



## Tornedalian Teachers' and Principals' in the Swedish Education System: Exploring Decolonial Pockets in the Aftermaths of 'Swedification'

Pär Poromaa Isling<sup>1</sup>

Postdoctoral researcher, Umeå University, Sweden

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### Abstract

This article explores decolonial pockets among Tornedalian teachers and principals by scrutinising the pre-requisites for school staff to integrate Tornedalen's minority culture and practise the Meänkieli language in ordinary teaching and learning. It also investigates the challenges and opportunities aligned with such endeavours. The data collection is based on qualitative focus-group and individual interviews with teachers, principals and pupils at upper secondary schools in two Tornedalian municipalities, in Northern Sweden. The findings reveal a practice in which teachers' and principals' Tornedalian cultural background is either more or less prominent, depending on the occasion. Particularly in the classroom context, teachers are obliged to mute and put aside their minority language, Meänkieli. Thus, they transform their behaviour and adopt a Swedish manner of conduct in their contacts with pupils. Consequently, teachers' Tornedalian cultural identity becomes less prominent. Simultaneously, Swedish school culture takes precedence, and its authority controls what can be seen as proper educational subjects as well as the classroom's social interactions. The analysis, guided by decolonising perspectives, reveals that minority language and cultural practices are mainly alive and active in the unofficial settings of the schools. These manifestations of resistance against the Swedish language and Swedish culture's dominance of school practices, which remain alive in these decolonial pockets, is not organised and not part of official school practice. However, the conversations with school staff and pupils revealed that the competence, desire and strategies exist to ignite a pedagogy more inclusive of minority perspectives that can facilitate the transfer of Tornedalian minority knowledge and perspectives to pupils. This could empower decolonial Meänkieli practices and revitalise Tornedalian culture among young Tornedalians.

**Keywords:** National Minority; Tornedalians; Meänkieli; Decolonisation; Swedish Education System

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [par.poromaa-isling@umu.se](mailto:par.poromaa-isling@umu.se)

## Introduction

This article contributes to a body of decolonial studies that are interested in the prerequisites for national minorities to practise their minority group status within educational systems. Human rights organisations have been communicating the importance of minority issues for an extended period of time. For example, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages has stated the importance of its members, including Sweden, making minority languages available throughout the education system. Hence, education in and about minority languages was to be implemented from pre-school up to higher education and adult training (Council of Europe, 1992). Sweden attracts repeated criticism concerning its failure to protect the national minorities' languages and cultures. Recent evaluations of Sweden's fulfilment of these minority policies show that measures to protect and develop the national minority languages and culture are still unsatisfactory (Council of Europe, 2018). Thus, international authorities are demanding that national minority issues be prioritised and urgently realised within the education system.

The Tornedalians is a national minority group that lives alongside the Torne River Valley (Tornedalen) in northernmost Sweden. The minority group's characteristics include the Meänkieli language, which, similarly to other minority and indigenous languages in the region, is threatened with extinction (Ridanpää, 2018) and the Finno-Ugric culture, which distinguishes Tornedalians from the Swedish majority society (Kontio, 2010). Tornedalians are struggling to gain wider recognition for their minority rights and cultural identity. In fact, for many, the Tornedalians are still an unknown, 'forgotten' minority group in the Nordic countries (Lipott, 2015). Studies about Tornedalians from a decolonial theoretical perspective are currently lacking.

With this backdrop in mind, this article focuses on exploring decolonial pockets among Tornedalian teachers and principals by scrutinising the prerequisites for school staff to integrate Tornedalen's minority culture and to practise the Meänkieli language during ordinary teaching and learning. Furthermore, it sets out to investigate the challenges and opportunities that are aligned with such endeavours. In an essay by indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016), decolonial pockets are described as stressing place-based decolonial thinking and struggles against colonialist structures. Here, the concept is used to describe practices of resistance by minorities against and within the bodies of a nation's majority culture, such as its education system.

The following guiding questions are posed: (1) How do teachers and principals relate to and act out their Tornedalian minority group status within the Swedish education system? (2) How do teachers perceive their opportunities to teach and for pupils to learn about Tornedalian language and culture in Swedish schools and under the present curriculum? (3) What restricts or supports principals' ability to obtain the prerequisites for organising school practices that engage in Tornedalian culture and for practising Meänkieli in the classroom?

### **Tornedalians past and present relation to the Swedish Education System**

Tornedalians' experiences, relations and interactions with the Swedish education system are related to Sweden's colonial history in Tornedalen and the repressive abuses directed towards Meänkieli-speaking populations. This abuse, described as the *Swedification* of Tornedalen, manifested itself through a vast assimilation policy, which was most evident during the years 1880–1950. Fuelled by 'breakthroughs' in the so-called science of race biology, the goal of the Swedish authorities was to force the Tornedalians, who were perceived as inferior, into total abandonment of their minority heritage and to entirely assimilate and submit themselves to Swedish language and culture. Expressions of Tornedalian language and culture were seen as threats to nationalist narratives, which portrayed Sweden as a homogeneous country solely populated by a Nordic race (Persson, 2018). In this colonial process, the education system was used as a tool to correct the Tornedalians' behaviour and lifestyle (Elenius, 2014). Following the Royal Charter on public education, Meänkieli was prohibited as a school subject in the 1880s, a ban that lasted until 1950. During these decades, pupils who used the language were subjected to harsh punishments, manifested through physical and psychological violence by school staff (Lipott, 2015). Textbooks written in Finnish were prohibited and replaced by solely Swedish literature and learning materials. Children who lived in remote areas of Tornedalen were separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools and work cabins to ensure that they became 'proper' Swedes (Kokkola, Palo, & Manderstedt, 2019). Most of the interviewees in this study had heard stories from elderly relatives and family members about this repression. The older school staff also had personal experiences of the violence that the Swedish nationalist ambitions had created through schooling. Thus, a lot of older Tornedalians live with the historical burden of shame related to Meänkieli and are somewhat ambivalent about the function of the language in today's society. On the other hand, young Tornedalians seem to have a less ambivalent attitude to this heritage. Thus, they desire more knowledge about Meänkieli and Tornedalian culture and request opportunities to learn more about minority issues in school (Poromaa Isling, 2020). This historical background is an important component of understanding contemporary Tornedalen and the prerequisites for modern-day Tornedalians' relation to and opportunities within the Swedish education system.

Today, Sweden's education system has a certain obligation to provide a teaching and learning environment that considers the rights of national minorities. Documents stress the need to facilitate and strive for more elements of minority issues in education. For example, 'The Swedish Curriculum for Upper Secondary School' emphasises the responsibility of schools to ensure that every pupil possesses knowledge of the country's minority cultures, languages, religions and history (National Agency of Education, 2013). Furthermore, the Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages (SFS 2009:724) stresses that schools, as public authorities, are required to ensure the rights of national minorities to develop a cultural identity; to protect and promote the use of minority languages; and to cede influence to, and consult national minorities on, issues that concern

them, especially children and young people. Hence, the official stance of the Swedish government is to emphasise the importance of national minority issues (SOU 2017:60). The necessary requirements for pupils to receive native-language teaching in Meänkieli are that they have good knowledge of the language and that there are appropriate teachers (National Agency of Education, 2020). However, studies show that these ambitions are not met with sufficient resources to ensure their realisation. Tornedalians school staff do not receive proper training in minority issues and lack beneficial pedagogical tools (for example, there is a shortage of proper textbooks in Meänkieli for pupils) with which to organise an inclusive education linked to minority issues (von Brömssen & Rodell Olgaç, 2010). Hence, there is an immanent need to further critically examine the relation between the Tornedalians and the Swedish education system.

### Theoretical perspectives

Decolonial perspectives offer analytical tools to scrutinise on-going consequences of a colonial past; in that sense it can help to unfold structures of injustices that tends to occur as ‘normal’ and at the same time give voice to minority knowledges and experiences (Bhambra, 2014). The imposition of *internal colonialism* (see Hechter, 1975) by the Swedish government upon Tornedalians still to this day has a negative impact on the minority group’s opportunities to engage in cultural and language practices, similar to the situation of populations in the global south or indigenous people (Tuck & Yang, 2012), for example the Sámi people (Ojala & Nordin, 2015). The decision to deploy decolonial theories in this article stems from a need to critically examine modern-day Tornedalian prerequisites to practise their minority group status to the fullest, through the integration of Tornedalian language and knowledge in a Swedish context, such as school. The education system was one of the primary mechanisms by which the Swedification policy’s implementation was made possible (Elenius, 2014); thus, decolonial thinking offers tools with which to scrutinise its consequences for present-day Tornedalians, and thus allows a critical outlook on Swedish language and culture’s dominance within the education system (Laakso, Sarhimaa, Spiliopoulou Åkermark, & Toivanen, 2016). Moreover, this theoretical lens encourages perspectives that significantly involve acknowledging the local and the value of difference (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It is an established fact that the paradigm of Western, Eurocentric traditions and ideas is a prominent feature of the Nordic countries (Lóftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016) and also of its education systems (Kuokkanen, 2007). Thus, homogeneity has been a common narrative in descriptions of the Nordic countries; however, in reality these countries are places of vast cultural heterogeneity (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, & Toivanen, 2019). Hence, decolonial theories can illuminate alternative ways of practising education that challenge established preconceptions about academic activities based upon a homogeneous, universalistic perspective on knowledge production (Gregers Eriksen, 2018).

Similarly to other anticolonial theories (e.g., postcolonialism) decolonial perspectives criticise the domination of European, Western knowledge production; thus, they offer thinking tools for an intellectual resistance to the consequences of colonial experiences and history (Bhambra, 2014). The term coloniality emphasises the expansion of colonialism, its globally dominant impacts and the endurance of its effects in the present day (Moraña, Dussel, & Jáuregui, 2008). Theorising about the power of coloniality, Quijano (2008) stresses that Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge, including its rationality, were globally hegemonic forces that set out to overthrow the development of local knowledge: “colonizing and overcoming other previous different conceptual formations and their respective concrete knowledges, as much in Europe as in the rest of the world” (p. 198). From this perspective, education is saturated with notions of universalism that hinder expressions of difference and diversity, but also require these conditions as a mirror for itself (Quijano, 2013). Mendoza (2015) argues that coloniality’s impacts on present-day societies lie in their power to “redefine culture, labor, intersubjective relations, aspirations of the self, common sense, and the knowledge production in ways that accredit the superiority of the colonizer” (p. 114). Thus, to this day, educational practices are still at work and have been shaped so as to silence and eradicate non-Western knowledge (Lander, 2000, as cited in Mendoza, 2015). Following the thinking of coloniality, Tornedalians’ experiences of racialisation and stigmatisation in Sweden due to their minority Finno-Ugric ethnicity, culture and knowledge (Heith, 2016), should not be viewed as a demarcated contextual period of time marked by Swedish colonial intrusion; instead, the aftermaths of these colonial abuses have a continuous character, with real consequences for modern-day Tornedalians. This is especially true in institutions such as schools, which aim to socialise pupils into the majority society’s values and culture (Biesta, 2009).

Andreotti (2011) has deployed decolonial thinking to examine knowledge production in the context of global citizen education. The pedagogical concept of *dissensus* is put forward to challenge the conformity of school within a Eurocentric paradigm and thus to illuminate paths towards an education characterised by diversity and decolonial practice. Of significance for this article is the focus on school staff, and specifically educators’ roles as agents of change and as negotiators between different interests within the education system. Andreotti (2011) describes this opportunity as follows:

Between enunciation (e.g., of a neoliberal educational agenda) and interpretation in a specific context (e.g., teacher ‘on the ground’) lies a space of negotiation and creative opportunity that is always pregnant with (risky) possibilities. This space is extremely useful for those who can re-work these discourses and interfere in the geopolitical economy of knowledge production by displacing or interrupting certain constructions of meaning and enabling others (...) the role of an educator, as seen from this perspective, is a cultural broker, negotiating between discursive systems: disrupting old patterns and creating new possibilities (always already embedded, contaminated, constrained and enabled by the context). (p. 395)

Approaching education from this perspective means that school staff can find enhanced, new ways of organising teaching and learning into previously unknown territories. An important role of a pedagogy of dissensus, according to Andreotti (2011), is to

support pupils in gaining the ability to analyse the complexities, paradoxes, conflicts, ambiguities and differences that are aligned with the practice of education and schooling. In that sense, this decolonial perspective on education is a pedagogical tool that can ignite a shift in thinking and challenge deeply rooted, taken-for-granted assumptions about what characterises and signifies a school practice in Sweden. It offers an opposing mindset and brings useful and necessary language with which to critically examine the consequences of the domination of Western, Swedish culture, language and knowledge in Tornedalian schools and, moreover, alternative ways of doing education.

## Method

This article is based on a qualitative focus group and individual interview study. Interviews were chosen because they can provide in-depth accounts of participants' perceptions and experiences of being a teacher, principal or pupil within the Swedish education system (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Another key reason for this choice was the importance of being flexible and adjusting the interview content to the shifts and turns in conversations. Furthermore, the data were collected in a minority context, which historically has had a colonial experience of research and researchers (Heith, 2016). Being a person who comes from Tornedalen with Meänkieli-speaking family members, and at the same time having a role as a researcher meant that ethics connected to the research practice were of utmost importance. A point of departure for the study was to engage in and commit to a careful practice characterised by transparency, and to communicate and discuss the results in cooperation with participating schools. In that sense, my researcher role took inspiration from the methodological approaches employed by Brattland, Kramvig, and Verran (2018). From this perspective, the role of the author/researcher is to develop knowledges together with participants, and to avoid working as a 'neutral commentator' (p. 75). Hence, given this approach, certain attention had to be paid to the selection of method (Andersen & Kukutai, 2017; Chilisa, 2012). From this perspective, the interview allows a direct form of communication about subjects which, when properly used, combines sensitivity and an opportunity to double-check the meaning of what has been said by participants; thus, this method, at its best, counteracts erroneous perceptions (Smith, 2012).

In total, 28 informants contributed to the study. All of the participating teachers, principals and pupils lived in county towns or villages in two Tornedalian municipalities. A majority of the participants identified themselves as Tornedalians. One school in each municipality was contacted, and the principal in each school setting organised meetings for interviews with the participants. The teachers were interviewed in a focus group format. The group at one school consisted of five teachers, and a group of three teachers participated at the other school. The principals of these schools were interviewed individually. Correspondingly, two focus group interviews were conducted with 18 pupils (aged

16–17) from the two school settings, 9 pupils at each school. The focus groups were organised so that each conversation would involve only pupils from either vocational or study-preparation programmes. The focus groups and individual interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours.

The interviews were customised to the different groups of interviewees, but a common point of departure was an interest in minority education issues. More specifically, the questions stressed the experiences of school staff and pupils of being minorities in relation to the content and execution of school practice. The interviews' overall themes focused on the obstacles and opportunities related to an educational practice which involves and develops Meänkieli and the Tornedalian culture, as well as the experience of being a minority person *and* a teacher or leader in a Swedish school. The status and position of the Tornedalian minority within the Swedish education system were also highlighted.

The inquiry process of gathering the data was conducted with the theoretical perspectives in mind; thus, these perspectives guided the whole procedure of organising and making sense of the materials. All of the recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to a content analysis (Schreier, 2012). The first step in the analysis was to read the transcripts thoroughly, during which some prominent categories emerged. Following this procedure, categories with a similar signification were subcategorised into overall prominent themes. Lastly, the themes that contained information in coherence with the article's scope and research questions were integrated into the presentation of the findings. The data gathered from teachers, principals and pupils had different characters, which enabled the illumination of contradictions and consistent perceptions among these participant groups (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). This procedure was also used in order to convey inconsistencies and thus enhance the findings' trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Transforming into a Swedish government official**

The interview conversations displayed a practice in which teachers' Tornedalian cultural background became either more or less prominent, depending on the occasion. Especially in classroom contexts, the teachers seemed to feel obligated to put aside their minority Meänkieli language. Thus, they transformed and adopted a Swedish manner of conduct in their contacts with pupils. Consequently, the teachers' Tornedalian cultural identity became less prominent within the Swedish school culture. Mendoza (2015) stresses that the authority of Western conceptions of knowledge lies in their power to control what are seen as proper educational subjects. In accordance with this reasoning, the existing space for Tornedalian teachers to use a pedagogy that authentically embraces local minority perspectives is limited. Given that the educational structure itself is built upon the notion that the Western perspective on knowledge is superior (Quijano, 2008), we can begin to understand why minority perspectives are not prioritised by teachers in the classroom situation. In contrast, in unofficial settings such as the staffroom, teachers and principals engage in a most vital Meänkieli practice. Here, minority knowledge and experiences are

discussed and seem to create a bond of recognition and confirmation among a majority of staff members which, to some extent, challenges and shakes up the pattern of domination of Western epistemology (Mignolo, 2008). Hence, Tornedalian language and culture are very much alive in these unofficial spaces, but utterly absent from the interactions with and among pupils. Several teachers explained that there is basically no communication about and on Meänkieli in the teaching situation, and few contexts in which pupils learn about Tornedalian culture or history. To some extent, these school staff and pupils live in parallel worlds of cultural practices. Both staff and pupils confirmed the absence of Tornedalian elements from ordinary education and school in general:

We should have more themes about this – much more stuff about Meänkieli. It’s been so difficult to realise this. Pupils have even said that they want to read Meänkieli, but they haven’t been given the opportunity; they don’t even know that such a possibility exists. (Teacher)

I have heard the teachers [speak Meänkieli], but not often. (Pupil)

The weight of Swedish school culture and the curriculum were evident in the interviews; thus, the teachers seemed obliged to deprioritise elements with significance for local minority culture and language. The experienced requirements pointed towards the role of teachers as needing to divide their activities and interactions in school into Tornedalian and Swedish practices. Official settings have appropriated a Swedish manner of conduct, which school staff perceive as suitable for embodying ideals associated with a Swedish school and the assignments within that institutional framework. Thus, they act out *Swedishness* (Hübinette, 2016) in spaces that they feel demand it from them as government officials.

When a Swedish speaker comes into a context where you’re speaking Meänkieli, then you switch to Swedish. The Swedish language is dominant, even though it’s a minority language right here in this municipality. (Principal)

Moreover, there are clear boundaries to what is socially acceptable in the execution of being a teacher in classrooms. Teachers’ transformation into the solely ‘Swedish’ type of educator has repercussions; for example, it seems to obstruct knowledge exchanges about culture or language with the younger Tornedalian pupils. The valid conceptions of what education in Sweden is supposed to be and its hallmarks generate corrective principles. Consequently, the teachers perceive an everyday teaching practice that integrates Tornedalian culture and language as being difficult to achieve. In that sense, the Swedish school culture is authoritarian and basically represses elements of Tornedalian minority knowledge and culture every time a lesson is held.

As already mentioned, an alternative social practice occurs in spaces where school staff do not necessarily feel the need to embody their teacher role. In these spaces, teachers speak Meänkieli more freely, combining expressions in the language or merging them with Swedish words or sentences. The use of Meänkieli is not merely as a language but also as a cultural practice for these teachers (and principals). The language engages staff

in opposition to the official way of conducting oneself as a teacher or principal in accordance with the Swedish education system. The teachers seem to be resting, to be at ease and more comfortable in these Meänkieli-based cultural practices because they allow the opportunity to be private and to interweave local narratives within the conformity of school practice. The language practice and the cultural meaning that it provides contribute with an alternative function compared to the Swedish language, which is described as an academic, institutionalised language, while Meänkieli is used for other purposes: to express emotions or to communicate labour activities or stories outside of school:

People often say that Meänkieli here in Tornedalen is the language of emotion. (Teacher)

The school is a Swedish environment. There was someone who said that it's an institution; it's Swedish. (Teacher)

The Meänkieli language was described as being the essential part of the Tornedalian culture: "It's the language that carries the culture" (Teacher). In classrooms and official school contexts, however, the Tornedalian language is subdued and silenced by the precedence of the Swedish language. To some extent, this denial of local knowledge dissolves the important quintessence of the Tornedalian culture and hinders the realisation of the legislated rights of national minorities to have influence over, teach on and be taught about local minority issues and conditions (SFS 2009:724; National Agency of Education, 2013).

According to Kuokkanen (2007), educational systems are sites that produce and reproduce values and knowledge marked by Eurocentricity and (neo)colonial conceptions. In these Tornedalian schools, similar processes are at work. The values and culture of Swedish schools do not support, but rather hinder Meänkieli and traces of minority life and knowledge from being present in ordinary teaching. In that sense, the Swedish school system's impact lies in its power to be a site that appears to be the rightful socialiser of appropriate values and the bearer of true and valid knowledge (Kuokkanen, 2007).

### Teaching in the colonial classroom

In the Swedish hierarchy of knowledge, Tornedalian experiences manifested through literature, history and language practices are usually deprioritised in favour of Swedish culture (books, authors, language, etc.). Teachers stressed that the focus of school – its goals – forces them to remove elements of the region's history, literature and culture from regular teaching. An illustrative example of this conflict of interests was evident in the following interview segment: the teacher chose to educate the pupils about the famous Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné, instead of the Tornedalian folk poet Antti Keksi:

But, for example, when we talk about literature, we have Keksi's poems, for example, which are about the ice breakup in the Torne River. We could work with that instead of working with Carl von Linné. (Teacher)

Tornedalian perspectives seem to be the losers when teachers try to balance different interests between the subjects about which they choose to teach. Thus, the school as an organisation does not seem to be making an active choice to ease the balancing of Tornedalian interests with Swedish teaching content; on the contrary, the curriculum's strong emphasis on majority society's knowledge and its vague formulations concerning minority issues seem to enhance and empower Swedish culture. Thus, the logic of school practice seems to demand and create teaching practices that focus on the benefits of choosing an imagined safe path within a Swedish cultural canon (Stoltz, 2011). According to Quijano (2008), the hierarchical structure of knowledge production is based upon the superiority of Eurocentric values, which relies upon rationality and a firm viewpoint on contested knowledge. This system's logic has the consequence of forcing local traditions and experiences into obedience within this paradigm. The exposed difficulties faced by Tornedalian teachers in embracing and integrating the local minority, as interpreted from this viewpoint, is an effect of an education system that repeatedly puts Swedish majority society values first. Teachers and principals recognised these nationalist processes in the interviews but, at the same time, to some extent, they questioned the function and value of pupils learning about and practising Meänkieli:

The school has created a situation in which we don't need our language, my language, Meänkieli.  
(Teacher)

We've made many attempts in this municipality to get Meänkieli to be a part of school education, but it has been very difficult. It's like it's not rooting in. (Principal)

Hence, teachers expressed anger directed towards the school itself, as a governmental institutional practice that undermines and disqualifies Meänkieli as a proper and useful language in school. Furthermore, these quotes visualise frustration about the hardships aligned with activities that are intended to re-vitalise Meänkieli in schools. In contrast to the teachers' experienced difficulties aligned with teaching on these issues, the pupils expressed an almost unanimous desire to learn more about them; moreover, they also knew why their needs are important.

Pupil 1: It would be good to know it [Meänkieli] and so much fun to be able to speak it.

Interviewer: But why? Do you benefit from it, or is it more so, why does it feel important?

Pupil 2: To understand what others are talking about.

Pupil 3: It feels like it's a part of [this municipality in Tornedalen] that you almost should be able to. It feels a bit like that.

The pupils' certainty about their desire to learn more can be understood as a consequence of minority issues being more visible and accepted nowadays in the wider Tornedalian society (Huss, 2008). The previous experiences of oppression and shame (Arola, Kunnas, & Winsa, 2011) do not have the same impact on the lives of these pupils because

they do not have personal, direct experiences of Swedish colonial intrusion comparable to those of elderly Tornedalians. According to the teachers, most of the pupils whom they meet today do not carry the burden of previous wrongdoings on their shoulders; instead, pupils communicate a sense of pride and acceptance of their minority heritage, or else have a neutral outlook on their cultural background:

They [pupils] don't walk around feeling ashamed that they have a Finnish dialect or that they speak Meänkieli; they're proud of it. I think something has happened to the attitude during these 35 years that I've been working, and I think it's very positive. (Teacher)

In this situation, school staff have knowledge and experiences of both the Meänkieli language and the Tornedalian minority culture. Every day, the teachers encounter pupils who are interested and willing to learn more about their culture and to practise Meänkieli. Thus, the prospects for a more inclusive school culture for the Tornedalian minority appear to be good. Unfortunately, exchanges of language and cultural experiences from the elders to the youths (and back again) seem difficult to ignite. The school and its classrooms, specifically their history as a place for the socialisation of dominant nationalist values and knowledge, still impacts upon what the staff think they can do, think and teach (Andreotti, 2010). Similarly, it affects pupils' expectations of what the school can offer them in relation to minority education. In that sense, school, and especially classroom practice, are saturated with Tornedalen's colonial past. The hardships, aligned with a more inclusive education (which considers the experiences and knowledge of local society), were apparent in these interviews, which communicated that colonial conceptions and ideas are still very much alive in Tornedalen's schools, especially in the classroom pedagogy.

### **The impact of the Big Swede in Tornedalian school practice**

So, what are the prerequisites for the development of a more visible minority culture and language practice in contemporary Tornedalian educational settings? Some things are more striking than others when focusing on these prerequisites. A prominent theme in the conversations was an awareness that Tornedalian interests are not prioritised by the Swedish state, either in school or in the rest of society. The statements made by principals, teachers and pupils communicate that they do not feel that they have a legitimate position from which to make and implement important decisions concerning themselves because they do not have the immense power of the society in which they live or of the education in which they participate. Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui (2008) accentuated that coloniality works to visualise the effects of a colonial past. This 'overarching structure of power' (p. 17) maintains a continuous character of inequality, aligned with endurance, which has vast impacts on social and political experiences in contemporary societies. Following this analytical argument, the conversations with Tornedalian school staff pinpointed a sense that the minority group lacks power to control its own destiny or to assert and protect its interests within Swedish society. One principal described the domination of the Swedish

authorities over Tornedalian interests by using the concept of the *Big Swede*, an idea that is commonly used to comment on Swedish nationalist interests (Storsvensk, n.d.). In this context, it stresses colonial mechanisms of governmental power organised so as to control knowledge production, to create homogeneity in its implementation and consequently to undermine expressions of Meänkieli and Tornedalian culture.

Interviewer: What does the concept of the Big Swede signify to you?

Principal: It's the one who, whom we, who belong to the minority, Meänkieli speakers, perceive as those in power.

Agents aligned with the power of the Big Swede in education include the Swedish National Agency for Education. According to this principal, the Agency's impositions have had a negative impact on the development of Meänkieli-based practices in that school:

At the end of the 90s in this municipality, there were attempts made to use the school's choice as a compulsory subject for everyone, so they tried to get Meänkieli to become a subject that everyone was taught. It was a mandatory element, but then we got our first school inspection. And then we learned that we weren't allowed to introduce subjects ourselves. (Principal)

Thus, the processes of coloniality in the Tornedalian school staff's interviews reveal these agents' ability to dominate and control the educational agenda and to determine the importance of issues. And, judging by the conversations with both staff and pupils, a common opinion is that they have been doing so for a long time. Hence, the requirements imposed by the authorities are not followed up with appropriate measures or the resources needed to ensure proper conditions for school staff to build and develop a more engaging educational practice involving Meänkieli-speaking and Tornedalian perspectives and knowledge. The principals and teachers stated that the ambivalence and shifting of politics and policies towards Tornedalians from the Swedish government are in themselves expressions of domination and oppression. One teacher said that the legislative demands to integrate minority issues is a contemporary example of coercion against the Tornedalian minority:

Teacher: First, we've been banned from speaking Meänkieli, and now they're going to force Meänkieli on us. They're forcing it into school. People say that this is a form of coercion all over again.

These experiences of supervision by the Swedish government have generated anger and suspicion among the school staff. The laws established to enhance minority issues are not supported with sufficient resources. Thus, there are not enough textbooks or educational materials that focus on Tornedalen and Meänkieli. This perceived gap between official commitments and altering objective conditions to create a favourable learning situation means that the legislation is seen as an extension of modern Swedish ambitions

to control and correct Tornedalians' behaviour (and also that they feel subjected to governmental ignorance about them as a national minority group). Both staff and pupils raised the fact that there are no proper textbooks on Meänkieli and that good-quality educational materials about Tornedalian culture and history are lacking. Consequently, the objective material conditions prevent education from having a minority focus. These limitations were raised both by staff and pupils:

The school administration [the National Agency of Education] that's located in Stockholm, I don't think they've even really been aware that there are languages that are native. (Principal)

They [the National Agency of Education] don't value Meänkieli at all. There are no teaching materials in it. (Pupil)

These experiences of indifference and trivialisation towards Tornedalians' right to learn about their culture and language in school communicate the domination of the Swedish authorities; thus, the Big Swede makes both physical and intellectual intrusions into school practice.

### **Tornedalian decolonial practices**

Despite years of colonial experiences, as well as challenging contemporary obstacles designed to generate obedience under the Swedish/Western educational paradigm (Elenius, 2014; Persson, 2018), Meänkieli-based cultural knowledge (Lainio & Wande, 2015) is alive and available, embodied in the staff and pupils of Tornedalian schools. In decolonial thinking there lies an opposing potential, or ways of questioning that which is taken as normal and in accordance with structures of domination (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The promise of imagining something else, and choosing another direction and other solutions that acknowledge and involve learning from past wrongdoings, is not just some fancy dream. To cite Quijano (2013), it is a matter of a need to "clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meaning" (p. 31). The signs of other conceivable ways of conducting education were visible throughout the conversations. In hallways, corridors, and staffrooms during breaks, the daily interaction and communication in Meänkieli is vital. In these decolonial pockets of minority practices, the staff are involved in a Meänkieli-based cultural practice, parallel to the official Swedish school practice. All of the interviewed groups (teachers, principals and pupils) desired common interests to be assembled around the minority group's heritage and future within the educational framework, to open up opportunities for decolonising activities. The conversations reveal that the competence, desire, and strategies that are needed to transfer knowledge of Tornedalian minority perspectives do exist:

Interviewer: Do you think that, as a school leader, you can influence the education, for example, the teachers' teaching? And steer them towards minority issues?

Principal: It would be easy to get the whole bunch together [teachers] if we decided that now we should do something to make this [minority issues] visible, and I would have them all with me. Even those who were not Tornedalians from the beginning. It wouldn't be difficult.

Although the schools' saturation with Swedishness is a mighty adversary, a pedagogy of dissensus, as suggested by Andreotti (2011), can work as a decolonial tool with which to create awareness of minority perspectives and integrate them into ordinary teaching. Such an autonomous force could be the game changer that facilitates opportunities to triumph over the structures that prevent Meänkieli from being spoken and used in classroom practice. A pedagogy that is more consciously organised around the local community's diversity could result in a platform that gives pupils access to their minority culture and language within the educational system (Andreotti, 2011). In this way, a pedagogy intertwined with decolonial awareness could be a present, normal phenomenon in the pupils' daily lives. In line with Andreotti (2011), such a pedagogy emphasises difference and diversity as strengths, and local knowledge and minority perspectives as empowering resources rather than as problematic obstacles that hinder ordinary teaching. Such an acknowledgement could emancipate hidden minority practices from unofficial spaces and transform them into legitimate educational tools.

## Conclusion

As shown, school staff are involved in a dynamic Meänkieli-based cultural practice, which involves Tornedalian experiences (but not in the classrooms with pupils). This practice has an oppositional character and carries within itself the potential to change the domination of Swedish values, culture and language in Tornedalian schools. This minority practice, packed with Tornedalian knowledge and experiences, challenges the conveyed Swedish cultural canon, which is generally aligned with Swedish schools. Thus, in that sense of being something else, a phenomenon that *should not be*, it is indeed a decolonial practice of resistance to the expectations placed on school staff and the mission that they embody through their services within the Swedish state; and against the domination of Swedish language, culture and curriculum goals that control the school setting and its classrooms; and also showcases resistance against the denial of local knowledge and experiences. I have chosen to define these unofficial Tornedalian minority practices through the concept of *decolonial pockets* to stress the existence of the minority language and cultural practices among school staff within the colonial space of school and its classrooms. In its own right, a manifestation of decolonising strivings highlights the conformity of the official educational contexts wherein the Swedish school culture, language and values dominate. Today, the content of these decolonial pockets does not have a given space in education; they can occur and re-occur within different spaces in Tornedalian schools. They are unstable and do not count as bearers of real knowledge in education's official rhetoric and execution; in that sense, these pockets are inactivated whenever teachers enter the classroom. The need to open up, ignite and use the content of these

decolonial pockets of Meänkieli-based cultural practices is urgent because the language is threatened with extinction (Ridanpää, 2018).

An alternative pedagogy could be a useful tool with which to shift this condition around and to offer the organisation of an arena that makes speaking Meänkieli a common interest for all, and not an individual desire among school staff or pupils. Such a shift in behaviour and thoughts, however, challenges the position of Swedish values and culture in school, and therefore it involves questioning the images of 'normal' practice because such a shift would signify that the minority's culture and language is about to take precedence. However, for such a pedagogical development to succeed, political interest is required that provides principals and teachers with beneficial resources to organise a learning environment where minority issues are prioritised. An educational institution, which communicates the importance and value of the local community's knowledge and experiences, can give weight to these issues and work to empower Tornedalian society to make its language and culture into parts of everyday life. Modern-day Tornedalian pupils are eager to learn about their language and culture; thus, there are good foundations with which to familiarise pupils with their minority culture and language within the school framework. This article reveals that decolonial practices are not some fictive, distant dream. As illustrated, they are already at work, ready to be part of official school practice. Schools have a vital role to play here: to provide a pedagogy which is more encompassing of the local community's diversity, which ensures future generations of Tornedalian youths a relationship with their minority heritage and an understanding of the value of local knowledge and their minority culture and language.

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