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Sami perspectives in school leadership? Conspicuous by their absence!

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Susanne Sahlin

My understanding of Sami perspectives has been shaped through discussions with friends and colleagues, my experiences in the national principal training program as an educator, and exposure to Sami jojk and literature in Sweden. Contributing as an author to this article enabled me to learn more about Sami peoples, specifically their history and present circumstances relating to education. Additionally, my Swedish university has begun to take responsibility for Sami education and research, functioning as a university in Sápmi. If I, as a well-educated academic and teacher with access to knowledge and the ability to share it with others, do not act as a role model, can I truly expect that from others?

Sandra Lund

As an educator on the National Principal Training Program at a Southern Sami university, it has struck me how little we talk about Sami issues. We as academics do not address these issues, but nor do our students, who are all school leaders. Sami-perspectives are essentially a non-issue, something outside the discussions that shape the professional school leader. Do we risk reproducing and reinforcing colonial values or can we as educators, with an awareness of Sami perspectives and cultures, change the discourses that are established in education?

Mari-Ana Jones

There needs to be a point of departure, and for us, this article is our beginning. The more I read about and discuss Sami cultures and perspectives relating to education and leadership, the more I realise how uninformed I am, but also how little knowledge has been formalised and shared. In my work with school leaders in Sami areas, I am continually shocked and surprised by the prevalence of prejudices towards Sami peoples. As a researcher and educator of educational leaders I have a role and a responsibility: to challenge existing discourses and participate actively in creating new, richer perspectives.

Sami perspectives in school leadership? Conspicuous by their absence!

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Abstract

"Why is it so difficult to get the Sami teachers to come to staff meetings?" asked one school leader in Norway. Imbued with frustration and suspicion, this question highlights the difficulties with ongoing reconciliation work with Sami peoples in schools in Norway and Sweden, confirmed by our experiences as educators of school leaders and by an exploration of existing policy and literature. There is a lack of understanding of the needs and interests of school communities situated in Sami districts. Dominant knowledge about school leadership in Norway and Sweden takes no account of Sami perspectives and school leaders are not afforded opportunities to develop the necessary culturally sensitive understandings. We propose that researchers should focus more on the vital work of school leaders, seeking to create knowledge and practices which support, rather than hinder, reconciliation.

Keywords: school leadership, leadership preparation, Indigenous perspectives, Sami peoples

How could we not have known?

In recent years, internationally, there has been considerable growth in the production of knowledge about Indigenous perspectives in education. This knowledge has been primarily produced by researchers situated in North America, Australia and New Zealand (Althaus and O'Faircheallaigh, 2019); very little comes from the Nordic region. We first became aware of this issue in our partnership work with schools. We are educational researchers situated in Norway and Sweden, with responsibility for school leadership education programmes at our respective universities. During a visit to one school in a Sami district in Norway, the headteacher asked us, "Why is it so difficult to get the Sami teachers to come to staff meetings?", expressing frustration and suspicion about perceived differences in their teachers' attitudes. Reflecting on this afterwards, we realised (with some horror) that we had no knowledge of the professional needs of Sami teachers, or the competences needed to lead schools in Sami districts or with Sami students. Furthermore, we had no insight into the ways in which leading in schools is framed from Sami perspectives. We use the term 'Sami perspectives' as a catch-all term for the fundamental ways in which Sami peoples understand, inhabit and construct the world: Sami onto-epistemologies. Being aware of the ongoing impact of prejudice towards Sami peoples in Norway and

Sweden, we began to question our conceptualisation of school leadership, keen to further our own understandings and to explore existing literature to see how we might develop our work with school leaders in Sweden and Norway.

From a report published by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Solstad et al., 2010) we learned that the school leaders who were interviewed either had little knowledge of and/or did not prioritise the Sami national curriculum or Sami language learning. There has been important work done by Balto and Østmo (2009), who interweave Sami perspectives with pedagogical practices and highlight the importance of knowledge, understanding and cultural sensitivity among school leaders. We found, however, no evidence of a discourse about how school leaders might understand or work according to Sami perspectives or how they can contribute to ongoing reconciliation work. Stunned by this, we felt compelled to write this article. We begin by describing past and current Sami education policy in Norway and Sweden, highlighting positive developments as well as continuing shortcomings. In the absence of research from our contexts, we explore a selection of relevant publications which demonstrate the vital role of school leaders in reconciliation work in other contexts whilst also underlining the lack of culturally and contextually sensitive knowledge and practices relating to Sami perspectives in school leadership.

Sami and Sápmi in education policy in Norway and Sweden

Sápmi is the geographical area originally inhabited by the Sami peoples. It stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, and continues to be known by some as *Lapland*, an outdated and pejorative term. Sami peoples are not homogenous; individuals choose to identify as Sami based on various factors, including heritage, language, and culture. There are no official statistics on the number of Sami people in Sápmi or in other areas of the world, but estimates suggest that there are approximately 80 000 to 100 000 worldwide, with the majority living in Norway (Skiphamn, 2021). In Norway, Sami peoples have the status of Indigenous peoples, in Sweden they are one of several national minorities.

Past uses of education as a tool for oppression in Norway and Sweden have led to deep trauma among Sami peoples (Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen [Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Norway], 2023). The Education Union (2023) writes that schools and teachers had significant roles in the realisation of 'Norwegianisation' policies directed towards Sami peoples in Norway since the 19th century and argues that schools must therefore now take responsibility for repairing the damage. The Truth and Reconciliation commission in Norway (2023), in which language and education are in focus, described how one director of schools (Bernt Thomasson, director of schools in Finnmark from 1902-1920) worked consistently to ensure the prevention of Sami languages being used in schools as well as closing down Sami teacher education. Furthermore, Thomasson was a pioneer in establishing state-run boarding schools for Sami children in Finnmark (more were opened later in other parts of Northern Norway). Sami children were forced to live away from their families for months to learn Norwegian and Christianity and were punished for using Sami languages, even during their free time. Such schools were being built until the middle of the 1950s, and it was not until the 1980s that teaching in Sami

languages became more usual (Eidum et al., 2023). About Sami education policy in Sweden, Svonni (2021, p.115) writes:

> Throughout history, Sami education has been governed by a Swedish state perspective through legislation and curricula. On one single occasion, an education directive has been published in Sweden based on a Sami perspective, namely the Sami syllabi 1996.

Times are, fortunately, changing. Educational policies and the national curricula in Norway now underline the importance of Sami perspectives in schools. The Norwegian Education Act (2024) reinforces and extends the rights of Sami school pupils to learn a Sami language regardless of where they live. Furthermore, it states: "All pupils must learn about the Sami people and Sami relations at school. In the Sami districts, Norwegian and Sami are treated equally in education" (Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2024). School pupils who live in municipalities defined as Sami have the right to an education in a Sami language, although families with more than one Sami language are forced to choose one, and funding issues can hinder access to Sami language learning. In 2020, Statistics Norway reported that 874 school pupils were currently receiving their education in a Sami language, and more than 2000 children were learning a Sami language in school (SSB, 2020). Since 2020, when an updated national curriculum was introduced in Norway, all school pupils are required to learn about Sami people and Sami history, culture, society and rights. Sami perspectives are required material in several subjects. Also in 2020, a national curriculum for schools in Sami districts was implemented (Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2020) which incorporates subjects specific to Sami education as well as highlighting Sami perspectives across all subjects. *Duodji*, for example, is a subject found only in the Sami national curriculum, being a word which describes both Sami art and crafts and the creative process itself. Older pupils can specialise in, for example, reindeer husbandry or Sami music and drama.

Sami children in Sweden have the right to pre-school in Sami languages, however, the national curriculum in Sweden is not as explicit about Sami education as in Norway. The Sami perspective is only briefly mentioned (Svonni, 2021), and the specific Sami curriculum (Skolverket, 2011) is intended only for Sami pupils. For instance, in the Social Science curriculum, Sami culture and religion are mentioned, but only after Greek, Roman and Norse mythology. In Music there is a brief mention of using different forms of vocal expression, such as singing rap and Sami *joik*. Older pupils learn about the Sami parliament and the ongoing struggle for justice. There are five Sami schools in Sweden which are governed by their own authority *Sameskolstyrelsen* (Sami Education Board). All teaching in these schools should be based on Sami culture and in Sami languages, but this is made difficult because of a lack of specific Sami curricula in all subjects (Nutti, 2013).

Following many years of repression, reconciliation work with the Sami peoples (and Kvens-Finnish national minorities) in Norway and Sweden has gained attention in recent years, due largely to the governments' establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs). TRCs are intended to 'build bridges' by examining and mapping past violations and their impacts in order to bring about justice for victims (Spzak and Bunikowski, 2022). Work began in Norway in 2018 and in Sweden in 2021. In Norway, in 2023, the TRC delivered their report in which knowledge, communication and language are

stated as key areas of reconciliatory work (Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). The TRC recommends a strengthening and expansion of Sami education, Sami schools and language learning, the recruitment and retention of teachers and compliance with existing laws and regulations which relate to the provision of education. This work will not be easy, and Norway and Sweden seem to be behind other countries with Indigenous peoples in the fulfilment of intentions and policies. Writing almost a decade ago, Rhea (2015, p.90) argues for:

> […] the need to develop an Indigenous, rights-based approach to the leadership and management of education of Indigenous children and to the education of non-Indigenous children about Indigenous matters, proper cross-cultural training for bureaucrats, proactive support for schools to bring Indigenous people into the governance structures of schools, substantial commitment of funds to teacher professional development in Indigenous matters.

Neither Norway nor Sweden has so far met these needs. The largest union of teachers in Norway, in a letter to the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (Solheim and Dahle, 2022), describes a lack of teaching materials in schools, a high drop-out rate among Sami pupils at high school level and a desperate need for more teacher educators. The establishment of Sami teacher education programmes has, however, not been able to counteract falling numbers of Sami teachers in Norway (Somby et al., 2023) and without the necessary competence it will be increasingly difficult to realise reconciliatory policies in schools. Despite increasing calls for schools to work deliberately to reverse the damaging effects of past assimilation policies (Solheim and Dahle, 2024), there appears to be no guidance of how this might be enacted by school leaders. Nor are school leaders in either country offered opportunities to develop such competencies. In the national target document for the Swedish National Principal Training Program (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2020) there is nothing written about Indigenous perspectives or Sami people There are, however, requirements for school leaders to:

> […] organise the activities and argue for them in accordance with the Education Act and other statutes' requirements to give all children and pupils the support and stimulation they need, make and justify decisions in accordance with laws and regulations; and based on ethical perspectives and dilemmas, clarify and assess different courses of action. (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2020, p.10)

According to the above quotation, the National Principal Training Program must provide school leaders with tools to give “all children” equal education including Sami children. In Norway, there are similar demands and expectations placed on school leaders to enact national and local policy and to lead the implementation of the national curriculum (Department of Education, 2020; 2024). Compliance with these laws is, however, difficult without school leaders having knowledge or understanding of Sami perspectives. How can Sami pupils be best supported and stimulated in schools unless we know more about their worlds? What do ethical dilemmas look like from Sami perspectives? How can leaders work with teachers and communities to learn more and enact policy? We took these, and many other questions with us as we began to investigate practices written about in other contexts.

Exploring the literature: Norway and Sweden have a long way to go

Whilst 'Indigenous' is used as a term throughout the literature, it is defined differently and can, at times, regrettably appear to denote a generic group. Perhaps this is a consequence of what Khalifa et al. (2019) describe as the Western-centric and reproductive nature of the research produced about Indigenous people. In our consideration of relevant literature, we did not seek any definition of Indigenous leadership (as if that might exist), nor did we intend to produce a complete review. Rather, we explored the literature with open minds, keen to learn from research in other contexts. We were inspired by descriptions of leadership practices previously unfamiliar to us and impressed by efforts made to understand and support the work of leaders in Indigenous communities. Most importantly, we became convinced of the need for further work to discover and highlight Sami perspectives on school leadership in Norway and Sweden, and aware of the importance of establishing ethical spaces where researchers and Indigenous peoples can co-create knowledge (Heppner, 2020).

We came across one research article from Norway which mentions the role of school leaders. Olsen and Sollid (2019) compare the celebration of the Sami national day in two different schools in Norway, exploring the ways in which schools intentionally and unintentionally communicate attitudes towards Sami peoples. They describe the school leader's speech in one school:

> On the one hand, the speech is an official expression of the school's participation; that the Sami national day is important at the school. On the other, the tone of the speech was rather distant, indicating that the principal did not define the Sami societies as a part of the school community. The day belonged to some other people. (p.128)

This example illustrates misguided intentions and unfortunate tokenism which undermine processes of reconciliation in schools. It underlines the critical need to support school leaders to develop the competence to understand and meet the challenges of reconciliation work.

Hohepa (2013) believes that it is precisely school leaders who can be responsible for positive change for Indigenous peoples, "educational leadership has been identified as a key factor in raising achievement, particularly among Indigenous and other minoritised pupils" (p.628). Agreeing with this, Trimmer et al. (2021) emphasise the impact of leadership on quantifiable results for Indigenous pupils as well as less measurable outcomes, "leadership influences development of genuine understanding and acknowledgement of Indigenous ways of knowing within the school" (p.21). Da'as (2024) describes school leaders having a central role as 'social agents for…socialisation processes', highlighting the work that school leaders do with pupils, teachers and communities to shape values and promote inclusion and learning, whilst also resisting unjust structures. School leaders can help to stand up for issues that are important to Indigenous peoples, strengthening calls to action in Western societies which are characterised by the majority having the right to decide according to democratic processes (Lund, 2023).

Althaus and O'Faircheallaigh (2019) are clear that "there can be no assumptions that Indigenous people accept Western ways of thinking about leadership, or that Western models of leadership offer appropriate or useful analytical tools" (p.84). They highlight, for example, the centrality of spirituality,

holisticness and a community-orientated approach in Aboriginal leaders as being considerably different from leadership qualities espoused in Western literature. Cashman (2018) explains one alternative understanding to school leadership in Hawaii (*kilo*), which emphasises the observation and critical examination of relationships between variables that govern the work. We are not currently aware of similar published insights into Sami perspectives on leadership, but there is clearly a need for them.

There seemed to be general agreement regarding the complexity of leading schools with Indigenous communities as well as the need for professional development for school leaders. Situated in Australia, Rhea (2015) argues for the need for leaders that can operate within the 'complex interface of negotiated meaning' when providing education to Indigenous peoples, and there was agreement about the necessity of suitable professional development for leaders. Scott et al. (2013) conclude after researching in Kenya, Australia and New Zealand that because "school leadership is crucial to promoting Indigenous students' success" (p.341), leadership development is essential, and Whitinui (2018) provides an example of an educational leadership programme in New Zealand which develops Indigenous school leaders, supporting them to meet the needs of Indigenous learners, as well introducing Indigenous leadership theories. Williams (2002) reminds that inclusion can mean assimilation and argues that diversity should be valued and that school leaders should be trained to work with Indigenous communities to develop contextually appropriate strategies. Leadership 'beyond the school gate' (Trimmer et al., 2021) is also a theme in the literature, advocating working with Indigenous communities and the importance of school leaders having skills of collaboration and consultation.

The literature we have explored here suggests that school leaders play a crucial role in promoting improved outcomes, positive change and reconciliation for Indigenous peoples. They can make a vital contribution to the development of genuine understanding and acknowledgment of Indigenous ways of knowing within education. They occupy positions of importance within communities and can lead collaboration and the development of new approaches and strategies. But this is only possible with the right support to develop insights and build competencies. Other countries have clearly come much further in reconciliation work. There is insufficient knowledge in Norway and Sweden about Sami perspectives on learning, leading and education in general, and a long way to go in creating the conditions for school leaders to support the work of reconciliation.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, we draw attention to the lack of concepts and practices relating to leading schools which take account of Sami perspectives. Education and professional development opportunities do little, if anything, to support school leaders in Norway and Sweden to develop the necessary culturally and contextually sensitive understandings and practices, leading to, we fear, a lack of transformative reconciliation work and worse, a deepening of prejudices.

Reconciliation work is done by people, not institutions. School leaders may be essential to the success of reconciliation, but they can also be instrumental in deepening alienation. If Norway and Sweden are committed to addressing the trauma produced by years of repressive policies and practices in

education, then we need more knowledge about how school leaders can support this in schools. Such knowledge needs to inform education policy, school leader education programmes and practice in schools. We as researchers and educators at university are also responsible for contributing to the work of reconciliation. We need to avoid unintentionally advocating assimilation. Suggesting how school leaders can help Sami teachers to 'fit in', for example, would not be appropriate. By exploring and producing knowledge and understandings which question and disrupt existing conceptualisations of school leadership, we can be participants in creating new, more diverse educational norms. We have begun our journey by writing this article and are moving forward by establishing a network for Indigenous perspectives in school leadership and development in the Nordic region, bringing together researchers and practitioners from indigenous and other contexts. Whilst we focus on Sweden and Norway in this article, there is much to reflect upon in other regions – not just about Indigenous perspectives but also questions about what is allowed to become dominant and accepted school leadership theory and practices. How and by whom is knowledge about leading diverse school communities produced and disseminated? How and by whom are school leaders supported to lead the development of genuinely inclusive and culturally sensitive school communities? We look forward to the continuation and diversification of these discussions, and invite others to join in.

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Responses

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the paper, gaining new knowledge about Sami education, and picking up resonances with my own experiences in Alaska and Scotland. Behind many of the issues lies trauma, and this is clear in the cases of Alaska, Scotland and Sápmi. This is painful for many and does elicit some anger when reading about the shared experience, but it also elicits purpose and determination to progress and move on and widens the collaborative group working for change. Clearly, in all cases, minority or Indigenous language and culture were seen as a threat.

I was hit by the first sentence 'why is it so difficult to get the Sami teachers to staff meetings?' I was curious about this question, because it shows some willingness to cooperate but also demonstrates what folk would call in Scots a *deif lug* (a deaf ear). It resonates with the case of Scots in schools, where leaders can maintain a state of unconscious bias, left over and undealt with, from previous times of worse prejudice and a leather strap - an attitude I would illustrate as something like 'it's OK to do Scots once a years to celebrate Burns night, but we wouldn't speak Doric in the formal space of the Board Room'.

This paper expanded my vision regarding school leadership and change. With Scots the progress we have made has been largely bottom up, powered by enthusiast teachers, activists and the pupils themselves. Prompted by the Sami perspectives paper, I see now that with Scots, top leadership of schools has almost been avoided, perhaps given previous fruitless attempts to take the top-down approach. People often talk about gatekeepers, and to succeed maybe we need to identify those blockages and plan accordingly. In the future, we will need leadership to be on board in order to make progress, but the Sami perspectives paper provides a warning that half-hearted support from school leaders can actually do more damage and cultural knowledge and sensitivity is key.

Encouragingly, in Norway, Norwegian and Sami are treated equally in Sami districts, according to their directorate of Education. We do not have such statements in Scottish Education and can clearly learn from this type of bold policy making. However, on a trip to Norway with pupils, I learned that not all Norwegian pupils were happy with learning both Bokmål and Nynorsk, and we were warned – don't necessarily do the same for Scots as we did here with Nynorsk.

The paper talked about how behind Norway and Sweden were with education and Indigenous peoples, and I would add Scotland to that in the case of the Scots speaking population. I was interested to read this quote in the paper about the needs to fulfil, which we could equally adapt as a tick list for Scots: "….the need to develop an Indigenous, rights-based approach to the leadership and management of education of Indigenous children and to the education of non-Indigenous children about Indigenous matters, proper cross-cultural training for bureaucrats, proactive support for schools to bring Indigenous people into the governance structures of schools, substantial commitment of funds to teacher professional development in Indigenous matters."

Another point in the paper which resonated with me was that the existence of Acts and policies regarding indigenous or minority languages does not always result in action. Who checks that they are being adhered to? And can leaders comply with them without sufficient knowledge and understanding

of Indigenous people and culture? As the Scottish Languages Bill nears enaction, the article made me realise that we should be putting in place bodies to do this, and I shall now do my best to discuss this need in language campaign forums.

My curiosity was piqued by the ideas, expressed in the Sami perspectives paper, about contrasting styles of leadership. The idea you can't assume that indigenous people relate to or accept Western styles of leadership, preferring holistic and community-based approaches and an examination of the relationships between variables governing work. Reading the paper, my own ideas about using Scots to connect the curriculum and work with the wider community were solidified, and it has gifted me with lots to think about in terms of leadership and Scots in the future.

Jamie