

The present and future of municipal school services for inclusive education in Iceland¹

1 Introduction

With the ratification of Compulsory School Act, No. 66/1995 it was decreed that local authorities assume responsibility for the operation of compulsory schools from 1 August 1996, whereas previously they had been in charge of preschools. As a result of this change the local authorities were required to establish school support services for preschools and compulsory schools within their administrative areas. According to Article 2 of the current Regulation on municipal school services for preschools and compulsory schools and compulsory schools' pupils welfare councils (Reglugerð um skóláþjónustu sveitarfélaga við leik- og grunnskóla og nemendaverndarráð í grunnskólum, No. 444/2019) (hereinafter referred to as Regulation on school services) those services comprise, „on the one hand, support for students in preschools and compulsory schools and their parents; on the other, professional support for schools and their staff“. The aim of those services is to ensure that „pedagogical, psychological, developmental and sociological knowledge is utilised to maximum effect in the operation of the schools“ and to „strengthen schools as professional organisations that are able to solve most issues they confront in their operation“. Article 3 of the Regulation also states that municipalities shall „issue instructions in their school policies as to how the aims of this Regulation are to be achieved“.

Now, a quarter of a century later, the Icelandic school support service is at a crossroads. A recent report by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (European Agency, 2017) on the implementation of the policy of inclusive education in Iceland reveals that while the national policy on inclusive education is clear, there is little consensus among policy makers at the municipality level and practitioners alike, as regards what the policy means in practice, how it might be implemented, what practices constitute inclusive education, and how inclusive practices in schools might be supported. The report emphasises the importance of strengthening municipal school services and abandoning a clinical perspective on the challenges students face during their schooling. This should be in favour of a social standpoint (Graham et al., 2020) and school-based consultation (Gutkin & Curtis, 2009; Larney, 2003) by co-ordinating the work of experts within the schools and external student support services.

Furthermore, new legislation on integrated services for the welfare of children (Lög um samþættingu þjónustu í þágu farsældar barna, No. 86/2021; see Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Hauksdóttir in this volume) entitle children and parents access to suitable integrated services according to their needs and without hindrances. This integration broadly includes large categories such as education, health, law enforcement, social services and child protection (Article 2). The continuity of services is strongly emphasised as is an easy flow of communication between organisations. The children's welfare legislation does not define the roles of individual organisation in the integration of services and the role of the municipal

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school services seems to be less defined than the role of other service systems such as the social and health services. Therefore, there is every reason to strongly emphasise the role of school services in the implementation of the welfare law as well as learning from the results of a study of the school service outlined in a later section of this paper.

The aim of this paper is twofold: First, to provide a compilation of results from a study of municipal services to preschools and compulsory schools in Iceland. Second, the paper aims to build a vision of how schools and school services might develop their practice and cooperation with the aim of developing schools as learning organisations capable of enacting the Icelandic education policy of inclusion. This is built on the premise that educational challenges, such as inclusive education, social and emotional learning, culturally responsive teaching and the teaching of plurilingual children, need to be placed in the context of school service operations.

The paper is divided into three parts: Following the introduction the first part presents some of the main conclusions of the research into municipal school services. The second section of the article outlines the recommendations of the research team regarding prototype school services, followed by a few conclusions.

2 Current school services

Since 2020 a research team at the Faculty of Education of the University of Akureyri has presented the results and conclusions of research into municipal services to preschools and compulsory schools (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2020a, 2020b; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2022). The principal objective of the research was to investigate the structure and operating procedures of the school services and monitoring how the municipalities ensure that their schools have access to the services they are entitled to in accordance with legislation and the Regulation on school services (No. 444/2019).

Three kinds of data were gathered in the study:

- Firstly, a questionnaire survey was submitted to the principals of preschools and compulsory schools as well as to administrators of school services. Respondents representing school services were in most cases superintendents, but they could also be municipal managers/mayors in those municipalities which do not run a school office.
- Secondly, nineteen interviews were conducted with superintendents, heads of departments and other staff members of school offices such as psychologists, special education consultants, teaching consultants and speech or language therapists in five pre-selected cases. The interview schedule was in line with the questionnaire survey aiming to generate more detailed answers to various items than could be obtained by questionnaire.
- Thirdly, an analysis was conducted of school service documents published on municipal websites in the five cases where interviews were carried out. Special emphasis was placed upon analysing the clarity of municipal policies regarding the organisation and content of school services as presented on the web, what kind of service strategies were to be found in municipal school office descriptions of their own activities and what was the structure, organisation and professional environment of school services.

In addition, the kinds of application forms available to users of the service were investigated as well as accessibility to various information relating to the school services, for example staff, work descriptions and co-operation with other service systems.

2.1 The structure of the services

The conclusions from the research into municipal school services reveal that the services have developed differently depending on municipality. A large majority of those who responded to the questionnaire survey either have their own permanently staffed school service, or their own school service in co-operation with an outsourced service provider. The third most common type is a joint undertaking in the form of municipal co-operation. The organisation of the services is often complex and responsibilities are distributed between different service specialisations such as the education department, social services and child protection committees, but those organisations do not always have a co-ordinated perception of the tasks in question. According to the website of the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities 17 compulsory schools out of the 162 run by municipalities (independent schools are not included) do not have access to school services (IALA, n.d.). This applies to approximately 10% of the schools run by municipalities and, according to Statistics Iceland, there were 1127 students in those schools during the school year 2019–2020 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.).

Regulation on school services (No. 444/2019) stipulates that municipalities shall, as part of their school policy, outline how the aims of the Regulation on school services are to be achieved. Nevertheless, research data reveals that only very few municipalities comply in detail with this requirement and many of them not at all, nor can any joint policy among municipalities be identified as to the tasks allocated to school services. There are few teaching consultants; the bulk of the staff are psychologists and special education consultants and their services feature most prominently in the operation, as well as those of speech therapists. This is despite the willingness of most respondents to expand the role of the teaching consultants. Thus, the focus of the services appears to be mainly based on financial contributions and the specialisations of available staff, rather than on a targeted definition of the services and the relevant human resources policy. In addition, the professions of special education consultants and psychologists appear to have acquired a certain legitimacy within school services and those professions appear to have, to a certain extent, appropriated this sector.

2.2 The functions of school services

All research data indicate that the main functions of school services involve student diagnoses, diagnostic assessments and to some extent, diagnostic consultation as a summing up. The approach is, first and foremost, clinical and diagnoses are used to prescribe special treatments and to ensure that these can be funded. On the other hand, there is but little emphasis on pedagogic consultation to teachers and other staff. A telling sign of this is that on the websites of school offices investigated available forms were almost exclusively designed for the purpose of applying for diagnoses and other solutions relating to children's 'individual problems' whereas application forms for pedagogic consultation were practically non-existent. In numerous interviews, superintendents expressed a strong inclination to change this emphasis and they believed that their perspective was gaining ground in the schools, despite their prevalent emphasis on diagnoses of student 'individual problems'. However, in spite of this interest deliberate action appears to be lacking and there does not seem to be consensus between schools and school services, or even municipal councils and/or education committees, as to what should be changed and how.

The research data strongly suggest that there is a divergent understanding as to the meaning of the concept of consultation and the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the consultation process. As far as school services are concerned, psychologists' diagnostic sessions where the outcomes of diagnoses are submitted to teachers, are regarded as pedagogic

support and consultation. Nevertheless, those sessions mostly involve the reviewing of diagnostic results and suggested treatments without monitoring of how successful teachers are in adhering to them in the classroom – neither is an orderly assessment conducted as to the success of such procedures. There are strong indications, however, that consultation is not seen as a solution-oriented dialogue between teacher and consultant, where both are specialists in matters relating to the child. The consultation process is much rather regarded as a set of instructions issued by the consultant to the teacher where the latter does not influence the procedure, nor carries any responsibility, apart from the role of complying with the instructions.

2.3 Support and co-operation

All research data indicate little emphasis on school staff support, professional development and other improvement activities. According to principals who participated in the questionnaire survey the school services show limited initiative regarding staff support and consultation and the same applies to school activities such as counselling and assisting new teacher recruits, the compilation of a school curriculum plans, the development of formative assessment as well as support for their own school service staff. Conversely superintendents indicated considerably more support in the above areas, thus reflecting the divergent perspectives of those two sources. The interviews indicated that although school service staff members would prefer to deliver more in-field consultation and provide better teacher support, they felt that principals and teachers made unrealistic demands which the school services could not satisfy due to severe lack of human resources. It would be difficult, for example, to undertake in-field consultation when the staff needed were non-existent.

In the questionnaire survey an open question asked respondents to identify what they saw as the main challenges to meeting the demands of inclusive education. The answers indicated that those challenges relate both to student's scholastic situation and their conduct and well-being, both mentally and socially, as well as to children with multiple problems. The identified challenges, however, differ between preschool principals, compulsory school principals and school service administrators.

- The compulsory school principals believe solutions could be found in enhanced specialisation, more professional variety in the schools and stronger support from school services which could bring more specialist support into the schools, give teachers more assistance regarding professional development, and provide a greater variety of solutions.
- The playschool principals see recruitment problems and lack of professional knowledge within the school as the most serious problems (see Hinz in this volume). They want school services and the education authorities to be more supportive as regards teachers' preservice and continuing education and to create an environment which attracts qualified teachers as well as increasing the space allocated to each child.
- School service administrators feel that the greatest challenge to inclusive education is teachers' reluctance to alter their work practices in line with inclusive education and maintain that the correct response to this is to strengthen teachers' professional development.

The questionnaire survey also contained an open question relating to the content and organisation of co-operation between school services and social services. Most respondents gave similar answers which mostly focused on the organisation of the co-operation, for example consultation, meetings or teamwork as regards matters concerning individual students. They also spoke about joint operations, the sharing of accommodation, pointing out that the

two service sectors share the same staff to a certain extent and may even share a senior manager, but there was less emphasis on co-operation on an equal basis focusing on student-related matters. Conspicuous concepts from these responses are

“(student) problems, difficulties, student-related matters, diagnoses/diagnostic teams/diagnostic solutions, search for solutions, processes and reactions to them, specialised teaching, psychological services and interviews”.

Many responses relate both to child protection and families. Education sometimes comes up in the context of matters relating to individual students. Only very few responses (three from school service administrators and one from a compulsory school principal) are in any respect connected to professional progress or school development.

Despite the overall picture drawn here, the data also contain various examples of deliberate steps taken to increase co-operation between social services, health services and school services by creating teams of professionals in charge of matters relating to children and their families to ensure early intervention for the benefit of children in their daily surroundings. In such instances social service staff and staff members in closest contact with the child, for example teachers and other members of school staff make a joint effort to provide the child with necessary support (cf., for example, Múlaping n.d.).

3 The future of school services

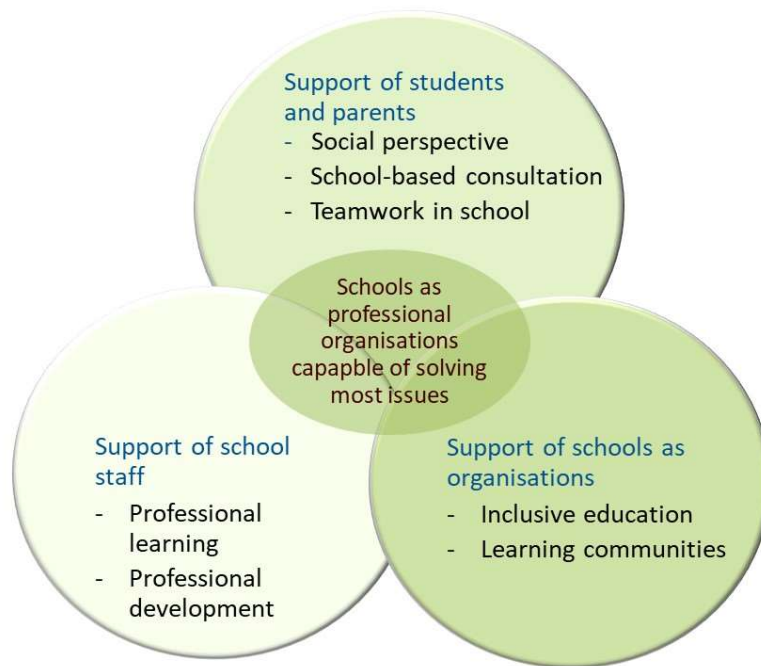
With a view to the results from our research and the theories and data on which it was based we shall attempt here to present our future vision of municipal school services and the areas of emphasis we consider important to its operation.

3.1 Three areas of school services

The functions of the school services can be broadly divided into three areas (cf. for example the Regulation on school services, No. 444/2019):

- support of students and parents;
- support (e.g., pedagogical) of school staff in their daily operations; and
- support of the school as an organisation.

Most importantly, those functions must be regarded as a whole (cf. Fig. 1), where each factor reinforces another to strengthen schools as a professional organisation.



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Fig. 1. Functional model of school services

The results of the school service research regarding the diagnostic emphasis of the service are to some extent contradictory for at the same time as the schools appear to increasingly seek various diagnoses relating to students' difficulties most of those concerned are unhappy with the ways in which diagnoses are conducted and, in particular, how they are followed up.

- In opposition to the clinical emphasis of school services we wish, first of all, to present the social perspective (Graham et al. 2020) where a special effort is made to regard the student as part of the social context and the learning space where he or she is being educated, instead of identifying the problem with the student as an individual and consequently making use of clinical diagnoses and seeking 'special solutions' in search of problems and proper responses to them.
- Secondly, we focus on school-based consultation with its emphasis on solution-oriented co-operation between diagnostic experts, teaching consultants and school staff; here the consultation concentrates on how to respond to the student's circumstances. This is a school psychological perspective (cf. e.g., Gutkin & Curtis, 2009; Larney, 2003) which directs our attention to the need to further develop school psychology as a profession in Iceland.
- Thirdly, we highlight the need for teamwork involving teachers and specialised staff inside the school, such as special education teachers, developmental therapists, occupational therapists, study and vocational counsellors and even family counsellors (cf. more detail later in this chapter), and the co-operation of those parties with school service consultants. There has been a significant increase of those professions in the school system in recent years and it is obviously their function, no less than that of school services staff, to provide support for students and parents.

It may be deduced from the perspectives outlined above that support intended for individual students and parents is no less – and perhaps first and foremost – support to teachers and other school staff. The school and its staff are always responsible for the student's welfare; it can never be transferred to the diagnostic professional. Consequently, school staff must assist the student when problems arise, working together or, depending on circumstances, with the specialists of school, social and health services. This perspective assumes that co-operation

with a consultant and a search for solutions working with him, involves the professional learning of staff members, new experiences and thus the professional development of staff which, in the long run, builds up enhanced skills within the school to tackle comparable tasks in the future, at the same time strengthening the school as a professional organisation. This is, in our opinion, the only way out of the vicious cycle of clinical diagnoses which feature in one interview after the another in our research data.

Another aspect of supporting school staff is, then, general assistance regarding in-field operations, such as the enactment of national curriculum and school curriculum plans, diverse teaching methods and the development of teaching in certain subjects or subject areas, classroom management, etc. School-based consultation can also promote this kind of support, especially since it is often impossible to separate tasks of this kind from problems affecting individual students.

The third strand of the service model being recommended here and presented in Fig. 1 is support of the school as an organisation and the development of learning communities in schools (cf. e.g. Hall & Hord, 2015 and Leonhardt & Kruschel in this volume). This is by no means a separate task, but closely related to the other two. In this case we are talking about supporting larger initiatives affecting the school as a whole or specific sectors within it, for example schools' internal evaluation, responding to the results of an external evaluation, the implementation of a curriculum and education policy, for example that of inclusive education, social and emotional learning (cf. e.g., Sigrún Davíðsdóttir et al., 2019), multicultural school activities and the teaching of plurilingual children (Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017).

3.2 Incremental support and co-operation within and outside the school

Inclusive Icelandic school and education policy assumes that the general foundation of child welfare consists in all children belonging to a school community where teachers constantly seek ways to adapt the curriculum, learning culture (cf. e.g., Christiansen, 2021) and school environment to students' diverse needs in order to enhance the quality of learning and improve social conditions in the school. Such a foundation is not laid by diagnosing and treating 'problems' confined to individual students. Nevertheless, the school frequently has to respond to students' needs for increased support relating to their studies, emotions or social skills. Finally, individual students may require stronger and more comprehensive support. Such circumstances have to be responded to by incremental support from professionals within the school and, in rare cases, from experts outside the school as outlined in Fig. 2.

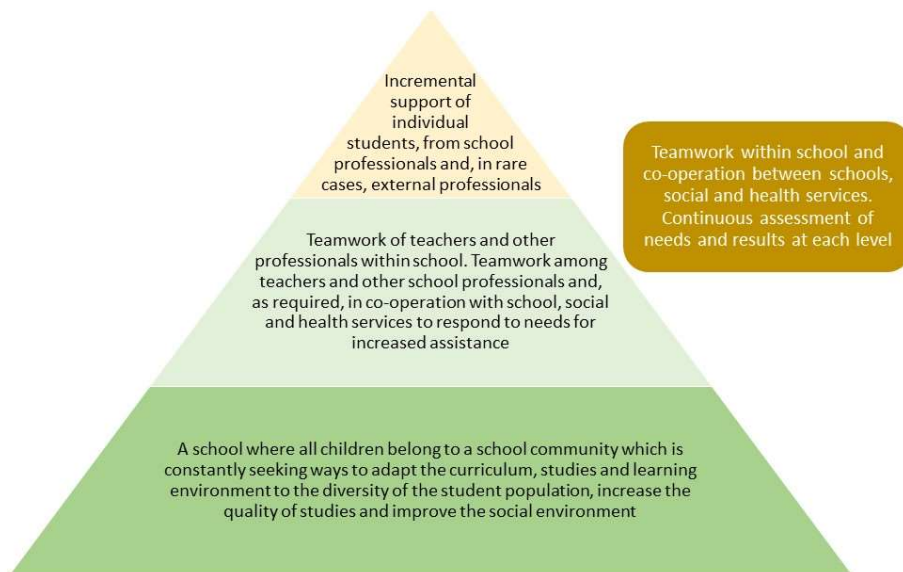


Fig. 2. Incremental support in school operations (adapted from Daníelsdóttir et al., 2019).

When seeking to meet students' diverse needs, it is of paramount importance to co-ordinate the roles of all parties concerned in order to ensure an integrated mode of operation. This involves the focused teamwork of specialists within the school and of divergent external systems. This co-operation of all relevant groups must be conducted on an equal basis at all school levels; that is, preschool, compulsory school and secondary school. Fig. 3 illustrates an example of a model displaying a comprehensive overview of divergent support systems internal and external to the school.

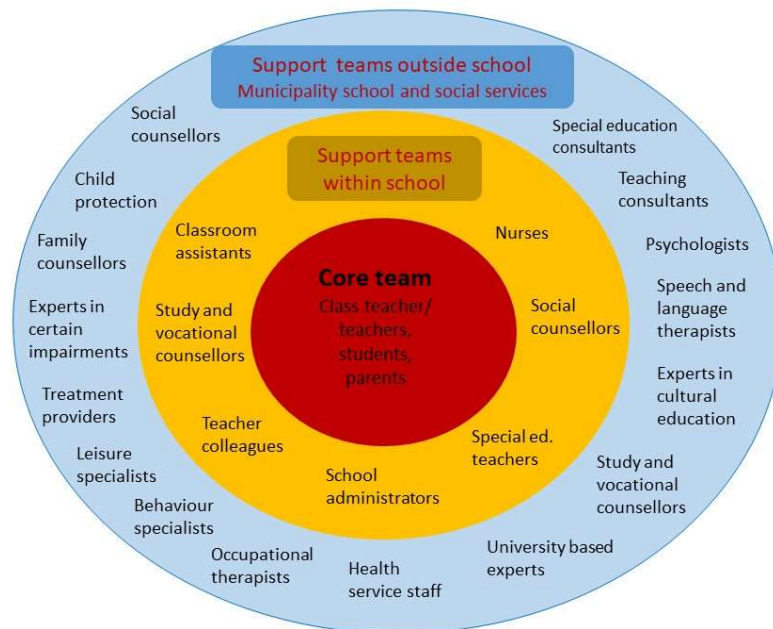


Fig. 3. A comprehensive approach to student support (adapted from Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014).

The central circle of the model contains students, teachers and parents, constituting a core team with the main focus on the student. In order to acquire a comprehensive perspective of the student's needs and circumstances it is essential that teachers conduct a formal discussion of his or her situation. The teachers must also be informed of the attitudes and feelings of the student and his or her parents regarding the operation of the school, studies and liaisons.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the student's circumstances and to bridge the gap between his or her needs and the organisation of teaching and learning the teacher should be able to consult other professionals who form a supportive team inside the school. In Fig. 3 the members of this team are placed in the mid-circle of the model. They can be school administrators, fellow teachers, special education teachers, study and vocational counsellors, developmental therapists, nurses, etc. It is of vital importance that the principal provides instructional leadership, is informed about the situation and supports the teacher professionally as needed. It may be necessary to temporarily strengthen teacher support as well as assisting a certain student. The teacher might, for example, need to strengthen his own knowledge or skills in a certain area, or, alternatively co-teaching could be arranged (cf. also Inclusive Education Canada, 2014.).

The two inner circles of the model constitute the environment of the student and the teacher and finding solutions within this environment is the preferred course of action. It is, however, of the utmost urgency and in fact a precondition for success to present a clear outline of support for teachers in their daily work with students. This support must be visible, well organised and effective, having the main objective of supporting teachers in their role of better meeting the students' diverse needs and expectations. The support must also be based on a team effort and distributed leadership where many individuals make important contributions.

The outermost circle of the model contains specialists who are generally external to the school and represent different systems, such as municipal school services, social and health services and even consultation from university experts. Here we find professionals such as family counsellors, psychologists, social counsellors and health service staff. School administrators, teachers and other professionals within the school are active participants in assessing students' needs and respond to them, for example by bringing together different agents who must be involved in issues at hand. It is important to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all those inside the circle in order to ensure efficiency and follow-up, both within a team and among the teams involved. A certain party must also be identified who assumes responsibility for the follow-up of issues dealt with. The membership of each team varies, depending on circumstances. Although municipal school services are placed in the outermost circle their impact must also be felt within the central circle to ensure their support of the work conducted there.

3.3 Teamwork

To ensure continuity in support and the development of work procedures described above the school must establish a clear approach to teamwork. The impact of activities on students' development and progress must be monitored, with interventions when results turn out to be below expectations. Efficient teamwork can help produce a better overview of student issues and school responses. Thus, reflecting on daily operations is of crucial importance. School administrators should listen to teachers' perspectives and all involved should seek joint approaches and results for the purpose of further development for the benefit of all students. Here, teachers and school administrators are key agents.

Fig. 4 presents a model of teamwork, indicating the composition and work procedures of teams as well as demonstrating how diverse participants work together within them (Hylander & Skott, 2020).

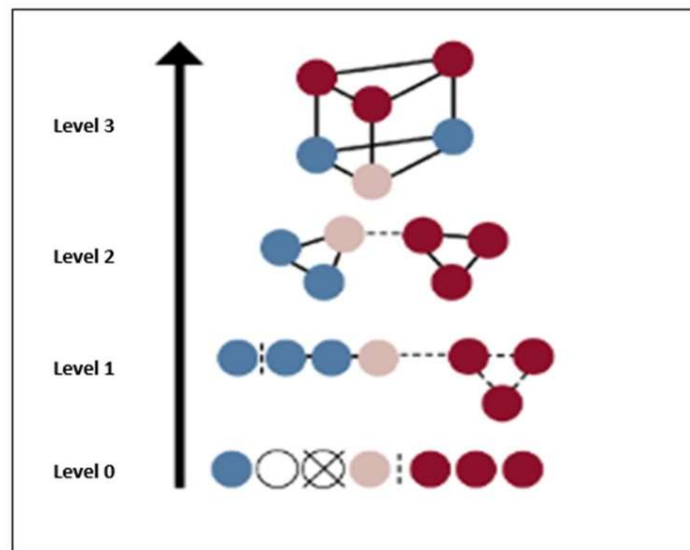


Fig. 4. Team composition and activities (Hylander & Skott, 2020).

- *Level 0*: There is no teamwork here although teachers and other professionals work both inside and outside the schools (cf. the two outer circles in Fig. 3). Nor is there principal leadership of teamwork. In those circumstances all individuals try to do their best with little or no integration and work procedures are characterised by ‘putting out fires’ rather than co-ordinate activities and work towards joint solutions. Consequently, there is no overall perspective of students’ circumstances.
- *Level 1*: At this level, a contingency plan has been initiated, although work procedures of those involved have not been co-ordinated. Teachers’ teams have been formed but their work has not been co-ordinated by means of plans relating to specific roles and responsibilities. Teachers mostly directly contact other experts within the school (cf. Fig. 3) for example if problems arise and responses usually comprise involving more sources of support.
- *Level 2*: Here support teams have been established and some ideas formulated as to how different professionals in the team can relate to teachers, for example by offering potential consultation. At the same time, there are communication snags as relationships are still under development resulting in gaps between different agents as regards their roles and responsibilities.
- *Level 3*: By the time this level is attained, teamwork has become the normal mode of operation and part of the school culture. Core elements have been formed which link different partners in one co-ordinated whole with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

4 Summing up

It is obvious that the school services managed by municipalities have not developed as was anticipated when the municipalities took them over in 1996. Municipal policy formation and leadership regarding this important sector has not attained its objectives. School services are not based on a fully-formed service model created in step with academic and school political

reasoning which could serve as a foundation for service policies and leadership in individual municipalities. Support of school staff and schools as institutions has fought a losing battle in the competition with diagnoses which are first and foremost conducted in accordance with clinical principles. School services vary from one municipality to another and a significant number of schools do not maintain active links with them.

Municipal school services are also at a crossroads because of the implementation of legislation regarding integrated services for the welfare of children (No. 86/2021), Act on the Quality Inspectorate for Welfare Work (lög um Gæða- og eftirlitsstofnun velferðamála, No. 88/2021) and the initiation of a new education policy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). This legislation is certainly a step forward, but it does not apply to school services and it is hard to envisage how they are included in the sense outlined in this article. The law mainly focuses on responses towards the child *per se*: assessment – diagnoses – follow-up – rather than dealing with children's learning environment and the facilities available to them in the schools. It is essential, therefore, that the municipalities themselves clarify the role and status of the school services in the implementation of the law, along the lines proposed in the article. Only thus can services to children be made comprehensive in the sense that a balance is achieved between all its elements without separating aspects focusing on the child *per se*, on the one hand, from the school environment, on the other.

Both social and school services are, by law, municipal responsibilities. The legislation referred to above contains non-negotiable provisions as to municipal responsibilities in the sphere of social services. If the social services and school services are to be properly integrated through the implementation of the law, the same must apply to both service systems; they must exist in the same location under the same administration. This article has argued that the main responsibilities of school services must be interrelated and mutually supportive. It must, therefore, be regarded as unlikely that some kind of centralised school service organisation – with or without the participation of state institutions – first and foremost responsible for professional and school development, would be capable of initiating the comprehensive school services described in this paper. It is rather to be feared that support of children and parents will remain in its current clinical rut, removed from the context of the professional development of those who now work in the school and from the general development of school practices. It is just as unlikely that a centralised school service institution will contribute to the integration of social and school services which must be seen as a prerequisite for the effective implementation of the law regarding integrated services for children. Nevertheless, municipal school services might benefit from centralised support or a forum of co-operation for its professional operations, as would also apply to other school operations undertaken by the municipalities. This, however, would neither aim to take over municipal tasks in the field of school services nor reduce municipal responsibilities in this area, but to empower and support integrated local services for the benefit of schools, students and parents.ⁱ

It is of paramount importance to render school services visible in the integrated services being discussed here. Municipalities must provide an improved definition of the services that are their responsibility and reach a consensus regarding a service model and human resources policy which yields a balance between service sectors, defines the division of responsibility between schools and school services and endeavours to educate staff in order to enable them to work in accordance with the service model. At the same time, similar demands must be placed upon the school services as apply to other aspects of welfare services. For this to happen it will be necessary, inter alia, to define school service criteria in such a way as to ensure their compliance with the Act on the Quality Inspectorate for Welfare Work (Lög um gæða- og eftirlitsstofnun velferðarmála, No. 88/2021) and ensure it is provided in a comparable manner as other aspects of welfare services. There is no reason why school services should be exempted from the

provisions of this legislation. Similarly, the government, who is in charge of secondary schools, must answer the question of how to ensure school services in secondary schools for the benefit of progressive school operations and the welfare of students at that school level.

School services worthy of being taken seriously will always be a solution-oriented co-operation between schools and external service institutions – with regard to general work procedures which are the foundation of the welfare of all children in the school, with regard to the school's internal support networks which grasp students needing additional support in school and with regard to students who require a significant degree of support and even external treatment (cf. Figs. 1–4)

The question is often asked how small rural municipalities can be expected to manage running a school service. This is in itself an important question, but it is not valid if it is to focus on school services alone. The question must be how small rural municipalities can be expected to operate *integrated services for the welfare of children*. If we are to be able to answer that question, we cannot isolate one particular aspect of the service – the answer must apply to all of them. Providing the answer, however, is not the task of this article, because the analysis presented here and the solutions suggested apply equally to work procedures and policies of school services in both densely populated and rural municipalities.

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ⁱ In this connection, you may wish to consult a newly established association of eight Scottish education districts, named: *Northern Alliance*, cf. <https://northernalliance.scot>

And, furthermore, cf. a new report on the Scottish education system: Muir, K. (2022). *Putting learners at the centre: Towards a future vision for Scottish Education*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/documents>