

# **POLICIES FOR INCLUSION IN ICELAND: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the development of the inclusive education system in Iceland, as well as the response to the 2008 education act and 2011 National Curriculum. The idea of inclusion has been implicit in Icelandic law since 1995, although it was not until 2008 that the Icelandic act for compulsory schooling explicitly declared that pupils should be educated in inclusive schools (Lög um grunnskóla, 91/2008). The ensuing 2011 National Curriculum is based on six fundamental pillars for education: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality (equity), health and welfare, and creativity. These fundamental pillars are grounded in the imperative of providing general education to all, in order to foster each individual's ability to meet life's challenges (Mennta- og Menningamálaráðuneytið, 2011).

For the purpose of this chapter, we use UNESCO's definition of inclusive education, which focuses on how schools respond to and value a diverse group of learners and others in the school community (UNESCO, 2009, 2017). This implies that inclusion is an ongoing process focusing on increasing participation in education for everyone involved, thereby working against inequality and increasing people's sense of belonging in school and society. The central message from UNESCO is "seeing the individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for democratizing and enriching learning" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 13).

The questions we aim to answer in our analysis of inclusion in the Icelandic education system are:

- How has the idea of inclusion been developed in laws and regulations?
- What are the barriers to the implementation?

Iceland's population is around 350,000. Two-thirds of the population live in or around the capital city, Reykjavik, with the remaining third living in rural areas and smaller, mainly coastal towns and villages. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for monitoring the educational system at all levels. The educational system operates mainly within the public sector, and is divided into four levels: preschools (age 18 months – 5 years old), comprehensive schools (compulsory for 6- to 16-year-olds), upper secondary schools (16–19 years old), and universities. Iceland's 74 municipalities range in population from 53 to 120,000 individuals. The municipalities operate the preschools and comprehensive schools, while the upper secondary schools and universities are operated nationally. Nationally coordinated examinations take place in grades four, seven, and ten in comprehensive schools, but there is no school inspection at a national level. Ninety-seven percent of children aged 2–5 are enrolled in preschools, and almost 99.5% of children from 6–15 years of age go to compulsory schools. The number of learners in the country's 171 compulsory schools ranges from four students in one rural school to about 700 in the largest schools in Reykjavik. The percentage of compulsory school students in need of special education is around 16.5% of the total enrolment; of that figure, 1.5% are educated in segregated settings or special schools. In addition, 20–25% of students in compulsory schools receive some kind of additional support for some length of time (European Agency, 2017). This high percentage of students

needing special education and support indicates that we still need to do better in developing inclusive practices for meeting the needs of all students.

This chapter further discusses the two questions mentioned above. It begins with an overview of the development of the inclusive education policies, focusing on the compulsory school level. The ensuing section discusses reports on the policies and implementation. To conclude, reflections and thoughts about the challenges to the implementation are provided.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLICY OF INCLUSION**

Although the requirement that pupils should be educated in an inclusive school was first made explicit in the Act for Compulsory Schooling in 2008 (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008), the idea of inclusion has been implicit in Icelandic law since 1995. In the spirit of integration, the 1995 Act for Compulsory Schooling stated that schools should welcome all pupils living in their neighbourhoods, teaching them according to their needs as equals, but not specifically mandating that pupils should be segregated according to their needs. On the contrary, "integration" suggests that pupils with special needs were supposed to adjust to the school, not vice versa; they were even educated in the same building as other pupils, sharing the same space but lacking access to equal education opportunities (Jóhannesson, 2006; Marinósson, 2011).

### ***LOOKING BACK***

Progress towards inclusion in the Icelandic school system has been ongoing since 1995. The foundation was laid in 1974 when a new Compulsory School Act was passed, confirming some important developments that had been happening in the school system for the past decade (Jónasson, 1996). This act changed some fundamental assumptions of schooling by mandating equal access to education with regard to residence (urban vs. rural), gender, and disability. There ensued a transformation in the understanding of the role and obligations of schools, from emphasis on teaching subjects which the pupils were obliged to learn, to meeting pupils' needs and organising instruction according to their development and

understanding (Jónasson, 1996). This act also stated explicitly for the first time in Icelandic school history that the school was for all children, and that most children should be educated in the regular school, categorising special needs into five groups and stating that students within two of those groups should be educated in institutions (Jónasson, 2008a). The 1974 Compulsory School Act was later supplemented with the first regulation of special needs education in 1977, which further emphasised the categorisation of pupils and secured financial support for special schools and special classes (Jónasson, 1996; Jónasson, 2008a).

In 1990, in response to criticism of the categorisation of special needs, which endlessly called for different specialised placements, lawmakers established a new regulation for special needs education, also based on the 1974 act (Jónasson, 1996). This regulation explicitly affirmed the right of all children to access their neighbourhood schools (Reglugerð um sérkennslu 98/1990). Here the shift was towards assessing pupils' needs in the school environment, rejecting the medical model of categorising children according to their "handicap." The 1990 regulation based the funding for special needs education on a fixed estimate that 20% of the school population needed special education (Jónasson, 1996; Jónasson, 2008a; Oskarsdottir, 1993).

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

Iceland's 1995 Act for Compulsory Schooling (1995, no. 66) moved the control of and responsibility for schools, including special schools, from the state to the municipalities. This has led to a relatively high level of decentralisation of education administration and has provided schools a high level of autonomy. The

municipalities established an “equalising fund” to respond to concerns regarding how to finance the growing call for special needs education, to even out financial situations among different schools (Jónasson, 2008a). Contributions from this fund are based on the diagnosis of a medical specialist at specific qualified institutions, which means that the medical model was once again the basis for financing special needs education (Jónasson, 2008b; Marinósson & Magnúsdóttir, 2016). This model of financing inclusive education is still relevant today. However, current discussions based on the audit findings emphasise moving away from the diagnostic model of distributing funds to schools towards a model that will take into account different populations and social variables in schools’ intake areas, such as poverty, minority groups, and the location of the school (European Agency, 2017).

### ***THE CURRENT STATE***

The latest (2008) Compulsory School Act states that school practice should be in accordance with pupils’ needs and attainment, supporting their development, well-being, and education. Pupils’ educational needs are to be met in their neighbourhood schools without exclusion or regard to their physical or mental abilities (Lög um grunnskóla, 2008).

The 2008 act introduces several innovations: it uses the phrases support system and support service instead of special needs education; it builds education on pupil competences instead of subject areas; and it requires schools to make an active plan of screening pupils from first grade upwards to ensure that they are taught and supported according to their needs (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008). The wording still identifies the source of learning difficulties within the pupils themselves, rather than in how learning activities and the school environment are being organised. Nevertheless, it indicates that pupils should have the opportunity to attain educational goals in different ways.

The 2010 regulation on learners with special needs, following the 2008 act, fundamentally transforms special needs education, shifting the focus from special needs and remediating pupils’ failings to pupils’ strengths, abilities, and individual circumstances. It also addresses how the school responds to diversity, equal

opportunity, and participation in learning, going further in the direction of inclusion (Reglugerð um nemendur með sérþarfir 585/2010).

### ***THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM***

The national curriculum has a direct impact on inclusive education. It manages education by setting forth a mosaic of skills for learners to master and strategies for teachers to employ. In order to support inclusive education, it needs to be flexible and dynamic enough for teachers to provide all pupils with appropriately challenging work, thus implicitly rejecting competitive individualism.

In 2011, the Ministry of Education released a new national curriculum; the first part is for all school levels. The ideas behind the national curriculum are in line with inclusive education and can influence and sustain inclusive pedagogy and practice. The national curriculum supports flexibility in teaching and learning by stating that each compulsory school can decide whether specific subjects and subject areas will be taught separately or in an integrated manner. It is further emphasised that education should be as integrated as possible (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

The Ministry of Education developed six fundamental pillars within the national curriculum in order to “accentuate the principle of general education and encourage increased continuity in school activities as a whole” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 14). These are literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, health and welfare, and creativity. The fundamental pillars are grounded in an imperative to provide general education to all, serving to promote each individual’s abilities to meet life’s challenges (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Each pillar emphasises a different idea, described below.

*Literacy:* Ideas about literacy evolved from thinking of literacy as acquiring specific foundational skills, to centring first and foremost on creating meaning. This meaning creation depends both on individuals’ varied experiences and numerous situated factors. This expansion of literacy opens up possible ways to develop inclusive pedagogy in relation to literacy instruction that build upon pupils’ different strengths and backgrounds.

*Sustainability:* From a social perspective, sustainability concerns equality, respect for diversity, and multiculturalism; it must be employed through democratic methods, in the spirit of inclusion. Education for sustainability encompasses individual and collective responsibility for “democracy, human rights and justice, for equality and multiculturalism, for welfare and health, and for economic development and vision of the future” (p. 19).

*Democracy and human rights:* The prerequisites of democracy are collective responsibility, critical thinking, and agreement about the basic values of society. It relies on working with attitudes, values, and ethics. In schools, it is important that teaching and learning are based on students’ resources and develop their awareness of taking responsibility for their learning processes.

*Equality:* Equality in education centres on creating opportunities for every individual to develop on their own terms, nurture their talents, and lead a responsible life in a democratic society. It refers to the content of education, educational practices, and educational environment. Equality involves critical examination of the established ideas of a society and its institutions. Students at all school levels should be educated in equal rights to prepare them for equal participation in all aspects of life and society. This pillar emphasises education concerning culture, nationality, languages, religion, and values, with the emphasis on leveraging inclusive education to develop Iceland as a multicultural society.

*Health and welfare:* Health includes mental, physical, and social well-being. Schools are to create a healthy environment and positive atmosphere that nurtures welfare and well-being for children and youth. This includes understanding the influence that culture, mass media, and technology can have on individuals’ health and well-being. By creating opportunities for children and youth to enjoy their strengths and build a positive self-image, schools can enable students to make informed and responsible decisions concerning their health.

*Creativity:* The creative impulse originates in an innate curiosity and desire for innovation, and influences individual initiative. The joy of creation for children and youth is a springboard to discovering individual and collective talents and expanding one’s knowledge and skills. Creation and innovation are key elements for forming a vision for the future, and an awareness of one’s responsibility to

participate in developing a democratic society. Creativity as a fundamental pillar supports inclusive education, as it encourages reflection, personal becoming, and initiative in educational work.

When school activities are evaluated, the influence of the fundamental pillars and the way they underscore teaching, learning, and play should be made visible (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). In this emphasis on flexibility, there is inherent trust in teachers as professionals who are free to create inclusive learning spaces based on their professional knowledge of pedagogy and content.

## **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY**

Within legislation passed in recent decades, evidence of an underlying movement towards inclusive education can be recognised. A turn in educational policy and school practices is highlighted in the law from 1974 that mandated education for all children. The law moves away from grouping pupils by their abilities and towards mixed-ability groups, while also ensuring schooling for all children (Lög um grunnskóla, 1974). However, even as the philosophy around inclusive education has developed within policy documents and certain steps have been taken to follow it through, there is some doubt about whether the implementation is inclusive at all levels. For this reason, the Ministry of Education decided to examine and evaluate the inclusive education system in Iceland.

In 2014, the OECD conducted a Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource Use in Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b). From 2013 to 2015, a group from municipalities, the Icelandic Teacher Union, and the Ministry of Education together conducted an evaluation of the implementation of the inclusive education policy (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015). In 2014, the Educational Research Institute at the University of Iceland's School of Education also conducted a review of policies and academic research in relation to inclusive education (Ólafsdóttir, Jóelsdóttir, Sigurvinsdóttir, Bjarnason, Sigurðardóttir, & Harðardóttir, 2014). Finally, in 2015 the Ministry of Education brought in the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to do an external audit of the Icelandic system for inclusive education (European Agency, 2017). Findings from



these three reports generally agree with the ideology of inclusive education as a humanitarian approach to education; however, the reports also found that there were multiple definitions of inclusive education in the field. As inclusive education is a social construct that relies on relationships between people and systems in society, these different understandings are problematic. For inclusive education to become a sustainable phenomenon integrated within the school system, those who have the power to shape schools must come together in a learning community to discuss and develop inclusive practices with the aim of meeting the needs of all learners. Without a deep and ideological conversation about inclusive practice and pedagogy in schools, the risk remains for schooling to continue to be inequitable, humiliating, and even painful for some learners (Brantlinger, 2005; Óskarsdóttir, 2017). As inclusive education is a situated process, constant negotiation of the definition is essential for successful implementation.

Findings from the 2014 OECD review show that school administrators and staff feel that the policy on inclusive schools is not sufficiently funded (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). This was explored further in the European Agency Audit, which found that, although the financing of the education system is well above the OECD average, the mechanisms for funding are not equitable or efficient at any level in the school system (European Agency, 2017). Further, the responsibility for implementing inclusive education in many schools rests on the shoulders of those in charge of special education (Óskarsdóttir, 2017), rather than being a shared responsibility. This development has resulted from the policy of funding for special needs, which serves as a classification system that labels learners based on categories of need. Consequently, this funding policy can lead to strategic behaviour in which schools try to get parents to agree to diagnoses and statements of special needs in order to push pupils up the funding ladder (Óskarsdóttir, 2017; Sodha & Margo, 2010). The results from the audit show that stakeholders across all system levels call for a shift away from allocating funds based on the identification of individual pupils' special education needs, to more flexible funding that would allow schools to support all learners' needs in more responsive ways (European Agency, 2017).

Other key challenges in implementing the inclusive education school policy are the lack of cross-sectoral cooperation between system stakeholders, such as the health, welfare, and education systems, and the challenge of leadership for

inclusive education in schools. At the ministerial level, there is insufficient joint cooperation around matters that impact on equitable education provision for all learners because of a compartmentalisation of different sectors, which has led to a “silo approach” within these systems (European Agency, 2017). Establishing cross-sectoral functionality is important for shared ways of working and thinking with the interest of students in mind. The problem of leadership for inclusive education at the school level is that it is often left to those in charge of special education (such as special education needs coordinators) instead of the principal or school administration (Óskarsdóttir, 2017). By giving the responsibility to the special education needs teachers, the focus of inclusive practices becomes a narrow rather than a whole-school approach. This goes against the core premise of inclusive education ideology, which calls for a broad distributed leadership focused on inclusion, with the principal as the “leader of leaders” in building a quality school for all learners.

The school system in Iceland is decentralised in that municipalities and schools are responsible for implementing the national curriculum. Thus, responses to the policy of inclusive education can differ between municipalities, schools, and even classrooms. Research findings indicate that analysing policy documents does not reveal much information on how municipalities are working towards inclusive education. Most build their financing of inclusive education mainly on the medical diagnoses of pupils, rather than their pedagogical needs. Overall, the acts, regulations, and policies of municipalities create a framework in accordance with the ideology of inclusive education, but still there are elements, other than the financing, that could work against it (European Agency, 2017; Gíslason & Sigurðardóttir, 2016; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2010; Marinósson & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2014).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Inclusive practice is fundamentally grounded in the ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights, and full participation of all (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2009; Jónsson, 2001). These ideologies are connected and dependent on each other in various ways, as a socially just education system is premised on the idea that quality education is a democratic right of all (Reay,

2012). The fundamental pillars of the Icelandic national curriculum – literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality (equity), health and welfare, and creativity – provide a means to explore the ways in which these intertwined threads can drive educational practices towards supporting inclusive education. According to the external audit of the inclusive education system in Iceland (European Agency, 2017), legislation and policy do support the goals and aims of inclusive education. The audit also shows that there are some challenges in the implementation. The findings from the audit, as well as other reports, indicate that stakeholders have diverse ways of understanding the policy, and thus how it can be implemented. It is clear that stakeholders need to explore examples of inclusive practices to fully understand the concept and the process. In addition, to achieve inclusive education means establishing interaction and collaboration across groups, focusing on collaboration between teachers, with the support system, with parents, and in classrooms with pupils.

Another barrier to the development of inclusive education is funding, which is based on a classification system that leads to labelling pupils based on categories of need. Stakeholders across all system levels call for a shift to more flexible funding that would allow schools to support all learners' needs in more responsive ways (European Agency, 2017). However, the reports on policy documents regarding the implementation of inclusive education also show that the challenges do not stem from a lack of available resources, but rather from how existing resources are distributed within the educational system and how the resource allocation system places the focus on special needs.

Transforming practice depends on school stakeholders being willing to reflect on and be critical of policies, processes, and practices that can serve to marginalise pupils, parents, and staff. School stakeholders, including parents, need dedicated space and time to negotiate a common understanding and vision of the inclusive school. This, in turn, establishes the importance of shared or distributed leadership and a dialogue between school stakeholders. In this process, teachers can utilise their professional knowledge to find ways to develop inclusive practices and pedagogies that accommodate different learners (Óskarsdóttir, 2017).

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