



# **Experiences and expectations of successful immigrant and refugee students while in upper secondary schools in Iceland**

Susan Rafik Hama

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a PhD degree



**UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**



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while in upper secondary schools in Iceland

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## Preface

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## Abstract

The influx of refugees and immigrants into Iceland continues to affect the society socially, culturally, and politically. Like many other European countries, Iceland has become home to many refugees and immigrants, including young adults. This influx has affected the education system, and many schools have developed different models to serve the diverse needs of the increasing number of immigrant children entering the system. In spite of the obstacles – which include cultural and linguistic differences, struggles with different school systems and academic programs, educational level, financial standing or country of origin, little education, and limited family income – many refugee and immigrant students are enthusiastic about learning, and are able to succeed both academically and socially in their new learning spaces.

Research has shown that immigrant students drop out of school as a result of different factors, such as not valuing school and having poor relationships with teachers and peers (Makarova & Herzog, 2013) and that immigrant teens in some ethnic groups suffer a higher dropout rate than the national average (Morse, 2005). According to a study conducted by Grétarsdóttir (2007) on educational progress among youth whose heritage language is not Icelandic, more than half of the respondents either never attended upper secondary education – i.e., the three to four years after compulsory school, typically about ages 16-19 – or dropped out. Understanding these students' academic and social engagement and success may be critical for addressing the high dropout rates among immigrant students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to answer the question:

*What academic, personal, and social experiences account for the success of young immigrants and refugees while in upper secondary schools in Iceland?*

This study aimed to understand young immigrants' and refugee students' experiences of academic and social success in upper secondary schools in Iceland. In this study, 27 academically and socially successful students participated in one-hour semi-structured interviews. In the interviews, young immigrant and refugee students were asked about their attitudes toward their culture of origin and Icelandic culture and society, their experience of belonging to different groups, their aspirations and future goals in those settings, different learning environments and practise, their

expectation of the schools and curriculum, and their motivations and obstacles including their language backgrounds.

The study applies different theories, including culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education, that incline toward providing all students, regardless of their background, culture, language, race and ethnicities with the knowledge, tools and skills necessary to function harmoniously both in their community and globally. These theories facilitate the academic and social success of young immigrant and refugee students and create equity in the education system. The theoretical background chosen for this study aims to support the research questions and capture the depth of the data. Theories of inclusion and safe zones are discussed as ways to value diversity among these groups of students regardless of their background, language, ethnicity and race, and they address equitable opportunities for these students and to bring about equal, just and democratic society (Banks & Banks, 2013; Gay, 2018; Grant & Sleeter, 2013; Nieto, 2010; Pratt, 1991, 2007).

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) is used to analyze the data. This method is useful when one is trying to find commonalities in meaning among the participants' responses. Knowledge about the reasons for the academic and social success of these students is important for policymakers, teachers, and governmental organisations, both in terms of societal stability and for the sake of individual refugee and immigrant youths. Bringing young immigrants' and refugees' academic and social success to light may also be significant in counteracting xenophobia.

The findings reveal that various internal and external factors determine academic and social success of the refugee and immigrant students, including their desire, passion, and strength, as well as their interest in education and their future goals. They were intrinsically motivated, exerted effort, and refused to give up despite the various challenges they faced. Immigrant and refugee students' journeys of success were also shaped by a set of visible factors both structural (inside their schools) and social (outside their schools, at home and in their communities).

**Keywords: Immigrant, Refugees, Students, Iceland, Upper secondary schools, Success, Experiences, Expectations, Qualitative study**



## Abstract in Icelandic

### Velgengni nemenda af erlendum uppruna í framhaldsskólum á Íslandi, reynsla þeirra og væntingar

Koma innflytjenda til Íslands hefur félagsleg, menningarleg og stjórnmálaleg áhrif á íslenskt samfélag. Líkt og mörg önnur Evrópulönd hefur Ísland orðið heimili margra innflytjenda. Fólksflutningar til Íslands hefur einnig áhrif á menntakerfið og margir skólar hafa þróað líkön til að þjóna ólíkum þörfum innflytjenda og flóttamanna í menntakerfinu. Mismunandi skólastig á Íslandi þjóna vaxandi fjölda nemenda af erlendum uppruna með ólíkum hætti. Þrátt fyrir ólíka menningu og tungumál, glímu við mismunandi skólakerfi og kennslufyrirkomulag, menntunarstig, efnahagsástand í upprunalandi, takmarkaða menntun og lágur tekjur foreldra, þá er fjöldi nemenda af erlendum uppruna áhugasamur um nám og stendur vel bæði námslega og félagslega í nýju námsumhverfi.

Rannsóknir hafa sýnt að brottfall nemenda af erlendum uppruna er af ýmsum ástæðum, má nefna taka ekki mark á skóla, tengsl milli kennara og nemenda, tengsl milli nemenda (Makarova & Herzog, 2013) auk þess sem brottfall meðal ungs fólks í sumum þjóðernishópum er hærra en landsmeðaltalið (Morse, 2005). Samkvæmt rannsókn Solveigar Brynju Grétarsdóttur (2007) um framfarir í námi meðal ungmenna, sem eru ekki með íslensku sem móðurmál, hafði meira en helmingur svarenda (þátttakenda) aldrei hafið framhaldsskólanám eða hætt í framhaldsskóla.

Markmið þessarar rannsóknar er að skilja reynslu ungra nemenda af erlendum uppruna af velgengni bæði námslega og félagslega í framhaldsskólum á Íslandi.

Í þessari rannsókn voru tekin viðtöl við tuttugu og sjö nemendur sem notið hafa velgengni bæði námslega og félagslega. Mismunandi spurningar um viðhorf nemenda af erlendum uppruna til þeirra eigin menningar og íslenskrar menningar og samfélags, reynslu þeirra af því að tilheyra mismunandi hópum, væntingar í því umhverfi og framtíðarmarkmið, mismunandi námsrými og venjur, væntingar þeirra til skóla og námsskrár, helstu hvata og hindranir auk tungumála bakgrunns voru lagðar fram til að skilja reynslu þátttakenda af námslegri og félagslegri velgengni í framhaldsskólum á Íslandi.

Fræðilegur rammi ritgerðarinnar byggir á mismunandi kenningum, þar á meðal kenningum um menningarmiðaða kennslu og fjölmennarlega menntun sem eru notaðar til að tryggja að fjölbreytileiki nemenda sé metinn óháð bakgrunni þeirra, tungumáli, þjóðerni og kynþætti. Áðurnefndar

kenningar eru einnig hannaðar til að veita öllum nemendum nauðsynleg þekking tæki og hæfni til að vera virkir þátttakendur bæði innan þeirra samfélags og á heimsvísu. Þessar kenningar auðvelda okkur einnig skilning á velgengi innflytjenda og flóttamanna og leitast við að skapa jöfnuð í menntakerfinu.

Fræðilegur rammi ritgerðarinnar miðar einnig að því að styðja rannsóknarspurningar og dýpka skilning á gögnunum. Kenningar um menntun án aðgreiningar (menntun fyrir alla) og örugg rými eru notaðar til að tryggja að fjölbreytileiki nemenda sé metinn og skapa á sami tíma jafnt, réttlátt og lýðræðislegt samfélag (Banks & Banks, 2013; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Pratt, 1991, 2007).

Þemagreining (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) er notuð til að greina gögnin og draga fram þemu en það er gagnleg aðferð þegar leitast er við að finna líkindi í svörum rannsakenda. Skilningur á ástæðum velgengni nemenda bæði félagslega og námslega getur verið mikilvægur þegar leita á leiða til að bregðast við brottfalli nemenda af erlendum uppruna. Megintilgangur rannsóknarinnar er að varpa ljósi á hvað býr að baki námslegum og félagslegum árangri nemenda af erlendum uppruna. Reyna að skilja og draga lærdóm af námslegri og félagslegri reynslu nemenda af erlendum uppruna er vegnað hefur vel í framhaldsskóla og skapa skilyrði sem veita öllum nemendum raunveruleg tækifæri til að ná árangri. Þekking á ástæðum fyrir þátttöku og velgengni nemendanna gæti verið mikilvæg og áhugaverð fyrir stefnumótendur, kennara, embættismenn og stjórnvöld. Að koma upplýsingum um námslegri og félagslegri velgengni nemenda, af erlendu bergi, á framfæri getur einnig verið mikilvægt til að vinna gegn hræðslu og fordómum í þeirra garð.

Niðurstöðurnar leiða í ljós að ýmsir innri og ytri þættir ákvarða námsárangur nemenda af erlendum uppruna, bæði innflytjenda og flóttamanna. Meðal þessara þátta voru löngun nemenda til að læra, ástríða, seigla, notkun auðlinda sem þeir eru að koma með og mikill áhugi á menntun og framtíðarmarkmiðum þeirra. Þeir voru mjög áhugasamir, tilbúnir til að leggja sig fram og lögðu ekki árar í bát þrátt fyrir mismunandi áskoranir sem þeir stóðu frammi fyrir. Námsleg og félagsleg velgengi þessara nemenda mótaðist einnig af ýmsum sýnilegum þáttum innan og utan skólans. Samspil þessara námslegu og félagslegu þátta hafði mest að segja um velgengni og árangur nemenda í íslenskum framhaldsskólum.

**Efnisorð: Innflytjendur, Flóttamenn, Nemendur, Ísland, Velgengni, Framhaldsskólar, Reynsla, Væntingar, Eigindleg rannsókn.**

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# 1 Introduction to the Study

As the population of refugees and immigrants in Iceland, as in many other Nordic countries, continues to grow, changes are needed within the public school system to better serve the diverse needs of the younger generation of refugees and immigrants who are not familiar with the local language or fluent in English. It is also essential that a broader understanding of this population and their education is developed. The definition of *immigrant* adopted here is derived from OECD (2011), and refers to the foreign-born population as all persons who have ever migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence. The foreign population also includes persons who are still nationals of their home country (OECD, 2011). This is in contrast to *refugee*, which refers to:

a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2016).

In this study I have tried to use the term migrant as an umbrella term to cover both immigrants and refugees, but the term is not defined formally under international law, and there are important differences between the terms migrant, 'immigrant', and refugee such that they cannot be used interchangeably (UNHCR, 2016, 2018). The term migrant reflects common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his/her place of residence, temporarily or permanently, for various reasons. It includes those whose status are legally defined or not specifically defined, such as smuggled migrants and international students (IOM, 2015). Since the participants in this study were either immigrants or refugees, the terms immigrant and refugee are used throughout the explanation and analysis. Immigrant and refugee students in this study is equivalent to the term first generation students used in other countries.

For terminology I preferred to use the Icelandic terms. According to Statistics Iceland, an immigrant is a person with a foreign background, but not all people with a foreign background are immigrants. Statistics Iceland uses six categories to clarify inhabitants' origins. Two of those categories are referred to as 'no foreign background' and four as 'foreign background,' as follows:

- No foreign background = Born in Iceland = Icelandic citizen
- No foreign background = Born abroad, both parents Icelandic = Foreign citizen or Icelandic citizen
- Foreign background = Immigrant = Foreign citizen or naturalised Icelandic citizen
- Foreign background = Second-generation immigrant = Foreign citizen or naturalised Icelandic citizen
- Icelandic citizen with a foreign background= Born In Iceland, one parent born abroad
- Foreign citizen or Icelandic citizen with a foreign background= Born abroad, one parent born abroad

According to Statistics Iceland,

An immigrant is a person born abroad with both parents foreign-born and all grandparents foreign-born, whereas a second generation immigrant is born in Iceland having immigrant parents. A person with a foreign background has one parent of foreign origin (Statistics Iceland, 2019a).

Individuals all over the world continue to migrate (Tawat, 2016). For many refugees and immigrants, this may be the only way to improve their personal and socioeconomic status. Others are motivated by certain 'push' factors from their country of origin, such as politics, religion, war, violence, social pressure, and lack of opportunities (Noguera, 2006). Divergent circumstances bring refugees and immigrants to a new environment. For example, 'voluntary' immigrants (Ogbu, 1982), decide to move or reside in a new country. They have time to think about their choices, and they may have visited their country of choice previously. They may have some fluency in the dominant language before coming to a new country. Many of them are also highly educated (Cowart & Cowart, 1993; Glastra & Vedder, 2010; 2008; Rong & Preissle, 1998).

On the other hand, the number of refugees has increased as a result of war, persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations, with 25.9 million refugees at the end of 2018 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Unlike voluntary immigrants, refugees do not move to a new country by choice (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000). They are usually forced, often in violent circumstances, out of their native countries. Many of these refugees are forced to take up residence in temporary refugee camps (Coward & Coward, 1993; Gary & Rubin, 2014; Huyck & Fields, 1981). The camps are usually placed on the borders of neighboring countries with poor living conditions, few or no educational opportunities, and insufficient food, medical care, and shelter (De Bruijn, 2009; Gary & Rubin, 2014; Westermeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996). Many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of going through rape, torture, or witnessing the often brutal killings of family members and relatives (Hones & Cha, 1999; Nygaard, Sonne, & Carlsson, 2017). Refugees very often live in camps for years before they receive notification from UNHCR that a country is willing to receive and resettle them (Hones & Cha, 1999; Tollefson, 1989; Yassen, 2019). Lack of fluency in the new country's dominant language(s) causes high levels of alienation for some of these refugees (Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2010; Nicassio, 1983). Various authors have found cumulative evidence of the effects of immigrant status on students' educational aspirations and chances to further their education despite the optimistic future plans these students may have when entering the school system. This evidence includes poor academic training, lower grades and test scores, and lack of integration into the academic context (Kao, Vaquera, & Goyette, 2013; Orellana, 2009).

Ogbu (1982) clarified that adjustment to different conditions and situations is affected by whether an individual is a voluntary or involuntary immigrant. Ogbu describes refugees in between these classifications as semi-voluntary immigrants. Ogbu claimed that voluntary immigrants view learning the language and ways of the local culture as a desirable path to success. However, people with an oppositional cultural frame of reference (such as colonised or enslaved people) view conformity as "a symbol of disaffiliation" (p. 201) with their own culture. Thus, members of the oppositional frame of reference are more likely to reject the host culture, viewing separation and self-segregation as desirable goals.

In contrast, Gibson (1998) found that voluntary immigrants gain new cultural tools without denying or rejecting their native knowledge and skills. Gibson (1998) described the additive acculturation strategy usually chosen by voluntary immigrants as "accommodation and acculturation without

assimilation, in which one can draw from more than one culture to make space for a given social context” (p.623). Ogbu and Gibson (1991) define immigrant minorities as those who move to new societies because they believe relocation will lead to increased economic well-being, better overall opportunities and/or greater political freedom.

Ogbu (1991) interprets refugees’ and immigrants’ economic, political and social barriers as temporary problems that can be overcome with more education, hard work and the passage of time. In line with Ogbu’s theory that immigrants leave their native countries for better opportunities, this study analyses how young immigrants and refugees interpret and reinterpret social, economic and political barriers as temporary problems that can be overcome with the passage of time, hard work, and more education.

This study focuses on young adult immigrants and refugees who are in upper secondary schools and are either enrolled in full time study, in upper secondary schools or university, or are working in the job market. The age of maturity in Iceland is 18; however, throughout my research, I found that there is no agreement on the definition of ‘adult.’ Wlodkowski (2008) argues that the term is culturally and historically relative. In some cultures, puberty is considered to be the entry into adulthood. In other cultures, including Iceland, legal codes are used to permit and promote adult behaviour. Becoming an adult is often associated with having some sort of life responsibility, such as working full time. Wlodkowski classifies adults into three groups by age: younger adults aged 18-24, working adults aged 25-64, and older adults aged 65 and older. This study focuses on the first group, i.e. younger immigrant and refugee adults aged 18-24.

Despite the fact that refugee and immigrant students sometimes face difficulties gaining fluency in the language of their new environment, establishing social networks, transitioning to new schools, navigating cultural differences, and dealing with prejudice and stereotyping, many of these students continue to be optimistic when they compare their current situations to the situation in their country of origin. They thrive despite complex challenges and report a higher degree of academic and social well-being. My study focuses on the experiences and expectations of successful young immigrants and refugees in upper secondary school in Iceland.

Success means different things to different individuals. In a broader sense, it can refer to any achievement that turns out well in the eyes of the learner (Wlodkowski, 2008). It can, for example, mean passing a test, receiving a good grade, completing a fine project, satisfactorily demonstrating a new skill or finding an answer to a problem (Wlodkowski, 2008). In general,

success is often described as achieving set personal, political, or social goals and can, as such, be either subjective or objective. Subjective success comes from the students' own perspectives and perceptions. In other words, it is the self-fulfilling feeling of achievement based on personal goals, such as those relating to well-being, family, or agency (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018). Objective success relates to the political or societal success that has to do with education and employment, material goods and status, and is based on a standardised or measurable view of what it takes to be successful as an individual, a school, or a community (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018).

According to Statistics Iceland (2019c), it is clear that immigration into Iceland, like many other European countries, is currently increasing, despite the slight decrease in immigrant population in 2008 due to economic crises (Jónsson, 2013). As of 2014, Iceland's total immigrant population, including children, was 27,445 (Statistics Iceland, 2019c); by 2019, the number of immigrant population reached 50,272, which is 14.1% of the total population (Statistics Iceland, 2019c), including children and young adults. Iceland has also received 574 quota refugees from 1956 until 2019 (Stjórnarráð Íslands, e.d.). The proportion of refugees, including quota refugees, has increased over the last few years: in 2014, when the interviews for this study were conducted, 60 refugees were admitted, including 10 quota refugees (Statistics Iceland, 2019b). By 2019 quota refugees accounted for over 15% of refugees admitted (Statistics Iceland, 2019b). This rapid increase in the diversity of the population is also reflected in the Icelandic education system. In 2014, there were 980 immigrant students in upper secondary schools; by 2019 that number increased to 1,213 (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The continuing increase in the number of immigrant and refugee youth in upper secondary schools and higher educational institutions raises numerous questions. Thus, I seek to understand their experiences and expectations and to interpret the reasons for their success. I also focus on their barriers in terms of language proficiency, income level, and social and cultural backgrounds.

As a facilitator and a teacher, I sometimes hear my students and my classmates talking about their experiences of being excluded, discounted or isolated. I often asked them how they felt, what they did, and how situations like these affected their motivation for the assignment or the course. I am also familiar with these experiences. I remember moments when I felt marginalised, especially when I started university with little knowledge of Icelandic. I also remember moments when I was regarded as important to the group and society. My motivation was greatly influenced by the degree

of my inclusion in a given environment, whether it was work, study, or the broader community. Because of my experience of being an immigrant/refugee from Kurdistan in northern Iraq and have been living in Iceland for 20 years and an active participant in education and the job market, I know that the immigrant and refugee populations are not the same, i.e. the reason for moving to the country, their educational background and experiences are wide-ranging. Immigrants and refugees today are also different from those from 20 years ago; additionally, schools, programs, and curricula have been improved to accommodate the needs of immigrant and refugee students.

### **1.1 The Learning Spaces Project**

The present study is based on the 27 interviews from immigrant and refugee students at the upper secondary levels that were conducted as part of the Learning Spaces Project. The three-year Learning Spaces Project (LSP) took place from January 2013-December 2015 in four Nordic countries: Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Norway (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018). The main objective of the project was to draw lessons from success stories of individual immigrant students at different levels (preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school) as well as whole school communities that have succeeded in developing equitable and socially just learning contexts. 'Learning spaces' refers to school communities, as well as learning environments and practises other than schools, which may be important or instrumental for young immigrants' participation and success. By identifying success stories and good practises, the project aimed to provide guidelines for teaching and school reform based on these strategies.

LSP had two major aims. The first was to understand and learn from the experiences of immigrant students who had succeeded academically and socially. The second was to explore and understand how social justice is implemented in equitable and successful diverse Nordic school contexts and other learning spaces. The project integrated four subthemes: students, teachers, schools, and policies and curricula. Sampling was purposive in that the participating schools were chosen because they had been successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. In selecting the schools, indicators such as grade point average, test scores, and dropout rates were used, as well as evaluations and judgement of school authorities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and school principals, and students' experiences of success were

collected through in-depth interviews in schools in all countries. Twenty-seven of these in-depth student interviews are the data source for this study.

## **1.2 The education system in Iceland**

In Iceland education is provided to every legal resident, and it is mostly free of charge. An equal right to education is guaranteed by law for all persons 18 or younger; the focus of education is on equal opportunities for all (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2008b). The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) is responsible for education at the upper secondary and university levels, while local municipalities are responsible for operating schools and implementing the laws at the first two levels, preschool and compulsory school. In the education system in Iceland municipal councils, schools, and the communities they serve all have considerable freedom regarding how schools are organised and what courses are offered. Municipalities have to ensure that educational policies provide equitable and inclusive spaces for all students, including immigrants (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2014), such as translating information into different languages, using interpreters, and in some cases appointing bilingual and bicultural staff members.

The education system in Iceland is divided into four stages. Pre-primary School, called early childhood education and care, is from ages 2-6. Compulsory education comprises both primary and lower secondary education, and is mandatory for children between the ages of six and sixteen. Students who have completed compulsory education have the right to enter upper secondary school. These students are usually between the ages of 16-19, and in some cases are older. The age distribution of students enrolled in matriculation or vocational and technical programmes in upper secondary schools differs. The average age of students is 18.7 years in matriculation programmes and 25.2 years in vocational and technical programmes. The flexibility of the system sometimes works as a barrier for students to complete their upper secondary education at the right time. Some students get part-time or full-time jobs after graduating from compulsory school.

## **1.3 Icelandic background and context**

The Icelandic educational system follows international agreements on inclusive education, such as the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), which recognises the necessity of providing education for all within the

regular educational system. The educational policies and curriculum guides in Iceland emphasise equity and inclusion (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011, 2014). According to this perspective, individuals and groups should be treated according to their needs; that is, they should be treated equitably. Treating individuals equitably (according to need) rather than equally (the same regardless of need) provides the potential to counteract existing, unjust differences (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). Inclusive schools are expected to find ways to educate all their students successfully, thus working against discrimination and leading to an inclusive, just society in which everyone is a valued participant (UNESCO, 1994; Slee, 2011). A broad definition of inclusion focuses on diversity and how schools respond to and value a diverse group of students, as well as other members of the school community; it plays a critical role in ensuring that students receive a quality educational experience (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015; Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018; Underwood, Smith, Lutz - Johnson, Taylor, & Roberts, 2019; University of Phoenix, 2019). Inclusion directs attention towards inequalities and discrimination against diversity such as social and ethnic status, religion, gender, and ability of students and their families (Slee, 2011). Inclusion is seen as an ongoing process focusing on increased participation in education for everyone involved (Booth, 2011).

According to the central principle of the Icelandic education system, everyone is to have equal access to education irrespective of sex, economic status, geographic location, religion, disability, and cultural or social background. This principle is stated in the Constitution of the Icelandic Republic (Constitution of the Republic of Iceland, 33/1944) and also in legislation pertaining to the various educational levels (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2016). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA-könnun) results (OECD, 2013) have indicated that Iceland ranks highly in terms of equity in compulsory education. Preschool education in Iceland is not obligatory, but throughout the country most children aged 2-6 attend preschool. Primary and lower secondary education is compulsory from the age of six to sixteen and is offered in public compulsory schools. At the local level, municipalities are in charge of operating and implementing the laws at the preschool and the compulsory school levels (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2016). The main emphasis of compulsory schools is to enhance the development of students and prepare them for studies at the upper secondary school level. As such, everyone has the legal right to enter school at that level, irrespective of their academic attainment at the end of compulsory schooling. Upper secondary schools and universities, on the other hand, are the responsibility of the MESC (Ministry



of Education Science and Culture, 2008). Following legislative changes in 2008, the Minister of Education and Culture issued national curriculum guides for preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools in 2011 (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011). The educational policy that appears in the national curriculum guides is based on six fundamental pillars of education: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. Each of the fundamental pillars is derived from laws on preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011)

One of the main goals of educational policy in Iceland in recent decades has been to raise the general level of education. According to the laws that govern different educational levels, pupils with disabilities are entitled to the same education as other pupils at the preschool, compulsory, and upper secondary school levels. The main policy is inclusion rather than segregation (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011). Schools are expected to provide all pupils with appropriate opportunities and access. Schools are required to have reception plans for pupils whose heritage languages are other than Icelandic, and these pupils have the right to learn Icelandic as a second language. Some schools in Iceland have reacted to the diversification of the student body by exploring and carrying out various new educational practises, as well as by building partnerships with parents and communities (Ragnarsdóttir & Rafik Hama, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014).

Upon completion of compulsory education, students have the right to enter upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2002). At the upper secondary level, students have the right to attend a grammar, comprehensive or vocational school (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2002). Students pay enrolment fees for textbooks and material costs, and some students prefer to take a break lasting from one semester up to a few years (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2002). The flexibility of the Icelandic system allows these students to be independent and work for some years before continuing their education. Some of the students quickly come back to education, while others may take years due to particular circumstances (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2002). In this context, it is likely that some young adult refugees and immigrants use this flexibility to help their families financially, making it more difficult for them to go back to school immediately.

Article 35 of the Act on Language Instruction in Upper Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2002) states that students with

home languages other than Icelandic may conduct studies in languages other than Icelandic when:

- Entailed by the nature of studies or curricula, and
- When the study program in question is intended for pupils that do not have command of the Icelandic language or must carry out, or have carried out, part of their studies abroad.

Students who do not have Icelandic as their native language have the right to instruction in Icelandic as a second language. The same applies to pupils that have stayed abroad for a long time and have little knowledge of Icelandic. The objective is to provide pupils whose native languages are not Icelandic with the opportunity to maintain their native language as an optional subject, through distance learning or otherwise (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2016).

The Ministry of Education Science and Culture (2016) also directs upper secondary schools to devise a plan for the reception of students. According to Article 35 of the Upper Secondary School Act, the upper secondary schools are required to have reception plans and they should be accessible for students and parents. The reception plan has to include information about studies and school activities in general, as well as information for parents whose languages are not Icelandic, and for deaf parents concerning interpretation services. Reception plans for students whose heritage languages are not Icelandic must take into account the students background, language skills and skills in other fields of study. Students with another heritage language have the right be instructed in Icelandic as a second language, and they should be provided with the opportunity to maintain their heritage language as an optional subject (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2008). Existing definitions of heritage language HL vary, some authors define heritage language in terms of the order of acquisition and of language competence, others stress cultural roots of the speakers (Valdés, 2000; Trifonas & Arravossitas, 2014). Students' background, language, and other resources that they bring with themselves to their new spaces become positively associated with their academic success and promote the learning of immigrant and refugee students.

The refugee committee guidelines for municipalities address reception and services and assistance for social participation of refugees. They state that young refugees (quota refugees) up to the age of 24 who haven't finished compulsory or upper secondary education in their countries of origin should receive educational assistance. This includes financial support such as tuition, fees, and money to buy books and/or electronic equipment for

schools (Velferðarráðuneyti, 2014). Some municipalities offer refugee students monthly financial support to complete their studies. In an informal conversation with the head of a department in one school, it was found that the school was inclined to give priority to younger students due to the extra applications received every year. This was one challenge they faced in recent years. Another challenge that the teachers talked about was having students with limited Icelandic proficiency. To some teachers, student participation was tied to their level of Icelandic.

Despite these new challenges, some of the schools in Iceland have succeeded in managing the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds, and have demonstrated a positive views toward diversity. At the upper secondary level, there was only one private elite school at the time of this study, and even that was not very expensive. Students of immigrant backgrounds, especially those who are new in the country, are often advised to register in one of the three schools involved in this study, as they are known for the amount of support they offer immigrant students. Students and their parents are also given chances to visit other schools and familiarise themselves with the fields and subjects taught there.

#### **1.4 The relevance of this study on societal and school levels**

Due to the increasing number of refugees and immigrants in many European countries in recent decades, Europe has undergone dramatic social, cultural and political changes. This increase and the corresponding challenges for societies and educational systems have prompted many studies attempting to understand the demographics of this population, including education and other factors. Schools, the role of schooling, and the impact of immigrant students entering educational institutions are topics that have been studied widely (Gay, 2010; OECD, 2013; PEW Research Center, 2005). Limited representation in certain countries has often had unintended consequences for this population, such as devaluing immigrants' culture, language, and backgrounds. This could negatively impact the overall educational life of these students.

Research in the field of education in the Nordic countries has criticised the focus on assimilation instead of integration, as well as the focus on uniformity and cultural homogeneity, as this excludes students with diverse cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Ngo, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). While these factors likely pose a high level of concern for many educators, additional factors could also contribute to immigrant and refugees' academic and social success.

Research has revealed that immigrant students generally have lower academic attainment than native students (OECD, 2012, 2013). Young immigrants encounter more difficulties in achieving academic success than native-born children of elementary school age, and often drop out of school or college in their new homelands ( Ngo & Lee, 2007; Fekjær & Leirvik 2011; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). This is true of both refugee and voluntary immigrant populations, whom research has shown to have similar academic motivations and characteristics and face similar challenges in their new countries (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012; Kao et al., 2013). Both groups have to deal with separation and division in a new country and adjust to a new culture and lifestyle (Simha, 2019). Many newcomers encounter discrimination and racism because of race, ethnicity, religion, and cultural differences (Martin-Beltrán, Montoya-Ávila, Gracia, & Canales, 2018; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Investigating how various challenges affect educational attainment of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds will help educators generate strategies to support them in both their academic and social spheres.

However, research focusing on student perspectives indicates that the school and the school community, including people, programs, and practises, play important roles in engaging students academically (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009), and many schools have adapted their programs to suit the different needs of their students. For both refugees and immigrant students, the struggle of entering a new space while trying to learn the language of instruction and succeed academically and socially could be the same. The academic outcomes of minority and immigrant students are also affected by friendship intimacy (Berndt, 2004; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Less social support from classmates may lead to isolation from the community and school, which is why school personnel need to be fully aware of the needs of immigrant youth so as to avoid marginalising them (Rúnarsdóttir & Vilhjálmsón, 2015). In their study on students' reciprocal friendships and their link to students' feeling of school belonging, Vanquera & Kao (2008) reported that students in reciprocated friendships enjoy high levels of school belonging and educational outcomes. Friendships among students from different ethnicities, races, nationalities, etc., can foster positive intergroup attitudes (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Feeling a sense of membership within the school community may provide immigrant students with support for academic learning, and at the same time play an essential role in their linguistic acquisition and perseverance (Souto-Manning, 2013).

## 1.5 Studies in the field

In their 10-year longitudinal study of immigrant youth enrolled in 49 schools in Fort Lauderdale/Miami and San Diego, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) examined the adaptation processes of second-generation voluntary immigrants and refugees, concluding that governmental and societal policies that encourage and discourage welcoming refugees from various countries play a prominent role in their degree of success. They also reported that unsafe school conditions are among the reasons behind dropout of immigrant and refugee students (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Other researchers indicated that self-perceptions of academic ability (House, 2001), along with parental involvement and interest in their children's education, were positive factors behind their success, despite the fact that some parents tend to pressure their children to enter highly skilled professions (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). French & Conrad (2001) indicated that alienation, social rejection by peers and lack of contact among their fellow students are also among the reasons behind immigrants and refugees dropping out. Other studies have shown that despite the negative effect the experiences of alienation, lack of contact among fellow students and teachers, discrimination, and prejudice have on social integration of ethnic minority students, they did not have any effect on their study progress (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 2016; Höglin & Johannesson, 2014; Loo & Rolison, 2016). Tran's (2015) study of students of Vietnamese background in upper secondary schools in Iceland found that immigrant students are less advantaged than local students at the upper secondary school level. Research has shown the positive association among motivation, learning, and academic performance of students. Students who were not motivated have shown least desirable learning behaviors and academic accomplishment (Kusurkar, Croiset & Ten Cate, 2013)

Tsokova and Tarr (2012) referred to the role of teachers, schools, parents, and the community sector in securing quality of education for learners. Teachers' understanding of their responsibilities to all learners, their knowledge and ability to educate all, and working collaboratively with others are key factors leading to inclusive school communities. Schools must understand, respect, and trust individuals and acknowledge their various backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, and skills in order to empower everyone to participate to the best of their capacities. The role and responsibility of different actors inside educational institutions has been studied widely. Juva, Holm and Dovenmark (2018) described the actions and actors (school culture, students, and teachers) in the bullying process that

represents the school culture and norms. When students fail to fit in with the existing construction of normality, they can become unrecognisable to their classmates, which can lead to bullying. The authors concluded that bullying should be seen as one of the (dys)functions of school and as part of the school culture in which students and teachers are actors and should recognise their own role in the processes. Harðardóttir, Magnúsdóttir, and Dillabough (2019) argue that for true success of integration and inclusion in Iceland, the whole concept of integration must change, which has to involve political leaders and policy-makers.

Parents have a unique position, role, commitment, and engagement in the education struggles of their children regardless of their individual capacity to be involved in their children's education. According to Tsokova and Tarr (2012), the volunteer and community sectors are valuable resources in widening understanding of local communities and enabling their direct involvement in the provision of education. In their study of the ways in which motivational characteristics and environmental social supports contribute to the academic attainment of ethnic minority first generation college students, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) concluded that among the various reasons that pushed minority students to attend and succeed in college were peer support, personal interest, intellectual curiosity, and the desire to enter a satisfying career. Other studies revealed the influence of peers on the educational aspirations and academic outcomes of students at various educational levels (Fletcher & Tienda, 2009; Ryan, 2000).

Issues of teaching about refugees in initial teacher education and professional development for practising teachers have been addressed in various studies, including Gagné, Schmidt, and Markus (2017). To them, the Syrian refugee issue has opened the door to a beneficial wider conversation. Its benefit can be recognised if the system learns from the current situation to set up comprehensive and continuous support for all educators of refugee students. Comparing their teacher education practises across three narratives, the authors agreed on three main themes: the power of sharing the stories and experiences of refugee learners with future teachers, the need to recognise and reaffirm the complex identity of refugee learners in teacher education contexts, and the importance of engaging teachers in a critical praxis that moves beyond teaching strategies to facilitate systemic transformation. An Icelandic study of principals at the three school levels (preschool, compulsory, and upper secondary) recommended a participative leadership style to distribute their powers to include members of the school community in the decision-making process (Svavarsson, Hansen, Lefever, Guðjónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2016). Stewart (2011) indicated the need for

educators and school leaders to learn about issues related to war-affected children so as to be able to meet the needs -- especially the learning needs - of these students in the best way. Working with these students requires cultural understanding, shared values, and pragmatic solutions on behalf of the school. Research has also indicated that when the content and pedagogy used by educators and teachers reflects the history and culture of the participants involved, they become more engaged, gain academic attainment and experience inclusion (Au, 2011; Gay, 2010; Lee, 2007). Reflecting critically on current practise can help educators transform their knowledge into future practise. Hence it is the role of the teachers and schools to support these children and remove the barriers that impede their exposure to different resources inside their schools.

Lack of exposure to fluent peers is one factor that can prevent immigrant students from getting the rigorous content necessary for their academic success; in other words, language barriers create obstacles to understanding academic content (Kao et al., 2013). However, Noguera (2008) reminds us that language support is only one need that children of recent immigrants may have. These children also need other forms of support, such as information about schools, how to apply for college and financial aid, learning about the school system, and becoming integrated into school communities. This is in line with the results of a new study on the experiences of the staff members and immigrant students concerning the formal and informal support at Icelandic universities (Rafik Hama, Benediktsson, Hansen, Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020) which shows that immigrant students usually rely on informal assistance from peers and families, but when it comes to issues that cannot be solved without professional assistance they turn to formal types of support.

## **1.6 Researcher positionality**

For the past 20 years, I have been involved in teaching and working with refugees and immigrants at different levels and have been an interpreter for different organisations in Iceland. I moved to Iceland 20 years ago; my heritage language is Kurdish, and I also speak Arabic, English and Icelandic. I have some understanding of Persian and French as well. Working as a project manager for refugees and asylum seekers for the Icelandic Red Cross gave me a chance to learn about the diversity of these groups. They come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and speak different languages. Some of their religious beliefs, values, and practises have created issues and challenges in their new society. I learned through my work with these groups

that the main reasons why refugees and immigrants move to Iceland, regardless of their educational level, is the desire to provide better educational opportunities for their children and economic opportunities for their close and extended families.

My involvement as an interpreter was to understand the life and needs, particularly educational needs, of refugees and immigrants when they move to Iceland. Although much progress has taken place, we continue to face major issues. My past efforts and study focused on women from the Middle East and their limited participation in education, enrolment in schools, completion of studies, and participation in the job market. I have seen some major changes in their enrolment, deriving in large part from their increased pre-existing understanding of the society that they are joining. I was able to work with their children in preschools as a counsellor, providing advice to the schools and helping parents understand the environment and cope with their new society. My major research interests focus on the education of immigrants and refugees, both children and adults.

When I completed my diploma in pedagogy in 1993 at the Institute of Pedagogy in Suleimany in Kurdistan, I had not yet decided to become a teacher. That is why I followed my dream and entered the University of Salahaddin. I completed my B.A. in English in 1997. In 1998, I was appointed an assistant researcher at the University of Suleimany. Through my role as an assistant researcher, I worked with faculty members and paraprofessional staff, as well as deans and teachers of other faculties. I worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for few months in Kurdistan, north of Iraq. Two years later, I moved to Iceland, where I started working in different fields. I took part in several lifelong learning, professional, and language courses. Then I decided to pursue a B.A. in Icelandic, which I completed in 2011. At the same time, I studied at the University of Iceland and got my teaching certificate. I completed my M.Ed. in adult education and human resource development from the same university. It was a privilege to take part in the Nordic research on success of immigrants, both socially and academically. As previously noted, the project is called *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Four Nordic Countries*. After joining this project, I found it extremely rewarding to investigate the other side of the issue, which is young immigrants' and refugee students' academic and social success while in upper secondary schools in Iceland.



## 1.7 Research questions, objectives and significance

In this study, one main question and three sub-questions are used to understand immigrant and refugee students' experiences of academic and social success. The main research question is:

What academic, personal and social experiences account for the success of young immigrants and refugees while in upper secondary schools in Iceland?

Under this main question I investigated three sub-questions:

- How do young immigrant and refugee students make sense of their experience of success, inclusion, and social justice in upper secondary schools and society?
- What perceptions do they have about upper secondary schools in Iceland?
- What role do their social, cultural, and academic backgrounds play in their success?

The main objectives of this study are to:

- Identify the factors that support the academic and social success of young immigrants and refugee students in upper secondary schools in Iceland.
- Raise the profile of high-achieving immigrant and refugee students by sharing their experiences and applying them in different learning spaces in Iceland.
- Gain new knowledge that leads to the development of programs and creation of conditions enabling students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds to have a real chance to succeed academically and socially in Iceland.

The study focuses on the experiences and expectations of 27 successful immigrant and refugees while in upper secondary schools in Iceland. Reasons for the academic and social success of these students will be of significant interest to policymakers, educators and financial institutions. Bringing young immigrants' academic and social success to light may also help counteract xenophobia. The study provides additional insight into intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the academic and social success of these students.



## 2 Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework for this study is designed to match and feed into the research questions presented above.

In this chapter, the theoretical frameworks used for the study are outlined. The study focuses on both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation behind the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students in upper secondary schools in Iceland. Intrinsic motivation has a significant impact on students' interest and engagement in their studies, yet this motivation is insufficient in the absence of instructional and societal forces. Thus, extrinsic motivation is used in particular to understand the extent to which these students achieved academic and social success. My review of extrinsic part of motivation consists of different theories related to multiculturalism and multicultural education, such as inclusion, building positive attitudes toward learning, culturally responsive teaching, critical pedagogy, and contact zones and safe spaces. The third part of my theoretical focus includes using theories of social and cultural capital to analyze the role of students' networks and how various skills and practises that these students possessed contributed to their academic and social success.

### 2.1 The power of intrinsic motivation

One of the highly complex terms used in many areas and various branches of psychology, educational studies and applied linguistics is *motivation* (Dornyei, 2001). In education, learning motivation is conceptualised as students' energy and desire to engage in learning. It drives a large part of students' interest and engagement in school and study (Martin, 2003). Student motivation can be driven by various individual and external factors, such as interest and types of school experiences. In their research on the impact of teacher feedback in fostering EFL student motivation in Thailand, Hamidun et al. (2014) concluded that teachers' use of direct immediate feedback increased students' level of motivation.

The role of motivation has always been prominent in determining degrees of success and engagement in any learning space, as well as in participation in wider society. Pioneers in the study of intrinsic motivation believed that the key to acquiring this value is to find learning worthwhile and to accept it

as one's own (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Dörnyei (2001) relates motivation to learning a foreign language together: according to him, successful foreign language learners are those who are very motivated; without sufficient motivation, even the smartest learners are unlikely to persist long enough to attain a useful level of fluency. Ryan and Deci (2000b) note that "intrinsic motivation is entailed whenever people behave for the satisfaction inherent in the behaviour itself," such as choosing a course or reading the work of a certain author out of inner motivation or interest. To Ryan and Deci, intrinsic motivation results in high-quality learning and creativity. Wlodkowski (2008; 2017) refers to circumstances that elicit intrinsic motivation and facilitate a mind-body state conducive to learning. To him, intrinsic motivation is governed to a large extent by emotion, which in turn is provoked by an environment that connects what is culturally relevant to people. Theories of intrinsic motivation take learners' perspectives, language, values and ways of knowing into consideration so as to increase motivation; i.e., they mobilise cultural resources to facilitate learning (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). In our daily lives, when we think of a motivated student, we imagine a committed, enthusiastic student who demonstrates resiliency and perseverance. We often forget that a myriad of additional attributes contribute to an individual's inner motivation, such as access to good opportunities, building trust, and caring. Rhamie (2007) explains how positive support from various sources engenders resilience. When school, home and community provide children with a strong, supportive, and achievement-oriented environment, their success is even more likely. Teachers' positive and strong relationships with students also increase their resiliency (Davis, 2014).

In general, intrinsic motivation has more roots in the realm of education. It refers to interest, enjoyment, inner satisfaction, effort, passion, and perseverance of the students to engage in certain fields of study, activities or subjects. Intrinsic motivation is very important for learning, yet there are some discrete factors that account for the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students. These factors relate to external or 'pull' conditions that support the students' intrinsic motivation and effort. These include classroom environments that engender feelings of belonging and connectedness, as well as the various institutions, social groups, family, and the society in which these students live. Intrinsic motivation can be enhanced by making the learning more relevant, interesting and accessible to students from various backgrounds; this can be done by making use of the multiple resources these students possess.

## 2.2 Extrinsic motivation and schools

Creating equitable and successful learning spaces for culturally diverse learners at all educational levels is the foremost challenge of education in our societies today. When educators are able to accomplish this task, they respect the cultural integrity of every learner while increasing their motivation to learn (Wlodkowski, 2008). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) describe motivation as a potential range of influences on human behaviour. They say that it seems impossible for researchers to capture the whole view of motivation, so they are selective in their focus. Intrinsic motivation is central to the educational process according to authors such as Deci and Ryan (2000a). Yet, intrinsic motivation appears to become weaker as students advance through the educational system (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

This study on the experiences of young refugee and immigrant students in upper secondary schools in Iceland relies on the concept of motivation. It connects to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Research on structural, or extrinsic motivation describes it as the external conditions that affect these students' academic and social success. Ryan and Deci (2000a) pointed out that, in school, the facilitation of more self-determined learning requires classroom conditions that support the innate need to feel connected, effective, and agentic as one is exposed to new ideas and exercises new skills. Extrinsic motivation is based on external values and demands (Ryan & Deci, 2000a) rather than initiated by self-interest, and manifests when students desire to reach certain goals that they did not set for themselves, such as meeting the expectations of their teachers or parents.

Educators typically try to understand the factors that motivate students in order to give all students the best possible chance to achieve academically. To better understand academic motivation, Ginsberg & Wlodkowski (2000) describe the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching. The theory is built on principles that apply within and across cultures, and it brings out the intrinsic motivation of all students so that educators can consistently design learning experiences that matter to and support the success of all students. The framework is broad enough to accommodate the range of ethnic and cultural diversity found in most schools. The motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching can be used to help refugee and immigrant students attain relevant academic success, and it can be used as the foundation for a pedagogy that crosses disciplines and cultures to respectfully engage all learners in their schooling (Wlodkowski, 2008). It is considered a comprehensive and systemic representation of four convergent

motivational conditions that teachers and learners can create or build up (Wlodkowski, 2008).

The question of what institutions can do to support immigrant and refugee students to succeed socially has been researched for years (Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004). In general, studies show that ethnic minority students maintain poorer contact with their fellow students (Nikolaou, Kaloyirou, & Spyropoulou, 2019) and have poorer relationships with teachers (Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016) than ethnic majority students. Bankston (2014) refers to the fact that the social networks that exist within the school may sometimes have a larger immediate impact than the networks outside the school. Thomas (2002) demonstrates several ways institutions can improve the academic integration of minority students. To him, students perform better when institutions like school acknowledge the differences between students instead of striving for homogeneity. Teachers expectations play a role in this process, with low expectations having a negative effect on student performance, which in turn lowers expectations, in a vicious cycle. Education has an immense impact both on society and on the individual. It is one of the surest ways to increase an individual's social and economic levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and suboptimal social conditions (Swail, 2000).

Motivation does not occur in a vacuum; it is energy with a consequence (Wlodkowski, 2008). Therefore, it is both necessary and relevant for each and every teacher or instructor to create an inclusive, safe, and respectful learning environment for each and every student, engage the motivation of all learners, and relate course content and learning to the social concerns of learners and the broader concerns of society.

The question of what institutions and programs can do can be discussed in several important themes: inclusion, supporting students in building positive attitudes toward learning, establishing good relationships with the students, enhancing meaning in students' learning, and providing students with secure and safe spaces.

### **2.2.1 Inclusion**

One important motivational strategy is to create an environment in which all learners feel respected, connected, and included. Inclusive schools are those that find ways to educate all their students successfully, thus working against discrimination and helping create an inclusive, just society where everyone is a valued participant (Slee, 2011; UNESCO, 1994). A broad definition of inclusion focuses on diversity and how schools respond to and value a diverse

group of students, as well as other members of the school community. Inclusion directs attention towards inequalities and discrimination against social and ethnic circumstances, religion, gender, and ability of students and their families. Inclusion is seen as an ongoing process focusing on increased participation in education for everyone involved (Booth, 2011). Addressing inclusion does not rely merely on taking a group of diverse students into a class and teaching them, but on teachers using tools and approaches that give students the feeling that they are respected and that they are part of a learning environment that engages their attitudes, uses their experiences and resources, and listens to their perspectives. For Wlodkowski (2008), inclusion is the result of understanding a constancy of practises mixed with ideals from the beginning to the end of every class of every term in every course. This is in line with Sapon-Shevin's (2007) explanation of inclusion that:

It is neither a special educational issue, nor a favor for a particular group of people; rather, it is a gift to ourselves, a way of seeing people as interconnected and realising at the same time that any solution should attempt to address the needs of every individual. Inclusion is about acceptance, belonging, and seeing all people as complex and valuable. From this perspective, inclusion paves the way for social justice, and being in an inclusive environment makes the dream of social justice real (p. 217).

Inclusion means equal access and equitable education. To Banks (2013), multicultural education is inclusive education that insists on valuing diversity and providing equal opportunity regardless of gender, religion, belief, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, disability, or other status. Students in the three schools took some classes in separate classrooms from the other students. But the students generally viewed this positively -- they were happy to get appropriate second language support. It helped that their other classes were with local/native Icelandic students. In terms of equity in educational settings, inclusive education is an important part of school development (Löser & Werning, 2011). Access and equity are the main concerns of inclusive education (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2011). Because participating students were taught in regular classes with various forms of support, they felt they had educational access and opportunities to participate in society.

Nancy Fraser (1996) identifies two types of claims for social justice. The first and most familiar ones are redistributive claims, which seek a more just distribution of resources and goods. For Fraser, however, we increasingly encounter the second type of social justice claim, where assimilation to majority norms or dominant culture is no longer the price of equal respect. This type of claim has recently attracted the interest of those who seek to develop a new paradigm of justice that puts recognition at its centre. For her, a politics of recognition targets injustices rooted in the social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication; for example, cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect. The remedy for this sort of injustice is „cultural or symbolic change“ (Fraser, 1996). Fraser talks about changes in the political environment, criticising identity politics and defending non-identitarian politics of recognition. For her what is really important is not the demand for recognition of a group’s specific identity, but demanding recognition of people’s standing as full partners in social interactions; i.e., enabling people to participate as peers with others in their shared spaces. According to Fraser, what is required is a politics of recognition that aims to build equality of status, not a validation of group identity.

Since the feeling of cultural isolation causes our students’ motivation to learn to deteriorate, it is the fundamental obligation of educators to provide every student with an equitable learning environment that respects diverse cultures, maintains a common culture that all learners can accept, and enables them to realise their own power as related to equitable opportunities to be motivated to learn (Wlodkowski, 2008). As far as cultural sensitivity and the students’ backgrounds are concerned, school personnel should receive appropriate training to provide their students a safe and welcoming environment (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Teaching Tolerance, 2013). Creating a caring, friendly, and respectful climate motivates students to voice the things that matter to them, develop trust, and promote positive interaction and relations among students, school personnel, and families. Students in such a climate feel connected, honored, and included. In line with Wlodkowski (2008), Booth (2011) defines inclusive pedagogy as a continuous process focusing on increased participation in education for everyone involved. Feeling included helps students take risks in learning while sharing resources and strengths, giving them the feeling of being part of a group, which in turn helps them to develop a positive attitude toward their learning.



### **2.2.2 Building positive attitudes toward learning**

Motivation was portrayed above as emerging from a range of individual and environmental sources such as belief, determination, interest, and personal goals. It also originates from external resources such as having significant individuals like teachers, friends, parents and co-workers who give their time and are a source of motivation.

Refugee and immigrant students enroll in upper secondary schools with varying levels of academic and social readiness. Some of them have not been in school for many years; others have dropped out for a certain period of times. These students usually need to be given a second chance. The third group of students are those who have not missed any school levels, in some cases despite the difficult circumstances they have experienced. Differentiated instruction is necessary for teaching students with diverse needs, interests and levels of readiness and for seeing the diverse backgrounds of these students as a cluster of resources on which to build. This often requires course content to be more flexible (Tomlinson, 2001, 2005). Vygotsky described 'assisted learning', introduced in Snowman & Biehler (2004), as when teachers provide students with appropriate help and support so they will be able to solve or master certain problems. This approach is in line with Wertsch's (1991) toolkit framework, which describes the importance of support in the learning tasks. For him, students' prior knowledge and language can be used as a mediational tool during the reading comprehension process (Wertsch, 1991). This can be achieved through school and teacher support.

Wlodkowski (2008) characterises good teachers as those who want to help their students feel positively toward learning and make an effort to accomplish this. It is insufficient for teachers to 'argue' students into developing a positive attitude toward learning and the subject (Wlodkowski, 2008). There are far more effective strategies and teaching methods for the presentation of subject matter and for the teachers' treatment of students to build positive attitudes in students, both towards learning and towards themselves (Wlodkowski, 2008). Students' intentions to learn are determined by their attitudes toward: a) teacher or instructor, b) the subject, c) their self- efficacy for learning, and d) specific learning goals or performance (Wlodkowski, 2008). In his description of the five pillars supporting effective instruction, Wlodkowski (2008) describes the core issues that have a major influence in building a positive attitude toward teachers or instructors. These are subject matter expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, clarity, and cultural responsiveness.

Using different strategies can influence learners' self-efficacy in learning and succeeding academically. Strategies should be based on the teacher's own awareness, students who are part of the learning process and the learning environments. This will be a base for a strong motivational state to support academic success in learners and their active participation in their learning.

### **2.2.3 Culturally responsive teaching**

A key factor in culturally responsive teaching is the teacher-student relationship. Gay (2010, 2018) provides a detailed description of culturally responsive teaching, defining it as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance style of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strength of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming. In line with culturally responsive teaching, cultural proficiency views diversity as a valuable resource. Focusing on the knowledgeable and respectful interactions among a variety of cultural groups, culturally proficient educators believe that diversity adds positive value to the educational enterprise (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching is rooted in multicultural education that stresses the significance of employing miscellaneous teaching materials, theories and concepts that respond to the demands, needs and aspiration of various groups.

Cultural proficiency in teaching and culturally responsive teaching are not new concepts. However, they are still more the exception than the norm in educational systems. Despite the equity and equality plans of our educational policy, there are principals, teachers, and school personnel who prefer to focus on the mechanism of teaching rather than on the fact that immigrant students' connection between home culture and school culture contributes a great deal to their academic and social success. On the other hand, when teachers consider the cultural backgrounds of their students, and critically reflect on, dialogue with, and have high expectations for their students, they will be successful, as suggested in Gay's (2000) recommendations:

Teachers and other educators should act now, without a moment's hesitation and with deliberate speed, to revise the entire educational enterprise so that it reflects and responds to the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterises U.S. society

and its schools. The underachievement of marginalised African, Asian, Native, Latino, and Asian American students is too pervasive to do anything less. The question is not whether to act, but how soon and in what ways ... Reform cannot wait until teachers and other educators are comfortable with the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy (p. 212).

Classroom teachers can significantly assist their students in developing sensitivity and communication skills. They can help them embrace cultural differences as a national asset rather than a deficiency (Ploumis-Devick & Follman, 1993).

In their definition of cultural responsiveness, Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko and Stuczyski (2011) indicated that cultural responsiveness follows the same premise as cultural competence, but it goes deeper, in that it

values diversity, has the capacity for cultural self-assessment, is conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact and pays attention to the feelings in the pit of our stomachs, embeds cultural diversity and responsiveness into all aspects of the school or classroom and finally, it implements different interactions and behaviours in response to cultural diversity, understanding the double consciousness students go through when home and school cultures are at odds with one another, obtaining a willingness to adjust teaching styles to reach all children (p. 47).

In line with culturally responsive teaching, Saifer et al. (2011) characterise multicultural education as:

An educational approach that looks beyond curricular content and strategies from the white, Western European tradition. The goal usually is to broaden students' perspectives and understanding to encompass one or more cultures that are different from their own. Some multicultural education models highlight subjects from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender perspectives. Others represent an immersion in one culture, ethnicity, or race (p. 219).

Other scholars, like Moll, Gonzalez and Amanti (1992), describe other creative ways to use culture and family as resources for students' individual

interest. They use the term 'funds of knowledge' when valuable information from work, home, and spiritual life of the family and community members can be used as resources for individual and group interests. This can occur when teachers or instructors ask their students to provide them with topics that individuals from their cultures or families find valuable and necessary. Another way to access funds of knowledge is by discussing interesting or important topics that students talk about at home, but seldom talk about in class.

In building relationships with students, it is important for teachers to use culturally responsive practises in their teaching spaces. The increasing numbers of immigrant and refugee students in our schools today tells us that the demographics of our schools and society are changing. Wink (2011) calls attention to the necessity of acting differently in our ever-changing schools:

We all must move forward. We cannot continue to use old answers for new questions. The questions have changed, and, together, we are seeking new answers for new questions (p. 107).

Giger and Davidhizar (2004) define culturally competent care as a dynamic, fluid and continuous process whereby an individual, system, or health care agency finds meaningful and useful care-delivery strategies based on knowledge of cultural heritage, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of those to whom they render care. In the field of education, culturally competent care corresponds to culturally responsive teaching in that it recognises and respects students with diverse values, beliefs, behaviors and linguistic needs. In other words, it requires educators to understand cultural differences and respond accordingly.

When relationships between teachers and students are based on reciprocal learning and respect, students will be able to make constructive meaning of their experiences, and presumably their cultural experiences will become part of their academic lives. Hayes, Bahruth and Kessler (1998) describe a caring and loving relationship between teacher and students and how a strong teacher-student relationship leads to student success. They found that the traditional ways of teaching have not helped this group of students succeed. In their view, "teaching is more than books to be assigned and read, content area to be mastered and tested. Teaching entails a mutual as well as reciprocal act, a collaboration" (Hayes et al., 1998, p. 11).

Caring, sensitive and confident teachers and school personnel usually support their students, provide them with opportunities and hold high expectations for them. They do not pity their students, but build their confidence and nudge them to succeed. In order to provide culturally competent and appropriate care in classrooms today, it is important to remember that each individual is culturally unique and, as such, a product of past experiences, cultural beliefs and cultural norms. Schools and communities need to view students of diverse backgrounds as capable learners (Banks & Banks, 2013; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Structural motivation can be used in tandem with culturally responsive teaching that is distinguished by: respect for diversity; engagement of the motivation of all learners; creating safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environments for all learners; employing teaching practises that cross disciplines and cultures; integration of culturally responsive practises in all subject areas; and promoting justice and equity in society (Phuntsog, 1999; Wlodkowski, 2008; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Culturally responsive teachers and school personnel are valuable assets to the educational community in that they provide optimal environments for refugee and immigrant students to succeed both academically and socially.

#### **2.2.4 Critical pedagogy and critical multiculturalism**

Enhancing meaning in students' learning means avoiding assumptions about right or wrong attitudes toward learning, showing respect, and reducing students' fear of participating. This leads them to the next step. In some cases, this is called 'probing further' or 'giving a second chance' (Wlodkowski, 2008). Students often feel interest when they encounter something different or new. Interest in school and study sometimes happens because of curiosity or when studying somewhere else. It often involves an element of surprise, such as learning in a different way or being able to choose the field of interest, or even when the school provides students a safe space within which to participate in different activities and make their voices heard. The more teachers interact with their students and learn about their cultural perspectives, the better their chances to stimulate students' situational interests and attract their individual interest (Wlodkowski, 2008). From Freire's point of view, a dialogue from multiple perspectives among teachers and students can result in a new collective understanding (Freire, 1972). These processes help learners heighten their own understanding and better involve them in the learning process.

Freire (1972) insisted on a resolution of the traditional teacher-student contradiction, redefining 'teacher of the student' and 'student of the teacher' as teacher-student and student-teacher. He puts the responsibility of providing space to grow on both. To him, education has the responsibility of creating critical minds (Freire, 1972). Seen through a Freirean lens, learning is connected to students' growth as critical citizens with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency (Giroux, 2003).

Critical education, and pedagogy more generally, emphasises the importance of human intervention in transforming education and stimulating critical reflection (Freire, 2009). Generally, critical theory in education should have as its goal emancipatory practise (Giroux, 2009), in which schools practise construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling (Giroux, 1997, 2001). Critical educational theorists view school knowledge as historically and socially rooted and interest-bound. Knowledge acquired in school is never neutral or objective, but rather a social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations (McLaren, 2009).

Critical multiculturalism is fundamental to this study, focusing on challenges in modern societies related to questions of cultural rights and participation of minority groups, and criticizing education when it develops in relation to the defined needs of a particular majority or majorities in spite of diverse student groups (Parekh, 2005) and exclusion and marginalization of minority groups (Nieto, 2010). Education based on critical multiculturalist paradigms valorises equity and social justice, and incorporates the idea that all students – regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics – should be provided with inputs to level the playing field and ensure that they really have equal opportunities to learn in school (Banks, 2007).

Critical multiculturalism has in recent years challenged liberal approaches to multicultural education. By combining and developing various critical theoretical threads such as anti-racist education, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy, critical multiculturalism has offered a more complete understanding of oppression and institutionalization of unequal power relations in education (May & Sleeter, 2010). This field has examined many challenges in modern societies, such as the cultural rights of minority groups versus educational development that serves largely the defined needs of a particular majority or majorities (May & Sleeter, 2010; Parekh, 2005). The starting point for equity and social justice to take place should be the

recognition of students' different capabilities. Those who need them should be provided with tools and resources necessary to be able to function effectively in society. The work of caring should be socially recognised, fairly distributed and fairly compensated (Nussbaum 2006, 2011).

In contrast to deficit approaches, which focus mainly on students or others who don't succeed academically and socially by pointing out what the individuals lack (Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011), this study uses culturally relevant teaching or pedagogy (Gay, 2010) that includes and connects to the strengths of a student's home culture as a way of inviting them to learn. Culturally relevant teaching or pedagogy is also related to ecojustice education (Martusewicz et al., 2011), which is a modern critical approach that refers to the educational effort of students, teachers and members of the local community learning collaboratively while engaging in revitalizing the local commons. The notion of ecojustice refers to understanding how local and global ecosystems are essential to all life.

Whenever we work or teach individuals from other countries and are able to create a climate of mutual respect, care and understanding, we feel that we are in a remarkable position. Creating a climate of equitable opportunity in which learning is connected to students' diverse backgrounds is a challenge for teachers. In today's educational system in Iceland, many students are experiencing greater linguistic diversity among their peers. The need for practise and feedback from the teachers is different from the need of the local students in learning the Icelandic language. Formative assessment is one way for teachers to help linguistically diverse students to deepen their learning in a way that benefits all learners. For some students from certain backgrounds, low grades can be regarded as a threat or warning sign that decreases rather than enhances their motivation to learn.

Multiculturalism is both a philosophical position and a movement that holds that in a pluralistic society, cultural, gender, ethnic and racial diversity should be reflected in all structures of educational institutions, including curriculum, staff, values, and the student body (Banks & Banks, 2013). Multiculturalism often functions as a basis for intercultural and pluricultural societies. Without having a multicultural society, it is not possible to make the leap to other forms and levels of multiculturalism. Multicultural education is also a reform movement designed to adjust and change the educational environment to enable diverse students to experience equal opportunities in schools, colleges, and universities. This was based on the findings that these students (from diverse racial, ethnic, social and social backgrounds) experienced a better chance of success when the educational

institutions took their various backgrounds and needs into account (Banks & Banks, 2013).

Critical multiculturalism, on the other hand, is a field that disputes and questions liberal approaches to multicultural education. It integrates and at the same time develops various critical and theoretical threads that offer further understanding of the injustices and institutionalization of unequal power relations in education (May & Sleeter, 2010). The field has examined various challenges in our societies, such as cultural rights of minority groups, and has interrogated educational developments that largely serve the defined needs of a particular majority or majorities (May & Sleeter, 2010; Parekh, 2005)

The difference between multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism in the context of educational institutions is that in Iceland, and in Europe given a singular, sometimes superficial understanding of multiculturalism, interculturalism tends to be favored. Nevertheless, the term intercultural has a transactional connotation. Critical multiculturalism is needed to unflinchingly address issues of power and privilege, or lack thereof, in society. 'Intercultural education' is a contested term. It can be interpreted in many ways, depending on how it is contextualized. It is fundamentally about respectful communication between cultures and across cultures, where all cultures are valued equally. Its usefulness as a concept depends on the way in which a society or the policy in a country may choose to deploy it. It may be used superficially as a token gesture or be used more seriously to address difficult questions of social and cultural injustices.

### **2.2.5 Contact zones and safe spaces**

In providing a descriptive analysis for understanding the experiences of young immigrants in upper secondary schools, this qualitative study also examines the theoretical framework of contact zones and safe spaces. In so doing, it provides an understanding of a theory of participation and distancing in cultural, linguistic and religious encounters. According to Pratt (1991), contact zones are: "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (p. 34).

An important aim of contact zones in education should be the recognition of diverse races, histories and other identity markers (Pratt, 2007). Pratt's main concern was in giving an account of inclusive pedagogy, or how education is systematised in a way that all students and school personnel felt



that they belonged to the school and that the school equally belonged to them (Pratt, 1991).

Contact zones are where the complexities of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity that characterise a modern, pluralistic society come together and illustrate the cultural exchange that takes place due to global migration flows and processes of globalization that most people, including refugees and immigrant students, experience in their everyday lives and in school (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Vertovec, 2007). Contact zones can be learning spaces where knowledge is constructed together in the light of diverse histories and awareness that power relations between genders, races, classes, sexual orientations and even knowledge can be used to create a sense of belonging for those considered to be 'others' (Pratt, 2007). An example of this could be teachers who take an active role in discussing and responding to injustices. Pratt (1991) argues that education should be open to constant contact zone negotiations in which students become familiar with each other's diverse backgrounds and learn to communicate with each other and the teacher. Pratt (1991) also emphasises cultural specifications that become institutionalised in education if they are not challenged.

It is the contact zone that makes the notion of safe houses valuable and influential. The concept of a safe house refers to:

social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporary protection from legacies of oppression (Pratt, 1991).

Due to legacies of subordination and stories of unequal power relations, groups need "places of healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledge, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone" (Pratt, 1991). Pratt's (1991) theory corresponds to interpretations of the intercultural encounter as an oscillation between closeness and distance (Biesta, 2013). We are different from each other, but we are also similar. We meet each other in the contact zone, but we also need to separate in safe houses. In this way, Pratt (1991) offers a theory of participation and distancing in cultural, linguistic and religious encounters.

A sense of belonging to the school, and at the same time a feeling of ownership of the school, is an important component of social integration. Studies have shown the influence of belonging and ownership on students'

persistence and academic success, finding that these feelings reduce inequalities in achievement and health (Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This is especially important for immigrant and refugee students, since many of these students have difficulty developing connections with the community.

## **2.2.6 Social and cultural capital theories**

Individuals all over the world continue to migrate in search of a better life in terms of either personal or socioeconomic status. Ogbu (1991) argues that with time and education, immigrants are able to assimilate into their new homelands and ultimately obtain a better quality of life. Moving from one place to another and settling leads to diversity in our societies and educational systems, as has happened in recent decades in many countries around the world including Iceland.

Portes (1998) discusses how the roots of social capital can be traced back to Pierre Bourdieu and his definition of the concept in his "Provisional Notes," published in the *Actes de la Recherche en Science Sociales* in 1980. According to Bourdieu (1986) social capital exhibits itself in two main components, the actual social relationship itself (structure) and that the relationship allows individuals to gain access (interaction) to the resources of their network and the amount and quality of those resources. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital focuses mainly on the benefits occurring for individuals emerging from individual participation in a group.

Various authors (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1994; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) have provided numerous definitions of social capital and the role that it plays within individuals and groups. Putnam (2000) refers to social capital as the connections among individuals that result in certain assets for those individuals. Similarly, Spaulding (2005) states that "physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individual social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p.4).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that the cultural capital of the educator serves as a gatekeeper to academic success by reifying the value of dominant forms of cultural capital. In the role of gatekeepers, teachers expect that students and their families will possess the skills and practises (forms of cultural capital) required to ensure student success in school. These expectations may include particular levels and types of parental participation in their child's education (Lareau, 1987; Kao, 2004) as well as access to resources such as books and other educational materials (Roscigno &

Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) understood that educators play a role in affirming some cultural behaviors through positive feedback, while discouraging other displays. For Bourdieu habitus doesn't act alone; there is an „unconscious relationship“ between habitus and field, and they produce as a result practise -- i.e., one's practise results from relationships between habitus and the field within a particular social space (Maton, 2008; Wacquant, 2006, p. 7).

Other authors define social capital as a way of interacting between people. It is about the way social networks and social capital both bind similar people and bridge diverse people with norms of reciprocity (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001). Coleman (1994) states that “social capital is any aspect of informal social organisation that constitutes a productive resource for one or more actors.” Yosso (2006) argues that familial capital helps to reduce the isolation of families, enables them to connect more with others around common issues, and become aware that they are not alone in dealing with difficulties. Yosso further argues that familial capital is nourished and developed by “extended family” such as uncles, aunts, grandparents and friends who see themselves as part of the family.

Woolcock and Navaran (2000) define social capital as the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively. According to them, social capital is characterised by the phrase “it's not what you know, it's who you know” (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000, p. 225). They further define social capital as wisdom born of the experience that gaining membership to exclusive clubs requires inside contacts, and that close competitions for jobs and contracts are usually won by those with friends in high places. In this way, the basic idea of social capital is that a person's family, friends and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called on in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged for material gain for individuals as well as groups (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

This study uses the theory of social capital as a conceptual framework to interpret how, for example, social capital and social networks play a vital role for immigrant and refugee students who have succeeded both academically and socially in their new learning spaces in Iceland, as well as how both formal and informal support networks contribute to high academic attainment. The theory of binding and bridging social capital helps us gain a clearer understanding of who students rely on for support among families, relatives, friends and school personnel, including teachers. The role and effect of social capital is not limited only to students and teachers, but also affects parents and teachers. Reay and Mirza (2005) argued that

supplementary schools – those that provide additional space for parents -- present additional opportunities for black women's effective educational involvement even when teachers and parents hold diverse educational philosophies.

Various studies have been conducted on the effects and benefits of friendship for immigrant students on students' academic outcomes and friendship intimacy (Berndt, 2004; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Verbera (2014) discusses the importance for immigrant students of having positive friendships with native-born peers who can help them navigate through the school system and language barriers. Verbera also pointed out the benefit for immigrant students of cross-cultural friendships when they are adapting to a new culture, which can assist them in learning the new language and cultural system (Verbera, 2014). Thus, it can be problematic when immigrants and refugees only make connections within their own cultural groups.

Research has also shown the effect of networking and friendships on immigrant and refugee students' dropout rates. Dropouts among immigrant and refugee students have been addressed in various studies both in Iceland and elsewhere. These studies have largely found that immigrant and refugee students' likelihood of dropping out is affected by a number of factors, such as lack of positive relationships with peers and teachers and negative attitudes toward the formal aspects of school (Makarova & Herzog, 2013). Students experience school differently because of their different origins and backgrounds (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). OECD (2016) illustrates that students' immigrant status or special education needs can lead to dropouts and lower performance. According to Statistics Iceland, fewer immigrant students graduate from upper secondary schools than native Icelanders. In Fall 2004, 175 immigrant students began their studies at upper secondary schools. Four years later, only 26% of them graduated. However, the graduation rate increased to 31% in 2010 (Statistics Iceland, 2014).

Albrecht & Ko (2017) conducted research that examined the way immigrant students gained social confidence and made friends in secondary school. They highlighted the key role that the school, teachers and counsellors have in facilitating friendships by creating opportunities for immigrant students to connect with others, ask or answer questions, and feel included and worthy. Other studies have indicated that a positive attitude towards and motivation for better integration within the society are among the reasons for immigrants' participation in higher education (Geiger & Lund, 2010; Nordisk Ministerråd, 2004).

Immigrants and refugees leave their homelands for various reasons, among them to take advantage of the educational and other opportunities the new society affords. As immigrants and refugee students enter a new school, their participation in education serves as a means to improve their academic and social success.

### **2.3 Summary: the theoretical framework for this study**

In order to understand this young population's perception of the factors that allow them to be successful both academically and socially within their new spaces in Iceland, different theories on motivation are regarded as useful. Among these theories are intrinsic and extrinsic ones. Intrinsic theories are concerned with students' interest, effort, passion, and perseverance. Extrinsic theories are concerned with what formal school settings have provided these students and how these settings have supported their academic and social success. This study leans on the critical notions of pedagogy and education that have roots in Freire's work (Freire, 2005). He criticises education 'banks' where teachers discuss reality as static and predictable and choose materials that are alien to students' experiences. Through this lens, teachers deposit knowledge into students, who are reduced to receiving and storing these deposits. Instead of patronizing attitudes passed unilaterally from teacher to student, schools should be a place to empower students' creativity and aspirations and should provide students with enough space for continuous dialogue, cooperation and engagement.

This study is also based on critical theories of how the success of immigrant and refugee students is reflected in their talk, in teachers and schools, and in the larger society. Critical pedagogy is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world. Critical pedagogy implies praxis, i.e., developing the important social action predispositions and attitudes that are the backbone of a democratic society, and learning to use them to help alter patterns of domination and oppression. Rather than being a mechanistic strategy or a technical process, critical pedagogy is a way of thinking more openly and critically about learning. Critical pedagogy is not a standard set of practises, but rather a particular stance *vis-à-vis* knowledge, the process of learning and teaching, and the educational environment in which these take place (Nieto, 2010).

When the difference is acknowledged in a negative way, it has a negative impact on education and academic and social well-being of young

immigrants and refugees. The opposite is also true -- i.e., when it is acknowledged in a positive way and made into a resource for all students and schools, it has a positive impact on young immigrants and refugees especially, and on all students more generally. Berger and Milem (1999) found no difference among students of diverse ethnic backgrounds in regard to their social and academic integration. In their study on the experiences of students who are treated differently by fellow students and teachers at institutes of higher vocational education and at research universities, Severiens & Wolff (2008) came to the conclusion that being treated differently had a positive effect on the students' social and academic integration. More equality and attention to diversity in the program had a positive effect on the academic integration and study progress for ethnic minority and majority students. Tinto's (1997, 1998) model of social and academic integration indicates that social integration refers to positive social contact with teachers and fellow students. The quality of contact between teachers and students, the quality of the lessons given, the underlying process in the learning environment, and the environment itself all affect study progress and student achievement. For most students, being around those with whom they feel at home is an important factor in their engagement in a program, and it also determines the chances of their success both academically and socially.

This qualitative study also looks at the theoretical framework of social capital networks and provides an understanding of how, for young immigrants and refugees enrolled in upper secondary education and universities and those who are part of the job market, social capital networks serve to enhance their academic and social success. It also reveals the significant role of young immigrant and refugee students' networks at both micro and macro levels of the society.

The purpose of this study is to answer this key question: What academic, personal and social experiences account for the success of young immigrant and refugee students while in upper secondary schools in Iceland?

My research is guided by three additional exploratory research design questions. These questions will provide a descriptive analysis for the purpose of understanding how young immigrants who have succeeded academically and socially make sense of their experiences and expectations (Merriam, 2002b) either through their participation in education or in the job market.

- How do young immigrant and refugee students make sense of their experience of success, inclusion and social justice in upper secondary schools and society?
- What perceptions do they have about upper secondary schools in Iceland?
- What role does social, cultural and academic background play in their success?

These questions, focused on young immigrant and refugee students from various backgrounds, are framed through the approaches to multicultural education and critical pedagogy described above. In examining these students' interpretations of their experiences, these theories will guide my understanding of the academic and social success of these populations of students while in upper secondary schools in Iceland, allowing me to understand how and why some immigrant and refugee students succeed academically and socially.

The methods of the research study are discussed in the following chapter.





### **3 Method**

This interpretive, qualitative study delved into how immigrant and refugee students make sense of their successful experiences and why young immigrants and refugees succeed academically and socially in their new learning spaces in Iceland. It is interpretative because understanding how immigrant and refugee students make sense of their experience was achieved mainly through interpretative activity on the part of the researcher. The study used qualitative research methodology and it was conducted with people, rather than on people (Reason 2002; Reason & Bradbury 2008). It attempts to give a voice to successful immigrant students at upper secondary schools in Iceland. The study looked for experiential evidence instead of numeric data. Qualitative data were collected from 27 students through interviews, which were chosen because they allow researchers to delve deeply into how individuals interpret their experiences, how they build up their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience (Merriam, 2002b; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Packer (2018) discusses the flexibility inherent in qualitative research: the interviewer can phrase questions on the spur of the moment, vary the sequence of questions, and give control over subtopics to the participants.

#### **3.1 Basic interpretive qualitative research**

Like any other qualitative method of research, interpretive qualitative studies are found throughout disciplines and applied fields of practise (Merriam, 2002). A key characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals form reality through interaction with their social worlds (Merriam, 2002a; Smith et al., 2009). Any qualitative researcher who wants to conduct a basic interpretive qualitative study must be interested in three basic fields:

- How people interpret their experience(s);

- How they construct their worlds;

- What meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2002a).

To Merriam (Merriam, 2002a), a basic interpretive qualitative research study elucidates all of the characteristics of qualitative research. Merriam's definition is also influenced by constructionism, according to which meaning "is not discovered but constructed. Meaning doesn't inhere in the object,

merely waiting for someone to come upon it. Meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 2003, pp. 42-43). Merriam also argues that, in phenomenology, which focuses on interpretive qualitative analysis along with symbolic interactionism, a researcher is looking at how people interpret everyday experiences in different contexts (Merriam, 2002b). Consequently, subjective angles of people’s behavior are emphasised as the researcher ventures into the subjects’ reality (Merriam, 2002) so as to understand how and what meaning they give events in their daily lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Bogdan & Biklen (2003) discuss subjectivity as a concern for qualitative researchers, yet subjectivity is an inevitable part of research. They emphasise that researchers need to be open to being shaped by the research experience and their thinking needs to be informed by the data. Researchers’ thinking is necessarily shaped by the empirical world they are exploring, and it is necessary for researchers to put themselves in the place of others to see things from others’ viewpoints (Merriam, 2002b).

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) and Lichtman (2006) argue that people change and grow and construct meaning through interactions, since people regularly interact and share experiences, problems, and backgrounds, learning more about themselves in the process. They further argue the importance of the meanings that people give to their experiences and their process of interpretation. Their arguments follow phenomenological perspectives commonly discussed in qualitative research directed at identifying and describing the subjective experiences of participants. It is a matter of studying everyday experiences from the point of view of the subject (Schwandt, 2015). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) further state that objects, people, situations and events do not possess their own meaning. Rather, meaning is conferred on them, and that interpretation is neither a self-determining (autonomous) act, nor is it determined by any particular force, human or otherwise. It is, rather, an interactive process that individuals interpret with the help of others and through the influence of their environment. Individuals are able to construct meaning through interaction. From Packer’s (2018) point of view, qualitative research is the study of meaning, which is why it requires access to the subjective explanations participants attach to their objective circumstances. Merriam (2002b) states that a basic interpretive qualitative study is probably most common in educational fields.

In this study, I attempted to understand the academic and social experiences of immigrant and refugee students and the meanings they make of those experiences. As mentioned earlier, the study is based on a Nordic

project called *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Four Nordic Countries*. Twenty-five of the interviews chosen for this study were conducted by me, with the other two conducted by two other members of the research team. The interview questions were developed collaboratively by the research team. The interviews were semi-structured in that I had a general plan for the topic to be discussed with participants, but I did not follow a fixed order of questions. My participants were given wide latitude in the way they answered and in the length of their responses.

### **3.2 Research design**

The interpretive qualitative study design allowed me to focus mainly on Merriam's idea of the three "key dimensions" discussed earlier. These dimensions are: how people interpret their experience(s); how they construct their world; and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. In this study, students from three upper secondary schools were selected. Participants were either enrolled in educational programs in one of these schools, or they had already completed their upper secondary education successfully. Sampling was purposive, in that the participating schools were chosen because they had been successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. Others were either students at the University or part of the job market. The interview method allowed me to provide an in-depth picture capturing each participant's experience of success. The selection of the participants, which was guided by clear criteria, was one of the key factors in the design of this study.

### **3.3 Recruitment of participants**

This study used purposive sampling. This sampling method was chosen because I wanted to gain insight into the reasons behind young refugees' and immigrants' academic and social success. Purposive sampling generates insight and in-depth understanding of the topics of concern and interest (Patton, 2015; Bernard, 2011). In this type of sampling, a strategy called snowballing, chain, or networking were used. This involves asking participants to refer the researcher to other participants whom they believe would be good for the study or would be good interview subjects (Merriam, 1998).

Like many other countries, Iceland is experiencing an influx of immigrants and refugees, among them young adults who need to start their education in the new country. According to Statistics Iceland's data processed

especially for this study, the number of immigrant and refugee students is also increasing in the three schools chosen for this study. In 2013 the total number of students enrolled in the three schools chosen for this study was 5,889, and the number of immigrant and refugee students was 386. Four years later the total population of the students was lower 5,526, but there were 418 immigrant and refugee students in the three schools. The three schools provided both day and evening school, and one of the schools offered distance learning as well. The participants had opportunities to participate in the different programs, and they could choose their preferred time of instruction (i.e. day, evening, or distance).

The 27 participants in this study were immigrant and refugee students who were either enrolled in upper secondary schools in Iceland, or had just completed their upper secondary school studies and were either university students or working in the job market. The students originally came from fifteen different countries located in North and South America, east and south Asia, and eastern and central Europe. The countries include: China, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Kosovo, Lithuania, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Ukraine, and Vietnam. The participants had been living in Iceland for between 3 and 15 years. To ensure equal distribution among the three schools, we selected four to seven participants from each school and 11-12 participants who were either enrolled in a university or were working. Teachers who worked and taught these students, in one of the three schools chosen for the project, provided the research team with the names of immigrant and refugee students to contact. All of the participants met the selected criteria for my study. The group consisted of 13 female and 14 male participants. Since this study was part of a larger project, in two cases participants were referred by researchers in the larger LSP research project. These were former students who graduated from one of the selected schools.

Data collection took place from March to December, 2014. To make the determination of whether a student was successful, indicators such as grade point average, test scores and dropout rates were used, as well as the evaluations and judgement of school authorities. Another criterion was student age between 18-24. All participants were either immigrants or refugees who were born in other countries and moved to Iceland at different ages. The definition of 'immigrant' has been derived from the OECD (2011), and refers to all persons who have ever migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence (OECD, 2011). The 'foreign population' consists of persons who still have the nationality of their home country

(OECD, 2011). ‘Recent immigrants’ refers to a foreign-born individual with a residency of less than five years.

**Table 1. General profile of the 27 study participants**

Schools	Participants						
F1	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F	
F2	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D			
F3	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student G
FVN	FVN1	FVN2	FVN3	FVN4	FVN5	FVN6	FVN7
FVN	FVN8	FVN9	FVN10				

\*F1 = Upper secondary school 1, F2= Upper secondary school 2, and F3 = Upper secondary school 3. FVN = Former students who had graduated from one of the three schools chosen for the LSP.

As shown in Table 1, 27 immigrant and refugee students participated in the study. The letter F stands for upper secondary schools and the letters FVN stand for former students who graduated from one of those schools. Seventeen of these students were students in the upper secondary schools chosen for the study, and ten were either enrolled at a university or were employed. This study sought to learn about these former students’ experiences and expectations while they were in upper secondary schools in Iceland.

To gain access to the students, we requested permission from the school principals to contact the students. The participants could choose to speak and answer the questions in Icelandic or English. Almost all participants were proficient in both of these languages in addition to their heritage language(s). Two of the them who had moved to Iceland at a very young age were fully fluent in Icelandic. Some had one Icelandic step-parent, while others had two immigrant parents. Neither the Icelandic nor English languages were barriers to student participation, since many of the students had resided and studied in Iceland for more than four years. For those who migrated more recently, we used English primarily and Icelandic sometimes if they preferred. All students except one were quite proficient in both languages. The one participant who had some difficulty understanding every word used his cell phone, both through Google Translate and another app, to translate words

into his home language or first language, which helped him answer the questions and talk about the subjects.

When the participants were contacted, they were ensured that all personal information that they provided would be confidential, and other information would be anonymised and deidentified. The participants were also informed that they would be asked to participate in a single, hour-long interview, with any further clarification occurring through email or post. The participants were assured as well that their names and any other identifying information would not be used and that they would have an opportunity to review any text that are intended to use in my study. All participants who agreed to take part in the study were asked to sign the letter of consent, which was provided in Icelandic and English (See Appendix 1).

Only one set of data collection procedures was used in this study. The individual interviews with 27 participants were conducted in 2014 as part of data collection for LSP, whose project team also conducted interviews with teachers from the same selected upper secondary schools. The data from the teachers were used to enhance the comprehension and accuracy in LSP, but the present study is limited to the academic and social experiences of the immigrant and refugee students.

The questions used in this research study concerned the autobiographical, personal and social experiences of the participants. Critical questions were also asked in the research study (see Appendix B). Questions that led the participants to a specific response were avoided in order to ensure that the data collection from the interviews represented the participants' authentic voices and experiences.

### **3.4 The participants**

As noted above, this study is part of a three-year research project titled *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Four Nordic Countries* that took place from January 2013 through December 2015 and was funded by NordForsk, an organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministries that provides funding for and facilitates Nordic cooperation on research and research infrastructure, and Rannís, the Icelandic Centre for Research, which supports research, innovation, education, and culture in Iceland. Within LSP, data were collected at three school levels (preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools). Data for the study were comprised of interviews with 27 then-current and former upper secondary students.

I interviewed six students from upper secondary school 1 (F1) (three female and three male), four students from F2 (three female and one male), and seven students from F3 (three female and four male). In addition, I interviewed eight former students, and two interviews were conducted by the research group. Five of the former students were enrolled in university (one female and four male), and five who were working in the job market (two female and three male), one of whom had recently graduated from the University of Iceland.

### **3.4.1 The upper secondary schools**

The three upper secondary schools (F1, F2, and F3) were chosen for LSP, and were compliant with the Upper Secondary School Act of 2008. The Curriculum Guide conforms to the six fundamental pillars of education: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, health and welfare, and creativity. The final objective is for students to be knowledgeable and able to think critically and independently so as to be take active roles in Icelandic democratic society. Cultivating a positive, healthy learning environment fostering respect, tolerance, and equality was the focus of the three schools. The schools also aimed to meet students at their various ability levels, being aware of the various needs of each individual student and ensuring the welfare, overall development, and education of all students. The normal period of study in the three schools was four years by the time we started our project in 2013, although flexibility in the system generally allowed students to graduate in only three to three-and-a-half years. There was also flexibility in the other direction; i.e., students could extend their studies a year-and-a-half beyond the dedicated four years. Starting in the 2016 school year, the study period has since been shortened, and students typically graduate in three years instead of four. Yet there is still flexibility in both directions.

#### **3.4.1.1 F1**

Upper secondary school 1 is located in the capital area and provides a wide range of vocational and specialised programs. It is subdivided into 13 trade-specific and vocational schools that collectively comprise one of the largest secondary schools in the country. The school has the largest number of students with foreign backgrounds; in January 2013, 124 immigrant students representing 38 nationalities were enrolled in the school. Twenty-six of these were first-year students. According to data processed for this study by the Statistics Iceland, the immigrant students who were involved in the study

from 2013-2018 were from Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and there were also students without citizenship. The majority of immigrant students were enrolled in an intensive program intended for recent immigrants who want to learn Icelandic and improve their knowledge of English, mathematics and computer science so as to be able to meet Icelandic upper secondary school requirements. The school provides immigrant students with separate instruction until their Icelandic proficiency reaches the level that allows them to enroll in various academic courses. Many students continue their education in one of the diverse vocational programs on offer, like hairdressing, information technology, multimedia, design, and handicrafts.

#### *3.4.1.2 F2*

This comprehensive college is located in the capital area. This school provides preparation for the matriculation exam through instruction in languages, natural science, sociology and economics, thus preparing students for university courses. F2 is also one of the leading schools in information technology in Iceland, and it offers vocational training as well. In 2013, there were 113 immigrant students enrolled at F2. According to data obtained through the Icelandic Statistics immigrant students who were involved in studies in this school during 2013-2018 were from Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and there were students without citizenship. Among them were immigrants and refugees without legal status in Iceland, yet they had opportunities to start and continue their studies here. Twenty-seven of those students were new in 2013. The school has a long history of educating students with immigrant backgrounds and has developed a multicultural policy and reception plan for immigrant students. Teachers and students in this school have often taken part in projects with other European schools that have been funded by Leonardo, Comenius, Nordplus, and EEA grants.

#### *3.4.1.3 F3*

Upper secondary school 3 is a comprehensive secondary school founded in 1975 located in the capital area. The school offers morning and evening classes and summer programs. The total population of immigrant and refugee students in the morning, evening and summer programs in this school was 149. Like the other two schools, some students enrolled in the programs did not have legal status in Iceland. Fifty-four of those students were new students in 2013. Immigrant students who were involved in studies in this school, according to data from Statistics Iceland processed mainly for this study, were from Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania, and there were students without citizenship. The school has a diverse body and staff.



In addition to preparing students for university-level coursework, this school offers qualifications in multiple educational paths and in specialised areas such as a Business diploma (2 years), as well as state-recognised 3-year programs in Licensed Practical Nursing, Carpentry, Electrical Studies, Cosmetology, Media Studies, and Athletics. The school offers a specially designed program for students with immigrant backgrounds that consists of a two-year program with special emphasis on learning Icelandic as a second language.

### **3.5 Data collection procedures**

Data collection for this study was done through an hour-long (on average), face-to-face, semi-structured interview with each participant. To ensure their time availability, all participants were informed prior to the interview that it would take around one hour. In some cases, it took up to an hour and fifteen minutes. Each participant signed a letter of consent agreeing to the terms and time commitment of the study.

The interview questions were developed by the LSP research group. Different types of questions focusing on young immigrants and refugees' experiences, expectations, belonging, language and cultural background were asked in the interview. According to Creswell (2002), interviews should be composed of five to seven questions and the design can either be a 'grand tour' or specific. Creswell (2002) also proposed that the researcher could reduce their whole study to a single main question followed by several sub-questions. In most cases, sub-questions fit into two categories (Creswell, 2002): 'issue' questions and topical questions (Creswell, 2002). Issue questions address and resolve major concerns and difficulties. Topical questions elicit information necessary to define the participant's experience (Creswell, 2002). With these two types of questions, the participants are offered the opportunity to tell their stories with fewer interruptions by the researcher. Morse (2002) argues that the most appropriate use of unstructured interviews is in studies where the researcher wants to investigate the respondents' understanding of the matter at hand. Morse also describes another form of interview used primarily in qualitative research studies, the semi-structured interview, used when the researcher has enough knowledge about the topic to frame the needed discussion in advance (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Designing interview questions is a critical and complex part of the research process. Since this study focuses primarily on the experiences and expectations of young refugees and immigrants who have succeeded both

academically and socially in their new country, I did not ask only open-ended questions when conducting the interviews. Rather, I chose an in-depth description of their academic and social experiences of success elicited through semi-structured interviews that included both critical reflection questions and autobiographical questions (see Appendix B).

All 27 interviews were recorded via Dictaphone; in some cases, I used two devices to ensure the quality of my data collection. I downloaded these later onto my desktop computer for replay and transcription. The interviews were conducted in participants' homes, in my office, in university classrooms or in the school libraries. The interviews were held at times convenient for the participants. For example, I conducted interviews in the school library during the time when upper secondary teachers were on strike and the school library was open for those who wanted to do extra homework. I conducted my interviews in a section of the library that was enclosed and allowed for privacy. I found that the participants in my study were comfortable in any of these places, since they chose the time and place of the interview.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

There are no protocols or procedures that tell education researchers how to analyse data (Pillow, 2002). Data analysis is often hard and time-consuming work. It is usually hard to analyse data in small doses (Worthen, 2002). Data analysis can fill us with doubt and confusion. A practical way to diminish the confusion and doubt is to go back to the data to verify that they support our findings. Since we collect more data than we use, a common procedure in dealing with a large amount of data is to narrow down the topic (Silverman, 2013), search for connections across themes, and code data or sort text into categories (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Creswell (2002) defines coding as a process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and themes in the data. He even includes as codes things like seating arrangements, teaching approaches, or the physical layout of a classroom.

As far as the analysis of my data is concerned, I reread and repeatedly listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and made preliminary analysis before breaking my data into parts. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to the process of listening and memo-writing as important aspects of the transcription process needed for the researcher to become immersed in the data. I used a colour-coding system and wrote short notes on the interview transcripts, mainly about the key concepts that occurred to me. I often ended up reworking and revising my ideas to better fill in gaps in the data. Similar data were combined to form common, universal themes. The themes were

then assessed for quality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If the themes didn't relate to the research question, they were dropped.

A crucial issue that I faced was the language. I relied heavily on resources such as Thesaurus.com and Snara (a handy website and a spelling dictionary) to assess and secure the kind of language that conveyed the right concept. Merriam (1998) describes data analysis as one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of conducting qualitative research in which there is a right way and a wrong way. Silverman (2013) describes the right way of analysing data in a qualitative study as a process of doing the analysis simultaneously with data collection. I began to analyse my data as soon as the first interview was conducted (Lichtman, 2006; Silverman, 2013); this process helped me generate further questions to ask the students. As mentioned above, the interviews were conducted and transcribed in English and Icelandic. I have translated many of the quotes used in this study from Icelandic into English. As neither of these languages is my native language, the transcription of the interviews turned out to be more time consuming than expected. However, this method of transcription assured accurate transcription of all interviews. I conducted 25 interviews, and the other members of the research team, coworkers in the project, conducted two interviews. Duplicating copies of my transcribed interviews secured my data from any damage or loss.

For coding, I used Atlas.ti, which is a systematic, thorough, and inclusive tool. Like any other program, it doesn't analyse data, but supports the process of qualitative data analysis, enabling the researcher to organise textual, graphic, audio, and visual data files along with coding memos and findings (Creswell, 2013). When using Atlas.ti, the researcher needs to arrange the data and the meaning from the data and input the coding. The program makes it easier for the researcher to find the coding and strings of characters in a large variety of combinations. It also frees the researcher from all those tasks that a machine can do much more effectively, like modifying code words and coded segments, retrieving data based on various criteria, searching for words, integrating material in one place, attaching notes and identifying them again, counting the numbers of coded incidences, and offering overviews at various stages of a project (Friese, 2014). It also increases the validity of the research results, especially at the conceptual stage of analysis. When using manual methods, it is easy to forget the raw data behind the concepts, as it is quite laborious to get back to the data. In software-supported analysis, the raw data is only a few mouse clicks away, and it is much easier to remind yourself about the data and to bolster or problematise your theoretical perspective.

Atlas.ti. offers many functions and options, but it does not explain what you actually need to do in order to conduct your analysis. For this study, the themes were assessed for quality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If a theme lacked sufficient support in the data, or if the theme didn't relate to the research question, it was modified. Subthemes were also created in order to capture the depth of the data. After identification, themes were labelled and defined.

Thematic analysis was chosen for reasons, including that it allowed the researcher to interpretively identify themes that may not have been considered closely in previous research (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and because it focuses on what was said rather than who said it (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2002). The flexibility in using thematic analysis gives the researcher space to analyse almost any kind of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, thematic analysis was selected due to its inductive approach. Themes were generated from across the whole data set and evidence for the meaning and depth of each theme was presented in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Unique to inductive approaches, the data collected and the themes identified shape the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013) rather than the other way round. This unique trait of inductive analysis is useful for instances when there is a lack of previous research in the topic area, such as in the present case. It also ensures that the themes identified are analysed equally, rather than focusing on or searching for themes to fit into a pre-existing framework. The seven stages of coding and analyzing by thematic analysis are: transcription, reading and familiarization, coding across entire dataset, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing/finalizing analysis. Progressing through these stages makes the process easier and more logical for qualitative researchers to follow (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### **3.7 Quality criteria and techniques**

Validation of findings needs to take place throughout the process of data collection and analysis to ensure that the findings are accurate, valid, and reliable. Certain kinds of strategies are used in qualitative research to make the findings accurate and credible, including triangulation, member checking or credibility, transferability, dependability, and reflexivity (Creswell, 2002, 2013).

### 3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility, or member checking, is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the researcher's account (Creswell, 2002). It also works well with experience-based questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This sort of checking includes taking the findings back to participants and asking their views, in writing or orally, about the accuracy of the report and whether your descriptions are complete and realistic, as well as whether your interpretations are fair and representative.

This study used a member check process to ensure that the information collected was solid and credible. I mainly used the research team to check credibility. I conducted 25 of interviews, transcribed them and did the first coding, and then presented the written draft to the members of the research team in the LSP project. Members of the research team conducted two interviews, they transcribed those, and we did the first coding together. While I collected, transcribed, and coded the data, we worked together as a team to analyze it. My colleagues reread the transcripts, and I did a second round of coding. Member checking provided the group with an opportunity to reflect, comment, question, and have a dialogue about the findings of the study. In this way, we were able to review the data that led to various themes related to the research. The interviews conducted in Icelandic include quotes translated into English. In order to establish the credibility of the findings, the research team validated the first interpretations of the research themes for the project. Then I went through and did the second round of interpretation for my research study. The main reason for the second round of analysis was validation.

### 3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability and generalisability are used interchangeably. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings are transferable to other groups of people or contexts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Thus, if one conducts a research on upper secondary schools, the question is asked whether other upper secondary schools are the same or different. Generalisability is mostly associated with quantitative studies and refers to the ability to apply the results of a study to a wider or different population (Creswell, 2002). Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2013) discuss how transferability is a concept which is more frequently used in relation to flexible generalisations or qualitative, not quantitative, research. The key to enhancing the transferability of a study is to describe the specific contexts, participants,

settings, and circumstances of the study in detail so that the reader can evaluate and decide upon the potential for applying the findings to other contexts or participants. The final decision rests with the reader, who has to decide whether the circumstances or the settings are similar enough to warrant an accurate transfer.

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) point out that researchers use the term generalisability when they are referring to whether the findings of a particular study hold up beyond the specific research subjects and the settings involved. If, for example, we conduct a study on a classroom, readers will want to know whether other classrooms like the one under study are the same. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) claim that not all qualitative researchers think of generalisability in the conventional way. Some of them are more interested in deriving universal statements of general social processes than statements of commonality between similar settings, such as between classrooms. Hence, the concern of some qualitative researchers is not the question of whether their findings are generalisable, but rather to which other settings and subjects their findings are generalisable.

The question of whether my findings are generalisable to other settings is also a matter of concern. According to Creswell, Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013), a rich and thick description of the participants or the settings under study will give the reader the opportunity to make decisions regarding transferability. To achieve transferability in this study, I provide the reader with a detailed description of the participants and their selection.

In this study, purposive sampling process for the selection of the participants was used to guarantee that the participants have experienced the phenomena under study. I used other techniques such as description of specific contexts, participants, settings, and circumstances of the study to achieve transferability; i.e., I provided a detailed description of both the participants and the data.

### **3.7.3 Dependability**

Dependability is parallel to reliability. It refers to the process of the inquiry and the inquirer's responsibility of ensuring that the process of the study was "logical, traceable and documented" (Schwandt, 2015).

What makes a qualitative research study dependable is how the researcher is able to convince the readers of the accuracy of the research (Morse & Richards, 2002). Guba and Lincoln (1989) state that consistency in research leads to the dependability of the findings. They describe this

criterion as more appropriate for judging the trustworthiness of naturalistic investigation. Dependability is also referred to as 'trustworthiness criteria,' a quality of an investigation that makes the findings of the study noteworthy to audiences. In this interpretive qualitative research study, consistency was applied across the whole research study to ensure that the data analyses were credible. It refers to the accuracy of the findings and ensures at the same time that the findings are supported by the data collected, the results make sense, and that they are consistent and dependable. Dependability also addresses the fact that the researcher must be aware of changes and nuances that differ from the design of the proposal, such as changes that happened in the methodology due to increasing the number of interviews (Given, 2008).

The research methodology of this study particularly examined the factors that contributed to the academic and social success of young immigrants and refugees in upper secondary schools in Iceland, including individual and environmental factors both within and outside their schools. Though the study's sample size of 27 student participants was sufficient for a qualitative study addressing the gap in knowledge about the experiences and expectations of this student population, it was necessarily limited in duration and scope. Additional future research in different contexts and with expanded scope will be necessary to further validate and expand upon the findings discussed here.

### **3.7.4 Triangulation**

Triangulation is one of the three primary forms of validation generally used by qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2002). It is the process of authenticating, justifying, or validating evidence from different individuals (e.g. a principal and a student), types of data (e.g. observations, field notes, and interviews), or methods of data collection (e.g. documents and interviews) in descriptions and themes within a qualitative study (Creswell, 2002). In line with Creswell (2002), Bogdan and Biklen (2003) refer to the term 'triangulation' as having been widely used in discussions of qualitative research, and they state that triangulation was first used in the social sciences to convey the idea that you need multiple sources of data to fully understand the phenomena you are studying.

Going further, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) provide an example of an individual who declares that he had arrived by a certain train at a certain time or on a certain day. In this case, we might need more than the entry from the diary of the person who was on the train. We need, for example, the train's

arrival and departure schedule, plus the person's diary. It would be even better to have a report of the arrival in the local newspaper. Bogdan and Biklen, however, argue *against* using the term triangulation, as according to them it tends to create more confusion than clarification and more intimidation than enlightenment. Rather, they suggest that the researcher simply state what he or she did, such as describing types of data sources and methods of collecting data, rather than using the imprecise and abstract term triangulation.

According to Schwandt (2015), triangulation is a procedure used to demonstrate the fact that the criterion of validity has been met, and the central point of triangulation procedure is to examine the conclusion, claim, etc. To Schwandt, the process of triangulation is both necessary and possible since research is a process of discovery from different vantage points. Whereas to Flick (2014), the multitude of information approaching from different methods may add to the problem of context and anonymity for individual participant in the study, despite the fact that it is becoming more fruitful to use different approaches and combine methods.

As mentioned earlier, this project is part of a larger project for which data from different directions and school levels have been gathered. As far as upper secondary school is concerned, data from 27 students and 9 teachers had been collected. Nine in-depth interviews had been conducted with teachers from three upper secondary schools. These teachers were selected using purposive sampling from the participating schools which, based on criteria used in the larger study, were judged to be successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. They were actively involved in teaching immigrant students, either as teachers of Icelandic as a second language or of other subjects such as life skills, ethics, social studies, and so on. The findings of these interviews were published in an article and book chapters (see for example Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018).

Like all studies, this one has limitations. What is important is that these limitations are taken into consideration when drawing conclusions. The sample for this study consists of 27 in-depth interviews, and consequently the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of immigrant and refugee students. Yet the study has allowed the academically and socially successful students to reflect on their experiences, perspectives, and views of their journeys of success and challenges that they faced. Their personal accounts were captured in three spaces -- home, school, and in the



community -- and they gave detailed accounts of what contributed to their educational and academic success.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

This study is based on the Learning Space Project (2013-2015). Permission for the research project was obtained from data protection authorities and the project was registered, as required. School authorities in the selected areas were contacted for permission to conduct research in the schools chosen for the project. School principals in selected schools were contacted for permission to invite teachers to participate in the research and to select academically and socially successful students, who were invited to participate.

Kvale (1996) addresses the moral issues of any interview by bringing up three ethical guidelines for human research: informed consent, confidentiality, and consequences. By applying these three ethical principles, the risk of harm to a subject should be minimised. Various authors have mentioned the importance of ethical issues in conducting qualitative research. Good qualitative research is conducted according to the highest ethical standards (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Merriam, 2002b). In this study, all participants gave their informed consent. Permissions were obtained as discussed above (see Appendix A). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from participation at any point.

Confidentiality and anonymity are central throughout the processes of data collection and analysis. Research participants have the right to review transcriptions before they are used for research. This study follows the usual practise of ethics in relation to research on humans: respect for the rights, interests, and dignity of the participants and related persons. In order to ensure these protections, this study is conducted in accordance with local legislation. The design of the study ensures integrity and quality. The principle of responsibility (Braun & Clarke, 2013) also covered this research; the participants were informed about their rights and the protection of the information they provided, as well as the responsibilities of the researcher.

According to Merriam (1998), all research should be concerned with producing valid and reliable information in an ethical way. When research results are trusted, they became crucial to professionals working in that field. As a researcher, I informed the participants in this study about my role and responsibilities so that they would feel more confident in sharing their actual experiences. This was critical for the research study. The participants were also informed that the data collected from the study would be reviewed and stored securely by the research group, and that pseudonyms would be used instead of their real names.

### 3.9 Summary

The beliefs of the participating refugee and immigrant students about their academic and social success will certainly determine the answers to the research questions posed. Many immigrant and refugee students had survived difficult and/or traumatic experiences before they arrived in their new countries. Despite these experiences, education ranked as a high priority for many of them. That is why it is necessary for the schools and teachers to acknowledge and be willing to work with their immigrant and refugee students.

The interview guide (see Appendix B) reflects the research questions. It allows for a complexity of factors that can affect the academic and social success of these vulnerable groups. The research team restricted the scope of their work to immigrant students living in Iceland, and later I realised that some of the interviewees were also refugees. The literature reviewed here emphasises the success, both academic and social, of refugees and immigrant students. It also stresses the ability of these students to succeed in their new environments. Different strategies were employed to enhance validity, trustworthiness, and reliability of the research. These strategies include credibility, dependability, transferability, and triangulation in conjunction with ethical issues. The research question guiding this qualitative study centered on understanding the factors that enhanced the academic and social success of these students. This study fills a knowledge gap within the literature by providing a descriptive analysis and understanding of the experiences and expectations of young refugees' and immigrants' academic and social success while in upper-secondary schools in Iceland. It attempts, at the same time, to uncover the increased and various needs of this young population that need to be addressed by government organisations, local communities, public institutions, and local and national policies. The study findings add to the literature on key research questions that attempt to uncover and interpret the reasons behind the academic and social success of young immigrants and refugees and how they make sense of their lives and experiences.



## 4 Findings

Academic and social success result from a mixture of factors, including personal traits, awareness or aspirations, intrinsic motivation and self-direction, and good social skills. It also depends on acceptance from peers, safe school conditions, and parental support and involvement in their children's education (along with students' pride in their parents). Many students attributed their academic and social success to various internal and external resources or motivations. Internal resources include hard work, outcomes, engagement and educational productivity, personal goals, students' linguistic and cultural resources, and students' sense of resiliency or personal strength. External resources refer to the extrinsic motivations behind immigrant students' success. These resources or motivations include school environment, teacher's care, sense of belonging and inclusion, equitable treatment from the schools and school personnel, employment, and flexibility in the system.

The three secondary schools chosen for the study are known for their experience in receiving students from diverse backgrounds, and they provide various forms of support and assistance. These three schools are similar in that they provide both general education and vocational and technical training in a wide range of fields. Though there is some overlap, the schools vary in their course choice/selection of courses. In F1, for example, the majority of the courses and programmes emphasise vocational training, but they also give students the option of graduating with a matriculation examination, which many students choose to complete in parallel with their vocational training. This school offers 50 study programmes and 800 courses each semester.

Immigrant students' perceptions of their school and educational environments and teachers' expectations were mainly positive. They variously described their schools as learning spaces, enabling environments that provide extra support, supportive and caring environments, safe and secure spaces, and places to fulfil one's dreams. They characterised their school environments as supportive, structured, flexible, and providing adequate academic and social support. Clear expectations and consistent feedback from teachers increased students' motivation and academic success. Students also described how their social, cultural and academic backgrounds affected their academic and social success, mainly through

family, friends, and community support. Immigrant and refugee students' parents, in this study, were generally well-equipped to provide their children with the emotional support and positive models that they needed to succeed socially and academically.

Parental involvement is frequently cited as a factor behind academic and social success. Students were positively affected by their parents' support and interest in their education, but some of the students mentioned parental pressure placed on them as a negative factor. For example, they mentioned that their parents tended to pressure them to achieve higher grades in schools or to enter highly skilled professions, such as medicine or law.

These various push and pull factors operate within the context of academic and social success of immigrant students in Iceland. The connections between these two sets of influences are important, providing different sorts of assets in the process of success. I have categorised the push factors as inner motivations; these include students' personal strength and resiliency, their linguistic and cultural resources, their minor and major goals, and having a sense of direction. The pull factors are the external motivations or outer input behind these students' academic and social success, including degree of support, care received, experiencing a positive school environment, being allowed flexibility within the system, and access to inclusion and social justice resources from schools and teachers, parents, friends, peers, and community members.

The data analysis resulted in the identification of three major and eighteen subthemes. The first theme involves how immigrant and refugee students made sense of their experiences of academic and social success. This theme identifies both push and pull factors in their success. The push factors related to individual characteristics of the student participants, while the pull factors had to do with instructional and societal characteristics. The second theme dealt with the young immigrants' and refugees' perception of the upper secondary schools in Iceland, which in turn has led to five minor themes. Participants' perceived the upper secondary schools as learning spaces, enabling environments where they got extra support, supportive and caring environments, safe and secure spaces, and finally a space where they could fulfil their dreams. The third theme was the role of the social, cultural, and academic backgrounds of the student participants in their academic and social success. This theme led to four subthemes: family support, friends and peer support, community support, and cultural and social expectations.

## **4.1 The push factors behind academic and social success**

Immigrant and refugee students' motivation to learn emerged when they saw themselves as agents of their own learning. This was the case when they felt in control of their own learning process, when they saw a clear pathway toward their educational outcomes, when they were working toward their goals, when they were employed, when they felt that they were capable, and when they had sufficient linguistic and cultural resources. In short, when students saw that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspectives, they were motivated to learn.

### **4.1.1 Individual characteristics of participants**

Almost all of the participating students moved to Iceland with some degree of education from their native countries. Some of them moved at very young ages, some entered upper secondary school after their arrival, and others had yet to complete upper secondary school. A participating student who moved to Iceland as a refugee said "I moved to Iceland at a very young age. I have lived here for fifteen years, it will be fifteen after few months" (F3G). Another student mentioned "I moved to Iceland three years ago" (F1E). Many of the students had good knowledge in subjects like mathematics, language, and economics as one student said: "Back in my country I learned two languages and some English language as well" (F1B). Students mentioned that they learned, for example, to solve mathematics problems in different ways back in their countries of origin. The different methods they learned to solve problems were not considered a hindrance to their success; teachers in Iceland allowed them to use previously learned techniques.

Back in my country I learned different ways of solving mathematic problems, here I used the same ways that I am used to solve mathematical problems. They are different from the ones they teach here, but it isn't problem at all to use them.  
(F2C)

Students in this study who succeeded academically and socially at the end of their upper secondary schooling did so partially because they worked hard and they had developed resilience both within and outside of their schools. Their success was measured by different criteria, as discussed above in the Methods section. Some of the common features of their success were: hard work, educational and academic productivity, having personal goals, and having linguistic and cultural resources. All students in this study had

direction, set goals, expended effort, and sought to fulfil their commitments even when they encountered challenges in doing so. It is inestimably important to indicate how they kept going when things were difficult, which direction they took, and how they were able to incorporate external resources. For example, participants mentioned models at school agencies where they sought academic assistance. The models consisted of extra academic and social support provided during breaks and after school by teachers, students and other school personnel. Some of the teachers went even further, providing these students support during the weekends.

#### **4.1.2 Outcomes from hard work and engagement**

Among the most important internal or intrinsic factors that led to the students' academic success were their own personal awareness and strengths. Some mentioned that they first tried to learn study material by themselves, but if they had difficulty in understanding, they asked for help from their siblings, teachers, and classmates. These successful students also felt like they belonged to the group and the school, emphasising that they were not alone. As one student put it, "we all worked together and encouraged each other" (FVN3).

Many of the participants in this study said that they learned material best when they were personally interested, and some of them referred to their learning as fun and interesting. These students did not give up easily, even when they found learning subjects like Icelandic difficult -- they wanted to learn the language to reach their future goals. Belief in their own efficacy was also among the factors to which some of the students attributed their academic success. One student said that she always tried to understand the subject by herself, but she was willing to learn from (initial) failure, and to challenge herself:

I try first by myself, there are always examples if you read them you understand them. I'm not the kind of a student who goes to teachers immediately. First myself, then the teachers (F3A).

Another student described his situation when he first started upper-secondary school in Iceland as "Someone who is coming from outer space or from the moon" (FVN8). He didn't understand a single word at first. He spent hours and hours each day trying to understand a subject. He stayed after class and asked the teachers for extra support. He went home and started translating the words, sentences and paragraphs to understand the content.



He said, “to succeed you have to work hard and do your homework and your project” (FVN8).

Despite the fact that their new learning was challenging, some of the students mentioned that it is also worth mastering new knowledge. They purposely sought to deepen their knowledge and understanding through using different resources available to them. In almost all of the interviews with these students, I realised that the two invisible reasons behind their success was their hard work and resilience. In addition, these successful students also consistently worked toward their future goals.

#### **4.1.3 Setting their own direction and persevering**

All of the students in this study valued their education and discussed their future plans. They related their education to well-defined goals that included guidelines and boundaries that kept them on track. Besides being enthusiastic and interested in their learning, students were also optimistic about their futures. All participants had a hierarchy of goals behind their study. Some mentioned that they would like to become psychologists, musicians, or writers. Other students mentioned professions such as: businessman, guide, bank director, paediatric psychologist, airplane mechanic, counsellor, pilot, doctor, computer programmer, chef, and professional soccer player. They believed that through their hard work and motivation, and with support from both their school and community, they could reach their goals. When these students encountered obstacles, they persevered. As one of the students mentioned, “it was painful” when he received a poor grade in one subject, but he didn’t dwell on it for long since he wanted to move on and reach his real aim behind his studies.

Many participants also described a non-academic goal hierarchy. As one student said, “I wanted to do so many things beside my school” (F1C). Another one wanted to become a role model for her siblings and the younger generation in general. Another described waking up in the morning and looking forward to playing football in the evening, making friends, and “learning Icelandic and preparing for the University” (F1B). Another student’s motivation for learning English was to be able to “tak[e] part in projects related to immigrants” (FVN5).

Students in this study were also aware of their strength and future direction: “I’m doing well, on the right track, and I intend to continue” FVN5. Many of their goals were in fact related to one another and were steps toward one ultimate goal. In other words, they served the same ultimate concern, i.e. to succeed both academically and socially.

It is not easy to move to a new country, especially when the language and culture of the country are very different from yours. One participant talked about her future goals and how her mother was her main source of encouragement. She also felt a sense of responsibility toward her family and other immigrants from her country of origin. She wanted to take an active role in helping new students from her culture learn the language and find jobs:

I know it is very difficult for us to live in Iceland, so I need to do something to have the family together, and the best way to do so is to learn well. When you move here, everything is new. The new language, which is very hard, and my mom is almost fifty now and it is so hard for her to learn something new. She goes to her work at school, cleaning, and ... Imagine after ten years she will be so old that she cannot do it anymore. I think is better for me to have a good job to take care of her. I also want to help the newcomers from my country. I want to help them with the language and also to find a job or get into the Icelandic culture ... so I think it is a good way to learn (F1D).

Another student referred to one of his goals as making friends, saying that he managed to make many friends when he had been in Iceland long enough. He referred to the importance of time, noting that time heals everything. He explained that some people, whether Icelanders or immigrants, tend to maintain a smaller number of close personal relationships, so that it is more difficult for them to make new friends. So while it isn't always easy for immigrant and refugee students to meet and make friends, most manage to do so given enough time. He explained:

I will take time, I started right now; I just started to meet more people, so it is changing. I don't say that keeping on the same level. I'm meeting more people and they become open after sometimes, but some people...hm... do not reach this level. They are too close that they don't want to speak even to people from Iceland (F1E).

Students also referred to taking part in volunteer work and helping newcomers to learn and get to know Icelandic culture as providing feelings of success:

I'm active in social activities outside school, and I work as a volunteer in an organisation that belongs to the Red Cross called "Alþjóðatorg", international square. Our main work is to introduce Icelandic culture and traditions to newcomers (FVN6).

Besides the different types of support that immigrant and refugee students received in these schools, some of the students connected the reasons behind their school choice to their future goals:

I am learning physical education and am thinking about learning to be a nurse (sjúkraliðabraut) I intend to finish that before I start university. It is more likely that I go to the nursing education/paramedic practise, I'm thinking as well about learning Latin (F3A).

Another student said that he chose the school because he wanted to become an aircraft mechanic:

I chose that school because I want to be.... I want to work with planes. They told me that [F1] school is good, and also because I've liked planes since I was three or four years old. I saw a plane passing by and had no idea how it flies and makes such a big noise (F1C).

Another student mentioned that she worked as a secretary in the hospital, but this wasn't her future direction or a sort of job that she wanted for the future rather, she saw this as a necessary step toward her other overarching goal of studying sociology.

In sum, immigrant and refugee students who were successful academically and socially knew their direction and worked hard to reach their goals; they imagined their possible futures and plotted a course to get there.

#### **4.1.4 Students' linguistic and cultural resources**

The participants in this study came from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Some perceived success in terms of levels they reached in school or degrees they achieved here in Iceland, while some related success to their employment status or language acquisition and being able to use them in different contexts. Other students related their success to their ability to assist their families back home and their friends and peers here in

Iceland. One participant mentioned that completing upper secondary school in Iceland and working as a hairdresser represented success for her, while another student who migrated alone talked about his experience of success and compared it to his experience in his homeland:

I know I'm doing very well and when I do well on an exam, it's like a kind of dancing, then I go home and look in the mirror and say, "OK, you are doing very well," and I remember my time in my hometown, when I was not doing well in school. It was really bad. When I think about myself now I become very happy, that I do something in different languages that I couldn't do in my own language (F13).

Some students identified gaining fluency in a new language and as a measure of success. One of them referred to learning Chinese, Mandarin and another to learning Icelandic and English:

The thing is I was rather eager to learn Icelandic. When you come here and you don't speak Icelandic you can't have contact with people. This was the main encouragement behind learning Icelandic, to communicate with others. I managed to use the language after three to four months living here. I don't mean fluently but I used Icelandic in my communications (FVN6).

A female student mentioned that it is because of the Icelandic language that she reached a certain level of success, as fluency in Icelandic increased her self-confidence and provided access to new opportunities:

I'm more confident with myself and I understand people a lot more, if I haven't reached that level of Icelandic I wouldn't have been in University and I wouldn't make it to that level of success (FVN5).

Another student referred to the opportunity that he got in Iceland to learn two languages, saying that getting a job was like a dream for him. Back in his native country he was a different person, but in Iceland he learned many positive things:

When I was in [my country] I was another... I was completely a different person. I came here to Iceland, started working and learned to speak English and learned a little Icelandic. I changed

my way of thinking about life and changed my way of relating with people. So I said to myself, if I could learn some English and learn some Icelandic, why not go and learn more at school? If I have the chance to do it, why not? Maybe in future, I know it will help me, and I don't want to do hard jobs all my life. I wanted to do something that helps me and those who are around me (FVN9)

This student described how he used his immigrant status as an opportunity to partially reinvent himself. The majority of the students in this study emphasised the importance of their heritage language, referring to it as an inevitable part of their identity. Students' interest in their heritage languages was not limited to use inside their homes with their family and siblings; rather, they used them alongside other languages in order to understand their academic lessons. One student said:

Whenever I had difficulty understanding the subject matter, for example in natural science, I read the material, highlight it and translate what I don't understand into [my native language]. In case I don't understand I translate it to English. This helps me to remember the words and it usually takes me one day to go through my notes for the exam (F3G).

Students who did not have a strong family connections in Iceland noted the importance of gaining fluency in Icelandic and English, since these are the primary languages used in the country. Some of these students described using their heritage languages only when contacting their family members or friends back home. Many students went further with learning their heritage languages, because they wanted to achieve greater mastery and literacy. They borrowed books in their heritage languages and other languages, such as English and Icelandic. Other students were active participants within their cultural enclaves, using their heritage languages to organise activities: "we also have our own society here in Iceland, we talk together and have fun together, we know that not everybody speaks Icelandic" (F2E).

Students in this study used internal and external resources to survive, achieve and succeed. Understanding and acknowledging the resources that immigrant and refugee students leveraged casts light on the processes affecting their academic and social success – but at the same time, it also challenges the policies, practices, and procedures adopted at schools.

The factors presented above related to the students themselves and their characteristics are subjective factors; i.e., factors that do not represent the entire experience of the participants, but are what they themselves consider to be important and relevant to their success. There are, of course, other factors that worked as a basis for their motivation, such as a positive school environment, which often leads to caring student teacher relationships. Participating in activities both inside and outside school environments such as playing music with others in a band, practising soccer in a team, sharing religious beliefs, and getting encouragement and support from different members of the community — I call these outside influences *pull factors*, which are contributed by schools, teachers, parents, friends, community members, and others who instil interest, trust, hope, purpose, and usefulness of practise in immigrant and refugee students to help them succeed academically and socially.

In short, it is not only the intrinsic motivation that worked for the academically and socially successful students, especially when they were new in the country and they had limited knowledge of the language; it was also the support, care and empathy that they received from their new environment. A little guidance and support can be a tremendous help.

## **4.2 The pull factors behind academic and social success**

The ‘pull factors’ behind academic and social success are the outside resources or sources of extrinsic motivation that support students to succeed both academically and socially. This type of success also has to do with education and employment, material goods, and status. It is based on a standardised or measurable view of what it takes to be successful as an individual, a school, or a community.

Some of these students had negative educational experiences back in their countries of origin. One said:

I was not good in mathematics and English, didn't get any support from the teachers and our English teacher for example was very mean, so I decided to leave school (F1C).

Some students described bullying they faced in Icelandic compulsory schools, mainly because of their accent, country of origin, or skin colour. However, according to the students, these experiences did not affect their school progress, academic and social success in upper secondary schools in Iceland. Students were able to navigate and minimise the negative

experiences they had through teachers' care and high expectations, positive school environment, flexibility in the system, and inclusion and social justice.

#### **4.2.1 Teachers' care, knowledge and professional competence**

The student participants in this study recognised teachers' knowledge and professional competence. Many students mentioned that their teachers were skilled, well prepared, and used various methods to engage and support their students. Some of the students treated their teachers as role models, especially those who taught with passion and care. Success and achievement often relate to one's passion for a job. One of the students described how passionate his teacher was:

In school I would say [X] teacher was my role model in a way that she manages to do what she loves to do. She does in her life what she loves to do. I think that is what I want to get. I want to make living out of what I love to do. I want to really focus on my passion. I don't think there is sadder thing to work in your life... for whole of your life do work that you hate to do. I don't think there is sadder thing than that. I think it is terrible for a person to do things that they hate to do for a living. Everybody should enjoy what they are doing, love what they do (FVN10).

All three schools offered language support, mainly for Icelandic, for immigrant and refugee students and others who needed it. Students mentioned that they were happy about the support they got in learning Icelandic. One student mentioned that he learned Icelandic well and he could communicate with people now, whereas initially he could not understand or speak it:

When I heard the language first I was like frozen and thought how can they speak this language and pronounce letters like [ll]such as in Eyjafjallajökull. I got it finally and I speak now both Icelandic and English, Human [People] can get the language but not all of it (F1C).

Another student indicated that his teacher and classmates were helpful in learning Icelandic:

I learned lots of Icelandic from my teachers and my classmates. In the class we have a lot of activities like watching TV programs,

movies and talk a lot about it. We also make program to introduce our culture and our country, and yes, a lot of things that I can't remember right now (F1D).

Another student explained the use and the importance of learning Icelandic language:

I have gained quite a lot from learning Iceland. Now for example we hold presentations in Icelandic. It is very good to know the language and give presentation, write correctly and use the right words so as to make people understand what we say and write (F1A).

Many of the students agreed that they learned Icelandic both through their school and the community: "I learned in school and at work. I work with Icelandic boys and they help me a lot with new words and expressions" (F1D).

Besides the language support that the students got from their teachers, classmates, and their surroundings, the important role that teachers played in the success of these students came up again and again in the interviews. Teachers played a crucial part in the academic and personal lives of the students, and many of the students had positive attitudes toward their teachers' schools and learning. Others positioned their relationships and good communication with teachers as a main source of their positive attitudes toward their education. One of the students said in this context:

[In my native country] teachers are much higher than the students. There is actually no relation (connection), but here the teachers are really good. They look like friends and we can always talk together (F2C).

Some students even felt that their teachers were like family members who cared about their learning. One said:

I love the teachers. They are like family ... They help you, and they care about you. My teacher didn't know that there are several foreigners who didn't understand the subject. They (students) were with me in a bookkeeping course. She decided to come back to school and explain it again for us. She is like an angel to me. She has always helped me since I started (F2D).



Students also appreciated their teachers' role in providing information about, and following up on, useful educational activities. One student reported that an activity "was advertised for all and they informed us about it and asked us to let to know whether we attend or not" (F3E).

Students saw their teachers as engaging and inspiring; one student mentioned, "they made a deep impression on me" (FVN2). Generally, students expressed that in contrast to the teachers they had in their homelands, teachers in Iceland were accessible, showed an interest in the lives of their students, and truly cared about them. They were also supportive and welcoming. One of the students mentioned that his teachers here in Iceland were not like his teachers back in [his native country]:

They try to help you but not kicking your ass like in [my country of origin], they don't make your life worse. We don't only go to school to learn. It should be interesting as well (F1E).

In the end, schools and teachers demonstrated their influence on immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success in many ways. Many of the students referred to the role of the schools in their academic and social success, explaining that the schools treated students' differing cultural backgrounds as a strength rather than a deficit. Further, teachers' high expectations, care, passion for their jobs, friendliness, and professional knowledge played a vital part in the academic and social success of these students.

The question of what institutions and programs can do to help students succeed is discussed in terms of three important themes: positive environment, flexibility in the system, inclusion and social justice.

#### **4.2.2 Sense of belonging from a positive environment**

Students in this study characterised their schools as diversity-friendly spaces that allowed students to integrate well and make solid connections with teachers and peers. Many of their teachers regarded student differences as a resource and emphasised diversity in their teaching. Students mentioned that they were integrated with Icelanders in the classroom, but received extra support with subjects they found difficult to understand, like Icelandic history and literature. As one student related:

The school provided us with many extra hours with other teachers. We were learning Gisla (saga), we watched the movie,

but I found it very difficult to read and understand the material first (F2B).

Students felt that they belonged in the school at the same time as they belonged to different groups. When I questioned the students further about their sense of belonging, they referred both to the Icelandic and immigrant groups. A student explained:

I would rather say that I belong to both Icelandic and Immigrant group, mainly because I'm of foreign origin and as I mentioned before I'm mainly with Icelanders (F3D).

Another student described the difficulties and benefits of befriending native Icelanders:

Look, it actually takes time to get to know people. It also takes time to get to know Icelanders well but when you get to know them, they naturally invite you into the group (FVN6).

Some of the students compared the school system and culture of their home country with that of Iceland. Some students' past experiences included painful memories from their school in their native countries, such as difficult access to education, poor job prospects, negative power dynamics between teachers and students, and problematic educational policy and systems. One student left school because he found himself not belonging to the school space in his home country, but he started his education again in Iceland. For many of the students, access to education, work, and study in Iceland was easier than they expected, but they believed that they still needed to learn. Participants emphasised that the environment in Iceland is conducive to learning, especially since there are different types of support systems that motivate them and make school life easier. The availability of the teachers and the group work made them happy and able to succeed academically and socially. As one student said:

It is not easy to study here but it is easier than in my home country. The school environment makes a big difference. The teachers are always there for you. The group work makes the study more fun. We don't have this system back in our country (F2C).

One participant mentioned that the teachers' support and care were not limited to the classroom or the school; some of the teachers took further steps to assist their students. She shared her experience:

I think it is also amazing how my teacher helps me. Once I told him that my dad bought a house in [a small town] and I didn't know what I should do. He told me that if I didn't want to move there, he would find a room and part-time job for me in Reykjavík. He helped me like a friend (F1D).

One student referred to the school environment and he mentioned that the school environment is conducive to learning:

Iceland is better and education in Iceland is much better. As I said before it is like old system, communist system in my country. Teachers are very different, the atmosphere is very different and everybody is like supposed to study. There is no point just to be happy for that. If I'm going to school here I go for myself, I want to go to school. There I was like "Again I have to go to school?" (F1E).

Students in this study described not only their teachers, but also their schools in Iceland as supportive, and as better environments than those they had left. Icelandic schools actively helped them to make friends through different methods and programs used by teachers, who sought ways to educate all of their students successfully. Students felt that diversity was appreciated and that these three schools responded to students' diverse needs. The schools focused as well on increased participation of these students in different activities and programs, both social and academic. Students also mentioned they received extra time to learn more Icelandic: "We were in five additional hours" (F2C). They said that their teachers arranged further support for them when the students communicated that need beforehand.

The role of the schools was not limited to providing students with extra time and spaces to learn, but also to informing them when there were different activities both within and outside of the school. Schools responded effectively to their students' differing needs by segregating their students in a positive sense, to enable them to learn the Icelandic language better and to give them a space to ask questions in a more comfortable environment. Some of the students found that they felt more comfortable among foreign

students, and these students were encouraged to join their class and classmates if they wished. As one student explained:

I started in a special department (reception) in [F3] school. We were quite a few students, but I was like half of the day learning there and then the other half I was learning Icelandic with the local students. My sister wanted to stay longer with the foreign student (F1A).

Some of the students referred to their teachers and other students as the positive resources behind their success. One student characterised a good teacher as “the one who teaches well and she/he is around the students” (F3B). Another student mentioned that he got support in Icelandic while he was hanging out with Icelandic kids: “I got support with the Icelandic through Icelandic friends, this way I learned the language well” (F3C).

Those students who graduated from upper secondary schools mentioned that upper secondary school teachers were more empathic and supportive than university faculty, explaining that the former environment was more conducive to learning. One student explained:

In upper secondary schools, teachers came to you and asking whether you understand this or not, but not in university; if you don't ask them they are not going to ask you (FVN10).

It is not easy to be a foreigner in another country; some of the participating students mentioned that it sometimes gives you an unsafe feeling even when safety is clearly offered. Students mentioned that they felt included in the class and in learning. None of the students mentioned that they faced any prejudice within upper secondary school and felt that the general student body was open both with Icelanders and foreign students. Many students stated that they had friends from different backgrounds, including local students. Many students in this study were also active participants in leisure activities; they took part in these with both local and other immigrant groups: “I have a soccer match tomorrow with Icelanders and foreign students” (F3C). Some of them took part in activities both inside and outside of the school. One student explained, “I play soccer now with Leikni (football team), I go also to gym and I play basketball in my school” (F3E). Students also mentioned that besides their Icelandic and native friends, they also have friends from different backgrounds outside school. One student clearly defined her position:

I have Icelandic friends of both genders and I also have some friends from other countries. We go together to party or ball. Some students want to be only with those students who are [from the same background], but I'm not like that. I want to be part of the community. I have been in the school committee and things like that (F3D)

Not all students expressed that they consistently felt a sense of belonging. One student mentioned that he was the only foreigner in some instructional settings where the rest of the students were native Icelanders. This sometimes made him feel that he was not like everyone else. In general, however, the students participating in this study were satisfied with the chances they got in these schools to participate in the courses they wanted, both with the local students and in separate groups:

We study Icelandic, biology, mathematics, and other subjects with Icelanders, but we take Icelandic for second language learners or foreign students as well (F1B).

The different roles and responsibilities that schools and teachers took on were among the impressive factors behind immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success. Students felt that they belonged to their schools, and their schools belonged to them at the same time. Their teachers' care, support, use of multicultural practises and appreciation of diversity — not only within school hours, but also after school — increased students' positive feelings and encouraged them to succeed.

### **4.2.3 Flexibility in the system**

Almost all of the students who participated in this study had at least one part-time job. For some, this was their first job. Having part-time jobs forced them to become more organised and gave them a feeling of independence, as one student described:

I've learned to play piano and I was learning to drive. I started to work after one year settling here, which means I was 15 years when I started to work. I think it is really good to get your own money which is not possible in my country unless you are 18 years old. I was working in the bakery and I was happy to get something like ISK 20,000 per month. After that I started to work in a coffee shop and another coffee shop. I was working after

school several days in the month. I'm independent now and I don't have to ask my parents to give me money (F2C).

Many students explained that in their countries of origin it is impossible to be a student and have a job, but in Iceland it is possible. One student mentioned that in Iceland, despite potential language barriers, employers are still willing to hire you and give you an opportunity, which he described as almost impossible in his country of origin.

Some students referred to the flexibility of the system, that is to say getting the chance to work, as a motivating factor behind attending and succeeding in school. As one student explained:

I started school after two years of being here. I had been for two years and I worked for Pósthúsið [post office] and worked for Fréttablaðið [newspapers] and that was good for me ... kind a kicking your ass, because I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. So you better go and finish your school ... that was kind of ... that changed me a lot. To be honest I was a completely different person before school and then after. School changed a lot for me (FVN 10).

Many students agreed that in contrast to their native countries, both the job market and the school system in Iceland were flexible and allowed students to work and study at the same time:

If I would compare the life in [my country of origin] and here, of course it much better here because you can go to school and work at the same time, but in [in my country of origin] it is a lot more difficult (FVN4).

The students became comfortable communicating with Icelanders, and they were happy to collaborate in school. They learned together with other immigrant students and with native Icelanders, referring to the school environment as positive: "I learned with Icelandic students in different courses and we have good relations and we understand each other very well" (FVN6). Another student mentioned:

We [Immigrant and native students] are together in the school, like now we are going to graduate and we plan something

together, doing something together. We try to meet often if we have enough time (F1A).

Yet another participant referred to the language-segregated class for second language learners:

We were only foreign students learning Icelandic together, but in other subjects/class such as mathematics, English and other subjects which are the base for getting student degree we were with Icelanders (FVN7).

Non-native speakers are grouped with native speakers of Icelandic as soon as they gain sufficient fluency in the language. One of the students discussed the advantages of taking Icelandic classes with native speakers. He chose to take classes for fluent speakers of Icelandic, saying:

Yes, last semester I took Icelandic 400 and 500 at the same time. I got good grade, I got 7. I was satisfied with that. In those courses I got chances to read Laxnes, Stein Steinar, and poetry as well. I mean Icelandic poetry that if I kept learning Icelandic for foreigners, I wouldn't have touched these books (FVN2).

Many students agreed that their schools valued and took into consideration their diverse backgrounds. They referred for example to the languages in which they were proficient, and how the languages were used to assist them in learning effectively, with their schools giving them credit for learning and passing the exams in their heritage language rather than Icelandic. So, instead of learning the Danish language, for example, students were given opportunities to learn their heritage languages. Those students who started upper secondary schools in their home country were given a chance to pick up where they left off; they only needed to provide evidence of the subjects they took and the credits they got. As one of the participants related:

I took my grades from [my country of origin] and I translated them into English, they checked it through, and I didn't need to start from the beginning ... I started with already like about a year experience, like I already finished one year there ... I usually took around 22-23 credits per semester and that was kind of easy. So it was quite nice, I only took two years here (FVN10).

Another student, comparing the policy, learning environment, and flexibility of the Icelandic school system to that of his native country, said:

I think it is the system something like this. I don't know how to describe this. In my country almost all of the systems [are] still the same, it is like not going forward so fast, maybe after 200 years. So, I mean if you don't pass one subject in [my country of origin], you're supposed to take all of them again in the term. So, you will be back if you don't pass for example math or anything, you have to fix it again. Here if you fail in any subject you just take it again according to your wish. It could be next term or even after one or two years, it is your choice, but there in [my country of origin] it is different, you only have one year and is completely planned so if you don't pass you only have one year to fix it and to take all the subjects again. If you are 18 and still in school you need to get special access to stay one more year in school and they might let you or not, then comes university and everything, you know (F1E).

Students identified getting a job for the first time as a source of success. They described their work experiences as valuable resources through which they improved their Icelandic, English, and in some cases their heritage language, especially for the students who were working with individuals from their same cultural backgrounds. For many of the students, their participation in the job market was an opportunity to make more friends, both local and foreign, and to improve their Icelandic and put what they had learned in school into practise. Their participation in the job market also made them more independent and gave them a sense of responsibility toward their immediate and extended families.

All of the students had part-time jobs, and in a few cases, students said that they had a full-time job alongside their studies. One said that he worked 25% time in kindergarten after school and 75% in the hospital on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. In Iceland the system is flexible, meaning that you can study and work at the same time. Most students were not able to do that back in their home countries. Flexibility in the system doesn't only relate to the job market; it also relates to the flexible space within the schools. Students were happy to study, mingle, and work with Icelandic students. The learning environment and the flexibility in the school system supported them to succeed academically and socially.



#### 4.2.4 Social justice and inclusion

According to the equity perspective, individuals and groups should be treated based on their respective needs; that is, they should be treated equitably. Treating individuals equitably rather than equally provides the potential to counteract existing unjust differences. The students participating in this study mentioned that they got equal access and equitable treatment from their teachers, schools, and communities. Teachers gave them chance to answer questions in English or Icelandic. One student said, "I often added an English word because I didn't know the words in Icelandic" (F2D). In addition, another student mentioned that her teacher found a version of the text that they were supposed to translate in the student's heritage language and helped her translate it into Icelandic. In this way he helped the student avoid misunderstandings.

One student participant referred to the equitable treatment received from the teacher and the applicability of coursework in his school:

They teach you how to do things/parts and how to use your knowledge to create things, not like in [my country of origin] where students don't learn how to use the knowledge they have learned. There are many differences (FVN6).

Schools can become a location for bridging different cultures and enabling students to work within information and resources available to them, as one student described:

There are "Sæludagar", a three-day festival, and students are free to choose the field of their interest. I chose language policy. I went there and I learned about the Danish and Arabic language and culture (F3C).

Students who were shy at the beginning and couldn't communicate easily emphasised the support in learning strategies offered by their teachers as a reason for their success. One student explained,

At first, I was shy and didn't go to some places in the school building. No one knew me very well. I was very quiet in class and I got help from the teachers. They helped me a lot from the beginning (F3B).

Some students also felt that their teachers saw and treated them as they would their own children:

I have so many good teachers who are always ready to help you with the subject ... Like my English teacher. He tells us that if we don't understand the subject, he tries to find other ways to make it comprehensible. He follows with us and looks at us as his own kids ... he knows all his students (F3C).

Students mentioned that they made friends soon after they started school, which made them feel socially included:

I think it is very easy to get support in this school, and it is a big school. There are many students and I like to meet people. I made friends immediately after I started there. We all talked to each other and got to know each other. Now I know many of them (F2C).

They had teachers who did not lower their expectations for the immigrant and refugee students. Instead, teachers facilitated subjects for all students:

I'm not so much for poetry and I don't understand everything. My teacher understands that, and if I don't understand then he helps me with the subject, instead of saying that I'm a foreigner and I will not get the subject easily. He would rather support me to understand that (F1A).

The influence of their schools, teachers, and peers was central to students' academic and social success. One student discussed how she was treated according to her needs in school, and how both teachers and her fellow students helped her in subjects and fields that she had difficulty understanding:

Some of the teachers come directly to you, they know for example you are foreigner and you don't understand everything. They want to listen to us and give us extra exercises in order to learn and to practise more. They send us e-mails and inform us about what to do next. They prepare and give us power point slides to review and learn home. One of the teachers guides us to the important things that we can focus on

for exams and like that. So that is how good teachers should be in my opinion. I also get lots of support from my friends at school. When I don't understand something, I just inform them and they help me (F3C).

In school F3, peer support is encouraged, and the participants mentioned peer support through the mentoring programs offered by the school. One of the participants stated, “[t]here are also [students] who help the foreign students - Icelandic kids.” (F3B). Another mentioned that,

On the other weekdays, we have only half an hour we sit and study together, prepare for exam, like what we did last week. Those who finished the course help others who are finishing it now (F2C).

The students were very positive about their schools and about their teachers. Some expressed amazement at the way their teachers respected them and spoke to them. Among the various positive characteristics that students noted, they described their teachers as supportive and caring, and said that teachers had high expectations, wanted students to learn, showed empathy, and were friendly, helpful, and professional. Teachers knew how to help their students, used various techniques in their teaching, and, according to one student, “they are nice/beautiful” (F1F). Another student said that not only the teachers in her school, but teachers in other schools with whom she had interacted, were supportive and caring:

The teachers are really good. Each time I don't understand things I go to them and they explain it very well. Even for the final exam they explained very well for me because I'm a foreigner and the only foreigner in the class the rest are Icelanders. I also know one teacher who is an assistant principal. She is very good in physics and mathematics. She told me to ask her for assistance whenever I need. She is from another school not mine. One semester I went to her four times; you know mathematics is getting very hard (F1C).

Some of the students preferred to get support from the teachers while they were learning the subject in class; others were shy and wanted to ask privately, after the class or during the breaks. Teachers were aware of the students' various needs, provided them with extra material such as

PowerPoint slides, and guided them through their learning. Students stressed the importance of having friends and the support that they received inside their schools. Schools could, for example, help students to access support and develop friendships and social networks through their methods of teaching, learning practises and provision of facilities.

#### **4.2.5 The role of institutional input**

Students described their experiences of the role of their schools in their academic and social success as mainly positive. To them, what they accomplished in the journey toward academic and social success depended to a great extent on the flexibility and inclusivity of the space provided inside their schools. Students identified the characteristics of their schools that contributed significantly to their success as teachers who cared, listened, acknowledged their various backgrounds and needs, motivated them, and expected them to succeed. Many credited their academic and social success to the positive and the flexible school environment and the outside community. Inside their schools they were motivated to work hard and encouraged to do their best.

Institutional inputs should not be limited to language learning. They should include a wide range of responsibilities toward immigrant and refugee students, like providing diverse opportunities and flexibility within the educational system and among the staff. In addition, schools should focus on helping students to be themselves, and on using various and diverse approaches to widen their participation. Taken as a whole, the immigrant and refugee students in this study were mainly positive about their school experiences, and their perceptions of their schools provide further justification of the institutional factors behind their academic and social success.

### **4.3 Young migrants' perceptions of upper secondary schools in Iceland**

Students' perceptions of upper secondary schools were somewhat similar to each other, in that some of them referred to these schools as spaces that helped them reach their future goals, while others described their schools as uplifting environments. They referred to their positive relations with the teacher, which gave them a feeling of being at home. They mentioned the safety and the security of their environments. Schools were the place where they joined in extracurricular activities, many of which were new for them.

They characterised their schools as learning spaces, and as enabling environments where they received extra support, as safe and a caring environment, and as a place that helped them work toward their goals.

#### **4.3.1 Learning spaces**

Among the factors that made the students successful academically was the the extent to which Icelandic schools were superior to their native schools. Schools in their home countries tended to be very competitive, with different pedagogical systems that required students to learn material by heart. Moving from one level to another was also difficult, starting from the earliest grades. Some students within those schools would fail and have to take the exam again or stay in the same level for another year. In Iceland, by contrast, they learned that what is important is to understand the subject and use its lessons in daily life. One student said:

There was a lot of competition in schools back in my country but not here which I'm really happy with. The grading system is also different so instead from 1-10 we had from 1-100. We always had to think about getting high grades. Here in Iceland I do what I'm able to do to get good grades and what I get is what I deserve (F1A).

Students also discussed the teachers' expectations back in their home countries, specifically that many of them expected their students to learn the material by heart. In Iceland, they could discuss the material without remembering every single word, indicating that the school and the system here focus more on deep understanding than on rote memorization.

The creative teaching methods used by some teachers made many of the students fall in love with the subjects. Students mentioned that they looked forward every day to coming to school and learning new things, whether it was language or other subjects: "We have a lot to do in school and I like it. Our schools are full of valuable aspects" (F3G). Another student said, "I was eager to learn more Icelandic, talk and have contact with people" (FVN6). Students also recognised that their teachers' knowledge, competence, and humour supported their academic success. One student characterised the teachers as "friendly, and if you ask them a question, they explain it in a simple way" (F1E). Some of the teachers explained the subject in a humorous way that helped the students to remember information. Students also described upper secondary school as a space to make many

friends, both native and students from different countries (though students reported that there were more opportunities to make friends in upper secondary schools than in university). Speaking about his secondary school, one student explained:

It prepared me for the universities, I learned a lot concerning the language and the field that I'm interested in. It was rather a very good preparation and I'm ready to go to university (FVN6).

Students referred to both their teachers and the school system in Iceland as very good. When I asked the students how they learned Icelandic so well, two replied "in upper secondary school" (FVN3 and FVN7). Another student described his position in school back in his native country as "like a bird in a cage" (F1C). The strict discipline in all the schools there pushed him to drop out. While some students were shy about speaking Icelandic at first, in upper secondary school they were provided space to practise the language in a comfortable environment among themselves at first, and then in a broader circle.

### 4.3.2 Enabling environment (extra support)

The participating students came from different parts of the world and were used to school systems that typically did not allow them to change classes or subjects. So in Iceland, even though students knew that they could request class changes, they were often hesitant to do so initially. One student said:

[In my country of origin] I could neither complain nor express myself in front of the teacher or someone else in the school. We were taught in [my country of origin] that we shouldn't complain or express our opinions about the course or subject difficulty. It is like a school rule that you should never say that something is difficult. You have to learn and the subjects have to be difficult. They are using the old system (F2C).

Another student illustrated how difficult it was for them to change their class or subject in their home country, because only the teachers could make such a change. Several students mentioned that despite the heavy course loads that they took back in their home countries, they did not remember much content from courses they took in their school years. What they learned and remember are the subjects and materials they learned here in Iceland, as one student recounted:

I think it is much better here than back home. For example, in (my country of origin) they give you lots of heavy materials to learn. During the exam we study only to pass the exam after that we forget subjects. I see the difference between studying here and in [my country of origin]. I don't remember the things that I studied there but I remember the ones that I learned here even two years ago (F2D).

Some students described the educational environment in their home countries as strict and punitive; sometimes teachers held students after school until their projects or assignments were done. In Iceland it is different, as students are responsible for the quality of their own work and dedication to their studies. Rather than adopting punitive measures, in Iceland teachers helped these students develop a sense of responsibility toward their learning.

Students also experienced some culture shock in their new school environment. Elements of this included calling teachers by their first names, the degree of freedom they had in school, and the reduced workload and

homework. In some of their home countries, the students could immediately skip to the next level in school if they were sufficiently proficient, whereas in Iceland they found that it was not possible. There were also aspects of the physical space that surprised them, such as the structure of the school building and having a locker and a bathroom inside the classroom in compulsory schools. This was new for some students who lacked these resources back in their native country. Back home, the school buildings were typically smaller, but they had the same number of students, and teachers gave lots of homework every day.

Students found that it was easy to go and ask another teacher in the same school for help if they had difficulty with a subject:

I just went and asked another mathematics teacher and he explained very well. He explained in a way that everybody understands. I realised then that it was very easy but why I didn't understand it I didn't know (F1A).

It was not only the teachers who were supportive in those school, but also other school staff, like the principal who helped one of the students choose the field of study:

I didn't really know what I wanted to do at high school because I was scared about what I should really do, so I don't regret it and I kind of do ... something like that. I just went with rafvirki, training to become an electrician. I didn't really choose, it was the principal who chose it. He told me it shouldn't matter because the important thing was to get in, but I enjoyed learning it ... so now I'm looking for a way to get into the university (FVN3).

For students who had difficulty understanding the subject, schools in Iceland provided additional space where they could meet with teachers and other students. One student described the value of this space:

When we have a break, we can go to Setrið (special space) to give students of immigrant background extra support. Not every teacher understands the fact that immigrant students need more or extra support. I can always go there and ask for help, they explain the subjects for me (F2D).



When I asked students what they liked about their schools, they noted that their schools were conducive to learning. One student replied:

S: I like my school's place, after school you can go to downtown and take a walk or do anything else. I like the school's library.

R: Why the library?

S: You can have internet there, you can do your homework there and have many books and you also given a lot of time I think this school is very good for me (F1F).

Students expressed that they were happy with the choices that they had in upper secondary schools in Iceland, because there are different types of schools there. School space in Iceland is different from what they experienced back in their countries of origin. They noted that they could either attend a school with a class system, where they are with a single cohort until they graduate, or they can choose a school with a different set of students in each course. Some of the students mentioned that they feared the class system in their country. In [one country of origin], for example, students who were bullied in the first level were also bullied throughout the four or five years of their study. But on the other hand, the cohort model was good for those who were shy, as they could make friends more easily. In Iceland, students could choose between the two models: a cohort model, in which they proceeded through school in the same group of students, all studying the same subjects; or the standard model of choosing their classes, in which case their classmates would vary.

### **4.3.3 Supportive and caring environment**

Participants in this study generally characterised their school environments as welcoming and supportive. They also referred to their teachers as supportive, caring, and friendly, and noted that they use inclusive teaching pedagogy. They said they are able to seek support from their teachers at any time. This was true not only of Icelandic teachers, who gave them extra support in the Icelandic language, but teachers of other subjects as well, such as mathematics and English. Two immigrant students mentioned that through the extra support that they got in subjects like natural science, sociology, mathematics, and others, they were able to get an 8 (a very solid grade) in those subjects. Students even got support from different teachers

in the school who taught the same subject: “I went to another mathematics teacher and he explained it in an easy way, and I realised the different ways of explaining something” (F1A).

Students realised the importance of having teachers who understood their needs, and who valued their language and cultural backgrounds. Their teachers used the principles of multicultural pedagogy in their teaching to assist the students in learning the language and help to make them feel comfortable in their learning spaces. One student said:

The teachers know that I’m a foreigner, and I don’t have the same thinking and the same point of view in my assignment like other students (local). They didn’t disagree on what I do, and they always encouraged me. They allowed me to mix together. There is no, like rule, that I have to do things this way or that way. Sometimes I mix in [my native language] in my presentations, such as writing one sentence or a few words here and there. The teachers allowed me, encouraged me and told me that I might do that. I want to mix these two languages together, that is me and the teachers don’t want me to switch completely over to Icelandic (F1A).

One of the students described his school as a multicultural environment, with students from different cultural backgrounds as well as native Icelanders. According to him, they had good teachers and they received lots of support, for example: “during the exam we get additional time to finish our exam” (F1B).

Students also talked about teachers’ professional competence when they were asked about what a good teacher looks like. According to the students, good teachers should know their students, take care of them, and exhibit kindness and understanding. Good teachers are those who know their subject well, are creative, and use various teaching methods that give each and every student a chance to learn the subject. Humour is another characteristic the students identified. One student said, “it shouldn’t be like I’m a teacher and you may not speak in such away, it is rather like someone who jokes and laughs with us” (F2C). Another student described her teacher in this way:

Sometimes I’m bored, so when I attend the class the teacher asks me whether everything is fine with me. She receives me well, always greets me, and asks how she can help me. I went to

her very often when I started and I was new in the school but now I go less often. I had more difficulties then (F1B).

Teachers who understand diverse needs of the students are a valuable resource and have influence on students' achievement. One of the students described his situation when he first started school:

At first, I was like someone who came from the moon or outer spaces. I didn't understand a word. The teachers were explaining the subjects in Icelandic, but when the class was over some of the teachers came to me and asked whether I understood the subject or not. Of course I didn't and started to explain everything for me, they translate what I didn't understand then I went home and did my homework with the use of dictionaries (FVN8).

Both schools and teachers influenced immigrant and refugee students' success. One student mentioned that school administrators and teachers were knowledgeable and proficient:

Everybody was doing well and doing many things while I was in school. They supported us with Icelandic and provided us with longer time in exams instead of applying for it separately. If you are foreigner, you are entitled to longer exam time. Teachers knew us and they had knowledge about our background, that sort of information (FVN5).

In addition to the supportive and caring environment of the schools, some students looked at their teachers as role models because of their devotion and passion for teaching. Students mentioned that they enjoyed learning when their teachers put their passion and love into the subjects they were teaching. One of the students said that he had hated going to school in his home country, but he developed a different attitude in Iceland:

In my homeland I hated to go to school. Here it was different. I loved to go to school and I couldn't wait for the weekend to be over and go to school on Monday because I was really grateful to learn more and get better (FVN10).

Some of the students mentioned that they were shy and nervous when they started upper secondary school and that they did not comprehend the rules and regulations in the school, but through different forms of support they received, they knew whom to turn to for help.

Two of the participants mentioned that they had to change schools. The first participant moved to Iceland and registered in a compulsory school close to her home. She was the only immigrant child there, and the other children made fun of her because of her accent. She decided to move to another school where there was more support for immigrant and refugee children. The second of these two participants studied in one of the upper secondary school for one year. She decided to move to another school there due to the “many good teachers, much information, variety of books, and extra support” (F2B).

The immigrant and refugee students described their teachers as their advisors and friends. According to study participants, some of their teachers cared about their students, supported them, motivated them, included them, assisted them, and facilitated their learning. Participants perceived that they felt responsible for their students’ well-being, did their jobs with love and passion, and worked as a valuable resource that students could turn to whenever they wanted. Teachers provided their students with a feeling of safety, and that they could turn to them for advice whenever they needed it.

#### **4.3.4 Safe and secure space**

Feeling safe and secure was also central to students’ academic and social success. Upper secondary schools were places where these students felt safe, supported, and respected despite the differences in their religion, languages and cultures. Some of the students were targets of name-calling and racial slurs in their compulsory schools, but not in their upper secondary schools. One student reflected on her experiences of being a Muslim in the school and in Iceland:

It is very comfortable to be a Muslim and live here. You know there is always someone who is against you, but it's OK ... they do not show that they are against you and they are not violent (F1A).

A female student mentioned as well that she could walk home from school late at night without worrying that something might happen to her, like harassment or assault. She reflected that this sense of safety could not

be found in her country of origin. Another student said that the safe and secure environment both at her school and at work made her feel well.

Comparing different aspects of the school and external environment was one of the important points that students reflected on often, and it was an essential element in their success. One of the students compared different places she had lived in, with Iceland, saying:

Here in Iceland I learned to walk alone home in the evening without being scared, but in [X country] that we moved first my mom had to follow me to school and home again. We took the train in the morning and also on our way home in the evening. We did not feel safe and it wasn't as safe as Iceland. There is nothing to be scared of here in Iceland (F3D).

The feelings about safety and security that the immigrant and refugee students expressed were not restricted only to staying in school and not facing any prejudice, but also to the structural and institutional support the schools offered. When I asked her whether there was something that she was very satisfied with in her school, one student replied:

I'm really satisfied with the extra support that we get in subjects like Mathematics, English and Icelandic. I don't attend very often those classes because I had to work as well but it is good to know that there are supports on behalf of the school. It gives you a secure feeling that there are people inside the school whom you can turn to when you have problem in understanding the subjects (F1A).

Academic and social success for immigrant students depends on a range of factors, one of which is the feeling of safety and security both inside and outside their schools. Inside their schools, they felt safe in staying longer and secure in requesting assistance whenever needed, while outside their schools they had similar feelings that nothing bad would happen despite their status as immigrants or refugees.

#### 4.3.5 A place to fulfil one's dream

Generally, students participating in this study were happy and optimistic about their future and looked at upper secondary school as a place to fulfil their goals and dreams. One student mentioned, "here I learn what I like to learn" (F3A). Getting to know other students from different backgrounds at different ages was a good experience for these students. Some of them saw upper secondary school as a multicultural space where they could get to know and talk to people from various backgrounds:

I'm almost never with the same set of students -- for example I'm with ten different students in English and mathematics. I'm with another fifteen in Icelandic. This is the thing that I like most about my school. It is not like other schools that you are with the same set of students all the time (F2D).

Students appreciated the assistance they received for their studies and related good experiences with their schools, which they repeatedly described as very supportive. Some students mentioned that they got lots of language support, especially when they were new in the country, and they learned mainly through the additional support offered by the schools. School was the Icelandic environment that was offered to them from the beginning. Being able to read and speak another language was like a "dream" for one of the students:

It is a big dream. If someone told me that after two years I will be able to speak English/Icelandic, I would just laugh at him/her and tell him no way. It was too much for me (FVN9).

Some of the students were able to speak Icelandic after two or three months of study, while others found it difficult and said that it took them considerable time: "the first five years were difficult" (FVN1). This student explained further that it was difficult in the sense that she wanted to speak grammatically before she was able to do so.

The flexibility in the school system allowed the immigrant and refugee students to change their field of study and choose one in which they were more interested. One student was interested in Dentistry, a field that was offered in her school:

I'll study Dental technology or dental assistant I think in January because then I'd only have to take a few more subjects ... I could use all my subjects from paramedical field, can be applied on dental assistant (FVN4).

One thing that came up again and again was that these students loved what they did, with some of them mentioning that they were lucky to have a chance to study here, and that they looked forward to waking up in the morning and going to the gym and starting their school day. Different specific factors affected students' motivation to succeed academically and socially, although their realization of the importance of these factors often came after the fact. Many students noted that the school system in Iceland allowed for greater flexibility in course selection and scheduling. Here you could choose the major that you liked, and you could change the field if you were not interested. You could make friends through participation in different programs and you would not be with the same set of students all the time. In Iceland, the participants felt safe both in school and generally, and they looked at their school as a place to fulfil their dreams for the future.

In addition to the role of the school and teachers in immigrant students' academic and social success, many students mentioned the role of their family and friends in their ethnic and inter-ethnic communities in aiding their journeys toward academic and social success. An institutional view usually shows one set of factors that affect immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success. There are also external support factors behind their success, such as families, communities, and friends.

#### **4.4 The role that their social, cultural, and academic backgrounds play in young migrants' success**

In addition to the different types of academic support that immigrant and refugee students received from their schools, they also received academic and social support from their social environment. Students in this study reflected on and referred to the advantages of support from their extended and close families both in Iceland and in their homeland. Students also mentioned support and encouragement that they received from Icelandic society, different organisations they were involved in, and also from their workplaces. Without these various types of support, students could not achieve such high levels of success, either academically or socially. As one student mentioned, "The idea of a romantic artist working alone in the corner, somewhere, doesn't exist any longer" (FVN2). Students need to cooperate with each other and get support from others including teachers, classmates and friends, as well as provide support to others. Some students stated that they considered making Icelandic friends a success because they were able to learn words and expressions which otherwise would not have been possible.

#### 4.4.1 Family support

Family and parental support can help compensate for inadequate support from society and school. When immigrant and refugee students start school, their parents and siblings are often the first people to whom they turn to for support and feedback. Most students in this study described their home environments as warm and supportive. They referred to their parents and siblings as supportive emotionally, socially, financially, and in some cases academically. One student said that his brother found a job for him and through his work he became proficient in Icelandic. Other students mentioned that their parents did not get the opportunity to go to school, but were highly supportive in helping their children reach their goals:

My stepfather is good in mathematics; he is helping me with mathematics. Whenever I have exam in mathematics, he helps me with the subject and my step grandfather helps me with natural sciences, English and biology. I learn with my step grandfather during the weekdays also on Saturdays but not on Sundays. My mom also helps me with the English language (F1B).

Those students who had one Icelandic parent received academic support at home as well. One said that her stepfather helped her with her homework in Icelandic, math, biology and other subjects:

We study quite a lot ... we sat always at home with our stepfather and did our homework and studied with him as much as we could. We also talked about different things or subjects (F3E).

Another student referred to his uncle as a source of encouragement in learning and remembering their heritage language. While others turned to their teachers, friends or classmates to get support in subjects like mathematics, one student said:

My parents can't help me with mathematics -- it is very complicated for them. It is all about decrease, model and this and that. They have never learned these things, and besides, mathematics is not the field of their interest. That is why I don't ask for help from them (F1A).



Nevertheless, most students in this study received support from their close and extended families. One of the students referred to the support she received from her stepfather's siblings with Icelandic and also with getting a job. Another student described her parents as her largest sources of inspiration:

My parents, my parents ... my mom was for a long time studying psychology, not studying she was just kind of learning for herself. Just like having books home and reading them and my dad got into it. They had even few sessions in psychology, and I see how they changed because my parents were always one of my biggest inspirations (FVN10).

Despite the fact that much of the family support took place behind the scenes, it is nonetheless an important component with its own distinctive patterns. Some students described their parents as demanding, but at the same time supportive and caring. Others said that their parents had undergone a lot for their sake, working hard to support their children and to keep the family together in their new country. One student referred to her mother as the source of inspiration behind her success and graduation:

Because of my mom, who has always been here for us, that we would all graduate and that is really what we are trying to do. If you don't study, you won't go anywhere (FVN3).

In addition to moral support, many of the students also discussed receiving financial support from their parents. Some of the students paid the school fee by themselves, but they lived with their parents. Some helped their parents with bills and household living expenses. One student mentioned that it was his mother who chose the upper secondary school for him. She compared the schools and chose the one that she felt best suited him. He also mentioned that it wasn't easy for her, since she wasn't able to speak English well. One of the students referred to the support that he received from his brother, with whom he was living in Iceland. Another student mentioned the support that he got from his older brother, who was a university student who he described as clever and diligent; this brother was a role model in the student's education, especially since his brother was to graduate from university the summer after the interview took place. Yet another student identified her step-grandfather as her role model, since he supported her in many different aspects of her life, such as schools, family,

work and friends. Another student mentioned that besides her teachers, her family here in Iceland and her extended family back in her home country were the main sources of her success.

In many cases, extended family members who lived in other countries (neither the student's native country nor Iceland) contributed to the success of these students. For instance, one student learned German from a family member who had been living in Germany for a long time and spoke the language fluently. Students' relatives back home also served as role models. For instance, one student described her aunt when she talked about her future:

I want to become an accountant or work in the bank. My aunt in [my native country] is a bank manager and I want to do the same as her. She graduated from university first and continued to learn, she took extra courses, diploma, grades and so on until she became bank manager. I want to do the same (F2D).

Some of the students found it easier to ask their families for help first, since they did not need to inform them in advance as they would in the case of school teachers and administrators. In addition to the support that students received from their near and extended families in Iceland and back in their native countries, some students received language support through Icelandic families who made themselves available to support these students.

Some students' family members were not lucky enough to get the education or degree they wanted back in their native countries. For some of them, in fact, the main purpose behind moving to Iceland was to give their children better education and career opportunities. These family members tended to encourage their children to pursue careers in fields like medicine, law, and engineering, since people holding those degrees tend to have high salaries and a high standard of living.

#### **4.4.2 Friend or peer support (ethnic and inter-ethnic support)**

Peers and friends were especially important to the immigrant students participating in this study. These students often created strong bonds and were drawn to one another. Whether they were from similar or different backgrounds, they recognised and identified with one another. The help and support that they got from their friends was in many cases reciprocal: "I help my friends with subjects that I finished and am good at, such as nutrition, mathematics and natural science, and they help me with Icelandic" (F3D).

They served as role models for each other; for instance, one student said: “There is a guy from Vietnam, he is learning to become a lawyer, he is really like my... I wish to be good like him” (FVN3). One student described wanting to be with her friends as her motivation behind choosing a specific field of study. Another student said that his first year in upper- secondary school wasn’t easy. Most of his friends from compulsory school went to other schools, and it took him some time to make new friends.

Friends spent time with each other within and outside of school, and faced similar challenges. Students mentioned that they learned Icelandic through Icelandic friends or immigrant and refugee students who were fluent. They mentioned that they were not shy in asking their friends all sorts of questions that they couldn’t ask their teachers. One student described his experiences in upper secondary school in positive terms:

I made many friends, know many people, learned much more and I can even more. At first, I thought it would very difficult since I didn’t know everybody and the school is bigger than I expected and you don’t know everyone. Now I know almost everyone and made many friends and things like that (F3E).

Almost all of the participants mentioned that they liked their school and were happy there because they made friends. One student described the primary function of school for him was that it was a place to make and meet friends – he rarely met his friends outside of school. Other students reported that outside of school, they met friends who were on the same soccer team. Some students mentioned that they chose a particular school because they had friends, either from the same neighbourhood or from compulsory school, who intended to go to that upper secondary school. They also said that they made even more friends in school, which made school more interesting for them.

One student described the support from her friend in a different way:

I was in upper secondary school when one of my friends asked me to explain or translate the meaning of certain words for her, but I couldn’t find the word in my heritage language. That is how I realised that I’m not good in my language and I need to learn better (FVN5).

Students described their friends, both Icelanders and fellow immigrants, as friendly and supportive. Friends served as their second source of academic

support after their teachers – and sometimes their first, especially in cases when they didn't understand the subject: "One of my Icelandic friends helped me a lot when I didn't understand the subject well, and now I want to help other students" (F2D). Other students preferred to do their assignments with their classmates and get language support either from their teachers or their classmates and friends. One of the participants spoke about peer support and the encouragement that she received from one of her foreign-born friends:

I have a friend; she is from Nepal. She has helped me so much. She was really the first person who talked to me when I first came to Iceland. When I started in the school, she came to me and asked me to be her friend, and since then, we are best friends. She has helped me to write in Icelandic, and she explains things and just everything (FVN1).

Another participant shared her experiences with peer support:

The guys that I worked with and my friends who already finished the subjects they gave me some books and told me their experiences. (FVN5)

Some participants mentioned that they did their homework projects and managed to finish school through support from their friends:

[If] we were home working on projects or working on our homework and got into trouble, we spoke with each other via internet. I have always got support. They encouraged me to finish school (F3G).

Another student mentioned that several members of her near and extended family, both in Iceland and back home, learned to be architects; she said that they sometimes discussed and compared how architecture was taught in Iceland to how it was taught in their country of origin: in Iceland, many practical lessons were offered, whereas in their native country instruction in architecture was necessarily theoretical due to the lack of financial and material capacity of the universities there. Students in this field also turned to friends both inside and outside school for educational support and direction. In some cases, students were supported by friends who had finished the subject, or students who were more knowledgeable about the

subject. One student noted the need to cooperate more and organise more activities in order to interact with both Icelandic and foreign students.

Many students preferred group work, explaining that they learned a lot from each other, especially when the groups were from different backgrounds. One student explained that because of his limited proficiency in Icelandic and English, he couldn't talk about many things in those languages. Those students who spoke Icelandic well mentioned that it was easier to make connections and develop relationships when they learned Icelandic and started to talk to Icelanders. For some of the students, upper secondary school was the place to meet people from different backgrounds and make friends: "I made many friends there, my best two girlfriends I met them in upper secondary school" (F2B). Another student said that she got introduced to her best friends, who are from different backgrounds, in her school:

One of them is from Italy, she was exchange student and we are still best friends, others are from Iceland, Spain, and Poland. I also have many friends from Lithuania (F2C).

Having friends who encouraged them to finish school when they felt discouraged was a source of success for one of the students, who referred to her friends as ambitious and positive. They provided her with psychological support, and they believed in her. They served as role models for her. Some students considered making friends who shared the same interests, but were from different backgrounds, to be a sign of success. One mentioned:

S: There are also people that I know who are not friends. I met them when I practise my interest in groups, like jumping on my bike. Also, people whom I met in skating and things like this.

R: Are they Icelanders?

S: Yes, but it's not like I meet them after skating or biking and having fun or something like this, no, I just know them and talk to them. With my friends we practise lots of things together, we are now trying to make a video together. A video about me and my biking but because of the weather we were not able to do this (F1E).

One student said that it was difficult for her to make friends in compulsory school because she was shy, but she managed to make many friends in upper secondary school from different countries and Iceland as well. She also

mentioned that they were a group of friends who sat and worked together, but they rarely met outside of school, especially during the weekends when she had to work. Another student mentioned that she had Icelandic friends in school, but she preferred to be with immigrant and refugee students outside of school since they understood each other better and were a source of healing for each other. One student said that she never faced any prejudice from her friends although she was a Muslim. She found it comfortable to be a Muslim and to study in that school, and wherever she went she met good people. In general, students felt positive about their schools, had no complaints, and noted that their schools became more fun after they made Icelandic friends. Those students who had different language resources as home language used those resources to support their classmates and other students who were interested in learning that language. As one student stated, “I help them with the Spanish language and they help me with the Icelandic” (F3F).

In general, immigrant and refugee students in the selected upper secondary schools worked, learned and discussed schoolwork together, and helped and supported each other. They felt that they were a part of the school. They used their pre-existing resources in different ways both inside and outside their school communities. The significant impact of both formal and informal interaction among these students was clear in the students’ descriptions of their experiences. For some of the students the effects of informal interaction during breaks and outside of school were more impactful than their experiences within the classroom.

It is not only the school, parents, or friends who lay the foundation for academic and social success; the larger society that extends beyond the nuclear family, friends and schools also plays an important role. It is our collective responsibility as adults in a society to care for, encourage, and help mould each future generation.

#### **4.4.3 Community support**

When people emigrate to a new country, they need a support system to help them facilitate their lives and work. The support system might be through different organisations in the society or through individuals from the local culture or who share the same culture, language, or country of origin as the immigrant and refugees. The number of social capital networks that the individual can access in a new society is instrumental in facilitating their new life and opening the door to different opportunities. The networking support that the individual gets in a new society takes various forms, including non-

governmental organisations, sport clubs, religious communities, and informal language and cultural communities.

Almost all of the students in this study were working part or full-time, and they mentioned how their proficiency in the Icelandic language grew through community support:

I work with Icelandic boys, and they helped me a lot by speaking Icelandic to me, and I learn many new words (F1G).

Another student referred to the academic support she received from her co-workers:

I remember when I wrote a report. I took it with me to work in Hagkaup. We were all working together on it. I got comments and feedbacks from them. They explained and sometimes I let them go over it. They told me for example that is not right or that word shouldn't be there or that is not right Icelandic (FVN1).

Other students mentioned how different NGO organisations, such as the Red Cross, sport and leisure organisations, supported them with the language when they arrived:

When we came to Iceland, the two of us brothers, we started in football and our teammates always spoke Icelandic with us. Also, we went to the Red Cross downtown and learned Icelandic all summer (F1F).

A student who came to Iceland as a refugee described the support that she and her family received from three Icelandic families, both for their schooling and in other aspects of their lives. They were introduced to these families through the Icelandic Red Cross, and they are still in contact with them as of this interview. This student also mentioned that she still finds time to meet with one of her compulsory school teachers: "She helped me a lot with the Icelandic and other subjects and we meet sometimes" (F3G).

The type of encouragement and support that the students received was not limited to the Icelandic language. Some of the participants were encouraged to keep and use their heritage language as well. "Our football coach always reminds us to speak Spanish so we don't forget it" (F3E).

One of the students mentioned the encouragement and support he got through a religious community:

We have religious meetings ... so that was how I got to know them ... My best friends are very similar to me. I kind of get support from them mostly from psychological point of view ... they always like ... you to make it, you can do it, you can go through it (FVN10).

Some of the participants were introduced to Icelandic at work, where they had to speak it with their fellow workers and supervisors. One student shared his experience with his coworkers who supported him with learning Icelandic:

I started to learn Icelandic when I was working at a hotel with Icelanders. I started to use what I had learned and picked up phrases from them. They (co-workers) helped me a lot. Slowly but surely, my Icelandic got better. I learned the most from them during my summer job at the hotel (FVN6).

The type of support or feedback that these immigrant and refugee students got via their work or their participation in various clubs supplemented the support they received at their educational institutions, showing that the learning space is not confined to classrooms. Social networking and awareness of one's own cultural identity were strong predictors of immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success, along with other factors mentioned in the above chapters. When our educational institutions succeed in bridging different cultures, they are indicating that they value students' diverse backgrounds and see these as an asset to the educational process. In return, this gives immigrant and refugee students a sense of recognition, which has a positive impact on their educational performance and their academic and social success.

#### **4.4.4 Cultural and social expectations**

The immigrant and refugee students in this study moved to Iceland both voluntarily and involuntarily. In one case, "it was war between [my country and another country] and the Red Cross came and picked us." Others had to follow their parents' decision:



Actually I never really thought I would end up in Iceland. It was because my dad ... he was always travelling and looked for new work opportunity. He found a good work here and he fell in love with Iceland. He loved the whole system and everything. He convinced my mom to come alone then me and my sister (FVN10).

Another student mentioned how angry she was when she heard that they had to move, despite the poor conditions in her family's native country:

I was very angry and I told my dad that I have friends here and I don't want to learn another language. I didn't know that he was doing that for us to give us a better education and life. When we were in [my country of origin] we didn't have enough money and we ate often just bread (F2D).

The third group are those who decided to come because of their financial situation back home. In Iceland, they were able to study, work and assist their near and extended family back home.

Some of the students talked about their age, education, leisure activities, jobs, and how social and cultural expectations from their home culture affected their choices, activities, and work. One of the students said that aside from proving to himself that he could succeed, he wanted to show his parents that he could complete his education, and he wouldn't be like other foreigners, who would only work.

The responsibilities of some of these students, such as taking care of their siblings at home, started from a very young age. Partly because of this, when they reached upper secondary school, they were considered to be mature people capable of taking on adult roles in the absence of their parents. One student related that "when my mom has to go to work and my brother has a parents' meeting, I would go instead of her" (FVN 4).

Immigrant and refugee students who did not get a chance to finish upper secondary school in their home country and started in Iceland when they were over 20, found it a bit difficult: "You know I'm not very young now, I'm 25" (F1C). When I asked another student, who was 19, when he was going to graduate, he said, "In two years or two and a half, unfortunately." He explained that he would be 21 when he graduated, and he was worried about his future because his perception was that at that age, students are supposed to be at university. Another student identified his age as the main barrier to

his participation in music learning: “I was learning some music in [my country of origin] and I wanted to go deeper here but I think that I passed the time” (F1F). He clarified his view, saying that he was too old to take part in music courses or schools. Another student said that it was her mom’s wish that she would graduate and become a lawyer or a doctor, and according to her mom’s view, if “you don’t study you go nowhere” (FVN3). One student described how her mother wanted her to enter the College of Medicine instead of the College of Art; she referred to it as “Asian parents culture” (FVN2) – according to which, if you get good grades, you have to become a doctor, an engineer, or something equally impressive. She added, “she always mentioned that doctors earn high salaries and she seized every possible opportunity to convince me” (FVN2). This student “was at the top of her class” in compulsory school, and she was quite aware of her strengths; she wanted to follow her dream, not her mom’s. This attitude is very different from her home country, where students experience a lot of pressure to succeed, and education was seen primarily as a means to that end. Here, the students learned to enjoy their lives more; as one student mentioned, in Iceland we “enjoy the ride” (FVN3).

Though many of the students were from poorer backgrounds when they moved to Iceland, economic factors were not the only reason for emigration. Some of the families of the participating students were well-off financially. One student mentioned having servants or “house helpers” who did everything for him. This student appreciated the need to learn to do things for himself in Iceland: “So in the future, I know how to do everything” (FVN3).

#### **4.5 Summary: the fuel that fires academic and social success**

The research question and three sub-questions guiding this study centred on understanding the factors that enhanced the academic and social success of young immigrant and refugee students in three upper secondary schools in Iceland. The immigrant and refugee students participating in this study talked about their sense of academic achievement, inclusion, and social success, with measures of success defined differently by different individuals. Success is mutable, not fixed, and it also relates to both passion and perseverance.

Several critical components shaped immigrant and refugee students’ academic and social success. Among these were desire, passion, and strength of their interest. One of the most important components suggested by this study was refusing to quit despite the hardship of the new languages, school-related tasks, and adapting to a new learning environment. Having a

'never give up' attitude enabled these students to successfully navigate a path to academic and social success. Students were more satisfied, motivated, and performed better in their studies when they matched their area of study with their personal interests. For many of these students, the improvement in educational environment from their native countries was a motivating factor in itself. However, it wasn't easy for many of them to find their true passion immediately — it took some years to find it. But once they did, they tended to stick to their commitments and were constantly striving to better themselves in the Icelandic and English languages. Though they very often did not understand a subject the first time around, they didn't give up, instead trying again and again, seeking extra support from teachers, classmates, friends, and family members. The students who participated in this study consistently demonstrated a desire to practise, to do better, and to excel academically and beyond. Many of them were intent on the well-being of others; they wanted to be role models for other immigrant and refugee students. When I asked the students whether they defined themselves as successful academically and socially, they often answered that they reached that stage of their life through hard work, dedication, commitment to the courses they took, and by the support from their schools and their surroundings. They eventually learned the language, and some of them enrolled in university, while others engaged in the job market with the intention of coming back to school after one or two years. The academic and social success of these immigrant and refugee students did not depend only upon students' inner resources, as students mentioned. Outside influences such as teachers, schools, friends, and parents helped them succeed academically and socially.

In addition, students tended to view many of their teachers and school personnel as very supportive and respectful. As two students mentioned, their teachers knew when their students were bored or if something was bothering them. They asked them to share their thoughts, which enhanced their happiness. Students also noted that most teachers provided voluntary effort outside of class and were caring and friendly. Some of their teachers had a sense of humour, high expectations, and were demanding, accepting nothing less than students' best efforts. Some of the students pointed to their teachers as individuals who came at the right time and guided them in the right way (to the university or to their field of study). They tended to encourage their students to aim high and provided them with needed confidence and support. Some of the teachers tried help students overcome obstacles they were facing in their personal lives. They made a difference in their students' academic and social success.

According to participants' views, their parents tended to prize education above all else. Some of them moved to Iceland specifically to provide better educational opportunities and a better future for their children. Parents instilled interest, hope, purpose and practise. Some were also demanding, insisting that their children choose a certain field over another. Some of the students credited their success partially, if not totally, to parents or other members of the family who refused to let them quit. Parents had high academic expectations for their children and expected them to commit time and effort to their education. Students credited their parents with being extremely supportive and present, staying attuned to their emotional and other needs.

In addition to the role of the schools, teachers, parents, and family members, two of the students credited their success to their coaches, who constantly encouraged them both to use their heritage language and helped them to learn Icelandic. Students also mentioned the role of society and different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their success. These were sources of valuable and positive feedback that related both to students' academic and social lives, which made them feel content and secure.

Social circle outside of school and family, such as friends at work, also had a significant impact on the academic and social success of these immigrant and refugee students. Providing these students the chance to work helped them to make new friends, both with native Icelanders and other immigrants, helping them move in a promising direction.

## 5 Discussion

The study is about immigrant and refugee students' experiences and expectations of academic and social success at three upper secondary schools. While many of the participants in this study were students in one of the selected schools, some were attending university and others were pursuing their careers. All of those who had entered the job market planned to go back to university soon.

In this chapter I explicitly address the three research questions of the study, i.e. the factors behind the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students. My first research question asks about the experience of immigrant and refugee students with regard to their academic and social success. The second question is about the perceptions that young immigrants have about upper secondary schools in Iceland, and the third question is about the role of sociocultural and academic background on the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students.

This chapter is divided into two sub-sections. In the first part, I discuss the invisible elements behind the academic and social success of these students. In other words, the hard work, dealing with challenges, the habit of daily practise, having goals and purpose behind their studies. In the second part, I try to connect their success to the effect of the outside inputs such as schools, teachers, parents, friends, coaches, and the positive impact that networking has on their educational attainment.

### 5.1 The invisible elements behind immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success

While our culture often tends to focus on immigrant and refugee students who drop out of school, those who work hard and end up succeeding academically and socially in the long run are often overlooked. Several students in this study mentioned that they tried to give up when they first encountered certain obstacles, but later they reasoned, tried hard, got support and did better. They were optimistic, made the effort, focused on areas of improvement, (primarily language acquisition), and set lofty personal goals. They tried to make sense of their learning, found their learning meaningful, and reasoned that they would benefit from it in the

future. In order to enhance learning, many of the immigrant and refugee students indicated that they often took notes, reflected on how well they understood the subject when they went home, translated the material to different languages to make sure that they understood the subjects, and asked for more help and support when they were not certain.

### **5.1.1 Motivation and learning**

The findings suggest that the invisible power behind the success of these students was their motivation. The motivational signs that we often rely on are effort, interest, and passion for long term goals (Plaut & Markus, 2005). Immigrant and refugee students in this study mentioned that they worked long and with more intensity. They worked in cooperation with others, either family members or peers. They studied and practised over the weekends and during breaks between classes. Zull (2002) argues that motivation and learning are one unit and cannot be separated. The students in this study developed a habit of daily practise, connected their study to a purpose, and were optimistic about their future, whether in Iceland or elsewhere. Besides being interested in their studies, these students were also happy in their schools and with the outcomes of their education. Some of them changed compulsory and secondary schools several times before finding the three schools in this study, usually due to limited support and bullying issues.

### **5.1.2 Motivation and academic attainment**

For these students, the strength of their interest made it less likely for them to drop out of school. Their personal interests aligned with their major subjects, and they often got high grades. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2000, p. 30) describe intrinsic motivation as “a cork rising through water” that surfaces when the environment elicits it. When people realise the purpose behind their learning, their learning makes sense to them and they value it more.

Among the characteristics of successful students according to Rhamie (2007) is being goal-oriented. In her study she found that people who were successful knew what was needed for academic success from an early age and they clearly knew where they wanted to go. Almost all of the students in this study had a goal or goals and they were working hard to reach them. Through my experiences and contact with teachers who teach in multicultural settings I sometimes heard teachers describing immigrant students as hard-working, and that they stuck to their goals -- though there

are, of course, some exceptions as well. Pursuing your goal autonomously, for your own reasons, and using your own methods rather than according to a strict, external system of regulation makes you both satisfied and successful (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Research on self-determination theory and goals has confirmed the connection between success and autonomy, with results supporting the idea that success is more likely to flourish when our goals are intrinsic and when we surround ourselves with empathetic and supportive people (Koestner & Hope, 2014). When an individual is driven by autonomous motivation, they may feel self-directed and autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Self-determination theory differentiates between autonomous and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008); autonomous motivation includes both motivation that comes from internal sources, and also includes motivation from extrinsic sources for individuals who identify with an activity's value and how it aligns with their sense of self. Immigrant and refugee students in this study talked about their future in purely self-oriented terms, with students listing their future goals of becoming a psychologist, doctor, aircraft mechanic, etc. Participating students in this study were driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations; it was their self- and other-oriented motivations that made their academic lives more meaningful and successful. They worked hard toward the goal/s they set for themselves, didn't give up easily, and wanted to help their parents in the future -- i.e., to pay them back for their generosity. Some of the students also helped other family members around them both financially and academically, with the stated motivation that they wanted to be good role models for younger generations. The instructional and social space inside their schools supported their academic and social success, as did their families, communities, and friends.

Although the overall amount of autonomous or intrinsic motivation is certainly a factor behind the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students, it is important not to lose sight of the external motivators that also impact the academic and social success of these students. Teaching students from diverse backgrounds is challenging, and it requires teachers to accommodate their internal logic to their students (Wlodkowski, 2008). Teachers need education and experience in the field in order to validate their students' ethnic and cultural views, benefit students of all backgrounds, and emphasise the equality of the learning process and equitable education for all students (Banks, 2007; Sheets, 2003), creating an environment in which students can borrow from and lend elements to one another (Nieto, 2010). Immigrant and refugee students have inner resources, skills and intellect that can lead to extraordinary achievement, but they need support to work at

optimum levels. They need support to push their innate powers and energy to the outer extreme to be engaged academically and socially. Achieving the long-term goal of academic and social success requires students to cultivate their interest, have commitment to a high purpose, and implement daily habits of self-improvement. These qualities can be strengthened through support offered by teachers, friends, parents, teammates, schools, and both the close and extended community. Though immigrant and refugee students play a central role in their academic and social success, they cannot succeed alone. Being surrounded by people who give honest and kind feedback about strength and challenges helps students develop positive self-esteem (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). The academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students is the product of many people's work and support in dealing with the varied needs of these students.

### **5.1.3 Motivation and leisure time**

Some of the students participated regularly in extracurricular activities, such as playing soccer, boxing, composing music, and taking part in various other activities for young people. Besides the social and language-learning benefits of these activities, these students mentioned that helped them organise their schedules better. However, a few students mentioned that they either had no interest in extracurricular activities or that they gave up very early. This freed up time for these students to pursue what they were interested in most. Participation in extracurricular activities widened these students' circle of friendships (Putnam, 2000) and at the same time strengthened their identity, language skills, and helped them to bridge cultures, such as Icelandic and their native culture (Heo & Lee, 2007; Tirone & Goodberry, 2011). One student explained that because his fellow skateboarders were not from the same country, they did not speak the same language, but could nevertheless pursue the same interest in the same social space (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). A significant connection has been indicated between leisure and democratic social capital. When leisure activity fosters democratic norms such as autonomy, trust, cooperation and communications, it develops democratic social capital (Hemingway, 2017). Participation in leisure activities both strengthened these students' cultural capital -- i.e., their knowledge, language and identity -- and it strengthened and widened their social networks (Block & Gibbs, 2017; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). For Putnam (2000), when people engage in activities they connect more to each other, and the participation itself promotes cooperation and collaboration that is beneficial for society.



## **5.2 The crew surrounding immigrant and refugee students**

Educational and social success is not only the result of ability and individual support; the school environment and support system has a lot to do with immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success. Inside their schools, two forces shaped the success of participating students in this study: access and support. When the practise in the learning environment is guided by multicultural education philosophy (Banks, 2007), students get equal opportunities for school success regardless of their categories -- i.e. whether they are minority, from different cultural backgrounds, students of colour, or disabled. Interest cannot be discovered through self-reflection, but is triggered by interaction with outside stimuli. Participants in this study recounted interactions with a circle or crew of encouraging supporters, including parents and their extended and near family, peers, educational institutions (including schools and other language learning centres), teachers, and NGOs and other organisations (including leisure activity and coaches), and co-workers. In the following sections, I discuss the role of each type of 'crew member' in the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students in upper secondary schools in Iceland. The chapter addresses the research question on the immigrant and refugee students' perception and reflection on their experiences of upper secondary schools in Iceland.

### **5.2.1 Schools and teachers**

The first crew of supporters includes schools, teachers and other school personnel, including principals and student consultants. This crew observed immigrant and refugee students and predicted with some degree of certainty what would capture their attention and what would not. Without support from this crew, students would not be able to develop interests and determine which ones to pursue. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argue for the importance of support for low income students in order to achieve academically, and that students' success requires institutional investment in structured and carefully aligned activities aimed at their success. They further argue that without support many poor and academically unprepared students are unlikely to succeed. For them, access to educational institutions without support does not truly represent opportunity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Schools and teachers provided immigrant and refugee students with the information and stimulation necessary to keep the students engaged with their education and school at an increasing intensity. According to what students reported, some of the teachers in their schools applied multicultural

education philosophy, using different teaching methods that took advantage of students' diversity, while also making their teaching more equitable and welcoming to students of diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010).

Many of the students explained that their school took the differences between students as their basis, rather than striving for homogeneity. Further, they explained that their teachers' high expectations played a vital role in students' performance and positive attitudes toward education. Students in this study provided evidence of their teachers' care, knowledge and professionalism (Nieto 2000, p. 85). Some students described their teachers as family members because of the love, care, devotion, and security they provided to their students. In many of the students' opinions, teachers were skilled, well-prepared, and used various teaching methods to support them in their study. Some became role models for their students due to their passion for their work. Participants talked about their school as a community with people who cared about them and about whom they cared. Students described feeling safe and secure in their schools.

Many of the students were happy about the forms of support they received for their studies. Among these was support in learning Icelandic, which in their opinion helped them to be more efficient in their study and more active in taking part in different activities. It also gave them a sense of independence. Providing immigrant and refugee students chances to improve their Icelandic allowed them to use their previous knowledge by connecting, comparing, and contrasting (Cummins, 1996). In other words, they were able build upon their previous knowledge, whether academic or cultural.

The climate of respect that some of the students mentioned made them comfortable in voicing the things that mattered to them. This is in line with Guðmundsson's (2013) research indicating that students were grateful to environments in which they felt respected. Some of the students in this study described how Icelandic schools were superior to those in their countries of origin. As one of the students mentioned, the idea that in Iceland "teachers respect you" was a new concept for him. Many of the students referred to the power differences between students and teachers in their native country, where students were expected to show only modesty and obedience in the presence of their teachers. The type of learning that the students experienced in Icelandic schools was more empowering. Some of my student participants often talked about how different the system, teachers' relations and interactions with students and the schools are here in Iceland compared to their native countries. Students participating in this

study attributed their academic and social success to different school factors, indicating that their schools were influential in a way that helped them to build positive attitudes toward learning.

The students started to develop trust when they found that their well-being was assured. Wlodkowski (2008) discussed how intrinsic motivation is more likely to emerge when the learning atmosphere establishes trust and contributes to the well-being of learners. Parkeh (1999) found that people become more open-minded through living and participating in a multicultural community. Some of the students in this study mentioned that they became very open-minded after they started school and began working in Iceland. In both cases, they mixed with people from various backgrounds and became acquainted with different perspectives, languages and cultures.

In each of the schools studied there was a section dedicated to supporting immigrant students in languages and other subjects, which many students reported made them happy. The support that immigrant and refugee students got within their schools came from teachers, peers, students from the same or other backgrounds, school consultants, and sometimes from the principals. Another way in which schools encouraged students to be resources for one another was through peer tutoring or peer teaching. Some of the students mentioned that these programs were arranged across grade levels. They also mentioned that participating students switched off between mentor and mentee roles in subjects such as Spanish or mathematics. Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001) characterise peer support as a system of mutual understanding based on principles of respect, shared responsibility, and reciprocal understanding of what is helpful. Some studies (e.g. Dennis et al., 2005) have correlated the availability of peer support or lack thereof with the academic progress of students. To them individual-oriented motivation was an important personal characteristic that predicted the students' commitment to finish their schooling, yet contextual resources such as peer support were also necessary to predict good grades and adjustment later in the same school year. Lack of these resources also have negative impacts on these students' grades and adjustment.

Students in these schools were separated from native Icelandic speakers at the beginning of upper secondary school for some classes. The students found this strategy made them feel more connected to one another, more included, and more free to risk the mistakes true learning involves. They were able to learn and share resources and strengths. Their contact with students from various cultures and with Icelanders increased in these schools. They understood each other and they supported each other. One

student mentioned that when he saw a student alone or when he found someone new in their class or even in their break time, he would go over and start a conversation with the new student. Some of the participants also mentioned that they supported their friends or co-workers with emotional challenges. In fact, research indicates that students develop more complex thinking skills and learn more when they are exposed to a wide variety of perspectives through interaction with students from diverse backgrounds (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). The core of social justice and equity in our schools and society is realising, accepting and addressing the varied needs of individuals. In order to make this dream real, schools need to build an environment that includes everyone.

The school system was flexible enough to give students chances to connect with Icelanders and take classes with Icelanders, but some of the students preferred not to join classes with the local students until they reached a degree of fluency that allowed them to feel comfortable conversing in Icelandic or English. Students believed it was extremely important for them to get support to keep going when things were difficult; a little help and guidance was of tremendous help for them and gave them the feeling of belonging in the school space. This corresponds to Pratt's (1991) theory of participation and distancing in cultural, linguistic and religious encounters: when schools recognise their students' diverse backgrounds, race, history, and other identity markers, they give students and other school personnel a chance to belong to the school, while at the same time the school belongs to them. To Younger, Warrington, and McLellan (2005) the most successful schools in raising pupils' level of achievement are the ones which engender a sense of belonging in pupils. These schools generate at the same time feelings of responsibility; in them, students perceive they are listened to and their voice occupies a space in school policy and practise.

The Immigrant students in this study mentioned several dimensions that related to their school culture back in their native country and compared it to their new culture. Among those dimensions were warmth, friendly closeness and the availability of the teachers when they needed support. Not only did teachers support these students within school hours, but they also volunteered their time to assist them outside of school. As one student mentioned, her teacher came back on weekends or after school to explain the subject further to several immigrant students who had difficulty understanding it. One of the students said that it was because of her teacher that she could continue her study. The teacher found that student a part-time job and a room to live in, since her parents lived away from the city.

Some of the teachers were viewed as family members by their students, due to their caring and dedication. This contrasted sharply with the negative encounters some students experienced with staff and pupils back in their countries of origin. One student cited these negative experiences as the reason behind him giving up on his studies, reporting that he felt unfairly treated and unsupported, even saying that one of his teachers physically beat him. Another student mentioned that due to the asymmetry of power relations it was impossible to talk to the teachers outside the class.

In contrast to multicultural education that embraces critical pedagogy and insists on engaging students in dialogue with their teachers (Freire, 2009; Nieto, 2000), some of the students in this study described the teacher's main responsibility back in their country of origin as simply to deliver the lesson, usually by lecturing. Students were expected to reiterate some portion, if not the whole lesson, for the teacher. Their classroom had no inclusive characteristics; students were all expected to demonstrate their rote memorization of the material in the same way. This could be because of the high number of students in class, limited resources, few training opportunity and professional development courses for teachers in developing countries.

Students noticed that some of their teachers were able to identify their diverse needs in different subjects. Immigrant students received extra support when they decided to take classes with Icelanders. One student mentioned that she received extra support in history as she found it very difficult at first, but the teacher made it easier for her to understand through her various methods of teaching. This is in line with what Sapon-Shevin (2007) refers to as teaching inclusively, which demands changes in teaching strategies and classroom structures. Teaching inclusively means making schools accessible to a broader range of students, and includes different ways for students to acquire information, interact with new content, and show mastery of what they have learned.

A positive school environment and recognition of students' cultures, knowledge and languages empowered these immigrant and refugee students and at the same time gave them the feeling of belonging (Steen-Olsen, 2013; McEachron & Bhatti, 2015). The participants characterised their schools as diversity-friendly spaces that allowed them to integrate well and make solid connections with their teachers and peers. Students felt that they were included, while at the same time belonging to different groups. For other students it took longer to meet Icelandic friends, often because immigrant students were shy in using their Icelandic, and wanted to speak it very well before they started talking to local students. As one of the

immigrant students mentioned, some of the Icelandic students are closed-off, and it takes time to get to know them. In his opinion, when you get a chance to know Icelanders, things go more smoothly and they invite you to be with them.

In line with Noguera and Syeedd's (2020) view that school can transform and change the lives of students and promote equality and social justice, the positive school environments generally regarded student differences as a resource and emphasised diversity in their school, classes, and teaching. Schools focused on increased participation of these students in different programs and activities. As a researcher, I noticed the amount of support provided to immigrant and refugee students when I visited one of the schools. Flyers and posters with various information hung on the walls, such as available support time in different subjects, opportunities to participate in various activities both within school and after school, and so on. The support that these students received from their teachers was not restricted to helping them with their homework, clarifying the subject further or finding jobs or suitable activities in which they could take part. Educational equity and some teachers' pedagogic practises helped these students make use of the resources to obtain the knowledge they needed. Some of the teachers allowed the immigrant and refugee students to use their heritage language, which helped them to strengthen their identity and helped the teachers as well to understand who these students were — in other words, to know the identity of their learners. Bhatti's (2011) study explores the importance of identity in Muslim young men, who make sense of their worlds through their religious, social, and educational positions. She argues that identity is multidimensional in that it intersects with and overlaps other categories of difference such as ethnicity, social class, gender, and linguistic, cultural, and religious affiliations. To her these categories are interconnected, complex, and fluid, and exist simultaneously in daily interactions. In the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture's new curricula published in 2011, a common chapter discusses the fundamental pillars of education for all school levels: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, health, well-being and creativity.

The Icelandic Upper Secondary School Act (2008) emphasises the right of the students whose heritage language is not Icelandic, to being taught Icelandic. It further states that they should be provided with the opportunity to maintain their heritage language as an optional subject, either through distance learning or by other means. Some of the students in the study mentioned that they had achieved proficiency in Icelandic through different pedagogical practises used by their teachers, and were also given

opportunities to take Icelandic courses with their peers. The importance of engaging learners in pedagogical practises which value their cultural knowledge and language abilities is seen as one potential avenue for affirming students' identities and promoting their investment in language learning (Cummins et al., 2006). Immigrant and refugee students in this study succeed when their heritage language and culture are considered relevant to their academic progress. For example, teachers who allowed students to use their heritage language in presentations, and teachers who found the text in the student's heritage language to translate it into Icelandic, were not only providing their students with sense of belonging in their new environment, but also providing an educational space where the students' identity, previous knowledge, and talents were affirmed.

The findings showed that the participants were happy about moving from their native country to Iceland. Education in this new place helped them to understand the space around them, to be openminded and independent, and not to judge at first sight. It also helped them to change in ways that led to helping others. Being in a crowd of people doing things a certain way makes it easy for one to follow along. The drive to fit in or to adjust to the group is powerful. According to psychological experiments, individuals fall in line with a group that is acting or thinking a different way without conscious awareness (AlSheddi, Ruselle, & Hegarty, 2019). Including these students in different activities both within and outside of school gave them the feeling of belonging; i.e., the feeling that they mattered to the community and were supported.

Immigrant students who were in university by the time of this study felt they received more support and caring from upper secondary school, where their teachers cared more about them and showed interest in their lives. According to the participants, some of the teachers in upper secondary schools treated their students equitably, in response to the students' individual needs. One student related how getting the texts in her heritage language instead of English or Icelandic helped her understand the subject better. Students were also happy about the fact that their schools took into consideration their diverse backgrounds. Many were given credits for learning and passing exams in their heritage language instead of learning and taking exams in another foreign language, such as Danish. They were also given a chance to pick up where they left off when they left their native country.

Immigrant and refugee students mentioned issues of safety and security, emphasising that they felt physically and emotionally safe. Despite the fact

that they were from different backgrounds, cultures and have different languages, no student relates any such experiences of prejudice in regard to the three upper secondary schools in this study. As one student mentioned, these things did not happen in his upper-secondary school, but he experienced it in compulsory school. Another female student referred to how physically safe she felt, stating that she could stay at school until late in the evening and walk home after finishing her project. Regarding inclusion, Sapon-Shevin (2007) mentions that in an inclusive environment, it is safe to be yourself.

Another indication of the safety of the learning environment mentioned by the students was the amount of support they got both from their teachers and classmates when they did not understand the subject. As one student mentioned, she sometimes used words and expressions from her heritage language when she found it difficult to express an idea in Icelandic. Most significantly, none of her classmates made fun of her; on the contrary, they understood her challenges as non-native speaker of Icelandic, and supported her. In safe spaces -- i.e. schools, classrooms and communities – teachers, students, and all other individuals need to be themselves and need to be able to talk about their challenges. If teachers and students are not able to acknowledge their problems and struggles and solve them together, things won't go smoothly and effectively and they won't be able to "breathe deeply" as Sapon-Shevin describes. Providing students with a safe space gives them the feeling of being part of the group, helps them to risk making mistakes, encourages them to share resources and strengths, and makes them feel comfortable voicing the things that matter to them, i.e. they feel included (Wlodkowski, 2008). Inclusion is a continuous process; it means belonging and being a valid participant right from the start (Slee, 2011). Education should be systematised in a way that all students and school personnel feel that they belong to the school and the school equally belongs to them (Pratt, 1991).

Authors like Noguera (2009) contend that immigrant students might be better prepared to navigate the difficulties they face if schools were to focus more on implementing culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy. When teachers, coaches, school counsellors, and others expect immigrant and refugee students to do well in school and they view these students positively, they give students more chances to succeed. Students incorporate the expectations that others have of them and set expectations for themselves accordingly. When a group of students is met with lower expectations, students are less likely to succeed at challenging work and are less likely to be directed toward advanced classes (Kao et al., 2013). Low expectations



from teachers, a poor learning attitude, and poor school performance have a reciprocal negative effect on each other (Regalla, 2013).

Despite the positive experiences that these students had, it is still necessary to make some hidden truths visible for readers. Both students and teachers reflected on the nature of their interactions and relationships with each other. Teachers encouraged peer relations among the students, which is an important step in demolishing the hidden curriculum of unintended lessons, values, and norms that are not intentionally taught, but are learned nonetheless and reflected in student's talk (Banks, 2007). Teachers talked about their interaction with the students and how they often provided them with individualized instruction. One of the teachers found it was necessary to create space for personal dialogue with immigrant and refugee students within the school curriculum. They listened to their students' stories and participated in personal dialogue. For example, one teacher described how, when they were on a field trip, a student from Syria told her his own story, that he had not seen his grandmother for a year. More examples of upper secondary school teachers' perceptions are described in an article based on data collected for LSP (e.g. Tran, Lefever & Ragnarsdóttir, 2016).

Students also mentioned some of the challenges that they faced in Iceland, like not comprehending academic Icelandic or various terms in subjects such as mathematics. In one case, a student mentioned that the teacher went through the subject matter too quickly and did not give students like her further explanations. That student and her friend decided to go to another teacher, who explained very well.

Some of the students were granted space to mix in their own language. Their teachers showed understanding of the fact that these students had different ideas and views about the subject, and gave them spaces to be themselves. This is in line with Garcia and Wei's (2014) observation that languages are autonomous to one another. They also indicated that heritage language helps students to understand terms, see the connection between items or tasks, and explain themselves in an understandable way in their lessons.

Some of the students talked as well about the fact that they spoke and understood the language very well, but lacked academic language proficiency. Cummins (2005) differentiates between basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic proficiency. To be able to succeed in schools, immigrant and refugee students need to achieve the latter as well. Cummins (2015) indicates that misconceptions occur when educators and policymakers lack a clear understanding of second language

acquisition. If students' conversational language is limited, they will not make it to the level of critical and logical thinking. The other misconceptions are connected to those who have reached a high level of language proficiency, that they will be capable of dealing with the academic subjects with their classmates who are native to Iceland.

Teachers in these three upper secondary schools supported immigrant and refugee students by adopting multicultural pedagogical practices in diverse spaces. Some of them brought to bear their professional and personal life experiences, which gave them a greater sense of empathy and helped them to better understand multicultural issues. They believed in their students and acknowledged their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers' visions for these students' success were reflected in both their actions and words. One of them mentioned that his primary goal was to prepare students for learning, becoming critical thinkers, and understanding the value of learning. These teachers felt that it was their responsibility to support, listen to, and assist their students. Yet they found that there was not enough space in the curriculum for the regular personal dialogue necessary to do so effectively. They believed that their teaching would be more effective once their students got to know them. They recognised and regarded students' language, religious beliefs, and various backgrounds as valuable resources for their education. As one teacher mentioned, "I mean, these kids don't come here just as empty vessels; we have to continue to build upon what matters most to them ... we need to build upon the knowledge that is there."

Many of the students mentioned their negative relationships with teachers in their home countries, and contrasted this with their experience in Iceland. For their part, teachers communicated with their students, listened to them and their stories, gained knowledge about their differences, and reflected this in their teaching. This is in line with Griffiths' (2003) insistence that social justice is not a static theory, but is action-oriented. For her, social justice involves making silenced voices heard, valuing and respecting experiences, and looking at them as legitimate (Griffiths, 2003). Although some students did complain about certain teachers, more talked about how some of their teachers empowered them to find their strength and voice.

Despite the roles that these individual institutions played in filtering the academic and social success of the participants in this study, further steps need to be taken to make these and other schools better educational spaces for students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The results of the

interviews with teachers in LSP and another study (Rafik Hama, Benediktsson, Hansen, Jónsdóttir, & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020) in Iceland have shown that the success of multiculturalism has often depended on the individual experience, interest, wisdom, and good will of the teachers. Some of the teachers whom the team members interviewed had lived in other countries and understood the challenges that their students were experiencing.

The responsibility of the educational institutions toward the success of students of diverse backgrounds should not rely on individual teachers' or staff members' intercultural competency, but on the collaborations among different actors inside educational institutions. To reach these goals and mainstream these practices, schools need to encourage cooperation, communication among schools, formal training on the education of minorities, and professional development for staff members of educational institutions.

### 5.2.2 Parents' input

Researchers have long considered family input and support to be valuable resources with profound significance for children's academic outcomes (Bankston, 2004; Kim & Schneider, 2005). According to the immigrant and refugee students' discussion on parental support, all of the parents were overwhelmingly supportive and positive. This is in line with research on parental encouragement (Bankston, 2004; Ryan, 2006). These parents supported their children in various ways — if not academically, then financially and/or socially. They worked hard to create and provide a positive environment by listening and being responsive to their children's needs; above all, they trusted them. They were aware of the challenges that their children faced at a young age and knew that learning a new language was not simple. They were demanding and expected their children to do their best. They often placed their children's success ahead of their other priorities. While some of the parents did not pressure their children to excel in a particular field (though they wanted them to complete their education), others did. This may be a cultural effect from cultures that value high status jobs, often because those are the jobs that enable children to take care of their parents as they age.

It was remarkable that so many of my participants talked about their parents as their most admired and influential role models. Some of the parents endured significant hardships before they reached Iceland, and their main aim was to provide their children with the best education. They somehow communicated their interest to their children, and in some cases explained why they were so insistent. The students were quite aware of their parents' devotion and sacrifice, though some of them discovered this a bit later, as in the case of the two students who were totally against moving to a new country and leaving their extended families and friends behind. Later they realised that it was equally difficult for their parents to move, but they were motivated to provide their children with better education and career opportunities.

Some of the parents took an active role in choosing and supporting their children in their new spaces. In some cases, they chose the school they considered best for their children. Some of the parents went further and found individualized programs that enabled their children to invent their own major or field of interest. They also provided their children with a degree of autonomy to make their own choices about what they liked more, which was also important in building and developing their intrinsic motivation. In other words, some of the parents let their children do 'deep dives' into what they

enjoyed. This is in line with research that consistently indicates that parental involvement leads to improvement in children's academic and behavioral outcomes from elementary through secondary school (Bhatti, 1999; Hornby, 2011). However, parents' views on their roles in the education of their children is crucial -- some parents believe that their role is to simply to get children to school and then the responsibility of their education rests on the school personnel (Hornby, 2011).

Parents taught their children that quitting school led to difficulty and hardship, and they could end up regretting this decision for the rest of their lives. They engaged in frequent discussions with their children about the significance of education. Beyond having support from schools and teachers, some of the students mentioned the support and encouragement that they received from their parents, who despite their lack of education in some cases were keen to encourage and support them. One example is providing various resources such as books. Part of what it means to be a parent is the commitment to secure quality education, and parents often had no choice but to engage in the education struggle regardless of their individual capacity to do so (Tsokova & Tarr, 2012). For those immigrant and refugee students whose parents could not support them academically, these students clarified that they nevertheless supported them in any way possible to continue their education.

Two of the students mentioned that their parents got work in the suburbs or in rural areas, but sent their children to schools in the city. This indicates that education was so important to the parents that some moved to Iceland to give their children a better education than was available in their native country. These parents were aware of the quality of the schools and the services they provided, types of social capital, and information about colleges and universities. Access to resources such as social capital and structural characteristics of family social capital influence students' educational attainment (Crosnoe, 2008; Kao et al., 2013).

In sum, many of the immigrant and refugee students who were successful academically and socially had a kind of ferocious determination, which played out in several different ways. First, they were resilient and hardworking, and did not want to give up. They knew their direction and they had determination. School personnel, especially their teachers, took on the role of facilitator both within and outside of their schools. Parents' role in their children's success came in various ways. For many immigrant students it was difficult to determine their own interests in their new spaces without outside input. This included parents, teachers, community support and other

networking channels. The parents of the participants in this study played an important role in the academic success of their children. Research has also highlighted the effect of parents' role in helping their children to navigate the forces present in British society for example and to acquire the skills necessary to take their place in the workforce (Cork, 2005). Cork indicated that both Black parents and their children need the right support, and the right organisation that understands and supports their needs, to enable their achievement. Refugee and immigrant parents of the participants were generally prepared to support their children however they could, yet these parents themselves also needed the right tools and support due to their own circumstances. To enable them to work more effectively, schools need to provide spaces that bridge the diverse educational philosophies between home and school.

### **5.2.3 Networking channels and the journey of academic and social success**

The backgrounds of students in Icelandic schools are becoming more diverse. Despite research findings (Van der Veen & Meijnen, 2001) on academic underachievement, and findings that students from immigrant backgrounds are less likely to achieve social and academic success in comparison to the local students, there are a number of students who perform well both academically and socially. One of the important channels leading to immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success is networking inside and outside of schools. In this part I focus on the role that social capital networks play in the academic and social success of young migrants in Iceland.

When migrants and refugees move to a new country, they need a support system to help them facilitate their lives and work. The support system might come through different organisations in society or through individuals from the local culture or those who share the same culture, language, or country of origin as the immigrant and the refugee. The number of social capital networks that the individual can tap into in their new society is instrumental in facilitating their life and enabling them to access different opportunities. While these networks take various forms, the effect of social relations on educational performance has long been the primary focus of many researchers (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Putnam (1995, 2000) considered the linkages between interpersonal networks and formal organisations. Studies have demonstrated the importance of social support for immigrant and refugee students, recognizing that social support increases their institutional commitment, and it reduces student attrition (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). Along somewhat similar lines, Bankston (2014) pointed out that the immediate influence of networking within schools is greater than that of family and community networks outside of schools. Numerous researchers (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Perrell, 2018) have discussed the importance of engaging students both outside and inside the classroom, and that students who report higher levels of contact with peers and faculty members also demonstrate higher levels of learning over the period of their study, and this could lead to a greater sense of belonging. Tinto (2008) studied student social involvement in the educational life of the college, concluding that participation in educational activities provides a mechanism through which both academic and social involvement increase, and student effort is engaged. He also refers to the linkages

between membership in the community of the classroom and membership in communities external to the classroom (Tinto, 2008).

Students in this study talked about the recognition that they received from their new friends and the positive impact it had on their social and academic success. Their interaction with peers in the formal school environment and the informal environment both outside and inside their schools fostered active thinking and participation. This is in line with the conclusions of Curin et al. (2002) that students develop more complex thinking skills and learn more when they are exposed in their educational environment to diverse perspectives through interaction with students different from them. Ream and Rumberger (2008) refer to the influence of peer group networks on the high dropout rates among Mexican Americans, reporting that students who were highly engaged in schools were those who had friends who were also highly engaged. For immigrants and refugee students, peers and friends are important because they often create strong bonds. Regardless of whether they are of the same backgrounds, immigrants tend to recognise and identify with one another. They often face the same challenges and they spend time with each other within and outside of school.

Identity and the maintenance of culture also had a supporting impact on the students' academic and social success. When I asked them where they came from, all the students referred back to their own country, and said that despite the fact that they had lived in Iceland for a long time, they identified themselves according to their native culture. Culture has the power to shape our identity, over time and under the right circumstances. The norms and values of the group to which we belong become our own. We internalize them and we carry them with us. In the school context, the combination of one's own culture and adaptation to the local culture promises more success. To Phalet and Andriessen (2003), the retaining of culture takes on a safeguard role in school. It protects students and ensures that they perform well. Almost all of the students in this study said that they count themselves as Icelanders when they are back in their country, or even when they are abroad. Phalet and Andriessen (2003) explored the precise nature of the relationship between ethnic minority status and school achievement and the connecting mechanisms that may account for this relationship. Their study partially supports the hypothesis that maintenance of culture in the home environment has a supporting effect in the private space, while adaptation in the context of school is related to good school performance (Phalet & Andriessen, 2003).



The type of encouragement and support that the students received is not limited to the Icelandic language. Some of the participants were encouraged to keep and use their heritage language. As one student mentioned, “our football coach always reminds us to speak Spanish so we don’t forget it.” Another student mentioned the encouragement and support he got through a religious community. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital exhibits itself in two main components, the actual social relationship itself (structure) and that the relationship allows individuals to gain access (interaction) to the resources of their network and the amount and quality of those resources. Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital focuses mainly on the benefits occurring to individuals emerging from individual participation in a group. Putnam (2000) argues that social capital results in certain advantages for the individuals involved. In the case of this study, some of the students mentioned that they became better in Icelandic through community support, as one student participant said that she became better in Icelandic through her work, where she learned many new Icelandic words from her co-workers. Others mentioned the role of NGOs that supported them with language learning when they arrived. Another student, who spoke Spanish, used the language resource that he had to help non-native Spanish speakers, and made friends that way.

It is noteworthy that a large number of studies have demonstrated that social support of immigrant and refugee students increases their institutional commitment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of student attrition (Gloria et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2007). The quality of diversity in the student population, faculty, staff and curriculum often improves the quality of the student’s interactions within and outside of the classroom, strengthening their academic performance and social experiences. Some of the students found positive role models and experienced positive interactions within and between the triangle of school, home, and community systems.

The type of support or feedback that immigrant and refugee students get via their work or participation in various clubs compensates for a potential lack of support in their educational institutions, and also improves their academic life. Students in this study described feeling included both in their school and their society. Sapon-Shevin (2007) points out that inclusion is not restricted to school issues, but is about creating a complete society in which each and every member is valued. In these three schools, immigrant students and native Icelanders supported and communicated with each other within and across groups. In other words, these relationships were reciprocal (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001) in that they bonded similar people and built bridges between diverse people. In his book *Social Capital*, John Field (2008) refers

to the indirect role that schools have in bringing people into new networks of contact and helping them to build their social capital directly, helping everyone involved acquire new skills and knowledge. He also indicates that some people develop social skills as a by-product of participating in formal education. Similarly, some of the students in this study described their schools as fields of connecting land, connecting people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Several students referred to their afterschool programs, which worked as spaces through which they learned both languages better and connected more to individuals from various countries. Both cases — i.e., learning languages and making connections — confirmed the impact of social capital on immigrant and refugee students' achievement. Although proficiency in the Icelandic language does play an important role in enabling recent immigrants to participate fully in the Icelandic society (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir & Pamela Innes, 2017), for this group of students, lack of proficiency was not a hindrance to accessing available opportunities.

In broad terms, the relation between social capital and educational achievement has been studied widely, and the majority of the studies found a positive relationship between them (Dika & Singh, 2002). For a few of the students who participated in this study, social capital compensated for the shortfall of other resources. By social capital, we refer to students' families, friends and associates that constitute an important asset (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Putnam (2000) used the term social capital to describe the level of social engagement of individuals in organisations and institutions. Participation of these students in different activities and afterschool programs connects them to each other, promoting connections and collaborations while at the same time creating an environment of trust, which is beneficial for their own community and Icelandic society as a whole.

Types of community involvement varied from one student to another. Some were active participants in volunteer work for the community, while others described positive regular attendance at some activities after schools. The voice of the voluntary and community sector has been a valuable resource in widening understanding of the specific needs of the community and providing consultation and activities (Tsokova & Tarr, 2012). One student described his commitment to church and church club attendance throughout his school years. Of those students who were interviewed, five (2 girls and 3 boys) were involved in sport clubs. They all described their activities as rewarding and constructive.

The findings of this study indicate that various social networks, like friends outside the school and community organisations, which are often less visible, have a promising influence on school and educational attainment. NGOs and

religious organisations often serve as the backbone of informal support that helps immigrant, refugee and local students come together to share challenges and learn from each other. Despite the role that the social environment has on immigrant students' educational choices, various networking channels remain important in motivating and helping immigrant students gain a sense of belonging and overcome the barriers that they face in their various spaces. Kao (2004) refers to three interrelated forms of resources based on Colman's concept of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Because of the language barrier and limited contact, immigrants and refugees usually depend on their group lines for the flow of information. Relationships among immigrants usually strengthen social norms such as trust. A closer examination reveals how it was their own communities that provided students the assets they needed to negotiate Icelandic society when they arrived. Students gathered knowledge from their communities, and some of them actively disseminated that information to younger generations. The bonds formed through these relationships helped some of the students to do well in school and to find careers afterwards.

The literature shows that an initial factor that leads immigrant students to academic and social success is the school's commitment, which is not limited only to additional support, but also includes using diverse and varied approaches to involve these students in different activities and programs. Providing immigrant and refugee students with different programs, ensuring equitable chances, and changing school practises increases the chances that immigrant and refugee students will succeed. When students of immigrant backgrounds experience social inclusion, including contact with teachers and other students, they perform better.

Parental academic support was less influential in upper secondary school since some of the immigrant and refugee parents lacked the necessary tools and resources to effectively support their children academically. Nevertheless, almost all of the parents were able to support their children financially and psychologically. The cultural capital accessible to some of the participants also helped them to achieve more highly in certain fields. Students' ability to acquire and use resources (capital) in the educational field helped to determine their ability to navigate through the system and succeed. One participant mentioned that it was through the opportunities provided by his school that he learned to learn from others and respect diverse opinions. This is in line with Bourdieu's description of habitus and the field. Habitus does not represent the actions of individuals in isolation; there is what he calls connection between habitus of the individuals and the fields

in which one is involved. In line with Bourdieu, Mation (2008) agrees that one's practice results from "unconscious relationships" between habitus and the field within a particular social space.

The participants' feeling of awareness and belonging within their own culture and language also had a positive impact on the academic and social success of these students. The study demonstrated that participants have clear feelings of their own cultural identity, which has a positive influence on their academic success. The findings indicate that the various social networks, including parents, close and extended family, friends, and different community organisations, have a promising influence on educational attainment. NGOs and religious organisations often serve as the backbone of informal support that helps immigrants, refugees and local students come together to share challenges and learn from each other.

## 6 Conclusion

This interpretive, qualitative study provides a descriptive analysis of the academic and social success of young immigrant and refugee students in upper secondary school in Iceland. The participants were students who were registered in one of three upper secondary schools for at least one academic semester in a credit-based, four-year academic program and those who had completed their degrees and were either enrolled in universities in Iceland or were employed.

Academic and social success is described in relation to students' personal perspectives and perceptions, and it is also connected to their education and employment. In other words, it is described in a both subjective and objective manner. The idea of my study was to interpret how refugee and immigrant students conceptualised academic and social success in the spaces in which they took place.

The main objectives of the study were to identify the factors that support the academic and social success of young immigrants and refugee students in upper secondary schools in Iceland; raise the profile of high achieving immigrant and refugee students by sharing their experiences and applying them in different learning spaces in Iceland; and gain new knowledge leading to the development of programs and creation of conditions enabling students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds to have a real chance to succeed academically and socially in Iceland. Bringing to light young immigrants' success may also be a visionary and practical tool in working against racism, in that success of young immigrants and refugees may also lead to diminishing xenophobia and changing the focus to allophilia, or love and respect for others.

Immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success were in fact the result of the mixture of different ingredients -- such as their strength, awareness and sense of resilience -- that have enabled them to cope with the challenges they faced both within and outside of schools. What these students accomplished depended tremendously on their hard work and passion for their long term goals. They cultivated interest in their education and connected their study to a purpose. The academic and social success of these students critically depended on other people: teachers, school personnel, parents, relatives, coaches, friends, peers, and co-workers. The academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students was also a

result of their schools' provision of strong, positive and supportive environments; i.e., their schools provided opportunities and suitable learning spaces, and applied positive multicultural policies. When teachers are enthusiastic and provide care in the classroom, and when they have high expectations, immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success is greatly accelerated. When teachers appreciate and incorporate their students' knowledge, experiences and backgrounds; when they are experts in their subjects; when they are passionate, dedicated and show love for the subject they teach – all these characteristics that some of the teachers showed immigrant and refugee students, in the three selected upper secondary schools, made the students admire their teachers' passion, and instilled in them willingness to pursue success. Some of the teachers in these schools used culturally responsive pedagogies and practices that made use of diverse perspectives and different resources and types of experiences students had. This also had the effect of fostering democratic participation and critical, active thinking among the students.

When they saw their teachers' commitment and care – such as being available for overtime and during the weekends and showing care when things were not going well – many of these students wanted to do the same for others around them. In addition, the availability of the teachers sent a powerful message: that the learning and success of immigrant and refugee students matters. The safe, supportive and pleasant atmosphere in the school generally, and in the classroom specifically, made immigrant and refugee students feel relaxed, secure, and at ease. They risked mistakes, which is a natural part of learning. To belong to an accepting, supportive and caring learning space and to acquire friends from diverse backgrounds is as important as learning and comprehending new subjects. Diverse educational environments provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to interact and learn from each other both within and outside of the school environment and participate actively in a democratic society (e.g., through volunteering to participate in different activities in schools and the community).

Many of the participating students talked about the challenges that they faced when they arrived in Iceland. Some of those challenges were language related at compulsory schools. At the upper secondary schools students who needed extra language support were taught separately in some classes in order to help them learn Icelandic better and make friends with students from different parts of the world. These students were not segregated from the native Icelandic speakers for the whole time; other teachers took an active role in providing them with opportunities to participate in various

activities inside their schools. Individual teachers inside the three schools used culturally responsive pedagogy, which promoted students' sense of recognition and engaged them academically. Facilitating academic and social success of students from different backgrounds requires educational institutions to reduce barriers, and work as vehicle for changes. Since the LSP team of researchers conducted our interviews with the teachers for this study in Iceland, new requirements for teachers have been set in the teaching programmes today. Teachers must now take compulsory courses in diverse classrooms or environments so as to become effective teachers of refugees, immigrants, and other groups.

The positive role that the society played in immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success gave every student who participated in this study flexible chances to succeed and continue their journey as active and responsible citizens in their society. The realities of opportunities in Icelandic society surely had an influence on the academic and social success of the participating students; the question is what the society should do to ensure all young immigrant and refugee students have opportunities to try, learn and succeed. Academic success is more likely when experiences from home and community are positive and supportive. In addition to the educational outcomes that immigrant students promoted in the three schools in this study, they also promoted democratic outcomes through the learning spaces that the schools provided them. Within these spaces, the students gained a cultural understanding of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The three predictors of success that opened the door and gave hope to individual of diverse backgrounds, besides hard work and dedication, were schools, home, and community.

Diversity in learning spaces consists of more than exposure to contents. Rather, it is about accepting diverse views and different ethnic and racial groups. It is also about exposure to students from diverse backgrounds. It is about the space to which we belong and which belongs to us at the same time. Students' experiences of formal and informal interaction with peers and friends from diverse backgrounds also affected their learning outcomes and their self-assessed academic skills. The results of this study also show that the school facilitated diversity activities such as multicultural events and strengthened dialogue, leading to better learning outcomes among students in general. School diversity also leads to citizen engagement and respect, and deters prejudice, as some of the students mentioned. Students from diverse backgrounds are a resource that actively enables schools to achieve their educational goals. Diversity in these three schools enabled the students to accept the differences both in their educational environments and beyond.

Immigrant and refugee students in this study were well-prepared by their upper secondary school experience to live in heterogeneous neighbourhoods and attend heterogeneous colleges.

The findings of this study also demonstrate how immigrant and refugee families managed to support their children appropriately. In spite of their often limited education, parents were devoted, and supportive, and had high expectation for their children. Some of them engaged in frequent discussions with their children about the significance of education and future career. Some of my participants indicate that although they left their homelands for various reasons, they came to Iceland in order to take advantage of the educational and other opportunities Iceland affords. Because of the role that the social environment has on immigrant students' educational choices, various networking channels remain important in motivating and helping immigrant students gain a sense of belonging and overcoming the barriers that they face in various spaces. Having friends, knowing teachers and people both inside and outside schools and participating in various activities are all signs that students are well included. These help immigrant and refugee students feel comfortable, and they give them sense of security and belonging both to schools and to society.

There is no magic wand that can be waved in our schools to make students work hard and succeed academically and socially. We can neither force our students to their limit nor control their learning. But we can care, facilitate, and reach out with the help they need, when they need it. We can guide them toward the right direction, and teachers can influence and increase students' motivation by improving the quality of their teaching. Many immigrant students caught their teacher's passion for teaching the subject matter; these are the teachers who think about the long-term development of their students. Identifying the factors that helped immigrant and refugee students succeed academically and socially helps demonstrate the fact that despite the challenges they face, immigrant and refugee students can succeed. Giving immigrant students opportunities to share their experiences, perspectives, and views of their journey of academic and social success casts light on the process affecting their school attainment, while at the same time offering a valuable tool for a plethora of educational organisations to use. To change things for the better and help more immigrant and refugee students to succeed, we need to consider students' personal motivations and aspirations, school, home and community. The schools and teachers chosen for this study welcome immigrant and refugee students and emphasise equity and justice, telling the immigrant students that the school can belong to them as much as to anybody else.



Another finding of this study was the importance of the sense of fit, or belonging, for the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students both within and outside of school. Previous studies have shown how hard it is for students from different backgrounds to make friendships and connect to peers, co-workers and community members. This study showed that how an intervention, and support from teachers, peers, friends, and community members, influences sense of belonging and can lead to the academic and social success of these students. One type of connection sometimes compensated for the struggle they faced during their study. They also associated their sense of connection to their feelings of being cared about, accepted, respected and valued both within and outside of their schools and the community. The most important thing that indicated their sense of belonging was that they were happy about the choice they made both moving to the country and starting their study in upper secondary school. Although the participating students defined themselves first of all as Vietnamese, Pakistani, Polish, Lithuanian, and so on, they also viewed themselves as Icelanders. This sense of multiple belonging was nurtured by the cultural encounters they experienced within their schools and their communities.

The study data mirrored the fact that in Iceland the school system and policies do not distinguish between students' status when it comes to participation in upper secondary schools. Immigrant and refugee students with or without legal status can participate in upper secondary education. There are some distinctions in the policy; for example, the refugee children (quota refugee) get financial support so as to be able to continue their compulsory, upper secondary, and in some cases university education. The level of financial support is different from one municipality to another.

The study is based on the experiences and expectations of 27 young immigrants and refugee students of academic and social success in upper secondary schools in Iceland. Despite the fact that these immigrant and refugee students succeeded academically and socially, the number of immigrant and refugee students who dropped out of these schools was high in comparison to the graduation rate. According to data processed for this study by the Icelandic data statistic office, the completion rate of immigrant and students between 2014-2018 was 30% for the three schools chosen for this study. The dropout rates were 57% for these three schools. The reasons behind the dropouts need more study, but may include the fact that immigrant and refugee students who do not get legal status might dropout and continue their studies in their own or another country. Studies conducted previously have shown that immigrant students face difficulties in

their studies, and are at risk of, dropping out. Some of the factors that impede the academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students have to do with access to resources inside the schools, such as educators, teachers, school personnel, friends, and peers who understand their different needs and support them.

One immigrant student participating in this study dropped out after compulsory education and talked about her difficulty finding the right school and field in which she was interested. The lack of a multicultural and multilingual environment and support often leads to immigrant and refugee students dropping out. Within the same school, students sometimes went to different teachers to get support and assistance. Our schools need to make greater strides toward equity and inclusion of all immigrant and refugee youth in our educational sphere. It is time to question the long-standing policies that is deeply embedded in a school culture so as to be able to acknowledge and openly discuss, views, behaviours, values, and perspectives that might contradict challenge the self-perceived identity.

The unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school are also reflected in the students talk. When they talk, for example, about a teacher who gave a tough assignment and expected everyone to finish and do well on the assignment. This high expectation caused them to learn more and experience a greater sense of accomplishment. The value (cultural value) promoted by their schools abroad and their schools in Iceland also conveyed some hidden messages, for example in their countries of origin, certain behaviours like following the rules and not questioning adults or the system were rewarded, while in Iceland the opposite is true: questioning is valued behaviour. With regard to cultural perspectives, students reported how their previous schools and teachers expected them to assimilate into Iceland by requiring them to speak Icelandic in the class or during group work (when the group was Polish, for example) -- whereas their present teachers brought the informational material in their mother language.

Providing immigrant and refugee students with a diverse and inclusive environment plays a critical role in ensuring their academic and social success. Integration and inclusion flourish when we recognise our students and help students of diverse backgrounds not to surrender their home languages and cultures when they become full citizens in Iceland, and when we incorporate important aspects of their ethnic cultures into the education and society. Conversely, the absence of this environment could have

alarming negative implications among those populations, such as increasing dropout rates, negative views of schooling, and other issues.

Moving forward, it is critical to accurately and fully comprehend the experiences of academic and social success of the immigrant and refugee students in this study. We have heard here the voices of some of the academically and socially successful immigrant and refugee students, voices that we have not heard in previous studies. It is my hope that these students' reflections on their experiences lead to the creation of additional initiatives to support them both within and outside of school by offering additional opportunities and dismantling barriers that they encounter as they strive to succeed and reach their goals.



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## Appendix A – Letter of consent

Participant Agreement

Project title:

I consent to participate in the above-mentioned qualitative study conducted by PhD candidate Susan Rafik Hama from the University of Iceland. The study's main purpose is to: understand and learn from the experiences of immigrant students who have succeeded academically and socially in Iceland.

I understand that the study is conducted to gather data on the impact of social relations in young immigrants' academic and social success in their new learning environments, and the data will be collected by participating in thirty minutes interview. I understand as well that my participation in this study is voluntary, and I can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. I grant permission for the data to be used in this PhD process or any other future publications. I give my consent for the interviews to be recorded. As a young immigrant participating in a research I understand that the researcher has responsibility to not identify me by name or origin in any reports, and my confidentiality as a participant in this study will be secured. As participant I have the right to:

- Withdraw from the study for any reason
- Review the final written dissertation or any other report connected to this study.
- Ask any questions before, during or after the interviews have been completed

Participant- signature Print name Date

Researcher signature Print name Date

Many thanks for your participation

For further information, please contact: Susan Rafik Hama: [srh2@hi.is](mailto:srh2@hi.is)



## Appendix B – Interview Guide

1. What are the immigrant young adult 's attitude towards their culture of origin and the majority Nordic culture and society?
  - a. Where are you from?
  - b. How long have you been living in Iceland?
  - c. Why did you move to Iceland?
  - d. Do you have a family here in Iceland? Can you tell me something about your background, such as your parents' education or employment?
  - e. What do you like or dislike about living in your country of residence?
2. What are the immigrant young adults' language backgrounds, language learning environments.
  - a. What language(s) do you speak at home?
  - b. How important is your home language to you? When and in what contexts do you use your home language(s)?
  - c. What kind of language support have you received for your home language(s)?
  - d. Are you doing anything to sustain or improve your home language proficiency?
  - e. How have you been learning the majority languages? At home, outside the school?
  - f. Do you enjoy learning the majority language? Is it difficult?
  - g. What have you gained from learning these languages? Were they of any value to you?
3. What learning environments and practises (school and other) seem to be instrumental for young immigrants' participation and success in their school and society?
  - a. What are you studying?
  - b. What are your reason for your choice of study? Choice of school?
  - c. Can you tell me about your experience in college? The positive one.

- d. Have you ever asked for assistance regarding school or studying?  
Why do you ask for assistance?
- e. Does your family support you in your studies? In what way?
- 4. How do they describe their situation, motivation as well as obstacles within the school?
  - a. Have you ever felt that you cannot continue?
  - b. What factors encouraged you to hold on?
- 5. What are young immigrants' expectations of teachers and curriculum?
  - a. How would you describe a good teacher? Have you had one?
  - b. What do you like (and dislike) about your studies and school?
  - c. What inspires you to excel in school?
- 6. How do students experience belonging to different groups and what are their aspirations in these settings and their future goals?
  - a. Who do you interact with outside of school?
  - b. Do you receive support from your friends or other individuals when it comes to language learning and school matters?
  - c. What kind of leisure activities do you participate in?
  - d. Where do you feel most at ease? With whom and in what social contexts?
  - e. What do you want to become when you grow up?
- 7. Has moving from one country to another taught you something important?
- 8. How do you respond to the questions (where are you from)?

