

INTERPLAY OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN COMPULSORY SCHOOLS, TEACHER EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ICELAND

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Abstract

The significant rise in immigration to Iceland over the past two decades has led to increased diversity in schools, prompting growing interest in how educational systems include immigrant students. This paper investigates how schools, teacher education, and research practices influence immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. Specifically, it examines how rural and urban compulsory schools in Iceland, along with teacher education and research, address opportunities for inclusion. The research question is: How do the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices that leverage everyone's social, linguistic, and cultural resources? Addressing a gap in the literature, this study examines the interplay among research, teacher education, and school practices. Employing a range of qualitative methods—including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and immigrant students, a collaborative self-study with teacher educators, and a critical autobiography—the research is analysed thematically using frameworks of inclusion, critical pedagogy, and the ecology of equity. Findings emphasize the pivotal role teachers play as agents of inclusion. Despite limited training or resources, many teachers strive to engage all students meaningfully in learning. Supportive school environments and strong teacher-student relationships further contribute to students' sense of belonging. However, systemic challenges—such as shifting demographics and resource constraints—highlight the need for broader structural reform. Insights from teacher educators emphasize the value of open dialogue in diverse classrooms, while the researcher's critical autobiography underscores the importance of maintaining reflexivity to avoid reproducing bias. Using Ainscow et al.'s (2012) ecology of equity framework, the study concludes that while the researched schools stand on their own in tackling issues *within school*, these practices have an important impact on students' experiences of inclusion and may unintentionally reinforce inequalities between schools. At the same time, the schools seem to tackle *between school* issues in different ways. Such autonomy in implementing policies, varied local responses and the lack of consistent policy guidance may lead to unequal educational opportunities for immigrant students and the professionals who support them. When it comes to *beyond school*, broader social and economic contexts significantly shape students' experiences of inclusion. Real progress toward educational equity requires collaboration across schools, teacher education, research, and policymaking. This study contributes theoretical, empirical, and practical insights into how inclusion is conceptualized and enacted in Icelandic education. It underscores the importance of coordinated and cross-sector efforts to promote equity and inclusion in a rapidly diversifying society.

Keywords: *Immigrants, inclusion, compulsory education, teacher education, case studies.*

1. Introduction

The global migration brings challenges and opportunities for schools, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of students' mother tongues, ethnicities and sociocultural resources. Iceland has been experiencing a rapid demographic shift. In the year 2000, 2,6% of the population were immigrants. By 2023, the share of immigrants reached 18,4% (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024). This leads to a new discourse in Icelandic society and to changes in the policies. Icelandic schools are obliged to work towards inclusion of immigrant students and address their diverse academic and social needs, support the acquisition of the Icelandic language and strengthen immigrant students' mother tongues to achieve positive learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to understand school, teacher education, and research practices and their impact on immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. The research question was: How do the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop and sustain inclusive practices based on ideas of use of everyone's social, linguistic and cultural resources?

2. Context

According to the research in Iceland, immigrant students report being isolated from Icelandic peers (Ragnarsdóttir, 2010) and perceived by some teachers as deficient due to a lack of proficiency in Icelandic (Tran, 2015). Yet, when teachers include their students' knowledge and backgrounds, and have high expectations, the academic and social success of immigrant students seems to accelerate (Rafik Hama, 2020). Research also shows that the support in Icelandic and the mother tongue is insufficient and differs between schools and municipalities (Dánielsdóttir & Skogland, 2017).

Studies advocate for increased dialogue between schools and immigrant families, aimed at strengthening linguistic bridges and parental involvement (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017; Harðardóttir et al., 2023). Yet, Icelandic teachers often feel they are not prepared to work with immigrant students (Ólafsson, 2019). Teacher education has no nationally defined compulsory core subjects, and as yet, courses about inclusion and diversity are mostly elective (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2023). The shortage of mandatory courses may have implications for student outcomes and teacher preparedness.

3. Theoretical background

From a critical social justice perspective, people and their different capacities and backgrounds should be celebrated and valued, and not quashed or ignored (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). This perspective is intertwined with the concept of inclusive education, understood in this study as an ongoing process of responding to and valuing a diverse group of students, and increasing their learning opportunities and social participation (Black-Hawkins, 2017).

However, schools and students do not exist in a vacuum. Even if schools improve their practices, for the educational system to be inclusive, the underlying socio-economic conditions need to change as well. Ainscow et al. (2012) suggest that students' achievement and experiences of inclusion depend on many interacting processes which form an ecology of equity. The division of *within*, *between*, and *beyond* allows us to deepen our understanding of different levels of education policy and practice through multi-layered analysis.

Within schools describes the ways of teaching and engaging students with learning, and organising student groups in the school. It refers also to social relations and support that are characteristic to each school. *Between schools* refers to the characteristics of local school systems; hierarchies, competition and collaboration between schools; integration or segregation of students in different schools; and the access to similar opportunities in every school. *Beyond schools* includes families' resources; the understandings of the school professionals; and the demographics, economics and cultures of the areas served by each school. Moreover, it refers to the underlying socio-economic processes at national and global levels that impact the local conditions (Ainscow et al., 2012).

4. Methods

To answer the research question, I applied a multiple-case study (Miles & Huberman, 1994), a critical autobiography (Gilmore, 1994) and a collaborative self-study (Bodone et al., 2004).

In the data collection phase in two rural and two urban compulsory schools, I used repeated field observations; semi-structured interviews with 18 students and 20 teachers; and informal conversations. The schools were selected through purposive sampling to gain a deeper understanding of different factors (location, school size, immigrant students' share, mother tongues' support, presence of immigrant unit) that might influence immigrant students' experiences. With the assistance of headmasters, I selected immigrant students and their teachers. To present the complexity of the phenomenon, I used purposive sampling and traits such as gender, age, origin, and number of years in Iceland.

When embarking on my research journey, I thought that my immigration experience was shared by many -- if not by the students I was about to interview, then at least by their parents. Thus, part of my study was to shed light on my reflexivity while doing research with immigrant students. It builds on the data from my journal with reflections and questions. I also incorporated some of the data from a previously described multiple case-study.

During the process of analysing data from schools, I noticed that many teachers mentioned feeling unprepared to work with diverse groups of students. Therefore, I decided to investigate my role in preparing teacher candidates to work with diverse student populations. Together with my colleagues in a graduate course, I conducted a collaborative self-study. I relied on nine years' worth of retrospective data about our teaching, interactions with students, and collaboration.

I applied a thematic analysis because it is convenient when working with larger samples and addressing a wide range of qualitative data. The thematic analysis included initial revision, data coding and sorting it into themes by discovering patterns derived from existing theories, as well as from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

5. Findings

In the data analysis process, I encountered three different stages of engaging with immigrant students in educational practice and research that formed three themes: understanding of inclusion, implementation of inclusion and a holistic approach to inclusion.

5.1. Understanding of inclusion

Students who participated in my research had different experiences in educational settings, which shaped their understanding of inclusion. Some students, especially older ones, sometimes felt othered, while others considered themselves to be Icelandic and belonging to the group. Several participants mentioned that they felt acknowledged as individuals who brought various resources to the classroom. Teenage girl students who reported they felt excluded from their female peers still had generally positive experiences in school itself and felt appreciated by their teachers. The support and caring relations with the school personnel seemed to have a positive impact on students' feelings of belonging.

Teachers in schools I visited possessed knowledge and professional experience in working with students with immigrant backgrounds, but more importantly, they were enthusiastic and ready to learn. They did not necessarily use the word "inclusion" when talking about their work, but they felt a strong sense of responsibility towards their students' present and future well-being.

5.2. Implementation of inclusion

The schoolteachers and my fellow teacher educators set clear expectations for all students and intentionally bridged their own and the students' knowledge and experience. In so doing, the teachers moved beyond the superficial level of multicultural education in addressing cultural aspects such as authentic food, clothing, and social events. Instead, they emphasised the importance of individuals negotiating the historical, social and institutional forces influencing their lives. What distinguished these teachers was their consciousness of what could happen if students' resources remained unnoticed, and their willingness to prevent any negative, academic, or social consequences.

Several teachers reported they felt alone in their work with immigrant students. The understanding of inclusion of their co-workers was different -- they thought that it was the role and responsibility of special education teachers or teachers of Icelandic to take care of immigrant students. Practices of inclusion tended to be fragmented, and teachers mentioned they did not have sufficient time and space to share knowledge. Teachers were sometimes worried that good practice developed in their educational setting was unsustainable and depended on individuals rather than on collective effort.

Some teachers felt unsupported or unprepared to tackle challenges. They felt that there were no clear rules, so in everyday practice, they were often "learning by doing." Although it is challenging for schools and teachers to have an impact on demography or resources available in the local community, one rural school showed initiative and the capacity to adapt to change, for example, by inviting a specialist from another municipality.

Findings revealed that collaboration and using the strengths of others can both facilitate teaching and make it more inclusive for everyone involved. It also showed how important it is for the teacher workforce to experience practices of inclusion during their teacher training, as they become more aware of the impact of such practices on their own learning and feelings of belonging. Creating a dialogue in a large group of students can be challenging. To work through this challenge, my fellow teacher educators and I tapped into our diverse resources and applied creative methods. The hands-on, visual ways of working provided students with an additional language to enhance their understanding of inclusion.

5.3. A holistic approach to inclusion

The study shows that the first step in a holistic approach to inclusive practices is to develop trust. Teachers trusted that students were in school to learn, and the students trusted the teacher and each other. Students' mother tongues were welcomed in the classroom and used to build foundational knowledge of concepts. Trust was also visible in the case of a rural school, where the municipality trusted the teachers that they were professionals and knew best what support was needed in the school. My background and experience helped me reach interviewees and gain their trust.

Finally, findings indicated that the crucial element of an inclusive approach in education and educational research was to reflect on one's own practice and to have space to mirror one's own experiences with others. To cultivate critical dialogue on an inclusive approach, we need to share our diverse knowledge and methodological approaches.

6. Discussion

One common theme of good practices in my study was a holistic approach to inclusion; that is, looking at children/study participants/students as a whole and moving beyond the technicist approach to teaching and researching (Black-Hawkins, 2017). As teachers in my studies argued, inclusive practices should be a collective responsibility, revolving around the well-being of children. Such a whole approach requires constant development in line with the changing society.

There is a rapid shift in Iceland, including different patterns of migration, the growing share of refugees, and children with trauma or no experience of schooling. At the same time, more negative discussions can be heard in society, politics, media, and even within the school walls. How do we use research, policies and teacher education to respond to these changes?

Considering Ainscow et al.'s (2012) the ecology of equity, it seems that the researched schools stood on their own in tackling issues *within school*, but their practices had an important impact on students' experiences of inclusion and may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools. At the same time, the schools seemed to tackle *between school* issues in different ways. Such autonomy and flexibility in implementing policies and unregulated support may lead to uneven opportunities for immigrant students, teachers and schools working with these students. When it comes to *beyond school* and to the underlying social and economic processes, the context of the social space seemed to influence the immigrant students' experiences of inclusion. The improvement on the path toward equity is only possible if representatives from all areas manage to work together on a common agenda.

7. Conclusions

I consider my research question to be essential in an increasingly multicultural global landscape. Further research is needed, focusing on the sustainability of inclusive teacher practices and the importance of teachers' continuous professional development and cooperation *within* and *between* schools. Also, a more detailed analysis of the intersectionality of gender, culture, and immigration status of students is necessary, as this may impact the sense of belonging and inclusion in different ways.

The most important lesson of my study is to look beyond the add-on approach. We need to shift our emphasis to the whole child and to the importance of social and mental well-being. Inclusion should happen not only in the classroom, but also in the school corridor and cafeteria, in after-school activities, and in the local community. It should be visible in policy and public discourse. It should be a core topic in teacher education and educational research.

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