

## Outdoor Days as a Pedagogical Tool

Ylva Jannok Nutti



Jokkmokk. Photo: Timo Jokela

In the following chapter, I will show how the use of outdoor days in a particular school resulted in increased learning, where, among other things, knowledge of languages, culture and specific fields, as well as positive health-benefiting and psychosocial factors, play a part. This text is the result of conversations with the teachers Britt-Inger Baer, Hanne Sofie Brandsfjell, Elsy Labba, Katarina Spiik Skum and Margareta Åstot, and visits to the Sami school in Jokkmokk. In this chapter, the concrete work with outdoor days in the school is related to Sami education and the Sami language, based on being bilingual or multilingual, nature as a learning environment, outdoor teaching, and the concept of traditional knowledge.

### Visit to and participation in an outdoor day

On a beautiful sunny day in late winter I accompanied a few teachers and students from the Sami school during one of their outdoor days. Skiing was on the agenda and the students arrived with ski equipment and backpacks containing, among other things, hot drinks. The Wednesday in question was the first outdoor day of the semester, which is why some students and also parents had missed the information or forgotten to look on the calendar. In spite of this, the parents who had forgotten the outdoor equipment gladly ran

home to pick up what was needed. All of the students were very eager to get out into the woods, but before they set out, they all gathered in the classroom. The teachers went through the plan for the day and the central concepts for the day. Then in the woods everybody went skiing. One parent accompanied the group and acted as a ski instructor. Lunch was cooked over an open fire in the woods. After lunch, there was a period of free time and some students started skiing on a slope, while others played close to the fireplace. Before the school day ended, ski instruction continued on the slope and at the end of the day all of the students were daring to go down the slope.

The teachers have long used specific outdoor days as part of the school schedule, with the result that teaching takes place outdoors in the woods each Wednesday. However, they have chosen not to have outdoor days during the coldest part of the year, as it would probably not be very pleasant to be outside when the temperature is about minus 30°C. The idea of the outdoor days started at the Sami school a number of years ago when the teachers in year F-2 started to structure their teaching based on the inspiration of a language immersion model. The teachers then started to arrange fixed outdoor days in an attempt to create informal language environments to reinforce the Sami language. The Sami school is a multi-lingual school. Accordingly, the teaching in Jokkmokk is carried out in three languages: North Sami, Lule Sami and Swedish. The focus of today's outdoor day is skiing. That means ski school, as well as looking at current central Sami concepts. This outdoor day has stimulated the use of the Sami language, but over the years, the teachers have found that an outdoor day also covers learning of Sami traditional knowledge, as well as more traditional knowledge in school subjects. In addition, this day also includes other factors, such as values and value bases, independence and friendship, motor functions and so on.

### Sami education and the Sami language

According to Hyltenstam et al. (1999), historically speaking, education for Sami children was carried out according to the interests of the majority of society up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was used as an instrument for society's assimilatory and segregational purposes. The role of the Sami language in teaching varied and it was always used to aid in conveying Swedish language, religion and culture. In this way, education did not support the use of the Sami language, which meant that Sami children lacked support in their development in the use of their mother tongue. This is something Balto also writes about: "Siden vi alltid skulle snakke norsk i timene, så utvikla ikke skolan morsmålsferdighetene våre." (We always had to speak Norwegian during classes, so the school did not develop our skills in our mother tongue.) (Balto, 2007, 430). Accordingly, education was a reason why the Sami children were prevented from profiting from the knowledge of their own culture and their own language (Kuokkanen, 2000).

The Sami school today is equivalent to a nine-year compulsory school, intended to give Sami children a Sami-orient-

tated education. The Sami school includes years 1–6, and can, following an agreement with local authorities, also include preschool classes and activities, and after-school recreation centres (Utbildningsväsendet, 2004). The goal of the teaching in the Sami school, according to the curriculum (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998), is that students, having finished the Sami school, should be able to speak, read and write in

the Sami language. In addition, the intention of the latest curriculum (2007) of the Sami School Board is that students should be functionally bilingual. Being functionally bilingual is a central and important goal in the Sami municipalities and schools, but very difficult to achieve owing to the limited resources available today within and outside the nine-year compulsory school system (Bergland, 2001). The Sami language is one of the national minority languages in Sweden and the situation for the Sami language to be able to remain a living language in Sweden is very fragile (Teilus, 2007). Accordingly, there is a great need to actively support the preservation of the Sami language. Schools can be an efficient tool when revitalising a language, but in order for this to happen, it is necessary both that teachers have a good command of the language and that they also have extensive knowledge in language teaching (Todal, 2004). Furthermore, in order to succeed in revitalising a minority language, it is necessary that teaching, to a large degree, is done in the minority language.

Education in the Sami school in Jokkmokk was based on a bilingual immersion programme when outdoor days were instituted, where North Sami and Lule Sami are the bilingual immersion languages. A bilingual immersion programme means that two languages are used in the school, but the emphasis is on the bilingual immersion language or the second language (Centret för språkbild och flerspråkighet, 2007; Todal, 2004). Students in the Sami school have a language background which is richly varied. This is because they might have North Sami, Lule Sami, South Sami and/or Swedish (and/or another Nordic language) as their first language. This means that students are (or will be) bilingual or even multilingual, with the Sami language as their first or second language.

Teachers who teach in the bilingual immersion language are an important language model for the students and they should only use the bilingual immersion language in contact with their students. The reason for this is because it is important that the students get to listen to and use the language in different functions and situations (Centret för språkbild och flerspråkighet, 2007). During the outdoor day, the teachers have observed that: "Students who do not speak Sami in school can do so out in the woods." The bilingual language programme is based on the assumption that language development most efficiently takes place in a meaningful situation involving communication (Centret för språkbild och flerspråkighet, 2007). In addition, the use of the Sami language is of vital importance in developing different subjects for students who have Sami as their first language (Bergland, 2001). The choice of teachers to try and focus on the Sami language, through the method of an outdoor day, obviously might mean advantages for both students with Sami as their first language and those who have it as a second language. An outdoor day

focusing on teach different Sami concepts involving skiing will probably be based on the learning of a second language. However, in order for the outdoor day to involve learning for students with Sami as their first language as well, the language needs to be used to communicate subject knowledge too. On a previous outdoor day the Sami language was also used when communicating subject knowledge, and spending time in the natural environment was the basis for learning.

### Nature as a learning environment

*During the autumn, the school went fishing during one outdoor day. Afterwards, the school used fish and fishing as a theme for some time.*

The starting point of the school's thematic work consisted of the outdoor days spent in the natural environment, where the practical experience was the basis for beginning theme work about fish and fishing. The outdoor environment and being outdoors can facilitate learning which comes from both practical and theoretical experiences. During this particular outdoor day the Sami language was also used when communicating subject knowledge. Dahlgren and Szczepanski (2004), spokesmen for outdoor teaching, have pointed out that all areas of knowledge and skills can be passed on outdoors, and that there are specific possibilities for integrating different school subjects. Dahlgren and Szczepanski's opinion that all subjects, skills or areas of knowledge could be learned outdoors is a bit exaggerated, given that, for example, if you are going to learn to write it is probably much more suitable to be inside the school, but that is not my focus in this article. There are opportunities for connecting pupils' learning in school with visits to the natural world, and also to connect school subjects with both nature and other activities. The work within school with fish and fishing as themes involved both natural science as a subject field with a focus on fish and also a more social science-orientated subject field with a focus on fish and fishing, past and present.

In Hirvonen's (2004) evaluation of the Sami school in Norway, following the reform 97<sup>[1]</sup>, many teachers state that Sami children and young people learn best by doing practical work outside the school building, through: "an outdoor school" (Hirvonen, 2004, 116). The essence of outdoor teaching is to

transfer learning to other contexts outside formal learning spaces (Dahlgren, 2007; Szczepanski, 2007).

Utsi Gaup (2006) has emphasised the Nomad school<sup>[2]</sup> from a perspective of outdoor teaching. Outdoor teaching is a concept which encompasses thematic and comprehensive subject fields of research and education, where learning, to a large extent, takes place in an outdoor environment. Outdoor teaching is intended to be a complement to traditional teaching, where experiences in the surrounding environment are the basis for learning (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 2004). Utsi Gaup in her study points out how the landscape, so characterised by nature, was used for learning at the nomad school's summer school and field study courses. The summer schools and field study courses were visiting activities which were carried out in the reindeer herding areas. In their teaching, teachers connected nature studies with practical activities. Teaching outdoors is beneficial in terms of bringing theoretical and practical work together and it involves learning that is based on both experiences and places (Szczepanski, 2007). Sami traditional knowledge, based on reindeer herding and the natural environment, was the basis for learning in summer schools and field study courses. Sami traditional knowledge is knowledge which is gained and preserved for generations in local Sami communities (Jernsletten, 1997).

### Traditional knowledge and the school

Technological development and urbanisation have alienated people from daily contact with their physical environment, unlike earlier cultures of gatherers, hunters, fishermen and farmers where the physical environment was used as a learning environment (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1997). The Sami have preserved a thousand-year-long tradition as hunters and gatherers among other things, through their reindeer-herding culture with gathering and fishing as important sidelines (Jernsletten, 1994). Their traditional knowledge about nature has developed over a long period of time, in accordance with humans' need to use the possibilities of nature for survival. Ruong (1982) emphasises that the rich terminology in use for natural conditions and terrain shows the importance of knowledge about ecological matters for people's lives in the arctic and sub-arctic regions.

Sami traditional knowledge encompasses practical and theoretical knowledge about how to use the natural environment, as well as an understanding of psychological conditions, spirituality, social relationships, cultural and social

<sup>2</sup> The Nomad school (now called the Sámi school) was instituted in 1913 and was previously the school for the children of the nomadic Sámi.

<sup>1</sup> The reform which resulted in the introduction of a Sámi curriculum for 10-year compulsory schooling. The Sámi curriculum is equal to the national one and is being used in six Norwegian municipalities within the Sámi management area for Sámi languages. The management area is made up of the municipalities of Kåfjord, Tana, Kautokeino, Karasjok, Porsanger and Nessby (Hirvonen, 2004).



Jokkmokk. Photos: Timo Jokela



institutions and forms of expression (Bergström, 2001). Historically it meant people's knowledge to enable them to use local natural resources for their daily needs and building up the supplies they needed (Sara, 2004). In addition, this concept includes things people had gathered, prepared and produced themselves, as well as goods and materials which they had traded with others and then completed themselves. Mostly, it meant knowledge about day-to-day living which was practised within the immediate neighbourhood. Things which were gathered were mainly found in the natural environment, and nature regulated people's work through the changing seasons. Accordingly, there is an in-depth traditional ecological knowledge within Sami culture.

Today, there are still ways of living and livelihoods which continue to use Sami traditional knowledge, but this knowledge has partly disappeared or is at risk of disappearing. However, this traditional knowledge needs to be preserved so that it can be transferred to other contexts (Bergland, 2001). Traditional knowledge should contribute towards: "equipping young people with a fundamental horizon of understanding, a certain base on which to form individuality, personal projects and a whole lifespan" (Bergström, 2001, 127). Traditional knowledge in school could mean that students feel that their own culture is made visible (Bergland, 2001; Jannok Nutti, 2007). The school in Sami local communities has to have its base in traditional knowledge and local culture. This would mean a central role for the knowledge held by older generations, relatives and local people (Bergland, 2001; Hirvonen, 2004). Education based on the students' own cultural background was the subject of an earlier research project by Johansson (1985). This project shows that when the basis for education is students' own cultural background it means both changed ways of working and also changed content in school work.

Hirvonen's evaluation (2004) also investigated teachers' opinions of Sami learning. Sami learning meant doing things in a practical way, and that theoretical knowledge had to be based on practical training. Jernsletten (1997) points out that knowledge, in earlier times, was transferred through actual work done alongside an older person who had this knowledge. Knowledge was transferred through observation, learning of skills and then systematising these in linguistic expressions, terms and professional concepts. Earlier research (Balto, 1997; Jannok Nutti, 2007; Nergård, 2005) presents learning which is based on participation. Children participated in various activities and social contexts through practical work. This was done by watching grown-ups carry out the work, and also by trying to carry out different tasks themselves. Creativity is a central starting point for learning within outdoor teaching; students can touch, feel and act in a physical environment

(Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 2004). This is a view on knowledge and learning which corresponds to my own earlier research (Jannok Nutti, 2007), where Sami handicrafters and reindeer herders describe their view on knowledge and learning, and it can be summed up in the concepts of tradition and creativity.

Regarding learning, in the past, people were always completely dependent on learning by experience and through oral tradition (Szczepanski, 2007). The Sami view on learning is based on the Sami story-telling tradition (Jannok Nutti, 2007). Story-telling can take the form of both telling stories and adults giving instructions and explanations (Jannok Nutti, 2007). A reindeer herder (in Jannok Nutti, 2007) says that stories and descriptions about the surrounding natural environment are told continuously and repeatedly to the children as one part of the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. The reindeer herder says that he describes things and instructs the children as he carries out different tasks, or during the time they spend outside in the natural environment. He describes and shows different natural features in order for the children to become aware of nature and, in this way, learn how to act in the natural environment. The role of the adult in relation to the children's learning is central; this also applies to the teacher, according to Dahlgren and Szczepanski (2004). However, a more conscious attitude on the part of the teacher is needed in order for the outdoor day to result in the students learning. Learning during the outdoor day is based on a context where the subjects and themes of the school can be identified (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 2004). This means that the teacher, for example, needs to know about different plant and animal systems as well as their life cycles, seasonal changes, and the traces of man's cultural activities and imprints (Szczepanski, 2007). The teacher has to be strongly aware of the goals of the practical activities outside so that the outdoor visit can lead to systematic, general knowledge for the students.

Todal (2007) has carried out a five-year language-motivating project in Elgå in the Engerdal municipality in Norway, where the goal was that children should learn to speak South Sami. As of the 1990s, interest in learning South Sami has increased and parents want their children to become bilingual. Being bilingual is also one of the goals of the Sami curriculum in Norway, but the school has experienced big problems in reaching this goal if the students do not have South Sami as their home language. The language-motivating project started with a group of children in preschool and continued in school. The project started out with South Sami content where the language was considered as part of the culture. The Sami content came to consist of Sami traditional activities, new modern Sami activities and other activities. The main focus of the language-motivating project in pre-primary school

came to be placed on conveying Sami traditional activities, for example throwing a lasso, picking blueberries, collecting lichen, boiling meat, learning about snow, studying hare tracks, learning about weather, carving out reindeer marks in birch bark, learning about tent sites, etc. In school, the subject content was determined by the Sami curriculum, but the school activities were often similar to activities in preschool. However, as students got older, less time was allocated to the Sami subject content. Central concepts in terms of activities in the school were active communication based on familiar situations, including preschool work, tasks related to the reindeer herding year, and contact with other South Sami. Accordingly, the language-motivating project had a clear structure in both preschool and school, mostly based on activities whose focal point was Sami traditional activities.

*It is important to be able to make a fire in Sami culture and when one spends time outside in the natural environment. Teachers report that students are responsible for making a fire. They go to the same place during the outdoor days and have made their own "árran"<sup>[3]</sup> there. As soon as they get there, the students want to collect wood for the fire and make the fire right away. The students have learnt to make a fire both together and on their own. The teachers also discuss where and how a fire should be made with the students.*

Making a fire involves practical knowledge and even traditional knowledge. Ryd (2005) has, in close cooperation with older Sami, documented different Sami methods of making a fire. Larsson-Lussi (in Ryd, 2005) says that older people are happy when a fire is burning as a fire means warmth and light. Rassa (in Ryd, 2005) describes how each family had their own *árran* and nobody would use another family's *árran*. This is also knowledge which the students gained during the outdoor day through conversations with the teachers. Besides the practical knowledge, the students have also noticed that there are different approaches in terms of where and how a fire should be made, and that how to make a fire accordingly also includes value considerations.

### Value bases

*Once when they were out in the woods they met some students from another school. The students from the other school were shouting and made a lot of noise in the woods. Later on, one of the students said: "They are really shouting, we do not behave that way in the woods!" The teachers say that they and the students would talk about how to behave in the woods, and not shout or hit and destroy trees and plants...*

The teachers convey a respect for nature. Nature itself and a sense of belonging to nature are central parts of Sami culture.

<sup>3</sup> Fireplace

Oskal (1999) emphasises that people should not try to dominate the world, but rather try to understand the world and be in harmony with it. Many Sami stories describe how to relate to nature, and the relationship between humans and nature. In an indirect way, stories teach children norms, values, good and bad models, and the kind of morals which adults want to transfer to the next generation (Balto, 1997). Stories contain good advice, morals, practical instructions or rules of living; accordingly, they have a fostering function (Nergård, 2005). The Sami story-telling tradition is marked by the importance of close social relationships and the relationship to nature (Nergård, 2006).

*The teachers say that during the outdoor day they always first walk past a natural spring in order to fetch water. One teacher says that this is important both so that the students know where water can be found and also so that they know how this was done in the past. Once when the main water supply was shut off in the community for a short period of time, the students said that this did not matter because they knew where to get water... The teacher also mentioned that they have now started a project with a water theme, to give the students an understanding of the natural lifecycle and the importance of protecting nature.*

One important aspect of outdoor teaching is creating an awareness of the relationship between humans and systems in nature, as well as making humans visible in the local and global lifecycle (Szczepanski, 2007). Teachers use water when trying to convey respect for nature and the importance of protecting nature in order to create sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development means that people's various needs are met without jeopardising the possibility of future generations meeting their needs. Sustainable development consists of three mutually dependent parts:

- Ecological sustainability, which means preserving the production capability of water, earth and ecological systems.
- Social sustainability, which means building a society where basic human needs are met.
- Economic sustainability, which means using human and material resources in sensible ways (Kungliga tekniska högskolan, 2007).

Furthermore sustainable development is also about promoting cultural sustainability, to make it possible for different cultural groups to sustain and develop their own cultures and languages. The concept of sustainable development can therefore be linked to concepts such as: "indigenous science, traditional knowledge, local knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge and traditional environmental knowledge" (Burgess, 1999, 12),

which are all concepts encompassing the knowledge indigenous people have. Accordingly, the outdoor day relates to the concept of sustainable development based on Sami traditional knowledge and value base concepts which also have links to humans. The outdoor day and outdoor visits to the natural environment have also proven to have a variety of health benefits and positive psychosocial functions for the students.

## Health benefits and positive psychosocial functions

*Students get physical exercise by walking, running, climbing and moving around in the woods, says one teacher.*

For the teachers, the outdoor day also involves the physical development of students, practising how to move around in the woods in hilly terrain. During the outdoor day where I was present, the focus was on skiing. If outdoor activities such as skiing are considered important by the school, they could lead to health benefits. Furthermore, placing an emphasis on outdoor activities such as skiing could provide the school with a health profile. Visits outdoors have positive effects on students' health, physical development, ability to concentrate and learning (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 2004). Visits outdoors give students an outlet for their natural need to move around. The concept of outdoor teaching implicitly encourages a kind of learning which involves more physical activity (Szczepanski, 2007).

*Outside in the natural environment it is quiet and everybody has time to listen to the silence there...*

According to the WHO's definition, (in Szczepanski, 2007), health means the greatest possible physical, spiritual and social well-being of the individual in question. Physical health has to do with the mechanical functions of the body, i.e. how healthy our way of living is in terms of diet and exercise. Spiritual health involves our philosophy of life and presupposes time for reflection on different matters. Mental health means the ability to think clearly and coherently. Social health means the ability to maintain relationships with others.

*An outdoor day involves both being independent and helping each other. Independence could mean being able to make a fire or find the way to the campsite without the company of an adult. Over the past year, they have walked to the same place in the woods many times. The first few times, the teachers walked first and showed the children the way, but after a while, the students were allowed to go on their own. The teachers were initially a bit worried about letting them go ahead of the others alone; what if a child had got lost? In spite*

*of their worries, the teachers allowed the students to go on their own without a teacher. They did this to try and make the students independent. Today, all the students are very good at helping each other to find the way to the site.*

In her research, Balto (1997), states that the most central aspect of Sami upbringing was making the children independent. Learning to become independent, i.e. being able to manage on one's own, is the ideal of how a person should be. According to one parent who participated in the study:

*"Selvstendighet lærer man ikke i barnehagen...Der lærer ikke barna å tenke selv og opplegget i barnehagen kolliderer med ideen om at barn skal lære på egenhånd gjennom erfaringer, ikke ved å bli styrt hele tiden..." (Independence is not something you learn in the day care centre.... That is not the place where children learn to think for themselves, and the way things are organised in the day care centre contradicts the idea that children should learn on their own through experience, and not by being guided all the time...) (Balto, 1997, 11-112.)*

This parent maintained that children do not learn to be independent in pre-primary school and normal school. Balto compared this with learning in the extended family, where children had their own areas of responsibility and tasks to carry out on their own, according to simple instructions from the adults. The children learned from other adults or from each other (Hirvonen, 2004). I have previously written about the fact that the views of handicrafters and reindeer herders on learning were based on children having their own tasks which they could try to do on their own (Jannok Nutti, 2007). These tasks had to be carried out properly (see also Sara, 2004), but it did not matter if the children made mistakes when they were carrying out their tasks (see also Balto, 1997).

My earlier research (Jannok Nutti, 2007) shows that it is important for children to be out in the woods and learn to feel safe there. It is also important for them to learn to find their way out in the natural environment. Sami learning involves children both learning to manage different things on their own and learning from grown-ups or other children (Balto, 1997; Hirvonen, 2004; Jannok Nutti, 2007). The teachers in the Sami school linked the outdoor days with the Sami view on learning, where the students learned to find their way in the natural environment together. They are trained to become independent when working together. As I have also previously discussed (Jannok Nutti, 2007; 2006), nature is an important foundation for developing a culturally based education in mathematics in the Sami schools.

## Summary of reflections

The work involving outdoor days in a school resulted in increased learning where, among other things, knowledge about language, culture and other subjects, as well as health benefits and psychosocial factors, play a part. The outdoor day resulted in increased use of the Sami language, and its content also encompassed both Sami traditional knowledge and added knowledge in traditional subject areas. The outdoor day also conveyed sustainable development and various value base matters, including, among other things, respect for nature, were in focus. There were other health benefits in terms of physical health as well, with different activities involving movement. In addition to the psychosocial functions, the outdoor visits in the natural environment promote spiritual, mental and social health. The spiritual aspect is apparent because the outdoor day provides a window onto the Sami philosophy of life and gives students time for reflection. The mental and social aspects of outdoor days relate to how students are trained in how to become independent and how to cooperate with others. According to Utsi Gaup (2006), the natural landscape was previously used for learning in the nomad school's summer school and for field study courses. Outdoor days are an attempt to use nature for learning in the Sami school. This means that outdoor days function as a pedagogical tool for learning in school.

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