

# ***Birgejupmi* – Life Skills, the Sámi Approach to Inclusion and Adapted Education**

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## **Introduction**

**T**his essay explores the Sámi approach to inclusion and adapted education through references to theory about Sámi culture and values concerning child rearing (Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014; Aikio, 2010; Balto, 1997). There are also examples of meeting the special learning needs of children in a Sámi community in North Norway. The personal experiences of a Sámi woman who lives and works in a Sámi village are shared. To anonymize, the woman is given the name Sofe and the village is situated in the northern part of Norway. Sofe is a teacher with all together 14 years of teaching experience on different levels, from kindergarten to upper secondary school. Part of her teacher training education was about Sámi childrearing, and she currently works in upper secondary school. Some of the experiences Sofe shares are examples from her own teaching practice in school; others are from her colleagues and her community. Sofe shared her insights via informal talks and written texts in e-mails, and we communicated regularly about the topic over a period of three months. The stories she shares are the essence of this essay because they are key to understanding how the principles that are explained in theory transfer to everyday life in school and elsewhere. The headings of the essay create the text's structure and consist of Sámi terms that express a way of thinking and an ideology about human beings and child rearing. However, a brief introduction to the Norwegian system of education is necessary to create a backdrop for the reader to better comprehend the Sámi approach.

## **A glance at some principles in the Norwegian school system**

### The National Regulations for Education

The first chapter of the Norwegian Education Act (1998) states: “Education must be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual pupil” (Section 1-3). Chapter 3 of the Core curriculum lists the “principles of the school’s practice,” which includes an inclusive learning environment and differentiated instruction (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 15-17). More specifically on how to adapt classroom practice in order to meet the individual pupil, it says:

Differentiated instruction applies to all pupils and shall for the most part take place through variation and adaptation to the diversity in the pupil group within the learning community. Pupils who need differentiated instruction beyond the ordinary teaching programme are entitled to special-needs education. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 17)

The principle of belonging to a pupil group within the learning community is set against the need for individual instruction that ordinary teaching cannot provide when the right to special-needs education comes into play. How school practice differentiates instruction and what measures are put into action to provide for each pupil within the group is not the aim of discussion here. However, it is important to point to these principles because they show the schools’ responsibility for varying and adapting teaching methods to meet each individual pupil inside the regular classroom. If the pupils’ learning outcome of the teaching activities in the regular classroom is considered insufficient, the pupil has the right to special education.

This is stressed further in the Education Act (1998), which has its own chapter on Special Education: “Pupils who either do not or are unable to benefit satisfactorily from ordinary teaching have the right to special education” (section 5-1). Additionally,

before the municipality or the county authority makes a decision concerning special education pursuant to section 5-1, an expert assessment must be made of the pupil's specific needs. This assessment must determine whether the pupil needs special education, and what kind of instruction should be provided. The expert assessment must consider and determine the following:

- the pupil’s learning outcome from the ordinary educational provisions...
- whether it is possible to provide help for the pupil’s difficulties within the ordinary educational provisions. (The Education Act, 1998, Section 5-3)

Thus, according to The Education Act (1998) it is of utmost importance to try make arrangements for the pupil with specific needs within the ordinary system, and this links to the principle of differentiated instruction mentioned above. All pupils shall have “equal opportunities to learn and develop, regardless their background and aptitudes” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and

Training, 2020, p. 16) and the school shall first and foremost try to provide for this to happen in the regular school activities.

However, when planning and implementing measures to create an inclusive learning environment for all children, the focus is often on the children's difficulties or challenges rather than on their resources and talents (Faldet & Nordahl, 2017). One explanation may be the proceedings to obtain help if your child is in need of special education. As mentioned above, in order for the pupil to receive necessary resources and help if required, an "expert assessment must be made of the pupil's specific needs" (The Education Act, 1998, Section 5-3). An understanding of this section of the national Education Act is that the assessment requires a description of the pupil's difficulties. In contrast, the Sámi approach to inclusion and adapted education is different, as they address the pupil's strengths and talents. This again is based on the Sámi cultural heritage, but before exploring this further, a brief insight into the regulations for education that is specific for the Sámi community follows.

### Sámi in the Regulations for Education

Chapter 6 of the Education Act (1998) is on Sámi education. It contains four sections: definitions, Sámi instruction in the primary and lower secondary education, Sámi upper secondary education and training, as well as the content of the education and training. In short, these sections state that Sámi pupils have the right to receive education and instruction in Sámi, also when living outside Sámi districts if the group of pupils consists of at least ten persons (The Education Act, 1998, Chapter 6).

Furthermore, under chapter 1 in the Core curriculum, *Core values of the education and training*, it says about schools and education in Sámi regions that:

The Sami school shall ensure that the pupils receive education and training based on Sami values and the Sami languages, culture and societal life. The values in the objectives clause are also Sami values and apply in the Sami school. It is important to have a holistic- Sami perspective and an indigenous-people's perspective in the Sami school, and to focus on material and immaterial cultural heritage, such as traditional knowledge, duodji/duodje/duedtie and the importance of familial relations. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 4)

However, the Core curriculum also underlines the schools' responsibility in giving all pupils a good foundation for identity-building through insight into culture and history, including

Sami cultural heritage [which] is part of Norway's cultural heritage. Our shared cultural heritage has developed throughout history and must be carried forward by present and future generations . . . Through the teaching and training the pupils shall gain insight into the indigenous Sami people's history, culture, societal life and rights. The pupils shall learn about diversity and variation in Sami culture and societal life. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 5-6)

The examples above are from the Norwegian general regulations for education. This shows that Sámi matters are included in the national regulations, which indicates that Sámi history and culture are valued in educational policymaking.

In addition to the general regulations, schools that are situated in the Sámi administrative regions have their own curricula in most subjects. These are parallel and equivalent to the curricula in other Norwegian schools (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.) and in addition to Sámi language, these include social science and natural sciences, music, home economics, *duodji* (Sámi handicraft), religion and ethics, history and geography. For remaining subjects that do not have Sámi curricula, pupils follow the national ones, for instance in math, physical education, as well as English and other foreign languages.

The Sámi curriculum was introduced in 1997 with the aim to “help maintain and develop important aspects of Sámi language, culture and social life” (Balto, 2005, p. 87). In addition to a specific Sámi curriculum in Sámi regions, the regular national curricula include focus on Sámi issues. Also, the Core curriculum – which apply in Norway as a whole, as well as in Sámi regions – stresses the authorities’ responsibility to maintain and protect the development of Sámi language and culture (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 2).

To meet these requirements in both the Core and the Subject curricula, knowledge about Sámi cultural heritage is essential. Some of the stories shared by Sofe presented below show how this essential knowledge is embedded in the Sámi way of thinking, and reflected in action and behaviour towards all people, including those who have special challenges or needs.

## **Terms that describe the Sámi way | Stories from the Sámi community**

### Birgen and *iešbirgejeadji*

In Sámi culture it is important that everyone *birge* (Aikio, 2010, p. 13-14)—become independent. The meaning of *birgejupmi*—life skills, is controlling one’s feelings, participating in social relations, as well as engaging in tasks that are meaningful to oneself. The focus is on the person’s abilities and strengths. For example, a child diagnosed with ADHD is given a responsibility that she or he not only masters, but also that helps channel energy into positive tasks, helping the child become *searra*—hardworking, and *iešbirgejeadji*—self-supported (Aikio, 2010, p. 27-28; Balto, 1997, p. 111). Additionally, *iešbirgejeadjin* is “a holistic process of lifelong learning, for survival and for strengthening of one’s self-confidence” (Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014, p. 63).

Sofe shares the story of a girl with Down syndrome who was raised the same way as her siblings. She was supported, but also met with expectations and requirements. In Sámi families everyone cares for each other: siblings, aunts, cousins and other relatives look after family members, in particular persons with special challenges. She grew into a woman who is *iešbirgejeadji*—self-supported, and works with *duodji*—Sámi handicraft, which requires fine motor skills. Sofe shares another experience, about a boy in school who was very uneasy and climbed all over the place during classroom sessions. His teachers wanted the

parents to contact experts to diagnose the boy's behaviour. His parents did not want to follow up on the teachers' request because they were afraid it would marginalise their son, and give the teachers excuses when they could not manage to get him interested in schoolwork. In particular, his mother was concerned with *gal dat oahppá*—indirect teaching (Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014, p. 69). The expression *gal dat oahppá*, also means that the pupils will develop personally when initiating learning activities that centre on his or her strengths and interests. Thus, it is useful when planning for and working with pupils who have an individual plan in school. The mother insisted that her son would manage without medication if he was exposed to a range of different experiences. She thought the boy would learn social codes by being reprovved by his classmates and by this, he would understand that it is important to behave in certain ways. His mother thought that he would not make an academic career, so rather than pushing him to work on his academic weaknesses, she strengthened the areas where he was attentive and did well. The boy was interested in reindeer herding and his parents knew that there were numerous tasks for him in this field. "In due time he will realize what he wants to do when he grows up," his parents said. Today the boy is *iesbirgejeaddji*—a self-supported adult, working in a profession where he helps other people.

A person will always get by if receiving support and having experiences that lead to growth (Aikio, 2010). This is particularly important for special needs pupils who should be supported to *birgejupmi* and *iesbirgejeaddjin* by being given opportunities to work with tasks that they master. The role of the extended family's involvement in raising children (Balto, 2005) and the idea that a child belongs to a big group of extended family is, according to Sofe's experience, transferred to school. Each class or cohort of pupils functions as a group of extended family for the pupils, in particular for those who need special support. This extended family approach in school is rooted in the Sámi way of building relations and organizing child rearing, which has the goal of creating free and, as mentioned above, *birgejeaddjit*—independent persons. To be a free person is a universal human ideal (Balto, 1997). In this context, free and independent persons mean that all pupils, whatever challenge they are facing, have the opportunity to show what they can do. Everyone should create opportunities for other individuals to show how they master tasks and are useful, as it may create a feeling of accomplishment. This feeling often transfers to other situations, thus it contributes to the development of free and independent persons. Balto (1997) argues that the development of free persons happens through three elements in the Sámi culture; working collaboratively, through indirect ways of influencing others by the strategy called *nárrideapmi*—anecdotes, jokes and teasing, as well as through building networks. The following three sections elaborate on these central cultural qualities. They are presented one by one, but they are still interconnected.

### Working collaboratively

Working collaboratively not only integrates and connects young and adult lives (Balto, 1997), but is also the very essence towards building individual self-

worth according to one of Sofe's stories. She continues, when youth are part of the collaboration, their participation is necessary to get all chores done and they feel that they are useful. Besides, being responsible for and keeping busy with certain tasks engages the brain and makes them process emotions and thoughts. For those who have special needs it is particularly important that they are given working-tasks that they are very good at, so good that the rest of the group depend on their efforts in order to get the different tasks done.

Sofe tells about a young girl who felt sad because her mother no longer had time for her. The mother had recently started her own career, which she did not want to give up. However, after getting to know about her daughter's feeling, the mother was more aware of the emotional support that her daughter needed and she would provide it through sharing practical housework with her. They cooked together, vacuumed and folded laundry; they shared chores that led to mutual growth for both of them. Mother and daughter shared time when working collaboratively, which has always been central in Sámi upbringing.

One example of how the tradition of working collaboratively is transferred into school is when a teacher asks pupils to help with something practical if observing that the pupil is troubled. It can be, for instance, getting some books or carrying tables, but the important aspect is that they talk while executing a practical chore. The teacher (adult)-pupil (child)-relation is the important here: Sofe's experience is that the pupil often needs someone to share thoughts with, or get tutoring towards personal growth, or to find solutions to challenges or difficult decisions. Thus, the Sámi approach demands a foundation of trust before problems and difficult behaviour may be addressed—in this case the trust was established through talking while collaborating to do a practical task.

However, some Sámi families who experience their children having problems, in school or outside, report that the authorities' focus on the child's problem and possible quick-fix solution to the difficulty, without building trust, is problematic (Gaupseth, 2005). Rather, it is important to respect the child's own space when in a troubled situation, and one way to solve personal problems such as behaviour issues in school is through the *bálddalagaid*-talk—a talk side-by-side on equal terms between adult and child, which means a talk based on respect and equality. The *bálddalagaid*-talk means that the child is allowed to talk about the problem when she or he is ready, and it is initiated during some sort of activity: work, watching TV, around the fireplace, or while taking a drive (Gaupseth, 2005). Again, this shows how the indirect approach and help through doing something together is used in order to get someone to open up and talk about problematic issues.

### Nárrideapmi

*Nárrideapmi*—anecdotes, jokes and teasing, are used as an indirect way of strengthening another person to *birget*—become independent. Only persons who are close to the child should use *nárrideapmi* as a tool in child rearing, because it is important to know the child and his or her limits. When used correctly, this way of

speaking and communicating helps develop children emotionally and teaches them how to handle feelings— thus, *nárrideapmi* is a way to ensure that children experience mastering and progress on their own level, as it simultaneously creates an arena for development. One example is that correct use of *nárrideapmi* may give a pupil with ADHD strategies to regulate feelings that otherwise could end up with negative consequences. It is not uncommon that pupils with ADHD lack impulse control and act out. This again often leads to challenging situations, in particular in social settings. Good use of *nárrideapmi* when such situations occur or escalate means talking in a soft, supportive, and joking way to, for instance, explain the consequences of their behaviour. It trains the pupils to self-regulate feelings and actions because the anecdote, joke or teasing—*nárrideapmi*—reminds the pupil of alternatives in the given situation. The aim is to develop each individual’s awareness of how they master different situations and challenges, as well as to create an arena and opportunity for the pupil to practice how to manage her or his personal feelings.

The use of anecdotes, or storytelling, aims to establish a shared community and identity through stories about culture and traditions. In school, *searvelatnja*—the traditional learning arena means the classroom, the library, the cafeteria, and so on (Balto & Kuhmunen, 2014). In Sámi schools they consider that a lot of learning happens in various spaces, where the pupils experience life and shared community. *Searvelatnja* also means shared community, and focuses on strengthening the sense of belonging, as well as identity. Learning about and knowing one’s own history is important in order to become an independent person. The thought that all humans develop best within a shared community is the very foundation for the Sámi, Sofe says. Another of her stories shows how storytelling is part of the learning activities in school. Teachers implement stories into their teaching, to break up teaching sessions and to allow the pupils to reflect about what they have heard. Instead of guiding the children by direct explanations, they are tutored by actions and storytelling, wherein the children themselves are to catch the moral of the story. It can be a story, true or false, about someone who makes a choice which was not good for her or himself. Such stories often have two aims. First, to show the children that even though they might not master something at their first go, it does not mean that they will never be able to do it. Second, that the children learn something about their own feelings, actions, and reactions through a story about other persons’ choices. This type of storytelling helps build relations—a shared community— among the pupils, as well as teaching the pupils to reflect on their own choices and actions. Storytelling, whether the stories are true or false, is an important part of Sámi child rearing, according to Sofe.

### Networks

Close family, relatives, godparents, and *gaibmi*—naming someone after others, all create the basis for building networks. As mentioned above, the family network is important, both due to its role in raising younger members of the family— where adults are models for younger members— and as a social network

for all generations (Balto, 1997). According to Sofe the important role of family is reflected in school, where they use the terms *skuvlaobbá* and *skuvlaviellja*— school-sisters and school-brothers, terms that are common in Sámi culture. By using these terms, the relation between the pupils become stronger.

Strong personal relations are important in Sámi culture, as shown by reference to family. Moreover, also godparents used to be considered as equivalent to relatives. In fact, godparents were often also close relatives. In former days, they were active in the child's upbringing and taught the godchild both working and social skills (Balto, 1997). Today, godparents have a lesser part in direct childrearing, but it is still considered an honour to be one as it leads to strong affiliation and the role as caretaker (Balto, 1997). A role as caretaker, comparable to that of a godparent, is also part of the school setting, Sofe says. She expresses the importance of teachers recognizing their function as “godparent” and it strengthens the relation to each individual pupil, to better support all pupils.

*Gaibmi* honours the person the child is named after and is a way to secure a close relation between the two. Along with relatives and godfathers, *gaibmi* creates the social network for the child and social control for the parents (Balto, 1997). The *gaibmi* becomes the “significant other” for the child and one to look up to and learn from (Balto, 1997, p. 76). The *gaibmi* is chosen for his or her special qualities that the parents hope will transfer to their child. Also in school *gáibmi*—name-sister and name-brother— is emphasised, according to Sofe. She says that when the teacher names the pupils by using the relational-term *gáibmi* in class, it may strengthen the pupils, especially those who need special attention, both academically and socially.

Although these truly are family matters, it is relevant here as it shows how the choice of particular persons when building a social network around a child plays a role in his or her upbringing. Especially for children with special needs, it is important that the network consists of persons who contribute to healthy and positive values.

### **Concluding remarks - *li su ábut logahallat***

The saying *li su ábut logahallat* means that one should not focus on the child's weaknesses or negative sides, but rather use one's experience to help the child grow. The insight into the Sámi culture and tradition that this essay presents helps explain the focus on nurturing special talents and characteristics for all children in school, including those with special needs.

This essay explores the Sámi approach to inclusion and adapted education by way of certain terms that show the Sámi way of thinking about childrearing, social relations, and learning environments. This way of thinking is elaborated by the stories that Sofe has shared. Through Sofe's stories from the school setting, we get an understanding of the terms' implication in practice. To describe the Sámi approach to inclusion and adapted education in one word, it is *birgejupmi*—life skills, because of its fundamental focus on the pupils' abilities and strengths.

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