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National Policy and Practitioner Practice in Multicultural Education in Iceland

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This paper summarises the policies and practices in the formal education of immigrant students in Iceland. As participants in the research project Teacher Education Addressing Multiculturalism in Europe (TEAM) with our colleagues in Britain, France, Greece, and Poland we are studying teacher aims and practices in a new educational challenge in Iceland: working with students from multiple countries with various cultural backgrounds and native languages. In this paper we share some preliminary findings on teachers' visions, aims, and challenges as they work with immigrant students.

Migration to Iceland

The population of Iceland has always been very ethnically homogeneous, but in the past decade the number of immigrants has increased rapidly. In 2004 3.6 per cent (10,636) of the population had foreign citizenship, compared with less than 2 per cent in 1990. This migration is from various countries: by 2004 about 15 per cent had come from the other Nordic countries (890 from Denmark, roughly 300 each from Sweden and Norway), and 55 per cent from other European countries, mostly from Poland (1,903), but a few hundred each from the former Yugoslavia, Germany, Lithuania, Portugal, Britain, and Italy, among others. A further 19 per cent came from Asia (647 from the Philippines, 490 from Thailand), 8 per cent from the Americas (515 from the US), and 3 per cent from Africa.

Of the 44,511 pupils who attended compulsory school (between the ages 6 to 15) in 2004 around 3 per cent (1,369) had a native language other than Icelandic; they spoke 43 languages. The majority (56 per cent) of immigrant pupils lived in or near Reykjavík (Statistics Iceland, 2005).

In a comparative study made in 1999 that explored attitudes towards immigrants in 33 European countries, Icelanders (at 3 per cent) and Swedes were found to be the least opposed to having people of other ethnic groups as their neighbours (Jonsson, 2003). Only a few years later, however, studies seem to indicate increasing prejudice towards immigrants among the Icelandic population. In 2004 64 per cent agreed with the statement that immigrants should have the right to maintain their habits and customs, compared to 77 per cent in 1999. The percentage who were positive towards having people from other countries working in Iceland dropped from 42 per cent in 1999 to 28 per cent in 2004 (Gallup, 2004). Among the younger generation – 14 and 15 year olds – in 2003, 41 per cent felt that too many immigrants lived in Iceland as compared with 24 per cent in 1997 (Asgeirsdóttir, Kristjánsson, and Sigfusdóttir, 2005). The teachers we interviewed in our TEAM project share a concern at these signs of growing prejudice in the school community.

The educational system

All children and young people, regardless of their gender, place of residence, religion, ethnic affiliation, and social and economic circumstances, have equal rights to education in both compulsory school (primary and lower secondary, ages 6 to 15) and upper secondary school (ages 16 to 20).

Education in Iceland is administered by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, except for a few specialised schools. The national educational system is centralised and guided by national standards for education. The Ministry of Education develops curricula for pre-schools, compulsory and upper secondary schools; it also directs educational assessment and supervision at all school levels. Local municipalities are responsible for operating pre-schools and compulsory schools. In 2004 101 municipalities operated 178 compulsory schools. The state runs the upper secondary schools (30) and institutions of higher education (8).

By law, the major responsibility of the educational system is to provide students with a good general education and strengthen their general life skills to prepare them to live and work in a democratic society.

Several recent laws address the education of children and adolescents who immigrate to Iceland: the Compulsory School Act (1995), the Upper Secondary School Act (1996), and regulations for special teaching in Icelandic in the upper-secondary school (1997), as well as in the national curriculum available for both school levels (Adalnamskra grunnskola, 1999; Adalnamskra framhaldsskola, 1999). The acts for both compulsory and upper-secondary schools state that 'Pupils whose mother tongue is not Icelandic shall be entitled to special instruction in Icelandic' (art. 36; art. 20). The national curriculum for both levels further outlines the aims and ways to welcome and work with immigrant students, emphasising the teaching of Icelandic. Moreover, in designing its own school-based curriculum guidelines, each compulsory school has been encouraged to outline how to teach and support the immigrant students who attend the school.

Policy statements

At the governmental level two ministries, those of education and social affairs, have been most responsible for immigrant affairs in Iceland since 1997. Official policy is now being constructed in these ministries ('Stjornvold stofna innflytjendarad', 2005). The message is that 'new Icelanders' are to be acknowledged as active citizens without being expected to lose their national characteristics, language, or contact with their native countries. The policy emphasizes equal status comparable with Icelanders with regard to their rights and duties in their new society.

In line with the laws governing education, two municipalities in the capital region, Reykjavik and Kopavogur, have developed a policy on immigrant affairs. The Reykjavik policy's guiding principle is that its community 'enjoy social and cultural diversity, where knowledge, tolerance, equal rights, and mutual respect characterise the relations between people of different origins' (Arnadottir, 2002, p. 4). Similarly, Kopavogur's policy on multicultural community is largely based on mutual respect, equal opportunities, equal access to institutions in Kopavogur regardless of language fluency, with a strong opposition to any kind of xenophobia or discrimination (Kopavogsbær, 2004).

Some municipalities have special service centres for people of origins other than Icelandic. Nationwide, two major service centres available to immigrants offer services to students of foreign origin as well as their parents and other adults:

- An Intercultural Centre run by the Red Cross in Reykjavik in collaboration with municipalities in the region. The centre provides a forum for a multicultural society in Iceland and offers advocacy (a lawyer is available), information and counselling,

education (seminars), publications, interpretation and translation services, and various cultural activities.

- A Multicultural and Information Centre in Isafjordur, a fishing town in the Westfjords where 7 per cent of the population have foreign citizenship, run jointly by the town and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The centre's website provides extensive information on Iceland and its society, with a special focus on peoples' rights and duties.

Supporting intercultural education at school

Reykjavik Education Service Centre is responsible for the policy and services to immigrant pupils and their families, especially in the city. In 2005 two teaching consultants are supporting teachers and schools in working with immigrant students. One focuses on schools in Reykjavik and the other in the countryside. Below we describe the educational structure and several projects that aim to meet the need for a more multicultural or intercultural education at both compulsory and upper-secondary school.

The compulsory school

In 1993 the first immigrant department within a school – called a reception school – was established for immigrant pupils aged 9-15. In 2005, six schools, three of them in Reykjavik, are reception schools with special immigrant departments. The students attend the immigrant department for about a year to prepare to study in their own local school. In 2000 one of these schools became a so-called 'mother-school' in intercultural education. This school focuses on a whole-school approach to citizenship issues, including all pupils in the school under the label of intercultural education. In addition, the mother-school provides other schools with consultation on intercultural education (see Adalbjarnardottir & Runarsdottir, 2003). In addition, pupils who have just moved to Iceland are invited to attend a summer school where they can learn Icelandic and engage in outdoor activities run by the city of Reykjavik.

A few after-school programmes are available for the immigrant children and adolescents. For example, the 'Mentor Project on Friendship' involves students from the University of Iceland and the Iceland University of Education who volunteer to work with these pupils a few hours a week. This project has been well received by both the university students and the immigrant pupils. The Red Cross in Reykjavik also organises homework assistance and language stimulation for pupils of foreign origin aged 9 to 13. Retired teachers, engineers, and university students have volunteered to help. To make it easier for immigrant pupils to study by using their own native language, several institutions have joined in collecting teaching material and literature on their native languages both at compulsory and upper-secondary school level.

The upper-secondary school

In 2005 three schools at the upper-secondary level (all in Reykjavik) are offering special programmes for students of foreign origin. To meet the requirements of upper-secondary schools, the Reykjavik Technical College offers a two-year programme geared toward students who have recently moved to Iceland and want to study Icelandic and improve their skills in English and mathematics. One upper-secondary school offers several courses in Icelandic for students of foreign origin. Another offers an accredited

international programme organised by the International Baccalaureate Organization. Students can choose to study in English, Spanish or French.

Several after-school social activities are organised by institutions and grassroots associations. 'Adrenalin Against Racism' provides a context for Icelandic and foreign-born adolescents to discuss values of respect and peace; different cultures, and the harm caused by prejudice. 'Icebergs' aims to help adolescents aged 12-16 to work against the isolation of newly arrived immigrant adolescents; they also develop social activities and introduce Icelandic society to them. 'A Bridge Between Many Worlds' is a group work programme for young people aged 16 to 25, both Icelandic and foreign-born. The young people form discussion groups about issues that concern them and they share various social activities. Many more projects are being developed, implying increased awareness and need for projects to support both immigrant and native Icelandic children and adolescents to learn from each other and live together.

A new educational challenge: Teachers' voices

As our contribution to the TEAM study we have conducted interviews with teachers and principals at both compulsory and upper-secondary school level on their visions and experiences as they work with immigrant students. We also administered a questionnaire to a group of teachers teaching Icelandic as a foreign language (see our other paper at the CiCe 2005 conference: Ingvarsdottir, Runarsdottir, & Adalbjarnardottir, 2005).

Below we provide some preliminary findings from the reflections of experienced classroom teachers who have been involved with immigrant students. In particular, Johanna and Nanna comment on their work at their primary schools, where both have led immigrant departments for several years. Nanna has a longer experience, as a leader at the mother-school in intercultural education.

Teachers' major aims

These teachers all share an enthusiasm and a vision to create a school in which each student can flourish, irrespective of his or her cultural background. They find they play an important role in enhancing mutual understanding and tolerance among all students at their schools.

European identity and culture seemed not to be a special focus; rather they aim to promote students' mutual understanding and reduce prejudice by seeing them as part of the global world. In this respect, we should note that relatively many immigrant children and adolescents come from Asia.

In general, the teachers seem to focus first on the importance of teaching the immigrant students the Icelandic language – especially when they first work with them. Johanna reported that the main task of her immigrant department was to support the children, acknowledging their cultural background and help 'them through the first cultural shock most of them experience'. A very important part of the programme is to 'teach them Icelandic', and to 'provide them with good general education.' She highlighted the importance of improving her pupils' academic skills; she found them eager to study and 'smart' and stressed that the educational system had to respond to their motivation.

The more experienced teachers like Nanna focused not only on the immigrant pupils' skills in Icelandic but also on the school atmosphere, and each pupil's culture, and social

and emotional needs. She also took a broad perspective on the school's role in preparing all its students to learn to live together and respect each other. For example, she emphasized that the aim of the intercultural project in which all students participate is to search more for what they have in common than for differences. One of their projects illustrates this thinking: 'No one is capable of doing everything and everyone can do something.' In integrating the immigrant pupils to the school culture she wants them to hold on to what makes them special and to be included on their own ground.

Nanna states their overall aim as 'Everybody should be able to feel good in a changed world.' In particular she emphasises promoting the Icelandic students' awareness and responsibility as they adapt to the changed circumstances of having people from other countries moving to Iceland. She is clearly concerned that native Icelanders 'should not be full of national arrogance; rather we should appreciate the many new resources that the immigrants bring with them.'

The challenges

The teachers find it both challenging and rewarding to teach students of foreign origin.

Training preparation.

In general, the teachers' report their teacher education provided them with little preparation to work with immigrant students, and that they have very few opportunities for teacher training. Johanna reflected, 'I had no idea how I was supposed to teach these children. I only knew I could be kind to them.' This is in line with findings from a survey we conducted among teachers (Ingvarsdottir, *et al.*, 2005).

Three universities in Iceland educate teachers. In addressing and reacting to the increasingly multicultural society, the teacher training programmes in these three universities have taken a few initial steps. Issues of globalization, multiculturalism, and the changing society are reflected in several elective courses at two universities; at the third students take a core course on the issues. Clearly more action needs to be taken.

Curriculum material: The teachers reported a lack of curriculum material for their work with immigrant students. As a result on individual basis they were trying to develop their own curriculum material and other resources (e.g., websites).

Religion: Another pressing issue is religious teaching. At primary school level, by tradition, religious education within the Icelandic educational system focuses on Christianity. The teachers describe the challenge of responding to students' different religious backgrounds and needs.

Policy: Although the teachers were very positive towards their work with immigrant students, many complained about the lack of policy and resources from the Icelandic government and the Ministry of Education. For example, although they appreciated the curriculum material being developed by individual teachers, they called for a holistic approach to this work. Also, in policy planning they suggested strongly that our government should use the opportunity to learn from our neighbours, the other Nordic countries, which have rich experience in working with immigrant students.

Summary: Teachers' perspectives on the educational needs of a multicultural society

Within Iceland's educational system, the first steps have been taken to organise the work of welcoming and promoting the growth of children and adolescents from other countries. Many further steps are needed.

In our preliminary analysis of teachers' perspectives on their roles, aims, and challenges in working with students of various ethnic backgrounds we see:

- a sincere interest in and concern about the well-being and growth of immigrant children and adolescents,
- a concern about the native Icelandic students' attitudes towards 'new' Icelanders,
- a concern about supporting the immigrant students in adapting to their new society, in particular by teaching them Icelandic, but also providing social activities, and
- a vision of promoting students' mutual respect and tolerance.

The teachers feel a lack of support in their important role with regard to teacher education and teacher training, as well as available curriculum material. In addition, they call for a clearer policy on the education of immigrant students. Clearly, actions are needed in these areas.

These are the first hints we received from our discussions with the teachers of immigrant students. We will continue with our interviews and analysis, focusing on their experiences of multicultural and intercultural education and how their professional competencies develop.

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