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LANGUAGE NESTS ON THE MOVE: THE CASE OF VÕRO PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ESTONIA

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Abstract

This article considers the circuitous route of knowledge exchange from South (New Zealand)-to North (Finland)-to regional South (Estonia) by examining the development of Võro language nests (*keelepesä*) in Estonia. Language nests reflect the global nature of educational knowledge exchange as well as the importance of networks of language-researchers and activists in this policy inspiration. Estonia is a fascinating case for understanding the international spread and local development of the language-nest approach in a post-Socialist context. The authors draw on concepts of policy borrowing and diffusion and the “grammar of schooling” to explore the spread of the language nest approach and its appropriation in Estonia. In particular, the article explores (1) the ways the language nest strategy emerged as an approach to early childhood language learning that “stuck” in Estonia, and (2) the factors that facilitated and frustrated the adoption and adaptation of the language nest in southeastern Estonia. The authors conclude that the take-up of this global approach to non-dominant language preservation in Estonia offers key lessons about local adaptation, including the possibility of borrowing, and the limits of program dispersion globally.

Keywords: language policy, immersion, language nests, Estonia, policy borrowing

Introduction

Linguists predict that 90% of the world’s seven thousand languages will become extinct during the next century (Crystal, 2014). One institution is increasingly tasked with preserving the world’s diverse linguistic heritage: the public school (Hornberger, 2008). As

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educators, language activists, and researchers attempt to shed light on the key educational policies, challenges, and practices that enable and inhibit long-term cultural and linguistic sustainability, the world has become an inspiring laboratory for promising school-based approaches to language learning. Paradoxically, some of the global forces that so threaten smaller languages simultaneously have also helped to foster a community of activists whose practices spread around the world. Language nests—a total immersion approach to early-childhood language education—represent one of these traveling, global educational ideas.

Premised on the understanding that a learning environment exclusively in a non-dominant language² helps to pass the language along to the next generation, language nests have developed into a global education phenomenon. In the course of thirty years, the nest idea has circled the world. The approach originated in the 1980s in New Zealand (as *kōhanga reo*) in an effort to revitalize the Maori language, then “traveled” to places like Hawaii as *Aha Pūnana Leo*, to Inari (Finland) as *kielâpiervâl*, to Karelia (Russia) as *kielipezä*, to Taiwan as *yuyanchao*, and to Võrumaa (Estonia) as *keelepesä* as part of globally inspired, locally-organized efforts to renew Indigenous and autochthonous languages (Ford, 1996; Golovachev, 2007; Huang, 2007; King, 2001; Pasanen, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2018). In each site, the same core purpose of the nest approach—to revitalize the non-dominant language—can be found, but national possibilities and local priorities differently shape the nest’s form.

Purposes

This article considers the circuitous route of knowledge exchange from South (New Zealand)-to North (Finland)-to regional South (Estonia) by examining the development of Võro language nests (*keelepesä*³) in Estonia. Language nests reflect the global nature of educational knowledge exchange as well as the importance of networks of language-researchers and activists in this policy inspiration. Estonia is a fascinating case for understanding the international spread and local development of the language-nest approach in a post-Socialist context. The Võro language nest is the most recent educational strategy, begun in public preschools in 2011, to revitalize a South Estonian language spoken by an estimated 75,000 people. This article draws on concepts of policy borrowing and diffusion (Rappleye, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) and the “grammar of schooling” (explained in following section, Tyack & Tobin, 1994) to explore the spread of the language nest approach and its appropriation in Estonia.

In particular, the article authors consider (1) the ways the language nest strategy emerged as an approach to early childhood language learning that “stuck” in Estonia, and (2) the factors that facilitated and frustrated the adoption and adaptation of the language nest in southeastern Estonia. The article incorporates Brown’s qualitative research (primarily interviews with language-nest educators in 2013-2014) as well as FASTER’s insights drawn from her influential involvement in and research on this approach to non-dominant language-education. Both of us find that the take-up of this global approach to non-dominant language preservation in Estonia offers key lessons about local adaptation, including the possibility of borrowing, and the limits of program dispersion globally.

² A non-dominant language is one that does not have privileged status (e.g., legally, socio-culturally, etc.) in a society even if spoken by the majority of speakers in a region or country.

³ This is the Võro-language term for language nests. In Estonian, it is *keelepesa*.

Language Nests as a Global Development in Early Childhood Education

Language nests are, as one researcher observed, “an emergent global phenomenon” (Chambers, 2015, p. 25). The nests—first conceived in the early 1980s within the Māori community of New Zealand—served as a springboard to language revitalization. The Māori-medium pre-schools, *Kōhanga Reo* (language nests), relied on fluent Māori speakers, typically those in the oldest generation, who “taught Māori language and culture to the children and assisted parents to learn the Māori language alongside their children” (May & Hill, 2018, p. 310). Since the first Māori language nest opened in 1982, this immersion approach to language learning and revitalization at the early childhood stage has reached almost every continent in large part due to its effectiveness.⁴ This worldwide spread raises the question of whether certain defining aspects of “language nests” are shared globally and in what ways this model follows the principle “as it moves, it morphs” (Cowen, 2009, p. 315). As a starting point, Pasanen (2010) offers this useful definition of a language nest:

A language nest is a day-care centre meant for the children of a community of an endangered minority language, where the minority language is used in all activities. Language nests work in the same way as early total language immersion: the children come to the language nest speaking the majority language, and the teachers or kindergartners speak to them only in the minority language right from the beginning....Language nests aim at transferring an endangered language to the children of the community in a situation where the language is not passed on from the parents to children in a natural way at home. (p. 95)

The research on language nests, which we share below, suggests at least three shared features to this approach across the globe: (1) the model’s ideological links with revitalization; (2) the targeting of pre-school age children; and (3) pedagogical commitment to full immersion. First, language nests result from existing concerns about language shift and loss⁵ (Fishman, 1991). Generally, nests develop as part of broader, already established language revitalization efforts. That is, language revitalization efforts typically first concentrate on other spheres (e.g., arts, journalism, politics), or even in other levels of schooling (e.g., primary or higher education) before turning to the education of young children.⁶ Second, with a few exceptions (e.g., select language nests in Taiwan), the language nest model focuses exclusively on pre-school age children in either the public or private sphere.⁷ This target group has a particularly appealing profile: at this age, language acquisition might be easiest for the child, and, at this education level, the demands of formal schooling have yet to dominate the curriculum. The third defining aspect is a pedagogical commitment to 100% immersion in the target language (i.e., only the target language is

⁴ As far as we are aware, no research as of yet suggests that language nests have reached African contexts. However, it is important to note that efforts akin to the language nest, but not adopting that name, have been documented in African communities, for example, among the Nluu speakers of South Africa (Fihlani, 2017).

⁵ Language shift refers to an individual or group of speakers’ decision to speak a different language all or most of the time.

⁶ The Māori nests are one of the few examples, along with the Inari Sami, of language education starting with the youngest and then growing, institutionally and programmatically, to primary and upper levels of school.

⁷ The particular age range for language nest children might vary from country to country, and the upper age cut-off typically depends on the starting age for formal schooling.

used for teaching). Though the number of days and years allocated to the language nest varies from country to country, and within countries as well, there is a shared belief in the effectiveness of, and need for, a language immersion environment.

In addition to these three threads uniting language nests, there is the common reference point for their collective inspiration and proof of immersion efficacy—the Māori language nests. In some cases, a direct link exists between the Māori experience with the development of other nests. For example, the idea for Hawaiian nests—Pūnana Leo—resulted already in 1983 “following conversations between Hawaiian language professors and some leaders of the Māori language immersion preschools (Ngā Kōhanga Reo)...” (Kapono, 1994, p. 126-127). In other countries, as with the development of South Sámi language nests in Norway in the early twenty-first century, a general awareness existed about the Māori experience. As Todal (2018) recounts, “Both parents and teachers [in Elgå, Norway] were familiar with the language nests in New Zealand...” (p. 77). Importantly, part of this familiarity grew through the political cooperation among and across global Indigenous populations (Todal, 2018, p. 79).

While similarities unite language nests globally, notable divergences from the original Māori language-nest model are also evident. First, a defining element of the Māori language nest was, and remains, its animating, anti-colonial ethos. This core aspect of *kōhanga reo* was largely diluted, disrupted, rejected, lost or faded as the model has traveled around the globe. Māori language nests developed and continue to play a central role in the Māori’s larger struggle “to shake off the oppressive mantle of colonization, state dependency and state-imposed regimes” (Mutu, 2005, p. 117). With its origin in the settler colonial society of New Zealand, nests aim to challenge “the global coloniality of ‘schooling’ in English through the regeneration and reassertion of the global-south Māori language in a *rangatiratanga* (chiefly, sovereign or self-determination) approach” (italics in the original; Skerrett, 2017, p. 85). With these purposes, language nests were, and are, inherently “revolutionary” (Skerrett, 2017, p. 85), at least in New Zealand. A key, distinctive aspect of this anti-colonial drive is the settler colonial context of New Zealand. These language nests draw attention to “the seemingly unremarkable, everyday business-as-usual state of early childhood education remains inadvertently (albeit often unknowingly) entangled in the social and ecological legacies of colonialism” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 1). This anti-colonial spirit continues in certain locations such as the Uqautchim Uglua language nest in Alaska, which offers full immersion in Iñupiaq. According to the interim Language Nest Program Director, the nest is an expression “to indigenize regional education systems, increase the number of state-certified Iñupiaq teachers on the North Slope, address issues pertaining to childcare, and attack Native language and culture degradation concerns head on” (Bates, 2013). Not all language nest contexts around the world so readily, clearly, and centrally identify as operating in a colonial or post-colonial society. Without this close identification, the language nest movement takes on a less revolutionary or charged purpose.

A second global difference, and one closely related to the anti-colonial efforts explored above, is the centrality of Indigenous identity to the development of the language nest. With Indigenous identity foregrounded, language nests emerge as a particular epistemological space to preserve (or reintroduce) foundational community concepts and knowledge distinct from the majority (or those in power). The Māori and Hawaiian language nests, among others, reflect the centrality of Indigeneity in shaping the purpose and content of the language nest. For communities identifying other than Indigenous (i.e.,

with the majority, autochthonous, etc.), the sharp divide between us and them, as well as the epistemological and cultural urgency to use language nest spaces to introduce and reinforce distinctive community ideals, may be less possible or urgent. Indigeneity is also a key aspect to the nest development because it links supporters with other Indigenous people in the world and connects them through international laws (e.g., the 2007 U.N. Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) (May & Hill, 2018, p. 313) and networks like the World Indigenous Research Alliance (Whitinui et al., 2015) that promote idea and strategy exchange.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on concepts of policy borrowing and diffusion (Rappleye, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) as well as the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) to explore the spread of the language nest approach and the nature of its diffusion in Estonia. Of particular relevance to our focus on the global nature of the language nest approach are two diffusion ideas—key policy advocates and the systemic receptivity to new educational approaches. In his work on educational transfer, Rappleye (2006) points to the importance of considering the cross-national attraction of a specific program or approach. He is attentive within this conceptualization to a “multiplicity of *actors* who introduce the foreign example into the discourse of reform and thereby create an *impulse* for change” (italics in the original; Rappleye, 2006, p. 230). In order to build support for reforms, these policy actors “‘package’ their reforms” in reference to external cases in the broader international sphere to help justify the ideas’ legitimacy and potential efficacy (Rappleye, 2006, p. 230). In the development of the Võro language nest, we find that key reform actors offer legitimizing references to the language nest experience of the Māori (i.e., distant) as well as to that of Finland (i.e., close) with the Inari Saami (and nearby Karelia) in a policy effective “distant-close” combination. The established success of the distant Maori language nest approach, as well as the familiarity and proximity of the nearby experiences in Finland generate a potent double case of relevancy ripe for educational transfer.

While ideas of cross-national attraction help, in part, to explain the take-up of the language nest approach, Tyack and Tobin’s (1994) concept of the “grammar of schooling” aids in our understanding of the reach and limits of this transfer. According to Tyack and Tobin (1994), the “grammar of schooling” includes:

the regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction. We have in mind, for example, standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into ‘subjects.’...Indeed, much of the grammar of schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the way schools are. (p. 454)

In considering the adoption and spread of language nests in Estonia, the “grammar of schooling” points to the ways the established and durable organizational framework of the country’s pre-primary education both *primes* the system to adopt a new educational approach and *frustrates* attempts to create new imaginaries of schooling for language revitalization. Tyack and Tobin draw attention to the importance of institutional continuity within educational systems. As we will explore in this article, Võro language nest revitalization develops in the public sphere only within the scope of institutional continuity: predominantly Estonian-medium instruction must be maintained, the primary goal of

preparing children for school remains prioritized, and the well-established daily structure and routines are upheld. These factors all constitute the “grammar” of pre-primary schooling in Estonia. When the language nest works within this established grammar, it is folded into the pre-primary routines; when it challenges this “grammar,” for example, by nudging out more than two days of Estonian-medium instruction, it moves into vulnerable, potentially indefensible, educational territory. As Tyack and Tobin (1994) posit, “It is the departure from customary practice in schooling or speaking that attracts attention” (p. 454). In this article, we identify moments when the adoption or continued development of the language nest “attracts attention” and is curtailed precisely because of the way this model challenges the established grammar of pre-primary education. Challenges to the “grammar of schooling,” as seen below in the attempt to introduce a five-day nest program, are typically met with community resistance and will not get taken up or supported at least in the public sphere.

Võro Language Nests in Estonia & the Broader Võro Language Revitalization Effort

This article focuses on the take-up and transformation of the language nest model in the Võro-speaking region of southeastern Estonia. Võro is an autochthonous, Finno-Ugric language spoken by just under 75,000 ethnic Estonians in a country with one official language—Estonian.⁸ Võro, considered a “regional variety” of Estonian (*eesti keele piirkondlik erikuju*) by the 2011 Language Act, enjoys no specific legal protection by the state, though the national government does support language revitalization efforts through targeted funding.⁹ Language shift from Võro to Estonian over the twentieth century as well as increased opportunities to organize have sparked a variety of revitalization efforts since the country’s restoration of independence in 1991. Language revitalization unfolds in multiple spheres—the arts (e.g., with support for Võro prose and poetry; the organization of Uma Pido, a regular, and popular, Võro song festival, among other activities), media (through a weekly Võro language newspaper¹⁰, Võro broadcasts and programming in television and the radio), linguistics/philology (through support for the creation of dictionaries, grammar guides, and textbooks), regional culture (e.g., targeted projects to recognize, protect, and develop local culture, like smoke saunas) and, of course, formal education. Revitalization occurs, however, in a national context with, among other factors, the increasing popularity of English and declining demographics (both lopsided birth-death rates and emigration) that threatens the vitality and longevity of both Võro *and* Estonian.

School-based programs to promote Võro language education began formally in the mid-1990s. Efforts to use Võro as the medium of instruction concentrated initially at the public basic school (grades 1-9) level. The state-funded research and development group, the Võro Institute, developed, initiated, and continues to coordinate the voluntary Võro language instruction in southeastern Estonian public schools. This education takes many forms that depend on the teacher’s will and skill, as well as the support of the school administration. Most often the language is taught as either an elective class (*valikaine*) scheduled during the school day or an after-school extracurricular activity (*ringtund*). School (and most often student) participation is voluntary, as the Võro-language class is not

⁸ This figure is based on the 2011 Census which asked respondents, for the first time in Estonia’s history, if they knew a local language variant, dialect or sub-dialect.

⁹ The bulk of this funding comes from the Ministry of Culture’s programme especially framed to support Võro language and culture, “Programme Lõunaesti keel ja kultuur.” The newest iteration of the programme is “Vana-Võromaa pärimuskultuuri programm 2018-2021.”

¹⁰ Since April 2017 the Estonian (national) government has fully funded the Võro-language newspaper.

included in Estonia's National Curriculum. The Võro Institute has developed a curriculum that is followed more closely (or loosely) depending on the teacher. Basic schoolteachers are provided instructional support through in-service training and a modest stipend for their teaching through the Võro Institute. Despite the almost twenty-five years of Võro-related teaching at the basic-school level, accessibility to these classes remains an issue; only thirty-five percent of the basic schools in the region (12 out of 34) in the 2018-2019 academic year teach a Võro-related subject (e.g., language, culture, etc.) (Võro Institute, n.d.). While this network reaches about 400 children, typically the elective or extra-curricular option will only be offered to one class (i.e., one group of children).¹¹ Võro instruction at the secondary-level has been limited to an elective class and only available at one school, though a second school was slated to offer a course in the spring of 2019.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, Võro language education began to extend to the early childhood level. While the extensive, public, and locally supported pre-primary network in Estonia would come to serve as the base for the Võro language nest, the initial efforts began in the private sphere. The language nest idea circulated in the Võro language press by 2002 (Faster, 2002). By 2004, on the initiative of the NGO Haanimiihi Nõvvokogo (Haanja Men's Council), a Võro-language playgroup began to meet in the village of Haanja.¹² In the spring of 2009, people from Haanja joined forces with other invested language nest friends, including Faster, to organize a once-a-week full immersion Võro experience for young children held at the Võro Institute. At that point in its development, eight children, aged 2-7, attended the nest; many of these children spoke Võro as their primary home language (Haanimaa Keelepesä, n.d.) and spent their day at the Institute playing, talking, and making music in Võro. The Haanja language nest website notes the importance of the nest, "Those years, when our language nest was working, clearly showed, that it influenced our children in useful ways" (Haanimaa Keelepesä, n.d.). During the interim years until the autumn 2011, efforts were made to expand awareness and understanding about language nests and their need in the Võro-speaking region.

The Võro language nest moved into the public sphere in the autumn of 2011 due in large part to the willingness and interest of a handful of pre-primary teachers. Initially, one class/group in three kindergartens (*lasteaed*) serving 3- to 6-year-olds adopted the language nest approach. In southeastern Estonia, the language nest model entails one to two days per week of kindergarten entirely conducted in Võro—a one-hundred percent immersion model requiring two teachers (one for the morning and another for the second half of the day) and a teacher assistant present for the entire day using only Võro. Music and physical education teachers might also contribute to the language nest efforts by exclusively using Võro. The remaining weekdays are conducted in Estonian, and the National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions (*Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava*) must be followed on all days regardless of the medium of instruction. Joining the language nest network (as coordinated in 2011 by the Võro Institute) meant that the kindergarten director, an existing team of two lead teachers and one assistant, and the children's parents *all* voluntarily adopted the language nest approach. The Võro Institute offered and continues to provide free inservice

¹¹ Important exceptions to this accessibility trend exist. One school (Orava Basic School) offers a Võro Language and Culture class to each grade 1-9. In addition, *all* the third-grade student groups in the Põlva School are learning Võro (Võro Institute, n.d.).

¹² The genesis for the Haanja Men's Council's knowledge about language nests was the same as Faster's; both Faster and Sulev Iva (Jüvä Sullõv), a founding fellow of the Võro Institute and language activist, participated in University of Oulu Professor Helena Sulkala's 2002 study trip to Karelia where they learned about the nests (more detail about this network in the Finding's section under "Inspiration").

training to prospective and current language nest kindergarten teachers and assistants. Additionally, the Institute financially supports two traveling teachers (*rändõpetajad*) who visit each language nest to provide on-site teacher support and modeling (discussed more in the “Innovation” subsection below).

Since its inception in the public sphere in 2011, additional kindergartens have joined the language nest program, growing it almost sevenfold. As of 2017, sixteen of the thirty-four public preschools plus one community childcare center (*Haanja keelepesä*) in the Võro-speaking area had Võro language nests (including three preschools with two groups each) serving a total of 400 children (about 16% of all pre-primary students) with twenty Võro-language groups in total (Parijõgi, 2017). The number of days allocated to Võro immersion depends on the site; in Haanja they operate three days a week exclusively in Võro, while in the public kindergartens, the majority of kindergartens commit one or two days to the nest. One kindergarten offered the nest five days a week for two years, though this model is no longer operating.

Table 1
Language nests across Estonia

<u>Language</u>	<u>Year Initiated</u>	<u>Public/Private</u>	<u>Age Group</u>
Võro	2004-current	Private: Haanimiihi nõvvokoja	3-7
	2009-2011	Private: Võro Institute-based nest	2-7
	2011	Public: Municipal pre-primary network	3-7
Seto	2013	Public	3-7
Mulgi	2014	Public: Municipal pre-primary network ¹³	3-7
Swedish	2017	Private	Under 12

As with Võro language at the basic school level, accessibility to pre-primary Võro language education depends on geography. As mentioned above, fewer than half of the kindergartens in the region participate in the language nest program. The goals of the Institute’s strategic plan were, by 2018, (1) to have at least one two-day language nest group in each of the parishes of Historic Võrumaa (i.e., Kanepi, Urvaste, Karula, Hargla, Rõuge, Põlva, Vastseliina, Rāpina) as well as in the southern Estonia city of Tartu; (2) to offer five-day language nest groups in the largest cities of the southeast-Põlva and Võru; and (3) to have the first fully Võro-language kindergarten (anticipated in the Haanja region) (Võro Institute, Keelepesa Arengukava 2015-2018). These aspirations have been

¹³ Mulgi data incorporated from Visor, 2014.

challenging to achieve. In most cases, schools offer only one class (or group) out of the entire kindergarten the opportunity to participate in a language nest. The fact that language nests are dependent on willing and able teachers as well as supportive parents and kindergarten directors results in the inequitable availability of pre-primary Võro language education both within kindergartens and across the region.

As discussed in the findings section below, the language nest model in Estonia has radiated out from its initial Võro home in the southeastern part of Estonia to inspire models in other parts of Estonia: in the east among the Estonian-Orthodox Seto, in the south to the Kihnu island, and to the west with the Mulgi. The diffusion of the language-nest program across Estonia has most recently (2017) reached the northwest with an attempt to revitalize Swedish (*rannarootslased*) (Medvind för, 2017). This national spread speaks powerfully to the appeal of the language nest model and the variation within the large umbrella of what constitutes a “language nest” in Estonia as reflected in Table 1 above. Even within one country, a shared name—language nest (*keelepesa*)—indicates *only* the exclusive use of the minority or regional language for some period of time to some group of younger students for educational purposes. The choice of a public or private site, the days committed to language immersion¹⁴, and the target age group all vary considerably across language groups (see Table 1). What unites these varied programs, at least in policy documents, is the pedagogical approach—they all use the “language nest method” or the “immersion method” (*keelepeseametodil (ehk keelekümblusametodil)*) (Ministry of Culture, 2010, p. 11). In practice, this method is defined by the “one teacher, one language” approach and having one-hundred percent of the instruction in the target language.

Methods

This article blends traditional ethnographic research with a range of other qualitative methods including dialogic duoethnography to “juxtapose...life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 9) and to make sense of the language nest pathway in southeastern Estonia. The blend of primary and secondary data analyzed in this piece includes (1) transcribed, translated, and coded transcripts from semi-structured and open-ended interviews (N = 18) conducted by Brown in 2014 with language nest kindergarten teachers; (2) FASTER’s oral and written responses to Brown’s interview questions (October 2018); (3) FASTER’s follow-up interviews and research in autumn 2018 on language nest developments; and (4) relevant national, regional, and local newspapers (in Estonian and Võro spanning from 2002-2018), policy documents, as well as scholarly articles focused on language nests, language-policy in early childhood education, and policy transfer and appropriation. The authors translated interview and policy-document quotes included in the article.

The co-authors bring together insider and outsider perspectives and insights on this topic. FASTER, a philologist born and raised in southeastern Estonia and a native Võro speaker, has played a key role in the Võro language revival, starting in the 1990s, while still in an undergraduate student and continues to be active today as she completes her doctoral degree. She has been actively involved in onomastic research and played a central role in creating the first Võro-Estonian and Estonian-Võro dictionaries. FASTER has also figured prominently as a language expert working with developing the Võro skills of pre-primary

¹⁴ The days and time committed to the nest range from the Võro- and Mulgi-speaking areas with generally one nest day per week (Monday to Friday) to the Coastal Swedish language nest meeting two times a month on Saturdays.

teachers through inservice and preservice trainings. Finally, she is responsible for introducing language nests to the Võro-speaking region and being the primary advocate, as well as initiator, of this strategy.

Brown, a U.S.-based researcher in comparative and international education with a focus on language issues in education, first became interested in the Võro language revitalization in 1999. After conducting her dissertation research on the role of schoolteachers as language-policy actors in Võro-language education (2001-2003), she returned to the region again in 2013-2014 during a sabbatical project focused on the development of language nests in the region. In the spring of 2018, Brown, while in Estonia for the semester conducting different research, also presented findings from the language-nest project to teachers during a professional-development session.

Findings

Inspiration: Relevance & Reference

Global developments to Estonia's north and south inspired the genesis of the Võro language nest, as discussed above. These global nests differ in relevance, however, when used in the development of the Võro nest project. The New Zealand-based Māori initiative served as a primary reference point to introduce the language nest in Estonia. As with nests elsewhere in the world, Võro language advocates like FASTER referred to the Māori experience when initially explaining the pre-primary model to those in southeastern Estonia. In the first print introduction of the language nest model in Estonia, FASTER (2002) mentions: "The Māori started language learning almost from zero, but now, they have arrived so far, that their whole life is in Māori." The lesson is clear—the Māori experience points to the possibility for positive results of early language learning even if there is little to build on. The international and universal importance of the Māori nests are also mentioned on the Haanja language nest webpage (Haanimaa keelepesä, n.d.): "The Māori language nests have encouraged Indigenous people around the world to use the same methods." The webpage also acknowledges New Zealand in the section on the historic roots of the nest (i.e., "Where did the language nest come from?"). The language nests of regional Finno-Ugric neighbors in Finland (Inari Sami) and Russia (Karelia) have served as more prominent references for the Võro. In her 2002 Võro-language article introducing language nests to the region, FASTER mentions the Inari Saami along with the Māori as a model for the language nest in Karelia.

The Finno-Ugric cultural-linguistic connection, geographic proximity of Finland to Estonia, and shared language skills facilitated the movement of scholars and ideas around the nest idea. Scholars from Finland, in particular, played a pivotal role in the early development of Võro-language nests. FASTER, who brought the nest idea to southeastern Estonia, first learned of them in 2002 when she traveled to Karelia on a study trip led by University of Oulu Professor Helena Sulkala as part of a network of scholars working with non-state Finnic languages (i.e., languages other than Hungarian, Estonian, and Finnish). FASTER's subsequent connections with Annika Pasanen, the researcher of Inari Sami language and language nests, as well as the initiator of language nest projects in Karelia and elsewhere in Russia, provided a regional reference to the language nest idea.

Seminars and information sessions served as key venues to share and explain this new approach to language learning. In 2007, FASTER provided an overview of Pasanen's language nest research at the Võro Institute's annual academic conference. That year's

conference theme—“Education—the carrier of cultural and linguistic uniqueness” was particularly suited to disseminate research on language nests. The 2011 Võro language nest information day at the Võro Institute, for example, included presentations by two Finns: Annika Pasanen, then a doctoral student, on “Local language, language nests in Finland and Russia” and Janne Saarikivi, a professor of Finno-Ugric languages at the University of Helsinki, on “Why do people need the Võro language?”

As the language nest model has spread across Estonia since 2011 through study visits, press coverage, Võro language week (held every November), and word of mouth, the preferred global or local nest model seems to depend on the language community as well as the possibilities given existing human and material resources. In some cases, the reference shifts away from the Māori and the Finno-Ugric neighbors to the domestic Estonian experience. In these cases, Estonia’s original language nest—the Võro *keelepesä*—emerges as the most prominent example. Print news regarding the first language nest in the Mulgi-speaking area, just west of the Võro region, for example, opens with a reference to the 2009 Võro language nest (Visor, 2014). The article makes no mention, however, of any other nest within or outside Estonia. A Mulgi language teacher who travels between three kindergartens to lead the morning circle and crafts lessons in Mulgi has attested that the Võro language nest was a significant model for her (interview with Faster, October 2018). The Coastal Swedes provide a triple reference to nest experiences far—the Māori—, close—the Saami in Finland—and near—the Võro. For example, in one of the first mentions of the coastal Swede language nest (Medvind för, 2017), the Haapsalu and Läänemaa Museums’ webpage claimed, “There have been good experiences in the language nests in Finland with the teaching of Saami and on the part of the Võro and Setu in Estonia. The main point is for the leader to speak with the children in the given minority language. This instructional form got its start in New Zealand with the revival of the Māori language.” This look to the national level for points of reference and legitimate models suggests a diverse picture of the relevant cases both close and distant.

Adoption and Adaptation: The “Permissive Space” for Nests

The adoption and adaptation of language nests in Estonia unfolds only within defined legal and cultural boundaries, which we identify here as “permissive space” or the space for possible support within delineated political and curricular lines. In the Võro case, the boundaries of this permissive space are constituted by multiple stakeholders who must approve the nest before its adoption. Because the vast majority of Võro language nests are incorporated into the existing pre-primary education system, this non-dominant language initiative operates fully within the public sphere. Main policy stakeholders, therefore, include the state and municipal government as well as institutional powerbrokers (e.g., school director, teachers, and parents). If any one of these groups withdraws their support, a language nest may be undermined, as happened in 2014 with the closing of the five-day nest by the local municipality (*vallavalitsus*) in Sõmerpalu. Below, we examine the ways permissive space plays out at the national and local levels in Estonia, and we follow with reflections on the fragility of this permissive space.

Permissive space at the national level has defined ideological and financial lines. The initial response at the national and regional levels after Faster’s introduction of the language nest idea in 2002 was positive and set an encouraging tone. The then-Director of the Võro Institute and Chair of the State “Southern Estonian Language and Culture” Program, Kaido Kama, declared that such an initiative could be funded “if the plans were realistic” (Kas võrokiilne, 2002). The Head of Early and Basic Education at the Ministry of

Education, Kai Võlli, also articulated his support as long as the nests followed the Early Childhood Education National Curriculum (*alushariduse õppekava*) (Kas võrokiilne, 2002). This conditional support points to *curricular* permissive space determined by the adherence of National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions; this curriculum must be followed on all days, whether learners are taught in Estonian or Võro. Although the curricular guidelines are broad enough to allow for the creative incorporation of locally based initiatives, they still set an unconditional guarantee to be upheld.

By the time the first public Võro language nests opened in 2011, politicians framed their support as important regional and national contributions. For example, the then-Minister of Education and Science, Tõnis Lukas, explained in a 2011 announcement of the first direct state-level financial support for the public Võro language nest¹⁵ that “The Indigenous regional languages (*põlised piirkonnakeeled*) should be supported since those who love the language and culture of their home also love their homeland. The patriotic upbringing of little children begins with language and, through this, culture” (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2011 January 31, our translation from Estonian). Lukas’ comments reflect the ways the nest’s permissive space is predicated on the ways it works to strengthen further, rather than threaten, national identity and belonging.

The state has most clearly advanced its support for nests through the Ministry of Culture’s various Old-Võrumaa Culture Programs (*Vana-Võromaa Kultuuriprogramm 2014-2017* and *Vana-Võromaa pärimuskultuuri program 2018-2021*). Importantly, national financing enables, among other projects, the Võro Institute-led inservice trainings of teachers and traveling teachers (*rändõpetajad*; discussed below in the “Innovation” subsection). As stated in the 2014-2017 *Program*, one Ministry goal is to “support the kindergarten and playgroups working on the language-nest principle” (Ministry of Culture 2013b, p. 12, our translation). The 2018-2021 *Program* specifically notes that it supports the goals of the Võro Institute-created “Language Nest Development Plan 2015-2018” (*Keelepesa arengukava 2015-2018*) (Ministry of Culture 2017, p. 6) and, in particular (in section 5.2.7), “the kindergartens with language nests and schools teaching the Võro language and cultural studies...” (Ibid., 9) The Ministry of Culture’s parallel Seto and Mulgi Cultural Programs also mention language nests¹⁶ through their support for “Seto language teaching in kindergartens through the help of activities, games, instruction and talking (language nests)” (parenthesis in original) (Ministry of Culture 2013a, p. 9, our translation) and the “organization of [Mulgi] language nest and camps” (Ministry of Culture 2017a, p. 12).

At the local level municipal government and key school-connected stakeholders determine the nest’s permissive space. The impetus to adopt a Võro language nest begins with parent interest and support. Since language nests are situated within an existing institution, the kindergarten director needs to ensure that the community families are interested in the initiative. To introduce the language nest, explain its benefits, and field questions, the Võro Institute along with the traveling teachers have organized presentations at kindergartens for parents and any other interested community members

¹⁵In 2011, the Ministry granted the Haanja Men’s Council 3830 Euros (5210 USD) to support the Võro language project. In the same decree, and for comparison, the Ministry allocated 12,782 Euros (17,388 USD) to the Finnish-Estonian Institute Foundation (*Soomme-Eesti Instituudi Sihtasutus*) to arrange Finnish language instruction in at least four Estonian general schools.

¹⁶ The Ministry’s Kihnu Cultural Program, in contrast to its Võro and Seto counterparts, does not mention language nests, but does support “the teaching of the Kihnu language and cultural in kindergartens, schools, and courses” (Ministry of Culture 2014, p. 7).

since 2011. As Külli, a language nest teacher, recalled about her kindergarten, “It took many months after the first information session for the parents to change their way of thinking and support the start of a language nest here. Honestly, I thought that it probably wouldn’t happen because of their lack of support” (interview with Brown, March 2014). The parents also play a major role in helping to define the form of the program in their kindergarten by weighing in on the desired number of nest days per week taught in Võro. Once the nest is in place, parents regularly and formally provide feedback on the program in most kindergartens.

The permissive space for the language nest is fragile. In addition to the expected concerns shared among non-dominant language education initiatives across the globe, especially the challenge of teacher recruitment and retention, the Võro language nest has experienced particular pressures connected to its location in the public sphere¹⁷ and sharing space within Estonian language-dominant kindergartens.¹⁸ Several challenges have surfaced. First, the nest has not expanded beyond two days per week due, in part, to the fact that Võro language education operates within an institution where other educational goals, most of all the aim to prepare children for Estonian-medium primary school, supersede the expansion of Võro language instruction. Many of the nest teachers remarked in Brown’s interviews in 2013–2014 that even if the parents supported an expanded number of nest days per week, they, as educators, would want to limit the days in order to ensure children are ready for first grade when the medium of instruction will be completely in Estonian.¹⁹

Second, the Võro Institute’s goal to establish one language nest in each of the region’s historic parishes has been difficult to achieve. While unexpected developments, like the 2017 administrative reorganization (i.e., consolidation and redrawing of municipal borders) that shifted some established allies out of political power, impacted these goals, a more enduring challenge is finding the teachers and kindergarten directors willing to participate in the language nest network (due to an increasing paucity of Võro speakers and the lack of enthusiastic response to the possibility). A third pressure for nests is operating within an Estonian-dominant educational environment. This has meant that even though the “nest’s goal is to have the children only hear Võro from their teachers and only [use] the majority language in exceptional circumstances,” the nest children in the one five-day group, but even several one-day groups, “were often put with other [non-language nest] children at the end of the day...[and] music and sports classes were in Estonian” (Brown interview with Faster, October 2018).

A fourth aspect of the fragility of Võro nests is the lack of a systemic embrace of language-learning opportunities. The children who have learned Võro for two to three years in kindergarten rarely are able to continue their language studies further from the first grade. The problem is the sharpest in central town of Võru, where are three kindergarten classes with about 60–70 children, but there are no school (grade 1–9)-based Võro language classes. Problems like this also exist in rural areas, where only a handful of schools have some support for local language. These multiple pressures compound to create

¹⁷ Despite the particular pressures of this public space, the currently private Coastal Swedish language nest has hopes and is optimistic about opening a language-group in the local public kindergarten. (Sjövall, 2018, p. 38) It is important to note here that the language nest is teaching standard Swedish (i.e., the state language of Sweden) rather than the coastal Estonian-Swedish dialect (*eestirootsi/rannarootsi murre*).

¹⁸ Some of these challenges, to be sure, mirror those of other language nests in the broader region, like the Karelians, which share the same program design (of operating within a larger public kindergarten) and of which Pasenen had observed in that case (Brown interview with Faster, October 2018).

¹⁹ Notably, the Haanja Võro Language Nest strives to be expand from a three-day to a five-day a week children’s center.

a fragile permissive space significantly shaping the form, network, and quality of Võro nests.

Innovation

Despite these challenges, Võro language nests represent systemic policy reform nationally that lends itself to probable continuity and some degree of security. The nests reflect a creative exploration of ways to work within an existing public pre-primary institution to develop a program supporting a non-dominant language for the first time in Estonian history. The adoption of a day or two per week of complete Võro instruction in public kindergartens allows teachers to fulfill key aspects of their professional obligation—to follow the national pre-primary curriculum, to continue established daily and monthly traditions, to work knowing that they have parental support, and to maintain a majority of the children’s instruction in Estonian. Importantly, the language nest day offers something different without disrupting the established traditions and expectations of pre-primary education (i.e., the grammar of schooling); this expected difference excites children and attracts a certain cadre of teachers.

One of the original language nest leaders for the region, Triin Nagel, spoke about this enthusiasm for something different, saying “The children wait for it [language nest day] because Võro language day is different in the kindergarten: the children hear the Võro language, enjoy understanding and also speaking it, they have good experiences and gain the bravery to speak in the Võro language; [and] they can learn something new about the culture and traditions of their home region” (Leht, 2014). The language nest likewise offers teachers a fully supported opportunity for professional development and experimentation. Lena, one language nest educator, shared that “it was satisfying to try something completely new as a teacher, to learn with other language-nest teachers, and to contribute to doing something unique in the kindergarten” (Interview with Brown, April 2014). A common theme throughout Brown’s interviews with the language nest teachers was their satisfaction in trying something new professionally, especially in the supportive context provided by the Võro Institute and a network of other educators. Faster also noted that a motivating force for language nest educators to be involved is that this approach is “interesting and also a way to change the kindergarten routine” (Interview with Brown, October 2018).

In addition to systemic innovation nationally, Võro speakers have made nests “their own,” putting a southern Estonian mark on this global development. Language nests have creatively been adapted in and to the Estonian context in at least three notable ways: (1) the institution of traveling teachers (*rändõpetajad*), (2) the development of cooperative community relationships, and (3) crafting a range of related language nest symbols for practical and pedagogical use. We will describe these innovations in this section.

First, the traveling teachers project began in 2011 with two fluent Võro speakers who had educator experience and/or interest in pre-primary Võro education and who could provide additional pedagogical, linguistic, cultural, and sometimes moral support for language nest teachers. While the traveling teachers were coordinated jointly from 2011 to 2013 by the Võro Institute and the Haanimiihi Nõvvokoda NGO, from 2013 on, the Võro Institute fully funded these two positions and has since helped to coordinate their work. The idea for traveling teachers, which Faster recollected was original and not inspired by any global nest model, has been a key feature of the Võro language nests facilitating on-site advice, modeling, and support for the Võro teachers who frequently are only one of two (the other being their immediate nest colleague) in their kindergartens. The traveling teachers

together visit one to two language nests a day, coordinate all in-service teacher training, and are heavily involved in recruiting new teachers. This traveling support system provides, as kindergarten teacher Sandra aptly phrased it, “a positive wave of energy and expertise right into our classroom” (Interview with Brown, March 2014).

The second innovative aspect of Võro language nests is the distinctive cooperative approach to curriculum development. The first example of cooperative efforts is found between the nests and the broader arts community. While language nests worldwide engage with creating teaching materials out of both necessity and creative impulse, the Võro language nests have long incorporated (often with the coordinating help of the traveling teachers) local Võro-speaking artists (e.g., musicians, dramatists, singers, poets, storytellers, and puppeteers) in visiting kindergartens, teacher training, and helping to generate new class material. While the nest teachers regularly share their pedagogical insights and materials through teacher-to-teacher sharing sessions during inservice training, periodic educator-community cooperative ventures also occur. One recent (autumn 2018) example of this cooperation is a collaborative effort involving Võro-speaking music teachers, language and culture teachers, two area musicians, and poets to write a collection of original music and Võro language lyrics. This music was then recorded to form a collection intended for the language nests. A second cooperative arrangement with curricular influence is with the state-funded group Innove, which focuses primarily on language immersion in Estonia among the Russian speakers. Innove teacher trainers helped to advise the Võro-nest organizers and helped to shape the professional, in-service development of teachers through study visits to immersion classes in Tallinn, Tartu, and Valga.²⁰

Image 1. Võro-language nest logo



Translation: “Becoming wiser step-by (baby-bird) step! A Võro Language Nest”

²⁰ Of note, especially when considering the movement of ideas, is that the model for Estonian immersion (i.e., Estonian-language immersion especially for Russian speakers) is the French-immersion model in Canada (a north to east movement of an educational model).

The third adaptive aspect of the Võro language nest is the development of signature symbols to represent and use in the language nests to distinguish the immersion space and teaching time. The image of a language nest bird (*keelepēsätsirk*) was originally developed by linguist and Võro language activist Sulev Iva, mentioned earlier in the article (see most recent iteration of the logo, Image 1). His concept, originally, was to use the logo to encourage parents to speak Võro to their children, but the idea, and the image, were suitable for Võro language nests as well. Every teacher has a badge with the logo and wears it on the language-nest day. In 2011, a contest for a creative expression of a material language-nest bird resulted in the selection of a regionally-clothed language-nest bird (mascot) by local artisan Sirje Pakler. This winning entry was then created for each language-nest classroom in 2012. This bird typically sits in the children’s cubby room or on a classroom shelf until language nest day, when the teachers or traveling teachers take it into the classroom to sit in morning circle along with the children. The bird acts as symbolic reminder that it is Võro language day when used by the teacher or passed to the children. A related development is the costume of the language nest bird mother (*tsirguimä*) crafted for the traveling teachers to wear when they visit nests to assist (see the costume starting at second mark 00:25, Taro, 2014). These efforts to distinguish language nest day symbolically and materially in an easily comprehensible way for children is an example of an innovative adaptation of nests in Estonia’s pre-primary space.

Discussion & Conclusion

The Võro language nest provides intriguing insights into the global spread of educational approaches and the potential for systemic change to support non-dominant language schooling. We have highlighted in our analysis the “distant-close” approach in Estonia of pointing to successful and prominent language-nest models in an effort to advance the spread of this pre-primary innovation. Identifying language nests as far as the Māori in New Zealand (the distant case) and as close as the Inari in Finland (the close case) suggests the enduring importance, as noted by educational-transfer scholars like Rappleve (2006), of legitimizing a new educational strategy through referencing a successful “external” case (or a case outside the region or country).

The Võro case underscores the importance of considering the ways that regional iterations of relatively new educational strategies might be of particular importance given socio-cultural links and immediate contacts with scholars working in and with these communities. Pasanen, as a respected researcher with the language nests of the Inari Saami and Karelians and linked with Faster, played a particularly prominent role as a foreign advocate (in collaboration with a persuasive domestic advocate) to help explain, enlighten, and vouch for the significance of this approach. As discussed in the “Inspiration” subsection, we see the ways Pasanen, one among several Finns who played important and varied roles in the development of the Võro nests, helped to advance language nests in Estonia through her practical advice, insights, and guidance to Faster and others. As the Võro language nest became established and recognized nationally, one can observe the ways the local model (i.e., the *keelpesä*) helped to legitimize and educate the Estonian public about the possibilities of new educational pathways within the shared national context.

It also helps to return to the concept of the “grammar of schooling” (introduced in the “Theoretical Framework” subsection) when reflecting on the transfer of the language nest model to Estonia. Tyack and Tobin (1994) highlight the importance of institutional continuity to the grammar of schooling. As we see in the Võro case, immersion instruction was predicated on the continuity of the national curriculum, the daily routines, and in-house

educators. That is, much about the organization and approach to pre-primary schooling in Estonia remained in place with the adoption of the nest model. The personnel, the patterns, and the place were all familiar in this new educational approach—“only” the pedagogy of “one teacher, one language” had changed (rather than having both teachers teach in Estonian). A crucial aspect of language nest adoption in Estonia was working with, rather than against, the familiar organization of kindergarten.

These continuities should not camouflage, however, the fact that the Võro language nest broke completely with pre-primary traditions in Estonia around the medium of instruction. Never before has officially supported Võro immersion existed in Estonia. In many ways, this can be considered revolutionary or, at least, a revolutionary step in language revitalization and education for Estonia. The fact that the key stakeholders in the Võro nest model from the national government to the parents agreed to support and adopt this approach, an experience that none of them ever had as students, is remarkable and encouraging. Furthermore, the development of the nest points to the ways that the grammar of schooling does change (e.g., formally offering instruction in a regional language for an entire day), albeit modestly and sometimes with several setbacks (e.g., the reduction of language nests days, the challenge to increase the number of nest days, etc.). The real test of the boundaries of the nest’s permissive space might be the sustainable expansion within the public realm to a five-day program. At the present, as was seen in the case of the short-lived five-day experiment in the village of Sõmerpalu, there is no strong public movement to promote this.

The southeastern Estonian adaptations of the global nest model—from the traveling support teachers to the community teacher cooperation around the arts—demonstrate the adaptability of educational models as they travel the world. The language nest model exemplifies Cowen’s (2009) observation about education policy that “as it moves, it morphs” (p. 315). Significantly, the Estonian case of language nest development also reveals the ways that nests can look significantly different even *within* one national context (recall Table 1). Future research on the constraints of permissive spaces, that is, research that examines when attempts to create or expand nests fail, and for which reasons, is just as important as examining the creation of new educational pathways. Another potentially generative research path could focus on the concept of “becoming a model” and its impact, like how the Võro language nests domestically attract visitors and become sites that inspire potential transferability and policy diffusion.

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Mariko Faster is a Võro language specialist and name researcher at the Võro Institute, Estonia. She has compiled Võro-language dictionaries and has written and edited Võro teaching materials as well as children's fiction. In addition to organizing Võro language courses, Faster has also taught Võro. She has collaborated in Finnic languages' networks organized by the University of Oulu and the University of Helsinki, Finland. Faster has visited Karelia several times in order to exchange ideas about good practices and shared challenges in revitalizing endangered languages. She has also researched and published on place names and last names. Faster will defend her PhD thesis about etymologies of the hydronyms in Southern Estonia at the University of Tartu in early 2020.