

Title: “It’s really stiff and we stick to the point” – Public service provision in a multilingual setting

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In many areas populated by indigenous peoples, public services are provided in other language than the language of the indigenous population. In some of these settings, the service providers and service users do not have a shared language. When public service providers do not share a common language with the people they serve, what happens to the relations between them and the services the people are provided with?

My research is on language barriers in public service provision in general, not exclusively from indigenous communities. Through fieldwork with participant observation and interviews, I have explored this topic in Norwegian institutions of public service. My data is from social work in social welfare offices with immigrants, refugees, national minorities and indigenous peoples.

In this paper, I will show how language functions as a medium of expressing identity, and how a shared language gives an opportunity for finding shared identities. My data shows how working relationships when there is a language bond, is substantially different from those working relationships where there is no shared language.

Building on this, I will look at whether the provision of interpreting services can bridge this gap. Traditionally interpreting services have been regarded a solution to the provision of public services to communities that does not speak the state bearing language in an area. However, can interpreting services bridge this gap, and if so what kind of interpreters and interpreting services are needed for that goal to be reached? Through empirical data these questions will be explored.