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15 AMASS-AMAS-WEIRD

Community-based art education project in the Sápmi area, Finland

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Theme

This chapter analyses a community-based art education project carried in the province of Lapland, Sápmi region, Finland. In Northern Sámi language, *amas* means weird or strange, so the word was selected to be the leading theme of the project. The project aimed to develop the participants' relationship with their surroundings and the local area while giving them a way to broaden how they picture their own culture and how they place themselves within it through art in a playful way. We paid attention especially to cultural sustainable development by focusing on socially activist art. Cultural sustainable development considers local conditions and culture as well as builds awareness of cultural expressions and heritage and recognises diversity while emphasising the importance of respect for human rights (see Härkönen 2021).

The themes are part of the Finnish national curriculum's extensive objectives in the practice of teaching, which support the perception and development of learners' cultural identity and how to develop into an active participant in one's own society (<https://www.oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/national-core-curriculum-basic-education>). The workshops also aimed to enhance one's creativity and increase the interactions within a culture and between cultures. In the larger picture, the project was contemplating the role of social justice and decolonial thinking in the context of the Arctic region in Finland and art teacher training (see, e.g., Hiltunen et al. 2021; Jokela and Hiltunen 2023).

Target population

The project was carried out with the Utsjoki River Valley School and the Sámi Upper Secondary School in Utsjoki. The entire school community 100 participants took part in the activity for a week in May 2021. Utsjoki is the northernmost municipality in the European Union and is situated at the border areas of Finland and Norway. The Tenojoki River, which separates Finland and Norway, flows next to Utsjoki.

For locals, the river is not so much a separator as it is a joining factor: the borders of the states, which have a Sámi population majority, are not the same as the countries' official borders. The families' stories and history have been combined on both sides of the Tenojoki River for dozens of generations. Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures affect each other and are bound to nature in the same location. The Sámi culture is evident in Utsjoki. Among other things, the Sámi language is spoken daily in the area.

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Methodology

The local curriculum in Utsjoki emphasises Sámi culture and its inclusion in education alongside national content. A group of six art education students from the University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, took part in the project as animators, tutors and student teachers at the school; they also conducted socially engaged art with the community.

Throughout the process, our challenge was to find ways to promote active interaction and dialogue between Sámi culture, contemporary art and encounters through art in the Northern multicultural school context. For our methodological approach, we chose art-based action research (Jokela et al. 2019).

The art education student team was divided into three groups during the planning stage, which started one year before the activity week. The contents of the three different workshops planned by the art education student team were formed in cooperation and dialogue with the teachers, consisting of themes such as history, locality, identity, environment and active citizenship. The local teachers were involved from the first planning stage to the implementation of the project and held different roles.

Since the project focused on planning and implementing a multidisciplinary learning entity, curricula have naturally guided the project. The entity was focusing on art in collaboration with other school subjects like craft, geography, history and English. Among other things, aspects related to community- and environment-based art were in the background, for example, the aim to include community members through artistic work and consider the environment as part of work (Jokela and Hiltunen 2023; Huhmarniemi et al. 2021). In practice, the whole school week was planned so that the three different workshops could be carried out by art education student team during each lesson, taking place in a whole week. The primary school pupils went around the workshops while being led by their teachers in the mornings, and the workshops for lower and upper secondary schools were held in the afternoons. Hybrid modes were also used; some student teachers were tutoring the workshops through distance learning.

The first workshop was named as “Map workshop”. The idea for this workshop came from the principal of the Utsjoki schools, Pasi Oikarinen. The region of Utsjoki was studied from above, asking the following questions: How does a familiar area look from a different perspective? What weird forms do satellite and map applications bring out? How does a person’s own identity become more detailed in a broadened view? The participants from all grades considered the environment and the Utsjoki community. The goal was for the maps to be understood as visual, ideological and experiential productions.

The different art-based exercises generated by student teachers also focused on bodily experiences, personal and mental images and memories of place. Attention was paid to the students’ own symbolic and mental images when reviewing the environment’s map forms. The aim of the exercises was to create a peaceful, ambient working atmosphere for the participants, one in which each person’s work, stories and discussions would be supported in a teacher-driven manner but in which the students have wide-ranging freedom to decide on the content and visual image of the works (Figure 3.12).

The participants had the opportunity to verbally express their experiences and consider their own experiences and observations about the environment and those of others.

In addition to discussions, as an assignment, poems were created describing the pupil’s and students’ emotions concerning the workshop and the weird theme of the entire week (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.12 The participants use various pens and colours to draft the image of a place they chose: the entity is enriched with various unique individual- and community-based elements and named “As Individuals in the Community”. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen, 2021.



Figure 3.13 The different elements of the map trigger discussions about experiencing the place. Alongside work, students are encouraged to discuss, bring out their own opinions, listen to others and compromise. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen, 2021.

At the second workshop, which concentrated on art and craft, the participants created self-images as part of a collaborative artwork combining all different grades. The workshop was led by art education students Sara Kangas-Korhonen and Elisa Pölönen. Personal identity in relation to others and location was studied: What makes me and us special, and what connects me and others? The student teachers also introduced to the pupils the contemporary artists' way of working with recycled materials and collage techniques (Figures 3.14 and 3.15).

The third workshop concentrated on media and was led by art education students Henna Mattila and Pulmu Pitkänen. The workshop consisted of assignments that had been separately implemented for primary school, upper secondary and lower secondary students. The primary school pupils worked in groups to create a weird story in Utsjoki. Coincidences were utilised in creating the narrative. Each participant was given one scene of the story to illustrate, and the entity was implemented as a group work by painting or drawing on a long roll of paper. Finally, the stories were dramatised into short plays.

The lower and upper secondary students also worked with stories, but at this point, the work was based on experiences of the place, the region and history of Utsjoki.

Computers and personal mobile phones were used as tools and techniques. The workshop started with joint discussions and conceptual mind maps. Some participants



Figure 3.14 The self-images were created using a mixed technique by laying various materials on a wooden blank. The materials took into account locality and ecological sustainability, for example, excess art materials that the students brought from home and that would have otherwise possibly ended up as rubbish. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen, 2021.



Figure 3.15 The workshop ends with the creation of a public artwork, “Made from the same tree”, which is displayed in the school’s hall. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen, 2021.

combined the photographs they had taken with those from their family albums as part of their work.

Summary of assessment methods and outcomes

We used an arts-based action research approach (Jokela et al. 2019) to explore contemporary arts possibilities in all three workshops for increasing the dialogue between different school subjects and crossing the boundaries when focusing on cultural competence, interaction and expression between Sámi Indigenous culture and other local cultures. The student teachers introduced to the pupils the contemporary artists’ way of working with different medium, materials and themes; for example, how Indigenous artists have raised awareness of the Sámi people’s position and history as a minority culture (Hiltunen et al. 2021).

From the perspective of learning, the central features of contemporary art to be emphasised are diversity, performativity, eventness and the simultaneous existence of the familiar and the odd. Contemporary art can be seen as a learning environment by utilising community-based shared expertise. Contemporary art as a learning environment is playful but challenging, connecting elements and is thus potentially meaningful, concurrently communal and considerate of individuality. Contemporary art at its core, like community-based art education, offers an environment to have dialogue with the world, means to embrace it and to learn (Desai 2020; Dewenhurt 2014; Hiltunen 2009; Kester 2004; Venäläinen 2019).

During the activity week in May 2021, there were approximately 100 participants, 80 of which were students. Ethical issues were considered at every phase of the project:

planning the workshops, interacting with community members, data gathering, consideration of the rights and the positions of the researchers and publication of the results. Consent forms were offered in both the Sámi and Finnish languages.

The research data collection methods consisted of participatory observation, research diaries, visual data, focus group interviews, images and videos. Content and visual analyses were used, and the art education student team made a project report based on their findings. Two of these were carrying out their master's theses based on their own experiences as student teachers. The theses will be published by the summer of 2022. One of the student teachers reflected on the process and found it very educative for herself as well:

As an experience, AMASS was both a community-based activity and experience that broadened activities. I gained a lot from it in the form of the environment and its residents, but at the same time, I hope that my efforts were visible in the community. The tasks of the workweek and entire project supported us all and provided a new type of encounter between different people.

Student teacher, workshop leader

An essential part of the assessment of the whole project was conversation and community-based activities and dialogue, here as part of the working process. The evaluation of the student's learning experiences considered active participation during lessons and expressed personal stories and opinions. The primary school students' weird stories, that is, several-metre-long, colourful graphic narrations, were hung in the school's hallways. The media productions were presented at the final celebration. At the end of the week, all the artworks created in the different workshops were reviewed in groups with the participants. This assessment made by joint discussion in groups highlighted visual observation and thinking, graphic production and aesthetic, ecological and ethical evaluation.

The participants also had the opportunity to peer- and self-evaluate both the working process and products in written form. For example, one upper secondary school student reflected her experiences after the activity week:

At the map workshop, I had a lot more creative thoughts after reviewing the map; at the art workshop, I learned that not everything had to be controlled and that sometimes it is good to just "work with what you have". At the media workshop, I learned that it's quite alright if the end result of the work does not meet expectations; it's not the end of the world.

And one primary school pupil stated:

My memories include the use of excursion maps and drawing together, designing at the art workshop and expressing myself while working, joint activities at the media workshop and story illustration. It was fun, and all the workshops were well planned.

Participant, Utsjoki primary school

Most of the local teachers were excited about the activities and gave us positive feedback; collaboration increased the entire school's sense of community and supported the

school's operating culture during the age of COVID-19. As stated by one of the local teachers who actively participated in the activity week:

The AMASS project was a great entity formed in cooperation with the Utsjokisuu School and University of Lapland. Joint planning was started in good time, in the autumn, and all of Utsjokisuu School's teachers and the university's art teachers and students participated in it several times. All those interested had the opportunity to generate ideas for workshops; these became interesting and great entities. During the week, the pupils visibly enjoyed creating art together. [...] Hopefully, we will get more opportunities for similar art-related cooperation in the future.

Participant, a teacher

However, criticism highlighted that other study subject contents could have been further included in the art activities. The workshops' guidance and implementation, which were partially carried out remotely, caused its own issues, alongside communication challenges. The project involved many uncertainties, a challenging project design and community members active participation due to COVID-19. The activity week was presented in social media, but because of COVID-19, the pupils' parents, relatives and other village residents could not be invited to the final celebration or to the exhibition's opening, which ran against the original plan.

The collaborative artworks are permanently exhibited in the Utsjoki Education Centre. Visibility is important. Later, the AMASS-AMAS-WEIRD poster was made and exhibited at the exhibition in Malta 2021 and the collaborative artworks were displayed in Rovaniemi at the Valo Gallery as part of the "Active witnesses" exhibition 2022.

Policy implications

This art-based action research project emerges from research interests in place-specific issues in art teacher education and their importance to teacher education in Finland in general. In this project, the Sámi people's perspectives have been essential and studied as part of the art education students' own studies at the University of Lapland. For example, awareness of the Sámi people's position and history as a minority culture has been an essential factor throughout the entire project and will have implications for art teacher education in the future, as well.

The new national core curriculum for basic education in Finland focuses on school culture and an integrative approach, where the active involvement of pupils, meaningfulness, joy of learning and interaction is the focus. Considering the transversal objectives of core curricula, our workshops are a good example of an interactive approach. All the workshops involved discussions and shared activities, aiming to inspire creative work and diverse expression while introducing visual storytelling through contemporary art. Sámi culture is a subject of focus in Utsjoki, and it was essential for our project, but more attention should be paid on Sámi culture all over in Finnish school system. Discussions of location and history experiences help in the development of attitudes towards a culturally sustainable future. Visual methods are good means for expressing past and current stories, visualising possible futures and renewing hope.

Dialogue requires that everyone participates, listens to and hears the thoughts and needs of the others from the first planning stage to implementation (see, e.g., Desai 2020). This requires a lot of effort in time, willingness and resources to find new ways to

develop the school culture: the teachers need guidance and time for planning multidisciplinary teaching. Based on our findings and considering the transversal objectives of core curricula, we highly recommend the Finnish school system to

- develop the school culture by promoting instructions with an integrative, art-based approach
- focus on contemporary arts ways of working in interaction with the different school subjects
- pay attention to cultural sustainable development by focusing on socially activist art
- be aware of our Northern context and how contemporary artists have lately claimed current societal and future threats like climate change, openly discussed, for example, Sámi rights, oppression, discrimination and marginalisation.

Conclusion

The AMASS-AMAS-WEIRD project deepened and strengthened the participants' understanding of their own identities, both as individuals and as part of a community and society. We created an inspiring, creative and safe atmosphere for artistic work and discussion, one in which every individual's voice was heard.

By joint planning and collaboration with the locals, we managed to create an operating environment promoting communality, learning and participation. The activity week was the entire school's collaborative effort, in which everyone, all the pupils, students and teachers, participated as learners. The pupils and students had the opportunity to share stories about themselves and their communities and create new stories. Art operates as a gateway to self-expression and strengthens individual and community-based identities.

Evidence shows that the participants understood the relationship and interdependence between different learning contents and learned to combine the knowledge and skills provided by different subjects to form meaningful wholes. As a conclusion, the AMASS-AMAS-WEIRD project developed the school culture by promoting instructions with an integrative, art-based approach. Contemporary arts offer the possibilities for increasing the dialogue between different school subjects and crossing the boundaries when focusing on cultural competence, interaction and expression.

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