

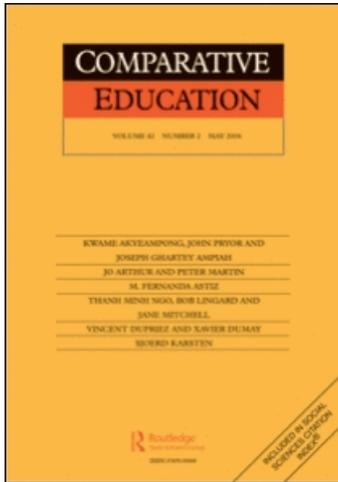
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The Sámi School System in Norway and International Cooperation

JON TODAL [1]

ABSTRACT *This article discusses recent developments in Norway, where a separate curriculum for the primary and lower secondary schools in the indigenous Sámi areas has been introduced, and a part of the jurisdiction over the school system there has been transferred from the government to the Sámi Parliament. In particular, the increasing articulation of minority rights, and a related desire for autonomy, from national minority groups and indigenous peoples the world over, provide an important backdrop and crucial frame of reference for the recent Sámi initiatives in Norway.*

Introduction

In Norway in 1997, a comprehensive school reform was carried out. At the same time as the number of years of required education at the primary and lower secondary levels was extended from 9 to 10 years, new curricula were introduced in all subjects. For the first time, *two* national curricula were introduced, one for the Sámi areas and one for the main area of Norway. Sámi students were now able to follow their own syllabus in all subjects (Norwegian Ministry of Church, Education and State, 1997).

On 1 January 2000, the elected body, the Sámi Parliament (first established in 1989), officially took on partial responsibility for the school system of the Sámi minority in Norway. The actual remit of the Sámi Parliament's new educational responsibilities was limited primarily to the right to decide the content of some important school subjects. However, the wider principle of greater indigenous control of Sámi education was a further significant development, representing a clear break with traditional (assimilationist) Norwegian educational policy towards Sámi (see below). Moreover, the developments in 2000 excited very little opposition—a far cry from the outright opposition to greater indigenous Sámi control a decade earlier when the Sámi Parliament was first established in Norway. At that time, those who had voiced support for such a policy were labelled extremists by the Norwegian media. A decade later, this had become the official policy of the Norwegian government.

Historical Background

The Sámi are an indigenous people in the northern regions of Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, and they are thus a nation divided by four states. They comprise a very small percentage of the population in each of these countries. The subject matter of the present article concerns the Sámi in Norway.

From approximately 1860 to 1970, the Norwegian government practised a policy of assimilation towards Sámi. The Sámi were to become Norwegians, and the schools were regarded as an important means towards this end. The other three countries followed a

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similar policy towards their minorities. That the Sámi lived along national borders was an important argument for the assimilation policy; the countries wanted to have a population they could trust in these strategically vulnerable areas (Eriksen & Niemi, 1981). Thus, the Norwegian government considered full control over the schools in the Sámi districts to be of ultimate importance in order to protect its borders.

Despite the fact that national security was so important, the official justification for the assimilationist policy adopted was based to a large degree on social Darwinism, in keeping with the prevailing ideology of the European Great Powers at that time. Assimilation implied lifting 'backward' groups up onto a higher level. The Sámi were thus subjected to the same policy and ideology as a great many other minority groups, even though it could not be said that Norway was a Great Power.

In view of this historical background, there is clearly reason to ask how the Norwegian government came to introduce a separate Sámi curriculum in 1997 and to go even further in the year 2000 by delegating some of the jurisdiction over the educational content in the Sámi areas. This turnaround was achieved primarily as a result of political pressure from the Sámi themselves. In this article I will consider the question of how international cooperation between the Sámi and other groups has contributed to the framing of the new educational policy towards Sámi in Norway.

An International Development

During the last half of the twentieth century, it is evident that many minoritised groups from around the world used political activism as a means of obtaining a certain degree of autonomy. This applied in particular to those minority groups that defined themselves as indigenous (such as Inuit, Sámi and Māori), as well as those that defined themselves as national minorities (such as the Welsh, Frisians and Catalans). The claims and demands they made to their respective national governments varied according to local conditions, but almost all of them worked towards the goal of controlling the subject content of the curriculum and the language policy in the primary and lower secondary schools (see, May, 2001, for an extended discussion here).

As early as 1979, the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt noted the striking resemblance of the campaigns conducted by the various native European linguistic minorities that he was principally concerned with, although, as I will argue, this can be extended to encompass indigenous peoples as well. He identified five common denominators which could be used to compare them: timing, categorisation, professionalisation, political radicalisation and governmental problem solving (Allardt, 1979).

Timing

In each case, the renewed interest in roots and ethnicity caught on early in the 1960s. The new Sámi consciousness-raising was no exception.

Categorisation

Previously, it was usually the majority that saw the need to place ethnic labels on the minority and thus put them into a category. From the 1960s on, categorisation became something that the representatives of the minorities themselves were particularly concerned with. Many names which previously had had a derogatory connotation, or which had been restricted to folklore, were transformed in this period into words with *positive* emotional connotations.

The reversal of the traditionally prevailing values which found their expression in the American slogan 'Black is Beautiful' thus has many European counterparts, as Allardt (1979) points out.

The same tendency is evident in Norway in the process by which the name Sámi replaced the two names that had been in use in Norway up until that time, 'Finn' or 'Lapp'. With the establishment of the Sámi Parliament, a crucial question was to arrive at criteria to determine who was a Sámi and who was not. Today, the Sámi Parliament bases its official definition of a Sámi on the criteria of both language and ancestry.

Professionalisation

Ethnic activism underwent professionalisation. A new kind of ethnic activist emerged. He or she was university educated, articulate and good at working through the media. Starting in the 1960s, the same phenomenon occurred in Norway as we saw elsewhere in the western world, namely that far more people receive higher education, and students are recruited from a far broader social range than before. With time, a group of well-educated and politically active Sámi emerged. Most well known in this group was Ole Henrik Magga, Professor of Finno-Ugric languages, who became the first President of the Sámi Parliament (see Magga, 2000).

Radicalisation: the move to the left

The movements took on a radical character. In the 1930s, demands made by minorities in Europe were usually related to conservative parties. The 'new' activists usually took their rhetoric from the political left. In retrospect, it is clear that the new Sámi political movement of the 1960s is not easily placed on a political right/left axis. But the political rhetoric *was* nonetheless adopted from the radical left, and contemporary Norwegian authorities regarded the Sámi Movement as a part of the political left.

The Government Response

The authorities were, from the 1960s on, much more accommodating than before to the demands made by ethnic and linguistic minorities. This may be seen as part of a general pattern, in which the authorities tried to handle conflicts in a more humane manner. In regard to public policy, one trait that applies to advanced societies is the ability to *solve* conflicts, instead of using sanctions and hard-line counter-reactions. Around 1980, Norway experienced a major conflict over the building of a dam and hydroelectric power plant on the Alta-Guovdageiadnu River, which runs through the main Sámi territory in the north. The conflict was brought to a head with the use of civil disobedience and hunger strikes on the part of the opponents of the power plant, and the use of police force on the part of the government. This conflict was a turning point in the relationship between the Norwegian government and the Sámi. It resulted in a comprehensive public study of Sámi rights and the subsequent establishment of Sámi institutions, with the founding of the Sámi Parliament the most important of the latter. School policy was also part of this new approach and, as an example of the consequences, a Sámi College was established in 1989, with the education of teachers competent in the Sámi language as a major goal.

Allardt's (1979) five common denominators are not only typical of the European minority movements which he specifically describes, but also of the indigenous movements which have developed in industrialised nations such as Norway, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. It is interesting to ask why the same developments took place simultaneously in so

many countries. A good answer to this question would necessarily be complex and require much more detail than the present article can provide. Here I will limit myself to one factor which is often overlooked: the fact that when indigenous groups and other minorities put forth their demands in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not do it independently of each other. It was the result of cooperation.

In the following, I will take a closer look at what this cooperation on a political and scholarly basis has meant for the Sámi school system.

Three International Interrelationships

Indigenous groups are often characterised as ‘primitive races’, living in sharp contrast to society in the modern western world. The media, in particular, regularly draw such a picture of indigenous peoples. The Sámi are thus often described as a nomadic people following their herds of reindeer, the Inuit as primitive hunters and fishermen, etc. The fact that the Sámi and the Inuit are internationally engaged in scholarly and political cooperation does not fit easily into this picture. However, such political and academic cooperation has been of significant importance for the development of the indigenous school system, both for the Sámi and the Inuit. This is a part of what Allardt (1979) calls the professionalisation of ethnic politics.

It is natural to regard the Sámi people in connection with three international interrelationships: the Finno-Ugric relationship, the Arctic indigenous peoples relationship and the Western European minority relationship.

The Finno-Ugric Relationship

The Sámi language belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages (including Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian, to mention the three languages having the most speakers). This connection has been of great importance for all linguistic research in the Sámi language. But scholarly contact in this field has had little influence on language policy, except that those who have worked with standardisation of the Sámi languages in the planning of the corpus have naturally borrowed principles from the standardisation of other Finno-Ugric languages.

Similarly, scholarly contact with other Finno-Ugric peoples has not had any direct influence on Sámi school policy in Norway today. For this reason, I will not pursue this aspect of international cooperation in this article.

The Arctic Indigenous Peoples Relationship

The official Norwegian policy towards minorities in the 1990s was based on the fact that the Sámi were an indigenous people in the areas they traditionally inhabited. The basis for their position is to be found in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention, 169, *Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries* (ILO, 1989), which was ratified by Norway on 20 June 1990. The Norwegian ratification came as a result of a long political struggle. By the time this finally came about in 1990, the Sámi political leaders had already held an important position in world-wide cooperation among indigenous peoples for a couple of decades. One example of this is that when the World Council of Indigenous People (WCIP) was organised in Canada in 1975, a Sámi, Aslak Nils Sara (1934–1996), was elected vice-president of the organisation, an office he held for nine years. But even prior to this there had been political cooperation between the organisation for the Sámi Movement and other organisations for indigenous peoples (Minde, 2000).

First and foremost, it is the historical situation and international legal agreements which bind indigenous people together. Beyond this, the individual groups live under very different conditions around the globe, according to whether the countries that have annexed their lands are rich or poor, or whether these countries are governed democratically or by a dictator. This condition is a determining factor as to how concrete the cooperation becomes, and in which areas it is natural to cooperate and with whom. In regard to educational questions, there has been a long-standing and close cooperation among the indigenous peoples in the northern regions.

Even *before* the WCIP was formed, scholarly contact was established among Inuit in Greenland, Inuit and American Indians in Alaska and Canada, and the Sámi in Scandinavia in order to discuss educational questions. All of the groups in this cooperative effort belonged to the Arctic indigenous peoples. In 1969 the First International Conference on Cross-cultural Education in the North was held. Ever since that event, a network of these indigenous peoples has existed in the field of education, and many meetings and conferences have been held to discuss educational issues that concern the indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

An important aspect of the educational network has been the informal (but significant) influence it has had on the formation of educational institutions and educational policy for indigenous peoples in a large part of the Arctic area. The same individuals who have had central positions in the processes of international cooperation have also taken the lead within their own countries in the establishment of educational institutions for indigenous peoples in the Arctic region. Through professional activities and conferences on educational policy, they have gradually swayed their own national governments to change their policy, and through the establishment of institutions, they have later seen many of their ideas take form. Among the influential Sámi, Professor Anton Hoëm and the first president of the Sámi College, Jan Henry Keskitalo, have throughout this period been central figures in international educational cooperation. They have fostered breakthroughs in several key areas.

First, their research has shown that minority pupils suffer in primary schools that are designed to suit the majority (see Hoëm, 1976, in particular). They approached this question under the assumption that the school system was at fault, not the pupils. Based on this assumption, they raised questions regarding the content of the curriculum and questioned the traditional school definition of what is meant by the concept of knowledge itself (cf. Bishop, Sarangapani this issue). They addressed the question of what kind of influence the majority school had on the minority in regard to socialisation and the formation of an identity.

In order to rectify the situation, they proposed the creation of a school system for indigenous peoples, where the people concerned would have a significant influence. In order to accomplish this, educational institutions would have to be set up to produce textbooks, establish and develop the curriculum, conduct research, and provide teacher education directed particularly toward the situation of indigenous peoples. Such an infrastructure was built up in Alaska, Canada, in Greenland and in the Sámi area in Scandinavia (Demmert, 1986; Demmert & Keskitalo, 1998). The Greenlanders have made the most progress in this area during the period following the introduction of home rule. In Norway in the 1990s, the development of the school system was particularly delegated to the Sámi Educational Council (founded in 1975) and the Sámi College (founded in 1989). The introduction of Sámi curricula in 1997, in all subjects taught at the elementary and lower secondary level in six counties in Northern Norway, was a significant step on the road to creating a separate Sámi school system. The transfer in 2000 of jurisdiction over the Sámi Educational Council from the Norwegian Department of Education to the Sámi Parliament was a further step in this direction.

The philosophy and visions of those who are leading this development are to be found in a number of articles, reports and books which have been produced during these years (see, for example, Hoëm, 1976; Darnell, 1972; Darnell & Hoëm, 1996; Demmert, 1990; Keski-talo, 1994) and the reports from the conferences, *Cross-Cultural Education in the Circumpolar North*. Up to the present (2003), seven such conferences have been held, and representatives for the governments in the countries concerned have also participated.

The Western European Relationship

In the same period that indigenous peoples around the world were establishing political organisations, a similar movement was taking place among the national minority groups of Europe. Geographically, the distance is not as great between the Sámi in Norway and the European minorities as it is between the Sámi and many of the other indigenous peoples. Most of the Western European countries are also quite similar to Norway in respect of forms of government and economy. Despite this, developments within the European minority groups were less important politically than the international mobilisation of tribal and indigenous peoples for issues of Sámi autonomy, and the development of indigenous education for Sámi. Nonetheless, in certain areas there was a good deal of contact between the European national minority groups and the Sámi. In particular, this concerned the development of curricula and methodology in language instruction at the primary and lower secondary level.

The Sámi educational institutions had close contact during the 1990s with the language curricula and language planning which were emerging in Friesland, Wales and the Basque Country, for example. This contact was largely restricted to the institutional level. For all practical purposes, it was the Sámi Educational Council and the Sámi College that cooperated on professional questions with comparable institutions in other multi-language areas in Europe.

In addition, there is a certain tradition of influence passing from Wales to the Sámi. A Sámi intellectual, Per Fokstad, came into contact with the Welsh when he studied in Great Britain in 1920 (Eriksen & Niemi, 1981). At that time, the authorities in Britain as well as Norway were conducting an active assimilation policy towards their national minorities. Fokstad was able to show that the Sámi were not the only ones in this situation and that there was resistance to state-run assimilation campaigns in other countries. Fokstad used his insights in connection with his work on behalf of the Sámi in Norway.

When a committee appointed by the Norwegian government, namely the Committee to Study the Conditions among the Sámi People, published its findings in 1959, an account of the linguistic conditions in Welsh schools was included as an addendum to the proposals (Norwegian Ministry of Church and Education, 1959 pp. 75–79). The addendum was a summary of a report prepared by the Central Advisory Council for Education. The report was entitled *The Place of Welsh and English in the Schools of Wales* (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1953). Per Fokstad, who has previously been mentioned, was a member of the committee that wrote the proposal in 1959.

At the end of the 1960s, the Norwegian government decided, on a trial basis, to allow beginning instruction in Sámi in the primary and lower secondary schools for students whose domestic language was Sámi. Inez Boon, who at that time was a teacher in the Sámi core area, went to both Friesland and Wales in order to study instruction in Frisian and Welsh. She published her findings in an article in the *Yearbook for the Sámi Society 1964–66* (Boon, 1967). The first curriculum for reading and writing Sámi was later organised according to the lines drawn up by Boon in this article.

In the 1990s there was cooperation between the Sámi educational institutions (the Sámi Educational Council, the Centre for Sámi Educational Resources and Sámi College) and comparable Welsh-language institutions in Wales. This time the concern was to address the question of how best to give instruction in Sámi as a *second language* for students at the primary and lower secondary level, whose domestic language was Norwegian. In Wales, English-speaking students had already been receiving instruction in Welsh for 60 years. The results of this cooperation had a great influence on how Sámi institutions later gave priority to the various pedagogical tasks, and experiences from Wales provided a pattern for certain courses in Sámi teacher education.

Conclusion

The introduction of a separate Sámi curriculum in Norway in 1997, and the partial transfer of the jurisdiction over the Sámi school system from the Norwegian government to the Sámi Parliament in 2000, marked two important steps on the path to Sámi autonomy in the cultural area.

These developments were, in turn, the result of a long period of scholarly agitation and political strife. Along the way, international trends and cooperation were of great importance for the Sámi. This article has referred briefly to a number of examples that demonstrate that the exchange of professional and political ideas took place directly among minority groups.

Even though the new policies are mainly a result of the political campaigns conducted by these various minority groups, it was still of great importance for their development that the European countries at the time were in fact willing to enter into a dialogue with the minority groups. As Allardt (1979) points out, this was something new in European politics.

Based on my assessment here, one could say that the events of 1997 and 2000 did not so much represent a new phase in the history of Sámi schools, but rather came as a result of both a long-term political struggle on the part of the Sámi, and a new attitude towards conflict-solving on the part of the authorities.

But the story is far from finished. The challenge in the years to come will centre on how this new freedom for Sámi education is used, and what it can actually accomplish for the Sámi.

NOTE

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