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# My Culture, My Roots – A Community Art-project with Nordic Children

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### Abstract

The theme of the project *My Culture, My Roots* was cultural identity where the participating children between 7–17 years old had the possibility to reflect upon their cultural roots and create meaning through art workshops about their daily life, their interests, their identity in the cross-roads of their own traditional culture and a contemporary world. The project consisted of participatory workshops with creative writing and both analogue and digital visual art work. In the art workshops the children and young people could use different kinds of creative visual methods such as drawing, painting, mixed-media, collage, digital media and photography. Children and young adults, as well as other audience members, were invited to visit exhibitions and learn more about the participating Nordic countries sharing thoughts about their cultural identity. In this way, the project investigated the cultural activities and visual learning strategies of children.

**Keywords:** community art, art workshops, cultural identity, elementary school

### Introduction

*My Culture, My Roots* was a community art-project with children and youth conducted during years 2013–2014 in compulsory schools in the arctic area of five Nordic countries; Faroe Islands/Denmark, northern Finland, Greenland/Denmark, Iceland and northern Norway. The project was funded by the Nordic Cultural Council. In total, over 100 children participated in the project on six schools. The aim of the project was giving children and youth the opportunity to express themselves and share their cultural identity through art and writing workshops. The elementary school pupils were supposed to reflect on their unique cultural affiliation and gain in-depth understanding of their heritage, since most of the participating children either belonged to minority groups or lived in minority cultural areas. The aim was for children from various minority cultures to get in touch with, see, and read other children's art work, but also to give them the possibility to be creative and participate in their own culture based on the Child Rights Convention Article 13. The idea was that becoming aware of how one's cultural background, in an increasingly globalized world, gives perspective to their own lives and can boost the self-esteem of children and young people in a time of differentiated contemporaries. Leading the project were an artist, also master degree student in Cultural Sociology at the

University of Tampere in Finland, and an art educator who work as visual art teacher educator at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden and have a Ph.D. in Art History and Visual Studies.

### **Art project process and methods**

The schools in the project were from Faeroe Islands, where one school with 23 children of Faeroese and Faeroese-Danish background in school year 3 participated, from Finland, two schools with 8 respectively 18 children of Finnish and Finnish-Sàmi background, both school year 1-6, from Iceland, one school with 19 youngsters, mostly Icelandic, from several year 7-9 classes, and on Greenland participated one school with 21 children of Inuit and Inuit-Danish background from several year 1-9 classes. In Norway a museum workshop were held with a small group of youngsters, school years 1-7 (In the article the results from the workshop from Norway is not included). In all countries were held follow-up exhibitions of the workshops. The final exhibition of the project was held at the Parliament House Library in Helsinki in Sep 2014.

The participating children were able to write texts and create images by using artistic methods based on their life-world as young citizens in their culture but also as participants in various children's cultures. The writing of their own texts about their life was based on their personal experiences. Work in the art workshops was a way to express these experiences, but also provided a basis for reflection. Subsequently, they first wrote about their everyday lives, about their interests, their hobbies

and what they do with their peers, their families and other things such as what is important to them, to the culture and the place they live in. After the writing workshop the children and youngsters were offered to paint an individual artwork with acrylic paints on a white wood panel of size 35 x 27 cm. They could also work in groups on a white fabric or with other imaging techniques like collage or free drawing.

Before the workshop the children were introduced to what the project was about, why they had been selected to participate in the project and to be able to get to know who the two external leaders of the workshops were. The teachers had been contacted beforehand and agreed to join the project. The main reason for their interest had been the possibility for their pupils to learn and create in another context and to come in contact with other children's art work from similar cultural environments. The teachers supported the introduction, which, depending on the children's language skills, was held in English, Finnish or Swedish besides their mother tongue. In addition to the project leaders, at least one teacher from each school was always involved in the workshop. The teachers also helped to translate the children's texts for the exhibitions (Figure 1).





Figure 1. Children reading texts from their writing workshop at Greenland.  
Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.



The workshops often were two hours for two consecutive days and the exhibition of the art works and texts were arranged either in connection to the workshop-days or arranged at a later occasion in public spaces. In the exhibition the children were able to see their own work as well as their peers' work, but also works from the other participating countries to get in touch with other children's experiences. The schools could also be linked to an internal project blog where the participants were able to publish their own selected photographs after the workshops. In this way the children's thoughts and cultural expressions were given voice. Parents and the public were invited to visit the exhibitions to learn more about the participating countries and share in the thoughts of the children about their cultural identity. The exhibitions, for example, were held in public spaces like the Nordic Houses at Faeroe Islands, Denmark and in Reykjavik on Iceland as well as cultural centres such as Skierri, in Enontekiö, Finland (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Children in Greenland looking at art works of children from Faeroe Islands and Iceland at the school exhibition. Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.



## Results

In the project the children produced approximately 100 paintings and other art works such as collages and photographs. The childrens' art works can be categorized in topics, some more specific for the different schools and countries like national costumes or rituals, and some more general for all the partaking pupils, such as nature and natural phenomena, sport activities, animals and pets and cultural expressions. The differences in the topics between the schools may be due to differences in the introduction, the translation made by the teacher, or by other events that affected the children like group settings, peer culture, child and youth cultural influences, local special conditions as nature and geographical surroundings, media surveillance, school thematics and practice as well as curriculum content. However, the instructions given in the workshops were very similar in every country and the children's own interests were emphasized to have importance by the project leaders.

In Faeroe Islands typical topics were animals like birds and sheep, boats and fishing, houses, the sea, the national flag and peace (Figure 3), but also favorite food like hamburgers (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Paintings from workshop on Faeroe Islands.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.



Figure 4. Painting of favorite food at Faeroe Islands.

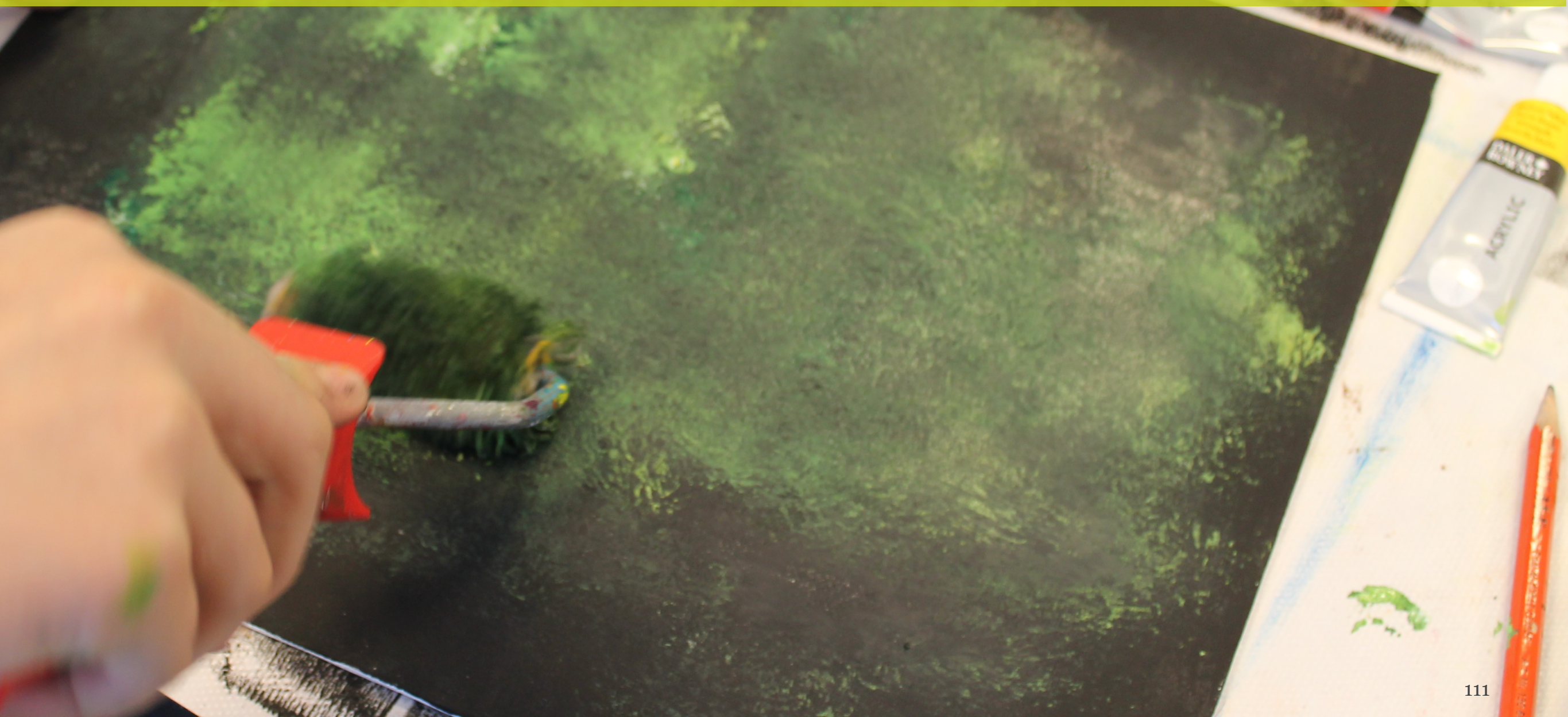
Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.




The children discussed that they are privileged because the Faroe Islands are not at war, has low crime, and they have access to necessities such as water, electricity, food, clothing, and health care in the form of hospitals and medicines. They also talked about different kinds of natural disasters and storms that are common on the Islands. In the Finnish schools the children chose to depict topics as nature and natural phenomena like fall colors in the mountains, but also sport activities such as skiing, snowboarding or racing with scooters. Several children focused on trying to capture the flow of the northern lights (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Painting the flow of the northern lights in Finland.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.





A photograph of a child's hands holding a smartphone, capturing a painting of a person in traditional Greenlandic costume. The painting is on a canvas, and the child is using a pencil to draw. The background shows a window with a view of a building and a small blue cup on a white surface.

Other common topics were animals and the retention of cows, sheep and especially reindeers. Some of the children depicted their own reindeers and talked a lot about how they took care of them and an upcoming reindeer race soon taking place. On Greenland the group was more mixed both in age and nationalities with children born in other countries such as Denmark, the Faroe Islands, England, Australia and Thailand. Animals like crows, deer, polar bears, whales – animals that are common on Greenland – and pets, different national flags or costumes (Figure 6), sport activities such as snowboarding and swimming are some of the favored topics here.

Figure 6. A child documenting a painting with national costume, Greenland. Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.



In Iceland the school has had experience cooperating with other countries and the pupils were accustomed to cultural exchanges in visual arts. The pupils seemed to choose motives that were particularly Icelandic and also representative of Iceland on a symbolic level, like pictures of volcanos. Typical topics among the youngsters were nature and natural phenomena like mountains, northern lights, volcanos, waterfalls, but also flowers, Icelandics (small horses), lakes and images from sport or advertising like football logos, snowboarding (Figure 7) or the yoghurt Skyr. (More can be read about the results from the project, see Karlsson Häikiö, 2014 pp. 38-39).



Figure 7. Snowboarding on Iceland. Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.



## Conclusion

The children from different nationalities and cultures were given possibility to reflect on their lives, identities, culture through the production of both linguistic and visual narratives. Many of the partaking schools were situated in minority cultural contexts. Meanwhile, the minorities are woven into secular and multicultural social contexts where there for a long time been a mixing of cultures between for example Danish and Inuit communities as well as between Finnish and Sàmi cultures and where the mix of cultures is the everyday life the children grow up in. Many of the children, as Sàmi and Inuit children, are in a social situation where they are captured in-between preserving the richness of their traditions as a source of surviving, and an increasing secularization of the society they live in. The community art-project aimed at creating knowledge between children in the arctic parts of the Northern countries and to contribute to, and increase, the recognition of cultural diversity. An overall aim of the project was giving children and youth the opportunity to work with their conception of their cultural identity and in this way empowering children's awareness and agency through creating conversations about children's art work. In this way the project also highlighted school as a part of the active community and as a civic arena: a meeting place and generator of dialogue and participation.

## References

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