitalizing and Revitalizing Culture-Based Pedagogy in Sámi Schools in Sweden

**Asta Mitkijá Balto**

Sámi University College  
Guovdageaidnu, Norway

**Gunilla Johansson**

Luleå University of Technology  
Luleå, Sweden

The Sámi schools provide Sami children an education that also deals with Sami and is equivalent to an education in the Swedish nine-year compulsory school. Both Sámi and Swedish language are used in the Sámi schools. Sámi schools are an option for all parents who claim to be Sámi. The main purpose of this study was to learn, describe, analyse and work with processes aiming to strengthen the Sámi cultural and linguistic competencies within the Sámi school system. Sámi Schools in Sweden and their staff have not yet been able to reconstruct a Sámi school platform of their own. Teacher education or training of teachers, in Sweden has few adaptations for the appropriate education of teachers working at Sámi Schools. Regardless of this situation, teachers and parents expressed a vision of a Sámi School with cultural sensitivity and that also takes the culture into account in the curriculum and activities. The idea for the three-year participatory action research project discussed in this paper was initiated by the rectors of two Sámi primary - and preschools in Sweden. The research model and the research objectives of the study were developed together with the teachers, rectors, to some extent the parents and elders. The research project focused on how the Sámi School community could be enabled to activate their cultural knowledge and practices to make them part of the curriculum and the schools' everyday life. This article discusses how to 1) examine the possibilities for a Sámi-culture-based pedagogy and the conditions required to enable them, and how to 2) recognize challenges, weaknesses and the strengths therein. The research project was conducted in two Sámi schools in Sweden with 115 children, their parents and elders, and 30 teachers as actors in the collaborative, collective process. The rectors and teachers were leading the processes. Results included transforming and integrating Sámi culture and language into pedagogy and curriculum content. Practices were improved. The positive research results were disseminated to both State and Sámi educational and political authorities. The need for a continued Sámi education and competence-building for teachers and staff was highlighted. No actions have yet been taken by the various informed authorities to continue the school development or the capacity building of Sámi teacher's professional skills.

*Keywords:* curriculum development, Sámi - Indigenous education, participatory action research, colonization/decolonization, school-home cooperation, educational policies.

## Introduction

### The School Initiative

The idea for the three-year participatory action research project discussed in this paper was initiated by the rectors of two Sámi primary- and preschools in Sweden. Since 1842, all children have been obligated to attend formal schooling in Sweden. Sámi children were offered education by

the Swedish State prior to 1842, with the State aim of developing Swedish citizens who were loyal to the State and who spoke the language of the Swedish nation-state therein (Johansson & Johansson, 1968; Ruong, 1975).

The Sámi schools provide today Sami children with an education that also deals with Sami and is equivalent to an education in the Swedish nine-year compulsory school. Both Sámi and Swedish language are used in the Sámi schools. Sámi schools are an option for all parents who claim to be Sámi. All six Sámi schools in Sweden are obligated to follow the

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Asta Mitkijá Balto, e-mail: marehanieida.amb@gmail.com

Swedish State's national curriculum for the Sámi schools and the State national exams (Skolverket, The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). The National state responsible body for the operation of the Sámi schools is the Sámi School Board (*Sameskolstyrelsen*). The Sámi school Board is appointed by the Sami Parliament, a popularly elected government body established in 1993. Sámi Parliament's mission is to examine issues dealing with Sami culture in Sweden. The Sami schools are funded by the State.

The participating Sámi Schools' rectors, teachers and researchers were all involved in discussions concerning how these Indigenous schools, and their society and the teachers, could be strengthened so as to regain control of the cultural knowledge and cultural practices in the everyday life of the schools. The challenge therein was to encourage teachers to become researchers of their own practices and to involve the entire school community in the development process. Capacity building was necessary for the project's success, and both teachers and rectors were supervised and monitored closely by the two University-based researchers. In-service training of teachers, courses in decolonizing processes, cultural and multicultural understanding, and participatory action research and Sámi traditional knowledge and teachings were offered.

### **Sámi School Curriculum**

The Sámi school curriculum (Skolverket 2011) emphasizes that Sámi students must be familiar with Sámi cultural heritage and that they must be able to speak, read and write in a Sámi language. Briefly said, these regulations give Sámi Schools the opportunity to alter the mainstream curriculum and to apply some Sámi content and cultural practices in the classroom. However, the foundation of the Sámi Schools in Sweden has been built upon the dominant, mainstream Swedish cultural definition of knowledge and knowledge base. The Swedish National Agency for Education is a central administrative authority for the public school system. Skolverket (2003) evaluated the ways in which the Sámi Schools in Sweden managed to follow their mandate when it comes to Sámi culture and language, and the results were unexpected; the assessment showed a need for further development of Sámi Schools, moreover in-service training of Sámi teachers, and related research.

Hirvonen's study in Norway (2003) expressed that Sámi Schools in Norway and their staff have

not yet reconstructed the Sámi platform for the Sámi schools. According to Hirvonen, this is a result of the assimilation politics that still makes an impact on Sámi education in Norway. Another study, by Balto and Hirvonen about Sámi rights to be consulted and have influence on the school reforms in Norway, shows the ways in which the dominance of the Norwegian national regulations and exams are a hindrance to developing a Sámi-based curriculum (Balto & Hirvonen, 2008). Similar situations occur in Sweden, as well; Johansson et al (2004) questioned how Indigenous Sámi perspectives were tended to in the Swedish national curriculum, and how these perspectives were part of general Swedish State-recognized policy. All Sámi teachers have graduated from the mainstream teacher education system in Sweden, a system without few adaptations made to meet the needs of teachers for Sámi schools. Regardless of this problem, the Sámi teachers and parents who were engaged in the research project discussed in this paper expressed a vision of a Sámi school with cultural sensitivity, a school that takes Sámi culture into account as a point of strength, as well as a desire to be participating members of the continuation of their Sámi culture. Rectors, teachers and the parents had strong beliefs in the potential for collaboration between researchers and practitioners; they expressed that, together, they would be able to recognize some obstacles which promoted or hindered the strengthening of Sámi culture in their schools' curriculum contents and activities.

### **Sámi Schooling – a Parental Choice**

The parents of Sámi, Indigenous, minority and also immigrant and refugee students, in general, have to make conscious choices if they want their children to have an education that takes into account their own languages and backgrounds, as all children have to be part of the Swedish state compulsory school system. Sámi parents in Sweden can voluntarily choose a Sámi Preschool for their children at the age of two, and their children have the possibility to continue through State compulsory schooling levels at the Sámi school from age 6 to 11. After that age, Sámi children are not offered school programs that are adjusted to the needs of the Sámi culture or society; instead they are then offered small

fragments of and basic extra-curricular options for Sámi culture and language learning as integrated into the mainstream Swedish compulsory school programs. This was the overall situation for the parents and communities of the two Sámi Schools that participated in the research project.

### **Research Objective and Theoretical and Methodological Background**

The aim of this study was to learn, describe, analyse and work with processes aiming to strengthen the Sámi cultural and linguistic competencies within the Sámi school system. Research aim and questions for the two Sámi schools in Sweden were formulated as follows:

- The overall aim is to find the measures that must be taken to enable the Sámi teachers and Sámi schools and home environments in the actualization of their vision to strengthen the Sámi content and activities of their schools.

And the following research questions:

- What kind of conditions promote a Sámi-developed pedagogy and curriculum in the Sámi Schools in Sweden?
- What are the Sámi cultural and linguistic competencies that need to be updated among the staff of the participating Sámi schools?
- What are the challenges, weaknesses and strengths for and of Sámi students, parents and teachers in striving for the achievement of a Sámi curriculum?

### **Theoretical Part**

#### **Participatory Action Research**

The research model and the research objectives of the study were developed together with the teachers and rectors and, to some extent, also, the parents and elders participated in these processes. According to Epstein (2001), there are different types of parental engagement within schools that increase the level of school reform advocacy and collaboration. As the researchers guiding the project and the study, we found Epstein's identified parental engagements of own communication networks and own volunteer activities paired with students' learning at home to be especially effective and useful as collaborative methods with the Sámi schools and the communities they serve.

Reflections and analyses of current practices already in place are important, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986), to be able to clarify the general idea of a research project and the development of topic(s) and context therein. The surrounding conditions and circumstances for development and change within the Sámi schools were not as good as they could be; researchers and staff had to discuss what could be done to enable the teachers to transform their own cultural knowledge into school content. The teachers needed to be offered in-service training courses and supervision, to compensate for what they had not obtained in Sámi teaching competencies during their mainstream Swedish teacher education. That very objective then assisted us all in identifying good examples of teaching and learning to grow from, with a focus maintained on involvement, communication, and cooperation with parents, the local culture and communities.

The research model applied was closely connected to practical, every-day life experiences and practices at hand. Participating teachers became researchers themselves, and university researchers were not only researchers, but also supervisors and leaders of action-based processes. Gaventa's (1988) way of characterizing action research mirrors the way this school-based development was conducted. Gaventa states that action-research "attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action" (Gaventa, 1988: 19).

#### **Theories on Colonization/Decolonization of Indigenous Peoples**

The fact that the Sámi, as an Indigenous People and as indigenous persons, have experienced and still experience the burden of the colonization of their minds (Kuokkanen 2000, 2009, Hirvonen 2003, Battiste 2000) had to be taken into consideration in the planning of the project and in the analyses and

discussions throughout. The use of the term colonization was not applied in the sense of a settler State occupying Indigenous or local lands, but rather as the colonization of the subjective, social and spiritual minds of people (Daes, 2000). Maori academic Tuhiwai Smith explains the effects of colonization on minds by using the term *imperialism*; she states that imperialism frames the Indigenous experience as a part of the Indigenous story and version of modernity (1999: 19). Smith affirms that the challenge for those who belong to colonized communities is to understand how colonization occurred and to become aware of needs to recover from colonization, so as to then “claim space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity” (Smith 1999: 23).

Research conducted in Sámi primary schools in Norway have revealed consequences of colonization; these studies showed that measurements for achievement within the Sámi curriculum that were structured to strengthen the Sámi perspective within schools in Sámi areas were not fulfilled. The failure in the case of the Sámi primary schools in Norway was deemed due to the strong influence of the mainstream Norwegian culture, in general, on the mentality of those Sámi involved. In essence, the Sámi teachers were also weakening the efforts to strengthen the Sámi perspective (Hirvonen et al. 03).

Thus, in this research project as researchers we are aware of the need to build a space for the teachers participating to develop their own authentic senses of Sámi teachers. Both the lack of education in Sámi-related issues in Sweden and the need for related knowledge in decolonization processes made it necessary for us to create courses for the teachers and to have our own input in terms of knowledge, concepts and supervision; when addressing the colonization of people’s minds it is necessary to reveal the effects of colonization. In support of this is also the fact that Indigenous Peoples are now recognized as having their own unique and valuable traditional knowledge and knowledge systems, which are to be maintained, protected and practiced. This reality comes after centuries and decades of Indigenous claims that their own knowledge systems must be recognized as equal to other knowledge systems, a claim several academic researchers have also upheld (Alfred, 2009; Battiste, 2000; Barnhardt, 1991; Cajete, 2008;

Kuokkanen, 2008, 2000; Nelson, 2008; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000).

Smith states that theoretical underpinnings and practices that arise out of traditional Indigenous knowledge need to be developed without turning away from theories developed elsewhere (Smith 2000, p. 214). To increase awareness of the value of the teaching of traditional knowledge was essential for all the participants involved in our research project. Researcher Balto’s contribution to the Sámi knowledge base from her previous research on traditional Sámi childrearing (1997, 2006) formed a foundation for the project from the very beginning and was continuously discussed and critically put to test during the research project practices. To indigenize a knowledge base is to increase the decolonization process and, according to Smith, thus is also recognized as a long-term process in the divesting of bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological colonial powers (Smith, 1999, p. 98).

### **Assimilation Politics**

Sámi in Sweden, as with Sámi in all the other States, have been victims of assimilationist politics. Sámi language and culture were historically replaced with the languages and cultures of their eventual respective, increasingly encompassing States. According to Henry Minde, the political assimilationist policies created regarding the Sámi as a minority in the State of Norway was “[for] long time synonymous with a policy of assimilation or ‘fornorskning’, which literally means *norwegianisation*. The policy of *norwegianisation*, understood as a period, stretches from about 1850 up through 1980. The politics resulted in ‘cultural pain’ and caused different reactions; among those in the Sámi movement it often appeared as bitterness and opposition and among those who gave in it caused ‘shame’, either on behalf of one’s ancestors and fellow tribesmen who still spoke the native tongue or on behalf of themselves” (Minde, 2005).

Assimilation of the Sámi is not an official political policy of either Sweden or Norway today. However, that does not mean that assimilation practices have come to an end and, in addition, self-assimilation still remains as one of the lingering results of colonization. While assimilation of the Sámi is not officially

considered appropriate as a form of politics in Sweden, there remains an assimilation-based power dynamic that has shifted to become more symbolic and indirect. According to Bourdieu (1991), the dominant status that a mainstream society has in such a situation on the related education system occurs on the symbolic level. In this research study we are discussing the presence of symbolic mainstream dominance, for example, raised educational dilemmas for the participatory actors and especially for the parents, as they wanted a Sámi education for the children but were worried about how this would affect their children's future opportunities as beholden to the Swedish system. It was crucial in our research to understand how the Sámi schools and preschools were affected by such camouflaged, Swedish State institutional power on different levels of the Sámi society in Sweden, especially concerning the State-recognized mainstreamed compulsory schools.

The revitalization, maintenance and continuation of Indigenous societies cannot be fulfilled without taking to account Indigenous cultures and languages. Within the context of this participatory action-research approach, Indigenous Peoples need to create new structures based on their own traditional communities, teachings and social relations in governance, politics, institutions and organizations (Alfred 2009:28, 25-26). These components were found essential for fulfilling the vision of a school that is based on continuing Sámi culture, both as cultural empowerment and as a contributing institution in the development and sustaining of Sámi culture and society.

### **Mainstream Dominance**

Swedish compulsory schools are complex learning and social environments that involve different groupings of actors, which creates methodological challenges. When it comes to the Sámi schools with their unique agenda, both for the children's education and for the maintenance of a Sámi society, the methodological and research challenges are even more complex. According to Hirvonen (2004), there is a large lack of research concerning Sámi schools in general. Hirvonen draws attention to the ways in which Sámi teachers have been invisible within the Swedish system: "...the voice and experiences of Sámi teachers have never been examined closely" (Hirvonen 2004: 9). Johansson (2008) conducted a study among teacher trainees and teaching

instructors concerning cultural diversity; she questioned if, or how, northern Indigenous cultures and values were included in the teachers' training in Sweden at the time. The conclusion Johansson made was that the teaching instructors were not giving attention to cultural diversity as a general component of the teachers' professional education in Sweden due to the fact that the professional teacher education programs did not include the subject.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Rectors and teachers, 30 persons all together, at the two participating Sámi schools were the main actors in this development study. The study also included the home environment, via participation of parents and elders, and 115 children (students). The children came from two preschool groups and two primary school groups.

### **Procedure**

Preschools and schools were asked to describe and analyse possibilities and potential conditions for developing a Sámi-based pedagogy and curriculum in their respective Sámi schools. The challenges, weaknesses and strengths within the two Sámi schools became more apparent, and actions became possible for planning and implementing project curriculum. Teachers, parents, pupils and researchers shared their knowledge, experiences and opinions during these cyclical processes.

The critical and emancipatory educational, participatory action research of Carr and Kemmis (1986), as well as Kemmis (2001) additional critical perspectives, were the points of departure in this study. Discussions about Sámi values and traditions needed to be critically analyzed so as to raise awareness about the qualities and relevance of the values and traditions in the context of today's societies and teachings. Theories about colonization and its influence on the minds of the participants of the study was an essential topic to cover in the project, as was the understanding of the impacts of assimilation policies and politics. These theories were a starting point for the understanding of the actual situation and provided a foundation for

the planning of educational change. Capacity-building plans, including five seminars, were developed by the lead researchers for the teachers, since the teachers had not had sufficient education in their own Sámi cultural backgrounds. Cultural understanding, decolonizing and participatory action research were topics covered in these seminars. The research field consisted of schools, parents, homes and communities.

Data was collected to describe and analyse the educational processes. The documentation consisted of enquires, interviews, written documents and seminars, and it was followed by analyses and reflections. This was an ongoing process with all the participants involved. Teachers, parents and children shared their experiences with the researchers. The capacity building seminars gave all participants the opportunity to gather together and discuss experiences from different points of view and to find new perspectives.

The concept of Sámi culture was an especially important topic for all participants, as were the themes of recognizing that culture encompasses more than mere material objects, learning to criticize essentialism, and perceiving the challenges and dilemmas caused by expectations of being an 'authentic' Sámi or Indigenous person (Balto & Østmo, 2012). Throughout all of these analyses, teachers had to keep a continuous eye on the quality of the cultural values and traditions they wanted to transform for the benefit of future generations. Plans made were followed by applied actions with teachers, parents, pupils and all participants involved (Balto & Johansson, 2007).

Parental involvement in this study was both home- and school-centred and based on both Sámi culture and the required Swedish national curriculum. In this way, parents and elders especially invested their own cultural resources, including their life experiences, we enabled to develop a fruitful and educational home environment (Epstein, 2001.) The school-centred component meant that parents and elders were continuously participating in parental meetings, approximately once per month, to discuss the educational and current issues in a culture-based school. Parents and elders were engaged in collective forms of involvement via developing a learning environment founded on Sámi cultural traditions. Teachers were involved in each child's school-based development and maintained concern for each child's results on Swedish national tests in reading and writing in Swedish.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical deliberations were taken to ensure that the research process was visible and accepted by all participants. Data was collected through triangulation via interviews, observation, films and written documents. These deliberations and methods were used to reduce bias and support reliable research processes. It was important and necessary to have the voices of Sámi teachers, parents and pupils embedded on the research, so as to have a deeper understanding of the complex educational situation. This approach was a challenging process for us, the researchers, as we needed to be aware of our roles both as actors in the study and guiding researchers simultaneously. The task as lead researchers was, thus, to engage in two approaches simultaneously; namely, keeping a distance from and closeness to the situations and other actors at the same time, which was of particular importance during the analysis and interpretation stages of the study. Cahill & Torre (2007) draw attention to one of the challenges for participatory action research (PAR), which is to provoke actions that engage the participant(s).

### **"Gal dat oahppá" Development and Outcomes**

One of the outcomes of the study was the process of *gal dat oahppá go stuorra*, a guiding Sámi proverb chosen by the participating teachers as a name and vision for the project. *Gal dat oahppá go stuorra* states that any person can learn anything and that everyone will learn as they grow (Balto, 2008a; 2008b; 2006; 1997; Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014). Sámi sayings often carry traditional values and teachings, and this one expresses having a trust and faith in every person who is in a learning position. Rauna Kuokkanen, who considers the roles of Indigenous ways of knowing in education and academia, states: "the academy must take into account indigenous scholars and others in producing different and alternative ways of knowledge and also take this role seriously" (Kuokkanen 2009, p. 211.) *Gal dat oahppá go stuorra* is a great leadership principle in which the one who is tutoring or teaching has to express, in some way, positive expectations towards the learner, so as to show the trust

that she/he will in fact learn or that she/he will master the task. During the development of new practices, the “*gal dat oahppá*” way of thinking played a supervisory role and had a significant effect on the results. At the same time, the understanding of learning as an individual process gave the learners space to have their own rhythms and their differing capabilities were taken into account. *Gal dat oahppá* served as a good reminder of the positive approach to learning and teaching that is so profound in Sámi traditional teachings and knowledge. This concept also ensured that the participating school teachers became aware of a need to safeguard “good situations”, one of the primary principles in Sámi traditional teachings, as present in a variety of learning and training situations (Balto 2008a, 2008b, 2009, Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014).

### **Capacity Building and Other Outcomes**

The outcomes of the study are focused on the capacity building process of the teachers and the impact that this had on the curriculum and the practices in the school communities overall. The new practices based on Sámi traditions and knowledge were transformed so as to make them relevant for a school curriculum. Teachers were enabled to take advantage of their traditional cultural knowledge and identities. To transform traditional knowledge for formalized school purposes was not easy in the beginning, and at times some of the participants struggled with distrust; they questioned whether the Sámi knowledge in question was appropriate or not for use in the school system. We had to acknowledge that the process, before any results were to become visible, took more time than expected, and we also learned that Indigenous Sámi teachers do need training and sharing of their inherited knowledge and their experiences so as to build their professional self-confidences as Sámi teachers. It was necessary for the teachers to share their knowledge with the parents, as well; parents and the students’ home environments also needed to undergo legitimatizing Sámi-based practices so as to understand the impacts of the non-Sámi Swedish education systems.

The locally-adapted courses and tutoring implemented by and within the project were necessary. Also necessary was the collective willingness of the participants to become involved in the participatory action learning and research processes proposed, so as to fully apply their Sámi

knowledge and backgrounds and to utilize the knowledge and capabilities of Sámi elders and parents.

### **Socializing Processes**

Hoëm (1978) discusses socialization processes, in general, and creates terms for different processes. The Sámi teachers had been educated and socialized through the mainstream education, and to strengthen their own personal cultural affiliations they needed to be re-socialized, according to the theories of Hoëm. Hoëm explains that to weaken the socialization process you have to go through a de-socializing process (1978: 72-73). This was the case with the Sámi teachers, who were de-socialized and thus became more aware of how to build up their cultural capacities. The strengthening of their awareness of being Sámi school teachers was underpinned by the decolonization trainings provided, which made it easier for them to recognize a Sámi foundation as natural, relevant and necessary for a Sámi school’s curriculum. It was also helpful for the teachers to learn that their experiences were similar to those of other Indigenous Peoples, too, such as when Ester Ilutsik, a native educator in rural Alaska, stated: “I had to re-educate myself so that I could explain and apply this knowledge to future educators. After all, all my formal education and training was to make me become as ‘white’ as possible” (Lipka, 1998:12).

Daes (2000) expresses that the best remedy for Indigenous Peoples is get to know others who are in the similar situations and to discover that they are not alone and that their experiences are not personal, but rather a part of a systematic oppression against specific groups of Peoples. In the research project, the Sámi teachers became aware of the reservoirs of knowledge that they had access to, as Sámi, and of the possibilities for bringing in newly created and relevant knowledge and information to develop their practices and curricula with. In this work it was encouraging to get to know the situations of other Indigenous Peoples.

Another outcome of the project was a developed approach to understanding culture and cultural affiliation (Balto & Østmo, 2012). In the beginning, teachers could measure their

own cultural affiliation in an essential or normative way, or, alternatively, they described how others did so. Sámi cultural affiliation was defined as being more- or less-Sámi, and it functioned as an exclusion of those who were not regarded as the authentic Sámi and an inclusion of those who were recognized as such. During the project period the teachers sharpened their comprehension of what cultural affiliation meant to them, in particular Sámi cultural affiliation and backgrounds in a professional context. The variety of backgrounds, competencies, ways of life and degrees of Sámi inheritance were not used in the study as sources for measurement, but rather as sources for perceiving variety and changes in Sámi cultural belonging and identities. This analytical approach to understanding cultural affiliation helped the teachers to see their own cultural ties and the ways in which those ties influenced their relationships with others.

#### **Parental and Local Community Involvement**

For parents and communities selecting the Sámi schools, the education system represents a vehicle to maintain and to develop their own culture and language. During the research project, parents were assisting in the leadership initiative to improve and strengthen the Sámi content in their children's school curricula; one parent participant asserted that parents have chosen the Sámi school alternative so that their children can be raised and educated in a Sámi way. The cooperation with the parents and relatives was more practical in certain activities; one of these activities, named "*Eallinbeivvit*", was initiated by the teachers and based upon the principle that parents and relatives in the home environments represent an additional resource to be used for facilitating the learning processes (Jannok & Tuorda, 2006).

The procedures for *Eallinbeivvit* were developed by the teachers to assure that the cooperation with the parents and community would be easy to carry out. Each pupil had to make an agreement with their parents on a chosen activity and then formulate the related aim and plan with the assistance of their teacher. After this was approved, the pupil carried out the work and documented their process with their own photography and writing. When they returned to school, the students reflected on and presented their work for the classmates and later for the parents in a parental meeting. *Eallinbeivvit* was directed towards acquiring practical skills and

competencies while experiencing cooperation with others; these skills included reindeer herding, branding reindeer calves, fishing in the lakes, cooking traditional food, building fire outdoors, cutting firewood, slaughtering, and assisting in tourist company work (Jannok & Tuorda, 2006).

In an Indigenous setting such as the one of the project it was important to raise the awareness of and make visible the traditional knowledge holders' capacities. The school-home cooperation was also a way to bring the children closer to their Sámi environments and to their extended family ties (Balto, 2008a; 2008b; 1997). One participating student commented that he had established a good relationship with his uncle through the project's process, an uncle he normally does not see very often. Other pupils who participated in the project drew attention to the roles of their parents in their lives as great and skilful teachers.

#### **Searvelatnja; Home-Based Learning Arenas**

*Eallinbeivvit* can be compared with a traditional learning arena named by Sara as *searvelatnja* (2003). According to Sara, *searvelatnja* is a space where not only skills and knowledge are transferred in a reciprocal learning process, but where values and ethical aspects are also a part of the sharing. The participants across ages - adults, elders, youth and children - all engage collectively in this shared space, exchanging practical skills and knowledge while socializing and increasing their communication capacities. Sara explains that human actions are not limited to the capacities of the current generations, but, rather, such actions include the capacities, judgments, and communications of former generations and ancestors and their relationships to people and nature. As with *searvelatnja*, *Eallinbeivvit* interweaves Indigenous knowledge, visual works, and mental and spiritual practices and ways of thinking in a holistic knowledge base. As a result, the values are transferred, as is the vision of a person as essentially good (Sara 2003, Balto 2008a:54, 59).

One of the participating mothers in the study made the following assessment of the significance of school developments resulting from the research project: she had noticed

how dedicated the teachers were when they worked on these issues, and that their enjoyment was spread to the students and then, in turn, to the students' homes. The parent continued that the school had been able to implement the Sámi content and had created physical Sámi environments as a framework for their teachings and trainings. A parent also stated, "We have chosen the Sámi School for our children and are expectant and dependent on the school reinforcing the children's Sámi language skills and their Sámi identity. Some of us don't even speak the language ourselves, because we were not so fortunate as to learn the Sámi language or cultural practices at home" (Balto & Johansson, 2007). Such statements from parents are examples of Swedish assimilation politics having deprived them of their Sámi culture, language and ways of life (Minde, 2005).

### **Lack of Political Attention**

The project researchers met with the former Sámi School rectors to discuss the completed action-research project and how the schools' developments were continued after the research period. Proposals after project completion from the participant Sámi schools in 2007 (Balto & Johansson, 2008) for a continuation of the development work initiated and inspired by the project were submitted to Skolverket and the relevant Sámi School authorities (the Sameskolstyrelsen/Sámi School Board and Sametinget/ Swedish Sámi Parliament) in Sweden for political and economic support. However, the proposals were neither met with support nor were they brought forward, in return. The lack of attention to the issues and proposals presented, and especially the lack of political engagement from the Sámi and Swedish authorities, was obvious. According to the Sámi School rectors, they felt the lack of support from politicians; education issues are often not given priority in the political agenda. Along similar lines, a change of staff and leadership at the Sámi schools occurring after the research project was also neither supportive of nor conducive to continuing the Sámi curriculum and school development the project had initiated.

### **Discussions and Reflections**

All the actors in this project needed to be trained to raise their awareness regarding their situations as Sámi educators through decolonizing

processes. The Sámi school staff had to keep in mind the goals and commitments as Sámi Schools and communities; it was crucial that the leaders and the participants of and in the schools were committed to the schools' Sámi missions and purposes.

### **Attitudes, Commitment and Education**

Rectors participating in the research project highlighted some of the conditions that were present during project's school development work, such as the education of the leaders in Sámi language and issues, the decolonizing and healing processes engaged, and the fact that the entire school community was involved in these processes. Such conditions created collective learning and understanding spaces and empowered the participants to believe that Sámi language, knowledge and cultural practices are appropriate building blocks of Sámi school curricula and that the inclusion of Sámi such heritage in education provided for the well-being, learning and growth of Sámi children.

The backgrounds of the teachers, parents and other staff as the participating Sámi schools had obvious impacts on the results and processes of the research project. Many of the teachers had grown up in traditional Sámi ways and had already created their own commitment to Sámi language and culture. The rectors of the Sámi schools and some of the other actors in the project had previously participated in the Sámi political movement. Among other things they had campaigned for the strengthening of Sámi language and identity as well as Sámi language and cultural rights in education; they had worked to raise awareness of and commitment to the collective of the Sámi People. Another component to add for the success of the transformations that occurred as results from the research project is the belief in education itself - that education can be used to re-vitalize and re-educate the Sámi in and with own cultural practices. As part of their own political engagements the rectors of the Sámi schools had already built their own education-related networks consisting of stakeholders, administrators, politicians, researchers and indigenous educators, and these networks were used actively during the project. Along those same lines, frequent meetings were arranged already at the preparatory stages of the

research, and then again when the funding application for the project had to be pushed forward to get the financial support.

Outcomes of the study clarified parents', schools' and communities' deep interests in being involved in the Sámi schools' daily work of strengthening Sámi culture and linguistic competencies. During the project possibilities and potential conditions for a Sámi-developed pedagogy were discussed and analyses were undertaken, and all was based in the Swedish State national compulsory school curriculum but developed especially for the Sámi schools that participated in the project. Cooperation with teachers, parents and students collectively resulted in the development of a "Sámi"-profiled local school curriculum in Sweden. These processes continued into the development of individual plans for every pupil/student. Challenges, weaknesses and strengths were explored continuously. Participatory action research made it easier to take advantage of participants' own knowledge and methods of inclusion of parents and elders.

### **Indigenous Community**

The Indigenous community had a significant role in this study. Parents were involved in several different practical issues, together with the students and teachers. This parental involvement was crucial for the continuation of the study. Hirvonen (2004) found that the primary teacher education programs at Sámi University College (SUC) in Norway had strengthened and increased students' Sámi language and cultural skills as well as their own personal identities. Sámi University College has the only program in Norway, Sweden and Finland that offers an adequate teacher education programs for primary level training for teachers who will work in Sámi schools. According to Barnhard (1991), Indigenous education has suffered because it has been limited to only some aspects of the given Indigenous culture at hand, instead of being grounded in the culture entirely. At SUC, Sámi culture is the educational foundation. Some researchers of Indigenous educational issues, many of them connected to SUC, have produced knowledge based on their Sámi and Indigenous traditions and knowledge as an alternative to current mainstream knowledge resources and theories. To involve the knowledge of the participants of a study or education as well as the community and elders is recognized as important world-wide, not least by researchers in

attendance at international Indigenous conferences (Owens et al, 2012). Future research needs to highlight the situation of the Sámi Schools and the education of teachers for Sámi Schools.

The research model applied in the project appeared to be beneficial in terms of revitalizing the Sámi schools' educational sphere. Anton Hoëm, recognized researcher on Sámi education, argued that most research methods in use today are not appropriate methods for societies like that of the Sámi People; methods that reinforce vitalization and revitalization are lacking (2007: 503).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The study of the research project discussed in this article revealed that to be enabled to develop and strengthen a Sámi pedagogy the competencies, capacities and commitment of the Sámi teachers, rectors, parents and the community was vital. In this case, the rectors as leaders had a significant role. Their commitment to the vision of a Sámi school, awareness of the urgent need of development of the school and formal education on their own costs in Sami related issues and language as well, was beneficial for the results of the project. The teachers' Sami cultural backgrounds and knowledge reservoir was a valuable contribution to the content of the project. In addition, it was of great importance that several of the teachers had at their own costs, studied Sami language and Sami related issues.

Rectors' confident way of leading the process, e.g. to oblige all the teachers to take part in the process, and to invite parents and community to participate extended enhancement for the mission. As they had been involved in the Sami political movement for decades, their engagement to sustain the Sámi language and culture was high. School development, like the one discussed in this paper seems to need leading lights for a fruitful process and result.

Despite the lack of political support for proposals to continue with the developments in the Sámi schools post-project, and thus a continued lack of adequate training and resources for Sámi teachers, the Sámi School development project did improve and increase the space for a Sámi-developed pedagogy in

Sweden. The Sámi School communities have developed educational systems based on their own traditional teachings, society and social relations. In accordance with Alfred's statement (1991)

concerning the continuation of Indigenous societies, we put forward that investing in Sámi schools is an investment in the continuation of the Sámi People and Nation.

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