

Sámi Language in Finnish Schools

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Sámi—an Indigenous People

The Sámi are both an indigenous people and an ethnic minority living in Finland, Sweden, Norway and on the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Their roots are in the oldest known Northern-Fennoscandian population dating back to prehistoric times. That is, from their point of view, all other inhabitants of the region are new settlers. The Sámi call their native area for Sápmi, Sámiland.

With the exception of Russia, each of these countries has adopted its own definition of Sámi. Precise demographic data on the size and geographic distribution of the Sámi people are not available. This is partly due to the fact that not all persons who would fulfill the criteria for being Sámi are registered as such.

The definition of Sámi varies from one country to another. It is linked to the Sámi language by the government authorities in Nordic countries. Altogether, there may be approximately 50,000–100,000 Sámi, or persons of Sámi descent. The estimated numbers are as follows:

Norway	40,000–60,000
Sweden	15,000–25,000
Finland	7,000–10,000
Kola Peninsula	2,000–4,000

The number of Sámi must be seen in light of the fact that the majority populations in the three Scandinavian countries and the Kola Peninsula number about 18 million altogether. Thus, the Sámi constitute a very small minority in each of the countries where they live.

Sámi Language

There are several Sámi languages, even as many as ten. Sámi who speak different dialects do not necessarily understand each other. The Sámi group of languages forms its own branch within the Uralic language family (Finno-Ugric languages).

In Finland, three Sámi languages are spoken: the North Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi. North Sámi is the most common one: it is spoken widely in the northern parts of the Sámi Regions in Finland, Sweden and Norway.

In 1992, a Language Act was passed in Finland to guarantee the official status and use of Sámi language. Today, the Sámi have a right to use Sámi when dealing with the authorities. In practice, this only amounts to the use of interpretation and translation services.

The situation is worst for the smaller lingual communities: those speaking Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi. Quite recently, there have been some improvements in their position. Language immersion for children under school age has, for example, now been started in Inari, Ivalo and Sevettijärvi with the help of funding from the European Union and the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

However these days, Sámi is no longer the only language spoken by the Sámi. In fact many Sámi are bilingual. On the other hand, some Sámi only command the language of the majority population, that is, Finnish in Finland, for example.

Basic Rights and Cultural Autonomy

In Norway and Finland, the rights of the Sámi are protected in the constitution. In Norway the position of the Sámi Parliament and Sámi language is regulated by an Act of 1987. Sweden has also adopted a law concerning its minorities, including the establishment of the Sámi Parliament in 1992.

The Finnish Sámi were recognized as the indigenous people of Finland for the first time in the spring of 1995. At that point, the Finnish Parliament ensured that the Sámi had the status of an indigenous people in the area they now inhabit (Constitution, § 14). The Sámi were granted the right to maintain and enhance their language and culture.

The Sámi were also guaranteed cultural autonomy in matters concerning their language and culture within their domicile area (Constitution, § 51 a). According to the Constitution, new laws in Finland must also permit the Sámi rights and their status as an indigenous people to be realized in practice.

The objective of cultural autonomy for the Sámi is to enhance the Sámi people's chances to influence preparatory work and decision-making in matters that especially concern them.

Sámi Parliament, “Sámediggi”

The Finnish Sámi Parliament, “Sámediggi”, was founded in 1996. On the basis of new legislation, this Parliament has continued the work of its predecessor (Sámi Parlamenta in Sámi/ Sámi Delegation in English).

The main purpose of the Sámi Parliament is to plan and put into effect the cultural autonomy guaranteed to the Sámi as an indigenous people, to give it content. The Sámi Parliament is the supreme political body of the Sámi; it functions within the administrative sphere of the Ministry of Justice. It does not form an integral part of the State administration.

The 21 members and 4 vice-members of the Parliament are elected every 4 years. The Sámi Parliament is the only body in Finland entitled to represent the official opinion of the Sámi in matters concerning themselves.

It is also the task of the Sámi Parliament to look after affairs concerning the Sámi language and culture and the status of the Sámi as an indigenous people. The Sámi Parliament can present initiatives and propositions and prepare statements for the Finnish authorities.

The Sámi Parliament also decides how the state appropriations granted for the needs of Sámi culture, and the production of Sámi educational material, are to be used.

Instruction of, and in, the Sámi Language in Finland

As regards the Sámi culture, teaching of, and in, the Sámi language is one of the most important issues. Instruction of, and in, one’s own language lays a foundation for the development of the language, and for an increase in its written and oral use. Education may significantly help to maintain and transfer to new generations the most important aspect of the national heritage and cultural identity of the Sámi: the language. School can also provide support for bi- and multilingualism—a feature typical of the Sámi population.

For decades, Sámi has been taught in schools on a small scale. We do not have a clear picture of the very beginning of this instruction, but the small, remote school in Outakoski, in the municipality of Utsjoki, has been a pioneer in this work since the beginning of the 20th century. The role this instruction plays in how people’s knowledge of their first language develops may be reflected by the fact that a remarkable proportion of today’s Sámi

authors once attended the Outakoski Primary School. The municipality of Utsjoki is the northernmost municipality and the only one with a Sámi majority in Finland.

In earlier decades, the position of the Sámi language was weak; schools efficiently assimilated the Sámi into the Finnish population. Earlier Sámi generations, as well as the present adult population, did not, almost without exception, receive instruction of and in their own language. As a result, a majority of them are still illiterate in their mother tongue. In many places, there has been a rapid shift in language, leading to a situation where the Sámi-speaking population has, after a short bilingual transition period, become monolingual Finnish-speaking. This shift is described e.g. by Marjut Aikio in her doctoral thesis “The Cycle of Language Shift Among the Sámi” (Doctoral thesis SKS 479/1988).

Due to the bitter experiences of older Sámi-speaking generations, the language shifts, and illiteracy in one’s mother tongue, there are many people who do not believe that Sámi is needed and fit for use in modern society. In addition, a compulsory shift from one’s original mother tongue into Finnish has a direct impact on one’s self-esteem, and has surely raised a lot of fear, shame and ambiguous feelings among the Sámi.

Thus, educational work, especially as regards attitudes, has become one of the tasks of the Sámi Educational Administration. For the most part, this work consists of informing and arranging discussions for parents, municipal decision-makers, and school authorities. The Finnish-speaking population of the area often has unexpressed prejudices against the Sámi language and bilingualism. The older Sámi generations, too, have in many cases considered their bilingualism a kind of handicap or disability.

In this informative work on attitudes, we have been greatly supported and helped by researchers and specialists on bilingualism, and by other language minorities. Here, the Swedish-speaking population of Finland has been the most important group. Educational work on bilingualism goes on all the time. Its main point is that bilingualism is a resource and much more common in the world than monolingualism. Young parents are in fact already bringing up their children with a knowledge of the benefits of bilingualism, and start to speak two mother tongues—each parent his own one—to the child right after the birth. Of course there are also monolingual Sámi families where the children learn Finnish from the Finnish-speaking environment.

The issue of bilingualism has also given rise to a discussion on language immersion and whether it could compensate for the losses of the past decades. Language immersion in schools and at kindergarten level, with a staff of native speakers, might in many places return the knowledge of Sámi to children. So far, there are no Sámi language immersion classes, although Sámi preschool has often worked like small-scale language immersion.

During the fall of 1997, language immersion for children under school-age (in Inari and Skolt Sámi) was started in the municipality of Inari. Only Sámi is spoken in these “language nests”, which aim at strengthening the children’s Sámi identity and their skills in Sámi. Formerly, there were very few, if any, children with Inari or Skolt Sámi skills.

The 1970s, the Beginning of Instruction

It was only in the 1970s that instruction of, and in, the Sámi language was launched. At the beginning of the decade, Finland moved from the old primary school system to a new, comprehensive school system (ages 7–15 years). The start was, however, very slow, and progress has consisted of small steps ever since. At the beginning of the decade, Sámi was taught in a total of six primary schools.

Education in Sámi began with elementary instruction early in the 1970s in Utsjoki. The first special positions for Sámi class teachers were established in 1975, and, ever since, instruction both in, and of, the Sámi language has increased markedly. According to statistics, there are in the 1990s five to six times as many pupils receiving, and schools providing, such instruction.

There was a lot of discussion on the objective of teaching children in Sámi when instruction began. Was its purpose to make it easier for Sámi-speaking children to attend school, by offering them education in their mother tongue in the first grades and leading them later into Finnish-speaking classes? Gradually, education given in Sámi was extended to cover all six grades of the primary level of comprehensive schools. By the end of the 1970s, a total of 23 schools taught the Sámi language, and, of these, six also taught children in Sámi.

The 1980s, a Decade of Development

The conditions for teaching Sámi, and in, Sámi were in many ways created in the 1980s. Resources for teaching, and for Sámi educational administration, both increased; syllabus work on the Sámi language was started; it became possible to teach pupils in Sámi within both primary and secondary education; Sámi became a part of the subject “Mother tongue” in comprehensive schools (combined subject “Finnish-Sámi”); it became possible to take a matriculation exam in Sámi as a foreign language; and a Sámi College was founded in Kautokeino (Sámi Allaskuvla in 1989).

The School Act reforms of the 1980s improved the position of the Sámi language, provided wider opportunities for the teaching of Sámi and in Sámi, but did not guarantee the Sámi pupils an unambiguous right to instruction of, and in, their own language.

The number of schools providing instruction of and/or in Sámi increased in the 1980s by ten (in 1990 a total of 33 schools), and the number of pupils by approximately a hundred (in 1990 a total of 590 pupils). The decade was characterized by an economic boom, which enabled municipalities to promote even the kind of instruction which was not their direct obligation. By the end of the decade, Sámi was taught in all schools in the Sámi Region. Instruction was also started in some schools outside this area, e.g. in Helsinki. It became an established practice to teach pupils in Sámi in the primary schools in Utsjoki. This instruction ended, however, when pupils entered the lower secondary level (at the age of 13).

The 1990s, a Decade of Uncertainty

In the first years of the 1990s, the trend of the previous decades continued. The position of Sámi and education provided in Sámi was strengthened. A new regulation granted Sámi the status of a mother tongue at upper secondary level, too (1991), and it became possible to take a matriculation exam in Sámi (North Sámi) when graduating from upper secondary school. In 1995, Sámi also achieved the status of a mother tongue—an independent school subject—in the comprehensive schools. A regulation granted schools additional resources (2–5 weekly lessons) for the teaching of, and in, Sámi; schools within the Sámi Region were allowed to hire, without a special per-

mit, one extra class teacher; and it was possible to provide an extended foreign language course in Sámi (“A-language”).

During the first half of the 1990s, the number of schools providing (and pupils receiving) instruction of, and in, Sámi grew, and teaching conditions improved. At most, there were altogether 625 pupils (in 1994–95) participating in instruction of, and in, Sámi.

The improvements in the conditions of teaching (still very small and basic ones) made gradually during the previous decades are now, at the end of the 1990s, about to come to a standstill. The future of this instruction is uncertain again.

Paradoxically, the position of the Sámi people in legislation is, at the same time stronger than ever.

Today, there are approx. 470 pupils studying the Sámi language (at primary and secondary levels). About 115 pupils receive (almost) all of their education in Sámi (at primary and secondary levels). This education in Sámi is best realized at primary school (ages 7–12) where it usually covers all subjects. Sámi-speaking groups work parallel with Finnish groups.

The Sámi language used in this education is usually North Sámi, which is the largest form of Sámi spoken within the Scandinavian Sámi Region. In Sevetijärvi, part of the instruction is given in Skolt Sámi. Inari Sámi language is not used as an instruction language anywhere.

Lack of Resources

As the amount of instruction has increased, the problems and need for resources have become more apparent. In Finland, it is the responsibility of municipalities to provide education. The recession and a drop in state subsidies for the municipalities of the Sámi Region have resulted in an annual competition for the decreasing resources. At worst, this competition creates ethnic conflicts, which is very unfortunate as regards the Sámi language.

Of the other problems, one must mention the scanty number of Sámi-speaking teachers. Another significant problem is the constant shortage of Sámi instructional material. For the production of instructional material, the state allocates in its yearly budget an appropriation which rose to its present level in 1993 (1.3 million marks). This has allowed us to produce each year almost 30 new titles (of books, exercise books or audio-visual material).

Most of this material is aimed at teaching the subject “Mother tongue”, but work on instructional material for other subjects has also begun.

Since 1996, the production of Sámi instructional material has been the responsibility of the Sámi Parliament in Finland. Co-operation between the Nordic Countries in this sphere is increasing, which is quite natural, as the same North Sámi is both an instructional language and a school subject in Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Different Kinds of Pupils

The language skills and cultural background of the pupils who are taught (in) Sámi varies, which places additional demands on the schools and municipalities providing such instruction. Some of the children speak Sámi as their first language when starting school, and have been bilingual all their lives. Others, in turn, learn the basics of Sámi at school and study it as a foreign language. There are also pupils between these categories.

Study groups and the meaning of instruction for different pupils can be described as follows:

- In terms of the development of the Sámi language and enhancement of the Sámi culture, the most important group of pupils is certainly the native Sámi speakers. Education provided in Sámi helps these pupils to reach a high level of bilingualism. This instruction extends their language skills to new spheres of life with the help of new school subjects. In this instruction, the fact that every teacher is also a teacher of the mother tongue is emphasized. At least for the time being, the problem is that such Sámi instruction is only provided on the primary level of the comprehensive school.
- A different kind of a group consists of children whose parents have shifted language, and who still have a Sámi identity and a desire to learn the language of their fathers and mothers. Such pupils can mainly be found near the southern border of the Sámi Region or among the Skolt Sámi or Inari Sámi groups. Instruction given in their own language is of great significance for these pupils as a way of strengthening their cultural identity and creating connections. With the help of school, some have even restored their forgotten language to everyday use. In the language shift areas, there are still older people who can speak Sámi.

- A third group of pupils studying Sámi consists of Finnish children in the Sámi Region for whom language instruction will open windows to their home region, its history and culture. Teaching the Sámi language brings people with different backgrounds closer to each other, lessens prejudice, and increases tolerance.

The Sámi Language in School Legislation

The position of Sámi in legislation on comprehensive and upper secondary schools has become much stronger in recent years, although there are still many shortcomings in the system, and the situation is far behind that of the other linguistic minority in Finland, the Swedish-speaking Finns. The situation will once more be changed by the School Act reform under way in Finland. According to the draft, the position of Sámi instruction and Sámi as mother tongue will be slightly improved, but, in other respects, it is probable that the reform will also cause new problems. Instruction of, and in, Sámi is a small specialized field within the Finnish school system, and tends to be always trampled by the larger whole.

However, for the time being, we have school legislation that enables—but does not oblige—us to provide instruction of, and in, Sámi. Sámi can be taught as a mother tongue throughout the school system. In addition, Sámi can be taught as a foreign language. In connection with the matriculation exam, one can take North Sámi as one's first language or as a foreign language. The Sámi language cannot be used when taking the other parts of the exam, nor can other Sámi languages be included as part of the exam.

The language program of the Finnish comprehensive school is complicated and stiff compared to that of schools in the Norwegian Sámi Region, for example. In the most important Sámi communes, the language programs of the Norwegian- and Sámi-speaking classes are mirror images of each other. All the pupils study both Norwegian and Sámi; in some classes Norwegian is the first and Sámi the second language, and in others, again, Sámi is the first and Norwegian the second language. Here, first language means the same as language of instruction.

Future in the 21st Century?

Instruction of, and in, Sámi is a new and developing sphere within the Finnish school system. Over the past two decades, a certain legislative and economic basis for it has been built, and it has got rid of some of the prejudices consequent upon its low status. In the years ahead, we need to increase the amount of instruction substantially. In today's economic situation, this seems likely to be a hard task unless municipalities are granted clearly earmarked resources for this purpose. Both the Sámi Parliament in Finland and the municipalities of the Sámi Region have demanded such special resources.

Receiving basic education in one's own mother tongue should be everyone's basic right in Finland. As a civilized country, Finland should guarantee all its citizens equal opportunities to receive basic education in their own language, and to raise their knowledge of their first language to a high level.

In terms of the content of this education, the objective should be the same as the general objective of the school: to pass the cultural heritage of the nation on to new generations.

FIGURE 1: Finnish Sámi / language groups 1995

	FIRST LANGUAGE	NUMBERS IN TOTAL:
North Sámi:	1744	(25%)
Inari Sámi:	324	(5%)
Skolt Sámi:	397	(6%)
Finnish:	3152	(46%)
Unknown:	1244 *	(18%)
	* mainly children under school age	
Sámi region in total:	4066	
Rest of Finland:	2327	
Finnish Sámi in other countries:	468	
Outside Sámi region in total:	2795	
Total:	6861	

Source:

Sámi Parliament's Office on Education and Instruction Material

FIGURE 2: Instruction of Sámi and in Sámi in Finland:
Schools in total
(comprehensive and senior high schools)

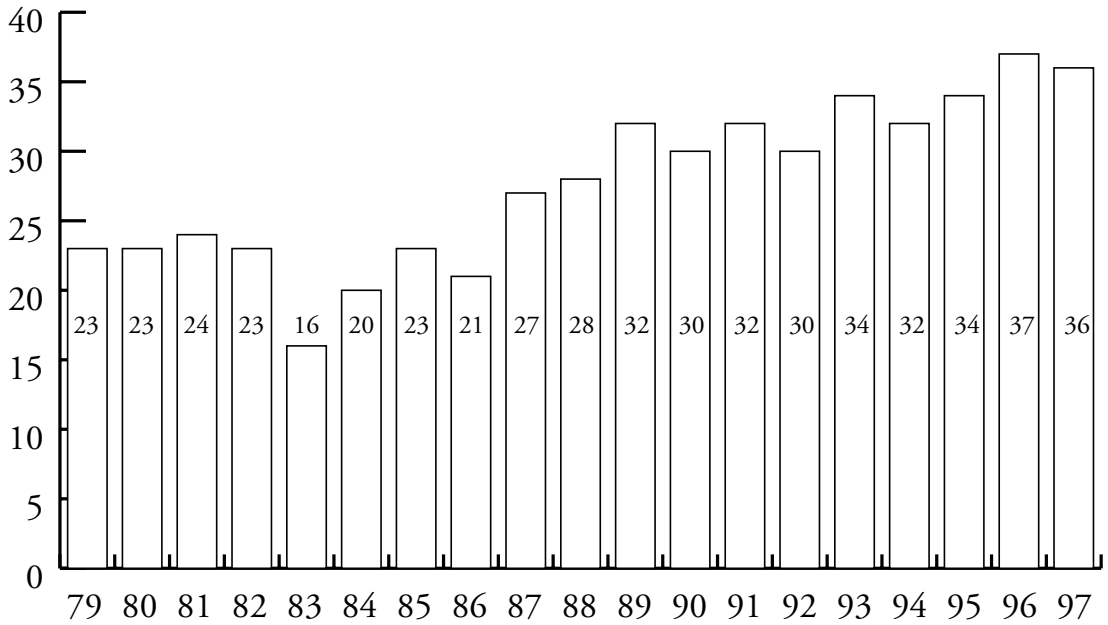


FIGURE 3: Instruction of Sámi and in Sámi in Finland:
Number of students
(comprehensive and senior high schools)

