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Challenges and solutions in inclusive education in Iceland: School perspectives and action proposals[1]

1 Introduction

The policy that schools are obliged to plan and conduct their work in line with the needs of all students, independent of academic abilities, and that all children are to be able to study in their local school was enacted in Iceland in 1974 (Compulsory School Act, No. 63/1974). This policy has been confirmed in various ways since that time and current legislation and national curriculum guide removes all doubt as to the schools' role as a democratic platform of co-operation, responsibility and respect for human values, where a special effort is made to exclude all manner of discrimination and separation and to support students' academic and social needs in the general operations of the school (Compulsory School Act, No. 91/2008; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014; The Preschool Act, No. 90/2008; Upper Secondary Education Act, No. 92/2008). For this to happen diversity must be regarded as a norm and all concerned must strive to eliminate obstacles to students' active participation in the school community with a relevant and meaningful curriculum, effective teaching and necessary support.

A report by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017) (here after European Agency) auditing the implementation of the policy of inclusive education in Iceland concludes that legislation and official policy formation of inclusive education is thorough and comprehensive. However, the report finds the implementation of the policy to be problematic, pointing out that the school community neither has a sufficiently clear definition of the concept of inclusive education nor a sufficient understanding as to the character of school operations on this basis. This conclusion is widely reflected in Icelandic research (cf. e.g., Gíslason & Sigurðardóttir, 2016; Matthíasdóttir et al., 2013). Challenges of this description are not limited to the Icelandic context as international research also brings up uncertainty regarding how to create an inclusive learning space within schools (Haug, 2017).

The report suggests, inter alia, the initiation of "a national and local-level dialogue … to ensure that all stakeholders understand inclusive education as the basis for high-quality education for all learners … [and] about the kind of schools and learning communities that stakeholders want and the best ways to achieve/develop these" (European Agency 2017,16). In response to this proposal a steering group of the Ministry of Education and Culture on inclusive education organised 23 meetings with representatives from all municipalities in Iceland in order to discuss inclusive education as an element in the formation of a new education policy until 2030. The meetings were held in autumn 2018, requesting the attendance of representatives of preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools, leisure services, parents' associations, school offices, social and school services as well as healthcare, a total of 2019 individuals (Ministry

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of Education and Culture, 2020). During the meetings, attendees completed an assignment in groups of six to eight persons (126 in total) under the heading "Education for All: Eliminating Obstacles" and each group submitted a written résumé of their discussion. The aim of this project was to give participants the opportunity to consider and co-ordinate their ideas as to the real meaning of the concept of inclusive education, the work procedures appropriate to this type of schooling, what kinds of obstacles they saw standing in the way of inclusive education and attempt to envisage strategies that could overcome the obstacles or render them harmless. To complete the project each group had to agree on the ten most effective strategies and arrange them in order of priority in a cairn or pyramid so that the most important strategy came at the top, two in second place, three in third place and four at the base of the cairn. The cairns of each group were then coded, resulting in a shared cairn reflecting results from all the groups.

This chapter is based on the analysis of results from the above-mentioned project. The objective is twofold. Firstly, to sum up the perspectives of those who attended the meetings on the implementation of the policy of the inclusive school, the main challenges they believe they are going to face and their ideas as to necessary amendments to strengthen the position of the inclusive school in the Icelandic school system. Secondly, to present proposals by the authors of this article regarding measures to strengthen inclusive education in Icelandic schools and determine which administrative level of the education system is to be responsible for the implementation of each proposal.

Apart from the Introduction, the chapter is divided into four sections. First, we place its subject matter in the theoretical context of pedagogy of inclusive education, school learning communities and the ecosystem of education. Then we summarise the outcomes of the meetings outlined above, followed by a chapter presenting our proposed measures for the strengthening of inclusive education in Icelandic schools. The final section of the chapter consists of a summary and conclusions.

2 Responsibility and support

The demands of inclusive education require teachers to be constantly searching for a pedagogy and methodologies which simultaneously respond to curriculum requirements and the diversity of the student population (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2020). Icelandic research, however, indicates the teachers have problems adapting study programmes to students' needs in such a way that they can be taught together as a group or combined class. Furthermore, schools' responses to learning difficulties, for example decisions relating to specialist teaching, are often arbitrary or based on medical diagnoses of psychologists (Harðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2019; Harðardóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2022). This leads to differentiating special solutions contrary to the social perspective characterising the policy of inclusive teaching which places students' difficulties in the context of social obstacles which restrict or exclude their participation, rather than seeking explanations by focusing on the student's own limitations (Oliver, 2013). Harðardóttir and Júlíusdóttir (2019) point out that the school system is in need of clearer guidance as to how the policy aims of inclusive education are integrated into municipal and school programmes and their implementation supported. The researchers conclude that the solution is to be found in extensive co-operation and joint inquiry by specialists, rather than diagnoses and remedies focusing on the learning problems of individual students. Foreign academics have come to a similar conclusion, cf., for example Gutkin and Curtis (2009) in their discussion of school-based consultation.

Emphasis on inclusion and inclusive pedagogy in teachers' studies and professional development is a prerequisite for its successful implementation in schools. This priority also

calls for teachers being able to work with diverse groups of students which requires mastery of flexible methodologies and the ability to co-operate with school staff and other professionals (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2020). But although it is important to approach inclusive education with an open mind and a positive attitude towards diversity, this by itself is not enough. Conditions supportive of students and teachers must also be created as well as a framework for criteria of competence and quality monitoring. And although teachers assume a key role in the implementation of the policy, they alone cannot be made responsible for the work procedures required by the policy; rather, its adoption must be seen as a co-operative effort including the participation of all who are professionally engaged at the various administrative levels of the education system.

2.1 The structure of inclusive education as an ecosystem

An education system which supports inclusive education may be regarded as an ecosystem consisting of linked structures, or sub-systems. Each structure contains agents responsible for administration and policy-formation, the operation and organisation of schools as well as learning and teaching (Anderson et al., 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Individual progress and learning occur through interaction with the environment and therefore it is a matter of priority that it should provide the best possible opportunities for everyone's learning and participation.

Fig. 1 shows the student centrally placed within the education system, surrounded by connected structures which make up the ecosystem through their interaction. The state (ministries) forms the outer edge of the ecosystem, the next is the municipalities, followed by the school as an institution and, finally, the students' learning space. Stakeholders operate within each structure, in their pre-determined roles, assuming the responsibility for an inclusive school and education system. All those structures, directly and indirectly, influence the student in work and play.
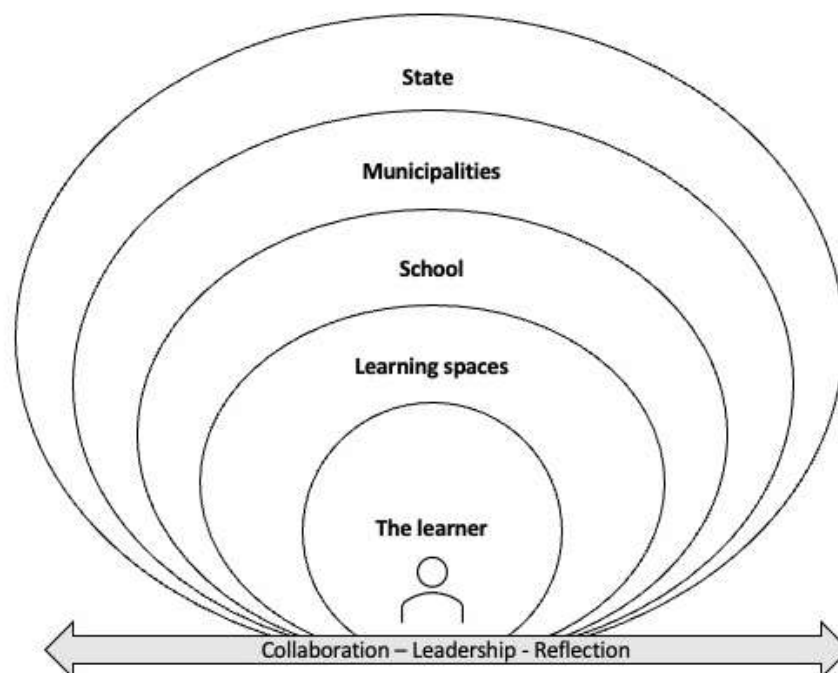

Fig. 1. The ecosystem of education – a theoretical model (Óskarsdóttir, 2017, 108)

An inclusive education system is not an isolated phenomenon. It is influenced by culture and community, social developments and international agreements and conventions which Iceland

has subscribed to. Within the ecosystem there is a constant flow between structures since each one is closely connected to its nearest neighbour, and they cannot be separated from one another. Thus, leadership, co-operation and reflection are important elements, both within each structure and across the spectrum.

Below each structure within the ecosystem will be outlined:

The framework of the state: The outermost structure of the ecosystem is based on laws and regulations imposed and adhered to by the state and the municipalities. The government can support implementation by removing obstacles from regulations, strengthening teachers' professional development and avoiding funding policies which encourage discrimination between students. The aim of policy formation is to provide a clear vision of the implementation of inclusive education, without stipulating specific approaches to this objective (Pijl & Frissen, 2009), and to demonstrate how the implementation is based on the joint responsibility of all those who work within the education system and those who occupy positions of leadership and policy formation.

The municipal framework: The second outermost structure is the community where the school operates and the municipal organisation within which preschools and compulsory schools find themselves. There must be continuity between levels within the education system, from preschool to university in such a way that both curriculum and pedagogy support students on their journey through the school system. In order to meet the diverse needs of the student population, support from diverse professional sources (i.e., from health, social and school services) should be accessible and these have to work together in supporting students and parents as well as school staff (reglugerð um skólaþjónustu sveitarfélaga, No. 444/2019; lög um samþættingu þjónustu, No. 86/2021). The community should be united in the duty to contribute to quality education for all students by accepting that inclusive education is part of all school development.

The school as an institution: Practices in each school are framed by traditions, culture, school atmosphere, values and ideology together with school administration and co-operation in the school with parents, external agents and the school's nearest neighbourhood. The responsible agents in this structure are school administrators, teachers, school support services and the general staff of the school. The school policy and school curriculum should indicate how the emphasis on inclusion is manifested in school activities. Therefore, schools must consider how visible the policy is and reflect on whether they have indeed adopted its spirit. Here, school management practices are important – how staff are recruited, what steps are taken to monitor that the school activities are inclusive and what measures the school has taken to support teachers, students and parents – how accessible these measures are and how they are used.

Students' learning space: The structure closest to the students and which most strongly influences them is the pedagogical approach of the lessons. Here the teacher plays the main role by organizing the learning space, learning and teaching and by creating the classroom atmosphere. Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to know their students well, to be responsive to students, imaginative, flexible and prepared to listen to their students. Co-operation with other teachers, special education teachers and support services is essential for success. The main values of teaching, crucial for attaining the aims of inclusive education, are to regard diversity as a resource, support all students, expect excellence from all students, working with others and regarding the profession of teaching as a learning process (Watkins & Donnelly, 2014).

The student: The students, with their various personal characteristics are at the core of the ecosystem. Those characteristics, however, should not determine students' academic success since the ecosystem as a whole should assume responsibility for that aspect. All decisions and

actions within the ecology should be aimed at assisting the students in achieving success and belonging to the school as fully functioning participants (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020). The term "achievement" is to be understood with reference to the results of academic studies as outlined in all sections of the curriculum, not only those that can be assessed by means of examinations or their results. Students' participation and the quality of their school experience is based on the prerequisite that the students have an opportunity to express opinions of their learning – and influence what, where, how and with whom they learn.

2.2 Schools as learning communities

The concept of a learning community is well-known in international dialogue about a school culture which is likely to strengthen schools' professional infrastructure and support progress. It appears to be the unanimous opinion of academics that its most significant characteristics are the following: Shared responsibility for students' learning and success; shared vision and values; professional development and collaborative professionalism which, inter alia, are revealed in organised social support, team teaching and solution-focused dialogue, reflection and knowledge creation. Among further items of importance, we should mention administration and leadership which prioritise advancement and focuses on empowering teachers as agents of change and providing them with a professional environment which aims at establishing connections and co-operation (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Well-aimed support and guidance for the benefit of teachers and other professional agents in the field have a decisive impact on the adoption, development and maintenance of a learning community. It is of major significance, furthermore, that work procedures, daily organisation and internal conditions in the school are supportive of co-operation (Svanbjörnsdóttir, 2015, 2019). Thus, one could say that the concept of learning communities is closely related to professionalism and professional development, since it has been demonstrated that it is mainly teachers and administrators who, as advocates of this approach, can bring about lasting change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016).

Inter alia, the emphasis on inclusive education in a school's learning community is manifested in the following:

- The school's traditions, culture, ethos and values all demonstrate inclusion.
- The school has a distributed leadership, reflecting a strong vision of inclusive education so that all decisions are made with this policy in mind.
- All school staff are collectively responsible for the implementation of the policy.
- The interpretation of the policy is reflected in the management of solutions and support, in school policy, organisational aspects, (e.g., timetable), work processes and school curriculum (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).
- Co-operation is a priority and the school endeavours to ensure integration and teamwork of school specialists and co-operation with parents, the local environment and different service systems outside the school (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014; Sigþórsson et al., in this volume).

3   Voices from within the Icelandic school community

In this section of the chapter, we sum up the perspectives of those who attended the meetings on inclusive education in Iceland in autumn 2018, including the principal challenges they feel they are facing and their ideas as to the changes needed to strengthen this aspect of the Icelandic school system. Those perspectives are summed up in the following themes:

- External framework, co-operation and education;
- perspectives, support, policy and vision;
- students, teaching and learning, human resources and leadership.

1 External framework, co-operation and education

Participants emphasised the need to review guidelines regarding the allocation of funds to cater for student diversity, in order to prevent student diagnoses to become a premise for financing the operation of the school as has been the general rule. Furthermore, to offer teachers added flexibility in professional development opportunities to better enable them to introduce innovative working methods and develop a learning community. There was general agreement among participants as to the urgent need of ensuring equal access to services for the benefit of students and teachers of both compulsory and upper secondary schools independent of residence for example by means of information and virtual meeting technology and inter-municipal co-operation.

A special priority was given to the development of team teaching in schools and to the creation of learning communities by wide-ranging co-operation: Mutually between teachers and administrators and including other professionals within the school (for example occupational therapists, psychologists, pedagogists); with the local community, between school levels, and not least between service systems such as school, community and health services to enable them to "talk together" more effectively.

It was considered necessary to review the content of teacher education, focusing on inclusive education, increase knowledge of the subject within teacher education institutions and strengthen the connection between teacher education and the general operation of schools. Teacher education needs to become more diverse and stronger in professional content (see Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir about teacher education and Leonhardt & Kruschel in this volume). Special attention must be given to staff members of foreign origin, for example by offering them Icelandic lessons during school semesters.

2 Perspectives, support, policy and vision

The conclusions indicated that an altered perspective was a prerequisite for increased positivity regarding the policy of inclusive education; this applied to everyone within the school community, the authorities and industry. Special emphasis was placed on the need to work deliberately against established and conservative ideas and traditions which worked against the policy as regards teaching methods and assessment, maintaining, for example, that academic studies are more important than other fields of learning and that some schools were intended for special groups of students to the exclusion of others.

As the groups see it, the school services must be comprehensive, diverse and co-ordinated, focusing on the quality of education in terms of inclusive education and on students' welfare. Services must also be increasingly provided within the schools, and the service providers must be visible and accessible to teachers and they must support pedagogical aspects and professional guidance, not least in cases of new recruits. The point was made that support systems need to be co-ordinated, both within the school services and externally and they must provide diverse counselling from a variety of professionals for the benefit of teachers, parents and students. Resources must also be increased to meet the demands of the multicultural society with interpreter services and support for teachers and parents of children of foreign origin. Furthermore, people of foreign origin should be given a more prominent role in the schools.

The participants emphasised the need for creating national unity with regard to long-term education policy, ensure a clear vision and shared understanding of the content of the policy of the inclusive school. Measurable objectives should be defined for each school level and the responsibilities of different agents. The participants called for a formal implementation process, including action plan, clear work procedures and tools, evaluation and follow-up.

3   Students, teaching and learning, human resources and leadership

The participants stressed the importance of meeting the varied needs of students at all school levels and ensuring they are provided with suitable tasks and assignments. Among important factors for this purpose, the participants mentioned increased diversity and flexibility in methods of learning and teaching, the development of learning materials, and more options for students with regard to subjects and learning paths. The participants also highlighted the importance of giving the students a voice in the school administration and the selection of learning materials and learning paths.

The groups emphasised the importance of improving and developing teaching methods, focusing on relevant professional reflection, variety, flexibility and problem solving. They highlighted the need for basing teaching on learning objectives and criteria of competences rather than textbooks or a rigid curriculum. The participants underlined that curricula need to be ‚alive‘ and subject to change in step with social developments, that the integration of subjects was helpful and that school and leisure activities should be integrated. They felt that academic studies were given excessive weight compared to art and craft subjects, that the creative aspect of all school subjects should be emphasised. They also mentioned that assessment needed to be increasingly adapted to each individual. In this context, it was considered essential to co-ordinate the understanding and implementation of the grading and assessment system as stipulated in the national curriculum for the compulsory school. The group highlighted the need to increase the number of professionally qualified teachers in each subject as well as staff with other kinds of specialist knowledge – as well as adding to the number of school service specialists.

4   Authors' proposals

Below, the authors present proposed actions to develop inclusive education in Icelandic schools. The proposals are based on the results of the teamwork described in the preceding chapter and placed in the context of the conclusions and proposals of the audit conducted by the European Agency (2017), of academic resources on inclusive education, learning communities and the ecology of education. The student is the common denominator of all the proposals and their joint objective is to fulfil the aims of Icelandic education policy on inclusive education.

The proposals are in six sections: 1) teacher education and professional development, 2) learning communities, 3) working environment in schools, 4) evaluation of school activities, 5) school services and 6) the interaction of systems and utilisation of resources.

4.1 Teacher education and professional development

During the series of meetings in 2018 a decisive request was presented for the attention to education and professional development of teachers and administrators since teachers' mastery of the pedagogy of inclusive education is the key to successful work in students' workspace

(Anderson et al., 2014; European Agency, 2018; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Mincu, 2015). In the report by the audit team of the European Agency (2017) the same factors are emphasised and, in addition, there is a discussion on teachers' education and professional development. The audit's fifth proposal (p. 129) focuses on the same issue.

In light of this, we propose that the pedagogy of inclusive education feature more prominently in teachers' initial education and occupy a central position in their professional development in each school. In addition to the supportive function of municipal school services regarding professional development, this topic should become one of the legally stipulated roles of universities operating teacher education programmes.

The responsibility for the implementation of this proposal lies with the Ministry of Education and Children, municipalities and universities and, last but not least, the schools themselves and their staff.

4.2 Learning communities

The conclusions of the series of meetings in autumn 2018 frequently highlight the needs for various characteristics of learning communities in schools (cf., e.g., DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir, 2015, 2019), for example co-operation and teamwork, professional learning and development as well as a joint policy, vision and leadership; and, furthermore, the need to further develop the content of inclusive education and to assist teachers in identifying work procedures which support or obstruct such practices.

According to the report by the audit team of the European Agency (2017), discussions aiming towards moulding the perspectives of those who work at inclusive education are considered to be among the levers of development within the education system. This reflects ideas relating to the importance of learning communities, as do various proposals by the audit team, for example regarding joint problem-solving, formal and informal networks and the shared responsibility of professionals.

In light of this, we propose that the formation of learning communities be identified as a key aspect of school development. A plan should be made as to their strengthening learning communities in Icelandic schools by means of a joint effort led by the Ministry of Education and Children with the participation of universities, funds which award grants to school development and municipal school services.

The proposal calls for initiatives from national and local authorities, whilst the responsibility lies no less with school administrators and staff.

4.3 Working environment in schools

Icelandic schools are generally well equipped with regard to accommodation, working conditions and equipment. Accordingly, it is one of the conclusions of the report of the European Agency (2017) that "it can be argued that Iceland's general education system is relatively well-resourced" (p. 90), although the use of resources is criticised in the report.

Nevertheless, there are numerous indications of growing stress at work and increased frequency of burnout among teachers in preschools and compulsory schools (Arnardóttir, 2017; Beck, 2017; Daníelsdóttur, 2017). For the most part, the sources referred to above indicate that the stress is particularly connected with teachers' working environment, such as lack of in-field support, for example with regard to meeting students' varied needs and introducing new

curricula, lack of teamwork and collegial support and dissatisfaction with facilities, apparatus and accessories.

The conclusions of the series of meetings in 2018 clearly indicated that participants believed that there are considerable differences between school levels regarding the working environment issues outlined above, and the preschool comes off poorly in this comparison (cf., also Dýrfjörð, 2017). With a view to having a positive influence on many of the aspects which cause work-related stress among teachers, we propose alterations in the working environment of preschool teachers with the aim of giving them additional time for preparation and professional development during working hours and we suggest that a special effort needs to be made to increase the number of qualified preschool teachers. It is also essential to investigate the causes of stress and burnout among teachers in general and carry out alterations of their working environment based on the results of such an investigation.

These proposals first and foremost call for the responsibility and initiative of municipal authorities regarding preschools and compulsory schools and the state in the case of upper secondary schools. It can also be argued that teachers' working environment to some extent depends on the organisational culture and internal conditions of the schools concerned and consequently is the responsibility of school administrators.

4.4 School evaluation

School evaluation is closely related with ideas of learning communities, since both external and internal evaluation is a legal obligation at all school levels. External school evaluation is conducted by the Directorate of Education and Reykjavík Municipality (Directorate of Education, 2018), although there is but scant knowledge as to how both the state, municipalities and schools react to the conclusions to ensure that the evaluation leads to improvements. Nevertheless, it is underlined in a review by the Directorate of Education (Jónsdóttir, 2018) that much improvement is needed in the planning and implementation of schools' self-evaluation and its use for development.

With a view to this, we propose that a special effort be made to strengthen the self-evaluation of schools at all levels and to ensure that schools are supported in its implementation and processing, not least when amendment plans are being compiled. We propose, furthermore, that criteria be established, for the use of national external evaluation, regarding the quality of school practices, focusing on inclusive education and the strengthening of the organisational infrastructure of schools described in these proposals.

The responsibility for the implementation of these proposals lies to a great extent with the Ministry of Education and Children and the Directorate of Education as well as with municipal authorities and schools. The development of criteria regarding the quality of school practices must be conducted in close co-operation between those parties, with the participation of the associations of teachers and principals and evaluation experts from universities. The responsibility for school support should lie with school services administered by those who run schools at each level; that is, the state with regard to upper secondary schools and municipalities in the case of preschools and compulsory schools.

4.5 School services

Many of the proposals in the conclusions of the meetings of 2018 relate to school services in one way or another, such as requests for instructional and professional development, and

consultation in schools to support change in teaching methods. The strengthening of school services, their co-operation with institutions at university level and their staff support in the implementation of inclusive education in daily activities are also subjects brought up in the conclusions of the European Agency (2017) as being among some of the most urgent matters to be dealt with (pp. 77–88).

This conclusion reflects the view that municipal school services have a significant role to play in the development of school activities and that, inter alia, this role involves teacher consultation and participation in professional development and other comparable activities, the evaluation of school activities as well as the co-ordination of specialists, both within the school and externally, who deal with student issues where support in school is involved (reglugerð um skólaþjónustu sveitarfélaga við leik- og grunnskóla og nemendaverndarráð í grunnskólum, No. 444/2019; cf. also Sigþórsson et al., in this volume)

In order to improve the support of schools and their staff we propose the establishment of comprehensive school services involving preschools, compulsory schools, music schools and upper secondary schools and a review of the Regulation relating to those services. Furthermore, that quality criteria be established with regard to the work procedures of school services and that the Directorate of Education be given the task of carrying out an external evaluation of these on the basis of those same criteria. It is essential, furthermore, to establish a more active and comprehensive co-operation between universities and school services, for example with regard to professional development and educational. Finally, all municipalities, both large and small, must be enabled to provide the services they are obliged to according to compulsory school legislation and regulation on school services. In addition, we emphasise the reduced significance of clinical approaches to tasks relating to school services. Instead, there must be emphasis on school service support of students and parents. Furthermore, the support provided by the school services for students, parents and school staff should be characterised by a social perspective on students' individual needs and school-based consultation (Gutkin & Curtis, 2009).

The responsibility for the above proposals lies both with the state and the municipalities; the responsibility for school services for the benefit of preschools and compulsory schools lies with the municipalities, but the responsibility for school services at upper secondary school level lies with the state as the operational agent of that school level.

4.6 Co-ordination of service systems

At the meetings in autumn 2018 participants underlined the need to review criteria on the allocation of funds in response to student diversity so that student diagnoses do not become a premise for the resourcing of schools. Furthermore, a strong plea was expressed for the co-ordination of service systems such as those relating to school, social and health matters.

The report on the audit by the European Agency (2017) also concludes that the clinical emphasis on services to children leads to the excessive use of diagnoses in accordance with various categories of individual needs which subsequently are used to justify the allocation of resources to the students concerned. The authors of the report come to the conclusion that this arrangement counteracts the principles of inclusive education by directing funds to special solutions for a limited group of students instead of using those resources for the benefit of the entire student population by developing a comprehensive organisation for the purpose of attending to students' diverse needs. Within such an organisation school staff must work together for the support of students and service systems outside the school must also be co-ordinated, such as school services, social services, child protection and support as well as health

systems so that they can work towards a similar purpose (cf., e.g., Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014; Harðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2019; Skoglund, 2014).

In order to break out of this vicious cycle we propose the continuation of work already begun on the review of current regulations relating to schools' access to funds for the purpose of allocating financial resources to inclusive education and to the strengthened co-ordination of human resources and service systems. This is emphasised as regards one of the levers discussed in the report by the European Agency (2017, pp. 137–141). We also suggest that a simultaneous organised effort be made to co-ordinate school services, social services and health services for the purpose of attending to the needs of children and parents in a comprehensive manner. With a new act on the co-ordination of services for the welfare of children (lög um samþættingu þjónustu, No. 86/2021) a large step in this direction may be anticipated as a result of the successful implementation of this legislation.

This is a task of huge proportions with responsibilities transcending all layers of the ecosystem, calling for comprehensive shared commitment and the joint decision-making of ministries, municipalities and organisations under their auspices.

5   Conclusions

Icelandic education policy lays down ambitious aims for inclusive education. Nevertheless, the conclusions of the European Agency (2017) indicate that the policy is some distance from being fully implemented. The meetings held all over Iceland in autumn 2018 established a venue for listening to opinions voiced by the school community, the administration of the education system and the institutions which support schools in the implementation of the policy, as well as co-ordinating the perspectives of those stakeholders so that they have a common understanding of inclusive education. An analysis of the results of those meetings and the proposals presented here could serve as a guide on the journey towards a continued development of an education system aiming for the success of inclusive education.

It is clear, nevertheless, that these proposals can only be implemented on the basis of wide-ranging consultation and shared decision-making by those in charge of all structures of the ecosystem of inclusive education. It seems reasonable to expect the Ministry of Education and Children and other state departments in the outermost layer of the ecosystem of education to be under obligation to assume leadership regarding this undertaking and seek co-operation with municipalities, university schools of education and teachers' unions in order to ensure the success of these proposals.

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