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Development towards inclusive education in Iceland[1]

1 Introduction

The history of public schools in Iceland is relatively short compared to that of other Nordic countries, spanning about 120 years (Guttormsson, 2008). It has been underpinned by a focus on different aspects of equity, involving equal educational opportunities for children regardless of place of living, gender or social status. This has been reflected in legislation and curricula. Despite several obstacles, the Icelandic school system seems to have succeeded quite well in this respect. International studies have shown high equity among comprehensive schools, meaning that student outcomes rely only to a small extent on what school they attend (OECD, 2012).

Although the requirement that learners should be educated in an inclusive school was first made explicit in the Icelandic Act for compulsory schooling in 2008 (nr. 91/2008), the idea of inclusion has been implicit in Icelandic law since 1995. The 2008 Act states that school practice should be in accordance with learners' needs and attainment, supporting their development, wellbeing and education. The 17th article of the Act, which addresses learners with support needs, states that "learners are entitled to be treated equally, their educational needs are to be met in a common compulsory school without exclusion, without regard to their physical or mental abilities" (Act for comprehensive school, nr. 91/2008).

The educational system in Iceland operates mainly within the public sector and is divided into four levels: preschools (called playschool in Icelandic), comprehensive (compulsory) schools, upper secondary schools and universities. The Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs is responsible for monitoring the educational system at all levels. Municipalities operate the preschools and comprehensive schools, while the upper secondary schools and universities are managed by the state. There are few privately run schools, most are at the preschool level, and those are run with financial support from the state.

2 The education system in Iceland

As defined by law, *preschools* are the first level of the educational system, providing education for children until 6 years of age, at which point compulsory education begins. The preschool is not a part of compulsory education but around 96% of children from the ages of 2–5 attend these schools (see Statistics Iceland, 2022a). There is a long tradition of 'private' preschools with a specific educational approach, such as Montessori school or Hjallastefna (an Icelandic school association that focuses on gender identities), that are funded by the local authorities to a similar extent as the official preschools operating under the same legislation (see Hinz in this volume).

The comprehensive school (grunnskóli) became a reality by law in 1974, when the common practice changed from a selective school system to a school system that does not group the

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students on the basis of academic achievement or abilities. It is compulsory for learners aged 6–16 years old. The most common form of organisation is that all ten grades are in one school building, although different arrangements exist. The number of years that children attend school has extended rapidly over the last century, from four years in 1907 to eight years in 1946, nine years in 1974 and then to ten years as it has been since 1990. School hours each week have increased as well as the number of schooldays in a year. School Councils in each local community have to ensure that all school children who are supposed to attend compulsory school do attend. School councils are appointed at each school and the school principal is responsible for establishing it and directing its work. In addition to the school principal, the school council consists of two parent representatives, two teacher representatives, one representative of other school staff, two student representatives and one representative from the surrounding community or an additional representative from the group of parents chosen by other school council representatives. The School Council is a forum for consultation between the school administration and the school community about how to manage the school (Regulation on School Councils, nr. 1157/2008). Thus, it is responsible for ensuring that schools are provided with access to specialist services and that there is acceptable housing available, as well as areas for outdoor activities and playgrounds (see Hinz in this volume).

Upper secondary education (ages 16–19) is not compulsory, but anyone who has completed comprehensive education, and is under 18 years old, has the right to enrol in studies at an upper secondary school (Lög um framhaldsskóla, nr. 92/2008). The state is responsible for secondary schools. They are steered directly from the ministry, which until 2008 gave the schools very little freedom to decide on curriculum issues. The latest legislation for secondary schools (Lög fyrir framhaldsskóla, nr. 92/2008) provided each school with more independence, requiring them to decide on curriculum matters and make their own plan (see Sverrisdóttir in this volume).

The secondary education has two main roles: to award final degrees for vocational training and to prepare students for university studies. The length of the courses in vocational education varies, lasting from one semester to ten, but the most prevalent are three-year study programmes. Most teenagers attend upper secondary school, and dropout rates have been steadily decreasing in the past decade, with about 20% of people aged 25–34 not graduating from secondary education (see Statistics Iceland, 2022b). The dropout rate is an ongoing challenge in the Icelandic upper-secondary system. Although all students that so wish are entitled to at least two years in secondary school, the schools can set their own rules for selecting students based on grades from the compulsory level, which is mainly applied when schools become popular but have limited space.

3 The foundation – a school for all

For centuries, children in Iceland were usually educated in their homes by their parents and later by teachers who travelled around as part of an ambulatory school system. This arrangement continued well into the twentieth century in rural areas (see Guttormsson, 2008). In 1907, the first education act was set in Iceland and thereby formal schooling was established. The argument for it was that Icelandic children had far less educational opportunities than children in the neighbouring countries (see Guttormsson, 2008), also there were worries that children and youth in towns and villages were loitering and needed to be doing something more constructive with their time. However, due to strong disagreement towards making school compulsory, each local authority was allowed to decide whether they established formal schools or provided ambulatory schools. Thus, in education legislation until 1946 the authorities had the duty to provide education. This resulted in a big gap in access to schools between rural areas

and villages or towns as there were fewer rural schools and their school year was shorter. This inequality of educational opportunities became a controversial issue for years but faded out as the parliament agreed on a new educational act in 1974 that focused on compulsory education with equal educational opportunities for all children (see Garðarsdóttir, 2008).

The first Educational Act in 1907 brought about discussion of establishing one school for the 'common people' and another for the 'elite', but it was not realistic for such a small population to run two different school systems. Early on, children were grouped according to their reading skills as they began school and parents with more means or ambition prepared their children for the reading test before they began formal schooling. As a result of less preparation, learners from the lower class were most often grouped in less skilled classes which led to less motivation to study (see Garðarsdóttir, 2008). In this there was not so much difference between the genders but as soon as learners finished their compulsory education, more boys than girls would continue with their education, of course depending on the financial situation of families. Children with disabilities were not allowed to go to school, they went to institutions or stayed at home with their families. The exception is that a school for the deaf was established in 1865.

A new education act was passed by Alþingi (the Icelandic parliament) in 1946 (Magnúss, 1946). It marked a turning point in the education of children and young people. The law was intended to form a comprehensive education system for all school levels, decreeing that the first stage was children's school for 7–12 years olds (barnaskóli), the next stage was middle-school for 13–15 years old and then gymnasium. Compulsory education was established for all children and youth, from 7–15 years old. Those who completed the children's exam 13 years old were obliged to start studies at the middle school level and those who finished the so called landspróf (national exam) at 15 years old were allowed to enter gymnasium (upper-secondary education). All children were to be educated according to their development and ability, and parents were responsible for their schooling (Halldórsson, 1946). Provision was made for developing vocational training at the middle school level. Equality for education was increased as children from poor households were given grants to attend schools. However, children and youth with disabilities were still excluded from formal education.

4 A school for all? – Emphasis on mainstreaming

A new Act for compulsory schooling was passed 1974 and confirmed some important developments that had been brewing in the school system in the previous decades (see Jónasson, 1996). This Act changed some fundamental assumptions about schooling by mandating equal access to education with regard to residence (urban vs. rural), gender, and disability.

Following this act a slow transformation in the understanding of the role and responsibilities of schools began, from emphasis on teaching subjects which the learners were obliged to learn, to meeting learners' needs and organising instruction according to their development and understanding (see Jónasson, 1996). This Act stated explicitly for the first time in Icelandic school history that the school was for all children and that most children should be educated in the regular school, stating that "children who are considered to be so developmentally deviating that they cannot benefit from regular teaching in one or more subjects have the right to special teaching according to their needs" (Act on comprehensive education, nr. 63/1974, article 50). The Act categorised special needs into five groups and stating that two of those: a) "children, as judged by psychological services and other professionals lack the ability to conduct routine good primary school education; b) children whose health or other physical conditions, according to the school doctor, prevents them from practicing normal elementary education" should be educated in institutions which the state was obliged to build (lög um grunnskóla, nr.

63/1974, articles 51 and 52). The 1974 Act was later supplemented with the first regulation of special needs education in 1977, which further emphasised the categorisation of learners and secured financial support for special schools and special classes (see Jónasson, 1996; 2008a).

In the 1960s students who were previously excluded from school began to enter the school system. A turn in educational policy and school practices is highlighted in the law from 1974 that mandated education for all children. The law moves away from grouping learners by their abilities, and towards mixed-ability groups, while also ensuring schooling for all children (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 63/1974).

This legislation was built on ideas of mainstreaming as students with special needs could enter their neighbourhood schools and receive their education in the special education environment if they could not function in a regular classroom (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 63/1974). A school for mildly disabled learners was established in 1960 and in 1980 another for severely disabled learners. A school for physically disabled children was established in 1969 but was integrated into a general school in the year 1974. Still another school for learners with behaviour or social problems was established in 1974 and in 1980 a school for severely disabled children was established (Jónasson 2008a). Most of these special schools were situated in the southwest part of the country (with most of the population), but a school for learners with disabilities was also established in the northeast.

The mainstream schools set up special classes for children with learning and behaviour difficulties and emotional or social problems. In some cases, these special classes were initiated for certain types of diagnosed disabilities, such as autism, behaviour problems or blind children. Learners with learning difficulties in the mainstream school were mainly educated in special education rooms outside the classroom. Support was focused on reading, writing or mathematics. It can be said that this was the first movement towards integration where all learners were educated in the same school building.

5 Moving towards integration

In 1990, in response to criticism of the categorisation of special needs, which endlessly called for different specialised placements, lawmakers established a new regulation for special needs education, based on the 1974 Act (see Jónasson, 1996). This regulation explicitly affirmed the right of *all* children to access their neighbourhood schools (Reglugerð um sérkennslu, nr. 98/1990). Here the shift was towards assessing learners' needs *in the school environment* and rejecting the medical model of categorizing children according to their 'handicap'. The 1990 regulation based the funding for special needs education on a fixed estimate that 20% of the school population needed special education (see Jónasson, 1996; 2008a).

The 1994 UNESCO Salamanca agreement, which Iceland was a party to, states that special needs education had to be part of the overall educational policy rather than developing in isolation. It called for a major reform of the school system, and a new approach to education policy in which difference was viewed as normal, and education systems could respond effectively to diversity (see UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education, in the Salamanca statement, is grounded in the concept of social equity and is consistent with the social understanding of disability. The concept of inclusion presented in the Salamanca statement, has been difficult to translate to Icelandic and various terms have been used through the decades. The Ministry of Education coined the term "school without segregation" (skóli án aðgreiningar) in 1995 but in today's policy documents the term 'education for all' (menntun fyrir alla) is used.

The 1995 Act for Compulsory schools (nr. 66/1995) moved the control of and responsibility for schools, including special schools, from the state to the municipalities. This change led to

a relatively high level of decentralisation of education administration and provided schools with a high level of autonomy. The municipalities established an “equalising fund” to respond to concerns regarding how to finance the growing call for special needs education, to even out financial situations between different schools (Jónasson, 2008a). Contributions from this fund are based on the diagnosis of a medical specialist at specific qualified institutions, which means that the medical model was once again the basis for financing special needs education (Marinósson & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Jónasson, 2008b).

In the spirit of integration, the 1995 Act for compulsory education stated that schools should welcome all learners living in their neighbourhoods, teaching them according to their needs as equals, without specifically mandating that learners should not be segregated according to their needs (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 66/1995). On the contrary, ‘integration’ suggests that learners with special needs were supposed to adjust to the school, not vice versa; they could be educated in the same building as other learners, sharing the same space but the access to equal education opportunities was not secure (Jóhannesson, 2006; Marinósson, 2011).

6 Current status: Inclusive education

The latest Act for compulsory schools (2008) states that school practice should be in accordance with learners’ needs and attainment, supporting their development, well-being, and education. Learners’ educational needs are to be met in their neighbourhood schools without exclusion or regard to their physical or mental abilities (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 91/2008). For the first time, inclusive education is openly stated as the basis for the education policy.

The 2008 Act introduces several innovations:

- it uses the phrases *support system* and *support service* instead of special needs education;
- it builds education on learners’ competences instead of subject areas; and
- it requires schools to make an active plan of screening learners from first grade upwards to ensure that they are taught and supported according to their needs (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 91/2008).

The wording still identifies the source of learning difficulties within the learners themselves, rather than in how learning activities and the school environment are being organized. At the same time, it indicates that learners should have the opportunity to attain educational goals in different ways.

A regulation on learners with special needs from 2010 followed the 2008 Act, fundamentally transforming special needs education by shifting the focus from special needs and remediating learners’ failings to emphasising learners’ strengths, abilities, and circumstances. It also addresses how the school responds to diversity, equal opportunity, and participation in learning, giving the policy of inclusion increased depth (Reglugerð um nemendur með sérþarfir, nr. 585/2010).

The education system in Iceland at the comprehensive level underwent three reviews in the past decade in 2014, 2015 and 2016. The OECD conducted a *Review of policies to improve the effectiveness of resource use in schools* in 2014 (MESC, 2014). The main findings from this review show that school administrators and staff feel that the policy on inclusive schools is not sufficiently funded (see MESC, 2014).

A committee composed of representatives from municipalities, the Icelandic Teacher Union, and the Ministry of Education conducted an evaluation of the implementation of the inclusive education policy in the years 2013–2015 (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015). This

review produced two reports: a review of policies and academic research in relation to inclusive education in 2014 (see Ólafsdóttir et al., 2014) and a final report of evaluation of the education system (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015). The final report concluded that the ministry would commission the European Agency for Special needs and Inclusive Education to do an external audit of the Icelandic system for inclusive education which was performed in 2016 (European Agency, 2017, see Óskarsdóttir et al. in this volume).

Findings from these three reviews are in agreement that the theoretical background of inclusive education as humanitarian approach to education is strongly evident in the policy framework for the education system. However, they all have ideas for how to move the system forward and the main suggestions for improvement can be organised into three areas:

1. Clarifying the meaning of the education policy, what it means in practice at all levels and how to implement it. This involves a nation-wide discussion and discussion at all school levels to reach a common understanding of what inclusive education means, what it calls for in school practices and pedagogy. Also, this need is aimed at attending to support for teachers, their initial education and access to professional development to ensure they are prepared to work in inclusive school environments.
2. Ensuring coordinated cross-sectoral cooperation between the health, welfare and education systems at ministerial, municipality and school levels for shared ways of working and thinking with the interest of learners in mind. Included in this is to reach an agreement on minimum support available in schools and ensure equal access to specialist resources between rural and urban areas and different areas of the country.
3. Tending to the mechanisms for funding to make sure this is equitable and efficient at any level in the school system. Although the financing of the education system in Iceland is well above the OECD average, the financing in many municipalities is based on a classification system that leads to labelling learners based on categories of need. Stakeholders across all system levels call for a shift to more flexible funding that would allow schools to support all learners' needs in more responsive ways (see European Agency 2017; MESC, 2014; 2015).

Furthermore, across these areas there is a call for increased research in the field and a stronger quality assurance framework to monitor the system.

To follow up on the audit the Ministry of Education appointed a steering committee. This committee worked from 2017 to 2019 and consisted of representatives from three Ministries (education, health- and social affairs), The association of municipalities, the Home – School parent organisation, the Teacher union, the Association of Schoolmasters and the Teacher education universities. The strength of the group was that the participants came from all these different stakeholder groups. This meant that the viewpoints of parents, teachers and school principals were heard as well as from municipalities and the ministry level. This was the first time that the three ministries looked together at their roles and responsibilities in the education system and it was a direct response to the Audit's finding of a lack of collaboration between sectors.

This group discussed the findings from the Audit and initiated the following actions:

1. Initiating a nation-wide discussion on inclusion

The first action that the steering committee initiated was to organise meetings all around Iceland to discuss inclusive education. Altogether there were 41 meetings in 18 communities around Iceland in three months to follow up on the Audit findings. The aim of the meetings was to initiate a discussion about (see in detail Óskarsdóttir et al. in this volume):

- What inclusive education really means in practice

- What kind of practices the policy calls for
- What the main hindrances for implementing the policy in the school system are
- How to remove those hindrances or make them harmless.

2. A project on financing inclusive education with municipalities

This project was carried out in cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Association of Icelandic Municipalities – with the participation of 13 local authorities. The aim of the project was threefold:

- to analyse the current funding practices,
- to consider and present guiding criteria and proposals for continued work,
- to examine how a self-assessment tool for financing policies from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is useful in the Icelandic context.

The main results of this project indicated that the allocation of funds to schools is comparable between the participating municipalities. Participants believed that compulsory school funding was based on outdated methods, e.g. emphasis on the classification and diagnosis of students, which need to be reviewed with the aim of increasing the autonomy of school administrators in allocating funds. This will support schools as professional institutions that can solve most of the issues that arise in the day to day school practices. Thus, funding can support changes in school culture, teaching methods and the organization of support within schools (see Óskarsdóttir & Hreinsdóttir, 2022).

3. Cross-ministerial collaboration

The ministry of social affairs initiated cross-ministerial cooperation on an Act to promote the well-being of children and young people. The main goal of this Act is that children and parents have access to appropriate services and support without barriers. Those responsible must:

- monitor the well-being and prosperity of children and parents and assess their need for services
- respond to the needs of children and parents for services early and efficiently and
- consult between systems with the aim that services are continuous and integrated.

This Act was agreed in parliament in 2020 and is being implemented at all stages of the systems that have to do with children and family affairs (see in detail also Sigþórsson et al. in this volume).

7 Concluding remarks

The Icelandic education system has come a long way since the first Education Act in 1907. The development towards inclusive education is ongoing and there is strong political and social commitment to have an inclusive school system. The steps taken as a follow up after the European Agency's Audit of the system have been important to support further developments and a future direction has been taken with a policy of Education 2030 (Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneytið, 2021).

One of the main actions of the Education 2030 policy is the development of integrated school services throughout the country based on tiered support. Behind the education policy lies extensive consultation and analytical work to sharpen the vision of the development and structure of the Icelandic education system for the future in light of new challenges. The motto of the

policy is *Excellent lifelong education* and it rests on five pillars: equal opportunities for all, teaching at the forefront, competence for the future, well-being at the forefront and quality at the forefront (see Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneyti, 2021).

The minister of Education and Children's affairs has been, in a consultation with stakeholders at all levels of the school system, preparing a bill for a new law on school services that rests on these main pillars. The aim of the bill is to ensure equality in services for children and young people regardless of age, origin and place of residence, meet increasing demand for consultation and support for staff and administrators at school level, promote interdisciplinary cooperation and integration between school and level of service in the interest of children's well-being (Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneyti, 2021).

So, the ministry level is taking action and it will be interesting to follow the implementation of the Education 2030 policy and how the education system responds. Each school and each teacher need to reflect on their practices and set their own course in shouldering the responsibility to educate all students, ensure their participation and that they belong in school. The teacher education at university level also needs to be responsive and reflect on how inclusive education pedagogy is presented in courses and study lines and how preservice teachers are prepared to respond to a diverse group of learners and collaborate with others (see also Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir in this volume).

For learners progressing through the education system, it is important to review how they move from one school level to the next. What happens when young people with additional learning needs graduate from comprehensive education, how does the upper secondary level respond and what then happens at the university level.

Sustaining and developing an inclusive education system is a journey that has a goal but will be ongoing. According to what this chapter suggests, the Icelandic education system is on the right road on this journey, but it is easy to be side tracked and take an easier road. So, the journey needs to be constantly reviewed and assessed, demanding reflection, introspection, open-mindedness, optimism, flexibility and innovative thinking from all stakeholders. The teachers who are in the front line of the journey should not be alone in carrying the responsibility for developing inclusive education, but the system structure, governance and policies should be what keeps it on track.

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