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“I sámifize it...”

Preschool in the Centre of South Sámi Language and Culture Learning in Norway

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Abstract

For an Indigenous population, there is a need for an inclusive educational space from the language and culture revitalisation perspective. This is especially important during the early years when the basics of the language are formed alongside cultural knowledge. This paper takes a closer look at a South Sámi preschool language learning environment through the lenses of teachers. The South Sámi (South Saami) is the southernmost Sámi population, frequently described as a minority within the minority. The estimation for South Sámi speakers in Norway is around 300, making the language severely endangered. This paper aims to take a closer look at how early childhood education teachers describe the South Sámi language learning space in their preschool environment. For this study, in total, three preschool teachers from a South Sámi preschool were interviewed. This textual data were analysed with content analysis. According to the results, the early childhood education in South Sámi context was seen as an important inclusive language and culture revitalising space with a clear societal responsibility.

Keywords

Sámi; indigenous; education; language learning; culture

Introduction

In today's world, the ability to speak languages is a critical skill. According to Saltzburg Statement (2018), all 193 United Nations (UN) member states and most people living in them are multilingual. Around 7100 languages are spoken across the world, and around 2500 of these are endangered. Thus, millions of people across the globe are denied their inherent right to maintain, enjoy and develop their language of identity and community. There is a clear need for policies and practices that support different languages in societies and give individuals their right to learn and maintain their language(s). This is due to the fact that language(s) are fundamental to an individual's identity as well as an important contributor to social cohesion.

An important underlying framework for this paper is the linguistic and cultural exclusion of Sámi languages in Norway throughout its history. However, according to Shchukina et al. (2019, p.192), it seems that among the states where the Sami people live, it is Norway's legislation that provides the largest degree of self-government and the possibility of enjoying cultural rights, including teaching the Sami language and its preservation. Further, the Norwegian public policy towards the Sámi population has reached a new level which can now be characterised as cultural pluralism. Albury (2016) argues against this and points out that the policy rhetoric indeed promises that all Sámi have a right to develop their home language, and that all Norwegian children will become familiar with Sámi languages and culture, but the rhetoric has not been operationalised to benefit all Sámi nor promote Norwegian familiarity with the languages.

This study has been conducted in the aforementioned Norwegian context, where many language and culture related discrepancies exist on all levels of society; in rhetoric, in policies and in practices. More closely defined, this study has been conducted in a small rural Indigenous preschool called *Suaja maanagierte* located in a school centre in Norway, in the southernmost part of Saepmie.¹ The estimation of South Sámi speakers in Norway is around 300 (Ethnologue database, 2020), making the language severely endangered (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], n.d.; Cocq, 2012).² Therefore, this study has been conducted in an educational space that is the last frontier fighting for the cultural and linguistic existence of the South Sámi Indigenous population. In this educational space, we wanted to take a closer look at how early childhood education (ECE) teachers describe the South Sámi language learning environment in their ECE working context. The data was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews during fall 2019, with three preschool teachers, and analysed by way of content analysis. We will start this paper by describing the Indigenous Sámi context of Norway in order to give readers an understanding of the history and the exclusive practices. We will, however, also give readers an understanding of the policies of

¹ Saepmie, the land of the Sámi (South Sámi; in North Sámi: Sápmi)

² There are no reliable official statistics on the number of speakers of the Sámi languages, and therefore all numbers are estimates. The estimation for South Sámi speakers in Norway is around 300 (Ethnologue database, 2018).

today's Norway. *Then*, we move on to describing what language revitalisation is and what type of pedagogical practices support language maintenance and learning. After that, the data and methods are introduced, as well as the most important findings. This paper will conclude with a discussion on perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in the paper will conclude with a discussion on perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in the South Sámi ECE language learning environment through the lenses of teachers. This research paper was conducted as a part of a research project called *How to support language learners in South Sámi language? A study of teachers' competence in instructional practices* and it was funded by the Regional Research Fund (Regionale forskningsfond, RFF Trøndelag), Norway.

Sámi Indigenous context in Norway

The Sámi is the Indigenous people of Fennoscandia (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Northwest-Russia). Although most of the nine Sámi languages spoken today are not mutually intelligible and the population inhabit a vast area across four different states, the Sámi is one people or nation sharing common cultural, historical and linguistic roots. (Hermanstrand et al., 2019). Throughout the 19th century to the end of the 20th century, the Sámi population was subject to extensive assimilation/segregation policies by the respective majority governments.³ The assimilation period in Norway is often referred to as the Norwegianization policy as its main aim was to initiate a language and cultural shift among the Sámi, making them fully Norwegian in terms of language, culture and customs. This policy was primarily conducted through the school system. Many Sámi children were enrolled in boarding schools where speaking Sámi was restrained (Niemi, 2017, p. 131-152). The Norwegianization policy was officially abolished by the early 1960s, but the effects are long-lasting (Minde, 2003). In many areas, the language was not passed on to the younger generation at all in the post-war years, e.g. in the coastal areas of Northern Norway and in many South Sámi families (Minde, 2003). However, in Southern Saepmie, the language survived in many of the reindeer herding families where the language has been a strong cultural marker and working language (Jernsletten, 1993, p. 126).

In spite of governmentally funded efforts to revitalise the Sámi languages for the past decades, only around 30% of the Sámi speak Sámi today (based on figures in the Ethnologue database, Vangsnes, 2018). Still, the Sámi population, in spite of the assimilation policies of the past centuries, have managed to maintain a unified culture, e.g. by constituting a Sámi parliament, Sámi institutions and national symbols (Keskitalo et al., 2012). The language situation, however, poses specific educational challenges (Keskitalo et al., 2012; Albury, 2016).

¹ In Sweden, the policy towards the Sámi population was part assimilation, part segregation. The so-called "Lapp shall be Lapp" policy was aimed at the nomadic, reindeer herding part of the Sámi population, who were supposed to be conserved and protected from the majority society. The other Sámi were not considered Sámi (Koch, 2016, p. 125)

The South Sámi is the southernmost population, frequently described as a minority within the minority (Hermanstrand et al., 2019). The traditional land of the South Sámi covers large areas in Mid-Scandinavia (Sweden and Norway), and there are very few public arenas where the language can be used on a daily basis. It means that the language is primarily used within the family and a few other traditionally Sámi domains (Johansen, 2019). In Norway, the Sámi Act of 1987 states that Norwegian and Sámi are official languages and they should be used on equal terms in the municipalities belonging to the Sámi administrative area. At present (2020), there are four municipalities in which South Sámi is an official language; Snåsa is one of them (Sámi Act, 1987, § 1.5, Chapter 3; Regulations of the Sámi Act, 2018; Education Act, 2020).

The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Task of Kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) highlights the special position of the minorities with an official status. According to this plan and the Kindergarten Act (2005), “Sámi kindergartens shall promote the children’s Sámi language skills, strengthen their Sámi identity and promote Sámi values”. In these kindergartens/preschools, Sámi is the main language of instruction. However, these documents do not elaborate on what Sámi culture is and what traditional learning and working methods are. Therefore, the Sámi preschools might interpret it differently, even if the Framework Plan for the Content and Task of Kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) states that “Sámi kindergarten children shall be supported in preserving and developing their language, their knowledge and their culture irrespective of where in Norway they live.” (p. 25).

A major challenge is the lack of qualified teachers speaking fluent South Sámi, inside as well as outside the South Sámi administrative area. In primary and secondary education, this is partly solved through various forms of distance education. Other challenges are connected to adequate teaching material but also, according to Keskitalo et al. (2012) to the need of developing an education paradigm that aligns with the requirements of the Sámi community. There is (Keskitalo et al., 2012, p. 59) a need to transform the Sámi community’s own culture and tradition, its values, stories, expectations, norms, roles, ceremonies, and rituals into school knowledge which would improve multiculturalism and the inclusion of Sámi culture in schools where Sámi curriculum would be utilised. The same would indeed be the case also for the early childhood education context.

Language revitalisation in an early childhood context

This study has been conducted in the preschool *Suaja maanagierte*, the only in the world dedicated primarily to teaching South Sámi. The preschool is a part of a centre also comprising a primary and secondary school (called *Aarjel-saemiej skuvle*) and a dormitory for children travelling to school from further away. Children come to this South Sámi centre from the entire Norway and Sweden. Due to diversified backgrounds, children have varying educational needs regarding the development and maintenance of their language and culture. Therefore, this Indigenous educational context has an important role in maintaining as well as developing children’s language and cultural knowledge. According to Maher and Buxton (2015), the educational success in settings like this is about making Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, the key components of learning opportunities provided to the children, supporting awareness of their social and cultural heritage.

Across the world, language extinction is fought with the help of language revitalisation. According to Sarivaara et al. (2013, p. 14) language revitalisation refers to a process with different actions that aim at revitalising a language in areas where it is in danger of disappearing, and it supports the vitality of the language. The purpose is, therefore, to increase the number of language speakers of an endangered language and widen the domains of using the language. Language revitalisation is a complex and multidimensional process that includes both societal and individual action. Sarivaara et al. (2013, p. 14) describe this process as following:

“At the societal level, language revitalisation is connected to the national and international legislation and cultural policy. Whereas at the individual level, language revitalisation is affected by attitudes, cultural heritage, and circumstances in which the speakers of the language live.”

Therefore, when we talk about revitalisation of an endangered language, we are not only operating with local processes, we also need to pay attention to history, practices, policies, beliefs etc., affecting the possibilities to learn a language and to maintain it.

Supporting Indigenous language learning in practice

Revitalising actions on the practical level are connected with the individual pedagogy used in the preschool context. This is especially important during the early years when the basics of the language are formed. Children speaking Indigenous language have often limited exposure possibilities to their heritage language and therefore have varying educational needs regarding the development and maintenance of it. Different educational programmes have been developed for Indigenous children and youth across the globe, for their language and culture revitalisation. One of these programs is a so-called language nest programme. Äärelä (2016) has studied Sámi language nest programmes where the North-Sámi language and culture are the objects of revitalisation. A language nest is an ECE space, where regular early childhood education and care is provided, but where children can learn about the Sámi language and culture. Pedagogical practices regarding children's language in language nests are close to language immersion practices (Äärelä, 2016; see also Harju-Luukkainen, 2007). In language immersion, like in language nest programmes, teachers use a variety of instructional practices in order to support children's language acquisition as well as to scaffold their understanding (see e.g. Snow, 1990; García, 2009; Baker, 2011; Laurén, 2000; Bergroth and Björklund, 2013; Harju-Luukkainen, 2007; Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2019). Harju-Luukkainen (2007, 139) has developed a model on the different instructional practices for immersion contexts. This model is based on a review of both national and international literature. According to Harju-Luukkainen (2007), a leading idea in immersion education is to incorporate a high language intensity, use a wide variety of language-rich teaching materials, and pedagogical activities (e.g. play-based learning, drama-based pedagogy, technology-supported learning and music-based pedagogy), where the instruction is done through the medium of the immersion language (see Baker, 2011; Harju-Luukkainen, 2007). The teacher's task is to ensure that the language is introduced and used in various situations as well as on a linguistically appropriate level for the children. A variety of language learning opportunities should be provided, including a number of songs and stories embedded in the daily routines (see also Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Since the teachers serve as linguistic role models for the particular language, the way they use the language – in terms of vocabulary and children's exposure to verbal communication and interaction, for instance – is highly significant (see also Savijärvi,

2011). Certain daily routines can be harnessed to serve the language acquisition process; for example, singing a song while helping children get dressed, or a morning circle conducted similarly every day. Such routines help children not only to acquire the language but also to guess and predict the forthcoming content, even if they would not yet understand everything the teacher is saying. The parental collaboration is also of importance when the children are learning a language (Harju-Luukkainen, 2007). However, when we are talking about endangered languages, according to Äärelä's results (2016), the language nest programme would need a common framework with curriculum guidelines as well as material that is based on the Sámi culture. Also, the language nest teachers expressed a lack of connections to the immediate surrounding community and other interest groups.

There are several reasons for families to prefer Indigenous-specific childcare for their children. Sims et al. (2012) highlight that what Indigenous families are looking for in a childcare service, and what attracts Indigenous families to Indigenous-specific services, rests upon a set of core principles. These include 1) preference for Indigenous staff working with Indigenous families in order for families to feel culturally secure, 2) the services to be culturally inclusive, 3) that services are tailored to fit the specific needs of the community, and 4) that family- and community- centred practice forms the basis of that service. These communities become spaces for Indigenous families to express their culture and maintain the language. According to Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020), preschool teachers in Indigenous settings can, with their ways of working with parents, create an open arena for children and families to learn the Indigenous language. It is, however, important to note, regarding the Sámi context, that the language is not the only revitalisation object. Sámi language is always connected with Sámi culture and the ways the language is supported and strengthened (Äärelä, 2016).

Data and methods

This study was conducted in Norway in a South Sámi preschool. In total, three teachers from this preschool were interviewed during fall 2019, with the help of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were between 57 to 66 minutes in length. The questions were connected to teacher's practices connected to language teaching, focusing on the following themes: strategies used in language learning, verbal, visual and non-verbal; challenges in South Sámi language learning and priorities in language learning. The entire textual data was analysed with the help of content analysis. According to Weber (1990), content analysis may address language, content meaning, techniques of communication, specific events, or all of these simultaneously. In this study, the focus of the content analysis was the textual data developed from the interviews. According to Gray and Densten (1998), content analysis examines patterns and structures from textual data and selects out key features that researchers want to pay attention to, develops categories and aggregates them into perceptual constructs in order to grasp the meaning. In this study, the first step in the analysis was transcribing the interviews verbatim. Then, the research team read through all the transcripts in order to get an overview of the data. After that, phase preliminary themes were aggregated. In the next step, the research team looked for meaning units (sentences or paragraphs) describing the phenomenon studied. After this, codes were generated describing how the teachers talked about language learning in their teaching context. These codes were then studied more closely and thematically sorted into three main categories. The thematic coding was reviewed and reorganised where needed by the research group members, and finally, names that best described the themes were defined.

Since this study was conducted in a South Sámi context and the researchers did not speak the language, all interviews were conducted in Norwegian. However, it is important to note that the teachers in the preschool considered themselves as bilinguals, hence fluent Norwegian speakers. The transcribed interviews were then translated into English. As regards ethical considerations, this study adheres to the international and national guidelines for research ethics, including those set by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (2019), with special considerations to research with Indigenous people (defined by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2019). The research team has provided its participants with adequate information about the field of research at the beginning of the study; the purpose of the research; who will receive access to the information; the intended use of the results, and the consequences of the research project. The research team also respected participants' autonomy, integrity, freedom and right for co-determination. The participants could choose if they wanted to participate in the study and they were able to determine their participation at any time. The data has been processed in such a way that personal matters and information was kept confidential.

Results

In this section, the results of our analysis will be presented. We will present how teachers in ECE described the South Sámi language and learning environment. The results are divided into the following three main categories. These are: 1) Teaching and learning a language simultaneously 2) Preschool as the main arena for South Sámi language learning and 3) Culture as a pedagogical tool supporting South Sámi language learning. The first category, called *Teaching and learning a language simultaneously*, refers to teachers' competence in South Sámi. Most of the teachers were not native speakers, and therefore have a continuous need to develop their vocabulary and language skills in South Sámi (side by side with the children). The second category, called *Preschool as the main arena for South Sámi language learning*, refers to the fact that for most of the children, the preschool context was the only arena for South Sámi language learning, giving teachers an important social responsibility towards the South Sámi community. The third category, called *Culture as a pedagogical tool supporting South Sámi language learning*, refers to how the ECE teachers used the South Sámi culture and tradition as pedagogical tools in order to support children's language learning.

*In the next section we will present each category in more detail, as well as quotes from the interviews in order to support the findings of this study. The quotes have been translated from Norwegian into English by the authors of this paper.***4.1 Teaching and learning a language simultaneously**

Teachers serve as linguistic role models in the South Sámi language. The way they use the language in terms of vocabulary and children's exposure to verbal communication and interaction is highly significant regarding children's language learning (Savijärvi, 2011; Harju-Luukkainen, 2007). To learn a language in an environment where there are no or very few teachers that speak the language fluently, is challenging for the individual teacher but also for the revitalisation of South Sámi (see also Sarivaara et al., 2013). One of the ECE teachers stated that: "*Almost none of us has got South Sámi as our mother tongue.*", referring to the people working at the school centre. This is an important statement indicating that the ECE teachers in this South Sámi context are also language learners and also struggling alongside the children to acquire and use the Indigenous language. The ECE teachers

interviewed were, however, very aware of this challenge and had found ways to overcome these challenges.

The teachers highlighted that speaking South Sámi sometimes requires more effort for them than, for instance, speaking Norwegian. They easily switched into speaking Norwegian with each other, even though they described their effort was to keep all conversations in South Sámi when they are together with the children. Likewise, one-teacher-one language approach is pursued in language immersion (Harju-Luukkainen, 2007). However, there were situations where the teachers worried that their own limitation as well as children's limitations in the South Sámi language might lead to misunderstandings. One of the teachers described this situation as following:

“As Norwegian is my mother tongue, and if I am busy, then I have to think harder, and that sometimes takes longer. I know all the regular phrases and things, but sometimes I worry, do the children understand what I am saying? That's sometimes challenging.”

The teachers talked about how working with the younger children sometimes was easier regarding South Sámi language, and how they had experienced situations where the children in the preschool almost had caught up with the teachers' South Sámi language competence. Further, they described situations where they have had to ask the older children in the preschool for help regarding a definition of a word they did not know. Therefore, all interviewed teachers talked about their own limitations when it comes to vocabulary and how they had tried to overcome this challenge. According to one teacher, not having South Sámi as a mother tongue makes the teachers try harder to widen their vocabulary, as following:

“If I don't have the words I have to work to improve, I need to find the right words so that the lack of vocabulary doesn't hinder me from using the language just because my South Sámi is limited.”

These linguistic challenges were well understood by the preschool organisation. To overcome these challenges, extra staff who were native speakers of South Sámi were employed. They were called language workers in the ECE environment. Their job was to support children's South Sámi language skills and thereby strengthen the vulnerable language environment. This extra linguistic resource was described as crucially important and a motivator not just for the children, but also for the teachers, when it came to keeping the learning environment mainly South Sámi.

“We sometimes need a kick in the butt as our motivation [to speak South Sámi] varies, at these times it is important to have a language motivator [talking about the language workers] to keep us on -track.”

4.2 Preschool as the main arena for South Sámi language learning

One of the biggest challenges with South Sámi, being a severely endangered language, is what the ECE teachers described as a lack of arenas to observe and practice the language outside of the location of the preschool and school that they are collocated with. This is something that was also described as crucial in Äärelä's results (2016). Further, a variety of language learning opportunities should be embedded in the daily activities (see also Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Swain, 1999), which was seen as challenging due to lack of South Sámi

language arenas. One of the teachers described the differences between a regular Norwegian ECE environment and the South Sámi context as following:

“Not having the language spoken in the local community is in my opinion one of the main differences between North and South Sámi language learning environments.”

The teachers described that it is unlikely that the children will hear spoken South Sámi if they go out on excursions to the local community. However, the teachers described how important it is to utilise the few existing arenas that are available for them. One of the most accessible ones, was the reindeer fence.

“When we go to the reindeer fence [where they meet the reindeer herder] we always know that the children will have the opportunity to practice their South Sámi.”

As the reindeers migrate from area to area, and it is hard for anyone to know exactly when the herder will arrive with the reindeers, the teachers described a need for pedagogical flexibility and spontaneity in their practices, in order to be able to utilise these important language meetings. This also meant that the reindeer herding as an arena for language acquisition is described as only occasional and not a daily or a weekly activity.

Preschool was, for most of the children, the only arena for learning the South Sámi language. The teachers described that most of the children do not get language exposure in their home environment as their parents might not have had the opportunity to learn South Sámi themselves, or maybe only one of the parents speaks South Sámi. Therefore, the teachers talked about how the preschool is an important or even the only arena that prepares children for the language they will meet when going to school. Further, the teachers described that, with more South Sámi language knowledge, the children will succeed in the school environment as well. For instance, children were described as more confident language users now than they used to be before the establishment of the South Sámi preschool.

“They [the children in school] know much more South Sámi now than what they used to do before the preschool was established.”

As an example, one of the teachers also emphasised how starting in preschool at the age of one or two gives a unique opportunity for the teachers to ensure that the children have a solid base in the South Sámi language that can be passed on. She described the children as language carriers and that the language teaching is her social responsibility as following: *“Thinking of the children and creating language carriers, essentially, that is our social responsibility.”* Therefore, the teacher was aware of her role in the language revitalisation of South Sámi. Sarivaara et al. (2013) describe that the language revitalisation is on individual level connected to attitudes, cultural heritage, and circumstances in which the speakers of the language live.

4.3 Culture as a pedagogical tool supporting South Sámi language learning

The language is not the only revitalisation object in the South Sámi context. Sámi language is always connected with Sámi culture and the ways the language is supported and strengthened (Äärelä, 2016). When talking about the language learning environment, the

ECE teachers talked about the importance of using the Sámi culture and traditions as pedagogical tools, but at the same time, they talked about the importance of not only teaching the children words connected to culture and traditions, but also make them able to express themselves in young people's colloquial language, i.e. keeping the language vital and alive. This is in line with Maher and Buxton (2015) who stated that the educational success in settings like these is about making Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing the key components of learning opportunities provided to the children, supporting awareness of their social and cultural heritage. One of the teachers talked about a concept called "*sámifization*", where traditional Norwegian teaching methods or activities are used to bring in materials and concepts more closely related to the Sámi culture or traditions, teaching the children traditional words that they might not learn from other places:

"It is actually a typical Norwegian activity, or it has nothing to do with the Sámi (context), but that I use Sámi language when we do that activity so I sámifize it...". The teacher continues further, "I believe for some of the children they will not be familiar with these words ... words that exist in the language but aren't that widely used anymore."

As a result of this, the teachers talked about how they have the opportunity to use language teaching in the preservation of the Sámi culture. They explained how they teach the children about the South Sámi culture and traditions through what they described as "*learning by doing*". They saw that it was important to teach children words regarding traditional activities, such as how to prepare the reindeer meat, how to make a lavvu (Sámi tent), how to herd reindeer, how to prepare leather, while doing these hands-on activities. With the help of these activities they were able to explore the richness of the South Sámi language and culture when it comes to expressions regarding nature and natural phenomena together with the children. As one of the teachers expressed: "*The active use of culture and traditions gives us numerous ways to teach the children the language.*". Even though the teachers focused on the importance of learning a language through cultural and traditional activities, they understood that the language needs to be adapted to what young people want to communicate nowadays. One of the teachers expressed it as following:

"It's all about talking, making the language live, it doesn't help to have all kinds of books and traditional things if the language isn't vital" and further, "Of course it is important to preserve the language, but we need for it to keep developing as well."

Discussion

The estimated number of South Sámi speakers in Norway is around 300 (Ethnologue database, 2018), which makes the language severely endangered (UNESCO, n.d.; Cocq, 2012). For this reason, an important underlying framework for this paper has been the linguistic and cultural exclusion of Sámi languages in Norway, throughout its history. According to Shchukina et al. (2019, p.192), Norway's legislation provides the largest degree of self-government and the possibility of enjoying cultural rights, including teaching the Sami language and its preservation. Further, they argue that Norwegian public policy towards the Sami population has reached a new level which can now be characterised as cultural pluralism. Albury (2016) argues against this and points out that the policy rhetoric has not been operationalised to benefit all Sámi nor promote Norwegian familiarity with the languages. This study was conducted in this discrepancy of claims, in an environment

where a need for pedagogical actions regarding Sámi language learning was expressed clearly (Äärelä, 2016). Sarivaara et al. (2013, p. 14) describe that the revitalisation process is connected to the national and international legislation and policy. Whereas at the individual level, language revitalisation is affected by attitudes, cultural heritage, and circumstances in which the speakers of the language live. This study was situated on the individual language and cultural revitalisation level, but which was strongly affected by the policy and legislation of Norway through the policy documents. In this study, three teachers from a South Sámi preschool were interviewed. With the help of content analysis three categories emerged, each describing what was characteristic to the language and cultural learning environment in a South Sámi preschool, according to the teachers. These were 1) Teaching and learning a language simultaneously, 2) Preschool as a crucial arena for South Sámi language learning, and 3) Culture as a pedagogical tool supporting South Sámi language learning.

According to the results, the early childhood education context was described by the teachers as an isolated space in Norway, fighting for the cultural and linguistic existence of the South Sámi population. The teachers had limited knowledge in the South Sámi language, but they had found ways to navigate around these challenges. The children were seen as important language carriers for the next generation and teachers as important linguistic and cultural mediators. The Sámi population has been subject to extensive assimilation/segregation policies by the majority government. The assimilation period in Norway is often referred to as the Norwegianization policy as its main aim was to initiate a language and cultural shift among the Sámi, making them fully Norwegian in terms of language, culture and customs. In this preschool, the teachers had transformed Norwegian educational activities and “Sámified” them in order to integrate the South Sámi language and culture into everyday pedagogical activities. According to Maher and Buxton (2015), the educational success in settings like this is about making Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing the key components of learning opportunities provided to the children, supporting awareness of their social and cultural heritage, something that was highlighted at the preschool of *Suaja maanagierte* in the South Sámi context. The teachers were aware of the need to integrate a variety of language learning opportunities into the daily activities (see also Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Swain, 1999). Therefore, they had found creative ways to incorporate language and culture into the pedagogical activities (like making a lavvu), despite challenges in finding societal arenas in which to practice the language.

For an Indigenous population, there is a need of an inclusive educational space from the language and culture revitalisation perspective. This is especially important during the early years, when the basics of the language are formed alongside cultural knowledge. Teachers are the forefront fighters in this revitalisation work, serving as linguistic and cultural role models in terms of vocabulary and children’s exposure to verbal communication and cultural interaction. The way teachers integrate language and culture, expose children to a variety of linguistic arenas to observe and to practice the language outside of the location of the preschool is highly significant. It is all significant since it correlates with the child’s later linguistic and cultural competence, which in turn is fundamental to the individual’s identity and future learning. Language is a vital part of human connection, a human right.

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