Teachers’ perspectives on the changing linguistic landscape of Sápmi

Nancy H. Hornberger¹, Hanna Outakoski²

¹University of Pennsylvania, USA
²Umeå University, Sweden

In this paper we present teachers’ perspectives and views on the structural, social and demographic changes that have taken place in the Sami educational system during the last two decades across three national contexts – Sweden, Finland, and Norway. We highlight changes that language teachers find most relevant to minority language revitalization and attempt to uncover language ideologies underlying their perspectives on the future of individual languages and the consequences of protruding multilingualism in Sápmi.

This case study is part of an ongoing Umeå University literacy research project Literacy in Sápmi. Data for this paper were collected among 25 primary and secondary school language teachers and seven school principals in the form of questionnaires and personal interviews during fall 2012 and early winter 2013, gathered at schools across northern Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Participating language teachers all work at schools where North Sami is taught as language subject, and where the pupils are to a large extent bilingual having North Sami as part of their language repertoire. Further, we offer a comparative perspective on the findings based on the second author’s trajectory and experiences as former Sami school pupil and present university teacher of North Sami language.

Findings illustrate how language teachers in Sápmi continuously struggle with maintaining a skill based and attitudinal balance between the national majority language, the Indigenous heritage language and English. As adult role models the teachers also feel that they must stay optimistic for the future of Sami language even if they do often sense that the overall changes in the surrounding society inevitably lead to situations where less spoken heritage language risks attrition and loss of important social domains for Sami language use outside the school realm.

Keywords: Sami, (heritage) language revitalization, multilingualism.