

Iceland: Challenges in Educational Governance in Iceland: The Establishment and Role of the National Agency in Education

Accepted manuscript

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Published 2020 in Springer series Educational Governance Research in *Educational authorities and the schools: Organisation and impact in 20 states*, edited by Helene Ärlestig and Olof Johansson.

Abstract

The chapter sets out to explore development in educational policies in Iceland, especially changes in governance during the last 20 years and the establishment and role of the national agency, i.e. the Directorate of Education. Furthermore, it looks into who the main players in the field are and sheds light on the major challenges that affect educational governance in Iceland. The governance of education is organized on state and municipal level. The state is politically and legally responsible for the school system, but municipalities operate preschools and compulsory schools. The recently established Directorate of Education is the only national agency in the country. Although rooted in Nordic model of education, neo-liberal emphasises in policies, together with instability in educational governance, have ruffled the educational system. Part of this is also public debate concerning the establishment, actions and purpose of the new Directorate that needs to gain trust from the school level. Its main challenges are to unite the educational field around a robust education policy. For that purpose, the state level must take more responsibility to support the work of the local and school level.

Introduction

Iceland is a 103,000 km² island in the North Atlantic Ocean. One of the Nordic countries, it has a population of a little less than 350,000 which makes it the most sparsely populated country in Europe. Iceland's educational policy has traditionally followed the Nordic model (Blossom et al. 2014), drawing from, among other theories, John Dewey's (1859–1952) emphasis on democracy and development of the individual. In his view, the purpose of educational policy was to provide guidance and structure for developing students, based on their interests and strengths in order for them to become functional individuals in a democratic society (Einarsdóttir and Jónsson 2010). According to Jónsson (2014), the highlight of this educational policy appeared in Iceland's education act of 1974 that mandated a systematic restructuring of teaching methods, educational materials and subjects, led by the Ministry of Education and its national agencies at that time. Jónsson claims this robust emphasis faded away with the stipulations of the 1995 education laws, as well as with the amendments of the law in 1999 and 2007, replacing educational policy with instructional policy.

The 1995 laws also marked the beginning of a major emphasis on decentralization and empowerment at the local level and the transnational intrusion of neoliberalism, school-based management and New Public Management in education (Hansen 2004); 2013). This course has been dominating Icelandic politics for over 20 years, though with a setback during and shortly after the economic crisis of 2008 (Sigurðardóttir et al. 2014).

Changes in policies usually mean changes in national governance, and sometimes in the role of national agencies. It is therefore interesting to look into this development over the last 20 years and investigate who the main players in the field are and what the main challenges are facing educational governance in Iceland at present.

In light of the above, the purpose of this chapter is threefold. The first objective is to give an overview of educational governance in Iceland. The second is to explain the establishment of the agencies in the educational system, delimited to the Directorate of Education (i. Menntamálastofnun), the only operative national educational agency at present, as well as to describe the influence of other factors that affected this process. The third goal is to gain an understanding of the main challenges facing educational governance and the ongoing political shifts that have influenced the structure and policies of education.

In an attempt to fulfil the purposes stated above, this chapter draws from a variety of sources of documents, such as national legislation, reports at the transnational, state and local levels, debates and discourses in social and traditional media, and scholarly research on the organization of school governance in Iceland.

4.2. Overview of the Educational Structure and School Governance in Iceland

The governance of education in Iceland is on two levels (Table 4.1): the state (parliament and government) and the local authorities (municipalities). The state is politically and legally responsible for the school system in Iceland. The implementation of legislation concerning education is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The structure of the school system is set out in educational acts and regulations (Compulsory School Act no. 91/2008; Preschool Act no. 90/2008; Upper Secondary Education Act no. 92/2008 with changes no. 91/2015). The ministry lays down policy for upper secondary schools, compulsory schools and preschools in the National Curriculum Guidelines and other steering documents. It is responsible for quality assurance at all school levels and for management and professional development at the upper secondary as well as state-governed higher education institutions. However, the municipalities have responsibility for the preschools and compulsory schools. The functions of educational governance (national) agencies are delineated in legislation and other steering documents (Directorate of Education Act no. 91/2015; Reglugerð nr. 530/2016).

Table 4.1

Levels and responsibility of the Icelandic school system

School (level)	Student ages (years at school)	Number of schools 2016	Responsibility of operation
Preschool (1)	1–6 (5)	254	Municipalities (74)
Compulsory school (2)	6–16 (10)	170	
Upper secondary school (3)	16–19 (3)a	30	State
University (4)	19*	7	

*Prior to the changes under the Upper Secondary Education Act (I. 91/2015), upper secondary schools were organized as 4-year schools, with students graduating at the age of 20

Iceland has been considered one of the most decentralized educational systems within the OECD countries, with 3% of decisions for compulsory schools taken by the state, 36% at the municipality level, and 62% at the schools themselves (OECD 2012). Similar findings might be expected for the preschools but are different for upper secondary schools that are governed and managed solely by the state.

In any case, schools at all levels have considerable autonomy concerning resource allocation, curriculum development and assessment. All schools are supervised by politically appointed school boards. Municipality councils must elect a school board that supervises and guides preschools and compulsory schools. Boards for upper secondary schools are appointed at the ministerial level. Legislation emphasizes the responsibility of principals to be leaders and managers with freedom to organize and run their schools in compliance with their staff. They see to it that parents and students form their associations and establish school/parent councils that serves as a consulting forum between the principal and the school community on the school's affairs (Compulsory School Act no. 91/2008; Preschool Act no. 90/2008; Upper Secondary Education Act no. 92/2008).

The fundamental policy emphasis in educational laws is the right of all students to receive equal education opportunities in an inclusive and comprehensive system. There is formally a free choice of school within each municipality. For upper secondary schools, the policy is a free choice of schools. It is, however, restrained with the obligation to provide space for students that live near the given school.

Iceland has a tradition of public schools and publicly funded education. However, since the millennium, the number of students attending private schools has raised from 1% to almost 3%. This increase is partly due to a rising segment of nonprofit school chains following the educational acts of 2008 that facilitated privatization (Dovemark et al. 2018).

Fiscal allocations to upper secondary schools are decided by the parliament's yearly budget. The municipalities finance preschools and compulsory schools on the basis of their income tax and capital

tax revenue, as well as 8–9% from the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund (Lög um tekjustofna sveitarfélaga nr. 4/1995). These funds major purpose is to equalize the means of municipalities that vary in size and capacity to fulfil their responsibilities. Preschools are also partly financed by service fees paid by parents. Private schools receive funding almost equal to the public ones (up to 82%) but can also charge tuition fees from the parents.

Compared to other OECD countries, Iceland spends a high proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) on preschool and compulsory education while the amount spent on upper secondary education (and universities) is below the OECD average (OECD 2016). The financial crisis that hit the country in 2008 somewhat diminished expenditure for education at all levels.

4.3. The Directorate of Education

The functions of national agencies are determined by legislation and other steering documents. The Directorate of Education² is the only national agency regulating and monitoring education, having been established in 2015 by the merger of two agencies, the Education Testing Institute (established 2000) and the National Centre for Educational Materials (established 1979). The directorate can be seen as an extension of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture but is, however, an independent institution with a director appointed by the minister. The directorate is organized into three departments and one project management office that works with the departments to develop standardized tests and work procedures (Menntamálastofnun 2016). The departments are as follows:

The Assessment and Evaluation Department conducts, analyses and presents national examinations, and handles international studies such as PISA. Those were formerly the tasks of the Education Testing Institute. It monitors external evaluations at all school levels, analyses and disseminates information on education, participates in development and implementation of legislation, and guides educational authorities regarding policy. Formerly those tasks were conducted at the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Furthermore, the department bears the responsibility of implementing the national covenant on literacy that followed the release of the White Paper in 2014. This is the most extensive new task the minister gave the directorate.

The Dissemination Department has the mandate to develop, publish and distribute educational materials free of charge for compulsory schools and to provide professional support to teachers concerning their use. This was previously the task of the National Centre for Educational Materials.

The Service Department conducts service and administrative tasks such as the validation of study programmes, the admission process for entering upper secondary schools, the accreditation of private schools, the management of adult education programmes and the licence framework concerning teacher certification. Those tasks were formerly at the ministry.

The minister, with little discussion in parliament or the educational field, launched the establishment of the directorate. In the process of passing the legislation and later, several concerns have been raised. Firstly, there is concern regarding the directorate's vulnerability to interference at the hands of the ministry and individual ministers due to the absence of a management board. Secondly, concern on a lack of holistic policy towards its main role and its role at different school levels. Part of the uncertainty of its approach is that the legislation stresses its function as an administrative institution that emphasises assessments, accountability and efficiency in education. By doing so, it neglects its role in

leading progressive improvement work in education and providing mentoring and support. Connected to this is also the concern of a lack of clarity of the directorate's responsibility to follow up on study materials by supporting teachers in learning to apply them to their teaching (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016; Sigþórsson 2017; Þingskjal nr. 1268/2014–2015; 1161/2014–2015).

Furthermore, since the directorate holds both responsibility for producing teaching materials and making the assessments, the concern was that it might lead to narrow assessments, overemphasis on mainstream subjects that are measured both at international and national level (e.g. math and Icelandic), and less emphasis on subjects such as art and craftwork (Þingskjal nr. 1161/ 2014–2015). Research has confirmed that this trend is seen in policy documents at both the state and the municipal level (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016; Sigþórsson 2017, 2020) and thus must be considered a valid threat.

The first years of the directorate have been immersed in conflict, highlighted by the media, and its existence, purpose, structure and actions have received criticism from teachers, teachers' unions, universities, university teachers and parents (see e.g. Kristjánsson 2017;, May 9; Sigurjónsson 2015, August 23). One of the directorate's first actions (supported by a former minister) was to publicly talk down literacy improvement efforts – the Beginning Literacy (BL) development project – that had already been implemented in half of the compulsory schools under the supervision of the Centre for School Development at the University of Akureyri. This action caused much debate in both traditional and social media, polarising the minister and the directorate, on the one hand, and the Teacher's Union, the teaching field and the university, on the other (Sigurjónsson 2015, August 23; Skólastjórafélag Íslands 2015, August 27). The latter groups felt attacked and that their professionalism was being questioned.

Recently, flaws in the execution of the national exams and PISA, which are under the jurisdiction of the directorate, have ruffled feathers again. This has evoked debates on the role of the directorate and their professionalism as well as on the purpose and existence of the national and international exams.

In this media debate, the municipalities and superintendents have kept their remarks low-key. However, after the flaws in execution of the national exams, both those parties raised their voices. The professional association of superintendents raised questions about the purpose of the exams and the minister and the Directorate of Education was urged to continue revision of the national exams using the work procedures of professional learning communities (Hreinsdóttir and Hjartarson 2018).

4.4. Other Actors and Associations Governing Education

Few actors or associations, other than the Directorate of Education, few actors belong to the governance system or are in a position to have any influence within it. Table 4.2 provides an overview of those main agents and a short description of their importance and place in the system.

Table 4.2 Main actors/associations in the governance system of education in Iceland and their function

Name	Function
Association at the local level	
The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities a	An umbrella organization for all municipalities, established in 1945. Has a legal status in educational legislation with the stipulation of actively working on behalf of the municipalities with the government in forming educational regulations. Provides information and materials that guide and support the municipalities in fulfilling educational tasks.
Councils established by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture	
The Associate Council on Professional Development of Teachers and Principals b	Established in 2016 by the minister. Works as a forum for the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the Association of Local Authorities, the Icelandic Teachers' Union, the Upper Secondary Principals' Association of Icelandic and the three universities that educate teachers (these parties are increasingly working together on various educational matters). It is the second council on the issue and originates from cooperation between the parties on teacher education and professional development in 2009. The council's mandate is to continue with the former councils suggestions for actions, give advice to educational governance and provide information on professional development, partly through its website d
Agencies for labour market-related issues and/or professional enhancement in educational sectors	
The Icelandic Teachers' Union e	An umbrella trade union for teachers, school leaders and student counsellors at school levels 1–3, established in 1999. Safeguards the rights and interests of its members, strengthens professional and trade union awareness and works towards increased professionalism of its members. Carries considerable weight at all educational levels and rests on a strong tradition of teachers' unions with the first one having been established in 1889. Principals in upper secondary schools belong to a separate union as do superintendents and managers at school central offices.
Foundation – Association of Superintendents and Managers at School Offices [Grunnur, félag	This is not a trade union like the Teachers' Union, but promotes cooperation and knowledge sharing among its members, strengthening the organizations they work for and working towards improvement in schools. Has been

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Name	Function
fræðslustjóra og stjórnenda á skólaskrifstofum]	strengthening and gaining a louder voice recently and taken steps to interact more closely with the Directorate of Education, the ministry, the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, the universities etc. to promote work procedures in the spirit of professional learning communities.
Three universities that offer teacher education and provide educational expertise and service	
The University of Iceland f, School of Education	Has offered Offers teacher education at all school levels since 2009 (previously offered at the Teacher University of Iceland, 1907–2008). Offers various professional development programmes for teachers and takes part in professional developmental activities in schools through research and development projects.
The University of Akureyri g, Faculty of Education	Offers teacher education since 1993. Operates at all school levels. Specialises in distant learning. The university runs a unit called the Centre for School Development h that offers services to all school levels on the professional development of teachers and school improvement, e.g. in regard to literacy, maths, information and communications technology, curriculum implementation, leadership and school evaluation.
The Iceland Academy of the Arts i, Art Education	Has offered Offers teacher education since 2001, at school levels 2–3.
A nongovernmental parental agency	
The National Parents Association j	A nongovernment parental organization established in 1992 to strive for better upbringing of children. Offers advice and support to parents and cooperates with different governing and nongoverning bodies at the national and local levels.
a http://www.samband.is/english/	
b http://starfsthroukennara.is/	
c http://skmi.is/	
d http://starfsthroukennara.is/hlutverk-samstarfsrads/	

Table 4.2 Main actors/associations in the governance system of education in Iceland and their function

Name	Function
e	https://www.ki.is/icelandic-teachers-union
f	http://english.hi.is/school_of_education/school_of_education
g	http://english.unak.is/humanities-and-social-sciences/faculty-of-education
h	http://english.unak.is/research/research-institutes/school-development-centre
i	http://www.lhi.is/en/arts-education
j	http://www.heimiliogskoli.is/um-okkur/about-us/

4.5. Challenges in Educational Governance in Iceland

The following subchapters elaborate on some of the main challenges in the educational system. These regard political instability, quality assurance, professional and school development, implementation of inclusive education, literacy enactments, teacher shortages and high dropout rates in upper secondary schools.

4.5.1. Political Instability and Disagreements

One of the greatest challenges facing education in Iceland today is the instability in politics and the disagreement regarding education policy that pivots especially around pedagogical views of education versus neoliberal views. Since the economic crisis in 2008, the political situation has been unstable, with frequent elections and changes in government and even more frequent changes in ministers of Education, Science and Culture.

A left-wing government set out the current national curriculum guides for preschools, compulsory schooling and secondary schools in 2011 shortly after the financial crisis in 2008. It marked a considerable change in policy, more of a return to the themes of the 1974 education act, and stressed the notion of the school as a professional learning community (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture n.d.). The implementation of the new curriculum has taken time and the ministry has been criticised for not supporting these changes firmly enough.

In 2013, a right-wing government took over. Although the national curriculum was retained, the minister released a White Paper on Education Reform (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014) and established the Directorate of Education, partly to follow up on his policy (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016). The White Paper stresses two issues: falling achievement levels of 15-year-olds on PISA, especially in literacy, and a dropout rate from upper secondary schools that was one of the highest in the OECD countries (OECD 2016). This policy paper celebrated and augmented narrow neoconservative views, favouring a few subjects, standardized tests and a market-driven education system built on comparative information, such as PISA findings, provided by the OECD (Dovemark et al. 2018; Dýrfjörð

and Magnúsdóttir 2016; Sigþórsson 2017). The implementation of the new curriculum has taken time and the ministry has been criticised for not supporting these changes firmly enough.

This was the first time a minister in Iceland had published a White Paper. It demonstrated a new way of developing educational policy. It also signalled that the minister was now going to take a more active role in education reforms and what the focus of education should be. The current government, consisting of both left-wing and right-wing parties, took over in 2017, making the political line a bit unclear.

Recent actions of the Directorate of Education have provoked public discussions that might mean changes in policy – but might also reinforce the same neoliberal path in education that Iceland has been on more or less since 1995. In the autumn 2018, the current Minister of Education, Science and Culture started work on education policy until 2030. Much depends on the spin she puts on the subject, and if her actions will help to unite the different actors or maintain disunity.

4.5.2. Balancing Quality Assurance

The educational laws set out in 1995 put an increased emphasis on quality assurance. The ramifications have not been straight forward. The laws stipulated that internal school evaluations were to be introduced and put the onus on every school to develop work procedures accordingly. The ministry took responsibility for external quality inspections. Yet, the intended inspections were never fully implemented, and the ministry kept a low profile regarding quality assurance during the first decade following the transfer of responsibility for the compulsory schools to the municipalities in 1995 (Ólafsdóttir 2016).

By the provisions of the educational acts in 2008, responsibility for external and internal school evaluations in preschools and compulsory schools was put on the municipalities, with the ministry to retain oversight of the procedures. For upper secondary education, the responsibility was kept at the state level. This provision concerning preschools and compulsory schools did not pass by without a debate, and there were concerns at the municipality level among superintendents and at the university level that not all municipalities would have the capacity to fulfil this task (Ólafsdóttir 2016).

Over the last few years, more weight has been placed at the ministerial level on external quality programmes that focus on key activities within the schools, such as teaching practices (Ólafsdóttir 2016). These can partly be explained by the ministry's reports indicating that schools and municipalities were not implementing fully the internal school evaluations or required improvements issued in educational acts 1995, 1999 and 2008 (Ólafsdóttir 2016). It had, as an example, taken a long time to implement internal school evaluations (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2010), professional support for teachers was claimed to be vague as well as specialist services, (Elíasdóttir et al. 2013), and PISA tests showed a decline in student performance (Halldórsson et al. 2013). At the same time, it was professed that too much emphasis was placed on the management processes of the transfer to the municipalities rather than the organisational structures (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs 2000) – an argument that had also emerged in other countries that had emphasised decentralization (OECD 1997; Schick 2002; see also Ólafsdóttir 2016). In the eagerness to decentralize and empower the municipalities, the state had forgotten, or had overestimated its capacity, to keep necessary organizational structures in the governance system to ensure that the protocols of the laws were fulfilled (Ólafsdóttir 2016).

However, results from school evaluations hold no financial or professional consequences for schools or teachers. The reports of the evaluations are published on the ministry website but are usually not highlighted in the media. This could, however, change rather quickly, based on the political interests of the current government at any given time.

4.5.3. School Service at the Municipal Level and Provision of Professional Support

With the transfer of the compulsory schools to the municipalities in 1996, the municipalities acquired responsibility for professional support and specialist services for students, in preschools and compulsory schools. Subsequently, the state closed down their support service offices. The municipalities either started their own school service (until recently called specialist service), made an agreement regarding the service with other municipalities, or left it open for schools to outsource services from relevant specialists or companies (Hreinsdóttir 2013).

Approximately 218,000 people out of the 336,000 living in Iceland are situated in the Reykjavík metropolitan area, while the smallest municipalities in the country have fewer than 50 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland 2018). As Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir (2016) point out, the size of the capital puts it in a leading position in discussion and policy setting in education at the preschool and compulsory level in the country. This follows a danger of neglecting to consider the different situations of the other municipalities.

At the time of the transfer, there was already a concern that it would lead to increased differences in the service since the capacities of the municipalities varied considerably. Also, too little money was believed to have accompanied the transfer (Hansen and Jóhannsson 2010). Nevertheless, the transfer is considered a positive step in educational governance in Iceland, providing the municipalities and the local community with greater impact on the schoolwork and bringing positive changes to it (Hansen et al. 2002; Hansen and Lárusdóttir 2014).

In a survey in 2002, Hansen et al. found that a significant majority of compulsory school principals believed that the school's ability to shape their internal work and adjust the support to the needs of children had increased, and municipal council support had grown. The view of municipal councils, school boards, parents and communities towards the schools was believed to have bettered, as had the atmosphere in the schools, student behaviour and teaching methods. Additionally, the principals felt they had more means of influencing the schoolwork at both municipal and school level, in particular in financial matters. This position did not come about without sacrifices, however. The principals reported that they had less time to provide educational leadership than before due to new financial and organizational responsibilities (Hansen et al. 2002). Later research has confirmed that the transfer from state to municipal control had left principals with less time to provide instructional and educational leadership and opened a discussion on how to change this route (Hansen and Lárusdóttir 2014).

Despite some positive effects, the school services have been criticised for rather being directed at individual students with various types of difficulties and diagnoses than directed at school-based consultation and strengthening of the infrastructure and improvement capacity of the schools (Sigbórsson 2013).

The assignment of responsibilities amongst the state, the municipalities and the schools themselves is somewhat unclear (Ólafsdóttir 2016; Sigurðardóttir, Sigurðardóttir et al. 2018in press). Lack of structure around professional development of teachers and principals seem to be a general weakness in the educational system. The schools (principals, teachers etc.) feel pressure from the state and the municipalities for stronger leadership and accountability but tend to be overwhelmed and feel they are left alone without sufficient resources and guidance (Sigurðardóttir 2018).

4.5.4. Implementing Inclusive Education Policy Curriculum at Local and School Level

The policy and curriculum implementation of inclusive education is being extensively discussed at the state and local level. Although it has a relatively long tradition (since the stipulation of the laws in 1974) in Iceland, it is at present one of the main challenges in the education system (Hansen, 2013). This policy insists that all children have equal opportunities to education, regardless of their origin or physical and mental ability, within their own home school. A recent report made for the ministry by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2017) detected several weaknesses in the implementation of this policy. According to the report, while necessary legislation is in place, a common understanding of what inclusive education means is lacking. In addition, teachers receive insufficient professional support regarding implementation and the budget for support is inadequate. Furthermore, the budget provision is partly believed to work against inclusion by promoting the diagnosis of students as having a disability and promoting organisational needs rather than learners' educational needs.

One of the issues at stake is the uncertainty of who should bear the responsibility of the implementation and the support to teachers to make inclusive education an integral function in classrooms. Is it the state, the municipalities, the principals or the teachers themselves? The findings of this report by EASNIE have received great attention at the state and local level. A ministerial-appointed committee that includes all the main stakeholders' voices is working towards solutions.

As mentioned earlier, Reykjavík has a vigorous school office and a dominating status because of its size and capacities in relation to other municipalities. In spring 2017, the city began to form a new educational policy. A team of national and international specialists guided the crafting of the policy. From the start, the focus was on working widely with the schools and the communities. This policy has now been released. Interestingly, although there was not a stress on behalf of the city to use the national curriculum as a basis for this policy development in the process. Nevertheless, the emphases in the policy corresponds closely to the six pillars in the national curriculum stipulated in 2011 (see Reykjavíkurborg 2018a, 2018b).

4.5.5. The National Initiative on Literacy and Literacy Enactment

Following a transnational trend (Gunter et al. 2016), PISA results and other OECD measures and research have gained increased attention at the state level (Dovemark et al. 2018). One of the main challenges has been to deal with falling literacy scores on PISA, and this has been mirrored in actions at the state level. The White Paper in 2014 was followed by the establishment of a literacy enactment program that included a national covenant on literacy between the minister, every municipality and the National Parents' Association and the placement of the program at the new Directorate of Education. In spite of

general acknowledgement of the need to tackle declining literacy in Iceland, this initiative – or rather the ideology behind it and the approach itself – has been strongly criticised.

Sigþórsson (2017, 2020) analysed the policy behind the literacy initiative presented in the White Paper and the implementation of the enactment program that followed. He claims that its primary aim was to improve PISA results, being driven by a narrow focus on testing reading literacy, measured in standardised national and international tests and screenings and summoning statistical data to use for comparison between students, schools and municipalities. This approach is clearly at odds with the definition of literacy and the key competences and pillars of education presented in the national curriculum and goes against the research and the view of literacy as a pedagogical and social culturally mediated activity (Sigþórsson 2017). Furthermore, it is at odds with the BL used by many schools, which is in consonant with the emphasis in the national curriculum on the conception of literacy and inclusion and gives space to teachers to develop their professional capacity and agency (Sigþórsson 2020). It seems that the public actions that the minister and the Directorate took against the BL reflects apathy in relation to the inclusive features of literacy and the development of classroom practice (Sigþórsson 2020).

4.5.6. Lengthening of Teacher Education and Teacher Shortage

Following the laws set in 2008, teacher education programmes were lengthened in 2011. The stipulation was that all teachers at all school levels were required to have a master's degree to qualify for certification. These steps were intended to increase professionalism within the profession in the hope of improving education for all children. Whether that is indeed the case still remains to be seen.

However, many have viewed the lengthening of the teacher education process as contributing to the decrease in students entering teacher education (Sigurðardóttir, Jóhannesson et al. 2018). Also, on average, Iceland's teachers are among the oldest in the OECD countries (OECD 2016). If this development continues, it is worrying, for the near future (see e.g. Eyjólfsson 2017).

The teacher shortage can be explained to a large extent as the result of an image problem coupled with the need for an increase in teachers' salaries. This situation has led to numerous teachers' strikes during recent decades. This shortfall has received increased attention lately in the media by stakeholders as at the state, municipalities, the Teachers' Union, and the universities (Baldursdóttir 2018, June 27; Arnarsdóttir 2018, February 2; Eyjólfsson 2017; Haukur 2018, March 26). The current minister appointed a group of specialists, comprising of has now come forward and announced that the ministry, in collaboration with the main stakeholders – the Association of Local Authorities, the Teachers' Union, the universities etc., – will release an action plan in the autumn of 2018 to form proposals for dealing deal with the situation (Baldursdóttir 2018, June 27). Based on those the minister has launced an action plan in 2019. Among the actions taken is items under discussion is to make it possible for teacher students to take the fifth year of teacher education a candidate year with part-time salaries, as well as to offer a scholarship for finishing their Master thesis change a part of student loans to a scholarship (Minister of Education, Sience and Culture 2019Baldursdóttir 2018, June 27).

4.5.7. Dealing with High Dropout Rates

One of the main challenges of the educational system is the high dropout rate in upper secondary schools. In addition, Icelandic students are among the oldest within the OECD countries to graduate

from upper secondary schools. A reaction to this problem took place during 2015–2016 when the upper secondary school period was shortened from 4 year program to a 3 year program. This reduction mandated a major reorganization of the upper secondary school curriculum. This alteration has received criticism, especially from upper secondary school teachers who claim that the necessary curriculum changes were done without sufficient support from the ministry. Another ongoing discussion concerns whether the governance of upper secondary schools should be moved from the state to the local authorities.

4.6. Discussion and Future Trends in Educational Governance

This paper set out to explore development in educational policies in Iceland, especially changes in governance during the last 20 years and the establishment and role of the national agency. Furthermore, it looked into who the main players in the field are and shed light on the major challenges that could affect educational governance in Iceland.

4.6.1. Policy Enactments at Local- and School Level – Increased Responsibility at State Level

One of the most serious challenges being faced in the development of educational policy in Iceland is the degree to which the education system is immensely dependent on politics at any given time (see Sigurðardóttir, Sigurðardóttir et al. 2018 in press). At fault, are the changes in dominance of the political ideology that swings back and forth between neoliberal views and social democratic views – although the neoliberal one has had more weight the last decades (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016). This pendulum effect contributes to instability in policy imperatives and a lack of sufficient support for education on the state level (see also Jónsson 2014). This effect also trickles down to the local governance level (Sigþórsson 2013).

There is not much disagreement among stakeholders that the state level should assume more responsibilities in education, but how the rebalancing should be done is however more the issue. In some ways, the poles in the media pivot around the ministry level and its agency, on the one hand, and the teachers, (some) academics, the union and parents, on the other hand, where the latter group is straining to give alternatives to the actions and policies of the former. Where exactly the local governance level – the municipalities – fit in this picture is somewhat blurred, leaving the impression they are the piggy in the middle of the two other major stakeholder groups. In any case, a gap between the state and local level actors, coupled with lack of support concerning various policy imperatives, is likely to attenuate the enactment of state policy at the local level (see Maguire et al. 2013).

It is interesting that the biggest municipality did not transparently use the national curriculum as a starting point in forming their new education policy and indicates how Reykjavík, with its power of size and force, has become a sort of a state within the state. It shows also how the discourse and emphasis at the transnational and national levels, presenting neoliberal views and New Public Management, has undermined the value of the curriculum at the local policy level. This shift has occurred even when the politicians in charge belong to the left-wing parties rather than the right, as is the case in Reykjavík (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir). This shows how the neoliberal discourse has managed to overtake truth and social reality and change how people think about their affairs (Ball 2017).

In any case, given the sway that Reykjavík exercises in educational matters in Iceland, the new policy might become a valuable component in the ongoing debate over Icelandic educational policy, giving more weight to a holistic approach to education instead of the narrow liberalistic view that has been controlling the balance for the last two decades. Whether this will be the case might appear in the new national education policy until 2030, when published.

It is obvious that policy at the state level has had considerable influences on the local- and school level. It is though as obvious that not all policies have been enacted at the local level as forcefully as they were intended nor in the expected way. This can be seen regarding internal school evaluations, curriculum implementations and, more accurately regarding principals' leadership and teachers' capacity to deal with curriculum implementation such as inclusive education. Furthermore, some of the policy enactment, such as moving accountability to municipalities, principals' and teachers, has evoked new and unexpected challenges. This is e.g. regarding how to support principals in providing more education leadership or to support teachers in dealing with ever-increasing demands that bring them to burnouts. Whether state policies have effect on student prerequisites, learning and results is though much in the dark. PISA results the last almost 20 years, supported with standardized screening, show declining ability among students e.g. in reading but few other measures are available. In any case, it seems true that the state governance has failed to follow their policies with sufficient support to the local- and school level and considerable policy change is needed at both the ministry and the directorate if it is going to change that route. The same seems to be the case for the support system at the municipal level. The longterm effects of the economic crises 2008 should not be underestimated, which indirectly might affect teachers and students in school through increased stress and shortage of teachers.

4.6.2. Establishing Trust Towards the State Level and to the Directorate

Resentment towards the actions of the ministry, the former minister and the Directorate of Education have led to a loss of trust, increasing the gap between the ministry and the directorate, and the teaching field. This trust needs to be restored. This is not the least important for the new directorate that has had such a haltering start. Unfortunately, the directorate seems to be more of an administration institution than a progressive education-oriented organization aiming at providing consultancy and support to the educational field (see Sigþórsson 2020). To deal with this awkward position and gain trust, the directorate needs to work better with the different actors in the field and listen to their voices. It needs to show by its actions that it is capable of being a leading institution in education, not only by practicing assessment, quality assurance and administrative protocols policy. It needs to show it understands the whole process of education and thus practice more educational leadership by providing students with the best education by taking actions that support supporting teachers in becoming better professionals. Time will show how much trust from the field the directorate will gain in the future, depending on how well it manages this and it's many, often conflicting tasks.

No doubt, an awakening at the governmental level towards taking more responsibility for education and following up on policy with systematic actions is in the works. On the other hand, it is worrying that on the way to taking more responsibility for education the ministry and the state seem to be increasing its interference in education instead of devoting its energies to enhancing competencies and skills within the municipalities and their schools.

The emphasis the ministry and the directorate put on international surveys such as PISA and TALIS and the amount of influence wielded by those assessment systems is worrying. They have the power to deflect the actions of the ministry and the directorate toward quick fixes instead of deeply thought-through actions. As can be seen, this situation is increasingly met with resistance from academics, the teaching profession, and recently, the superintendents. This resistance is likely to continue, though whether it will be enough to turn the policy around cannot yet be predicted.

Despite this spirited public debate, some signs have appeared that the state, together with other interest groups, is showing increased will to cooperate in educational governance to provide a more common ground for actions. This adjustment is likely to continue and is also fundamental for further educational prosperity in Iceland.

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