

# Am I Sámi Enough?

## *Narratives as a Means of Exploring a Sámi Pedagogy for Kindergarten*

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### Abstract

“Muitalus” is “story” or “narrative” in North Sámi. The word is closely related to the word for “remember” – “muitit”. The objective of narrative inquiry is to transform those who are participating. Such an enquiry must carry expectations for the future. In indigenous societies, telling stories has always been a means of transferring knowledge, sharing knowledge of expected behavior, or learning experiences. From the stories and the process of storytelling in a research project on language vitalization in a Sámi kindergarten department, I explore three themes in this article: language, identity, and Sámi pedagogy as experienced in Sámi practices. The stories are not merely material for this article, but they have been, and continue to be, a way of making ourselves – the participants – conscious about who has the power of defining Sámi, and how we, with our backgrounds may, or have the right to, work with strengthening Sámi language and culture in a Sea-Sámi area.

### Keywords

narrative inquiry – Indigenous storytelling – Sámi pedagogy – language vitalization – experience

### 1 Introduction

“Muitalus” is “story” or “narrative” in North Sámi. The word is closely related to the word for “remember” – “muitit”. In indigenous societies, telling stories has always been a means of transferring knowledge, sharing knowledge of expected behavior, or learning experiences (Smith, 2012). The great Sámi poet, composer and artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, also known as Áillohaš, wrote: “When a Sámi remembered and reminisced, it was not perceived as word art: it was theatre, it was education, it was a social happening, pastime<sup>1</sup>” (Valkeapää, 1982, p. 62).

From the stories and the process of storytelling in a research project in a Sámi kindergarten department, I explore three themes in this article: language, identity, and Sámi pedagogy as experienced in Sámi practices. The stories are not merely material for this article, but they have been, and continue to be, a way of making ourselves – the participants – conscious about who has the power of defining Sámi, and how we, with our backgrounds may, or have the right to, work with strengthening Sámi language and culture in a Sea-Sámi area.

Sápmi, the Sámi homeland and cultural region, transcends the modern borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Dávvisámegiella, North Sámi language, is the majority language of the three remaining Sámi languages in Norway. The Lule Sámi and South Sámi languages is listed as ‘threatened’ in *Ethnologue*, the Pite and Ume Sámi languages are listed with no speakers in Norway. The Sámi languages belong to the Finno-Ugric language group, together with Finnish and Kven, while Norwegian and Swedish belong to the Germanic language group. The Sámi minority was exposed to the cultural modern nation building processes of the various countries. In Norway, this process is called ‘fornorskning’, which could translate to *Norwegianisation*. This has led to all Sámi speakers being bilingual in their Sámi language and Norwegian, or monolingual Norwegian (Todal, 1998). To correct this situation, several measures are taken with a goal to *reverse language shift* (Fishman, 1991), among them, creating institutions like indigenous kindergartens to strengthen Sámi language and culture (Todal, 1998; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Storjord, 2008).

Within these frames, we were invited as researchers together with the staff members, ECE teachers Anette and JT, and the ECE skilled workers Anja and Lill, in the development of the project “Strengthening Sámi language and culture in kindergarten”. In a staff meeting we were discussing: How should we begin? What precisely were our goals and sub-goals? JT said his goal was to develop a local model for strengthening the indigenous minority language North Sámi in kindergarten. We were laughing about the audacity and courage of such a grand goal! This was a model which, as he in cooperation with others spoke it into being, involved local, place-relevant material that was both (1) pragmatic in its goal to have Sámi language-supportive material for projects and teaching when teachers or temporary staff did not have full command of the language and (2) ideological and didactic in its approach to use material relevant to the children, even produced in cooperation with the children. This courage and vision were a wish for, or even targeting, the power of definition related to being Sámi, regarding what should be perceived as Sámi and what is important to the Sámi community. Of course, of foremost importance was their own Sámi kindergarten department here and now and for all future “here and now”.

Where did JT get this courage from? Asking and answering this question is important for this narrative inquiry, because after he presented his plan, we began to wonder, aloud, if we were good enough to do this – rather, *were we Sámi enough?* Shouldn't we be properly Sámi to do this? The most devastating discovery we made telling and listening to<sup>2</sup> our stories, was that all five of us had wondered whether we really were Sámi enough. Surely this is our pivotal point, perhaps pivoting again and again: What made us look at ourselves like this, but still sitting here planning to strengthen Sámi language and culture? Did the way we see ourselves change on the way here? Did we consolidate ourselves as Sámi regardless of the doubt? Were we recognized as Sámi by other Sámi people or others?

It was in this context that Anette suggested we all write our stories, as she had for a long time thought about writing to understand why she thought what she did about being Sámi. My former student presented a method for how to understand ourselves and simultaneously perform a research project within a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry always begins with an autobiographic exploration of who the researcher is in relation to what is studied and that this helps justify and form research both theoretically and personally (Caine et al., 2018, p. 140). I had been pointed in this direction – to tell about myself and my ethnic identity – by another Sámi kindergarten teacher during my PhD project in linguistics (Kleemann, 2015). She asked me, “Are you Sámi?” In this article I focus on the implication that it was not obvious whether I was Sámi, and how it did not strike me that my identity had anything to do with my research. Much like I wrote about Latin and Old Norse in my master's thesis (Kleemann, 1999), I continued writing about language alternation between North Sámi and Norwegian in children's roleplay, as if a sociolinguistic study is a physical science study. It was in the nature of my discipline. Anette and the others taught me, since I had not understood it from earlier experience, that research involving others is not nonsubjective and independent of who does the research. It was not as if I would have been allowed to film the children during their free play if they had not accepted me, let me in. If they had not been able to relax in the notion that I, for example, “speak Norwegian, just like my mom”, as Joret (5 years old) categorized me, and then he played in North Sámi and Norwegian (Kleemann, 2015). Speaking Norwegian still allowed me to belong in a Sámi context in the Sámi kindergarten.

By challenging us all to tell our stories, Anette helped us create insight based on our experiences that enabled us to define what is Sámi. Relating and remembering episodes that have formed us and then discuss how they can be understood is a sound method both because it builds relationships among participants, and also helps create the individual's relationship to their own

experience and themselves, their identity, and the place they inhabit. This idea is expressed well in Caine et al. (2018), in which there is reference to John Dewey to explicate how the storytelling and narrative inquiry relates to the experiences the stories are based on:

The regulative ideal for inquiry is to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment – her life, community, world – one that “makes possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually creates a new kind of experienced objects, not more real than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive”. (Dewey, 1981, p. 175; Caine et al., 2018, p. 135)

For us, and particularly for me as researcher, the goal was to experience the practices in kindergarten and our past experiences as expressions and understandings of a Sámi way of living and seeing/understanding.

## 2 The Relationship between Narrative Inquiry and Traditional Sharing of Experiences in Indigenous Tradition

Research within narrative inquiry is not actually research on narratives or stories or to bring forth the stories in themselves. It could appear like a paradox that, with reference to Dewey (1938), the *future* is as important as empirical data (Caine et al., 2018, p. 142). While ‘living in the midst’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is part of understanding how any story is open-ended and does not always have a definite beginning, the future is important because the empirical data is what the consequent exploration of narratives has for future practice. Dewey (1916/1922) philosophizes experience as learning when the change that happened through the action is reflected back and the change is a stream of consequences. What possibilities will that yield? (Caine et al., 2018, pp. 134, 140–142) Stories have always been used to learn and to transfer experience, influence the ways in which individuals must behave in life, or just select the right plan and not wade into a treacherous quagmire.

The objective of narrative inquiry is not merely to teach but to transform those who are participating. Such an enquiry must carry expectations for the future. For this project on the narratives of the ones aiming to strengthen Sámi language and culture in a Sámi kindergarten, even though we were not the “iconic” Sámi, the expectation for the future is that we can justify that we have knowledge and that we can identify what knowledge we must acquire to continue our work and do better. By sharing the stories and using them and

making our stories and experiences meaningful, we can understand how to relate to transference of knowledge and strengthening identity in our area.

Another important difference between narrative inquiry and traditional meaning is that the stories in narrative inquiry do not have an ending or even a beginning. They are open and we are in the middle of our story; thus, the story itself and telling the story both have consequences for the story that is being told. The stories are not stories of our life span thus far; rather, they are more like moments or episodes without causal – or even temporal – connections. The Sámi professor Israel Ruong described his text on Sámi identity as a rhapsody rather than a synthesis (Ruong, 1982, p. 33) There is form to our stories, like JT's circularity coming back to being Sámi or Anja's causality in choices for her children's schooling in Sámi and her own experience as a child, or Anette's "in-between" motif showing up repeatedly, or the red thread laid by Lill's agency and curiosity. I had the most control over my own story, which can be said to describe my own developing insight into being Sámi. This development was temporal of sorts, but barely causative. For example, my curiosity for Sámi language somehow was "caused" by my interest in Latin and theories on language contact. It was not my identity-forming need for a language of the heart. The form of my story is more of an apologetic argumentation, leading to a "doing Sámi equals feeling Sámi", where episodes in a rhapsody answer my initial question: "Are you Sámi?"

Sharing experiences and stories was a part of the understanding of where we all came from, what we had in common, and what we wanted to do. It was important that all of us shared something that was intimate in a sense, because this also creates personal bonds: When you know someone's history, you cannot be indifferent, and you have an obligation to treat that knowledge with respect and understanding. Everyone having the same obligation creates some sort of togetherness that is important to develop something together: "To engage deeply with experience, an ontological commitment is, then, a relational commitment. It is a commitment to a form of togetherness in research that seeks to explore how we are living in the midst of our stories" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 576). Employing narrative inquiry is not just using the stories that emerge to learn something, like narratives in a traditional sense appear to have an obvious point to them, a life wisdom, like Aesop's fables. It is more like the stories themselves created and formed the questions and gave direction to or informed, an initial exploration of Sámi child rearing and which parts of a Sámi pedagogy we have within us and which ones we needed to make more explicit: "A narrative ontology precedes the emergence of research puzzles and calls forth obligations and commitments" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 576).

Deciding together what the research is and how to figure that out was a goal, even if the power balance is rather asymmetric when a researcher enters a specific arena. Sharing stories could even the field. However, it appeared to me that it reversed the asymmetry in the knowledge of the language and local practices – it made evident that their knowledge superseded mine, that their competence was fitting. Thus, their practices and experiences could entail the theory we needed. Maybe this is what Dewey expresses:

An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as a theory. It tends to become a mere verbal formula, a set of catchwords used to render thinking, or genuine theorizing, unnecessary and impossible. (Dewey, 1916/1922, p. 169)

To find what place the researcher has and what the relationship is among the researcher, research field and participants is part of narrative inquiry: “it is important that narrative inquirers carefully consider who they are, and who they are becoming, in the research puzzle” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577). By using narrative inquiry, I lost initiative and I was not prepared for how the stories were to be told or what would happen with them later. I got the idea from Anette; to ease into it, I wrote the first text. She was a gentle pusher and idea-maker – she reveals what she is thinking through her actions, formulating things in her head. I hope this work will push her to writing more and publishing her experience.

Anette and I wrote our own texts and then I functioned as sort of “ghost-writer” for the three other texts. I formulated these texts from conversations in staff meetings, hanging around and observing everyday life, and conversations in specially assigned one-to-one sessions that were interview-like. The first drafts of these stories were written during the interview sessions, where they were asked by me to explicate what is perceived as Sámi and what in their background enabled them to strengthen Sámi language and culture. When their voice silenced, I asked questions to elaborate or to remind them about something I had observed or experienced while staying with them. During the conversations, I took notes by hand, as we had agreed that a tape-recorder would disturb storytelling. I wrote the stories as continuous text on the computer in my office at the university the next day.

This implied that I was seeking a good story, which, apparently, I as a narrative inquirer should resist (Caine et al., 2013, p. 538), but could not. I constructed stories temporally and was particularly pleased with how JT's story achieved a beautiful circular form. Thereafter, I sent the texts back and asked them to read them and comment. This was an alienating way of working for them and did not serve the process: The thought of giving written feedback blocked our research relationship and was a mistake I made. We had to meet again, and when we did, we talked about the texts, clarified some aspects, and added some more information. However, the written form in itself could be alienating, and this could have been more carefully planned and more individually adapted.

We had planned to develop the stories during the spring of 2020. Unfortunately, restrictions due to COVID-19 put a halt to our further work on the texts and collective exploration of our own Sámi background until fall 2021, when we could finally meet again physically. A few adjustments were again made to the stories, and the narrative was explicated during our meeting. Even though more episodes came to our stories, they did not want all these stories as part of this narrative inquiry because they also involved others. To acknowledge and act upon this kind of relational ethics in co-construction of stories (Ellis, 2007), is essential in narrative inquiry as well. Still, the stories do exist and are a part of what we all do now, how we think. They are part of this text somehow, even if the reader cannot see them. When we spoke in the fall of 2021, the day before I presented the "findings" at the conference on Sámi education and philosophy, the meanings of our stories had changed, we had changed, and we discussed what was not to be a part of the narrative. All narratives have silence and omitted parts. Nevertheless, I feel that the omitted parts are part of the narrative inquiry as well. It has implications for my future practice as a researcher and it has impact on their professional practices in ways that may never be published or known explicitly to others.

We begin telling our experiences, occasionally detached, occasionally complete, but more as a part of an ongoing story. The stories change their meaning underway; give other impressions, other experiences from old experiences as we tie them to our current project – the right to be the ones that strengthen Sámi language and culture.

### 3 Access to Language as Pivotal Point

Proficiency in language is one of the aspects that is widely regarded as a factor to feeling acknowledged, or recognizing oneself, as Sámi. Language is power

and, thus, more knowledge of languages should give more power and, subsequently, less knowledge of languages, less power. Anja made the concretization and connection between language and voice: When she told of how she felt that her voice was weaker in Norwegian than in Sámi, that opened up the avenue for the idea that our voices could be weak because we, a few of us for generations, had to use another language. Have our voices been weak because we (over generations) had to use another language? Did we inherit a weak voice in a different language?<sup>3</sup>

Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, 1974) said that language is *arbitrary*, meaning that what sounds make up a word in any language is arbitrary; and *conventional*, meaning that a sufficiently large group must agree upon the meaning, and also traditional in the sense that it *traduxit* (transfers). Our varied stories and learning paths to language and our different experiences with being recognized as Sámi and having opportunities to use Sámi can be enlightened by how the use of two languages in the everyday life of kindergarten may produce a third space (Bhaba, 2004). The multilingual practices and the consequences it could have for linguistic and metalinguistic competence in a group of children can be illustrated by a short story where Anette and a girl (aged five years) are sitting around a campfire in the woods near the kindergarten:

One day we are on a field trip [Norwegian “tur” is somehow more of an everyday activity than the English “field trip”], and Anette demonstrates how we need birch bark to light a campfire. Simultaneously she uses both North Sámi and Norwegian to accompany her actions. Among other things, she puts stress on the pronunciation of Norwegian “never” and North Sámi “beassi” [both meaning “birch bark”]. This catches the girl’s attention at a metalinguistic level, and she says “bever”, combining the sounds of the two words Anette has pronounced so clearly, and by that accidentally saying the Norwegian word for the animal “beaver”. Anette laughs and repeats “bever” laughing. Then she becomes a little more teacher-like and leaves the teasing/comic situation with: “Bever lea eallit. Bever er et dyr”. [“Beaver is an animal”] in North Sámi first, then repeated in Norwegian. After that the girl looks up, and possibly teasing and definitely definite says, “Bever er faktisk en stein”. [“Beaver is, in fact, a stone”] in Norwegian. (From film footage)

To me, this is a story about power of definition, about how language is arbitrary, and about communication and relationship. We as a society must agree on what a word means, and when we have reached an agreement, the agreed-upon meaning must be retained. The bilingual kindergarten has several such



conventions, and conventions do change over time. Language is power, and, in fact, sometimes it becomes important to seize power.

Central in the stories, and to self-esteem, is the feeling of not mastering the Sámi language – a commonplace experience in Norwegianized regions (Johansen, 2008) – and what consequences that has had for the ability to carry language, transfer culture, and conduct research in Sámi kindergartens. The use of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) or language alternation has been looked down upon: The only goal for the Sámi kindergarten is to teach the children to speak Sámi, a pure Sámi. Ideally, the Sámi kindergarten must be a monolingual Sámi arena to weigh out the input from the majority community (Keskitalo et al., 2014; Storjord, 2008). There are many crossing influxes and ideals for the bilingual dwellers of the Sámi kindergarten. I begin by rendering some of my own feelings from the North Sámi language course held by the Sámi University College as an evening and weekend class in Alta.

We were ten adults, different ages, and different experiences, trying to claim or reclaim spoken and written North Sámi. Some already could speak but were insecure about forming advanced sentences or which words were allowed, others could speak but not write, and I could do neither. However, I am a linguist, so I went about learning North Sámi much like I learned Latin or Old Norse at university, as it felt more foreign than English or French from school. Imitating the teachers' pronunciation, I suddenly found my grandmothers language melody, like she spoke Norwegian. After that it was easier, although not easy, to speak or at least read aloud. Only after I started this class, did I know that my grandmother spoke Sámi. I was told she would only speak with the children from the nomadic reindeer herding families. All the time Sámi had been around me, but only like a substratum interference, the contact linguistic term for traces of another language in the target language, literally disturbance from under the surface.<sup>4</sup> (Carola: "Are you Sámi?")

This is a common experience from growing up in a Norwegianized Sea Sámi culture (Bjørklund, 2016) and it does lead to difficulties answering the "being Sámi" question. I belong to a second generation growing up without Sámi as a home language, a history known and hidden along the entire coastline of northern Norway. I did not suffer from Norwegianization, but I was the result of it. The silence surrounding our Sámi heritage led me to believe we did not have any other language than Norwegian, and suddenly my father could ask me to pass the butter in North Sámi at the breakfast table after nearly 80 years of Sámi silence.

Since the aim of the project is to strengthen Sámi language and culture, it is important to identify something to strengthen and not recreate. As a substratum interference, both Sámi culture and language exists, but vitalization is necessary. With vitalization and identifying what is under the surface comes the question of identity: Who am I? For me, the actions and practices of learning North Sámi language and *duodji* were essential: The materiality is an important experience. The sounds, the melody, and the meanings of words keep bringing newer and deeper understanding of the differences between Sámi and majority Norwegian. My experience is not unique, and the importance of material experience is also conveyed in texts on Sámi education and pedagogy (Balto & Johansson, 2015; Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011; Norwegian Committee on Truth and Reconciliation, 2023; Sarivaara & Keskitalo, 2016).

We had different paths to go on our language journey. Anja has experienced *Norwegianisation*, not as an official policy, but structurally through learning institutions and the choices her parents had to make regarding her schooling (Todal, 2009). As a child, Anja was monolingual in Sámi, but she was bereft of full literacy in her first language when she began school by being put in a Norwegian class with Norwegian-speaking teachers and very little written Sámi. As an adult, her spoken Sámi, her mother tongue, is still her strongest language, although she speaks Norwegian like a native as well:

I can express myself properly in Sámi. It is like I have more power in my voice. For example, if I say to my dog: “Ale!”, it is much stronger than the Norwegian: “Slutt!” (“Stop!”). There is much more natural authority and security in my voice. Both praise and reprimand in Sámi gives a different gravity. Maybe it is more honest or genuine? It is like I can express much more in Sámi, whether I am sad or happy. For example, saying “mm” is much weaker than “aa” [respectively Norwegian and Sámi for “no”, used only colloquially, often in child-directed speech]. (Anja: “Language and voice”)

Anja does not feel that her written Sámi is native-like; although she has spent time taking courses as an adult, she still does not feel that Sámi is her preferred written language. This is what led to us deciding I was to write down her text. The threshold for writing about her own *Sáminess* in Norwegian was too high, and it is easy to see the oppression she faces. Another, even more serious, consequence of the *Norwegianisation* she suffered is that she does not feel comfortable writing in her own language either. That is one thing she has been bereft from, as she experienced education as an oppressive experience (Dewey, 1938). Writing one’s own story is intimate, it is demanding, and it is exposing. Anja has her heart language intact orally, but she has experienced numerous

hindrances in using it and developing it in every field of her life. The use of Norwegian in certain contexts can be a hindrance for the native language, for example, having Norwegian-speaking friends as a child and family in adult life. Education has been the most substantial hindrance for her language, but more seriously for her voice. When she was a child, education eroded her confidence in her own native language, justifying it with giving her the opportunity to use the majority language at a native-like level subsequently. For her, education was also an oppressive experience. This kind of oppression is almost invisible, as she is doing well, speaking both Sámi and Norwegian native-like. Nevertheless, her voice is not as strong as it should have been.

JT has, as described earlier, a strong voice and makes strong choices for himself. He comes from a bilingual family background in a Sámi dominated town but preferred using Norwegian mainly with friends and family as well as in school. He could speak, but would not; rather, he would avoid it. For him, as for many others, language is closely related to identity. However, it is an identity he does not want. I elaborate on the implications for identity later; for now, I focus on language as a symbol. As language is a powerful material indication of identity, JT chose to silence himself, and silence is difficult to break. It helps to be a confident individual like JT is as to distance himself from being Sámi. As an adult, he has reclaimed the language and recognized what he has to do achieve his goals; thus, he began taking classes in North Sámi during the project period. The community and the Sámi University College has language courses for adults, with classes that give ECT points and thus higher formal education. The structures around him, like ECE teacher education, playing football and working in kindergarten, all built up a positive attitude towards Sámi, and he chose to speak and transfer it.

Further, Annette's mother has Sámi as her first language and her father is Norwegian; this makes their family language mainly Norwegian, even if her mother occasionally speaks some Sámi. Her mother is from the outer parts of a long fiord and uses Sámi with her family; thus, Anette has also had a stable Sámi-speaking element within the larger family group and local community. This community is having preserved a Sea-Sámi language and culture.

I grew up in a home where mom speaks both Norwegian and Sámi and dad was a southerner. Even though mom knew Sámi, only Norwegian was used at home. I have yelled at her many times for not speaking Sámi to me when I was little so that I could learn the language. She says that because dad did not speak Sámi, it was more natural to speak Norwegian. Every time we were with mom's siblings, she spoke Sámi with them, so I have heard a lot of Sámi growing up. (Anette: "Am I enough Sámi?")

In school, Annette had Sámi and has always been able to write and speak it to a certain level, but never really felt like she could speak fluently:

In primary and secondary school (classes 1–10), I had classes in Sámi. Even though I have had Sámi in school for many years, I do not feel like I am left with very much of it. I think education had too little focus on oral practice, so I never learned to speak and the threshold to speak Sámi became high. (Anette: “Am I enough Sámi?”)

Thus, it is evident that we all have different levels of mastering the North Sámi language. I have a lot of knowledge about the language as a system and its historic entity, but low proficiency in its pragmatics and the use of oral and written language. There is a big difference between the written and oral command of a language. Moreover, the feeling of proficiency also reveals differences in use in kindergarten – for example, in spontaneous production and planned pedagogical use. There is a marked difference between use in routine situations and more advanced conversation with exploration and philosophic wondering. It is both the feeling of having mastered a language and having command over it. Of course, Anja has full command of Sámi and full proficiency in the language in all work-related situations; however, she still feels insecure when it comes to written language. For the two teachers, JT and Anette, it was a goal to improve their spoken Sámi to fit the need for spontaneous speech and to be able to use advanced Sámi language in spontaneous situations, and to be pedagogical leaders in Sámi. Although it is important to acknowledge what capacities we all have, it is equally important to identify exact goals, like improving oneself to be able to deal with spontaneous situations. This has to be done in order to strengthen the use of the Sámi language. People need to be confident languages users, and: with mastery comes confidence.

#### 4 Identity

Being proud of one’s own Sámi identity is one of the goals of the project, as perhaps identity is a result of confidence. Everyone had to be adult enough to be able to sort that out. The experiences we have had form the path to Sámi pedagogy for kindergarten and Sámi kindergarten research. I was asked whether I was Sámi; Anette asked herself the question; JT identified himself as “the Norwegian one”; Lill’s identity was not recognized, she had to take it on as a young child; and Anja, with her unambiguous Sámi background, was pushed away. Ruong (1982) states that when he writes about Sámi identity, he

expresses his own identity and belonging to the Sámi people. For him, identity is a part of the fleeting now (*panta rei*) and therefore always changing, but with a firm nucleus. Identity is both what you want to be, and what you are recognized as. JT's story is also about making others recognize the identity that he, at any given time, wants to assume. At the same time, he lets how others identify him also become his own main identity. He describes a childhood where he wanted to be the Norwegian one, felt accepted as that – at least they perform it by speaking Norwegian – and then still he was experiencing terms of abuse about the Sámi people being shouted out at him on the football pitch because he appears Sámi or plays on a team located in Sápmi. One key to identity could be to understand how others recognize you based on biases, and even which biases you yourself have toward ethnicity and identity.

It has not been a rather straightforward process to identify ourselves as Sámi. Not even for Anja who grew up with Sámi as mother tongue and only family language. Being placed in the “Norwegian” class because the children of reindeer herders were in the Sámi class, why did she feel misplaced? Lill seized the language, taught herself, and used every opportunity to listen and learn without explicit instruction. More than encouragement, her story was about thirst for knowledge – laying under the table listening to the adults speak is powerful and so visually striking, a little child seizing knowledge. But somehow, she did not take on an identity as Sámi until she was an adult. It is apparent that language is a means to create identity – it is so visible, intimate, and clear-cut as an identity-marker.

For myself, I had no idea I even had to choose an identity, I was Norwegian, and experienced a substantial identity mix as I have a German grandfather and the legacy of WWII. It was certainly a pivotal moment to be asked whether I was Sámi, more so than enrolling in the Sámi census, which for me was more of a question of place and belonging to Finnmark. What does the question “Are you Sámi?” really entail? I have since then realized that I may be recognized as Sámi, but that other markers, such as language proficiency and mixed heritage, give me an uncertain identity. However, a question like that entails that it is never certain who you are. One analysis is that the teacher who asked the question was surprised that I, a Norwegian, would do research in a Sámi kindergarten. It could be that she wanted to put me in place, do a little bit of “othering” in a space where all others were Sámi. My conclusion was that it was an honest question and she wanted to know whether I was doing research on “us” or “them”. Perhaps the reason for her asking, was her answer when I started a conversation with: “You, who are a bilingual ...” and she replied: “I am not bilingual, I am Sámi speaking”. I should have been more aware. Among so many more, sociolinguist Peter Auer has explicitly (Auer, 1984) stated that

bilingualism is not an identity, it is a practice, although this may be slightly unclear in his subsequent work, where identity is more equaled to practice (Auer, 1998, 2007). One way to identity is language, another is mastering distinct cultural artifacts, like being able to do *duodji*. For example, for me, sewing the traditional Sámi folk costume, *gákti*, was contact with an identity; selecting patterns for the *holbi*, the bottom pattern of the skirt, thinking of how they must have used the materials they had; weaving and braiding every little scrap of yarn into patterns identifying them when tying the shoes – round after round – with long, colorful bands. Dressing up my daughters and seeing them content with, even proud of, their heritage. My grandmother's tongue, somehow, and my foremothers' craft was reached by circumnavigation (*liigemohkki*).

JT's voyage could be described as going from choosing not to identify as Sámi to ending up being a carrier of Sámi language and culture, making a career of being the one who works to vitalize Sámi language and culture. The circular form of his story was an eye-opener and a useful tool for thinking about his right to the theme. JT actively chose not to be Sámi. Growing up, he felt distanced or wanted to distance himself from the Sámi part of his background, he could not find positive Sámi role models. He wanted to tie himself more to being "mostly Norwegian". Many of the values he perceived as Sámi in childhood were values, he did not want to identify with or be part of. Nevertheless, he could use Sámi language with his friends, while identifying himself as "the Norwegian one" – the one you are supposed to speak Norwegian with. Moving to a more Norwegian dominated area for studies and football, his identity or what he wanted others to recognize him as, drifted to "the one with a Sámi background" He experienced being recognized as an asset for the kindergarten he worked in at the time and for the football team he played for. In this period, he was compelled to take a stance on being Sámi and he describes it as a beginning of a change in his identity: "I am Sámi, but" But what is in this "but"? Does it mean that he does not fit in his own stereotypical picture of "a Sámi"? Now his identity is more being a Sámi role model.

Maybe it is the same for Anette when she writes: "It was always a 'but'" Anette uses the metaphor of standing in the middle, not being able to choose, not fitting in categories someone else has defined, or perhaps you feel that their and your own biases or expectations to identities and how they are expressed. She expresses it in the following manner:

I have always felt a little in the middle of the Sámi and the Norwegian. At school I was not one of those that spoke Sámi. I had Sámi as second language, thus neither one of those that knew the language, nor one of those that did not have Sámi in school. Also, in connection with work I felt in

the middle of the Norwegian and the Sámi. I have taken a “Norwegian” education, and work in a Sámi department. It sometimes feels as if one stands between Sámi child rearing tradition and the “Norwegian pedagogy”. Or is it more about how I do not have all that much knowledge about Sámi child rearing or Sámi pedagogy? A question I have asked myself, is whether I am Sámi enough to work in a Sámi department. (Anette: “Am I enough Sámi?”)

There is a change when she gets older, and her story turns into a story about development:

Now that I am older, I think it is easier to call myself Sámi than it was before. I am immensely proud of my identity and wish to further Sámi language and culture to children so that they too can be familiar with and proud of their Sámi identity. I work to avoid the stereotypical trap when Sámi is mentioned. Often reindeer herding, lavvu and traditional costumes/gákti. I want that we who work with the children shall give them opportunities to get to know more sides to Sámi, both reindeer husbandry and the Sea-Sámi. (Anette: “Am I enough Sámi?”)

This is her reason. This is her drive. Her identity as an in-between – Norwegian and Sámi – is a reason for her to work to strengthen Sámi identity. The Sea Sámi identity is in dire need of strengthening; if the aftermath of Norwegianization is allowed to work together with the iconization (Gal & Irvine, 1995) of Sámi, the coastal Sámi will not recognize themselves and be recognized as Sámi.

## 5 Sámi Pedagogy

To strengthen Sámi language and culture, it is imperative to identify methods, knowledge, and philosophy within a Sámi pedagogy (Balto, 2005; Balto & Johansson, 2015; Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011; Keskitalo et al., 2013; Sarivaara & Keskitalo, 2019; Storjord, 2008). In indigenous minority education, this also entails a non-oppressive pedagogy (Freire, 1999; Smith, 2012). The SáMOS project (Sametinget, 2018) is work in progress to define a Sámi pedagogy for ECE. In the following, I present how a Sámi pedagogy can be read from “inquiring into experience as it is lived and told through and in stories” (Estefan et al., 2016, p. 15). Anette is explicit in expressing that western pedagogy as it is in ECE teacher education lacks a locally relevant curriculum, or at least this was

so when she took her bachelor's degree. The other narratives are more implicit on pedagogy and experience; thus, it is my interpretation or inquiry of the narratives as providing cues and clues to a sense of another kind of pedagogy than mainstream ECE in Norway.

I begin with Anja. Until she began school, she had encountered nothing but Sámi language and culture as well as Sámi child-rearing. This experience is what she wishes to transfer. Paired with institutionalized modern “strong language models”, her ideas are what counts as best practice and suit the leading ideology for language vitalization (Pasanen et al., 2023). Strengthening language is important; however, Anja meets resistance in her wanting to use only Sámi only: “When both Sámi and Norwegian is practiced (in a ‘one person, one language’ model), who will the children go to? It is always easier to go to the Norwegian speaking staff”. Anja also related how she expected the children to pick up their own skis in the yard after going cross-country skiing in kindergarten. This expectation is related to inculcating independence (being able to manage on one's own – *iesbirget*) as a crucial factor in Sámi child-rearing (Balto, 1997, 2005; Balto & Johansson, 2008; Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014; Balto & Johansson, 2015). She felt it was a Sámi value to teach the children to look after their own stuff: “Being able to save yourself in difficult situations demands that you can take care of your equipment, that could save you, so you have to know where it is and keep it tidy and functional”. Both her language demands and demands related to self-reliance are perceived as alienating and not very helpful in Norwegian kindergarten pedagogy. This is an issue she needs others to support her in, as she has experienced another regime in the department. Another aspect was higher tolerance for noise:

We do not like more noise than others, but how is it possible to play if one can only whisper? There is a higher tolerance for noise and movement, not because it is a lazy attitude, but because it is natural. One must check on the children, but it is best if they can carry on themselves, in their own tempo and sound level. You cannot go around hushing all day, just small parts of the day, for instance, when it is circle time or time to eat. (Anja: “Language and voice”)

One part of her hesitation to follow her inner pedagogical ideals is to dare to use one's own background in institutional settings. Anja is a native-speaking Sámi, brought up in a core Sámi area with Sámi speaking parents. Even she felt she had no actual Sámi background. When they were collecting *sennagress* for lining shoes in kindergarten, her experience was using hay as lining in the same kinds of shoes. While nomadic Sámi followed the reindeer and used *lávvu*,



her family spent all year in the highlands in permanent small farm dwellings. Anja's story actualizes issues such as hierarchies within minorities, silencing certain Sámi voices, and also some sort of homogenizing or iconification of what counts as the "real" Sámi. These are also questions a Sámi pedagogy must discuss or incorporate.

Since Sámi pedagogy must fit in with the western notion of kindergarten, and the official framework plan for Norwegian kindergartens, Anette's comparisons between Norwegian and Sámi are interesting. Her experience of being in between cultures might have made Anette aware of differences in culture from an early age. In her narrative,<sup>5</sup> there is an episode describing a visit her (Norwegian) father and she made to a Sámi family as a child. The coffee table was nicely set out for the guests. There were lit candles on the table and suddenly the one-year-old living in the house reached for the flame. Anette's father became anxious and wanted to take the child away from the candles. In contrast, the child's father was calm and would not interfere. Anette understood from the dialogue between the adults that the child's father said that it would be quite safe to be burned, or feeling the heat, from such a small flame. The rationale underlying this viewpoint was that by being burned just a little, the child would experience himself that flames are dangerous and painful. From this experience, the child would learn to keep away from flames and know that they are dangerous when the child is alone and does not have others regulating his behavior. Interestingly, Dewey (1916/1922, p. 163) also has an episode about the child and the candle to illustrate valuable experience. Keskitalo et al. (2014, p. 102) formulates the following principle for Sámi pedagogy: "The Sámi way of thinking is child-centered: the aim is to increase the children's abilities to cope in demanding conditions through self-evaluation and independent thinking skills". Following another rationale for protecting a child was when Anette found the mainstream pedagogical training lacking (see also Anja's story above). Her own Norwegian bachelor's degree in ECE did not provide the tools for allowing principles from Sámi child rearing to be part of a Norwegian institution. Of course, there are discussions on the "rough and tumble" play, but the question of experience and danger of getting hurt to learn to survive alone is perhaps not that prominent. The way those part of institutionalized childcare attempt to minimize accidents by "wrapping the playground in Styrofoam" is a poor replacement of the watchful presence of a caretaker.

Further, how Norwegian pedagogy and expectation for normative institutional kindergarten practices can stand in the way of expressing Sámi ways of learning is revealed in Lill's narrative. Lill had a concern with her own way of kidding around with language when the goal was to seriously learn the language. Whenever "learning" is actualized, the focus is on school-like contexts

and expectations of behavior. This is deeply internalized through socialization or even *bildung* in our education system. Lill had never experienced being encouraged, or taught, to have fun with language as a means of learning in institutional settings. In the seminal work *Samisk barneoppdragelse I endring* [*Sámi child rearing in change (transition)*], Asta Balto writes about *nárrideapmi*, a way of playful teasing within the extended family group (Balto, 2023). Lill has a playful approach to being with children, always in conversation, participating in play or encouraging play. However, she feels restrained by Norwegian pedagogy or perhaps by her biases and felt expectations regarding how formal pedagogy in a Norwegian institution should be. Thus, she feels that she must (or she feels the expectation to) suppress her own experience with what is interesting in languages and with learning languages. The mainstream language theory on language acquisition and learning clearly states the relationship between language users and a playful approach; the problem is the understanding of learning in an institutional setting. A Sámi ECE must certainly include fooling around, playing, and all sorts of non-serious actions (Balto, 2005) as part of learning. However, the general impression is that “learning” in institutional settings is formal education – it is structured and information-oriented (Keskitalo et al., 2014).

In his narrative, JT is involved in building knowledge. Surmounting language “refusal is part of his movement. To enable himself to create didactical programs for more systematic use of Sámi, he has chosen to take Sámi classes in the evenings, with a goal to also use Sámi in spontaneous situations in the department. That is his answer to whether he can do a sufficiently good job as a pedagogical leader without mastering the language enough. He was recognized by the leader of the kindergarten, who is very occupied with strengthening the identity of Sámi children. When JT began working, he was moved from the Norwegian to Sámi department by the leader. When JT began working, the leader of the kindergarten said: “You are to be pedagogical leader in the Sámi department because you are Sámi”. This external recognition made him surmount his own language refusal, to overcome “but” and to be a positive Sámi role model, even for himself. This experience is part of his Sámi pedagogy. For him, pride and joy over Sámi words and the Sámi identity is important to display. Their project-making, language-teaching material with pictures of the children themselves is part of placing the child in the middle of the Sámi teaching. To JT, it is evident that strengthening the language is invaluable. But he is not forcing the children in a strong language immersion model to speak only Sámi; rather, he opens to a pedagogical translanguaging practice that is open and inclusive (Kleemann, 2021). Like Balto and Johansson (2008), he expects the children to use the language when they are ready. Thus, Sámi

pedagogy must also include an openness and expectation for the future that children will use the tools, or “learn”, when they find these tools useful or when they are older.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

I was asked whether I am Sámi, which was quite an existential question for me as a person. In developing a professional identity for myself, I ask myself and will perhaps be asked in the future, “Are you an indigenous researcher?” (Olsen, 2018). I ask that if not, or not sufficiently Sámi, can I contribute professionally to identifying Sámi pedagogy? If the answer is no, I do not identify as Sámi? The challenge for me as a researcher with narrative inquiry and finding the clues within myself and others for Sámi pedagogy, has been moving away from my traditional disciplinary view of science. Traditions within linguistics, even sociolinguistics, occasionally believe they (we) are like mathematicians, that we are on the verge of finding a system, a formula, to describe it all. In a disciplinary vein, following Labov, finding the observable is finding what is researchable. Entering research on Sámi ECE, language as it is heard and communication, as it is visible through a camera lens, provided empiric evidence. But what is it I see when I see something (White, 2016)? What do the sounds of the indigenous language in a kindergarten in a Norwegian-dominated place symbolize? They are something else when in language vitalization the participants are vulnerable and insecure in their language choices, and every single Sámi word is a victory. And why do I get to attend and be part of these experiences? An outsider looking at the efforts of the kindergarten teachers will perceive and be perceived quite differently than a person sharing experiences and showing herself as vulnerable, sharing the insecurity. What has been my route from historical linguistics via the desire to study child language like a hidden ornithologist (Toulmin, 2001) to beginning to realize what I and my identity have to say for what I see? With narrative inquiry, one new insight is that my actions and my curiosity have consequences for how I see myself and how others see themselves. Acknowledging one’s own experiences as properly Sámi experiences, could contribute to strengthen the teachers’ own professional identity as the ones who transfer Sámi language and culture. Giving more attention to previously unattended experiences of Sámi teachers in the form of narrative inquiry provides a polyphonic platform to explaining or contributing to a Sámi pedagogy and culturally sustainable practices in Sámi kindergartens.

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## Notes

- 1 Translated by the author from Danish: “Når en same erindrede og mindedes, blev det ikke opfattet som ordkunst: det var teater, det var undervisning, det var en social begivenhed, tidsfordriv”.
- 2 In North Sámi, this can be expressed better, because dialogue or conversation in North Sámi can be translated as *gulahallan*, which is from the verb *gulahallat*, translating to something like *understanding each other, being able to hear each other*, and with ‘listening/hearing’ as the root (Kåven et al., 2002).
- 3 The idea of losing a language, or language loss, is described in depth in literature by indigenous peoples. Maybe it is so that another, a colonial, language can never be sufficiently strong and, thus, translating it is impossible.
- 4 “Substratum interference” is a term in the field of contact linguistics and describes how a language can influence another in a situation of imperfect learning of this language (Romaine, 1989). For discussions of this phenomenon in Norwegian Sápmi, see e.g., Hilde Sollid, 2013; Tove Bull, 2006.
- 5 This story came up at a staff meeting where we were talking about the experiences with cultural difference in child rearing, it was not part of the text she had written.

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