



Acknowledging Sámi as indigenous people in early childhood teacher education in Finland – A study in the light of values, knowledge, and competencies

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ABSTRACT: The study examines if and how the Sámi, their languages, culture, and rights as indigenous people are acknowledged in early childhood teacher education in Finland. In addition, it assesses what kinds of competencies connected to language, culture and rights are taught in early childhood teacher training programmes and what competencies future teachers need to develop. The data consists of focus group discussions with teacher educators from two universities. The discussions, led by the corresponding authors, included semi-structured questions, analysed using inductive content analysis. The results show that early childhood teacher educators see a discrepancy between the idealistic formulations in the different steering documents and the, at times, more complex real world. While the languages, culture, and rights of the indigenous Sámi people are acknowledged in different courses at both universities, teacher educators find it difficult to have more in-depth discussions because of their position as outsiders and a lack of knowledge. However, they also see the importance of better acknowledging the Sámi and their rights so that future early childhood teachers have a deeper understanding of the Sámi people, linguistic and cultural diversity within Finland, and additional competencies to support children and their identity construction.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, indigenous people, rights, teacher education*

Introduction

Although Finland is officially bilingual (Finnish, Swedish), it has always been multilingual in practice. The guiding narrative of Finland as a culturally and linguistically homogeneous country is strong (Helakorpi et al., 2023), despite the fact that Finland has for a long time been a culturally and linguistically diverse country, including, for example, the indigenous Sámi people, Roma, two national churches, and two national languages (Helakorpi et al., 2023). In recent years, rights issues as well as cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood education have been discussed and researched from many different viewpoints (e.g. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Honko & Mustonen, 2020a; Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022). However, our understanding is that the focus on Sámi languages, indigenous people, and their rights has not been made as clearly visible in the research areas pertaining to mainstream early childhood pedagogy and more specifically teacher education. Sámi early childhood education (e.g. Kuusisto et al., 2021; Laiti, 2018; Peltola et al., 2019) and Sámi education (e.g. Helander et al., 2023; Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021; Kortekangas et al., 2019) have been studied, though, from many points of view especially in the 21st century.

The Sámi are an indigenous people living in an area that spans the national states of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia, a people with a unique culture, customs, beliefs, and identity (see, e.g. Helander et al., 2023; Joonas, 2018). According to The Constitution of Finland (1999/731, §17), the Sámi as indigenous people have a legal right to maintain and develop their culture and languages. In addition, Sámi children have the right to early childhood education and care (later ECEC) in their own language to strengthen their identity, language skills, and culture (Act on Early Childhood Education, 2018/540; Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022). Finland contains speakers of three Sámi languages (Northern, Inari, and Skolt Sámi), and all three languages are endangered (see, e.g. Helander et al., 2023). An action plan to revitalise, preserve and strengthen the Sámi languages was outlined in 2012 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012). One of the objectives of the action plan was to “increase the knowledge of Sámi and their culture in the whole population, especially through education, culture, and media” by 2025 (Finnish Government, 2014, p. 3). This means that teacher educators should be able to discuss the rights of the indigenous Sámi people with (future) teachers. However, a recent report on Sámi languages and Sámi language teaching notes that the indigenous Sámi people and their rights are not systematically discussed in teacher education programmes, even if the issues could be combined with such themes as greater cultural awareness, language awareness and social justice issues (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021b, pp. 50–51). Therefore, this article aims to examine if and how the Sámi, their languages, culture, and rights as indigenous people are acknowledged in early childhood teacher education in Finland. To study this, the aim has been operationalized

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into two research questions. Firstly, we want to find out if and how spaces have been created in early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programmes to raise awareness about the Sámi and their languages, culture, and rights as indigenous people. Secondly, we want to assess what kinds of competencies connected to language, culture and rights are developed in ECTE programmes. In this article, we use the concept of early childhood education and care (ECEC) instead of early childhood education (ECE) due to the structure of the Nordic model, which combines education and care (e.g. Vallberg Roth, 2022). In this article, competency is understood in relation to a symmetry between knowledge, skills, and “being in a communicative relationship with (about) the world” (Schaffar, 2019, p. 114). The content of teacher education programmes and what knowledge future teachers acquire during their studies need to be understood in relation to the real world (e.g. Schaffar, 2019, 2021)

According to Joonas (2018), more than 75% of Sámi children are born outside the Sámi homeland, which presents challenges for maintaining language and preserving culture. Even though Sámi children have a legal right to Sámi ECEC, the number of Sámi-language daycare groups outside the Sámi homeland is in practice quite low and has demanded hard work from families and communities (Joonas, 2018). According to Keskitalo (2021, p. 67), only 5% of Sámi children living outside the Sámi homeland attend Sámi language subject teaching in compulsory education. Although the numbers represent only the children in compulsory education, similar results can be assumed for Finnish ECEC, thus underlining the need for (future) ECEC teachers to understand the position of the Sámi people as an indigenous people as well as that of their languages, culture, and rights.

Since this article discusses indigenous people who have been and still are oppressed in Finland (see, e.g. Keskitalo et al., 2013, pp. 115–118), it is important to explain our position as researchers. As teacher educators and researchers, we are worried about the amount of hate speech, polarisation, and lack of empathy and genuine listening in society and want to contribute to a more socially just world. However, it is important to note that our backgrounds are not in the Sámi community, which gives us very limited rights, if any, to discuss any topics related to the Sámi community in depth (see also Olsen, 2017; Paksi & Kivinen, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2021). The Sámi as an indigenous people have been the topic of many research projects, and the projects have not always been fair towards the Sámi (see Keskitalo et al., 2018; Paksi & Kivinen, 2021). Therefore, we do not see it as our right to discuss the Sámi people nor their daily life, customs, traditions, living conditions, or identity from our position as outsiders. However, in recent reports both Sámi children (Weckström et al., 2023) and working groups (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021b) mention that teachers need to better understand the position and situation of the Sámi and their rights and support their well-being. In this article, we turn our gaze towards teachers in mainstream teacher education programmes, and especially ECTE programmes. As this topic has not, to our understanding, been broadly examined in

Finland, we reflect on what kinds of actions we as teacher educators can, and need to, take to help contribute to a better world.

To answer the research questions, we arranged two focus group discussions with early childhood teacher educators from two universities that do not offer studies in Sámi didactics or Sámi pedagogy. The discussions, led by the authors of this article, included semi-structured questions that the teacher educators discussed together. In the following section, we present background information for the study, including information about the context, Finnish ECTE programmes and Finnish ECEC. Then, we present the data for this study as well as the data collection and analysis methods, followed by the results. Finally, we discuss the overall results of the study and offer our conclusions.

Background

Finland — a country characterised by complexity and diversity

Finland is mostly portrayed and idealised in national and international perspectives as a democratic country that cherishes fundamental values like equity, equality, and diversity — a country that also emphasises the importance of education in promoting democratic principles. Finland is also seen as a democratic country that wants to promote sustainable thinking, protect the equal value and rights of all people to develop to their full potential as human beings, and demonstrate respect for other people, cultures, languages, and ethnicities (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022). This applies also to the Finnish education system, which is often “regarded as a highly egalitarian system where all pupils can educate themselves as far as their potential and motivation carries them” (Helakorpi et al., 2023, p. 319).

However, Finland has been repeatedly reminded by the United Nations’ Human Rights Committee to acknowledge the rights of the indigenous Sámi people in decision making. Finland has not ratified the International Labor Organization [ILO] 169 Convention, which would give the Sámi “control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the framework of the States in which they live” (ILO 169 Convention). In addition, the Finnish Parliament has constantly failed to renew the Sámi Parliament Act, which would respect the right of self-determination of the Sámi people as an indigenous people (see, e.g. Joonas, 2019). The latest attempt, and failure, to reform the Sámi Parliament Act was not only widely reported on in the Finnish media, but also abroad, raising questions about Finland’s self-image as a country that values democracy and equality.

It is also questionable whether Sámi education is supported in a way that helps individuals maintain and develop their languages (e.g. Joona, 2018; Keskitalo et al., 2013). As an officially bilingual, but in practice multilingual country, language rights are upheld in multiple laws and steering documents in Finland. The constitutional rights to use the national languages, Finnish and Swedish, in different contexts and on an equal basis are declared both in the Constitution (731/1999) and Language Act (423/2003). In addition, the Constitution states that the indigenous Sámi people, Roma, and other groups have the right to maintain and develop their own languages and cultures (Section 17). Furthermore, the Sámi have the right to linguistic and cultural self-government in their native region (Section 121) as well as the right to use the Sámi languages in communications with the authorities in that region (Section 17). These sections, in accordance with the Sámi Language Act (1086/2003), should ensure the constitutional right of the Sámi people to maintain and develop their own language and culture. The Sámi Language Act mainly applies to the Sámi homeland, that is, to the municipalities of Enontekiö, Inari, and Utsjoki and the reindeer-herding cooperative in the municipality of Sodankylä (Sámi Parliament, n.d.). However, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) mentions that “the Sámi as indigenous people have a legal right for ECEC in their own language to strengthen their identity, language skills, and culture”. This means that children with one of the Sámi languages as their mother tongue have similar rights to benefit from ECEC in their mother tongue as speakers of Finnish and Swedish do, whether they are living in the Sámi homeland or outside it (for more about indigenous people and Sámi education, see Joona, 2018; Keskitalo et al., 2019; Savivaara et al., 2013).

Finnish early childhood teacher education

The Finnish education system covers different stages of schooling, from early childhood education to colleges and universities. The idea of a holistic learning path is based on the idea that learning starts early in a child’s life and continues throughout one’s life. For this reason, it is also important that every child has access to good quality early childhood education and schooling (EDUFI, 2022). This, in turn, places demand on well-trained teachers to create the proper conditions for learning and development to occur among children and older students. The Finnish education system is based on instilling a solid foundation of values that supports human rights, the equal value of all people, the right to one’s own language, culture, and identity, and the right to learn and develop (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022). Every teacher is obligated to help every child or student acquire knowledge about and an awareness of what diversity, multilingualism, and social justice mean from a Finnish perspective.

Finnish teacher education, including ECTE, are highly valued both within and outside Finland (Thrupp et al., 2023). Since the 1970s, teacher training has been academically focused, but it was not until the 1990s that the training of teachers in early childhood

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education moved to the universities and assumed a strongly academic focus. Even though the Finnish education system is based on the same principles and strives to align the teaching provided at different levels, the universities have freedom and autonomy in designing their education programmes. However, the programmes need to meet the national requirements and harmonise with the governing documents that apply to early childhood education and primary school. Due to the autonomy of the Finnish universities, there are some differences in teacher education practices between different universities (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021a, p. 119). However, the programmes are largely similar in their holistic view of a child's learning process, supporting a child's development and lifelong learning in multiple ways and offering a broad understanding of ECEC and the importance of critical and analytical thinking and theory-based knowledge and competencies (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021a, pp. 128–129).

With respect to how Sámi history, society, language, and rights are discussed in teacher education programmes in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia — the four countries overlapping with the Sámi homeland — Olsen and Keskitalo (2021) have identified differences between the countries. According to their study, every preservice teacher in Norway is required to have enough competency to teach about the Sámi based on the demands of the curriculum, whereas in Finland it is mainly the University of Oulu and the University of Lapland that offer studies in the Sámi language and on Sámi culture (Olsen & Keskitalo, 2021, pp. 4–5, 7). In Sweden, studies in the Sámi language are centred in Umeå, whereas Sámi language and culture studies in Russia are even more restricted (Olsen & Keskitalo, 2021, p. 5). To be able to support children's well-being and identity development as well as their linguistic and cultural diversity, it is important for (future) ECEC teachers to have enough knowledge to understand the rights and the position of the indigenous Sámi people.

Finnish ECEC

Finnish ECEC teaching relies strongly on several steering documents focusing on the local, national, and international levels (for a brief summary, see, e.g. Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021, p. 61; Lundkvist & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021). In addition, the pedagogy is based on underlying and fundamental values connected to international agreements about human rights and is in harmony with human rights, international agreements, and conventions as well as national laws and governing documents (EDUFI, 2022). The core values strongly emphasise the equal value of all people, equality, diversity, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, and family but also principles of fair treatment and protection against discrimination (Hellman & Lauritsen, 2017). The values are linked to thoughts about social justice, identity, and sustainability. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, ratified by Finland in 1991), all states agree that all children should have the opportunity to develop their personality and various

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abilities and to develop respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 29 of the convention states that the aim of childhood education must include respect for each child's own cultural identity, language, and values as well as for values and cultures that differ from the child's own culture. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child must have opportunities to prepare for a life characterised by responsibility, understanding and tolerance for all people, including other ethnic, national, and religious groups. Article 29 specifically emphasises that children must be taught to live a responsible and respectful life that includes valuing the rights of indigenous people. In addition, article 30 emphasises that in such states inclusive of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities or people belonging to an indigenous group, those persons must not be denied the right to their own cultural life, religion, and language.

The core content of Finnish ECEC teaching is detailed in the national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022) and the national core curriculum for preschool education (EDUFI, 2016), which discuss such topics as the mission and general goals for ECEC, the operational culture, pedagogical activities, and support for a child's development and learning. Languages are also mentioned in several parts of the Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC, and terms like multilingualism, language awareness, and bilingual ECEC have become more visible of late in the steering documents as Finland has started to recognise linguistic diversity (see, e.g. Söpanen, 2019). A child's right to her or his own language, culture, religion, and worldview is a fundamental right now recognised in ECEC teaching. The curriculum states that teachers "must have knowledge of different cultures and worldviews and an ability to see things from different perspectives and put themselves in the place of others" (EDUFI, 2022, pp. 33–34). Children with Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi as their registered mother tongue have the right to ECEC in their mother tongue, whereas other first languages are likewise supported in ECEC whenever possible. A key component of giving children opportunities to demonstrate their cultural backgrounds is evident in the partnerships and cooperation between personnel, guardians, and communities. Recent studies on multilingualism and Finnish ECEC have demonstrated that multilingualism has not only become a part of steering documents but is also visible in teaching practices (Honko & Mustonen, 2020a), teacher discourses (Honko & Mustonen, 2020b; Söpanen, 2019), teacher education (Bergroth et al., 2020), and in-service training (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). However, a recent report by a working group on developing the teaching of and teaching in Sámi languages (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021b, pp. 50–51) found that knowledge about the indigenous Sámi people has not been systematically included in teacher education programmes in Finland. It is then up to the teacher educators themselves to decide whether or not the Sámi languages are mentioned in ECTE programmes.

According to the national core curriculum, the special objective of ECEC for Sámi children is to strengthen their Sámi identity and awareness of their own culture, to provide them

with an opportunity to learn Sámi folklore and traditional skills, to strengthen their language development, comprehension, and use, and to support and develop their language skills (EDUFI, 2022, p. 53). Sámi ECEC is arranged, if possible, in groups in one of the Sámi languages or else in so-called language nests outside the Sámi homeland (e.g. Keskitalo et al., 2019). This form of Finnish ECEC aims to strengthen children's awareness of their own culture and language through total early language immersion (e.g. Äärelä-Vihriälä & Turunen, 2022) and to help them to learn an endangered minority or indigenous language (EDUFI, 2022, p. 56). Furthermore, the Sámi language nests are very important not only for language revitalisation purposes but also for the revitalisation of the whole community (Äärelä-Vihriälä & Turunen, 2022, p. 144). However, as Laiti (2019, p. 37) mentions, to receive ECEC in one of the Sámi languages, a child needs to have Sámi as a registered mother tongue and a home environment that supports the language. This might not be the case for all families because of earlier assimilation policies (e.g. Keskitalo et al., 2018; Keskitalo et al., 2013). In addition, it is only possible to register one mother tongue for a child in Finland, which means that a child can be bilingual with Sámi as one of the two languages even though it is not the child's registered mother tongue. In such a case, children with a Sámi background might well be placed in Finnish or Swedish ECEC groups, which means that their rights to support for their language and culture might not be recognised as they should. This also calls for ECEC teachers to understand the rights and position of the Sámi as indigenous people so that they can support the children in their identity construction.

Just as the overall goals for Finnish ECEC are to support children in their development, growth, and wellbeing (EDUFI, 2022), the aim of ECTE is to develop enough knowledge and competencies together with future teachers to work towards and ultimately reach these goals. According to Husu and Toom (2016, p. 7), teachers' work is seen as "knowledge intensive expert work and demanding interactive work in changing contexts", which in turn demands "versatile pedagogical skills and content knowledge, especially capabilities related to learning and instruction, interaction, well-being and school development". Similarly, Kangas and Harju-Luukkainen (2021) stress that three kinds of agency are demanded of ECEC teachers: pedagogical agency, relational agency, and agency related to sustainable development. They further argue that in the policy documents, teachers are given many different roles and asked to be more of everything (Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021, p. 71), which also places early childhood teachers in a demanding role.

Data and methods

Our data consists of two focus group discussions with seven early childhood teacher educators from two universities. ECTE is given altogether in seven universities in Finland.

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As the universities in Finland have a great freedom and autonomy in designing their education programmes as well as different focal points, the results of this article cannot be seen representing all the universities that are educating future ECEC teachers. However, it gives an insight to questions that teacher educators might be struggling with when discussing topics related to indigenous people as outsiders (see also Olsen, 2017; Paksi & Kivinen, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2021) as well as a starting point for further research needs. For this study, teacher educators were invited to participate in a discussion about the contents of ECTE programmes. More precisely, we wanted to know what kind of a space the Sámi as indigenous people are given in different education programmes. The teacher educators were given information about the overall theme of the study and the data-gathering and processing procedures. The focus group discussions, led by the authors of this article, included open-ended questions. The focus group discussions were held and recorded through the digital tool Zoom and were divided into three themes with a total of 11 open-ended questions. The authors functioned as moderators who named the discussion themes but did not actively participate in the discussions around the themes. The themes discussed were: 1) fundamental rights and education in Finland; 2) the Sámi as an indigenous people and their languages, culture, and rights; and 3) knowledge of the Sámi as an indigenous people and their languages, culture, and rights in ECTE in Finland.

Focus group interviews as a data-collection method gives, according to Dahlin-Ivanoff (2015), the participants opportunities to discuss and develop their thoughts through and in discussion with other participants in the group. By not guiding the participants' discussion through excessively strict and fixed interview questions, space is created for the participants themselves to develop their thoughts and reflections on the given starting points in the discussion with other participants.

The questions for the focus group discussions were formulated to stimulate as much as possible dialogue about the themes central to the study. Since the questions in a focus group discussion are of the utmost importance, they must be formulated so that they are clear, focused, understandable, and arouse the interest of the target group (Dahlin-Ivanoff, 2015). In a focus group discussion, the group leader functions as a leader and not primarily as an interviewer. Keeping this role in mind, our task was mainly to explain the aims and procedures of the study and to share the themes to discuss with the participants.

The recorded data was initially transcribed at the word level by the authors. Later, the transcriptions were anonymised, and more detailed examples with pauses and possible explanations were prepared to be used in publications (see Appendix 1 for the transcription key). The transcribed data have been analysed according to qualitative content analysis and, more specifically, with an inductive variant of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018; Tjora, 2018). This means that both the

central purpose of and overarching questions for our study guided the analytical process of searching for meaning in the informants' statements.

The actual analytical process began only after the data material had been transcribed. The analysis of the data material consisted of five steps in total. The first step included listening to the audio material, reading the transcriptions to obtain an idea of the entirety and structure of the text data and prepare the data for analysis. During the second step, we reflected on the material to identify the salient features of the discussions, including any important and relevant concepts, such as values, rights, education, teachers, students, awareness, competencies, and Sámi. The third step involved coding and categorising the material to identify key themes, and the material was grouped into larger entities and synthesised in relation to the central purpose and questions of the study. In the fourth step, overarching themes were created that revealed similarities, differences, and even opposing viewpoints. The fifth and final step consisted of interpreting and a discussing the results of the content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The next section presents the results of the study. Since the participants in this study have been promised anonymity, all informants have been assigned a code (e.g. U1T1), which is also used for the quotes in the next section.

Results

Results from the analysis of the focus group discussions, based on the open-ended, semi-structured questions, are divided into three main themes: 1) values in education, 2) knowledge of the languages, culture, and rights of the Sámi in ECTE programmes and 3) competencies — the teaching profession in a diverse and multicultural society. The results are presented in descriptive form, including selected quotes that represent the informants' statements. Since the article is written in English, the quotes are also presented in English regardless of the linguistic background of the informants.

The results are presented and discussed under the three aforementioned themes and further divided into the three dimensions of space that the Sámi as an indigenous people are allotted in ECTE (Table 1). The first theme deals with such dimensions as the fundamental values and core principles visible in teacher education. The second theme has to do with the knowledge and awareness that future teachers are supposed to have about the importance of language, culture, and rights to better understand the position of the Sámi as an indigenous people. The third theme focuses on the competencies that future teachers need in the teaching profession.

TABLE 1 Themes and dimensions of the discussions

<i>THEMES</i>	<i>DIMENSIONS</i>
Values in education	fundamental values and core principles
Knowledge	language, culture, rights
Competencies	teaching profession

In the following subsection, the results of the analysis are presented in relation to the different themes and dimensions, illustrated by certain examples.

Values in education

Values such as equality, equity, and diversity emerged in the discussions as core values and as something that "*unites us quite strongly within the other Nordic countries*" (U2T1). Although the steering documents providing guidelines for Finnish ECEC and basic education underline the values of equality, equity, and diversity, the teacher educators feel that the students need to discuss and problematise the reality they encounter in society. In addition, it is important for them to show the students what is written in the steering documents and laws, for example about the rights of different language groups in Finland, but also to focus on the difference between the "*beautiful formulations in text and how they are implemented in real life*" (U2T1). Policy documents, guidelines, and other types of steering documents that provide the framework for educational activities at different levels serve as frameworks on a more theoretical and rhetorical level. In practice, the curriculum may be implemented in different ways.

The discrepancies between policy documents and guidelines and everyday life in early childhood pedagogy became clear in the focus group discussions, and the need to concretise and raise awareness about them was something that several of the teacher educators highlighted as important.

[...] if our future teachers see diversity in different forms as a resource and that resource itself (.) we should not have to dictate what it is always but maybe more to point out the discrimination that they ((= minorities)) are exposed to (U2T1)

Quote 1

Both groups viewed the above-mentioned values — equality, equity, and diversity — as central parts of teacher education that should be made thoroughly visible in the teacher education programmes. As Quote 1 shows, the teacher educators also see it as important to try to broaden the viewpoints of the students as well as to give them competencies and

a desire to support children from diverse backgrounds (see also following Quote 2). To that end, it was important to discuss the values that the teacher educators view as important from different perspectives.

[...] we absolutely need to create space for discussion, and of course it does not have to be limited to the Sámi there are other groups in our society as well [...] but in general to knock and see what's behind this nice facade in our country [...] I can at least feel that there is a discrepancy between these policy documents and guidelines and how this everyday life and reality look like for many people (.) including the Sámi (U1T1)

Quote 2

The teacher educators also discussed values from another point of view, that of ecological sustainability, which can be connected to social sustainability and human rights as well as to the specific values and competencies that should be supported in ECEC. In one of the group discussions, several persons raised the point that the Western, individualistic way of living is not sustainable with respect to the environment, and therefore harmful from the future perspective, noting that a sustainable way of living is something that is important for and appreciated by indigenous people — including the Sámi. The knowledge that the Sámi as an indigenous people possess is valuable, and *“especially considering a kind of sustainable and forward-looking perspective on this planet, there would certainly be a lot (...) for us to learn”*, noted one teacher educator (U1T1).

Finally, the value of the Finnish education system, which has been highly praised both inside and outside Finland, was also discussed in both focus groups. The importance of Finnish education was contrasted with the history of the Finnish schooling system, which has been harmful for the Sámi, as the next Quote shows:

that this, how would we put it, Western civilisation and view of knowledge has not necessarily [...] ehh been so very (.) well of course very good but not only good (.) so I'm just thinking about what you said X, that something that may have been much more sustainable in some respects than what the current education system also represents has been pushed aside or repressed, and something like that (.) a look in the mirror as (.) a representative of that (U1T1)

Quote 3

Quote 3 shows the extent to which the teacher educators reflected on this topic from multiple perspectives. In the following subsection, we present how the languages, culture, and rights of the Sámi as an indigenous people are discussed in early childhood education teacher programmes.

Knowledge of the languages, culture, and rights of the Sámi in early childhood teacher education programmes

Linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity as well as the rights of children and different groups are clearly all-important parts of ECEC in Finland, and they were also eagerly discussed in the groups. Since an awareness of the languages, culture, and rights of the indigenous Sámi people was one of the starting points for this study, the early childhood teacher educators were asked if and how they are discussed in mainstream ECTE and their relevance for future teachers. Not surprisingly, the participants reported that Sámi languages and linguistic rights are talked about together with multilingualism in Finland in several courses at both universities. In addition to discussing the Sámi languages, one of the teacher educators mentioned that she talks about the so-called language nests, an early language immersion-based ECEC for Sámi children, with her students. Sámi ECEC was otherwise not mentioned in the dialogues, which might indicate that it is not discussed in detail in mainstream ECTE programmes, even though a significant number of Sámi children live outside the Sámi homeland.

Another issue that was discussed by one of the focus groups was sustainability, which also is closely linked to values that the teacher educators find important for the ECEC education programme. Sustainability is also mentioned in several parts of the national core curriculum. Some of the teachers discussed how the Sámi and their ways of living are mentioned in courses in connection with sustainable ways of living, a respect to nature, human rights, and a just world. Even though the themes generated lively discussion among students, the teacher educators wished for more possibilities to include the voices of Sámi peoples in their courses, as the following Quote 4 shows:

more genuine listening than telling them about ((the Sámi)) [...] but in such a way that it doesn't become like an exoticisation or ehm that one somehow teaches about something but that it should lead to [...] that (.) because also among the Sámi there is huge variety in terms of ways of living and relating to culture and traditions (U1T1)

Quote 4

Some of the teacher educators mentioned that they probably have not discussed the Sámi and their rights as much as they could have in their courses, as the following Quote 5 illustrates:

I must admit and acknowledge that I have not specifically highlighted the Sámi in my teaching or in connection with my courses (...) but have more so on a general level highlighted the diversity and how to see the individual children the individuals, and to see them in their own context to try to be curious and find out and be open to the fact that there are different ways of living thinking, and believing in that way (U1T3)

Quote 5

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Similar thoughts are evident in Quote 1 and Quote 2, where two of the teacher educators expressed the importance of seeing diversity in its different forms as a resource and to think about the discrimination children might face in society. However, the position of the Sámi as an indigenous people differs from the position of other (linguistic) minorities in Finland, not only because of their unique position as the only acknowledged indigenous people in the European Union (Keskitalo et al., 2021, p. 1), but because of the history of colonialism, which was taken up in the discussions. The need to call attention to the rights mentioned in the steering documents and laws, as well as the language situation of the Sámi, were themes that the teacher educators had already discussed with their students. However, the teacher educators mentioned that it is harder to go deeper into discussions about Sámi culture, the oppression of the Sámi, and the history of a school system that discriminated against and oppressed the Sámi, causing many of them to lose their language. The following Quote 6 shows one of the teacher educators pondering the complexity of rights, language, and culture, and how to discuss about these themes.

I think that language seems quite simple [...] but then it already becomes a bit more complicated (with) rights [...] but then when you look a little closer at language and it is also clear that language relates to culture [...] then yes what does it mean that you have the right to your culture [...] what does it mean as a teacher in early childhood education that s/he ((a child)) has Sámi parents [...] what does it mean to be Sámi here so (.) what can we offer what should we what does it mean to have rights in that case (U2T3)

Quote 6

There is also a gap between the awareness that teacher educators express about the position of minorities and indigenous people in society and their own concrete teaching. The teacher educators clearly expressed that they see it as important and as their duty to give future teachers opportunities to acquire knowledge about, discuss, relate to, and raise awareness about their own role as teachers in a society characterised by diversity and multiculturalism. This can be challenging precisely because the teacher educators feel that they do not have enough knowledge or perhaps the right to pursue the discussions on a deeper level.

The teaching profession in a diverse and multicultural society

In the group discussions, the early childhood teacher educators took two perspectives on the teaching profession in a diverse and multicultural society. The first was about the competencies that future teachers already possess and those they need to acquire through their studies to be able to work in a diverse society, and the second was about their own competencies to teach about working with children from diverse backgrounds. In the following section, we discuss teachers' awareness of and belief in their competencies to

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work with children in a multicultural and multilingual society first from the perspective of future teachers' needs and readiness and then from the teacher educators' perspective. These perspectives are often intertwined, which is why we have decided to present the examples together.

In the discussions, teacher educators emphasised that the students themselves are demanding more competencies for their future role as teachers. Through various courses and through discussions about various phenomena that exist in society, the students themselves are becoming more aware of and reflective about issues related to diversity and inclusion. The questions motivate many students to also focus on their own future work as teachers and on their responsibility as teachers. For several of the teacher educators, it was important that students gain more knowledge already during their studies and increase their awareness of the diversity in our society and the rights of all social groups.

The teacher educators highlighted the issue of how important it is that future teachers are allowed to discuss current social phenomena and that many students are seemingly eager to participate in the conversations about various issues related in general to creating a better world. These conversations highlighted a certain social pathos thinking among future teachers. The following Quote 7 illustrates the excitement of the students at a lecture on diversity given by one of the teacher educators:

I gave lectures in a course on diversity and inclusion and had a lecture in my area of interest worldview education and there the students were very eager and animated and wondering why we don't have more of this [...] this is something that we need more of (.) this is what we need when we get out into working life and we need to know this and be aware of it and I've tried to emphasise that we can't know everything and we can't keep track of everything but that still that we can be curious and discover together with the children [...] (U1T3)

Quote 7

It became clear that the students see it as important to learn about diversity since it will help prepare them for their future work. In addition, the quote shows that the students even want more of this kind of content in their studies. However, as one of the teachers discusses in the Quote 8, students' backgrounds might affect their awareness of and perspective on minorities.

I also think that it is different for different student groups [...] for example when I have students who have Finnish as their first language (.) there you can sometimes see a difference with majority and minority perspectives and how to think about indigenous languages and such and perhaps certain values and how they are highlighted when we talk about language and rights [...] (U1T4)

Quote 8

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As quote 8 shows, it is important to have such discussions in teacher education programmes because they, on the one hand, give future teachers the tools to work with children from different backgrounds (in a broader sense) and on the other challenge and support them to reflect on their own backgrounds, beliefs, and biases. In general, as we have shown earlier in this study, students are interested in learning about and discussing how they can act to create a more socially just world. However, in connection with the indigenous Sámi people, it was explicitly mentioned in one of the focus group discussions that students do not know much about the Sámi. This is illustrated in the following Quote 9:

but (I) could think that knowledge of the Sámi is probably quite (.) low among our students [...] I don't know if it's because they're not interested or simply because they don't have a connection with it (U2T2)

Quote 9

In both groups, some of the teacher educators mentioned that one reason why the Sámi perspective might not receive as much attention as other minority groups in Finland in teacher education programmes is that the students do not have any connections to the Sámi. Later, one of the teacher educators mentioned that because the Sámi people and their rights, languages, and culture are not discussed in detail in basic education, the students do not have enough basic knowledge to discuss the more difficult themes, such as social justice and prejudice. Another teacher educator in the same group talked about her connections to the Sámi in the following way:

it's something where I spontaneously come to think that these immediate points of contact in one's (life) are often not necessarily very large [...] but I agree with what you say and I also think that the Sámi presence in Finland and the consciousness of the Sámi people has increased with the general awareness of diversity and that it comes in a natural way there (U2T1)

Quote 10

In Quote 10, the teacher educator mentions that students' awareness of the Sámi has increased alongside a general awareness of diversity. We find this point interesting for two reasons. First, as we have discussed earlier, Finland has always been diverse in different ways, and the Sámi have been living in this area for a long time, yet they have attracted more attention now through the effects of global migration. Second, many Sámi live outside the Sámi homeland, which means that more teachers might be working with families with Sámi backgrounds in the future. Therefore, it would be of great importance for future teachers to have sufficient knowledge to interact with the children and their

families in a thoughtful manner. Similar thoughts on a lack of connection were mentioned in the other focus group discussion, but this time from a teacher's point of view:

one reason why I haven't specifically highlighted the Sámi is because they are not in our immediate neighbourhood in a way (.) here but they are in Finland and it is pretty much in the immediate neighbourhood (.) but you think a little bit regionally that where will our students work next and what do they need to bring with them (.) but when I got the enquiry about this and being here it triggered some thoughts that yes (.) I don't know where they will end up next and what they will start working on and who they will meet (U1T3)

Quote 11

Quote 11 shows the teacher educator's own thoughts about teaching and how participating in this focus group discussion has led the teacher to reflect on her choices. Overall, it has proven important for the teacher educators to get to talk about diversity together and to think about whether there is something more that they could do. The teacher educators in both groups acknowledged the need to discuss diversity and rights and problematise the beautiful formulations in the curricula and other steering documents. In addition, they also clearly noted the need to address the knowledge gaps that students have concerning the situation of the indigenous Sámi people and even allow space for such conversations in their courses. However, a degree of uncertainty was also visible in the focus group discussions. On the one hand, the teacher educators know that there is an urgent need to talk about the rights, languages, culture, and history of the Sámi with future teachers. At the same time, as the Quote 12 illustrates, they remained uncertain about whether they have enough knowledge to lead the discussions and what right they as outsiders might even have to talk about the Sámi people:

what resources are available [...] there for example to be able to do it systematically (.) we should really immerse ourselves and have more knowledge about it [...] someone should be able to coordinate this knowledge part of it simply because I think that if I think about myself I think that I don't have enough knowledge and I wouldn't want to talk so much about the Sámi people [...] so I would like to open the door to a meeting with people who actually carry that perspective in their body [...] it sounds strange to say that it has to be done in the right way but I think we can't know that way when we don't have that background ourselves (U1T1)

Quote 12

One possibility that was raised in the discussions was to include Sámi voices in the teaching programmes by, for example, cooperating more with the Sámi in teacher education programmes or adding Sámi literature to the course materials. At the same time, one of the teacher educators questioned whether it is appropriate to ask a minority to educate the majority about the past and present situations, which have been harmful and caused pain for the indigenous Sámi people in many ways.

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Discussion

In this study, we wanted to examine, if and how spaces have been created in ECTE programmes to raise awareness about the Sámi and their languages, culture, and rights as indigenous people. We also assessed what kinds of competencies connected to language, culture, and rights are developed for ECEC teachers in their teacher education programmes. The themes and dimensions that formed the starting points for the focus group discussions are shown in Table 2. In addition, the table shows the important concepts that the teacher educators highlighted during the discussions. The themes, dimensions, and concepts are highly intertwined, which is the reason why we have chosen to discuss the results together.

TABLE 2 Themes, dimensions of the discussions, and concepts that emerged from the analysis

<i>THEMES</i>	<i>DIMENSIONS</i>	<i>CONCEPTS</i>
Values in education	Fundamental values and core principles	Equality, equity, diversity, respect, integrity, courage, responsibility, freedom, social justice, sustainability
Knowledge	Language, culture, rights	Multilingualism, multiculturalism, policy documents, indigenous people, minorities, human rights, worldview, curricula
Competencies	Teaching profession	Awareness, reflexivity, actions, relations

The results of the study show a discrepancy between the policy documents that apply to Finnish ECEC in general and the content focusing on indigenous people and indigenous languages, culture, and rights in the early childhood teacher training courses at two Finnish universities. The teacher educators who participated in the study are aware of how important it is for future ECEC teachers to acquire knowledge about and familiarity with the Sámi as the only indigenous people in Finland. In the national core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022), the Sámi's rights to their own languages, culture and identity are made visible but not described in great detail, which leaves room for the reader to interpret the text in different ways. ECEC teachers in Finland are seen to have great freedom to plan and carry out teaching in their own way so long as the guidelines are followed (Alstad & Söpanen, 2021, pp. 40-41). This, however, places great responsibility on the teachers' shoulders.

According to the Finnish law, the Sámi as an indigenous people have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture (The Constitution of Finland, 731/1999) as well as the right to access ECEC in one of the acknowledged Sámi languages (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). In addition, the special objective of ECEC for

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Sámi is to support their identity, culture, language development, and language skills (EDUFI, 2022, p. 53). Earlier studies on Sámi ECEC have pointed out that arranging it outside the Sámi homeland, where a great number of Sámi children live, is challenging (e.g. Joonas, 2018; Helander et al., 2023). Even if Sámi children are in Finnish- or Swedish-medium schools, the teachers should be able to support them in the way that is mentioned in the policy documents. This sets a requirement and poses a challenge for teacher educators who, according to this study, acknowledge a gap between laws, steering documents, and real-life competency in terms of highlighting, making visible and discussing indigenous peoples and their position in Finnish society.

Knowledge of and competency in handling various issues dealing with the Sámi as an indigenous people is challenging and problematic from the teacher educators' perspective, even though they express a desire to develop their teaching so that it better corresponds to the needs of contemporary multicultural and multilingual Finnish society. The teacher educators noted their own limited competency in teaching about and discussing indigenous peoples with the students, and they wondered if it is even allowed or possible to teach about perspectives less familiar to them. The teacher educators reportedly find it difficult to strike a balance between their outside position and their position as a teacher educator who provides information, discusses, and reflects on issues together with the students: on the one hand, they do not have a Sámi background themselves but on the other it is their duty to talk about the languages, culture, and rights of indigenous people. One of the teacher educators even expressed this dilemma in terms of stepping over an imaginary line — crossing the border into a landscape that you do not have real access to as an outsider. The concerns that the teacher educators expressed reveals a clear respect for the uniqueness of indigenous people, but also great uncertainty about facing the unknown. The teacher educators expressed an understanding of and a desire for change and a need to create meeting places for the students to discuss the situation of the Sámi as indigenous people in Finland. At the same time, the educators expressed doubts about their lack of knowledge and also a lack of legitimacy as outsiders. A lack of knowledge and a lack of legitimacy are two factors that reportedly affect the agency of teacher educators despite their good intentions to emphasise the Sámi as an indigenous people.

A look at the future

A previous report by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021b, pp. 50–51) mentions that the indigenous Sámi people are not discussed systematically in the education of schoolteachers, even though Sámi knowledge could be combined with such themes as intercultural education, multiculturalism and multilingualism, culture and language awareness, equity, and minorities. However, as our study shows, teacher educators in ECEC are in fact discussing the Sámi and their rights in different courses connected with

themes like multilingualism, sustainability, and diversity. In this way, they can help the students broaden their understanding of different cultures and ways of thinking. However, since the teachers do not have a Sámi background or any connection with the Sámi community, they find it difficult, if not even unethical, to talk about the Sámi in Finland in more detail, even though it would be important to explicitly discuss such questions in mainstream ECTE. As a future possibility, one of the teacher educators reflected on opportunities to create meeting places where people with different cultural affiliations could meet and enrich each other in different ways. In addition, better connections to Sámi language nests could be arranged to help students better understand the Sámi ECEC traditions.

If future teachers do not have enough knowledge of the past and understanding of the present, then it raises an important question: Are they able to relate to the Sámi children and their families in an understanding way? Addressing this and other questions in teacher education programmes could at least in part fill in the gap that some of the teacher educators mentioned in relation to teaching students about the Sámi in Finland (see also Miettunen, 2020). In addition, it could better answer the call by the Finnish government (2014, p. 3) to "increase knowledge about Sámi and their culture in the whole population, especially through education, culture, and media" (Finnish Government, 2014, p. 3) and to combat hate speech and discrimination (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021b, p. 50).

Our study demonstrates a desire among teacher educators to highlight the Sámi as an indigenous people and their languages, culture, and rights in various courses. In addition, teacher students themselves are calling for more competencies for their future role as teachers. Through various courses and by discussing various phenomena that exist in society, students may become more aware of and reflective about issues related to diversity and inclusion. These questions can also motivate teaching students to focus on their own future jobs as teachers and on their responsibility to address issues of diversity.

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Appendix 1 Transcription key

(.)	pause
[...]	a part of the talk has been left out from the example
((laughter))	authors' comment
(text)	unclear
X	name of an individual or of a place