

Empowering female ethnic minority students in Iceland



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Introduction

Immigration to Iceland has been increasing steadily since 1995 and has reached 7.4 % in 2015 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2016). This fact has brought with it new inspiration and challenges for the educational researcher that seeks to understand the educational needs of diverse students and how to provide them with effective learning opportunities. In this article, we take a critical look at the University of Iceland's School of Education *International Studies in Education (ISE)* pro-

gram and ask how this program has influenced the lives of the participating women who all have an immigrant background.

Drawing on the knowledge gained through personal narratives and focus group interviews in 2011, we sought to answer the following key questions: In what way can education be an instrumental part of women's empowerment, and how can it be a fundamental component in giving women the "tools" they need to reach their goals and aspirations? What role does the critical pedagogy emphasis of the program play for the educational achievements of the women and how does it facilitate a multicultural learning community?

Theoretical background

The theoretical framework of both this particular research and the ISE program has its roots in critical pedagogy, critical multiculturalism and multicultural education (Banks, 2007; Nieto, 2010) with the pedagogical underpinnings of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). In this article, we claim that an educational program built on the basis of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching can provide a fertile soil for a dynamic learning community (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2010).

Empowerment and multicultural learning communities

According to Heng (1996), empowerment is the power and ability to control one's life and education, self-identity and influence. The primary goal is to enhance self-esteem and confidence since social conditioning has left many women without a sense of agency (Heng, 1996). Creating multicultural learning communities can empower diverse students (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2010). One of the conditions in the development of multicultural learning communities is to build on the experiences of all students (Nieto, 2010). In her book *The Light in Their Eyes* (2010), Sonia Nieto discusses how teachers need to recognize that they might have some preconceived ideas about students, and they must also recognize the importance of the relationship between culture and learning. Nieto (2010) notes that if they do not consider this connection as important, this can lead to inequality.

Culturally responsive teaching

Culturally responsive teaching has its roots in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1999; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2010). According to Gay (2000), it is an education based on cultural knowledge, prior experience, diverse forms of expressions and communication. She insists that in order to ensure effective teaching for all students, education has to build on their cultural backgrounds. Such education also ensures good relationships between home and school and prevents students from living in two different cultures, one in school and another one at home (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). Culturally responsive teaching works for and through the strengths of students and is both culturally validating and affirming while it facilitates high academic achievement. This is rendered possible through free personal and cultural expression and is part of teaching and learning processes.

International Studies in Education Program

In 2008 the *International Studies in Education* (International Studies in Education, 2016–2017) bachelors and masters' program was launched in an effort to serve the diverse student body at the Iceland University of Education¹ in a better way. The program was developed by scholars interested in working with diverse students and drawing from the various experiences they brought to the educational settings of the university (Ragnarsdóttir, 2012). The programs include courses on educational settings, educational research, academic skills, sociology and history of education, development psychology and self-identity, globalization, comparative education, professionalism in education and pedagogy in addition to final theses.

The main initial aims of the ISE program were the following: to explore a global and multicultural view on education; to provide college students with an insight into life and work in various societies and to explore diverse cultures and religions; to build competence for globally focused teaching in Icelandic schools as well as international schools; and to build competence in multicultural studies and international relations (Ragnarsdóttir, 2012).

During the development of the ISE program it became clear to the scholars that building on the emphases of critical pedagogy and multicultural education (Banks, 2007; Nieto, 2010) would be important for creating educational settings valuing the diverse experiences and abilities of the students (Ragnarsdóttir, 2012). The pedagogy of the ISE program seeks to support both student growth and empowerment by creating a multicultural learning community (Nieto, 2010). The program avoids building on a "banking" concept (Freire, 1999, p. 55) or the transmission model, where learning equals being taught (Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007). Rather, it is based on construction and co-construction models according to which learning leads to individual

sense-making and learning is defined as creating knowledge with others (Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007)

Even though the ISE program was not developed as a citizenship education program, elements within it certainly have the potential to promote active citizenship.

Method

To evaluate the program's effects, we constructed a purposive sample containing participants who had either finished the ISE program or were about to finish it. This applied to seven women who were then approached and asked to participate in the study. All of them agreed to take part. These women, aged 23 to 46, are all immigrants and have migrated to Iceland from four continents; from two countries in Europe, three countries in Asia, one country in Africa and one country in South America.

The study was twofold and the data were gathered via focus group interviews (Kvale, 1996) and personal narratives (Phillion, He & Connelly, 2005).

Findings

Below, we introduce the main themes emerging from the focus group interviews with the participants and their narratives.

Culturally responsive teaching

The women discussed the supportive environment of the program and noted how teachers always encouraged students and trusted in them. The culture of building on students' prior knowledge and experiences was not evident to all of the students. Valerie² writes in her narrative how she felt about speaking in front of her fellow students after an initial icebreaker:

I didn't really know what to share about myself and my life because I really am not a good story-teller, or just a verbal speaker especially when I am tense. I still get panic attacks whenever faced with a group. I was raised in, should I say, a very "unverbal"

culture. And I still carry that blockage .../... But as soon as I felt comfortable, it went naturally (Valerie, narrative).

Empowerment

The women described the empowering effects of the ISE program in their narratives and interviews. In her personal narrative, Vera wrote:

If I should reflect on my life before now, I feel that my past experiences were suppressed because they seemed as nothing. Therefore "I am nothing". It was as if people around me seem to feel that I hailed from an uncivilized world comparing to the other world where they are civilized people (Vera, narrative).

She went on to say that she thanked the ISE program for the transformation she had gone through and that it had changed both her perspectives and plans for the future. She added: "I have achieved self-confidence and I have more to offer to everyone around me".

Multicultural learning community

The women all expressed their feeling that they had contributed to creating a learning community and a support network. Vida expressed this in the following way:

We help each other.../... We really... I think we support each other in many ways. Whenever we have something to share someone starts to say something like on Facebook, we are from different countries but our situation here is similar. We have kids. We go through a cultural struggle. We talk about it and we help each other (Vida, interview).

The support they get and provide is both personal and academic, both equally important when language barriers and cultural differences can lead to isolation, especially in the beginning. Valerie noted how she wanted to use her experiences from the ISE program's multicultural learning community to make changes:

I want to create an international learning community. Helping youths to find themself-

ves. I want to spread some of the information that I have and then we can all learn together (Valerie, interview).

An important aspect to Vanda was that “Education gives you equal opportunities and is a place to meet.” She wants to empower students via education the way that she was empowered. Vanda describes this as follows: “In this country you have a foundation for women’s empowerment: Education for women’s empowerment.” We find it telling that all the women have recommended the program to friends and some of them have really gone out of their way to advertise the program, or as Vera put it: “I have recommended the program to many foreign women.” This fact gives us the confidence to say that the ISE program is living up to at least its most important expectations.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the ISE program has had a major influence on the participants. Their self-esteem has increased (Heng, 1996), and they described how they have become active, strong, and critical participants able to contribute significantly to a multicultural learning community (Nieto, 2010). A majority of the participants have since continued with further studies and personal and professional development. Being able to identify a resistance among a number of students to some of the teaching methods applied in the program, like using students’ prior experiences and ideas as a basis for new knowledge construction (Shor, 1996), gave us a deeper understanding of the learning process that the students had to go through to gain empowerment and transformation. Education for critical consciousness is the terminology that Freire (2007) has used to describe this, meaning an education that drives the students to critically reflect on themselves and their wider societal conditions and then proceed to act. This is what we believe the ISE program has achieved in the case of the participating women.

Notes:

- 1 The Iceland University of Education and the University of Iceland merged in July 2008, becoming the University of Iceland.
- 2 All women were given pseudonyms.

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