



## ARTICLE

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## **Young Tornedalians in education: the challenges of being national minority pupils in the Swedish school system**

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### **Abstract**

The Tornedalians are a national ethnic and linguistic minority group in northern Sweden who live along the Torne River Valley (Tornedalen) in municipalities that border the neighbouring country of Finland. This minority group has been subjected to marginalisation, racialisation and assimilation politics driven by Swedish colonial and nationalist interests and ambitions since the end of the 19th century. In the so-called 'Swedification' of Tornedalen, the education system has historically been a tool used to oppress and undermine the population's culture and language, Meänkieli. Few studies have scrutinised contemporary conditions concerning the relationship between Tornedalians and the education system. This article examines the challenges and obstacles that young Tornedalians encounter in their quest to learn about and practise their minority group status within the Swedish upper secondary school system. The data consists of interviews with pupils, teachers and principals at upper secondary schools in two municipalities in Tornedalen. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives and theories of nationalism, the analysis suggests that colonial conceptions and processes are still at work in the region through the medium of the educational system. School practice is described as an 'all-Swedish' institution that is saturated with its majority culture; in other words, Tornedalian culture and Meänkieli are repressed due to the power, domination and precedence of Swedish values in school practice. Thus, the effects of Swedification policies are still at play in Tornedalian schools. However, there are promising pedagogical opportunities to enhance and develop the learning practice of Meänkieli and Tornedalian culture due to pupils' interest in minority issues, combined with teachers' knowledge of these matters. A conclusion drawn in the article is that there is a need for teachers to bring these minority issues into ordinary teaching and modify the curriculum so that, to a greater extent, it integrates and enforces elements of local minority language and culture into ordinary school practice.

Keywords: Tornedalians, national minority, upper secondary school, postcolonialism, Sweden

## **Introduction**

This article contributes to the field of postcolonial research by focusing on minority issues in education. It examines the challenges and obstacles that young Tornedalians encounter in their quest to learn about and practise their minority group status within the Swedish upper secondary school system. Tornedalians have a long history of living in Sweden, since approximately the twelfth century onwards (Elenius, Tjelmeland, Lähteenmäki, and Golutbev, 2015), although they were only recognised as an official national minority group by the Swedish parliament in 2000. At the same time, the group's language, Meänkieli, 'our language', received official status as a minority language in the country (Hyltenstam and Milani, 2004). Due to the Tornedalians' late recognition and status as a genuine territorial minority, they are often described as the 'forgotten' national minority group (Lipott, 2015). The cultural identity of Tornedalians, as well as their language, is strongly connected to Finno-Ugric traditions in the region (Arola, Kunnas, and Winsa, 2011). However, it is an ethnic group in its own right with its own specific characteristics connected to customs, culture and mentality (Heith, 2012). There are no official statistics regarding ethnicity in Sweden but the available data estimates that the Tornedalian population consists of approximately 50 000 to 75 000 individuals (Elenius and Vakhtin, 2016).

To be able to understand the intertwined relationship between Tornedalians and Sweden's educational system today, one has to connect present conditions with the region's colonial past. The loss of Finland to Russia in 1809 caused a crisis in the Swedish national state. In the construction of a new narrative for Sweden, a more nationalistic stance gained the upper hand. Within this new political landscape, the vast populations of Meänkieli-speaking Tornedalians in the northern parts of Sweden became the objects of an all-encompassing assimilation policy within the paradigm of Swedish language and culture (Persson, 2018). This change in minority politics, dubbed the 'Swedification' of Tornedalen, was especially prominent during the decades between 1880 and 1950.

Due to this transformation of linguistic and cultural habits, the education system became an effective tool to ensure that Swedish language and culture were given a prominent role in Tornedalen (Elenius, 2014). In fact, the authorities implemented several precautions to ensure the Swedification of Tornedalians. For example, Tornedalians were prevented from learning Meänkieli as a school subject; educational materials in Finnish were forbidden in favour of school books solely in Swedish; compulsory school attendance guaranteed that teachers (often from the south of Sweden) could prepare Tornedalian children to adapt to the Swedish nation and its culture from an early age; and boarding schools and work cabins were implemented to assimilate young Tornedalians into Swedish society (Lipott, 2015).

These nationalistic ambitions were fuelled by the rise of eugenics as a scientific field. The minority group's Finno-Ugric language and cultural identity were seen as inferior and a threat to a homogeneous Sweden, which was portrayed at the time as a country exclusively populated by a Nordic race (Persson, 2018). This colonial abuse created a sense of shame and an inferiority complex among Tornedalians about their language and culture (Arola, Kunnas, and Winsa, 2011; Kokkola, Palo, and Manderstedt, 2018). As a consequence, many new generations of Tornedalians were not taught Meänkieli by their

parents or elders because the language was perceived as a barrier to becoming part of the Swedish community (Hansegård, 1968).

A shift in attitudes towards Tornedalen's cultural heritage led Tornedalian activists to organise a conference at the beginning of the 1980s: 'The Last Language Struggle', which was intended to challenge and break down the domination of the Swedish language in the region. A major task for these activists was to protect and develop the Meänkieli language and create awareness about Tornedalian minority identity and heritage among young people (Wande, 2011). In hindsight, this gathering became the starting point for a cultural mobilisation among Tornedalians, with the creation of the Tornedalian national association (STR-T) in 1981, which led the way for the establishment of the first administrative municipalities for Meänkieli in 1999 (Winsa, 2007; Ridanpää, 2018), and the formation of a youth association for Tornedalians (Met Nouret) in 2014. Parallel to these political and administrative developments, Tornedalian literature, music and art have gradually gained recognition in the wider Swedish society (Winsa, 2007).

According to the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum (National Agency of Education, 2013), schools have a certain responsibility to ensure that every pupil possesses knowledge about the culture, language, religion and history of Sweden's national minorities. Furthermore, the Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages (SFS 2009:724) emphasises the significance of schools in their role as a public agent, to ensure the rights of national minorities to develop a cultural identity, to protect and promote the use of minority languages and to give influence to and consult national minorities (especially children and young people) on issues that concern them. Criticism from the Council of Europe (2018) of Sweden's efforts to protect the country's minority populations' cultures and languages signals that there is still room for further improvement. Thus, in an attempt to rectify this situation, schools play a crucial role in ensuring that young Tornedalians are offered education in Meänkieli and about their culture.

In general, social science and humanist research about Tornedalen and the Tornedalians has mainly been restricted to demography, archaeology, language studies, the history of education and religion (e.g. Wande, 1984; Winsa, 1998; Elenius 2001; Johansson 2007; Kuoppa, 2008). Studies investigating the available conditions for young Tornedalians to practise their culture and language in schools from a post-colonial perspective are currently lacking. Thus, there is an immediate need for critical contemporary studies that explore the significance of schools as an educational institution with a responsibility to teach Tornedalian pupils about their culture and language (Persson, 2018). This article focuses on the following questions: (1) How are contemporary colonial processes in Tornedalian schools visualised through pupils' and teachers' experiences of the Swedish education system? (2) In what ways do pupils make sense of and act on the domination of Swedish values and culture in Tornedalian schools?

### **Theoretical perspectives**

In the Nordic region, the way in which the knowledge and conceptions belonging to the majority populations were forced upon minorities is contested (Vuorela, 2009; Lóftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016;

Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Knoblock, 2019). Tornedalians stand out from majority society due to their ethnicity (Heith, 2016) and have similar experiences of Swedish colonial oppression as the indigenous Sami people (Ojala and Nordin, 2015). A common stance within the research field of postcolonialism is to criticise the dominant position of Western narratives, philosophies and knowledge (Said, 1978; Loomba, 2015; Young 2016). Postcolonial theories offer analytical tools that enable research studies to scrutinise and give weight to minority voices in majority contexts (Bhambra, 2014). In this sense, a postcolonial perspective is a helpful tool for understanding the challenges presented to the Tornedalian minority pupils, teachers and principals who were interviewed for this study.

The Tornedalian experience of cultural domination, which was supported by the Swedish education system, is well documented (Elenius, 2014). Thus, this intrusion can be seen as one of the many consequences of domestic colonisation (Reimerson, 2015). Within postcolonial studies, these processes are defined as 'internal colonialism', to stress a situation in which minority populations, both historically and in the present day, are intimidated by structures of domination, reliant upon the government's provision of services (e.g. the education system) and inferior to political structures governed by the colonisers' power within the national state's territories (Hechter, 1975; Tully, 2000). Thus, negative conceptions prevalent among the majority society about the region being poor, backward and non-Swedish (Persson, 2018) can be seen as consequences of internal colonialism, similar to the self-shaming and marginalisation of the minority's culture and language (Heith, 2018). The concept of internal colonialism provides an effective instrument for interpreting the deeper meaning of pupils' statements and for analysing the consequences of using school as an instrument serving the interests of mainstream Sweden and its sanctioned values.

Another important analytical tool aiding our understanding of the experiences of Tornedalian pupils in relation to majority societal education is research on nationalism. Özkirimli (2010) stresses that the impact of nationalist discourses stems from their power and ability to display majority culture and values as 'natural' whilst at the same time undermining expressions of minority culture: 'its claims and value seem self-evident and common sense' (p. 211). Societal institutions, such as schools, work as an effective mechanism for the socialisation of minority groups into the dominant values and culture. Drawing upon this notion, we can see schools as a homogenisation instrument, an enabler that sanctions and realises, through the education system, the 'right' and 'true' Swedish values and culture.

This article's analysis also draws upon the concept of 'coloniality', first theorised by Quijano (2008), which emphasises how the effects of colonialism are still to this day at work on a global scale. The dominant position of Eurocentric viewpoints and conceptions that characterises the practices of educational systems all over the world is a consequence of the logic and endurance of this structure of power. The weight and impact of its claims to universalism and rationality leads to divisions of knowledge, whereby local and minority forms of knowledge are subdued and suppressed, and consequently seen as untrustworthy or not valuable enough in comparison to mainstream Western knowledge (Quijano, 2013). This way of thinking interconnects Tornedalen's colonial past and this minority group's experiences of Swedification, with contemporary consequences and effects, and thus it is possible to analytically capture it through conversations with pupils, teachers and principals.

## **Method**

This article is inspired by an indigenous research approach. The reason behind this choice is that it seeks to uncover informants' experiences that elucidate both the disempowerment and resistance that follow from being a minority group within the structures of majority education. Indigenous methodology offers guidance as to how to scrutinise such complexities, and places special demands on the actual collection of data, as well as how it is used and communicated with the informants (Chilisa, 2012; Lanas and Rautio, 2014; Andersen and O'Brien, 2017).

The research was carried out at two upper secondary schools in two municipalities in Tornedalen. The schools were selected on the basis of being located in areas where Meänkieli and the culture of Tornedalians is a part of everyday life. The method of enquiry employed an interview format to be conducted both in focus groups and individually. The interview method was chosen because it extracts the pupils' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of the impact of the education curriculum's content and practice on their day-to-day lives, both inside and outside the classroom (Merriam, 2009).

An explicit interest that was addressed in the interviews was minority issues in school. The questions that were posed focused on pupils' and teachers' experiences as minorities in relation to the practice, content and objectives of the teaching. The interview themes were constructed with the following subjects in mind: prerequisites for learning about Tornedalian culture and practising the Meänkieli language in school, Tornedalian cultural identity, and the challenges and opportunities that come with their roles as minorities in Sweden. Questions posed to pupils, teachers and school principals were characterised by similar content, but adjusted to their specific role and mission in school; for example, questions to pupils were characterised by their position as subordinated subjects under the teaching practice, while questions to teachers were characterised by their position as both practitioners of and subordinated subjects under the teaching requirements that all government officials must follow.

In total, 28 informants from two schools contributed to the study. Eighteen pupils (aged 16–17) in vocational or study preparation programmes took part in two focus-group interviews, involving nine pupils from each school. In addition, eight teachers were interviewed in the focus-group format. The two school principals were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours and were subsequently transcribed (in total, 223 pages).

The empirical data was subjected to an applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 2012). Firstly, all transcripts were submitted to a close reading and an evaluation of the overall quality of the data. Secondly, a selection of text segments that were significant for the research purpose and questions were extracted from the main set of data. This procedure was followed by the coding of patterns with a focus on similarities, relationships and dissimilarities in the chosen material. Codes that shared similar patterns of meaning were constructed into prominent themes and presented in the article's findings. All steps in the data analysis were guided by the theoretical perspectives. The individual and focus-group interviews produced varying data, which enabled comparative analyses of potential contradictions and revealed similarities between pupils' and teachers' experiences (Cohen,

Manion, and Morrison, 2011). This triangulation of the data was undertaken in order to add nuances to and strengthen the reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

## **Findings**

The data analysis resulted in three main themes that had a prominent significance on the participants' answers. The content of these themes was present in all the interviews, and is therefore of interest for the emphasis of the article.

### **The colonial classroom**

All the pupils who were interviewed articulated their experiences of the absence of Meänkieli and Tornedalian culture in their school. Not only did they have this experience in upper secondary school, but several also described comparable experiences from previous years in elementary school. According to these young people, their elders' experience of being shamed for speaking the language still influences the younger generation's opportunity to learn it:

“I've never ever heard anything about Tornedalen or Meänkieli in upper secondary school, or hardly in elementary school either ... it's always been taboo to speak this language. I don't know if you know much about the history of this, but it was like that, the children weren't allowed to speak it in school. They were forced to learn Swedish. And then it became, like, an in-between language, Meänkieli, between Finnish and Swedish. So your grandmother and grandfather weren't allowed to speak it, which is why they keep it inside them. They don't want to pass on the language. And that's why I haven't learned it. None of my siblings have. I still say today, 'Please talk Meänkieli with me!', but they won't.” (Pupil)

The conversations illuminate the fact that pupils are well aware of Tornedalen's colonial past and formulate its consequences for themselves, including how the shaming of Meänkieli-based culture has, over time, created resilient language barriers between generations. Furthermore, historical abuses of Tornedalians are met by these pupils with indignation and a sense of injustice towards the minority group that has not received reparations.

According to Quijano (2008), one powerful legacy of a colonial past is its capacity to shape present-day social orders and interactions. Drawing upon this thinking, pupils' experiences of the absence of Meänkieli and Tornedalian culture in their schools can be seen as an example of the impact that colonial wrongdoings in the past still have in terms of their negative effects on pupils' opportunities to learn and practise their minority group status to the fullest extent. The teachers too, much like the pupils, confirmed the prevalence of practices of shame in the Tornedalian community connected to their language and culture. Furthermore, they seemed to express a sense of loss, that it is somehow too late for younger generations of Tornedalians to learn their native language. In addition, there is a sense that pupils are not very keen on learning about Meänkieli or Tornedalian culture despite growing interest in minority issues:

“All these decades that have passed since the resistance, we’ve lost all these young people who can’t speak [the language] anymore and don’t think it’s important. My generation is one of the last who can speak Meänkieli.” (Teacher)

The determinism that characterises some of the teachers’ outlooks on these issues – that the Meänkieli-based culture is losing ground in favour of majority society’s language and customs – is, to follow the arguments of Özkirimli (2010), a consequence of the domination of a Swedish nationalist discourse within the wider Tornedalian community. Nationalist ideas and conceptions have a way of making some values and cultural artefacts appear as the ‘natural’ or most logical practice to enhance. From this perspective, the logic of school is a deceptive phenomenon, it presents itself like the bearer of objective truth (p. 211).

The interview conversations display how Swedish values and fashions dominate Tornedalian school practices. Quijano (2013) stresses that the logic of the Western knowledge system tends to push away any forms of knowledge that are perceived as peripheral. Consequently, it is difficult for Tornedalian knowledge to be seen as valid or for Meänkieli to be considered a language suitable for educational contexts. Teachers’ responses or thoughts about these issues are not consequences of a lack of information or knowledge. Instead, these attitudes and experiences can be regarded as the long-lasting effects of previous intrusions by Swedish officials that led policies and narratives to position Swedes and the Swedish language higher than Tornedalians and Meänkieli in a hierarchy of ethnicity/race, language and culture (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Given this colonial aftermath, it is not surprising that it is difficult to see another solution, to develop alternative ways of conducting teaching or to organise an educational practice that focuses on minority issues.

However, the interviews also convey a diversity of attitudes towards the possibilities of an education that engages more fully with minority issues. In contrast to the beliefs expressed by the teachers, the pupils did in fact ask to be taught Meänkieli. In that sense, the interviews revealed favourable conditions for adding both linguistic and cultural modifications to school practices, given the pupils’ apparent desire to learn Meänkieli in school.

“Just considering that many who are pupils here have, at some point, or several times, been in contact with Meänkieli because there are so many elderly people here who speak it (...) For those of us who come from this municipality, where Meänkieli and Finnish are spoken, it’s a thing that’s needed in school.” (Pupil)

While the pupils ask to learn more about the language in their classrooms, the language of Meänkieli is very much alive and practised at school among the teachers – although only in unofficial spaces such as staff rooms:

“In more formal contexts, it’s Swedish. Informal occasions, in the staff room where we exchange a word or two, then we speak Meänkieli with each other. Or talk or comment on something.” (Teacher)

Teachers and other school staff only speak Swedish to their pupils; their common minority language is not used. In this way, the classroom and situations of official learning practices can be regarded as a colonial room (Smith, 2012). Meänkieli is not spoken in these spaces, and issues related to the local minority culture are not a common element of ordinary teaching. It seems that the Tornedalian culture and language disappear as soon as the teachers leave their unofficial spaces to become Swedish government officials. The teachers touched upon this subject in the interviews; most of them stated that it is not suitable to use Meänkieli in the classroom due to pupils' low comprehension levels and the different functions of the two languages.

“If you're going to talk about what we're doing at school and start to talk grammar, then there are no concepts [in Meänkieli]. Then you would rather speak Swedish.”  
(Teacher 1)

“If you want to say something with emotions, you say it in Meänkieli, while the academic language is Swedish.” (Teacher 2)

The pupils are aware that their teachers speak Meänkieli with each other and confirm the teachers' tendency to decide not to speak Meänkieli in official teaching situations. According to the pupils, there is a general tendency in the Tornedalian community for young people's interest in learning the language and culture to be met to some extent by scepticism by the elders.

“I think many are quite afraid of this with Meänkieli, because it's such a big thing with the elderly. If they [the young people] try to talk to someone older and get it wrong, they don't want to be corrected. And that's wrong and why young people don't speak it.”  
(Pupil)

These conversations make it clear that teachers' 'hidden' practice of Meänkieli does not reach the classrooms. Yet, the pupils describe school as a place of great importance for their presumptive learning opportunities about the language and culture. Their opinion in this matter seems to be that school can provide them with an organised learning situation (with a focus on the minority language and issues) which they cannot find elsewhere in society:

“It would be an advantage if you had more in school. For example, if a teacher's explaining something, they might use Meänkieli, for fun, to see how many people understand it or understand something ... it would be positive if you got a little more teaching in school in Meänkieli.” (Pupil)

These phenomena of seeing the language as outdated or as inadequate for teaching in classrooms, together with pupils' experiences of constant correction of their language practices, can be interpreted, using Loomba's (2015) perspective, as a modern-day effect of historical experiences of domination by a foreign – or, as in this case, domestic – repressive power that tends to manifest itself through mechanisms of conformity and social control. Quijano (2013) asserts that, among those who have been

subjected to long-lasting repression, ambivalence towards the value and significance of their own language and culture is a common consequence. Similar processes seem to be underway in these Tornedalian schools, although there are different implications for pupils and teachers/principals, who, to some extent, live in two parallel worlds of language and cultural practice. The latter group expresses doubt concerning the Meänkieli-based culture's function and value in school and education while the former group wants to learn more about its minority language, culture and history, yet only has access to a colonial room dominated by Swedish language and culture.

### **A school saturated by the heritage of 'Swedification'**

According to statements made by pupils, teachers and principals, the weight of Swedish values and language in official school practice is all-encompassing; therefore, practices within the institution do not allow, or make only limited room for, minority culture and language to take place during ordinary teaching practice.

"I think school is a Swedish institution and has been for quite some time. So there are not very many Meänkieli words that describe the school or the school's work."

(Principal)

A common opinion among both pupils and teachers is that the institution of school does not allow or enhance local minority perspectives, due to the notion that they are too different, and consequently risk harming and interfering with ordinary teaching and school practice. The conversations convey how Tornedalian knowledge, experiences and language appear as counterparts or as values in opposition to the conformity of the institution. Those forms of knowledge that are envisaged as Swedish are regarded as more valuable in the teaching situation.

The ideas and conceptions of Swedification policies were implemented through the education system in Tornedalen based on the notion of the 'natural' racial superiority of Swedes and their population's customs (Heith, 2016). The education system was used as a tool to re-shape the Tornedalian community in accordance with the Swedish government's purposes, and the organisation of schools was one effective mechanism to ensure the precedence of Swedish language and culture over the Tornedalian minority (Elenius, 2014).

The precedence of Swedish knowledge, values and language under contemporary conditions in Tornedalian schools is not comparable with that of previous colonial practices. However, the informants' statements carry traces of resemblances to, and the lingering effects of, a colonial past, that seem to live on in today's school practices. Pupils' experiences of the content of their education and its priorities communicate a hierarchy of knowledge (Mignolo, 2008) whereby the minority language of Meänkieli, within the majority society's education system, is not given equal status with the Swedish language. Consequently, the potential of a pedagogy that emphasises minority perspectives seems to be suppressed by the domination of a nationalistic narrative in schools, which in most cases has the consequence of putting in place a practice that deprioritises Meänkieli and Tornedalian knowledge.

The logic of the Swedish education system, to follow Quijano's (2008) argument, like all education systems in the West, is heavily influenced by a Eurocentric standpoint, which in turn is based on the premises of rational knowledge as a major component. This globally hegemonic perspective on knowledge has undermined, and continues to undermine, ideas and conceptions that are grounded in peripheral knowledge systems and among minorities (p. 198). Hence, one manifestation of a school's power, in a minority setting such as Tornedalen, is its ability to communicate and control what are seen as proper learning goals and efforts, based upon its own premises. Hence, pupils' and teachers' ambitions to develop learning opportunities that enable teaching about minority issues are suppressed due to schools' official educational aims and policies, which are saturated with the objectives of the majority society's interests. In that sense, they do not allow or encourage diversity (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

An example of this tendency to downplay minority perspectives in education is communicated through the pupils' and teachers' experienced shortage or lack of good teaching aids in Meänkieli to use in ordinary teaching practice. One pupil saw this as a consequence of the lack of general interest in minority issues in Sweden, and more specifically the National Agency of Education's lack of interest:

"Our teacher, she's created her own national test. They don't value Meänkieli at all, so there's no educational material written on it. How much do you value the language and the minority then? Very little." (Pupil)

The shortage of appropriate textbooks in Meänkieli was also confirmed by staff. The principal of one of the schools confirmed the pupils' experience of lacking teaching materials. Consequently, both pupils and teachers found themselves limited by the poor availability of textual resources. Another aspect highlighted by pupils is the power of the curriculum in school. Several stated that there is not enough space in the present curriculum to allow content on minority issues and language:

"There's not so much pressure [in school] on this thing with minorities in Sweden. It should be special for those who have a minority background, that schools in these contexts work extra hard for the minority. Instead, you follow a general curriculum for an entire country, and there's very little to be learned." (Pupil)

Despite the clarity of legislation regarding the rights of minorities in upper secondary school (National Agency of Education, 2013; SFS 2009:724), these ambitions are not supported with beneficial pedagogical resources, nor an educational policy that, more exhaustively, gives minority issues extra weight. Instead, the logic of school practice, its 'taken-for-granted' assumptions, does not benefit minority perspectives. Thus, the Swedish school culture and language are part of a paradigm of 'Swedishness' (Hübinette, 2016) in Tornedalian schools, which sets the agenda for the implementation of education. Pupils' requests to integrate more elements of minority culture into ordinary teaching are seemingly difficult to achieve due to the weight of the Swedish curriculum and academic culture. Therefore, pupils seem to understand that they have to find knowledge about their culture and language in other contexts, outside of school.

### **Learning the culture and language outside of school**

A significant consequence of 'internal colonialism', according to Hechter (1975), is that those who have been subjected to abuse tend to close in on themselves and, in solidarity within the group, they create practices within the new structure, to maintain their culture and to protect their language. In accordance with this thinking, our conversations indicate that Tornedalian pupils are aware of their minority group's history and know how to gain access to the group's knowledge and narratives. Pupils do not perceive school as the primary space to offer potential opportunities for learning, and teachers and principals concur with this. Both the pupils and the school stressed that Meänkieli and the Tornedalians' way of life is vital in environments outside of school that are related to religious practices among members of the Revival, or the Church of Laestadianism, or in manual work (e.g. forestry, sales and nursing occupations):

"When the revival has major meetings, they always preach in both Finnish and Swedish. And when there are ministers from this area, they speak Meänkieli."

(Principal)

"It's a great advantage if you have it. I mean, many people don't hire people who can't speak Meänkieli." (Pupil)

School is described as an institution that does not allow them to learn to speak Meänkieli and does not provide a cultural understanding of the region's past or present history and development. How can this experienced absence of Tornedalian minority perspectives be understood? According to Özkirimli (2010), nationalist discourses do not acknowledge the internal diversity of nations related to ethnicity or culture; instead, such discourses present the nation as an 'immutable essence' (p. 210). Thus, the nation's institutions are designed to sustain homogeneity: 'establish its hegemony and naturalize itself, presenting its truth claims as "common-sense", and striving, if unsuccessfully, to obliterate alternative discourses' (p. 207). From this perspective, school is a guarantee of the domination of the majority society's vision of what education is supposed to be. Thus, initiatives and ambitions related to minority issues are difficult to achieve due to schools' preferences for Swedish values and culture.

Our informants' statements confirm that similar homogenisation processes are present in Tornedalian schools. For example, notions about Tornedalian culture not having a natural place within educational settings or that Meänkieli cannot function properly in educational practices, demonstrate the power of the schools' conformity on these issues. Furthermore, the conversations display an evident conflict of interests between Swedish academic culture and its goals in relation to Tornedalian minority culture, the latter characterised by knowledge and experiences connected to practices focusing mainly on nature, religion and practical work. Seemingly, it is the precedence of Swedish values and language, according to both pupils and teachers, that constitutes a significant obstacle in these schools to the development of the practice of minority culture and language. Consequently, this situation forces them to seek the desired knowledge elsewhere.

## Discussion

To submit to teaching and education means to demonstrate compliance with a specific societal power, aimed at the transferral of dominant 'objective' knowledge to those pupils who are incorporated into its practice (Loomba, 2015). Swedish schools can be regarded as the theoretical practice of the majority population, as characterised by their purpose and objectives, formulated in the governance documents of the educational institution. Thus, young Tornedalians have little impact on the already-given focus of the teaching that awaits them in their classrooms. Activities that value the culture and language of the Tornedalian minority are subject to Swedish schools' demands for conformity, with few examples of learning opportunities that have an explicit focus on minority issues. In that sense, the education system gives legitimacy to processes whereby the majority society's culture is forced upon minorities who live within that same space in the national state (Hechter, 1975).

This phenomenon is especially present in the classrooms and teaching practices of the Tornedalian schools examined here. When pupils and teachers talk about contexts dedicated to schoolwork, their minority language and Tornedalian culture are, in most cases, basically absent. The teachers solely use Meänkieli among themselves in unofficial spaces where it is socially acceptable to take a break from their role as government officials. In the classroom, the Swedish language reigns and the curriculum controls what is talked about and what should be the primary focus. In that sense, schools, and especially the teaching situation in classrooms, work as a colonial space where the local culture and language are, in most cases, invisible and unheard.

In several postcolonial situations, the oppression of minorities based on ethnicity has given rise to violent clashes, outbursts of resistance and loud protests against colonial oppressors (see Fanon, 1967; 2017). The clash between the Tornedalian minority culture and Swedish majority culture, exhibited in the country's education system, however, does not manifest as a dramatic eruption of resistance. Instead, it is a *silent clash*, in which pupils are placed in a situation where their native language is silenced and not incorporated into teaching or learning situations.

The results indicate that a significant cause of this condition is related to the pervasive dominance of Swedish values and language in schools. In that sense, schools' practices can be looked upon as a contemporary bearer of 'coloniality' (Quijano, 2008; 2013) that have an influence on the dos and don'ts of social practice. In comparison to the surrounding Tornedalian society, school appears in practical terms as a blank spot when it comes to the usage of Meänkieli or issues regarding the Tornedalian minority. In that sense, submission to school rules and patterns of behaviour, especially for the pupils, implies a colonial experience. The absence of Meänkieli and minority perspectives seems to communicate to both pupils and teachers that the only appropriate knowledge is that which bears a Swedish character. Thus, the supremacy and power of Swedish knowledge is manifested simply in its practice and is also legitimised in steering documents. The power of the curriculum is that it determines the content of what is supposed to be learned. Mentions of national minority issues do exist in the curriculum, but they appear vague and thus are not prioritised by teachers.

Thus, Swedish classrooms grant limited space for the use of minority knowledge or languages because they are not fully socially acceptable and the legislation on these issues appears unclear. Furthermore, resource scarcity caused by limited access to textbooks in Meänkieli and about Tornedalian culture also seems to hinder the promotion of minority elements in ordinary teaching.

A challenge for minorities' opportunities to apply their agency within structures of domination (e.g. schools) is that experiences of abuse tend to be internalised; they still live on in the minds of individuals long after the abuse has ended, and such memories become inherited and passed on from one generation to the next (Loomba, 2015). Pupils' and teachers' awareness of both the historical oppression and present-day injustices towards Tornedalian minority rights to engage with their language and culture are evident in this article. The knowledge and experiences of previous generations seem to have created a situation in schools where the pupils in particular question the absence of minority-related issues. Nonetheless, in the implementation of their education, such issues are not integrated into ordinary teaching.

Yet, parallel to the domination of Swedish culture and language in schools, another, alternative narrative is alive. Thus, to some extent, the outer world squeezes itself into the unofficial contexts of school practice and challenges the 'natural' order sanctioned by the Swedish government. These examples of Tornedalian culture are expressed in the interviews, through the participants' dialogues and discussions about nature; labour in forestry, mining and farming; older relatives' life stories; religious conceptions; etc. Similarly to those of other minority populations, these narratives and practices do not entirely fit into Swedish norms and traditions. They are, to some extent, 'a pattern of resistance to assimilation, a resistance so virile that powerful behavioural management techniques cannot overcome it' (Hechter, 1975, p.27). Compared to ordinary teaching and learning practices, these narratives appear as alternative practices that engage pupils, teachers and principals outside of ordinary teaching practice. In some respects, these narratives undermine the impact of 'Swedishness' in schools and consequently strengthen the pupils' and teachers' own role as minorities. This Tornedalian collusion is an expression of resistance against the legitimate Swedish authority.

## **Conclusions**

It is evident in this article that pupils are restricted in their engagement with their minority heritage due to the domination of Swedish language and values in Tornedalian schools. Despite these remnants of a colonial past, pupils wish to learn more about their minority culture, language and history. However, for these positive developments to continue and evolve, the Swedish government needs to respond to these calls and guarantee a much more vivid and progressive curriculum that allows and empowers teachers in minority contexts to work actively with minority issues. Speaking and writing in Meänkieli, along with activities closely tied to Tornedalian culture, need to be more visible in day-to-day classroom practices. This calls for an exception to be made from the ordinary curriculum to enable teachers and principals to organise minority educational activities. Meänkieli, similarly to other minority languages all over the world, is threatened with extinction (Pietikäinen, Huss, Laihiala-Kankainen, Aikio-Puoskari, and

Lane, 2010; Ridanpää, 2018). Therefore, it is urgent that schools prioritise Tornedalian language and culture.

The preservation and development of minority languages and cultures is not only a social and psychological issue but also one that is important for equality. Studies of the region stress that the opportunity to practise multilingual and local culture has positive effects on socioeconomic conditions as well as health benefits (Winsa, 2005). Furthermore, an education that embraces the Tornedalian community involves a shift in perspective, whereby alternative, decolonial conceptions stemming from rural experiences and the periphery can complement and add knowledge to ordinary teaching (Walsh, 2018). Such a change in thinking means developing an opposing standpoint to national self-images that perceive a nation as a homogeneous society (Keskinen, 2009; Quijano, 2013; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Tornedalen's colonial past is a dark chapter in Swedish history. Even today, the consequences of Swedification and the processes of racialisation, discrimination and aggressive assimilation politics – all of them mechanisms of Swedish colonial and nationalistic ambitions (Persson, 2018) – are alive in the minds of young Tornedalians. Thus, colonial projects legitimated by the Swedish state are still present in Tornedalian schools, most notably through the absence of Meänkieli and features of Tornedalian cultural identity in official school practices.

The interviewed pupils seemed keen to learn more about their culture and history and thus wanted to request more education on Meänkieli. These observations suggest that favourable prerequisites now exist for a revitalisation of the culture and language within the framework of upper secondary schools in Sweden. There are signs of interactions in which pupils speak Meänkieli with both teachers and each other outside of their classrooms. These *decolonial pockets* (Poromaa Isling, forthcoming) of interaction generate a certain amount of resistance against the impact of Swedish majority culture in schools and reveal a possible way forward for a pedagogy that embraces minority issues (Andreotti, 2011). Hence, this phenomenon needs to be scrutinised more thoroughly.

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