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From a school task to community effort: children as authors of multilingual picture books in an endangered language context

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Opening



Picture 1. The little books

This article tells the story of the journey of the little books, multimodal and multilingual picture books created by a group Sámi school children as a participatory literacy task in the context of endangered indigenous Sámi languages¹. All Sámi languages are classified as endangered and there are no monolingual Sámi speakers left. Rather, like in the case of the children in this story, Sámi languages are part of a multilingual repertoire of their users. These multilingual children are speakers of Finnish and Northern Sámi and/or Inari Sámi and to a varying degree, of other languages. As regards to Sámi languages, they are the youngest generation of the Sámi speakers, target of several language revitalisation and maintenance activities, one of which is the (mostly) Sámi medium education that they are taking part in. In this context, with the little books project, we aimed at encouraging children to make use of their existing semiotic resources, indigenous languages included, and thus to value multilingualism in their everyday lives without losing the sight of indigenous language

¹ The Sámi, who number approximately 60,000–80,000, are an indigenous people living in Scandinavia and northwest Russia. There are nine Sámi languages in all. The language with the highest number of speakers is Northern Sámi (c. 30,000 speakers), whereas other Sámi languages have as few as 250 to 400 speakers each (Aikio-Puoskari 2005; Kulonen, Seurujärvi-Kari & Pulkkinen 2005).

revitalisation. To facilitate this, we made use of a participatory literacy task in which readers are turned into authors and creators of their own learning materials.

Pedagogically, we draw on the work of Freire (1970), who emphasized the importance of people's local and personal experiences as the starting points and material for learning. Participatory pedagogy foregrounds the interaction between the learner and the broader society, the empowerment of learners, and encourages the learners' awareness of their own capacity and their ability to create new knowledge and thereby make use of their knowledge in society (Auerbach 1993, 1995; Ajayi 2008). The institutional context of multilingualism, such as L2 or CLIL classrooms, has traditionally relied on polarized binaries, boxing language into pairs of productive-receptive skills (i.e. reading-writing, speaking-listening), and dividing learners into L1 and L2 — native speakers and non-native speakers (Lotherington & Jenson 2011: 233). These concepts are epistemologically grounded in the relative fixed views on social and linguistic worlds of speech communities and on flat literacies.

In this chapter, we wish to step away from strict binaries and categorizations and aim to think out of the box. Rather than approaching languages as compartmentalized entities, we see language as resources and language use as practices, without losing sight of the role of the community and use of networks in an endangered language context (Heller 2011; Pietikäinen 2013; Pennycook 2010). With this backdrop, the project of little books was carried out. The project² lasted for one school year and it included the following steps: 1) raising multilingual awareness, 2) making the book; 3) printing the books with chosen languages, and 4) launching the books. The school where this project was carried out is a relatively small (ca. 100 pupils) multilingual primary school in the Finnish Sámiland. The languages used as the medium of education include Finnish, Northern Sámi, and Inari Sámi. The three Sámi languages spoken in Finland (i.e. Northern Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi), Swedish, and English are taught as a second, national or foreign language at the school. All the pupils are fluent speakers of Finnish, but ca. 70 % of them take part in Sámi education: about half of them take part in Sámi medium education and the rest learn Sámi as a second language. The two Sámi classrooms taking part in the book project are joint classrooms where pupils at different grades learn together in the same classroom with the same teacher, which is typical of small schools in these kinds of rural communities. The two classrooms we worked with have pupils from pre-school to the 3rd grade (i.e. 6-10 yrs) and from the 3rd to the 6th grade (i.e. 10-12 yrs). All children in these classrooms are multilingual, using at least Finnish and one of the Sámi languages in their daily lives, and many using other languages, often English or other Sámi languages, too. The language policy in the classrooms favours using Sámi language (only) for the activities, but in practice the children also use Finnish to

² We have changed the names of the children, even though as the authors of these books the children may be recognizable via their connections to the place, the books and so on. We also want to acknowledge the help and support of Brigitta Bush and Leena Huss in this project.

communicate with each other and with the children from the Finnish classrooms. Moreover, as a result of the lack of Sámi teaching and learning materials, most of the materials are in Finnish.

In the following, we will tell the story of the little books with the help of four episodes that each captures a step in the process of making and circulating these books. The analysis is based on multimodal ethnographic and discursive data and each episode starts with pictures and vignettes illustrating the activity under focus.

Episode 1: Raising multilingual awareness



Picture 2. Anna-Mari's Visualisation of multilingual repertoire

Children sit in the classroom together with the teacher and the researcher and they are colouring the human figure they were given on paper. They visualize their multilingual repertoire by colouring different parts of body of the figure, each colour representing a different language. Some add new elements (flowers, flags, a crown, face) to the figure, some

move about in the classroom and take a look at what others are doing. In the end, we form a circle and children take turns in showing their drawings to others. We talk about the languages shown on the figures, what colours have been chosen and where they are placed on the figure.

The guiding principle for the whole project was that awareness raising is essential for change in language practices. Our goals, set out together with the teachers and based on the previous discourse-ethnographic work in this school and surrounding Sámi community (Pietikäinen et al. 2008; Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta 2013), were to valorize multilingual resources at the school and, importantly, provide support for increasing value and use of indigenous languages among the children. Sometimes in endangered language contexts, multilingualism can be seen as a threat. However, in this project we start with the fact that indigenous Sámi languages are part of the multilingual repertoires of the children, and they should be seen as one resource among others. The role and status of different languages in one's repertoire can change during one's life and accordingly, the competences and intensity of use varies. Even partial competence is valuable and can be made use of in meaningful practices.

We aimed at creating activities in which children engage in personally meaningful activities and practices and thereby find a space for participation (Norton & Toohey 2001: 310; Watson-Gegeo 2004). Practices are an inherent part of certain social, historical, cultural and political contexts and learners' personal trajectories and previous experiences are central in the appropriation and transformation of practices. In addition, there is an evident scarcity of printed materials in Sámi languages and therefore we tried to find ways to develop multilingual Sámi learning materials and practices together with the teachers and pupils. What is more, literacy skills are highly valued in education in general and we wished the children to engage in these kinds of activities in the endangered language.

In practice, we started the awareness raising with a group discussion with each class (pupils, teacher, researchers on site) on the languages they come in contact with in their daily lives (hear, speak, see, read) and with whom they are using these languages. The different ways of talking and using languages were also talked about and thereby we wished to encourage the children to make a note of the various ways languages are used. The aim of the questions was to invite the children to reflect on multilingualism around them and on the position of Sámi languages in this environment.

As a way to gather information of the children and their perception of their linguistic repertoires, we asked each child to fill in a two-page background questionnaire about their background, language networks and language attitudes. One results of this questionnaire was that it shed light to a wide range of multilingualism present in the two classrooms: together these 17 children used 13 different languages and 7 imaginary languages (see below). After filling in the questionnaires and talking about language repertoires, our next activity concerned visualizing one's multilingual repertoires in a drawing task. The children were

given a white sheet of paper (A4) which had an outline of a human figure³, with the left hand raised in greeting. The children were also given plenty of crayons for colouring. The instruction guided the children to think about a language, choose a colour for it, mark it on the paper, and then colour the language on the human figure. The children started to work immediately and quite enthusiastically, which showed that drawing is a familiar practice in the classroom environment. When everyone had finished their drawing, there was a joint discussion during which everyone showed their drawing and told about the languages they had chosen to display on the figure, where they had placed them, and why. The discussion was video- and audiotaped.

The children seemed to be happy to tell about their languages and their choices regarding the colours and the placing of the languages. Together with the drawings, their accounts highlighted the multiplicity of language resources around them: while some of the languages mentioned were closely tied in with their everyday practices (e.g. Sámi language, Finnish, English) some languages were souvenirs from summer holidays (e.g. Serbian, German, Danish) or related to desires of future aspirations (e.g. Chinese). This activity also brought up the flexible, creative approach by some children towards the boundaries and categories related to languages. The next example illustrates how 9-year-old Anna-Mari explains two of the 11 languages she mentioned within her repertoire.

Extract⁴ 1. Discussion of imaginary languages

- Anna-Mari** koirakieli on tässä koska mie ymmärrän koirakieltä niiden silmistä ja luonteesta
(shows the drawing to everyone and points to one specific point in the drawing)
[dog language is here because I understand dog language from their eyes and character]
- Researcher** onko sulla esimerkkiä siitä koirakielestä kun sä itse puhut sitä?
[do you have an example of that dog language when you talk it yourself?]
- Anna-Mari** no mie haukun ja vingun ja kaikkea mitä mie osaan koirakieltä
[well I bark and whine and all that I can in dog language]
- Girl** sitten se ulvoo
[then she howls]
- Anna-Mari** ulvon kotona. siansaksa on täällä ylhäällä koska se on kaikkein helpoin kieli
[I howl at home. pig latin in up here because that's the easiest language of all]

³ We wish to thank Brigitta Busch for sharing with us this figure and practices around it. For use of this and similar kind of figures in other multilingual contexts, see e.g. Busch, Jardine and Tjoutuku (2006), Busch and Busch (2008), Krumm (2001).

⁴ The transcription conventions are (.) = pause, (word) = transcriber's comments, [word] = English translation

Anna-Mari's experience of the value and function of dog language and gibberish language gives us a glimpse of the creative take on language resources. Imaginary languages have probably always been used by children. It is a common practice of playing with language with the purpose of having fun, excluding others or strengthening group bonding (see e.g. Byrd & Mintz 2010). Anna-Mari does not want to limit her repertoire only to languages taught at school and her idea of language does not follow fixed linguistic classifications. Her account depicts creativity and invention as a resource for participation and her choices do not follow the default norms of the school or community neither normative views of multilingualism in educational institutions.

Episode 2: Designing the book



Picture 3. The Sámi version of the book by Merja

Children sit quietly in class and work on the books in a concentrated manner. Some have difficulties in deciding on the topic and the teacher helps them. All are eager to become authors for the first time and all wish to finish the task on time. The whole task appears to be a truly joint effort for the classroom.

The purpose of this step of the task was to encourage children to make use of their existing resources and thereby to show them that even limited linguistic resources can be used in creating meaningful literacy practices. Writing as a school task is not always something that pupils eagerly engage in: for younger children with limited language skills writing might be a difficult and strenuous task or writing in the classroom in general is just not a very "cool" thing to do. In these classrooms, too, there seemed to be some reluctance among some of the pupils to engage in writing in general. It appeared that writing is often associated with practicing the standard variant or drilling language structures and at times, related in particularly to writing in Sámi, writing was experienced as difficult and even boring. Therefore, we wanted to evoke a positive, "cool" spirit around this activity. The activity was

marketed to the students as a real world task in which they would become authors for the first time: they would create a book that will be printed with the name and picture of the author, there will be a book launch and circulation of the book beyond the classroom.

Designing a book represented an important and established practice for the community. Literacy, i.e. writing and printed text in this case, represents permanence, stability and transferability of knowledge and is therefore valued in indigenous communities (Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, forthcoming). For language users and learners, this task provided an opportunity to put their – sometimes limited – skills into practice in a way that would benefit the whole community and its practices and thus the process of learning an indigenous language became even more meaningful for the individual children. To ensure participation in the task, it was also important that the task was multimodal in nature, i.e. it involved both written text and drawing, as the literacy skills among the pupils varied considerably (the age range was six years). Drawing is a very common school task for children of this age and therefore its inclusion in this task was natural to all children. The children were encouraged to use whatever resources they have available and the resources might vary: some were good at writing stories and some were good at visualising. The multimodality of the task provided children with an alternative way of expressing oneself (Busch & Busch 2008, Krumm 2001, Pietikäinen & al 2008, 2012, Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta 2008).

At the beginning of the task, the pupils were given empty frames for the book, which all contained five openings with two lines on the left hand side indicating a space for the verbal story and an empty page on the right hand side meant for the drawing. The children were also given plenty of crayons for colouring the drawing. A joint decision was that the children would write the story in the Sámi language of the classroom (i.e. Northern Sámi or Inari Sámi). Designing the book took two months, as the children worked on it both in Sámi language and arts classes. This way of working seemed to fit best into the practices and routines of the classes. The teachers reported that the children worked eagerly and enthusiastically on the task throughout the two months, which a clear indication of the fact that the children considered the task an interesting and meaningful task.

The pupils were given free hands as to what kind of book they wished to design. The topics of the books were not predetermined and the children did indeed choose very different kinds of topics, with different kinds of justifications and backgrounds. Many topics seemed to simply arise from children's personal experiences, as with Petteri, who build the story around a specific kind of stick he wished to have (*no mailasta kun minä en saanu koskaan oikeanlaista mailaa [well about the stick because I never got the right kind of stick]*) or with Merja, who wrote about a miraculous night, as she had had a dream: *no ku minä nukuin sellasen ihmeellistä unta [well because I slept and had a miraculous dream]*. Some had just invented a story, as Aslak, who wrote about a cat and a dog: *noo (.) nnn no minä keksin sen [well hmm well I made it up]*. Aslak's choice for the topic was, however, also related to his personal wishes and aspirations, as he would want to have either a cat or a dog but his little brother was allergic so they could not have a pet in the house (*ku minun isä on allerginen niille ja minun pikkuveli myös--- niinku kerran joku koira nuoli minun pikkuveli Mattia kun*

minun isä veti sitä pulkassa ja Matti vaan nauroi mutta sitten sen naama vaan alko punottaa [‘cause my father is allergic to them and my little brother too --- like once when a dog licked my little brother Matti when my father dragged him in a sledge and Matti justed laughed but then his face turned red]). Some children were recycling familiar story genres, as Xia says: *se kertoo Viljamin mummosta joka on joskus ollu vanha kummitus [it tells about Viljami’s granny who has once been an old ghost].*

The next stretch of interaction serves as an illustration of participatory literacy in practice, i.e. a situation where the learners are truly involved and also take up peer teaching roles in jointly constructing the story and thus supporting each other in learning languages. The extract below takes place at the end of the joint discussion in which the pupils presented their books to each other. Riina wanted to translate her story to the researcher. Riina begins to tell her story, written in Inari Sámi, in Finnish and Merja and Aslak help her in telling the story in Finnish.

Extract 2:

- Riina** olipa kerran (.) tyttö (.) se
[once upon time there was a girl she]
- Merja** se kasvatti
[she grew]
- Riina** se halusi (.)
[she wanted to]
- Merja** (Sámi) synnyttää
[create]
- Riina** -nnyttää (.) kukan (.) sitten tyttö huo-huomasi (.) kukan (.) sitten (.) tyttö (.)
mietti (.) että (.) mitä jos (.) olisi (.) viidakko (.) ja (.) olisi (.) myös (.) lintu
[create a flower then the girl no-noticed a flower then the girl thought that
what if there was a jungle and there was also a bird]
- a section omitted**
- Riina** ja (.) minä (.) voi-sin..mennä (.) uimaan hui (unclear)
[and I could go swimming]
- Researcher** (laughs)
- Riina** hiu (.) ääk (.) Chirri (.) mitä (.) Aslak (.) mikä on (a Sámi word) suomeksi
[oh Chirri what Aslak what is (a Sámi word) in Finnish]
- Aslak** ihmettä
[on earth]
- Riina** mitä ihmettä (.) Chirrii (.) no jaa (.) ei se haittaa
[what on earth Chirrii well aha it doesn’t matter]
- Researcher** (laughs)
- Merja** Chirri on minun koira
[Chirri is my dog]

In Extract 2, we can see how Riina starts the story and twice at the beginning Merja fills in and offers Riina the right verbs. Later Riina asks Aslak for help with a Sámi word and Aslak helps her. This piece of interaction shows how this project was not only about the final product – the self-created material – but also about providing opportunities for student collaboration and shared knowledge building/learning, thus strengthening participatory pedagogical practices.

Episode 3: Choosing the languages

Bordes collie lái vájáduttán sa
lijii kávkán westie lái fáo

Bordercollie lái vájáduttám. Saavzah lijii kávkám. Westie lái fá
Bordercollie lei vájáduttán. Sávvzat ledje gávkán. Westie lei miehde.
Bordercollien hade glömt. Fåren hade rymt. Westien var med.
The bordercollie had forgotten. The sheep had run away. Westie was with them.



Picture 4 The Inari Sámi storyline (*The bordercollie had forgotten. The sheep had run away. Westie was with them*) with translations into Northern Sámi, Swedish and English.

Children sit in the classroom together with the teachers and the researcher and talk about the books and the languages they wish to choose for the translations of the story in the books. When the books are finished, each child author is photographed, as the purpose is to include the picture of the author at the back cover of the book. After the activity is finished in the school, it spreads into the Sámi community and into the research community, as the teachers and the researcher start to search for translators.

In this step of the activity we could see language policies as local practices. Children's and teachers' negotiations on what languages to include and children's explanations concerning their choices were prime examples of local language policy. In order to further encourage children to recognize and reflect on their multilingual resources, they were again given free hands as to what languages they wish to include in their books in addition to the two Sámi languages – Northern Sámi and Inari Sámi that were spoken in the classrooms. This language policy decision of including the two Sámi languages was made jointly with the teachers at the beginning. This policy reflects partly the institutional conditions and partly the emerging practices of the two classrooms according to which teachers use both Northern Sámi and Inari

Sámi when talking to these pupils. The linguistic closeness of these two Sámi languages makes this relatively easy and feasible. This situated negotiation of language policy is an instance of official and unofficial language policies becoming practices in the local situations.

Within these local conditions, the children were given space to choose freely the languages they wished their stories to be translated into. In the following extract, the teachers, researcher and children talk about the possible languages in translations.

Extract 3

- researcher** ehotelkaa vaan (.) se on teiän kirja
[just make suggestions it's your book]
- Petteri** kaikki saamen kielet
[all Sámi languages]
- researcher** se on hurjan hieno ajatus
[that's a really great idea]
- Lasse** japani
[Japanese]
(laughter)
- researcher** (laughs)
- Lasse** kiina se oli
[it was Chinese]

At the beginning of Extract 3, the researcher prompts the pupils to suggest languages for the translations. Petteri's quick response to the researcher's prompt may tell about his awareness of the expected response in this particular situation: this is a school task and the institutional expectation is to promote Sámi languages in all situations. This is what Petteri wishes to adhere to in this situation, perhaps to show that he is a good student and he knows what is appropriate behaviour in this kind of situation. Lasse's response, however, to include Japanese (or Chinese) points to his wish to set himself apart from the official language policy and include something exotic and unexpected.

Similarly to the initial language awareness tasks, invented languages are included in the languages the children wish their stories to be translated into. Saarakaisa suggest that Pig Latin and I-language should be included (*siansaksaksi* (.) *i-kielellä* [*pig latin i-language*]) in translations and later she adds Kontti-language. What is also interesting is Saarakaisa's suggestion of mixed languages: *tai sitte semmosia jossa ois sekakieliä* [*or then such where there would be mixed languages*].

Literacy practices are deeply networked (e.g. Barton & Hamilton 1998) and very often a community effort, especially when vernacular literacies are involved (Jones et al. 2001). Here, too, the community was involved in the process of translating the little stories and the participants used their networks to find people who were able to do this. When the decision on the languages to be included in the book were made in class, the teachers and the

researcher set out to find translators. The teachers did the Northern Sámi and Inari Sámi translations as standard written versions, and found a translator for Skolt Sámi in the community. To respond to Petteri's request to have his text translated into as many Sámi languages as possible, we found the translators for Kildin Sámi and Umeå Sámi through our research network. Similarly, the translations into various other languages (e.g. Swedish, Russian, Spanish, French, Norwegian) were translated either by team members or our colleagues at Department of Languages at the University of Jyväskylä. The translation into Chinese was done by a daughter-in-law of one of the team members. This was a process of community effort and crowd sourcing.

Episode 4: Launching the books



Picture 5. The Launch party

At the book launch party, the children came one by one to receive their copies of the book, and then joined a happily chatting group of children, who were eating snacks, drinking lemonade and comparing their books.

The materiality of the books was paid special attention to, as it was a central element in turning the school activity into a published book, thus valuing the vernacular mundane practices. The printing process involved several steps. After the translations came in, the original books were taken into a printing house. The books were printed on thick cardboard to make them look and feel like real books. All the different translations with their varying orthographies were typeset and the picture of the author was placed at the back cover.

After the printing process, the books were circulated to their readers within and outside of the school. First a book launch party was organized in the classrooms and each author was given author copies of the book. Invitations to the launch were also sent to local media, and the children and the researcher were interviewed by local journalists in the radio and Sámi television news. Copies of the books were also given to the teaching material section of the

Sámi parliament and a few months later more books were printed as the parliament wanted to send a set of copies of these books to every Sámi classroom in Finland.

The move from an institutional space of the school into the spaces of the children's home, the local media, and the Sámi political space gave the books their final legitimation as "real" books and to the children as "real" authors. The journey of these little books from the classroom into the public transforms the school task into a community effort with a potentially big impact.

Closing



Picture 6. Printed book by Jenna, ready for circulation

These books provide us a small scale model of participatory literacy. In this model, the organizing principle was to provide such practices in such spaces that invite and strengthen children's participation. In this case study, this was achieved by giving children free hands to make use of their multilingual repertoires in a way they saw fit in that particular situation, while at the same time respecting the institutional conditions and practices. Another crucial aspect of this model was to give multimodality a central role. An equally important aspect of the model was to take the materiality of the books seriously thus making it a permanent outcome of otherwise unrecognized and developing practice. Furthermore it facilitates the circulation of the participatory practice beyond the classroom. Finally, the book was made into a community effort. With the help of these elements of the model, we aimed at bypassing fixed views of language, competence, proficiency, and skills and give space for creating literacy practices that are meaningful both for the individuals and the community.

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