This paper is taken from

A Europe of Many Cultures
Proceedings of the fifth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network

London: CiCe 2003

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 369 7

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

Educational aims in a changing society: equal opportunities in citizenship, culture, and identity

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This paper discusses educational aims in the changing society of Iceland, as set out in the laws on education and general curriculum. Our principal foci are equality, citizenship, multicultural issues, and identity; we also consider how the educational system is responding to increased immigration to Iceland. First, however, we provide some background information about Icelandic society.

The changing society

Iceland has, particularly since World War II, been undergoing rapid social, economic, and political changes, moving from a traditional agricultural community to a modern industrial society. It is a parliamentary democratic republic, with a president as head of state. The state church is Lutheran. The national educational system is centralised and is guided by national standards, both for education as a whole and for specific subjects. In recent years both school districts and individual schools have received more independence in organising their work, along with more financial responsibility.

As in other western countries, sociological changes have followed radical economic changes, for example in family structure. Generally, fewer generations live in the same household, the divorce rate has risen, both parents work outside the home, and there are fewer children in each home (Hagstofa Íslands, 2002a; 2002b). The standard of living is high, with little extreme poverty or wealth by international standards, and there is therefore a relatively modest difference between social classes (Ólafsson, 1999). The country frequently ranks among the top five nations of the world on such quality-of-life indicators as level of infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy rate, and life satisfaction (United Nations, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), as well as having a low unemployment rate (International Labour Office, 1998). Recently, international surveys indicated that around 90% of employees are pleased with their work compared to an average of about 50% among other nations (Morgunbladid, 2003).

The population and immigration

The population in Iceland is around 290,000. In 2001 there were 16,000 students aged 6-15 in pre-schools and 44,000 in elementary schools (10 years), and 21,000 aged 16-20 in secondary schools (4 years).

Historically the population has been very homogeneous: however in recent years the number of immigrants has increased rapidly. In 1980, 1.4% (3,240) of the population were immigrants; 10 years later in 1990 the rate was 1.9% (4,812), but by 2000 the rate had increased considerably, to 3.1% (8,824); in 2001, only a year later, it was 3.4% (9,850) and in 2002 it was 3.5% (10,221) (Hagstofa Íslands, 2003a). Migration is from various countries: by 2001, about 17% (1,685) had come from the other Nordic countries (900 from Denmark, 325 from Norway, 300 from Sweden); 53% were from other European countries - mostly from Poland (1,800), but also from Germany (600), the former Yugoslavia (540), Britain (410), Lithuania (370), and Russia (230). A further 17%

came from Asia (600 from the Philippines, 400 from Thailand), 10% from North America (570 from the USA), and 3% from Africa (Alþjódahús, 2002; Hagstofa Íslands, 2003a).

Languages spoken

As of 2002, 37 languages were spoken in Iceland. In 2001, 1,200 students in elementary schools (2.7%) whose native language was not Icelandic received special support in learning Icelandic at school. In 2002 these included 177 English, 182 Polish, 107 Tagalog, and 105 Thai speakers (Hagstofa Íslands, 2003b). To illustrate the increase, in 1993-1994 only 50 students in elementary schools in Reykjavik received special language teaching in Icelandic, but in 2000-2001 the number had grown to 635 (Sigurdardóttir *et al*., 2000). Around 5% of children in pre-schools have a native language other than Icelandic; most speaking English (148) and Polish (92) (Hagstofa Íslands, 2003c). Moreover, in 2000 10.5% of the 9th and 10th graders reported that they spoke another language at home (Sigurdardóttir, *et al*., 2000).

Educational aims

The aims of education are outlined at three official levels in the educational system:

- laws for each of the school levels (nursery, elementary, secondary) (Lög um leikskóla, 1994; Lög um grunnskóla, 1995; Lög um framhaldsskóla, 1996);
- general national curriculum guidelines (Adalnámskrá leikskóla, 1999; Adalnámskrá grunnskóla, 1999; Adalnámskrá framhaldsskóla, 1999); and
- national curriculum guidelines for specific subjects, such as Icelandic, English, Danish, Mathematics, and Social Studies.

Moreover, each school designs its own school-based curriculum guidelines that are based on both the general and the subject-specific guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

These laws emphasise that ‘the role of the school is, in collaboration with the home, to prepare the students to participate in a democratic society that is constantly developing’ (Lög um grunnskóla, 1995, p. 2). It goes on: ‘school practice should be shaped by tolerance, Christian morality, and democratic collaboration’ (p.2). These basic values are further outlined in the national curriculum guidelines. They capture such values as the equality of all human beings, mutual respect and responsibility, and care and reconciliation.

The law states that the main obligation of the education system is to provide students with a good general education, with an emphasis on ambitious educational opportunities for everyone and equal rights to study. Good general education is defined as being the root of democracy. The aims of education are to promote students’ physical, social, ethical, and emotional growth in a constantly changing world. To do so, education must help develop students’ autonomy, critical thinking, and solidarity with others through tolerance and respect towards other people and the environment as well as self-respect. It must also help them develop personal relationships that are independent of gender, ethnicity, religion or disability. Finally, it must promote morality and equality, and a social vision that respects society, enhances democratic methods, and fosters international awareness and sustainable development.

The national curriculum guidelines for specific subjects (e.g. social studies, ethics, health studies) further outline these values and aims laid out in the laws and guidelines. The government has also recently formulated a new curriculum called 'Life Skills' (Adalnamskrá grunnskóla: Lifsleikni, 1999) to ensure schools promote citizenship awareness and prepare students to participate in the information society. In designing its own school-based curriculum guidelines each school is encouraged to outline how it will teach and support its immigrant pupils (Sigurdardóttir *et al*., 2000).

Multicultural education

Iceland has moved from being a homogenous country to one receiving people from other countries. The Ministries of Justice, Health, Social Affairs and Education welcome and support young immigrants and their families in various ways. Volunteers are also involved: when a family from another country arrives, an Icelandic family is assigned to be its host family and help them in any way they can. A section of the Red Cross, called 'The brightness', consists of volunteers who help immigrant families adapt to their new society.

In the education system two teaching consultants support teachers and schools in teaching immigrant students; one focuses on Reykjavik and the other on the countryside with an active internet communication. Within the district educational institutions, special departments have developed to address issues in immigrant children's education. Within the Reykjavik Educational Institution an interdisciplinary team is developing a curriculum for elementary school children who have Icelandic as a second language (Sigurdardóttir *et al*., 2000). The work is directed towards not only the immigrant children but also to their families and at ways they can support their children: for example, the teacher consultant in Reykjavik visits the families in their homes to help them find ways to adapt.

Six schools, three of them in Reykjavik, are reception schools for students aged 9-15 who have difficulties with the Icelandic language and thus have problems attending regular classes in their 'home-schools'. Along with educators in other European countries, these schools are participating in developing networks that provide an international orientation and focus on multiculturalism, ethnic minorities, bilingualism, and multi-faith issues - for example, one of the schools participates in a project with schools in Sweden and in Spain with a financial grant from the European Council.

There has been a special focus in the education system on multicultural education for all students, in order to work against prejudices. This important, as survey findings indicate signs of prejudice among young people towards immigrants (Sigurdardóttir, 2000; Tómasdóttir & Agnarsson, 2000). Three 'mother-schools' in Reykjavik are trialling multicultural education programmes which can then serve as models for other schools. Together with the mother-schools, each 'home-school' is supposed to make plans to support its immigrant students. In this work the 'mother-schools' have consulted and shared experiences with other European countries such as Denmark and Belgium, and also Canada. Below we outline briefly the work in one elementary-level mother-school.

"We need not only to learn about each other but to learn from each other"

This mother-school has a leading role in welcoming and educating immigrant children. Today 100 of the students (16%) who attend the school are immigrant children, speaking

29 different languages. Each of these 100 students attends regular classes, but they also belong to the Immigrant Department of the school, where they receive teaching in Icelandic. This is located at the centre of the school in order to help the immigrant students to connect more easily with other students. The Immigrant Department has four teachers, all of whom also teach in other departments.

The staff of the school are constructing a project on multicultural teaching for all students with the aim of promoting the students' empathy, solidarity, collaboration, knowledge about and respect towards different cultures, and an understanding of the danger of prejudices and narrow-mindedness of nationalism and racism (Austurbæjarskólinn í Reykjavík, 2002). The focus has been on teaching methods of 'cooperative learning' and 'complex instruction' with each student actively participating. Often the group projects are organised in such a way that they cannot be solved unless the whole group works well together.

Our colleague observed the school's principal, Gudmundur Sighvatsson, working with 5th grade students on this project (Sveinsdóttir, 2002). In the classroom four to six tables were grouped together in order to promote students' collaboration. She reports:

> Gudmundur points at the wall where the blackboard is. Above the blackboard we see several sentences written. Each sentence is printed on a white A4 sheet and the sheets are glued to a thick coloured paper. The row of sentences starts in the left corner of the coloured paper. The first one goes like this: "Each person is good at something." The next one says "No-one is good at everything." There are also sentences like "We should help each other" and "You can ask anyone for help".
>
> Gudmundur says that the class works with each sentence for about a week. They discuss the meaning of the sentence, they write stories and poems about it, and they paint and play: "We are trying to develop teaching methods that aim to bring about more positive attitudes among the students towards each other. The focus is on respect, that the students learn to respect each other and we construct our work from there."

Gudmundur feels that the main problem the school faces in working effectively with immigrant children is the lack of textbooks and other teaching material. Other pressing issues include religious teaching. The Icelandic educational system includes teaching about Christianity at the elementary level; indeed this is mandated in law, but the immigrant children have widely varied religious backgrounds. One way to adapt to their different needs is to give each child the flexibility to choose the projects in which he or she participates, for example around Christmas and church visits.

The principal and the teachers hope to inform other schools about their work on multicultural education and to serve as a possible model for them. Another concern is not to lose the expertise developed within the school as the teachers involved move to other school districts. It is also important to keep the work flowing; the school is collaborating with other institutions in the city, including a secondary school which is constructing a program for immigrant adolescents.

Other projects related to schools' projects

Several voluntary projects are related to the work this school is doing with its immigrant students. For example, the after-school program has an ongoing innovation program called 'Mentor,' in which students from the University of Iceland and the Teacher Training College volunteer to spend a few hours a week each with a student from the Immigrant Department.

A second project is 'the Multicultural Choir,' which frequently performs in public. The third project, the multicultural 'Adrenalin Against Racism' is conducted within the city. Adolescents from different countries, including Icelandic adolescents, discuss real-life values of respect and peace, and different cultures, and the harm caused by prejudice. The church is collaborating to organise and conduct this with two schools and the city's Department of Sport and Leisure Time. The woman minister who leads it said in a recent newspaper interview:

> We search for ways for young immigrants to find themselves at home in the Icelandic society and at the same time for Icelandic youth to find themselves at home in the multicultural society. In that way we hope we can prevent the creation of anti-immigrant groups and the violence that stems from prejudices. (*Fréttabladid*, May 2, 2003, p.30)

As in the mother-school programme, each person states where he or she is from, and describes the culture as well as its religion, economy, education, and issues regarding equality. Much of the discussion this year has focused on war and peace. Art is a very important part of the programme, as language does not get in the way of communication. The group has taken several adventure trips to the countryside where they have struggled with the Icelandic terrain and developed their solidarity. In their recent International Day they presented aspects of their home countries as they displayed their paintings, read poems, sang songs, and presented skits and a modern dance they called 'All of us are one, no one is like another.'

About half of the participants are Icelandic; they establish friendships with the young immigrants and help them find ways into Iceland's adolescent culture. The minister says she feels this experience has challenged the Icelandic adolescents: when they have witnessed racism and injustice in their environment 'they have shown great concern.'

Closing consideration

In Iceland, within both society as a whole and the educational system, we still have much to learn about how we can welcome people from other countries who want to migrate to Iceland and how we can help them adapt and flourish in society. We are just taking the first steps in that process. Given the small size of our society we have the advantage of helping and supporting the immigrant families on a personal level and of having rich educational and mutual interpersonal relationships. Together with relatively strong systems of both social welfare and education, the factor of personal relationships might be a strength of Icelandic society in promoting mutual respect among people with various cultural backgrounds and simultaneously working against prejudices.

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