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Challenges and opportunities in the education of students with immigrant background in Iceland

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study on how municipalities organise and structure the support for students with immigrant background. The study is part of a larger research project, Inclusive Societies, which aims to compare integration patterns of immigrants in Iceland in various municipalities across the country. The project's overall goal is to examine immigrants' situation in Icelandic society with regards to language, employment, education, culture and satisfaction. In the spring of 2019, qualitative data were collected in interviews in four municipalities with heads of school offices, principals of schools, teachers and special education teachers on issues related to the education of students with immigrant background. In the paper we present findings on educational policies regarding students with immigrant background, support and training offered to teachers, and the challenges and opportunities in the education of students with immigrant background in Iceland.

Keywords: students with immigrant background; municipalities; education; qualitative research

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the growing number of students with immigrant background in the Icelandic school system and the support they receive from local school authorities. Recent research shows that the Icelandic school system has not succeeded in meeting the education needs of this group of students (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018; Tran and Lefever, 2018). This situation is also well known in many other countries across Europe. According to the PISA 2009 study (OECD, 2013) immigrant students who share a common country of origin, and therefore have many cultural similarities, perform very differently across school systems depending on the country they live in. The following example is given: “Immigrant students from the Russian Federation living in Finland, Germany and Israel perform around the OECD average in reading while those in the Czech Republic score about 30 points below the OECD average – the equivalent of a full year of school – and those in Greece score more than 50 points below average” (p.2).

In the OECD summary it is concluded that the wide performance differences between students with similar socio-economic status and a common origin suggest that schools and the education policy in the host countries influence these students’ performance. While immigration policies, similarities between the immigrants’ and the host culture, and other social policies also explain some of these differences in performance, some education systems appear to be able to facilitate the integration of immigrant students better than others. The comparison between countries including various socio-economic factors indicates that school education and policies can have an impact on students’ performance and also minimise performance differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students. Immigrant students tend to do better in countries and economies that rise to the challenge of diversity and whose school system is flexible enough to adapt to students with different strengths and needs (OECD, 2013).

The Icelandic context and policy frameworks

According to Statistics Iceland (2020a), the total population of Iceland was 364.134 on 1st of January 2020. The immigrant population has been rising steadily over the last twenty years, and its proportion of the entire population in Iceland has gone from 1.8% in 1995 and 3.6% in 2001 to 13% in January 2020 (Statistics Iceland, 2020b). For a long time, Iceland was portrayed as a rather homogeneous country in terms of the population’s background, language and culture. This has changed rapidly in the last few years although it varies between municipalities. There is only one city in Iceland – Reykjavík – with 132.000 inhabitants, and the capital region as a whole (Reykjavík and surrounding towns) has a total of 234.400 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland, 2020c), which means that around 2/3 of the population live in Reykjavík and its surrounding towns. However, immigrants live in almost all communities in Iceland and the percentage of immigrants is not highest in Reykjavík but in much smaller municipalities near Reykjavík, in the Eastern fjords and in the Westfjords, where immigrants are up to 28% of the inhabitants. Although municipalities are required to fulfil the same Act as the local service providers (Local Authorities Act No. 138/2011), they are at the same time independent and administrated by democratically elected local authorities acting on behalf of the residents of the municipality. Their capacity to take on various tasks can vary depending on their population and economic status, and

according to the Local Authorities Act (No. 138/2011) “municipalities may collaborate with each other as regards the operation of the tasks that they are unable to undertake on their own or believe will be more economical to resolve in such a manner”. Municipalities with only a few hundred inhabitants can obviously not provide the same level of service as the larger ones.

The Ministry is responsible for the implementation of legislation pertaining to all school levels. This includes the tasks of creating curriculum guides for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools, issuing regulations and planning educational reforms (Government of Iceland, 2020). Pre- and compulsory schools are run by local municipalities in Iceland; thus, the municipalities are responsible for the operation and evaluation of compulsory schools (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). Upper-secondary schools and higher education institutions are under the administration of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture which sets the National Curriculum as well (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

Most students with an immigrant background are in pre- and compulsory schools (ages 2–16) and are thus the responsibility of each municipality across the country. Increasing immigration to Iceland in the last two decades has impacted Icelandic schools in various ways as these changes require schools and teachers to respond to the educational and social needs these students may have, such as additional support in learning the language and getting friends.

The Icelandic education policy is based on the ideology of equity and inclusive education (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011) (sometimes referred to as “School for All”) and schools are supposed to offer students appropriate education with an emphasis on equal or equivalent study opportunities. Schools should operate as learning communities where diversity and the different needs, abilities, and characteristics of students are respected and addressed. Furthermore, a fundamental principle of the Icelandic education system is that everyone must have equal access to education irrespective of gender, economic status, geographic location, religion, disability, and cultural or social background (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

The aim of this paper is: To explore how municipalities organise and structure the support for students with immigrant background. Findings will be presented on educational policies, on support and training offered to teachers, and on the challenges and opportunities in the education of students with immigrant background in Iceland.

Literature and background

In general, when it comes to immigrant students, research in Iceland has revealed the need to better formulate education for immigrant and refugee students. Research shows, for example, that teachers need more and better support to understand the needs of these students and manage their education (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018). The research findings of Ragnarsdóttir and Hama (2018) among refugee families indicate both positive and challenging issues experienced by teachers, the refugee children and their parents. Most of the children show signs of doing well both academically and socially in school after the first few months while the parents worry that their children are not gaining enough academic knowledge and would like to have more information about their schooling. The

researchers claim that multilingual education is generally not in place in schools and that the emphasis is laid on teaching Icelandic as a second language. In their research, Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl (2018) found some positive signs regarding the welfare and wellbeing of students, as both parents and teachers reported that students feel good in school and in their classes. There is a good relationship between teachers and students, and parents and teachers describe this as friendly and supportive. In Iceland, schools are seen to be responsible for establishing and maintaining collaboration with all parents and, according to the teachers, the immigrant parents need a supportive network of other parents to help them be more active and integrated as parents of school-age children. This can be seen as an opportunity for schools and parents of all children to actively contribute to mutual collaboration.

Integration and belonging

Research on integration processes among migrants and refugees has to a large extent focused on their relation to their country and place of origin on the one hand, and to their new country of adoption on the other (Liden, Seberg and Engebrigtsen, 2011). Recent studies have suggested that integration may be more pluralistic than hitherto assumed (Olwig, 2003; Zhou, 2001). Studies show that even after several generations of upbringing in a migration destination, children and young people might grow up within communities of strong diasporic or transnational ties rooted in a country of origin of migrant ancestors. Therefore, some scholars have suggested that the concept of integration should be replaced with concepts of transnationalism and diasporic links to homelands, in order to understand how migrants may remain closely attached to their places of origin (Vertovec, 1999). Similarly, Olwig (2003) points out that earlier migration studies viewed children as the agents of integration into a new country of opportunities, but today they are often seen as guardians of identities rooted in a distant ancestral homeland that continues to be of importance in their adopted country of residence. This shift of focus in migration research can be related to the downplay of monocultural nationalism in favour of global integration, an approach that seeks to improve the social position of immigrant minorities by working for the recognition of a particular cultural background tied to their country of origin (Baumann, 1999; Olwig, 2003).

In recent years, rural studies have focused on migration and integration related to the successful integration of migrants (Paulgaard, 2017). It has become evident that integration is not only the concern of the immigrants' ability and willingness to integrate; it also depends on the capacity of the locality to facilitate the integration process. In addition, integration includes, on a daily basis, social and cultural interaction between the native-born majority and migrant newcomers.

The findings of Olwig's (2003) research indicate that the children's identification and belonging also refer to places that they encounter in their everyday lives, including the school as a primary place of identification, due to the time spent there, important relationships and activities. Children thus operate with multiple, shifting identities, and develop multiple relationships and a sense of belonging (Motti-Stefanidi and Masten, 2017; Ragnarsdóttir, 2015; Ragnarsdóttir and Hama, 2018; Tran and Lefever, 2018). Building on such a perspective, children should be seen as actors in their own right, capable of developing different ties and a sense of belonging that reflect their understanding and interpretation of

their everyday lives. This might be important in order to analyse their integration in schools as well as in other arenas and networks in the daily life, and to inform policy.

The role of education for the integration of children

Demographic changes in many European countries and the diversification of societies and schools have triggered debates on various issues related to education and school development. Research in many European countries has revealed the marginalization of ethnic minority students in school systems. Educational policies and practices frequently exclude, devalue or marginalize students from migrant, minority or non-dominant language backgrounds and position them within a deficit framework, rather than acknowledging and affirming their strengths and abilities (Nieto, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 2009). In many cases, the majority language becomes the criteria by which student ability is measured, entailing that the lack of majority language abilities is regarded as a deficiency and resulting in labelling and categorization.

Schools face various challenges when working with children of immigrant background, including teachers' limited understanding of their situation and needs. Block *et al.* (2014) note that with the global increase of refugees and asylum seekers, and people on the move, recognition of the importance of the school environment for promoting successful settlement outcomes is growing. However, schools may be poorly equipped to recognize and respond to the multiple challenges of this group of children.

While there exist many intractable internal inconsistencies within the research data, the overall data point to significant challenges that migrant and refugee children face in integration and participation as well as learning the language of their new country. These data demonstrate that these children are far more likely to drop out of school early and perform worse on standardized tests. Furthermore, these data demonstrate that attainment gaps in certain countries actually widened from the first generation to second generation migrant pupils (OECD, 2010, 2015)

Ragnarsdóttir and Lefever (2018) have pointed out that while educational policy and curriculum guides in Iceland emphasize equity and inclusion, multilingual and heritage language issues have generally not been sufficiently addressed in official policy documents. Their research, and that of others, has documented inequalities and marginalization of immigrants in schools and communities in the Nordic countries, including Iceland. However, there is evidence in recent research findings in Iceland that particular schools and communities have succeeded in their quest for inclusion, equality and social justice for this group of students (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015).

Methods and Data Sources

The data collection was structured around municipalities as the main providers of service at the community level. There are 74 municipalities in Iceland, ranging in size from only 43 inhabitants to 126 thousand inhabitants. To preserve the anonymity of respondents, only municipalities with an immigrant population of 300 individuals or more were considered for the study. In the qualitative part of the project, data were collected in 2019 in semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) in four municipalities with heads of school offices, school principals, teachers and special education teachers

on issues related to the education of students with immigrant background in the respective municipalities. The four municipalities were chosen purposefully to reflect different percentage rate of immigrants and different immigrant population ratio, from 6-20%. One municipality can be described as being within the capital region but the others outside the capital area. In total, 10 individuals were interviewed, and the duration of each interview was approximately one hour. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed according to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We used the Nvivo analysing programme in order to identify and generate themes across all the interviews.

The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed of the research. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law no. 90/2018 about data protection. The participants' identities were kept secret and given pseudonyms when presenting the findings. The researchers took precautions against any possibility of disclosing the participants' identities.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data: Educational policies in four municipalities; support and training offered to teachers; and challenges and opportunities in the education of students with immigrant background.

Educational policies in four municipalities

The data shows that municipal educational policies differ and only two out of four municipalities have clear and well-developed policies. The well-developed policies have a broad focus and were developed in cooperation between various sectors and experts. They include the cooperation of schools (pre-schools and compulsory), leisure time and sport centres, and they also have implementation plans. These plans require that practices align with the policy. In the municipalities that did not have a clear policy it was evident that teachers struggle to respond to the needs of immigrant students and there was a lack of coherence in practices. Elísa, a teacher, framed it like this:

“In fact, I think the municipality has no policy. This is just, you know, the compulsory school has its own, the preschool has its own and there is no connection between the two. The social and school services are not part of this, I think, it is my experience, so I think nothing like that is in place.”

In one municipality in the countryside there is a reception plan (l. móttökuáætlun) in place, dated ten years back. Although the number of students with immigrant background has been rising fast in this small community (around 30% bilingual students in the preschool and 20% in the compulsory school) the document has not been updated. According to the head of school office in this municipality, a clear division is made between the status of the newcomers; either they are refugees under the quota regulations, or they are immigrants that come on their own seeking jobs. If they are quota refugees, they enter a very structured and supported programme lasting one to two years but if they arrive on their own as immigrants, the reception is less structured and even fragile. This applies to education and schooling as well. It seems that if there is a previously established immigrant group in the municipality,

the system relies on its support for the newcomers and somehow believes that the municipality doesn't need to interfere as much in their adaptation:

"It matters so much where [the people] come from, people may be coming from a completely different culture... as our largest group are Poles who have integrated into the society. It is these connections; they have good connections. However, if people come from Iraq, we really need to understand their culture and respond appropriately. Then there will be more interaction."

To summarize, the educational policies differ enormously in the four municipalities, as does the implementation of these policies. Furthermore, groups of newcomers receive different services, ranging from a well-structured service for refugees, to a looser and less structured service for immigrants.

Support and training offered to teachers

Support and training for teachers seems to be fragile and no structural or long-term plan is in place. Teachers, particularly in two municipalities, reported a lack of knowledge on the issue of immigrant students and being put in circumstances where they need to cope without support or training. Karen, who works in a small school in the North, said about this:

"I feel like we are expected to cope on our own and I have really been struggling this winter because I'm aaaa... yes both inexperienced and also not having someone with me that... who checks if I'm doing the right thing and monitors my work... I am alone and I must rely on myself."

Karen's situation and experience were also mentioned by other teachers who were in general longing for professional and collegial conversations and consultation. Furthermore, the teachers mentioned that they lacked knowledge and tools to evaluate students' skills in Icelandic, making it difficult to make purposeful plans for the students. This was confirmed by Sóley, the principal in Karen's school, who said:

"We do not always know their [students'] academic status and I have heard that there is an assessment tool that is probably very exciting... I think it can be of great benefit... we may not always be challenging them where needed."

It seems that there are conflicting statements regarding requests for courses or professional development concerning students with immigrant background as teachers state that they get few offers on this matter while principals and heads of school offices claim that teachers do not call for this.

Challenges and opportunities in the education of students with immigrant background

Numerous challenges were identified. In the smaller communities in the countryside challenges were related to a lack of knowledge and educational training. Andrea, a teacher in the countryside, said:

“I can be quite honest with the fact that we are out here in the country, I find it very difficult here. This is what I need, education about bilingual children... ..This is all in Reykjavík and it has been a bit that these courses have sometimes been on Mondays to Wednesdays and maybe run like this for a few weeks, [not a suitable arrangement for rural teachers]. I mean, we cannot attend when it's like this.”

In general, teachers reported that there was a lack of staff within the school to learn from and collaborate with. The teachers who are responsible for students with an immigrant background describe themselves as "islands" and complain about the lack of collaboration as they are not part of teams within the school. In all the municipalities a lack of qualified teachers was highlighted, even in the larger municipalities. Communication with parents was mentioned as a challenging factor, especially in relation to reaching out to parents, getting messages through and building trust. Rósa, a head of a school office, said in this regard:

“It is always a great challenge to communicate with parents, that is what we have had difficulty with... not necessarily taking care of the children themselves.... it's approaching the parents and being able to get the correct message across all the way and get them to trust us and contact the school when something happens.”

In a municipality with a rather well-established policy a principal mentioned that he is most worried about children who were born and raised in Iceland and said:

“They do not have a good enough language comprehension or reading comprehension, they can speak well, their pronunciation is very good, but they do not really have the skills they need to learn. We have become very successful in teaching them the reading skills, but I think we are a bit confused about... I think their study progress comes to a halt in 5th grade, something like that.”

In all municipalities there was a willingness to better bridge the support and service systems, so the service is centred around the child. Some of the municipalities had already taken some steps into this process, others planned to do so.

Discussion and conclusion

The Ministry of Education and local municipalities are responsible for the educational policy and the operation of compulsory schools in Iceland (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). Even though only four municipalities are part of this qualitative research it became evident that there is a wide difference between them regarding whether or not there is a municipal policy in place on educational matters for students with immigrant background and how up to date it is. In two rather small municipalities there was hardly any such policy in place. In one of these two municipalities immigrants are nearly 25% of the total population. Municipalities are required to follow the same Act (Local Authorities Act No. 138/2011) and fulfil the same criteria of service. It was evident in this research that the biggest municipality in terms of population had developed its policy and procedures far better than the others. Even though policy on its own and in itself is not a guarantee for changed practices it can create an

awareness, but obviously a weak or no policy can't be a guiding light for practices. It is important to highlight these findings as data from OECD (2013) show that this situation can play a role in creating or preventing the so called "performance gap", that is the performance differences in schools between immigrant and non-immigrant students, where immigrant students perform worse. The OECD data suggest that schools and the education policy in the host countries influence these students' performance. Therefore, the education systems are one variable - and an important one - when it comes to facilitating the integration of immigrant students. Policies and their quality can give an indication of how ambitious municipalities are regarding students' academic performance as students tend to do better in countries and economies that rise to the challenge of diversity and whose school system is flexible enough to adapt to students with different strengths and needs (OECD, 2013).

In one of the municipalities it was mentioned that as they do not have high numbers of students with the same background and languages, they try to individualise the service around each student. Despite good intentions, this can result in the lack of an overview of students' positions as no structured measures are followed and implemented. Teachers in this municipality reported being "lost" in how to tackle the teaching and learning of students. Thus, being too flexible and without a structured plan can have negative consequences and leave teachers frustrated in their quest to respond to students' needs.

Facing challenges like teachers' lack of knowledge and learning how to work with children of immigrant background is not a new phenomenon identified in Iceland as it has also been documented in research findings in various countries (see e.g. Block *et al.*, 2014; Nieto, 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 2009). Research in Iceland indicates that education for immigrant and refugee students needs to be improved in various ways, e.g. through more support and a stronger knowledge base for teachers (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir and Hama, 2018).

Based on the rich and wide research findings that have emerged during the last two decades (see e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018; OECD, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir and Hama, 2018), it is thus not acceptable not to respond and to ignore the knowledge already in place. This is even more important today, keeping in mind the global increase of refugees and asylum seekers, and of people on the move in general. Policies, schools and school environment can have an impact on the successful settlement and performance of students in schools, as stated by Paulgaard (2017), who has explored the integration process in rural areas. This applies to many places in Iceland, including some of the municipalities in this research. In Paulgaard's research it has become evident that integration is not a one-way process, and thus not the sole concern of the immigrants' ability and willingness to integrate, as it also depends on how well the locality is able to facilitate the integration process. In this research we found examples where the responsibility of the settlement and integration was laid - albeit informally - on the existing culture group in the community. By doing that the municipality doesn't take responsibility according to law and regulations and, most importantly, loses the opportunity to make connections with newcomers and guide them through its own system. Such actions - or lack of actions by the municipality might prevent that immigrants develop a sense of belonging (Olwig, 2003) towards their new homeland.

Integration into schools is the first step of integration into a community. It is therefore vital that students have a successful and pleasant beginning as newcomers where they experience the school as a professional institution that is able to deliver education according to their needs, as required by law and curricula (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). It is also important that schools and municipalities in Iceland learn from examples of good practices which have appeared in recent research findings in Iceland, where particular schools and communities have succeeded in their quest for inclusion, equality and social justice for this group of students (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015; Ragnarsdóttir and Lefever, 2018).

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