

## Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900-1940

Melissa Bishop

Volume 45, numéro 1, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088515ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.v45i1.5537>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Education

ISSN

0380-2361 (imprimé)  
1918-5979 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bishop, M. (2022). Compte rendu de [Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900-1940]. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 45(1), ix–xi.  
<https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.v45i1.5537>



## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

---

### **Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900-1940**

by Otto Kortekangas

McGill-Queen's Press, 2021, 184 pages

ISBN: 9780228005698

#### **Reviewed by:**

Melissa Bishop

University of Prince Edward Island

Skutnabb-Kangas (2002, p.539) eloquently states, "Just as DNA is the material of heredity, language is the DNA of culture." Language is the vehicle for knowledge transmission, and the Sami people's struggle to maintain their language, culture, and livelihoods are at the heart of Kortekangas' book, *Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900-1940*.

Kortekangas' work contributes to the literature regarding the history of Sami education, educational policies, and the struggle for Sami agency in education. However, Kortekangas' book differs from previous literature by offering an in-depth period-specific examination of Sami education rather than a generalized overview. Sami education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is presented so that the reader is provided with a foundation to build their understanding of the intricacies involved in developing a *modern* education system in the Nordic North. By delivering an in-depth period-specific examination of Sami education, positioning the voices of the Sami people and Sami educators at the forefront, the reader can critically analyze early Sami education systems and the paternalistic attitudes rooted within.

Kortekangas situates the issues embedded in Sami education by weaving together the historical tenets of assimilation, paternalism, and racism prevalent in the Nordic North in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author also provides a broader context by paralleling, albeit briefly, similar issues across Arctic populations, including those impacting the Inuit of Canada.

To better position the reader, early in the text, Kortekangas offers a map (p. xxi) of Northern Scandinavia and Finland, linking the reader to the *physical* space of the Sami.

Mapping the physical space of the Sami offers the reader a resource to refer to when identifying individual villages throughout the book.

Although the book is period-specific, 1900-1940, the reader is guided through the 40-year history, the impacts of Eurocentric education in the Nordic North and is reminded that variables beyond the timeframe discussed in the book impact Sami education. For example, the Sami political movement for Indigenous rights in the 1970s and the pedagogical ideas of the 18th and 19th centuries impacted how Sami children were educated. The latter focused on developing an education system to address industrialization, urbanization, and poverty by teaching *practical skills* and changing the *primitive* lifestyle of Sami peoples (Baer, 1994; Heidemann, 2007; Gaski, 1993). Kortekangas acknowledges the limitations of the timeframe, reminding the reader that there are significant contributors to Sami education within the 40 years discussed in considerable detail despite the period-specific limitations. However, the Indigenous rights movement of the 1970s, urbanization, and industrialization require in-depth analyses beyond this book's scope.

The author presents a comprehensive picture of Sami education, cultural and language considerations, influential teachers and pastors, Nomad schools, and the embedded political complexities. By including the voices of influential Sami educators, the reader is provided with meaningful insight into the bureaucratic processes that plague not only the Sami education systems of 1900-1940 but can arguably be applied to understanding the history of Indigenous education systems internationally.

Educational systems of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, like those in Canada, Australia, and the United States, operated on assimilation as a guiding principle, and the Sami education system, as discussed by Kortekangas, is no different. Although Kortekangas explores Sweden, Norway, and Finland in detail in the book, some voices are absent, namely, Sami peoples residing in Russia or along the Russian border. The voices and historical realities of Sami peoples living near the Russian border add another layer to the complexities of Sami education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kortekangas acknowledges these voices are. However, it would be beneficial to have explored the Sami education systems in Russian border communities, exposing variables that impacted the education of Sami children in this region to identify any parallels to the other Nordic Nations.

Kortekangas identifies that while Finland and Norway intended to fully assimilate Sami students into the majority culture, the Swedish Nomad school system had different aims. Throughout the book's later sections, Kortekangas explores the segregation and assimilation policies in the Swedish Sami education system. In Sweden, segregation was viewed as favourable. Nomad schools served reindeer herding Sami students while non-reindeer herding students assimilated into community schools. Nomad schools promoted Sami language and culture through reindeer herding as it continued a *culturally relevant, economically productive livelihood*. Nomad school educators promoted Sami culture and language to ensure continued economic stability for remote Sami communities, whereas the emphasis in community schools was assimilation into Swedish language and culture.

A recurring theme throughout the book is the subordination of the Sami people. To further limit opportunities and societal inclusion, policymakers used the education system to maintain a framework of subordination. In the broader context of Indigenous education, Kortekangas provides an insight into the Eurocentric practices that have permeated Indigenous communities worldwide with the application of *civilized* education reform and the paternalistic ideologies embedded within.

Conversely, the reader is introduced to individuals who worked tirelessly to challenge the status quo and promote the rich culture and language of the Sami peoples. However, the hierarchical political systems embedded in the education system presented the Sami language as a national threat, and for this reason, assimilation was highly supported.

Sami Education in the Nordic North will appeal to readers seeking to develop a more robust understanding of the early schooling systems for Sami children. By including the viewpoints of educators alongside tangible, authentic examples of Sami education, Kortekangas highlights the problematic underpinnings of the education system for Sami peoples and the need for Indigenous agency in education. Perhaps it is Kortekangas' intent to bring to light the education systems forced upon Sami people were, and perhaps to an extent still are, steeped in elitism and racism promoting linguistic and cultural genocide. However, to draw such parallels more easily, it would be beneficial to include a present-day section, even if minimally, for the reader to critically analyze the parallels between the historical elements of Sami education and the current state of education in the Nordic North. By aligning the paternalistic and assimilation themes embedded in the book with present-day elitism and racism, the author will begin to reveal the multiple layers involved in such discourse and the complexities that pose(d) barriers to Sami agency in Sami education.

## References

- Baer, L. A. (1994). The Saami of Scandinavia and Russia: great strides towards self-determination since World War II. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 18(1), 51.
- Gaski, H. (1993). The Sami People: The "White Indians" of Scandinavia. *American Indian culture and research journal*, 17(1), 115-128.
- Heidemann, K. (2007). The Process of Norwegianization and Saami Communities. *Language of the Land: Policy, Politics, Identity*, 165.
- Kortekangas, O. (2021). *Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900-1940*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2002). Review or emotional reaction? A rejoinder. *Applied Linguistics* 23(4), 536-541.