Inclusion of immigrant students in Iceland

Interplay of practices in compulsory schools, teacher education and research

Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka

Dissertation towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2025

School of Education

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Ágrip

Hröð fjölgun innflytjenda til Íslands undanfarna tvo áratugi hefur aukið fjölbreytni í skólum og vakið áhuga menntarannsakenda á fjölmenningu og inngildingu. Í doktorsverkefninu er rannsakað hvernig skólar, kennaramenntun og rannsóknir hafa áhrif á nám og upplifun nemenda með innflytjendabakgrunn. Skoðað var hvernig íslenskir grunnskólar, bæði í dreifbýli og þéttbýli, ásamt kennaramenntun og rannsóknum, stuðla að tækifærum til inngildandi menntunar.

Meginrannsóknarspurning rannsóknarinnar var: Hvernig taka menntakerfið og menntarannsóknir þátt í að efla, þróa og viðhalda inngildandi starfsháttum sem nýta félagslegar, tungumála- og menningarlegar auðlindir allra? Ýmsar rannsóknir á menntun án aðgreiningar og fjölmenningar hafa verið gerðar, en þessi rannsókn bætir við með því að skoða samspil rannsókna, kennaramenntunar og skólastarfs. Niðurstöður hennar leggja sitt af mörkum til fræðanna með því að bjóða upp á inngildandi sýn á menningarlega fjölbreytni í menntun.

Í rannsókninni var fjölbreyttum eigindlegum aðferðum beitt við gagnaöflun, þar á meðal vettvangsathugunum, hálfopnum viðtölum við kennara og innflytjendabörn, starfstengdri sjálfsrýni í samvinnu við kennaramenntunarkennara og gagnrýna sjálfsævisögulega nálgun þar sem rýnt er í hlutverk rannsakandans. Gögnin voru kóðuð, þemu greind og túlkuð út frá fræðilegum ramma um skóla án aðgreiningar (inngildingar), gagnrýna kennslufræði og vistkerfi réttlætis.

Helstu niðurstöður varpa ljósi á mikilvægi kennara sem hreyfiafls í innleiðingu inngildandi menntunar. Þrátt fyrir takmarkaða reynslu eða úrræði leggja margir kennarar sig fram við að virkja alla nemendur í námi. Staðbundinn stuðningur og samskipti byggð á umhyggju innan skólanna styrkja tilfinningu nemenda fyrir því að þeir tilheyri. Hins vegar krefjast kerfislægar áskoranir, eins og takmarkaðar auðlindir og lýðfræðilegar breytingar, víðtækari umbóta. Viðbrögð frá kennurum í kennaramenntun undirstrika mikilvægi þess að efla samræður í kennslustofunni til að virkja fjölbreytta nemendahópa, á meðan gagnrýnin sjálfsævisaga rannsakanda sýnir fram á nauðsyn ígrundunar til að koma í veg fyrir að persónulegar forsendur hafi áhrif á niðurstöður.

Saman mynda greinarnar fimm fræðileg og hagnýt sjónarhorn byggð á reynslu á hvernig skólar, kennaramenntun og rannsóknir skilja og framkvæma inngildandi menntun fyrir innflytjendur. Rannsóknin dregur fram mikilvægi þverfaglegrar samvinnu til að efla jöfnuð og inngildingu í sífellt fjölbreyttara menntalandslagi Íslands.

Lykilorð:

Innflytjendur, inngilding, grunnskólamenntun, kennaramenntun, tilviks rannsókn

Abstract

The rapid growth of immigration to Iceland in the past two decades has increased diversity in schools, sparking interest in educational research on multiculturalism and inclusion. This doctoral study investigates how schools, teacher education, and research practices influence immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. Specifically, it examines how Icelandic compulsory schools, in rural and urban environments, along with teacher education and research, address opportunities for inclusion.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How do the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices that leverage everyone's social, linguistic, and cultural resources? This study fills a gap in existing research on inclusive and multicultural education by examining the interplay among research, teacher education, and school practices. It contributes to scholarship by offering a more inclusive perspective on cultural diversity in education.

This research employs diverse qualitative methods, including observations, semi-structured interviews with educators and immigrant students, a collaborative self-study with teacher educators, and a critical autobiography that explores the researcher's role. The data were coded, thematically analysed, and interpreted using the frameworks of inclusion, critical pedagogy, and the ecology of equity.

Key findings highlight the critical role of teachers as agents of inclusion. Despite having limited experience and/or resources, many teachers actively engage all students in learning. Local support and caring relationships in schools further enhance students' sense of belonging. However, systemic challenges such as resource limitations and demographic changes require broader reforms. Findings from teacher educators emphasise the importance of fostering classroom dialogue to engage diverse student groups, while the researcher's critical autobiography underscores the necessity of reflexivity to avoid imposing personal biases.

Together, these five articles provide theoretical, empirical, and practical insights into how inclusion of immigrant students is understood and enacted in schools, teacher education, and research. This work highlights the importance of cross-sector collaboration to promote equity and inclusion within Iceland's increasingly diverse educational landscape.

Keywords:

Immigrants, inclusion, compulsory education, teacher education, case studies

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I am grateful to Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, my former teacher of International Studies in Education, for encouraging me to apply for doctoral studies. I thank my former fellow doctoral students, Anh-Dao, Artëm, Fríða Bjarney, Renata, and Susan, with whom I had many fruitful discussions. My special thanks go to all members of the writing group, Ásta, Cynthia, Gulla, Ingileif, Jónína, Megumi, Meghan, Robert, Ruth, and Soffía – I will cherish our online meetings, get-togethers, and participation in conferences forever.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmothers, Babcia Ela and Babcia Irena, who learnt about inclusion and exclusion firsthand during the Second World War, and to Nanna, my first Icelandic friend and teacher of Icelandic, and my role model.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

CoE – Council of Europe

EPC – European Policy Centre

LGBT – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender

LSP – Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PWT – Professional Working Theories

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WIP – Working in Inclusive Practices

W.O.M.E.N. – Women of Multicultural Ethnicity Network

List of Tables

List of Original Papers

This thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV, V):

I. Guðjónsdóttir, H., Óskarsdóttir, E., Wozniczka, A. K., & Gísladóttir, K. R. (2016). Námsrými byggð á auðlindum nemenda [Learning spaces built on students' resources]. *Netla – Veftímarit um uppeldi og menntun: Sérrit 2016 – Námsrými félagslegs réttlætis og menntunar án aðgreiningar/Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*.

II. Wozniczka, A. K. and Guðjónsdóttir, H., (2019). Working together for the inclusion of immigrant pupils: A case study of a rural community in Iceland. *Education in the North, 26*(2), 18–36. https://doi.org/10.26203/hbxt-e765

III. Wozniczka, A.K., & Rosvall, P-Å. (2019). A Nordic model in policy and practice? The case of immigrants and refugees in rural schools in Iceland and Sweden. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal, 9*(3), 388–413. https://doi.org/10.1556/063.9.2019.3.37

IV. Wozniczka, A. K., Óskarsdóttir, E., Gísladóttir, K. R., Guðjónsdóttir, H. & Jónsdóttir, S. R. (2025). Creating spaces for inclusion and innovation in a teacher education course: A collaborative self-study [Manuscript submitted for publication]. In A. Devitt (Ed.), *Cultivating dialogue, language, and literacy in teacher education*. Vernon Press.

V. Wozniczka, A. K. (2025). *Fostering researchers' reflexivity in research with immigrant students* [Manuscript under review in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*].

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Declaration of Contribution

I, Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka, declare that this PhD dissertation titled „Inclusion of immigrant students in Iceland: Interplay of practices in compulsory schools, teacher education and research" is my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged. I was responsible for the planning of the research, data collection and analysis for all publications. While writing the synopsis and publications II and V I had fruitful discussions with my doctoral committee, who reflected critically on my writing. Two of the compulsory schools that participated in my study were originally chosen for the research project *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice: Success stories from four Nordic countries (LSP)* (2013–2015). Data for publication I were collected by Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Edda Óskarsdóttir, Karen Rut Gísladóttir and by me. Swedish data in publication III were collected by Per-Åke Rosvall. In publication IV, data came from all authors; i.e., Edda Óskarsdóttir, Karen Rut Gísladóttir, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Svanborg R. Jónsdóttir and me. Data in these three publications were analysed and interpreted collaboratively.

1 Introduction

Education is considered a crucial actor in the process of integration and creating opportunities for immigrant students (OECD, 2015). However, many educational studies demonstrate the marginalisation of students with immigrant backgrounds (see e.g. Hannover et al., 2013; Helakorpi et al., 2023; Pihl et al., 2018; Welply, 2015).

This doctoral thesis, "Inclusion of immigrant students in Iceland: Interplay of school practices, teacher education and research" contributes to the range of studies on the inclusion of immigrant students within educational settings, teacher education and educational research, as well as to the expanding scholarship on the interplay of these three areas of interest. In this chapter I introduce context of the study and previous research in the field, explain the background of the project and state its aim and purpose.

1.1 Inclusion of immigrant students: An international and Nordic perspective

Many countries have a long tradition of migration, but in the past decades some of them, including Nordic ones, have been experiencing substantial increase in number of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers (OECD, 2015, 2024). In 2023, more than 150 million inhabitants in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries were foreign-born. Between 2013 and 2023, the share of foreign-born individuals in OECD countries rose from 9% to 11% (OECD, 2024). This global migration brings challenges and opportunities for schools, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of students' mother tongues, ethnicities, religions, and sociocultural resources. In the case of Iceland, this is a relatively new reality. The OECD (2015) report titled "Immigrant students at school; Easing the journey towards integration", names several factors that may hinder integration and, as a result, challenge immigrant students' progress, well-being and aspirations. These include the concentration of immigrant students in certain schools, language barriers, and certain school policies such as grade repetition and tracking that is separating students by academic ability.

Based on the experiences of countries in Europe and America with a longer history of immigration, European Policy Centre (EPC) (2011) and OECD (2015) suggested that targeted policy measures and initiatives, including monitoring of different migrant groups to address resources accurately, may lead to improved results in the integration of immigrant students. At the same time, teachers' expectations on the one hand and

parental attitudes and involvement on the other are considered by both institutions to be key factors in fostering immigrant students' inclusion. The OECD (2015) report calls for a whole-of-society response, with education policies and practices playing a crucial role in integrating immigrant students into their new communities. The focus should be on combining language and content learning as soon as possible, supporting all teachers to prepare themselves for diverse classrooms and reaching out to immigrant parents. Similarly, the Council of Europe (CoE) educational strategy for 2024–2030 (CoE, 2024) emphasises the social responsibility of education which can be achieved by ensuring that schools are not only responsive to the ever-changing needs of societies, but are also resilient in times of crisis. This involves strengthening language support for migrants and refugees and implementing whole-school policies that value inclusion and diversity. The strategy aims to empower all learners as social actors to develop more inclusive education policies, curricula and methodologies.

In previous research on immigrant students, the reason for migration has sometimes been outlined, as it may be important to understand the possible differences in findings (see e.g. Pettersen & Østby, 2013). Some studies focus only on one group of migrant students – for example, children of economic migrants, refugee students, or unaccompanied minors. In this study, I apply the term "immigrant student" to all students who are foreign-born; that is, who have migrated from their country of birth to Iceland, as well as to students born in Iceland of immigrant parents, to comply with the terminology used in the *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice: Success stories from four Nordic countries (LSP)* project from which this thesis partially derives (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018).

According to local laws in the Nordic countries, including Iceland, schools are responsible for providing high quality education for all students (Holm & Londen, 2010; Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014). Nordic research shows that an inclusive view of education, as stated in national educational policies, is constantly questioned, not yet fully reflected in the curricula, and challenging to implement in everyday practice (Guðmundsson, 2013; Helakorpi et al., 2023, Von Brömssen & Rodell Olgaç, 2010). Various research indicates that immigrant students experience some degree of marginalisation and exclusion (Holm & Londen, 2010; Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014). Nevertheless, other studies present positive stories from students and schools at different educational levels (Gundara, 2000; Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018). A study of refugees in six rural schools in Sweden indicated some changes in forms of teaching, including sensitivity to language differences and more explicit structuring of tasks, which were beneficial to non-migrant students as well (Öhrn et al., 2023).

In the last two decades, Iceland has been experiencing a rapid demographic shift. In the year 2000, 2,6% of the population were immigrants (Haraldsson & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015). By 2023, the total percentage of immigrants reached 18,4% (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024a). The number of children with a foreign mother tongue in

Icelandic compulsory schools increased from 5,2% of all students in 2001 to 11% in 2022 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024a). This change has had a significant impact on Icelandic schools, because, according to the Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools, they are obliged to work towards inclusion of immigrant students and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012).

Previous research in Iceland provides various accounts of inclusion of immigrant students in educational settings, focusing on policy (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019), practice (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2015; Gunnþórsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020; Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018), as well as on students' and parents' perspectives (Emilsson Peskova & Ragnarsdóttir, 2018, Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017). Still, only a few Icelandic studies (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2010; Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2023) have made constructive links between the inclusion of immigrant students in various educational settings and the importance of addressing inclusion in teachers' education programmes in the way I attempt to do in this thesis.

1.2 Background of the study

The initial idea for this study emerged from my participation in the project *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice: Success stories from four Nordic countries (LSP)*, the purpose of which was to research immigrant students and schools that have succeeded in developing learning contexts that are socially just and equitable. The three school levels – preschool, compulsory and upper secondary – were part of the study that spanned the years 2013–2015. Participating from each school were the school leaders, teachers and students. The research team was formed into four groups, three of which focused on each school level while the fourth explored the leadership across the three school levels. I was part of the compulsory level group, together with other three researchers – Edda Óskarsdóttir, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir and Karen Rut Gísladóttir.

As a researcher in this project, I could observe how different factors, including teachers' approach and context of the school play a significant role in influencing immigrant students' experiences. As a result of discussions with the multidisciplinary and multinational research team, I became more aware of how subjective and contextualised our understanding of the concepts of inclusion and social justice is. The collaboration within the project resulted in a study focused on *Research methodologies for a culturally diverse educational context* (2018) co-authored with Thor-André Skrefsrud, Karen Rut Gísladóttir, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Anette Hellman, Heidi Layne and Johannes Lunneblad. Another publication from the project was *The story of my teaching: Constructing learning spaces for diverse pupils* (2018) written together with my main PhD supervisor, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, as well as with Karen Rut Gísladóttir, Johannes Lunneblad, Ylva Odenbring, Hille Janhonen-Abruquah, Heidi Layne and Thor-

André Skrefsrud. Finally, together with Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Edda Óskarsdóttir and Karen Rut Gísladóttir, I co-wrote an article in Icelandic, *Námsrými byggð á auðlindum nemenda* [Learning spaces built on students' resources] (2016). This article serves as a departure point for my PhD dissertation.

Still, my interest in multiculturalism and inclusion developed much earlier, while working in an Icelandic preschool with children of various backgrounds between 2006 and 2010. This experience inspired me to pursue a master's programme in education and writing a master's thesis about home language environments of Polish children and their achievement in compulsory schools in Iceland. The master's programme opened my eyes to some of the key concepts I built on in this thesis, including inclusive education and critical pedagogy. After gaining my master's degree, I went on to conduct other studies on immigrant children and adolescents, including *Home language environment of Polish children in Iceland and their second-language academic achievement* (2011), co-written with the supervisor of my master thesis, late Robert Berman and *Attitudes towards languages and cultures of young Polish adolescents in Iceland* (2011), which I co-authored with Robert Berman and Samúel Lefever.

In 2010 I began to teach adult immigrants Icelandic and created community education material followed by a course for unemployed adult immigrants in Iceland. At that time, I also started to volunteer in the field of inclusion of immigrants and became a board member and later a chair of W.O.M.E.N. (Women of Multicultural Ethnicity Network) in Iceland, an association that addresses the interests and issues of women of foreign origin living in Iceland. I remained in that position until 2016, but I continue to volunteer for the association by providing peer counselling to immigrant women on regular basis. Since 2014, I have taught several courses about working in inclusive classrooms, pedagogy and leadership in educational settings at the School of Education, University of Iceland. This experience has helped me gain a deeper understanding of the realities, opportunities, and challenges awaiting in-service and future teachers and school leaders in their work.

Since 2020, I have been a project manager of a Refugee Reception Programme in a municipality in the south of Iceland. In this position, I have encountered how policies, funding and workforce interplay and have direct impact on lives of refugees and others involved, whether in welfare services or educational settings. Through cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Directorate of Labour, and other municipalities, I learnt that the characteristics of the local context – including access to services, cooperation between different service providers, staff training and experience, and openness of the community – may lead to different experiences of inclusion of newcomers and affect their sense of belonging as time passes by.

Being myself an immigrant in Iceland, who has moved to the countryside after residing for several years in Reykjavik, I became interested in gaining understanding about how it is to be an immigrant child and a student in various contexts. Since moving to Iceland

in 2006, I have seen, heard, and even experienced situations of exclusion, but I have also witnessed many examples of inclusion and good practice. Therefore, this doctoral thesis is inspired by my professional and personal concern about the practical, methodological, and ethical issues of working with, teaching about, and researching with immigrant students across languages and cultures.

1.3 Purpose, relevance, and novelty

The purpose of this doctoral study is to understand school, teacher education, and research practices and their impact on immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. The aim of the study is to analyse if, when, and how Icelandic compulsory schools in various rural and urban environments, teacher education, and research address the opportunities for inclusion of immigrant students.

The overarching research question guiding this study is: How do the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop and sustain inclusive practices based on ideas of use of everyone's social, linguistic and cultural resources? I consider this to be an important question to ask in Iceland's increasingly multicultural landscape. The subquestions developed for the five studies are:

1. What are the immigrant students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, learning environments and experiences of school?
2. What are the immigrant students' expectations of teachers, schools and curriculum?
3. What learning environments and practices are crucial for immigrant students' participation (academic and/or social) in their schools and communities?
4. What are the opportunities for a more inclusive schooling, taking into consideration different rural and urban contexts?
5. How does the interplay of collective professional identities open opportunities for cultivating critical dialogue about inclusive education?
6. How can reflexivity in research with immigrant students influence different phases of the research process?

While there has been research in the area of inclusive education, the interplay among research, teacher education, and school practice needs further exploration. The present research thus makes an important contribution to scholarship that brings attention to the need to engage with cultural diversity more inclusively. My doctoral research aims to understand the topic of inclusion of immigrant students from these three perspectives – school practice, teacher education and research – all of which I experienced firsthand and considered equally important while pursuing my PhD. In my thesis, I capture and discuss these perspectives, arguing that they all matter and need to be considered to effectively include immigrant students.

I do so through the five studies that comprise this dissertation. Studies I, II and III focus on the practice in the field, examining inclusion from the students' and schools' perspective and taking into consideration various contexts in Iceland. In these three studies, I used observations in educational settings as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers, school principals, and immigrant students. Study IV is a collaborative self-study of five teacher educators who explore how to engage more inclusively with cultural diversity in educational contexts. It was added to the original study later when I got the opportunity to teach in-service and prospective teachers. The study combines what I have learned through my research in the field and personal experience, and what I consider important to teach student teachers. Study V is a critical autobiography in which I explore my path as a researcher. It discusses the importance of asking ethical and methodological questions when doing research with vulnerable and marginalised groups. Together, the findings of these five studies can offer an empirical, theoretical, and practical understanding of how inclusion of immigrant students is understood and incorporated into school practice, teacher education, and research.

The novelty of my study lies in linking research, teacher education, and practice. By mapping the current situation within the educational system and education research in Iceland and connecting findings to broader international contexts, my thesis offers ideas to implement more inclusive schooling for all children. In this way, I hope my research not only has scientific value, but also an applied one, in that it may be useful for policy makers, teachers, parents, and most importantly students, in Iceland and beyond.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In the first chapter, I present the importance of exploring inclusion in relation to growing cultural diversity within the field of education. I describe my own motivation and rationale for conducting this study. The chapter states the purpose and research question, informed by a problem statement to highlight the research's theoretical and pedagogical relevance and potential contribution to the development of inclusive education in Iceland and beyond. The second chapter presents the international, Nordic and Icelandic context, offering a brief reflection on education policy developments and recent research, contributing to the topic of this dissertation. Here, I also clarify my use of the concepts of immigrant students, and urban and rural schools. In the third chapter, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the thesis in relation to my research questions. In Chapter 4, I present the research methodology and design, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 contains a summary of the five publications comprising this thesis, while Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the overall findings in relation to the conceptual background. In Chapter 7, I offer conclusions and opportunities for future research.

2 Context of the study and previous research

In this chapter, I offer a brief account of education policy and practice developments in relation to inclusion and diversity in broader, international, and Nordic contexts. I also address the situation of immigrants in diverse contexts in Iceland and clarify my use of related concepts.

2.1 Inclusion and diversity in international context

Many countries have a long tradition of immigration, while for others it is a new reality. While Iceland's context is unique, brief comparisons with international and other Nordic education systems may provide valuable insights into shared challenges and best practices.

In a study by Meehan et al. (2021) in six European countries (Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Portugal and Romania), a European Commission's four-dimensional framework of educational support for migrants was applied to examine how the context of each country shapes educational policies. The framework includes linguistic support, academic support, parental involvement/outreach and cooperation, and intercultural education and friendly learning environment. According to the study, policy measures in the six countries varied, depending on countries' patterns of immigration and broader historical, demographic, and economic contexts; but at the same time they had some common threads. Findings indicated that most countries paid great attention to linguistic support, mainly for the language of instruction, at the expense of other parts of the framework. Outreach to immigrant parents and, consequently, involvement of parents in their children's education remained underdeveloped in all investigated countries. According to the study, patterns of immigration may affect policymaking on education and migration. As an example, countries like Ireland and Portugal, considered "newcomers" to immigration, could prepare policies from scratch and build on the experiences of other countries. For countries with a longer history of immigration, including Belgium and Norway, policies have been changing gradually, both as an answer to current needs but also through learning from their own experiences of dealing with growing diversity (Meehan et al., 2021).

Another publication (Hammarén et al., 2024) investigated the experiences of young immigrants in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and the United Kingdom and explored how they position themselves in relation to school, friendships, language, aspirations, and the expectations placed upon them. The study group focused on often under-researched immigrant students, such as LGBT students, students with special needs, and/or students in rural areas. It also examined the role of teachers and other

professionals who play key roles in framing, representing, and contributing to shaping the experiences of young immigrants. One study in the project (Bhatti et al., 2024) focused on the UK context and analysed experiences of immigrant families with children with special educational needs. According to the study, teachers were not aware of the broad cultural framework of immigrant parents of children with special needs. At the same time, parents often lacked understanding about school processes, which resulted in mistrust. The study called for addressing the needs of these children and their parents more adequately and holistically. Another researcher (Hald, 2024) explored how teachers in Denmark negotiate challenging situations related to ethnic minority students. Findings indicated that some of the teachers in the study seemed to feel powerless and not able to live up to their professional obligations.

2.2 Inclusive policies and practices in education in the Nordic countries

In Nordic countries, including Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, offering preparatory classes for newly arrived immigrant students is common practice, ranging from up to one year in Finland to a maximum of four years in Sweden. Moreover, in Finland and Sweden students have the right to receive support in their mother tongue until end of their schooling, whereas in Denmark it is no longer a right (Tørslev & Børsch, 2017). At any rate, instruction in immigrant students' mother tongues is often problematic due to a shortage of qualified teachers (Helakorpi et al., 2023). The study by Helakorpi et al. (2023) investigated how Denmark, Finland and Sweden managed the education and inclusion of newly arrived students through comparison of national policy documents, legislation, and evaluation reports on the education of newly arrived students. The research showed that despite good intentions the policies did not seem to include all students, resulting in newly arrived students in the three Nordic countries being subject to underachievement, bullying, discrimination, and being at risk of not continuing their education. According to Bunar (2017), Swedish legislation has many positive aspects, but three major challenges must be addressed more adequately: i) promotion of social inclusion of newly arrived students; ii) bridging the gap between schools and newly arrived parents; and iii) ensuring the new policy reaches classrooms. The study by Benediktsson (2025) explored ways in which Norwegian student teachers adjusted their teaching to integrate children's diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their education. While the student teachers recognised the importance of embracing diverse backgrounds, emphasised the significance of self-reflection and acknowledged the necessity of confronting discriminatory narratives, they hesitated to fully engage with the sociopolitical dimensions of teaching, including discussions on power, inequality and social (in)justice within the educational context. The student teachers attributed these challenges to the insufficient focus on critical multicultural perspectives within the teacher education programmes.

Several Nordic studies focus on inclusion of immigrant students in rural areas. Herslund and Paulgaard (2024) investigated inclusion of refugees in rural Denmark and Norway. Resources for language teaching seemed limited in the small rural municipalities, which meant that the young refugees in such places did not have the same educational possibilities as their counterparts in more populated areas. Odenbring and Johansson (2019) explored how ninth-grade students in a Swedish rural school understood and categorised cultural diversity and 'immigrants' in their everyday life at school and how students who were exposed to racial harassment experienced and understood these situations. The findings indicated that many students– especially the 'Swedish' boys– drew strict boundaries between 'them' and 'us'. There were examples of racist language, name-calling, remarks about clothing and unwillingness to interact with "others". However, as the authors pointed out, the rural area where the school was located has undergone an economic and social change, resulting in a reduction of job opportunities and a considerable increase in the immigrant population. This has led to tensions in the community, which were reflected in the school. A study by Öhrn et al. (2023) explored how six rural schools in Sweden received the new refugees and how this influenced teaching. Findings indicated some changes in forms of teaching (e.g. sensitivity to language differences, more explicit structuring of tasks) that became permanent as they were considered beneficial to non-migrant students as well. In contrast, there were very few signs of changes in the content of teaching. Moreover, the preparation of teachers in teacher education appeared to be insufficient for working with diverse students. Teachers and school principals showed sympathy and concern for the refugee students but models for organising teaching depended on local resources and ideas rather than on pedagogical theories and research-based professional knowledge (Öhrn et al., 2023).

2.3 Development of inclusive education in Iceland

In the case of Iceland, the focus on inclusive education was initially limited to students with special needs (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). Although the idea of inclusion has been implicit in Icelandic law since 1995, it was not until 2008 that the Icelandic act for compulsory schooling explicitly declared that all students should be educated in inclusive schools (Lög um grunnskóla, 91/2008). The awareness of the importance of inclusive education has been growing since, with the focus expanding as the number of immigrant students has continued to increase. Icelandic schools are obliged to work towards inclusion of immigrant students and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). All schools in Iceland are required both to support the acquisition of Icelandic language, but also to strengthen immigrant students' mother tongues (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The newest subchapters of The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools, added in 2021, specify education for plurilingual children in Iceland, by acknowledging the value of children's cultural resources and encouraging

teachers to use students' languages and cultures in teaching (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The ministry also prepared *Guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools and afterschool programs* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020b). Great emphasis is placed on developing active plurilingualism, which includes support for the development of both Icelandic and children's mother tongues to achieve positive learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020b). This is not the case in all countries and should be considered as an exemplary approach, in line with the *Convention on the Right of the Child* (United Nations, 1990), even if teachers of mother tongues are not always available.

All compulsory schools in Iceland are required to evaluate and monitor their own work through internal and external assessment. Some of the questions in the assessment cover, in particular, issues of reception of students with mother tongues other than Icelandic and responding to student diversity and the various needs of these students (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2025). In Iceland, some schools organise a Multicultural Day or a Multicultural Theme Week, while in some cases this is a joint event of an entire municipality. However, schools rarely organise a Parents' Day or celebrate the minority ethnic children's festivals and invite their families to participate in preparation. Seldom are there community centres or spaces in or near the school where parents can meet to support their children's learning. In some instances, such support is offered by the Red Cross and its volunteers. Despite this, general awereness about cultural diversity has been growning through the counselling services of *Miðja máls og læsis* [Language and Literacy Centre] in the municipality of Reykjavík (Skóla- og frístundasvið Reykjavíkurborgar, 2025) and now nationwide through the *MEMM – Menntun, móttaka, menning* [MEMM: Education, reception, culture] project (Miðstöð menntunar og skólaþjónustu, 2024).

Some municipalities in Iceland, including Reykjavik, implemented a policy about school integration and work with immigrant students that emphasises support of active bilingualism (see e.g. Skóla- og frístundasvið Reykjavíkur, 2014). Still, municipalities and schools approach these issues differently, and this determines whether school staff are encouraged and supported in seeking additional courses and training that would further develop knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir, et al., 2017, 2023; Pálsdóttir et al., 2024; Ragnarsdóttir & Gunnþórsdóttir, 2024).

Several studies on or with immigrant students have been conducted in recent years in Iceland. Research on Icelandic teachers' perspectives about immigrant students showed teachers' concern with immigrant students' well-being and a will to respond to their needs (Karvelsdóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2010). Case studies in compulsory schools in Iceland indicated that the schools developed procedures to meet the needs of immigrant students and had a clear vision for teaching and learning based on

collaboration, active participation, and communication with parents (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2012; Ragnarsdóttir & Hansen, 2014). Ragnarsdóttir and Kulbrandstad (2018), who interviewed and observed students, teachers, and school leaders at all school levels in four Nordic countries, suggest the following guidelines for supporting inclusion of immigrant students: educating teachers for diversity and communication across linguistic and cultural differences and allowing for their continued professional development, involving all teachers in education of newly-arrived students, implementing a holistic approach in which both social and academic progress are emphasised, ensuring sustainable leadership and measures for sustaining knowledge and good practices, and developing cooperation between schools and with parents. Moreover, Icelandic research supports international findings that using students' resources, including experience, knowledge, abilities, and interests, should be recognised and cultivated to support and promote all students' well-being (Guðjónsdóttir et al. 2015; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2010).

Teacher education in Iceland – currently provided by two universities, the University of Iceland and University of Akureyri – has no nationally defined compulsory core subjects (Vijayavarathan-R & Óskarsdóttir, 2023). This means that institutions offering teacher education can set their own curriculum guidelines in terms of content areas, competences and learning outcomes. However, there is an *Act on the education, competences and employment of teachers and school administrators* that specifies the general knowledge, skills and competencies that they must possess (Lög um menntun, 95/2019). The *Draft policy for the education of children and youth with diverse language and cultural backgrounds* states that it should be ensured that the teaching of children and young people of foreign origin will be part of the education of all teachers and other specialists working with children. At the same time, teachers, school administrators and staff of after-school centres should apply for lifelong learning and professional development in the field of multiculturalism and the teaching of children with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020a).

As yet, there are no obligatory courses for teachers of different subjects on how to work with students for whom Icelandic is a second language. Courses about inclusion and diversity for teachers and teacher candidates that have been developed in the recent years are mostly elective and comprise 5-10 ECTS out of 180 ECTS for undergraduate students and 5-10 ECTS out of 120 ECTS for graduate students (see e.g. University of Akureyri, 2025a, 2025b; University of Iceland, 2025a, 2025b). The shortage of mandatory courses for teachers on working with students for whom Icelandic is a second language may have implications for student outcomes and teacher preparedness. Indeed, teachers in Iceland are calling for further professional training, as they consider working with immigrant students one of the biggest challenges of their daily practice.

Many teachers do not consider themselves sufficiently equipped to teach these students (Ólafsson, 2019) and feel they are not sufficiently prepared and lack the support and encouragement to work with immigrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017). A study with teachers in six compulsory schools in the north and south of Iceland indicated a lack of additional structured support for students with immigrant backgrounds and an unclear division of responsibility towards these students (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2023). Moreover, the study with 17 teachers on perspectives and strategies for supporting the plurilingual development of compulsory school students from first-generation immigrant families revealed that while national frameworks provide a strong foundation for multicultural education, there is a lack of specific, practical language policies and pedagogical solutions within individual schools (Benediktsson et al., 2025).

Therefore, the focus of teacher education should be on preparing pre-service teachers to meet the requirements for inclusive education and to offer quality teaching (Vijayavarathan-R & Óskarsdóttir, 2023). However, the findings of the study by Guðjónsdóttir et al. (2023) suggest that the focus on multicultural and inclusive education in the teacher education programme at the School of Education, University of Iceland has been inconsistent and inadequate. The theory of multicultural education was not strongly represented among the participants. Emphasis on social justice in multicultural classrooms was unclear and built on goodwill and instructors' own experience rather than on theoretical knowledge. However, the teacher educators found it important that student teachers understand the importance of ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students, irrespective of students' cultural or linguistic background. Most of the teacher educators who participated in the study have studied abroad and have experienced being newcomers in another country. This has helped them reflect on the challenges and opportunities people from diverse backgrounds face and to use their own experience in their teaching. They defined inclusion in accordance with the notion of diversity rather than disability, and applied a variety of approaches to provide student teachers with opportunities to broaden their understanding of working with diverse groups of students (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2023).

Studies built on interviews with immigrant students, mainly in urban areas, suggested that they experience marginalisation and that their contributions to schools are undervalued (Magnúsdóttir, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2010). Tran (2015), who explored the experiences of Vietnamese secondary school students in Iceland, concluded that despite students' warm feelings towards their teachers, they felt socially isolated from their Icelandic peers and were perceived by many teachers as deficient due to their lack of Icelandic language proficiency. Rafik Hama (2020) investigated immigrant and refugee adolescent students in three upper secondary schools in Iceland as a part of the *LSP* project. She found that participants' journeys of academic and social success were shaped by a set of visible structural and social factors, both inside their schools and at home and in their communities. The academic and social success of immigrant and refugee students was also a result of their schools' provision of strong and

supportive environments. In cases where teachers appreciated and included their students' knowledge, experiences and backgrounds, when teachers were experts in their subjects, and when they were caring and had high expectations toward all students, immigrant and refugee students' academic and social success were accelerated. Many participants mentioned their negative relationships with teachers in their home countries and contrasted with their experiences in Iceland of teachers communicating with their students, listening to them and their stories, gaining knowledge about their differences, and reflecting this knowledge in teaching. Although some students complained about certain teachers in Icelandic schools, more participants focused on teachers who empowered them to find their strengths and voice. Some participants shared stories about bullying they faced in Icelandic compulsory schools and which they associated mainly with their accent, country of origin, or skin colour. However, according to the participants, these experiences did not affect their academic and social success at the upper secondary level in Iceland, because they were able to minimise the negative experiences they had through teachers' care and high expectations, positive school environments, and flexibility in the system. This study showed that support from teachers, peers, friends, and community members, influenced these students' sense of belonging and academic achievement. One type of connection sometimes compensated for the struggle they faced during their schooling. They also associated their sense of belonging to their feelings of being cared about, respected and valued both in their schools and in the community (Rafik Hama, 2020).

Various research in Iceland shows that immigrant students lack academic vocabulary necessary to fully understand what is being taught (Ólafsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Þórðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2012). The support they receive in Icelandic and mother tongue is insufficient and differs between schools and municipalities in terms of organisation and numbers of hours and financing dedicated to the task (Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2017). The importance of strengthening linguistic bridges between home and school was emphasised in a study by Emilsson Peskova and Ragnarsdóttir (2018) and Emilsson Peskova (2021). A study conducted in the north of Iceland advocated for increased dialogue between schools and families of immigrant children, focusing on students' needs and parental expectations toward schooling and aimed at improving the education of immigrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017). Findings of a study on migrant parents' positions and participation within Icelandic schools by Harðardóttir et al. (2023) indicated that, regardless of the type or level of involvement practised, many parents struggled to become involved in their child's schooling only to find their experiences and knowledge were not valued.

A few studies in Iceland that investigated the social role of schools and inclusive education in rural settings demonstrated the ability of Icelandic rural schools to adapt to rapid socioeconomic changes, create opportunities for community members, and be an active force in the local sociocultural life (Ásgeirsdóttir, 2002, 2007; Björnsdóttir,

2008). Sigþórsson (1995) argued that small, rural schools were able to use their unique features for the benefit of their students and teachers by creating a family-like atmosphere, enhancing the opportunities of meeting individual needs, collaboration between teachers, and developmental work.

2.4 Conceptual clarifications

2.4.1 Immigrant students

Since immigration is a comparatively new issue in the Icelandic society, the use of different concepts for naming immigrants and immigrant students may be problematic. Statistics Iceland has a long tradition of providing statistical information about immigrants. In the past, members of Icelandic population were grouped mostly according to citizenship and the country of birth. These groups had some limitations, including the fact that many Icelanders had a child while studying abroad. Therefore, since 2006, Statistics Iceland has divided the population into six groups:

1. Individuals with no foreign background
2. Individuals with no foreign background, but born abroad
3. One of the parents is a foreigner, individuals born in Iceland
4. One of the parents is a foreigner, individuals born abroad
5. Immigrants
6. Children of an immigrant (Garðarsdóttir & Hauksson, 2011).

In the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) rather than using a word 'immigrant', other concepts, including: 'student with a foreign background' or 'student with another mother tongue than Icelandic' are applied. However, in this study I apply the term 'immigrant student' to comply with the terminology used in the *LSP* project which this thesis partially derives from (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018). Furthermore, the term 'immigrant students' is understood here as foreign-born individuals, i.e. persons who have migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence. In the present research participants also include second-generation immigrants, referring to children born of immigrant parents, in line with the definition applied in the *LSP* project (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018).

Most qualitative research with immigrant students has been done in areas largely populated by immigrants. Andersen and Sand (2011) question "the potential of generalisation from research conducted in the larger cities where, for example, the population is much more diverse in terms of immigration and the possibilities this might give" (p. 29). Hargreaves et al. (2009) claim that urban school settings tend to be

selected for education research, the results of which are then usually taken for granted as a norm. Thus, while researching immigrant students' lives and evaluating processes and outcomes of learning, teaching, and schooling, it is important to take into consideration local sociodemographic conditions (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Theobald & Herley, 2009). In my study, I deliberately chose four settings with diverse demographics, various opportunities for employment, and different school characteristics to gain a broader understanding and new ideas on inclusive practices.

2.4.2 Urban and rural schools

Previous Icelandic studies that concern issues of rural and urban context scarcely define these concepts, despite using this terminology. However, for statistical purposes, rural and urban limits in Iceland are currently set at 200 inhabitants (Sindradóttir & Harðarson, 2012). This division is similar to the definition used in many official documents in Iceland (see e.g. Ministry of Education, 2006) and therefore it will be applied in this study.

There is no common definition of a "rural area" in the Nordic countries, but when it comes to "rural schools" most definitions refer to the number of enrolled students. These definitions either set a limit of students (see e.g. Sörlin, 2005) or state that it is any school with few students and teachers. Another characteristic of a rural school could be the presence of multi-grade teaching (see e.g. Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009).

In Iceland, the Organisation of Small Schools (Samtök fámennra skóla) defines a "small school" as a school where "two or more grades are taught together due to a small number of students" (Sigþórsson & Grétarsson, 1995, p. 10). Harðardóttir and Magnússon (1990) understand such schools as having 40–50 students and/or largely multi-grade teaching. Previous research shows that this characterises many Icelandic rural schools (Arngrímsson, 2005; Guttormsson, 2008). For the purposes of this study, a rural school is any school that is situated in an area of fewer than 200 inhabitants, has no more than fifty students, and has at least one multi-grade classroom.

3 Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical background of the project. I start by introducing the concept of inclusion and inclusive education from a social justice perspective. I then discuss the critical pedagogy approach and how it can emerge in the classroom by making use of students' resources and creating learning spaces. I conclude with the overarching concept of the ecology of equity, which is helpful when exploring how schools, teacher education, and research address the issue of immigrant students' inclusion in a broader context. This holistic approach allows for a comprehensive examination of inclusive practices.

3.1 Inclusion and inclusive education

Discussion on immigrant students often adopts the cultural deficit theory, asserting that the culture of minority group is deficient in important ways, including language, compared to the majority group (Hess & Shipman, 1965). Such an approach uses the lens of the host language and cultural deficiency (Gay, 2000; Guðmundsson, 2013; Tran, 2015). Individuals and social groups can be simultaneously included and excluded. From a critical social justice perspective, people and their different capacities, characteristics, and backgrounds should be "celebrated and valued, not quashed, ignored or assimilated" (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007, p. 15). This concept does not support the idea of treating everyone equally (or simply allowing for participation of everyone without redefining the order), because such an approach may, unintentionally increase already existing inequalities. Rather, it advocates that individuals should be approached according to their needs and abilities. It emphasises the difference between "equality" (treating everyone the same regardless of need) and "equity" (providing the different resources different people need to ultimately produce equality among them).

The social justice perspective is intertwined with the concept of inclusive education, understood in this study in a broad sense – that is, not as an education for students with special educational needs only, but as an ongoing process of responding to and valuing a diverse group of students and as a matter of social justice (Allan, 2006). Inclusive education aims to increase learning opportunities and social participation for all students by reducing segregation, which groups students by gender, socioeconomic class, learning ability, or nationality (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2009) and thus diminishing external causes of educational inequality (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The concept of inclusive education, which I apply in my doctoral research, does not mean working differently or additionally with certain students, but extending daily routines that already exist in a school (Black-Hawkins, 2017; Rouse & Florian, 1996). It is understood as an ongoing process and a joint effort of the entire school system, administrators, and teachers to create learning spaces that accommodate diversity and increase all students' sense of belonging (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017). Therefore, the framework applied in this dissertation aligns inclusion with broader social justice goals, moving beyond working additionally with certain students to reimagining (educational) structures to value diversity and equity.

3.2 Critical pedagogy and multicultural education

Through daily interactions with students, teachers can purposefully empower them by co-constructing learners' identity and sense of belonging (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). Critical pedagogy tries to "understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects and social agents" (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). Such pedagogy suggests students and teachers engage in a dialogue and create partnerships (Freire, 2009). Critical pedagogy is therefore about thinking more openly and critically about learning and the educational environment in which it takes place (Nieto, 2010). The process of learning and teaching, then, rather than being a set of technical practices or a mechanistic strategy, is a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2009, p. 87). This means that both students and teachers do not only unveil the reality, but are able to critically analyse it and recreate the knowledge.

Applying critical pedagogy in an educational setting means being able to acknowledge and legitimate individuals' culture, language, knowledge, contributions, and abilities – in other words, being culturally responsive (Gay, 2000). It can be done through collaborative learning and encouraging students to think in a critical and creative way. However, to motivate and empower their students, teachers and schools need to create a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment (Bennett, 2003; Degen Horowitz et al., 2005; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

In this study, I use the term 'multicultural' to describe the culturally diverse nature of human society, as in the *LSP* project. I refer to the linguistic and socio-economic diversity of the teachers and students who participated in my study. The aim of multicultural education is to promote understanding of people and cultures. Such education refers to teaching practices that accept and value the normality of diversity in all areas of life (Gibson 2010; Nieto, 2010; UNESCO, 2009). Multicultural education focuses on creating conditions for equity, active participation, and empowerment of all students by promoting non-prejudiced schooling and helping students to understand how knowledge is shaped and that it is never neutral (Banks, 2007).

Sleeter (2013) argues that teaching for social justice in multicultural classrooms is grounded in four hallmarks. Teachers should recognise that culture is a foundation for learning and an asset; key concepts in the curriculum should be taught through content and examples from multiple cultural perspectives; teachers should facilitate intergroup dialogue to raise awareness of social justice issues; and the classroom should be a place where students can learn to analyse together and create solutions to social justice problems (Sleeter, 2013). Therefore, teacher education should find ways to transform school practices and promote inclusion by providing student teachers with knowledge and training in inclusive pedagogy and multicultural education (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2023).

Research with students shows that by applying teaching methods which connect with students' real lives and interests, promoting understanding of other cultures and encouraging students' understanding of their own culture, and raising awareness about racism and discrimination, students' achievement and positive identities can be enhanced (Byrd, 2016). On the other hand, marginalisation is referred to in my study as 'more than a state: it encompasses feelings about that state' (Mowat, 2015, p. 457). It means that a person feels that he or she does not belong, and therefore, is not a valued member of a society in terms of contributions or access to opportunities and services that are otherwise available to others (Razer et al., 2013). Although some argue that this sense of being marginalised is context-related (Razer et al., 2013), others claim that it can directly affect one's identity (Hjörne & Säljö, 2013; Skovlund, 2014).

In this thesis, a critical pedagogy is an overarching approach, as it is used as a lens in all five studies. By embracing the critical pedagogy stance in my research, I emphasise the importance of empowering students through multicultural education and dialogue. Moreover, it provides a meaningful strategy for addressing exclusion and marginalisation in schools.

3.3 Use of students' resources for empowerment

Inclusive approaches to education reject the hierarchisation of students on the basis of judgments about their limitations. Instead, they celebrate the diversity and complexity of student population (Bransford et al., 2000; Florian & Linklater, 2010). One way of investigating immigrant students' inclusion is to explore their personal and cultural resources and how these are valued within educational settings (González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rodriguez (2007) characterises resources as personal strengths and qualities, which emerge from and shape life experiences. Similarly, González et al. (2005) talk about 'funds of knowledge' and Wertch (1998) considers resources as mediational tools to act in the world and draw upon in the process of learning, meaning making, and empowerment of students. According to the ideas of inclusive education, teachers and schools in general should be agents who, by recognising and incorporating all students' strengths and qualities, are able to support their achievement

and well-being, in this way avoiding the repetition of exclusion (Allan, 2006; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011, Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

The outcome for both teachers and students of recognising students' resources can be described in terms of empowerment, as argued by Cummins (1996). Conditions of collaborative empowerment can be created when teachers organise their interactions with diverse students in such a way that power is generated and shared through these interactions. Such interactions require becoming aware of and actively working to change those educational structures, which limit culturally diverse students' opportunities for social well-being and educational achievement (Cummins, 1996).

In my studies, I use the concept of resources to describe the immigrant students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and to analyse whether and how schools and research engage with them to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices. This adds to the previously discussed framework of my research by placing greater emphasis on including immigrant students' voices in shaping inclusive policies and practices.

3.4 Learning spaces

If teachers and students are able to engage in a dialogue and draw on their linguistic and cultural resources in the process of learning and teaching, they stimulate development of a learning space. Learning spaces are understood in this study as diverse social contexts and networks that encourage and nurture learning. As a result, they support students to become agents of their lifelong learning and increase their participation and sense of belonging in school and society. This process of developing learning spaces is most powerful for students when "learning is a part of a highly motivated engagement with social practices, which they value" (Gee, 2004, p. 27).

The concept of learning spaces therefore allows me to explore how the issues of inclusion and critical social justice are embedded in the learning process of immigrant students (Banks, 2007; Gee, 2004). This concept is used in my research as a tool to analyse learning environments and practices that seem crucial for immigrant students' inclusion (academic and/or social) in their schools in different rural and urban contexts. Highlighting students' cultural and linguistic resources, along with the concept of learning spaces, underscores the importance of leveraging students' strengths for inclusive practices.

3.5 Ecology of equity

Ainscow et al. (2012) suggest that students' achievement and experiences of inclusion depend on many interacting processes which form an "ecology of equity." These include not only educational practices, but also characteristics of the school context; local and national policymaking; and culture, history and the socio-economic realities of

students and their families. In that sense, Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of ecology of equity is a tool to investigate power relations and the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity. Ainscow et al.'s (2012) division of *within*, *between,* and *beyond* allows us to deepen understandings of different levels of education policy and practice through multi-layered analysis.

Within schools describes the ways of teaching and engaging students with learning, and organising student groups in the school. It refers also to the kinds of social relations and support that are characteristic to the school. Finally, it illustrates the ways in which the school responds to student diversity in terms of gender, culture, social background and educational achievement; and the relationships the school develops with families and local communities (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Between schools refers to the characteristics of local school systems, the ways in which different types of school emerge locally and acquire certain statuses; hierarchies between schools in terms of performance and preference; competition and collaboration between schools; integration or segregation of students in different schools; and the access students have to similar opportunities in every school (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Beyond schools spans the wider policy context within which schools operate. It includes families' resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by each school. Moreover, it refers to the underlying social and economic processes at national and global levels that impact the local conditions (Ainscow et al., 2012).

I use Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of ecology of equity as an analytical tool to investigate local and national policies and practices in diverse schools in relation to inclusion of immigrant students. This involves exploration of the demographics of the areas served by schools and economic realities faced by immigrant populations. My analysis also includes investigation of the politics of the teaching profession and characteristics of educational research in response to students' diversity.

Ainscow et al. (2012) argue that the impact of individual schools on students' experiences is important, and they may play a vital role in fighting inequalities. Yet, schools and teachers cannot tackle the global processes underlying migration patterns on their own. Change is possible only if the representatives of *within*, *between* and *beyond* schools collaborate on a common agenda.

In my research, the concept of the ecology of equity benefits from engagement with migration dynamics, power structures, and resources of immigrant students, thus making it useful to analyse the academic and social experiences of individual students, but also to investigate whether and how schools, teacher educators and researchers address the issue of immigrant students' inclusion in different contexts.

4 Research methodology

In this chapter, I explain the research methodology guided by my research questions and the purpose of my doctoral project. I then discuss research methods I applied in each of the five studies presented within the five publications mentioned earlier. This includes a discussion of the participants, data collection instruments, data processing, and data analysis. Finally, I explore ethical issues and challenges in relation to the research.

The purpose of this doctoral study was to understand school-, teacher education- and research practices and their impact on immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. The aim of the study was to analyse how Icelandic compulsory schools in various rural and urban environments, teacher education and research address the opportunities for inclusion of immigrant students. My general research question guiding this study was: How does the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop and sustain inclusive practices based on ideas of use of everyone's social, linguistic, and cultural resources?

My doctoral research is theoretically and methodologically driven by a need to understand the topic of inclusion of immigrant students from different perspectives, which is why I chose to apply diverse qualitative methods when collecting and analysing the data. Studies I, II and III derive from a multiple-case study which included observations in educational settings as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers, school principals, and immigrant students. Study IV is a collaborative self-study of five teacher educators and how they respond to the situation. Study V is a critical autobiography in which I explored my path as a researcher. Together, the findings of these five studies offer an empirical, theoretical, and practical understanding of how inclusion of immigrant students is understood and incorporated into school practice, teacher education, and research.

4.1 Multiple case study

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the initial focus of my doctoral project was aimed at investigating compulsory schools' context only. More specific research questions were developed for that purpose:

1. What are the immigrant students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, learning environments, and experiences of school?

2. What are the immigrant students' expectations of teachers, schools and curriculum?

3. What learning environments and practices are crucial for immigrant students' participation (academic and/or social) in their schools and communities?
4. What are the opportunities for more inclusive schooling, taking into consideration different rural and urban contexts?

To answer the research questions for Studies I—III, I decided to apply a qualitative approach. The research questions suggested using a multiple case study approach (a collective case study) (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995), because:

a) it is a powerful tool when the purpose of the research is obtaining first-hand information and gaining a profound understanding of someone's reality rather than generalisation (Esterberg, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998); and

b) it is an appropriate method when a researcher seeks description and explanation rather than for prediction, and when she is interested "in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than a confirmation" (Merriam, 1988, p. xii).

Since the purpose of my study was to explore and draw lessons from the experiences of immigrant students, as well as to investigate the ways Icelandic compulsory schools in various contexts address the opportunities to work with inclusion and immigrant students' resources, I considered a multiple case study to be a suitable approach.

One of the biggest advantages of the (multiple) case study is that it is strongly grounded in reality and is therefore likely to appeal to readers (Adelman et al., 1976). Moreover, although the purpose of multiple case study is not to generalise, the readers who are practitioners may be able to relate their own positions to the situations described in the study (Bassey, 1981). This is particularly the case in education research, when educational issues can be examined to bring about understanding, which in turn can affect and perhaps even inform policy and/or improve practice (Merriam, 1988). Furthermore, the strength of the multiple case study is that the researcher locates each case within a larger geographical, socio-economic, and political context (Creswell, 2008). In this way, it could be argued that a thick description of different research settings, participants and interactions within particular contexts can support transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that the reader may relate to this research and find common patterns, despite particularities of a certain context.

The use of multiple case studies is appropriate for my research, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances in different urban and rural school settings. The consideration of diverse factors (school size, immigrant population, available resources) in the case selection ensures that a broad range of experiences is captured. The emphasis on context is crucial in understanding how inclusion is addressed in different environments.

4.1.1 Recruitment of participants

Initial data collection for the study was divided into two phases in the years 2014–2016. The first phase of data collection was a part of the *LSP* project that I participated in. It spanned September 2014 to March 2015 and took place in two urban schools in Iceland. These schools were previously chosen for the *LSP* project. They had a high share of immigrant students, received good overall results from standardised tests, and had positive outcomes according to internal and external assessments. The schools' curricula and policies were reviewed, focusing on social justice and inclusive education. Schools where these factors were prominent, and which were known in the society as successful in creating inclusive learning environments, were chosen for the *LSP* project (Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018).

The second phase of the data collection was initially scheduled for September 2015–June 2016 in two rural compulsory schools in Iceland. However, due to changes in the leadership in one of the rural schools, the data collection in that school was postponed to the school year 2017–2018. Previous research in Iceland focused mainly on urban schools and/or on schools with high numbers of immigrant students, whereas in my study I also explored the stories from schools with relatively few immigrant students, with the rationale that their accounts might bring new insights to the discussion on inclusive education (Andersen & Sand, 2011).

Each school in the study was treated as one case. The four compulsory schools were selected through purposive sampling to gain a deeper understanding of different factors (location, school size, number of immigrant students, school performance, assistance with mother tongue, presence of immigrant unit) that might be influencing immigrant students' experiences (Creswell, 2008). Names of the four schools in my study are pseudonyms (see table 1).

Table 1 Overview of data collection in four schools

Phase	**School**	**No. of students/ teachers/observations**	**Students' age and gender (B-boy/ G-girl)**		**Schedule for interviews**	**Schedule for observations**
1	Urban school 1 (Geysir school)	6/6/5	6–10y 10–13y 13-16y	B G G G B G	December 2014–January 2015	September 2014–January 2015
	Urban school 2 (Northern Lights school)	6/6/3	6–10y 10–13y 13-16y	B B B G G G	March 2015	February–March 2015
2	Rural school 1 (Lava school)	3/4/5	6–10y 10–13y 13-16y	B G G	January–June 2016	January–June 2016
	Rural school 2 (Volcano school)	3/4/4	6–10y 10–13y 13-16y	B B G	January–June 2018	January–June 2018

With the assistance of school headmasters and teachers, I selected immigrant students between the ages of 7 and 16, together with their teachers. To present the complexity of the phenomenon, I used purposive sampling and traits such as gender, age, origin, number of years in Iceland and in the Icelandic school system, mother tongue and Icelandic proficiency (Creswell, 2008). In total, the sample consisted of 18 students (eight boys and ten girls) and 20 teachers, only two of whom were male. This reflects the situation in Iceland in general over the past decade, where over 80% of compulsory school teaching personnel have been women (Statistics Iceland, 2025).

1. Geysir school is situated in the capital area of Iceland, with an immigrant population of about 20% and diverse opportunities for employment. The school had almost 500 students, with over 25% having an immigrant background and representing 30 diverse ethnicities. There were approximately 45 teachers employed in the school. 17% of all school employees were of foreign origin. Newly arrived immigrant students began in a special immigrant unit where they learnt Icelandic and sciences, but they joined their peers for PE and arts classes immediately.

2. Northern Lights school is located in a town outside Reykjavik, with over 10% of immigrants, working mostly in services. There were around 300 students in the school, 50 of them in an immigrant unit. The immigrant unit worked similarly to Geysir school and the school had a clear and documented structure and framework for working with students with diverse backgrounds. There were around 50 employees, over 30 of whom were teachers. The majority of staff were women. According to the external report, the staff turnover ratio was relatively low.

3. Lava school is the only compulsory school in an area, with enrolment of around 40 children. There were approximately 20 employees in the school, half of them teachers. The community has approximately 400 inhabitants and low percentage of immigrants. There are two bigger employers in agriculture and several tourist-related services, but many residents work in other areas. The school did not have any policy regarding working with immigrant students, but preparing such policy was on its agenda. This meant that newly arrived immigrant students started directly in a regular class.

4. Volcano has around 500 inhabitants and several employers in agriculture and tourism, but it is more remote than Lava. Around 50 children in total attended the compulsory school, which at the time had a policy regarding receiving new students but did not specifically reference immigrant students, who went directly to a regular class. Approximately 20 staff were employed in the school, 10 of whom held a teaching degree.

Although not specifically investigated in this study, while immigrant families in Iceland are dispersed across both urban and rural spaces, the great majority of all immigrants live in the southwestern part of the country. In general, immigrants choose to settle in places where it is easy to find a job, where housing is available and affordable, and where public schooling is accessible. Thirteen municipalities in Iceland (out of 62) have signed an agreement for services for refugees through the co-ordinated reception programme (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2023). By focusing on a variety of communities and schools with different immigrant populations, I aimed to avoid over-representation of a particular type of school experience.

4.1.2 Data collection instruments

In the data collection phase, I used triangulation (McLeod, 2001) and applied various qualitative methods, including repeated field observations of immigrant students' interactions with others; recorded semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and their teachers; and group discussions and informal conversations to obtain first-hand information and ensure trustworthiness of the data (Carspecken, 1996; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

4.1.2.1 Observations

Through 17 observations in- and outside of classrooms I investigated how schools engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain just and inclusive practices based on the use of everyone's social, linguistic and cultural resources.

To record information during observations it is recommended to use an observational protocol, in which a researcher describes the activities and characteristics of the setting and writes her reflections about themes and experiences from the visits (Creswell, 2008). In my study I employed the Visit Guide, built on the ideas of Moore (1995) and adapted to the Icelandic context by Guðjónsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2003). This is a tool for teachers, administrators, policy makers, as well as for researchers to see diverse and sometimes elusive dimensions of schooling. It is divided into two parts. The first part provides a space and structure for the observer to write field notes while in the educational setting, including notes about the structure of the school and information about school's mission and goals and whether and how they are displayed in practice. The second part is completed afterwards. It encourages an observer to reflect holistically and synthesise what she learned during the observation into the school profile. Moore and Ferguson (1997) argue that using such a tool "could provide the observer with a sense of school practices over time, minimising the effect of the 'unusual day' phenomenon" (p. 3). This means repeated visits to schools to capture a regular school day and general atmosphere in school, by attending various classes, observing what happens in the school corridor and canteen, checking whether students' projects are visible in the classrooms and on the walls. By using the Visit guide, I hoped to obtain a "big picture" profile of each school and to make balanced

conclusions about practices regarding inclusion in the larger context. Moreover, I repeated my visits to schools to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Carspecken, 1996). The importance of frequent visits has been stressed in previous research (Rosvall, 2015; Vincent & Warren, 2005), not only to develop trust among participants, but also to give the researcher time to (re)formulate research questions and adjust interviews based on observations and initial discussions in order to get more detailed and in-depth informed data. The inclusion of informal conversations and repeated visits helped me in building rapport and capturing richer data over time.

4.1.2.2 Interviews

Interviews with the students and their teachers helped me to define the main areas to be explored in the study and allowed me and the participants to pursue new ideas. Each interview lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, with interviewees participating either individually or in pairs. I used a previously prepared interview protocol with questions based on the set of questions prepared for the *LSP* project and a space for brief notes as a backup. However, I allowed for flexibility and tailored the length, content, and structure of the interviews to the participants' preferences and abilities (Creswell, 2008; Lichtman, 2010). I transcribed interviews in line with the characteristics of a qualitative inquiry. Since the interviews were conducted in several languages I am fluent in, I translated the excerpts into English.

Instead of using an interpreter, which is considered challenging and often limiting (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011), I applied story-crafting in some cases to encourage younger children and participants who did not feel confident in any language planned for interviews (Icelandic, English, Polish, and Spanish) to tell their own stories in an informal way. I did this by introducing a story of an imaginary student who has recently moved to Iceland. I then gave participants time to think about the imaginary student's experiences and share their thoughts with me and, in case of a pair interview, with co-participants. I wrote down the dialogues exactly as they occurred. Then the authors, immigrant children, had a chance to reflect on the stories and make any changes they wanted. Because children could see my interest in listening to their stories, they spoke more freely. They used their own ways of communication to provide information about the imaginary person. By warming the students up, giving them time to talk about an imaginary person, they got a chance to link their own experiences of becoming a student in Icelandic school. I also discussed the stories with the participants and gave them a chance to explain them and go into more detail (Lulle & Assmuth, 2013). By adding a question about an analogue for the participants themselves, I managed to change the focus of the story toward them. This strategy is also helpful in language development and can increase self-respect and sense of inclusion (Karlsson, 2005).

4.1.2.3 Artefacts

Beyond our ordinary written or spoken words there is a rich domain that cannot be easily communicated verbally. To learn about this domain, researchers suggest using different form of visual expression (Alerby & Brown, 2008). The inclusion of students' projects as artefacts is an excellent way to enhance the depth of the study and give students a voice in the research process. This method supports the argument that listening to children is "a pedagogy and a way of researching life, a culture and an ethic, a continuous process and a relationship" (Clark et al., 2005, p. 13). In my study, students and I together explored their projects, such as poems and art they created during various classes I observed, or drawings of an imaginary student they made during interviews to elicit narrative accounts of their experiences (Alerby, 2015; Lichtman, 2010). When interviewing the students, I used these artefacts as a helping tool for me to initiate the dialogue and for them to open up to me about their experiences. Moreover, interaction between students' projects and words enhanced the credibility of the study and provided an even more inclusive understanding of immigrant students' perspectives.

4.2 A collaborative self-study

When analysing data from schools, especially interviews with teachers, I noticed the pattern that I wanted to explore further in order to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences and challenges of inclusive practices. Many teachers mentioned that they felt unprepared to work with diverse groups of students, but it was their personal experience of living abroad, having children in schools in other countries that made them excited and interested in working with immigrant students. This approach, however, was not sustainable and not present in all classrooms. Also, at that time, there were rapid changes not only in number of immigrants, but also in the background of the students, with a growing share of refugees. However, there was not a corresponding shift within the teacher training and professional development courses.

At that point in my career, I was also a co-teacher at the School of Education, University of Iceland so I decided it was important to investigate my role in preparing teacher candidates and in-service teachers to work with diverse student populations. As I was analysing data from the field studies in four schools and learning from the teachers in my study, I used this newly gained knowledge to contribute to the development of the courses for student teachers. Together with my colleagues, I conducted Study IV, which was guided by the following research question:

How does the interplay of our collective professional identities open opportunities for cultivating critical dialogue about inclusive education?

This was a collaborative self-study (Bodone et al., 2004), focusing on how my four university colleagues (Hafdís, Svanborg, Karen, Edda) and I, all researchers and

teacher educators, support the dialogical interplay of our collective professional identities. The central feature of a self-study is reframing, which involves seeing the teaching and learning situation through others' eyes to gain different perspectives (Schön, 1983). In case of a collaborative self-study, the link between reframing and collaboration offers new ways of perceiving 'the taken for granted' and opens new possibilities for the development of understanding of one's practice (Loughran, 2004). We relied on nine years' worth of retrospective data about our teaching, interactions with students, and collaboration. A retrospective study makes use of existing data of events that have already occurred. Such data can provide an overview of various educational processes and can be helpful in examining and understanding long-term changes in educational policies and practices (see e.g. Guðjónsdóttir & Dalmau, 2017).

We also examined how creativity emerges in our educational practice and cultivates critical dialogue on inclusive education (Bodone et al., 2004). Self-study enabled us to engage in ongoing professional development; it encouraged us to develop dialogical spaces to examine the implications of our experiences and to discuss our practice (Tidwell & Staples, 2017). In this narrative self-study into our situated practice, we sought to reconstruct our process of working with Professional Working Theories (PWT). We attended to moments in our planning and teaching, considered the context of our practice, and retrospectively reviewed our development. This ontological orientation grounded our study in our relationships with each other (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

The data consisted of our journals about the graduate course "Working in Inclusive Practices" (WIP) in teacher education. We also collected recordings of our discussions and meeting minutes. The journals included field notes, incidents and stories from lessons, and photos of students' projects; they also contained our reflections, concerns, and responses and 'I remember' accounts. The data collection spanned nine years. From this data we extracted signs of how the interplay of our collective professional identities supported us and gave us the courage to teach creatively.

4.3 Critical autobiography

When embarking on my doctoral research journey, I thought that my immigration experience was shared by many – if not by the students I was about to interview, then at least by their parents. This, I believed, would help me gain access to participants and grant me a better understanding of my participants' realities. Although I was aware of the possible challenges of doing research with immigrant children, I thought that being an insider would facilitate tackling any issues arising in the research process. The purpose of Study V was to shed light on my reflexivity while doing research with immigrant students. It complements previous studies, as it tackles the challenge of including immigrants' voices and ensuring that the process of conducting research

does not further marginalise the immigrant populations. My research question was:

How can reflexivity in research with immigrant students influence different phases of the research process?

This study was a personal narrative, written in the tradition of critical autobiography (Felski, 1989; Gilmore, 1994). Critical autobiography allows a person to tell a story from her own point of view (Gilmore, 1994). It is not neutral, but positioned and contextualised, in a way that is presented from the perspective of a person with certain intentions and at a certain moment, and is "actively constructed, by a person in a social and cultural space" (Eisenhart, 2000, p. 45). Critical autobiography helps a researcher deconstruct a story in terms of: a) audiences of the research, b) purposes for telling the story, and c) social critique of one's subjectivity (Eisenhart, 2000).

The study draws mainly upon my own experiences as a researcher as I tried to situate myself within the research project and to deal with challenges I encountered while conducting the research. I kept a journal with field notes, reflections, and questions. However, I also incorporated some of the data from a previously described multiple case-study.

4.4 Ethical considerations

In conducting a qualitative study, a researcher has to take into consideration several ethical issues. First, a qualitative research design requires reassuring confidentiality and privacy. Second, research in the field raise many questions of power and reciprocity. Finally, there are several ethical concerns related to the analysis of the data and utilisation of the research (Shaw, 2008; University of Iceland, 2014).

4.4.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

I informed The Data Protection Authority of the purpose and details of the research in the rural schools (S7572/2015). All the necessary permissions for conducting the research in the two urban schools were granted through the *LSP* project. However, I also contacted the municipal authorities and headmasters of the rural schools to obtain their written permission to conduct the research and then asked teachers and parents or caregivers of students to sign an informed consent that had been translated into several languages. It included the general information about the purpose, implementation, and utility of the study, as well as detailed information about what participation involved. Participants were told that they had a right to refuse participation or to discontinue participation at any stage of the study. I ensured the anonymity of the participants and respected their decisions (including withdrawal) during the entire study period. I changed or eliminated any information that could help identify schools or participants. I also decided not to include details about participants such as their origin or socio-economical status to avoid potential breaches of confidentiality, especially if any data

could expose sensitive aspects of participants' lives. All data was kept in a secure place to which only I had access.

4.4.2 Research with children

According to the Science Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland (2014), it is important that children and young people who participate in research are treated seriously. At the same time, a researcher needs to have sufficient knowledge about children and be able to adjust the research methods and the content of the study to the age group spanned by the research. Details of the study need to be clear and understandable for young participants (University of Iceland, 2014). When the assent from the participants of my research was sought, I used language appropriate to the age and background of the participants in a manner that is reasonable and appropriate, to assure that they understood the message fully (Kristinsdóttir, 2017). It was very important for me that the child participants felt comfortable expressing themselves and understood their role in the study. Repeated visits, informal discussions, and incorporating story-crafting and students' projects into the research helped to genuinely capturing child participants' voices and enhancing inclusivity.

Researcher's confidentiality to a child is another crucial element of the research process (University of Iceland, 2014). Nevertheless, the situation may arise that researchers have legal or moral obligation to provide information, for example, to the child's parents or child welfare authorities. This applies to the situations when researchers become aware that a child has suffered abuse or neglect. However, there is a need to assess the risk to a child if data is disclosed to third parties (University of Iceland, 2014). I was prepared to encounter barriers and delays in gaining access to participants. Research with children shows that gatekeepers tend to hinder children's participation, especially if they consider a topic to be sensitive, as is often the case with immigrant students. Gatekeepers may insist on being informed about the content of the collected data, which puts the issues of confidentiality at risk (Kristinsdóttir & Árnadóttir, 2015). In case of this study, this was not problematic. However, due to sudden and unexpected changes in the leadership in one of the rural schools, the second phase of my data collection was delayed significantly.

4.4.3 Research with immigrant populations

While researching with immigrant students, a researcher must consider the possibility of reinforcement of marginalisation through the research (Mowat, 2015; Razer et al., 2013). This leads to questions about how researchers can ensure that they capture immigrants' voices on the one hand, and on the other hand, whether and how they can guarantee that their research does not further marginalise the immigrant populations through the research process. These questions are exceptionally appropriate in the ongoing debate about relevance of educational research not only for academia, but also for practitioners, policy makers, and other potential users (Landri, 2012).

Research on and with immigrants, including immigrant student populations in educational systems, is often used in a debate of advantages and disadvantages of immigration and immigration policies (Carens, 1996). This requires researchers to face a 'dual imperative' – a concern about reducing suffering (or not perpetuating marginalisation in this specific case) on the one hand, and the responsibility to provide research that meets the highest scientific standards on the other. This is a dilemma that remains unsolved for a researcher, despite guidance from existing ethical principles (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003, cited in Birman, 2005). Yet, with the growing numbers of not only immigrants, but also refugees and asylum-seeking children, educational researchers need to disrupt the inequalities that exist in educational research by addressing these issues (Souto-Manning, 2013; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2017). That is why I decided to incorporate Study V into my dissertation.

4.4.4 Positionality

A study with indigenous people by Martin (2010) shows that qualitative inquiry requires a researcher to constantly deal with the knowledge of self and others and with issues of power. This is especially crucial in research with children (Einarsdóttir, 2007), because a researcher can, rather than empowering them, underestimate or prejudge their abilities and concerns or present them in a way that reproduces "suffering and stigmatisation" (Te Riele & Brooks, 2013, p. 185). One of the biggest challenges of this research is my position as a 'cultural insider' researcher (see further in Study V). Cultural insiders are individuals who possess knowledge of the language and are familiar with the culture of a certain group through shared lived experience (Birman, 2005).

Both insiders and outsiders have their advantages. Insiders may possess cultural or linguistic skills which may be helpful while gaining access to participants and conducting and analysing research. At the same time, a researcher who is a cultural outsider may be more likely to encourage participants to explain their accounts in detail, rather than taking them for granted (Ganga & Scott, 2006). However, this divide is often elusive, and many researchers look at it rather as a continuum and take a "hybrid" or "third" position that acknowledges internal divisions within a group. Age, social class, migration history, education, or religion can make individuals who are considered similar in terms of language and culture only partial insiders to one another's worlds (Griffith, 1998). In my case, I needed to constantly navigate my potential biases and balance my 'hybrid' status with the need for objectivity. Therefore, as Warin (2011) suggests, it is important to be reflexive throughout the research process.

4.4.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is useful and relevant both in the context of knowledge production and research design (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). Reflexivity can be defined as

an ongoing process of inner dialogue and evaluation of the impact of behaviour, values and perceptions of a researcher on data collection, analysis, and findings (Pillow, 2003). Reflexivity is strongly related to the ethics of research, and as Pillow (2003) suggests, it means that a researcher takes a non-exploitative and compassionate stance toward the participants. In other words, being reflexive implies ensuring that the relationship between researcher and participants as well as data collection, analysis, and interpretation are scrutinised (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

The idea of reflexivity stresses positioning of a researcher due to personal traits such as gender, origin, age, professional and personal experience, and preferences (Berger, 2015). In her research with different populations, including immigrant women and stepfamilies, Berger (2015) suggests that positioning may influence research in three areas: a) access to the field; b) the nature of the researcher-participant relationship; and; c) the ways in which the researcher conducts the study – that is, the language she uses, the techniques she incorporates, the questions she asks, and the conceptual lenses she applies. Being a responsible educational researcher therefore requires constant decision-making and discretionary judgement of the actions and methods applied in the research process.

Throughout my research, I had to ensure that my cultural familiarity did not lead to assumptions or misinterpretations in data collection and analysis. The self-reflexivity demonstrated in Study V shows an awareness of how my own background and experiences as an immigrant in Iceland influenced the research process. My critical autobiography provides specific examples of the impact of my social identity on my interactions with participants and data interpretation and how I critically engaged with power dynamics and potential risks of exploitation when working with immigrant participants. In Study IV, in which I was a co-researcher and co-teacher, I had to account for potential biases in interpreting my own practice. To ensure a balanced exploration of everyone's perspectives, my co-authors of Study IV and I were critical friends to each other. The role of a critical friend in self-study is to highlight areas that are successful and suggest how teaching practices could be modelled in ways that influence students' learning (Russell, 2022). Identifying the linkages between our data, findings, and collective interpretations yielded meaningful insights into our practice (LaBoskey, 2004).

4.4.6 Reciprocity

Reciprocity in qualitative research is said to happen when there is give-and-take between researchers and the participants. Pursuing reciprocity is considered difficult due to the demands of the academia and resource constraints (Curry, 2012). In my research, I respected the participants and ensured their well-being at all phases of research process. Thus, I incorporated the idea of ethical symmetry, which requires researcher to establish a set of values and to reflect on and be involved in a dialogue

with the research participants (Christensen & James, 2000, see also further in Study 5). In this way, I hope that my research is beneficial for both parties. Moreover, Study I was written in Icelandic and offers practical recommendations with the aim of benefiting the local communities that were researched.

4.5 Data processing and analysis

I transcribed interviews and described the visual data in line with the characteristics of a qualitative inquiry. Since the interviews were conducted in different languages, I translated the excerpts into language of publication. However, when possible, I did that after data analysis, to ensure the appropriate level of detail during coding. The simultaneous thematic analysis included initial revision and lean coding of the data and sorting it into themes by discovering patterns derived from existing theories, as well as from reading the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Since my research consisted initially of four case studies, I started with a within-case analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis (Stake, 1995). I used computer for storing, organising, coding and connecting my data into a concept map. I then reported findings and interpreted them, by making comparisons between findings and the literature and discussing limitations (Creswell, 2008).

Analysing the data from Study IV, we first wrote an 'I remember' list built on data that spanned nine years. Next, we chose incidents or issues and created vignettes describing essential elements we noticed in our practice. First, we wrote the vignettes in a flow, that is as a "free-writing" exercise, and then read them over and marked critical issues in relation to the research question, while removing irrelevant or adding new elements. Finally, we read the story again to see if we had identified how our feelings impacted our practice and if our professional identities were evident; then we rewrote the narrative once more. We then analysed the data individually and collaboratively.

For study V, the simultaneous thematic analysis included initial revision and coding of the data and sorting it into themes by discovering patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013).

4.5.1 Thematic analysis

I decided to apply thematic analysis, because it is convenient for working with larger sample and addressing a wide range of research questions (experiences, practices, influencing factors) and type of qualitative data, as was the case of my study (Braun et al., 2014). Also, rather than focusing on the role of language (discourse analysis) or on unique characteristics of participants (interpretative phenomenological analysis), I was interested in searching for patterns of meaning across participants, practices and relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis is considered useful when a researcher wants to both reflect on reality and to look for the hidden meanings under

the surface of reality and that is something I aimed to achieve by applying this method of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, I found this method to be flexible in terms of timelines, because I could start coding already gathered data while continuing the data collection.

A thematic analysis consists of several stages, including becoming familiarised with data, generating initial codes, looking for themes among codes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). I defined my themes, stating their focus, scope and purpose. Each theme was developed in relation to my research questions and to the other themes. Together, I ensured that they provided coherent and meaningful picture of the patterns in the collected data. In the analysis, I intended to avoid selectiveness of the data by making sure to provide extracts from across the data, to show the breadth of each theme (Sandelowski, 1994).

Although in theory separated into phases, as presented above, the analysis of my entire study was a more interwoven process that involved revisiting the data. Along the process, I had to reconsider the themes, because as I become more involved in interpretation and identification of the patterns, I began to see the data in even more depth.

4.5.2 Trustworthiness

A thematic analysis causes some concerns because of the variety of interpretations that may arise from the themes, as well as from applying themes to large amounts of data. To avoid that, I monitored codes and themes throughout the process. This was facilitated by using a checklist for thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). My checklist included the following areas:

1. Transcription and description of data: I ensured that the data were transcribed at an appropriate level of detail.

2. Coding and themes: I ensured that each data item was given equal attention in the coding process and that the coding process was thorough and comprehensive.

3. Analysis: I ensured that data I collected had been "made sense of", rather than just described or paraphrased and that my analysis matched the data.

4. Report: I ensured that there was a match and consistency between my claims, my methods, and what I had actually done (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 287).

Moreover, I confirmed the trustworthiness of the methods of my data collection and analysis by triangulation of the data collection tools (McLeod, 2001).

4.6 Strengths and limitations

My research is not free from limitations. Consideration could be given to how various subgroups (e.g., students from different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and academic abilities) might influence the data and findings. However, one should beware that this was a first Icelandic study aimed at researching immigrant students in less investigated, rural contexts.

My dissertation does not address gender issues thoroughly. If critical feminist theories would have been applied with associated concepts, more in depth analysis on gender might have appeared. Thus, one limitation might be my choice of theoretical framework. However, the strength of my study lies in scrutinising the examples of good inclusive practices and critical pedagogy within the field of educational sciences. Further research that involves the social sciences lens, and in particular the analysis of the intersectionality of gender, culture, immigration status, etc., would be interesting, as these factors may impact the sense of inclusion in different ways.

It is important to mention the element of subjectivity and personal bias that one cannot avoid while incorporating a qualitative approach into the study. This applies not least to my Studies IV and V. Still, the aim of my study was not to present one objective reality, but to generate in-depth data on the diverse immigrant students' realities in Iceland and on teacher education and research responses to their inclusion. I could argue that these limitations are outweighed by the strength of drawing attention to the situation of immigrant students from multiple perspectives.

My choice to use a variety of qualitative methods, such as multiple case studies, a collaborative self-study, and critical autobiography, provides a rich, multi-dimensional approach to data collection. The use of multiple data collection instruments (observations, interviews, group discussions, artefacts, journal) strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The combination of methods reflects the complexity of the research topic and allows for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of the experiences of immigrant students and the institutional responses to their inclusion.

Applying triangulation in the study, including using diverse data collection methods and incorporating lenses of a teacher educator and researcher, helped me get a holistic picture of how education system in Iceland engages with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices. Obtaining such knowledge is essential to inform the discussion on how to work towards inclusion of all students and respond to immigrant students' needs.

5 Findings

This chapter provides an overview of the main findings from the study. The chapter is divided into sections that represent the main themes from my five publications. Each publication I discuss emphasises the importance of incorporating students' social, linguistic, and cultural resources into learning spaces, highlighting different approaches to inclusion, empowerment, and reflexivity in educational settings. Together, they provide insight into the ways the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices based on of the idea of using everyone's social, linguistic, and cultural resources. A comprehensive presentation of the findings can be found in the full text of each publication in the Appendix of this thesis.

5.1 Publication I: "Námsrými byggt á auðlindum nemenda" (e. "Learning spaces built on students' resources")

Study I is the point of departure for my doctoral thesis. The article was written in Icelandic and published in *Netla – Online Journal on Pedagogy and Education, Special Issue 2016 – Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*. In this study, my Icelandic colleagues from the *LSP* project, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Edda Óskarsdóttir, Karen Rut Gísladóttir, and I (a neophyte researcher at that point) argue that one of the biggest challenges in education in modern times is to find pedagogies and ways to accommodate students' diversity. Our vision is based on the idea that teachers create learning environments to support students and give them space to strengthen their minds and develop their skills. Student empowerment can occur when teaching methods are based on social and democratic accountability and social justice, with trust and diversity prevailing in school.

The aim of the study was to develop a better understanding of how social and cultural resources of students were viewed and used to plan teaching and learning. The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers design learning spaces based on the resources of immigrant students. For this study, we collected data through field observations and semi-structured interviews and conversations with teachers in three compulsory schools in Iceland, two in the capital area and one outside the capital area. We worked in pairs in collecting the data and took turns asking questions during interviews and informal conversations with teachers. I went to the field observations with all co-researchers at different times. Sampling was purposive in that all the participating schools were evaluated as being successful in implementing social justice and creating

inclusive learning spaces for all students.

Initially, we analysed and interpreted the data individually and shared our analysis during meetings. In the next stage, we conducted further analysis together by grouping the data and writing narratives from the classrooms. My language and cultural background were helpful in understanding the nuances from the field observations, and this was reflected later in the narratives. We used the narrative inquiry to write and rewrite the stories, two of which I was responsible for developing and finalising.

Findings indicated that teachers set out clear expectations for learning, while students got space to work and were encouraged to participate in, discuss, and reflect on their learning. The teachers drew on their own knowledge and professional experience, showed interest in immigrant students, and approached their teaching creatively. When they entered the classroom, they were well-prepared with clear objectives as a foundation, but remained alert and responsive to the present moment, using their intuition to adapt to the context. All spaces were characterised by patience, tolerance and trust – the teacher trusted that students were there to learn, and the students trusted the teacher and each other.

Findings illustrated that students' mother tongues were welcomed in the classroom and were used to build foundational knowledge of concepts and subject matter. Teachers encouraged students to discuss topics with their peers in their mother tongues. The teachers' awareness of the importance of leveraging students' experiences, languages, interests, talents, and strengths made these learning spaces exemplary models of teaching from which others can learn. Collaboration between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, played a significant role in creating these conditions.

Although this publication is already nine years old, I consider it to still be valid, as it explores good practices in the classrooms. The learning spaces described in the article mirrored inclusive practices in the way that teachers responded to, accommodated, and accepted individual differences. Learning was based on students' resources and related to their interests, allowing students to maintain ownership of their learning processes. The findings of the study are now as important as ever given the growing diversity in schools in Iceland.

5.2 Publication II: "Working together for the inclusion of immigrant pupils: A case study of a rural community in Iceland"

Study II focuses on inclusive practices in a rural, much less researched context in Iceland. In this study I collaborated with my main supervisor, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, and built on data which I collected in one rural school. The study explores how the school understands and works toward the inclusion and participation of immigrant students.

We analysed and interpreted the data together. While I took primary responsibility in developing the publication, Hafdís's support was crucial, as this was my first PhD article as a main author.

Findings of the study suggested that teachers were the key agents in inclusion of immigrant students. Despite lack of extensive experience or a special agenda regarding immigrant students, the teachers and school principal managed to involve all students in the process of learning. The school seemed to be an example of a learning environment where inclusion was displayed in teachers' creative solutions and sense of togetherness, which compensated for their lack of experience and/or professional preparation. Moreover, the Lava school personnel were encouraged by the principal to seek additional courses and training that would help them to develop knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant students. This, together with employing an assistant, was highly encouraged by the authorities from the local municipality. The municipality trusted the teachers that they were professionals and knew best what support was needed in the school.

The support and caring relations with the Lava school personnel seemed to have a positive impact on students' feeling of belonging. For example, even two teenage immigrant girl participants who felt excluded from their native female peers had positive experiences in school, spent time with their male peers during breaks and felt appreciated by their teachers. Teachers encouraged the two girls to interact with others after school but due to long distances between places the interactions were scarce. Moreover, neither students themselves, nor the school personnel considered them as immigrants or 'others'. One younger participant managed to develop his language and academic skills and become an active participant in the classroom in less than six months of attendance.

The findings suggested that it was not only the Lava school, but the entire community, including local municipality, that worked together to include immigrant students. They did so by coming to understand the differences between individuals living in the area and approaching each one according to their needs and abilities. Immigrant students' participation was encouraged and acted upon and the growing diversity in the local community seemed to bring forward positive and sometimes unexpected outcomes for all. Yet, there were some concerns that teachers in the Lava school did not have enough time and space to cooperate and share knowledge.

5.3 Publication III: "A Nordic model in policy and practice? The case of immigrants and refugees in rural schools in Iceland and Sweden"

In Study III, through a cross-national analysis of Iceland and Sweden, my second supervisor, Per-Åke Rosvall, and I investigate how the two countries' national and local

educational systems ensure access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees, as well as how immigrant and refugee students talk about their agency in their classrooms, schools, and peer communities in rural contexts. I collected the data in Iceland, while Per-Åke Rosvall was responsible for data collection in the Swedish context. We analysed the data together by reading and discussing data and paying attention to similarities and differences in processes and experiences of inclusion of immigrant students in the two countries. I suggested using the concept of "ecology of equity" to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency. The analysis also included investigation of the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity.

Findings, co-written by the two of us, showed that although some students described that they did not feel "othered," many of them, especially refugee students in Sweden, did feel excluded from their peers. In the case of Sweden, even though the refugees in the schools were in the classroom, they were not always part of the group. In Iceland, immigrant students were active participants in the classroom and reported that they do not feel "othered," although immigrant girls did report feeling excluded from other girls. However, it is possible that these differences might reflect the fact that Iceland and Sweden are experiencing different kinds of immigrant influxes – mostly economic migration in Iceland and mostly refugee migration in Sweden. The Icelandic and Swedish rural schools were on their own in tackling issues of working with these students, even though their practices may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions of the two countries. The two countries' educational systems tackled the refugee/migration issue in a somewhat different way on a teacher level. They have adopted basic policies regarding access to education and social inclusion of immigrants, but in practice, these seemed to be more developed in urban areas.

Findings showed that in case of Sweden, principals and teachers in rural schools seemed insufficiently prepared to work with immigrant students in terms of continuous capacity building. In the case of Iceland, unlike in urban schools, where teachers routinely receive training in working with immigrant students, the investigated schools used a strategy of inviting specialists from the capital area to prepare whole school communities to better receive and work with immigrant students. Schools in both countries had strong autonomy and flexibility when it came to implementing policies and practices for immigrant students.

Our findings in both countries indicated that the smaller the place, the more the immigrant students felt integrated, and school practices seemed more adapted toward the immigrants' needs for support and content adaptation. In addition, some Swedish immigrant boys depicted rural areas as less violent and involving fewer "cultural" fights.

5.4 Publication IV: "Creating spaces for inclusion and innovation in a teacher education course: A collaborative self-study"

Study IV is a narrative collaborative self-study of five university teachers who developed the graduate course *Working in Inclusive Practices (WIP)*. The course focuses on ideas of inclusive pedagogy and innovation education, emphasising creative, solution-oriented approaches and developing students' Professional Working Theories (PWT). Since 2011, a self-study has been conducted on the course by its instructors, recording its reconstruction and continuous development. I began to co-teach in the course in 2014 and was responsible for the topic concerning working with students with culturally diverse backgrounds. In the study, I collaborated with Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, my main supervisor; Edda Óskarsdóttir, a member of my doctoral committee; as well as with two other teacher educators, Karen Rut Gísladóttir and Svanborg Rannveig Jónsdóttir. In the study we argue that learning to teach builds on teacher educators' ability to foster classroom dialogue, moving beyond technicist teaching to a deep understanding of learning and teaching. The purpose of this research was to understand how to create an inclusive space for student teachers to cultivate critical dialogue about inclusive education. The aim was to unveil how our, the teacher educators, different knowledge and methodological approaches affected the creation of dialogical spaces in our teacher education classroom.

Data collection spanned nine years and included our continuous self-reflection journals, field notes, and photos of students' projects, as well as our regular discussions about the course and meeting minutes. The five of us analysed the data in several steps – by writing an 'I remember' list built on the data we collected, choosing incidents or issues and creating vignettes describing essential elements we had noticed in our practice. We used the 'I remember' method as a creative way to ignite our retrospective data analysis. We built on existing data stemming from events that had already occurred to prompt our memories of certain turning points in our work. This enabled us to address new knowledge and develop new understandings of our practice.

Findings revealed how the interplay of our collective professional identities multiplied the opportunities to apply creative and transformative pedagogies. We felt that opening a space for a classroom dialogue was crucial to engage with the diversity in the student group and improve learning outcomes. Drawing upon the collective strengths of our teacher group and the trust we had in each other, we managed to experiment and support these endeavors.

Through self-study of our practice, we constantly analysed and reevaluated our approaches. Creating a dialogue in a large group of students can be challenging, as some are silent, and others dominate the conversation. To work through this challenge, we tapped into our diverse resources and applied creative methods to open up a space for critical dialogue. The artistic, hands-on, visual ways of working provided students

with an additional language to enhance their understandings and encourage them to express their feelings and views in dialogue with other students and themselves.

As a team, we have found that having space and trust to express our ideas and feelings about the course was significant for developing it. Inclusive education can be a contested and difficult topic. We have witnessed how the methods we use have allowed student teachers to develop an agentive stance to move from feeling powerless or stuck in a conventional framework of schooling to developing awareness of practice, finding solutions, and taking steps towards social change in their local settings.

5.5 Publication V: "Fostering researchers' reflexivity in research with immigrant students"

Study V examined the role of researcher reflexivity in research with immigrant students. It is a personal narrative from my experience of a multiple-case study in Iceland, written in the tradition of critical autobiography, which helps a researcher to deconstruct a story in terms of the audience for the research, the purpose of telling the story, and the social critique of one's subjectivity. Edda Óskarsdóttir and Mariana Souto-Manning, members of my doctoral committee, provided valuable input for this study. In this narrative, I illustrate how, during the process of becoming a researcher with immigrant students, I moved from reflection toward a critical and reflexive approach. I applied various research practices, including giving participants time to gain trust and using diverse methods, which allowed me to capture stories that otherwise might have been omitted.

The findings showed that a researcher's background, knowledge, and experience can be helpful in reaching interviewees and gaining their trust. In order not to position participants according to my experience, I needed to be able to reflect on my own identity. Being an immigrant, I considered myself to be well equipped to research immigrant children. On the one hand, having had similar experiences of migration helped me to avoid harming or re-traumatising several participants. On the other hand, it was challenging not to compare my own experiences with the stories of the immigrant children engaged in my research.

I needed to make sure not to prejudge the abilities of the participants beforehand based on their age, knowledge of Icelandic, their mother tongue, or the information received from school principals and/or teachers. Rather, I had to get to know the students better, help them to speak openly, and even discuss the most appropriate research tools with them. This required repeated visits to educational settings, patience, flexibility, and ongoing self-awareness.

The study helped me to realise that no immigrant story is the same. Therefore, I tried to avoid any categorisation of immigrant children and fight the tendency to perceive and interact with them through the prism of immigration alone. In this way, I could see the

wide spectrum of different resources each child possesses, but participation in the study was for me an inevitable self-study as well, a process of re-examining my own story through new lenses.

The possibility of working in a diverse, multicultural, and multidisciplinary team was clearly a helpful tool for discussing and renegotiating the researchers' role in the project. I discovered that even much more experienced researchers encountered similar challenges, and they benefitted from becoming involved in a dialogue and from being ever conscious about sensitivity when doing research with immigrant children.

5.6 Summary of findings

The five publications that constitute this dissertation offer a comprehensive presentation of diverse perspectives on how immigrant students engage with and are supported by the education system. Several of the publications emphasise the importance of empowering immigrant students by drawing on their cultural and linguistic resources. For example, the first study on "learning spaces built on students' resources" demonstrates how fostering trust and encouraging participation can lead to more inclusive, student-centred environments. The second study, focusing on rural schools, highlights the importance of collaboration between schools, teachers, and the local community in creating inclusive environments for immigrant students. This finding suggests that community involvement can help overcome challenges like a lack of professional preparation. Each study includes practical recommendations for improving teaching practices and fostering inclusivity. For example, the article on teacher education demonstrates how creating spaces for critical dialogue can lead to more agentive student teachers who are better equipped to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. The final article offers a thoughtful reflection on the role of the researcher's identity and experiences in conducting research with immigrant students. This reflexive approach is crucial in ensuring ethical and inclusive research practices and provides valuable insights into the researcher's own growth throughout the study.

6 Discussion

The purpose of my doctoral dissertation was to understand school, teacher education, and research practices and their impact on immigrant students' experiences in educational settings. The aim of the study was to analyse if, when, and how Icelandic compulsory schools in various rural and urban environments, teacher education, and research address the opportunities for inclusion of immigrant students. My general research question guiding this study was: How does the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices based on the idea of using of everyone's social, linguistic and cultural resources?

Findings from Studies I—III suggest that teachers were the key agents in inclusion of immigrant students. Despite lack of extensive experience or a clear plan regarding immigrant students, they tried to involve all students in the process of learning. Moreover, in some instances the support of local municipality and caring relations with the school personnel had a positive impact on students' feeling of belonging and encouraged their participation. Although it is difficult for schools, teachers, and administrators *(within school)* to have an impact on demography or resources available, some of them showed initiative and were positive examples that both teaching institutions and policy makers *(beyond school)*, as well as other schools *(between schools)* can learn from. Yet, as Ainscow et al. (2012) argue, none of the three areas of the ecology of equity exists in a vacuum. Therefore, even if schools improve their practices, for the educational system to be equitable and inclusive, the underlying conditions need to change as well. This is in alignment with the findings from Study IV on teacher educators, which showed that opening a space for a classroom dialogue was crucial to engage with the diversity in the student group and to elevate learning outcomes. Findings from the critical autobiography in Study V showed how important it is for researchers to constantly renegotiate their roles and ensure that they do not position participants according to their own experience.

When revisiting my path as a doctoral candidate and the five studies that comprise this dissertation, I started to notice three different stages of engaging with immigrant students in educational practice and research that form a basis for a discussion on inclusion of immigrant students. I begin by delving into different understandings of the concept of inclusion in policy, research and practice, as experienced in my research. I then move on to scrutinising the process of inclusion and its implementation in different contexts. Finally, I explore the holistic approach to inclusion and argue why it is crucial for the educational system and society in Iceland and beyond.

6.1 Understanding of inclusion

Before looking into practices of inclusion, it is important to pause for a moment and think about the concept of inclusion and its different definitions and understandings. Findings from all five studies provide examples of different understandings of inclusion among various actors. The findings also show how understanding evolves through personal and professional experiences, conversations with others, and through dialogue with previous research and theories. Studies I—III indicate that teachers in schools I visited possessed knowledge and professional experience on working with students with immigrant background, but more importantly, they were enthusiastic, creative, and ready to learn. They did not necessarily use the word "inclusion" when talking about their work, but they felt a strong sense of responsibility towards their students' present and future well-being. They had a long-term vision for their teaching. They understood inclusion in a broad sense, as an ongoing process of responding to and valuing a diverse group of students and as a matter of social justice (Allan, 2006).

The issue of the term "inclusion" and "inclusive" not being used explicitly by participants in my research may be connected to the fact that in Iceland, the search for the translation of the English word inclusion has been ongoing for many decades. Phrases such as "skóli án aðgreiningar", "skóli margbreytileikans" and "menntun fyrir alla" all describe inclusive schools/inclusive education and have been used interchangeably in the policy and teacher education. All these phrases use word "skóli" (e. school) and "menntun" (e. education). Recently, a new, single word, "inngilding" came into use, with the specific intent of translating the English word "inclusion." It was somewhat controversial to start with and there are still mixed opinions on its use, although it is more and more visible in public documents, media and general discourse (see e. g. Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024a; Ómarsdóttir Awad, 2024). Similar discussions have been ongoing about the use of the word "Fjölmenning" (e. multiculturalism) as well as different words to describe individuals with an immigrant background, like "innflytjandi", "útlendingur" and "nýbúi." It sometimes feels that the disputes over the proper words overshadow the importance of constructive discussion and reflection on the ideas behind inclusion and inclusive education.

Some teachers in my studies reported that they felt alone in their work with immigrant students. The understanding of inclusion of their co-workers was different and they thought that it was the role and responsibility of certain teachers, especially special education teachers or teachers of Icelandic, to take care of immigrant students. The view was that the priority should be to teach immigrant students Icelandic. This was an understanding of inclusive education as an add-on and as extending daily routines, and not as an overarching approach to education (Black-Hawkins, 2017; Rouse & Florian, 1996).

Teachers were also sometimes challenged when the resources of immigrant students clashed with their values, traditions, and customs. One way of dealing with this

challenge was getting to know students and their families with the intention of exploring their culture, reflecting and learning about similarities and differences. What distinguished these teachers was their consciousness of what could happen if students' resources, experiences, language, interests, abilities, and strengths remained unnoticed, and their willingness to act to prevent any negative, academic, or social consequences (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). This was yet again an example of a broad understanding of inclusion – seeing students as a whole and not only focusing on how immigrant students differ from Icelandic ones, what they lack, and what they need to improve. Study II mentions the positive impact of teachers' willingness to learn and work together on the well-being of immigrant students, despite a lack of formal preparation. Implications for teacher professional development are further discussed in subchapters 6.2 and 6.3., as well as in Study V.

Students who participated in my research had different experiences in educational settings which shaped their understanding of inclusion. Some students, especially older ones, sometimes felt othered, while others considered themselves to be Icelandic and/or to belong to the group. Several participants, including Vincent in Study III, mentioned explicitly that they felt acknowledged as individuals who brought various resources to the classroom. This was an important reminder for me (as reflected upon in Study V) and for teachers, teacher educators and researchers in general to ensure that we do not position immigrant students as helpless or without voice and agency.

Findings of Study II suggested that the characteristics of the rural Lava school and community played a crucial role in influencing experiences of inclusion of immigrant students in a positive way. In line with the review by Hargreaves (2009) spanning 25 years of research on small and rural schools in England, the ethos of mutual respect and responsibility in school and community seemed more likely in small, rural schools rather than larger schools in urban contexts. Moreover, the review reported that students in small schools were more likely to be happy (Hargreaves, 2009).

The support and caring relations with the school personnel seemed to have a positive impact on students' feeling of belonging. Moreover, neither students themselves, nor the school personnel considered them as immigrants or "others." These findings did not accord with the signs of marginalisation encountered in Magnúsdóttir's (2010) and Ragnarsdóttir's (2010) studies in urban areas in Iceland. Rather, the findings were similar to previous research indicating that one-to-one teaching and working with small groups of students tend to lead to safer atmosphere and a good relationship between individuals at school (Aberg-Bengtsson, 2009). Students in Studies II and III who reported they felt excluded from their female peers still had generally positive experiences in school itself and felt appreciated by their teachers. These findings are in line with the students' stories in Rafik Hama's doctoral study (2020). This raises questions about the social aspect of inclusion and the importance of relationships not only in the classroom, but also outside the school walls, and needs further research.

My own story, as presented in Studies IV and V, is a clear example of the development of my own understanding of what inclusion is and what it is to be an inclusive teacher and researcher. There is a danger of generalising or assuming that all immigrants have the same experiences or share same challenges and hindrances. Hamdan (2009) uses the term "reflexivity of discomfort" to stress her concern about unintentionally generating stereotypical images of the population. The ability to respond and be reflexive while "in the process" is something that I noticed as I looked back to what occurred during my interviews and observations and when I read my journal from teaching the university course. Previous research shows that "there may be times when a researcher believes that particular aspects of their identity will generate more impact on their work than others but later learn to their surprise that it was actually a different, unexpected aspect that had a greater impact" (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 10). Findings from all five studies showed that what shapes our understanding of inclusion is often our experience and context in which we live, learn, and work. The more opportunities we have to confront our understanding with the reality we encounter in everyday practice, the better equipped we are to address the opportunities to include immigrant students.

6.2 Implementation of inclusion

Iceland is becoming more and more multicultural; over 18% of the population has an immigrant background (Statistics Iceland, 2024). These rapid changes and responses from the educational system have been visible in my studies. Findings provide many examples of teachers drawing upon students' linguistic, social and cultural resources in their everyday practice (Rodriguez, 2007). Teachers whom I observed in four schools and my fellow teacher educators were engaged in dialogue with their students as they teach by praxis (Freire, 2009; Giroux, 1997, 2001). They intentionally bridged their own and students' knowledge and experience. In so doing, the teachers moved beyond the superficial level of multicultural education in addressing cultural aspects such as authentic food, clothing, and social events. Instead, they emphasised the importance of individuals negotiating the historical, social and institutional forces influencing their lives (González et al., 2005). For example, if they used a cultural artefact like a world map, it was with the aim of identifying, discussing, and reflecting on own and students' feelings, thoughts, experiences, traditions, beliefs, and intentions (Riojas-Cortez, 2001).

The teachers set clear expectations for learning and achievement for all students, but at the same time they gave students a space for working and encouraged their participation, inquiry, discussion, and cooperation. They managed to create learning spaces where inclusion, although not explicitly referred to as such, was evident in everyday interactions and practices. When asked about successful stories from their students, teachers mentioned that they were most proud when they noticed that their students started to feel better, strengthened their social networks, or started to speak Icelandic. These were the small successes that made a difference toward students'

increased well-being and academic achievement. One of the teachers emphasised supporting students in developing a vision for their future and being agents of their lifelong learning. She wanted them to be happy individuals who know Icelandic and can do whatever they want in the future, instead of being forced to do something because they don't have the requisite language skills or education. Sincere care and responsibility for the students permeated these stories.

However, practices of inclusion in Studies I—III tended to be fragmented. For example, teachers in the Lava school from Study II did not have enough time and space to share knowledge and collaborate. Some teachers felt unsupported or unprepared to tackle challenges. They felt that there were no clear rules, so in everyday practice they were often "learning by doing." Teachers were also sometimes worried that good practice developed in their educational setting was not sustainable and depended on individuals rather than on collective effort. This is in line with the findings from other Icelandic studies (see e.g. Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018) as well as from the TALIS study (OECD, 2019) and might result in fragmented implementation and lack of sustainable practices. Although it is challenging for schools and teachers to have an impact on demography or resources available in the local community, the Lava school in Study II showed initiative and the capacity to adapt to change. Despite lack of extensive experience or a clear plan regarding immigrant students, the school principal and teachers used the ideas of inclusion to involve all students in the process of learning.

On the other hand, Study IV revealed how collaboration and using strength and knowledge of colleagues can both facilitate teaching and make it more meaningful and inclusive for everyone involved. It also showed how important it is for the current and future teacher workforce to experience practices of inclusion during their teacher training as they become more aware of their impact on their own learning processes and feeling of belonging. Such processes of learning and teaching, then, rather than being a set of technical practices or a mechanistic strategy, were an example of critical pedagogy, a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2009, p. 87). We, the teacher educators, as well as our students, were able to critically analyse the reality and recreate the knowledge. I believe that in the ever-changing Icelandic society it is something that the educational system, schools and teachers should emphasise more.

Findings of all studies indicated that the crucial element of an inclusive approach was to reflect on one's own practice and have space to mirror one's own experiences and discuss challenges with others. This is important not only for teachers and teacher educators, but also for researchers. In order to cultivate critical dialogue on inclusive education we need to share our diverse knowledge and methodological approaches. As in Study IV, the interplay of our collective professional identities multiplied the opportunities to apply inclusive pedagogies. Drawing upon and respecting the collective strengths of our teacher group and the trust we had in each other, we

managed to experiment and support these endeavors, resulting in our collaborative empowerment (Cummins, 1996). Creating a dialogue in a large group of students can be challenging, as some are silent and others dominate the conversation. To work through this challenge, we tapped into our diverse resources and applied creative methods to open up a space for critical dialogue. The artistic, hands-on, visual ways of working provided students with an additional language to enhance their understandings and encourage them to express their feelings and views in dialogue with other students and themselves (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2021).

My story presented in Study V, as well as many other studies (Kirova & Emme, 2008; Lulle & Assmuth, 2013) show that research with immigrant students is important, but we need to focus on how to do it in a conscientious, ethical and inclusive way. Neither developing a non-stigmatising research question, nor thorough preparation and reflection prior to the study, are sufficient in conducting research with immigrant children. Rather, such research requires the constant self-awareness of the researcher and her ability to be not only reflective, but also reflexive. During the entire study and dissemination of findings, I encountered various challenges related to marginalisation, identity, knowledge-power relations, and ethics; therefore, I had to constantly reflect upon and re-negotiate my role, in the manner that Hoveid (2012) and Te Riele and Brooks (2013) point out and I discuss in subchapter 4.4.4. on positionality and in Study V.

My studies show that the first step in implementing inclusive practices is to develop trust – that is, trust between students and teachers, trust between coworkers, and trust between school and local municipality and community. It is also trust between researcher and participants and between co-researchers. The findings in Study V show that interviewer's background, knowledge, and experience can be helpful in reaching interviewees and gaining their trust. In order not to position participants according to a researcher's experience, I needed to be able to reflect on my own identity as well. As Day (2012) argues, our social position has an impact across all stages of research – it determines the lens through which we approach, investigate, and analyse data. It is not to be viewed as a weakness of research, but we need to be explicit about it and how it may influence our research. Therefore, Warin (2011) suggests that it is important to recognise similarities with participants of our research – or "me too moments" – and, at the same time, to revisit our own experiences and assumptions and acknowledge dissimilarities. I believe we should apply this approach to inclusive practices in schools and teacher education as well.

6.3 A whole approach to inclusion

In all five studies that comprise this dissertation there are examples of good practices. One common theme of these examples is a holistic approach to inclusion; that is, looking at children/study participants/students as a whole and moving beyond the

technicist teaching of language only/researching. As teachers in my studies argued, inclusive practices should be a collective responsibility. Such practices should revolve around the well-being of children and their families. Improvement on the path toward equity and inclusion is only possible if representatives from all areas – schools, teacher education, and research – manage to strengthen collaboration and work together.

Such a whole approach requires constant development in line with changing society and a dialogue on a common goal between various actors – schools, families, policies, teacher educators. When we scrutinise how Icelandic society has been developing in the past two decades we can see some rapid changes, including different patterns of migration, the growing share of refugees, more children with trauma and/or no experience of schooling. At the same time, more and more negative discussion can be heard in society, politics, media, and even within the school walls. How do various actors use research, changes in policies and teacher education to respond to these recent changes? What has changed since I began my research?

Considering Ainscow et al.'s (2012) ecology of equity, it seems that Icelandic schools stand on their own in tackling issues *within school*, but their practices have an important impact on student experiences of inclusion and agency and may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions. At the same time, the four schools from my studies seem to tackle *between-* and *beyond-school* issues in different ways. Findings from Icelandic part of Study III show that, unlike in urban schools, where teachers routinely receive training in working with immigrant students, the investigated rural schools use a strategy of inviting specialists from the capital area to prepare whole school communities to better receive and work with immigrant students. Yet, it is uncertain whether this practice is true for all rural schools. Such autonomy and flexibility in terms of implementation of policies and unregulated support and evaluation of their implementation may therefore lead to uneven opportunities for immigrant and refugee students on the one hand, and for teachers and schools working with these students on the other (Ainscow et al., 2012).

When it comes to *beyond school* (Ainscow et al., 2012) and to the underlying social and economic processes at the national (and European and global) level out of which local conditions arise, the context of the social space seems to influence immigrant students' experiences of inclusion. Study III might implicitly reflect this when it compares economic immigrants in Iceland and refugees in Sweden. Based on our findings, one might ask what it means to be part of a group? Or to put it differently, what does social inclusion and equity mean in this context? In Study III, we pose the question of whether ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in everyday practice is something that can be achieved at a school level, or is it more of a societal issue – and a good example of how *within school* and *beyond school* can work or fail to act together toward inclusion. In my current work with refugees, including refugee children, I see many cases of trauma affecting individuals'

abilities to listen, receive information, participate, and learn. Many of the individuals I meet have their hearts and minds still with their families, in their home countries. I sometimes feel I lack the resources to support them.

Although it is difficult for schools, teachers, and administrators to have an impact on demography or resources available, some of them show initiative and are positive examples that both teaching institutions and policy makers (*beyond school*), as well as other schools (*between school*) can learn from. Yet, as Ainscow et al. (2012) argue, none of the three areas of the ecology of equity exists in a vacuum. Therefore, even if schools improve their practices, for the educational system to be equitable, the underlying social and economic conditions need to change as well. Improvement on the path toward equity is only possible if representatives from all areas manage to strengthen collaboration and to work together on a common agenda.

Ainscow et al. (2012) use the concept of ecology of equity, but in this project a concept of "ecology of inclusion" could be applied. In Study II it is not only the school, but the entire community, including the local municipality, that work together to include immigrant students. They do so by engaging with the differences of individuals living in the area and approaching each one according to their needs and abilities, as argued previously by Uusitalo and Assmuth (2013). Immigrant students' participation is encouraged and acted upon and the growing diversity in the local community seems to bring forward positive and sometimes unexpected outcomes for all.

The action plan published by the Icelandic government in the fall of 2024 emphasises ensuring that "the Icelandic education system meets the academic and social needs of children and youth with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds at all levels of education" (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024b, p. 14). This will include developing harmonised procedures for the reception and education of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To achieve this goal, it is crucial that schools are equipped with study materials and tools and receive effective advice and specific support in more complex situations. The aim is to develop support and services in the following areas:

"a) Icelandic as a second language

b) inclusion and multicultural education

c) literacy counselling and status assessment

d) parental co-operation

e) education and professional development of teachers and other staff

f) development and distribution of study materials and other tools." (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024b, p. 14).

The bodies responsible for implementation of the plan are the Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs, together with co-operating partners including The Directorate of Education and School Services, local authorities, universities, the educational community, the Icelandic Teachers' Union, Home and School Association and Móðurmál – the Association on Bilingualism. The focus will be on ensuring these services all over the country with a focus on local authorities' school offices, preschools, compulsory and secondary schools, and leisure activities in the local environment (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024b). This action plan is the first holistic approach to inclusion in Iceland. My hope is that it leads to more equitable and inclusive practices that all students deserve.

7 Conclusions

Conducting my doctoral research was a journey that took much longer than I initially planned. For a long time, I felt stuck, and I thought that I was not adding anything new to the current discourse on inclusion of immigrant students in Iceland. Gaining important experience during my journey, through cooperation with other researchers, university teaching, managing refugee reception, and participating in local politics in one municipality helped me in finding missing puzzles to my story. I started to notice the connections as well as challenges between the different roles I was in at the same time, all related to the issues of education and/or immigrants. My doctoral research took a new course as I went further and deeper than I expected into analysing the concept of inclusion.

When looking back, I feel that it was a well-thought-of and right decision. I think that by rushing the project, I would not have reached the same conclusions. There has been wide range of research on inclusion of immigrant students in Iceland and abroad, but the novelty of my study lies in looking at the phenomena from a broad perspective, being an immigrant myself and having experiences in different roles. As I was moving further in the research, I felt that adding new angles of the interplay of research, teacher education, and school practice would help me understand this complex topic better. I believe that now I have the picture that I was looking for at the beginning of my PhD journey. My journey as a doctoral candidate is in itself a contribution, not only to my own learning but to other researchers' journeys. How can I apply the knowledge I gained in my current work and in future endeavours and how can my experience benefit other researchers and practitioners?

I consider my research question – How does the education system and education research engage with immigrant students to promote, develop, and sustain inclusive practices? – to be essential to ask in Iceland's increasingly multicultural landscape. The most important lesson of my study is to look beyond the add-on approach, focusing on teaching the language and assuming that, if successful, it will ensure inclusion of immigrant students. We need to shift our emphasis to the whole child and its family and to the importance of social and mental well-being. Like other countries, Iceland is currently experiencing a growing number of political refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Africa, and South America– unlike the previous streams of economic immigrants mostly from Europe, America, and Asia. In my everyday work with refugee children and their families I see that the first step, which often may take a long time, is to make individuals feel welcome and safe and to build trust. Without that foundation,

we cannot expect people to open and be willing to participate and learn. At the same time, without feeling safe, people will not feel included or that they belong. I hope that in the future we see more research with these new members of the society.

Future research could focus on the sustainability of inclusive teacher practices and the importance of teachers' continuous cooperation within and beyond schools in developing practices responding to the needs of diverse students. It would be beneficial to explore the specific professional development training needs of teachers more comprehensively. While my thesis emphasises inclusive practices and teacher-student relationships, a more explicit focus on the academic or long-term outcomes (measurable academic success or other indicators of student well-being) of these practices would provide a clearer picture of their effectiveness. There is also a need for more longitudinal studies on the effects of plurilingualism policies and comparative rural-urban analyses.

The recurring theme of immigrant girls feeling excluded, both in the Swedish and Icelandic contexts, could be further explored. While my research highlights these experiences, there could be a more detailed analysis of the intersectionality of gender, culture, and immigration status, as this may impact the sense of belonging and integration in different ways. Finally, the voices of under-researched groups of immigrant children and youth, including students with special needs and LGBT students, should become more prominent in future studies.

Inclusion should happen in the classroom, but it should also occur in the school corridor and cafeteria, in after-school activities, and in the local community. It should be visible in policy and in public discourse. It should be core topic in teacher education and research. Inclusion starts with each of us.

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Original Publications

Paper I

Paper I

Netla – Veftímarit um uppeldi og menntun

Sérrit 2016 – Námsrými félagslegs réttlætis og menntunar án aðgreiningar/Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice

Menntavísindasvið Háskóli Íslands

Ritrýnd grein birt 31. desember 2016

►► Yfirlit greina

Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Edda Óskarsdóttir, Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka og Karen Rut Gísladóttir

Námsrými byggð á auðlindum nemenda

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Aukið flæði fólks á milli landa hefur leitt til vaxandi fjölbreytileika nemenda í íslenskum skólum. Sú þróun hefur áhrif á störf skóla sem þurfa að koma til móts við nemendur með ólíkan menningarbakgrunn, tungumál og trúarbrögð. Þessi breyting kallar einnig á fjölmenningarlega kennsluhætti þar sem auðlindir nemenda eru nýttar og þeir studdir til að verða hamingjusamir einstaklingar, þroska með sér forvitni, njóta þess að læra og þjálfast í gagnrýnni hugsun. Fræðilegur rammi rannsóknarinnar sem hér er fjallað um er byggður á hugmyndafræði menningarnæmrar kennslu, hugmyndum um námsrými og notkun félags- og menningarlegra auðlinda nemenda til að koma til móts við þá í námi og félagslegum aðstæðum.

Í greininni er sagt frá eigindlegri rannsókn. Tilgangurinn var að kanna hvernig kennarar í þremur grunnskólum skapa námsrými sem byggist á auðlindum nemenda af erlendum uppruna. Markmiðið var að bæta skilning á því hvernig félags- og menningarlegar auðlindir nemenda verða greindar og nýttar til að skipuleggja nám og kennslu fyrir nemendur af erlendum uppruna. Rannsóknarspurningin var: Hvernig birtast námsrými í kennslu sem byggist á félags- og menningarlegum auðlindum nemenda af erlendum uppruna? Þátttakendur í rannsókninni voru kennarar í þremur grunnskólum og nemendur þeirra. Gagna var aflað með vettvangsathugunum og viðtölum.

Niðurstöður benda til þess að kennarar og fagfólk í skólunum leggi sig fram um að skapa námsrými fyrir nemendur þar sem þeir fá tækifæri til að vinna og læra og eru hvattir til þátttöku, samræðna og ígrundunar. Lausnamiðaðir kennsluhættir, hvatning til að nota móðurmál og hlý móttaka nemenda stuðla að góðum árangri skóla í að skapa námsrými þar sem námið hefur gildi fyrir nemendur með ólíkan bakgrunn og tengist áhugasviði þeirra.

Learning spaces built on students' resources

► About the authors ► Key words

In the last few decades, technological, social and cultural changes have brought the education systems of the world new challenges to deal with. In this context, global migration between countries, as well as increased emphasis on the school policy of inclusive education has attracted people to an awareness of the diversity of students and the expectations of families and communities towards education. One of the biggest challenges in education in modern times is to find pedagogies and ways to accommodate this diversity.

Our vision is based on the idea that teachers create learning environments to support students and give them space to strengthen their minds and develop their skills. Empowering students can occur when teaching methods are based on social and democratic accountability and social justice, with trust and diversity prevailing in school. In such an environment teachers have the possibility of creating a learning space that supports students to participate actively (Duckworth, 2006; Gee, 2004; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers design learning spaces based on the resources of immigrant students. Immigrant students, in this study, are students who were born abroad or whose parents were born abroad (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). The aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of how social and cultural resources of students are analysed and used to plan teaching and learning for students of foreign origin. The research question is: How do learning spaces emerge based on the social and cultural resources of immigrant students?

The theoretical framework builds on a culturally responsive pedagogy and a critical education and pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of human intervention in transforming education. One way of empowering children through education is by noticing and making use of their cultural and linguistic resources. Rodriguez (2007) characterises resources as personal strengths and qualities, which emerge from and shape life experiences. We use these ideas to understand how teachers are working with their students and how they design their teaching. Finally, we explore the concept of learning spaces that allows us to investigate how the issues of social justice, equity, democracy, and human rights are embedded in the learning process.

The study is part of a larger Nordic research project, *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*. **In this article we present the data collected in three compulsory schools in Iceland, two in the capital area and one outside the capital area. Sampling was purposive in that all the participating schools were evaluated as being successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. Indicators such as average grades, test scores and dropout rates were used for school selection, as well as evaluations of school authorities (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). School administrators were asked to nominate teachers for participation who are effective in meeting diverse learners. ' needs. Twelve teachers and their students participated in the study, all of whom have been given pseudonyms. Qualitative data was collected through field observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers.**

Results indicate that teachers set out clear expectations for learning and achievement, while students get space to work and are encouraged to participate, discuss and reflect on their learning. It is understood that solution based teaching, encouragement to use native languages and a warm reception of students all contribute to the success of schools in meeting the diverse backgrounds of students. Thereby, creating a learning space where learning is based on students' resources and relates to their interest allows students to maintain ownership of their learning processes.

Inngangur

Síðustu áratugi hafa tækni-, félags- og menningarlegar breytingar fært menntakerfum heimsins nýjar áskoranir að takast á við. Í því samhengi má sérstaklega nefna að flutningar fólks á milli landa á heimsvísu og aukin áhersla á skólastefnuna skóli án aðgreiningar hefur vakið fólk til vitundar um fjölbreytileika nemenda og væntingar fjölskyldna og samfélaga til menntunar. Ein stærsta áskorunin sem kennarar standa frammi fyrir í skólastarfi er að leita leiða til að mæta þessum fjölbreytileika og þróa kennsluhætti sem koma til móts við ólíkan bakgrunn allra nemenda (Ainscow, 2008; Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir og Edda Óskarsdóttir, 2016; Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, 2003; Meijer, 2003). Kennsla sem tekur tillit til ólíkra félags- og menningarheima nemenda í öllu námi og fellur að fjölbreyttum nemendahópum þarf að vera í fyrirrúmi (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Í umhverfi

þar sem kennarar leggja samfélags- og lýðræðislega ábyrgð til grundvallar kennsluháttum sínum og félagslegt réttlæti, traust og margbreytileiki ríkir í skólum skapast rými til að efla hugann, þróa hæfni og styðja nemendur til virkrar þátttöku (Duckworth, 2006; Nieto, 2002; Ryan, 2006).

Rannsóknin sem hér er fjallað um er hluti af stærri rannsókn, en í þessum hluta verður því lýst hvernig námsrými sem byggjast á auðlindum nemenda af erlendum uppruna verða til. Þegar fjallað er um auðlindir nemenda er vísað til styrkleika þeirra og þeirrar menningar, reynslu, þekkingar og hæfni sem býr þar að baki (Rodriguez, 2007). Með nemendum af erlendum uppruna er átt við nemendur sem fæddir eru erlendis eða eiga foreldra sem eru fæddir erlendis (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). Markmið rannsóknarinnar var að þróa skilning og þekkingu á því hvernig félags- og menningarlegar auðlindir nemenda eru greindar og nýttar til að skipuleggja nám og kennslu fyrir nemendur af erlendum uppruna. Í brennidepli var nám og kennsla og skoðað var hvernig kennarar og nemendur skapa námsrými þar sem félagslegt réttlæti, jafnræði, lýðræði og mannréttindi eru höfð að leiðarljósi. Rannsóknarspurningin sem leitast var við að svara er: Hvernig birtast námsrými í kennslu sem byggist á félags- og menningarlegum auðlindum nemenda af erlendum uppruna? Rannsóknin var eigindleg. Í greininni er fjallað um kennslu nemenda af erlendum uppruna og fyrst og fremst stuðst við niðurstöður úr vettvangsathugunum en þær styrktar með niðurstöðum úr viðtölum og samræðum við kennarana sem tóku þátt í rannsókninni.

Fræðileg umgjörð

Námsrými (e. learning spaces) eru rými sem verða til við ákveðnar aðstæður og mótast af umhverfinu hverju sinni. Þau fela í sér félagslegar aðstæður sem gefa tækifæri til gagnvirkra samskipta ásamt því að hlúð er að þáttum sem hvetja, þroska og örva nám og styðja einstaklinga til að taka virkan þátt í námi og samfélagi (Gee, 2004; González, Moll og Amanti, 2005). Samkvæmt gagnrýnum kenningum (e. critical theory) um námsrými geta þau ekki verið hlutlaus. Til að þau stuðli að félagslegu réttlæti, jafnræði, lýðræði og mannréttindum er mikilvægt að námið dragi fram og byggist á auðlindum nemenda (Banks, 2007; Gee, 2004). Þannig er komið fram við einstaklinga í samræmi við áhuga þeirra, styrkleika, hæfni og þarfir. Í því felst jafnræði en ekki í því að koma fram við alla á nákvæmlega sama hátt (Ryan og Rottmann, 2007).

Hugmyndin um námsrými er ólík hugtakinu námsumhverfi (e. learning environment) sem vísar frekar til staðsetningar, aðstæðna og menningar þar sem nemendur læra. Segja má að mörg námsrými verði til innan hvers skóla og í hverri skólastofu og þau séu hluti af námsumhverfinu. Námsrými er ekki einungis að finna í sjálfu skólaumhverfinu. Þau er einnig að finna í daglegu lífi fólks. Innan skólaumhverfisins hafa bæði nemendur og kennarar tækifæri til að skapa slík rými og opna þau. Þegar best lætur verður þátttaka nemenda innan þessara rýma og tilfinningin fyrir því að þeir tilheyri í skólanum og samfélaginu sterkari (Banks, 2007; Booth, 2010; Gee, 2004). Í þessu sambandi er mikilvægt að nemendur fái að takast á við verkefni sem skipta þá máli og þeir hafa áhuga á (Gee, 2004). Við notum hugmyndir um námsrými til að draga fram hvernig námið byggist á félags- og menningarlegum auðlindum nemenda.

Til að valdefla nemendur er mikilvægt að nám þeirra sé byggt á þeim auðlindum (e. resources) sem þeir koma með í skólann (Freire, 2007). Hugtakið auðlindir hefur síðustu áratugi þróast innan kennslufræðinnar og er m.a. byggt á hugmyndum Moll, Amanti, Neff og González (1992) sem og González og samstarfsfélaga (2005) um þekkingarsjóði (e. funds of knowledge) nemenda. Auðlindir tengjast umræðum um styrkleika nemenda en hafa víðari skírskotun (Rodriguez, 2007). Styrkleikar eru auðlindir sem hægt er að koma auga á og nýta sem slíka, en ekki er litið á allar auðlindir sem styrkleika. Í sumum tilvikum eru auðlindir ýmist duldar öðrum eða jafnvel taldar til veikleika. Þannig að *styrkleikar* og *veikleikar* eru hugtök háð aðstæðum og viðhorfum á meðan auðlindir bara *eru* og bíða eftir því að verða virkjaðar. Horfa verður á auðlindir nemenda sem styrkleika til að hægt sé að skapa aðstæður þar sem þær eru þáttur í námi einstaklingsins. Hefðir og venjur innan menningarsamfélaga móta auðlindir einstaklinga sem verða að verkfærum sem fólk þróar við ólíkar aðstæður og nýtir til að skilja og takast á við það umhverfi sem það lifir í (Wertch, 1998). Í skólastarfi er mikilvægt að kennarar leggi sig fram um að koma auga á og virkja auðlindir nemenda. Slík næmni getur styrkt sjálfsmynd nemenda og auðveldað þeim að falla inn í nemendahópa í gegnum dagleg samskipti við þá (Harrell-Levy og Kerpelman, 2010). Ein leið til að valdefla nemendur er að veita menningarlegum auðlindum þeirra eftirtekt og hvetja þá til að nýta þær í námi og starfi.

Til að skoða ólík námsrými notum við hugmyndafræði menningarnæmrar kennslu (e. culturally responsive pedagogy) sem stundum er kölluð menningarmiðuð kennsla. Slík kennsla byggist á því að kortleggja þekkingu og reynslu nemenda og nota hana sem undirstöðu fyrir frekara nám (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Villegas og Lucas, 2002). Kennarar sem standa frammi fyrir því að þróa slíka kennslu verða að varast að falla í þá gryfju að byggja kennsluna á staðalímyndum um mismunandi menningarheima. Kennararnir þurfa því að vera félagslega meðvitaðir og leggja áherslu á virðingu fyrir fjölbreytileikanum. Það er hægt að gera með því að læra um líf, kunnáttu, lífssýn og viðhorf nemenda, horfa á þá sem færa einstaklinga og taka að sér það hlutverk að vera talsmaður þeirra allra (Nieto, 2002; Palmer og Martinez, 2013; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Sandhu, 2012). Bent hefur verið á ýmsar aðferðir sem hægt er að nota til að draga fram styrkleika nemenda, allt frá hlutverkaleikjum með yngstu nemendum eða leikskólabörnum (Riojas-Cortez, 2001) upp í menningarnæmt læsi (e. culturally relevant literacy) með eldri nemendum (Sandhu, 2012). Þannig opna kennarar rými þar sem menningarheimar nemenda verða efniviður í kennslu (Riojas-Cortez, 2001).

Með hugmyndafræði menningarnæmrar kennslu er sýnt hvernig kennarar geta nýtt auðlindir nemenda með erlendan bakgrunn til að styðja nám þeirra og félagslega hlutdeild í skólaumhverfinu. Hugmyndafræðin gefur jafnframt tækifæri til að skoða hvernig kennarar og nemendur geta samræmt sögulega, stofnanalega og pólitíska strauma sem eru samofnir þeim rýmum þar sem nám á sér stað (Giroux, 2001). Menntun og kennslufræði er ekki einungis til að læra um aðra, heldur til að koma auga á og vinna með eigin viðhorf til annarra og átta sig á hvernig þau hafa áhrif á skilning okkar á skólaumhverfinu og því starfi sem þar fer fram. Með því að átta sig á viðhorfum sínum til mismunandi tungumála, trúarbragða, menningar, þjóðernis og stöðu ólíkra hópa í þjóðfélaginu geta kennarar þróað félagslega meðvitund og unnið gegn mismunun. Nálgun menningarnæmrar kennslu krefst fjölbreytni og hugmyndaauðgi í kennsluháttum sem brýtur upp hefðir og endurskilgreinir valdastöður með það fyrir augum að takast á við þann raunveruleika sem nemendur búa við (Erickson, 1986).

Í þessari rannsókn skoðum við dæmi um námsrými þar sem kennsla er byggð á auðlindum nemenda og kennara. Dæmin eru tekin til að auka skilning á samskiptum, athöfnum og orðum sem stuðla að og skapa kennslufræði sem hefur félagslegt réttlæti að markmiði.

Rannsóknaraðferð

Hér er um að ræða eigindlega rannsókn sem ætlað var að auka skilning á námsrýmum sem kennarar og nemendur skapa í daglegum samskiptum og samveru. Tilgangurinn var að kanna námsrýmin sem birtast í kennslu þar sem kennarar vinna út frá auðlindum nemenda með erlendan bakgrunn. Markmiðið var að þróa betri skilning á því hvernig greina má og nýta menningar- og félagslegar auðlindir nemenda. Rannsóknarspurningin var: Hvernig birtast námsrými í kennslu sem byggist á félags- og menningarlegum auðlindum nemenda af erlendum uppruna?

Rannsóknin var tilkynnt til Persónuverndar og samþykkt þar. Upplýst samþykki, sem þýtt var á nokkur tungumál, var fengið frá öllum þátttakendum; kennurum, nemendum og foreldrum eða löglegum forráðamönnum nemenda. Helsta áskorunin í rannsókninni var að nýta ólíkan bakgrunn og þekkingu rannsakenda í gagnaöflunar- og gagnagreiningarferlinu. Við teljum þann margbreytileika sem bjó í rannsóknarhópnum einnig vera einn helsta styrk rannsóknarinnar. Til að tryggja trúverðugleika rannsóknarinnar var gagna aflað á fjölbreyttan hátt, yfir tvö skólaár, og fjórir rannsakendur tóku þátt í öflun þeirra og úrvinnslu (Taylor og Bogdan, 1998).

Þátttakendur

Rannsóknin er hluti af norrænu rannsóknarverkefni, *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*. Þessa grein byggjum við á gögnum sem safnað var í þremur grunnskólum á Íslandi, tveimur á höfuðborgarsvæðinu og einum utan þess. Skólarnir sem tóku þátt voru valdir með markmiðsúrtaki sem byggðist á fjölda erlendra nemenda í skólanum, góðum árangri á samræmdum prófum og jákvæðu ytra og innra mati. Auk þess var skólanámskrá og stefnuskrá skólanna höfð í huga og tekið tilliti til þátta er varða félagslegt réttlæti og skóla án aðgreiningar. Skólar þar sem þessi þættir voru ríkjandi voru valdir. Stjórnendur skólanna voru beðnir að tilnefna til þátttöku kennara sem þeir töldu að gengi vel að sinna nemendum af erlendum uppruna. Tólf kennarar, með íslenskan og erlendan bakgrunn, og nemendur þeirra tóku þátt í þessum hluta rannsóknarinnar. Kennararnir

kenndu ýmist í móttökudeild, íslensku sem annað tungumál, einstakar námsgreinar eða voru umsjónarkennarar í almennum bekk. Kennurum og nemendum eru gefin dulnefni í greininni.

Gagnasöfnun

Rannsóknin var eigindleg og var gögnum safnað með ýmsum hætti. Í þessari grein eru niðurstöður fyrst og fremst byggðar á gögnum sem söfnuðust í vettvangsathugunum og í formlegum og óformlegum viðtölum við kennara.

Rannsakendur fóru á vettvang og söfnuðu gögnum með fjórtán þátttökuathugunum í níu skólastofum. Vettvangsathuganirnar tóku allt frá tveimur klukkustundum til sex klukkustunda. Gagnasöfnun á vettvangi fór fram með skráningu, með hljóð- og myndbandsupptökum ásamt því að teknar voru ljósmyndir af kennslustofum og verkefnum nemenda. Vettvangsnótur urðu til með myndbandsupptökum, myndatökum og skráningu rannsakenda. Til að athugunin væri sem eðlilegust tóku rannsakendur þátt í kennslunni með því að aðstoða nemendur eins og þurfti og fengu þannig frá fyrstu hendi tækifæri til að upplifa kennsluhætti kennara og þátttöku nemenda.

Auk þátttökuathugana voru tekin 12 hálfopin viðtöl við kennara sem hvert um sig tók eina til tvær klukkustundir og síðan óformleg samtöl þar sem fylgt var gögnum sem safnast höfðu í vettvangsathugunum. Hálfopin viðtöl voru valin til að ná fram lýsingum og hugmyndum viðmælenda um eigin kennslu og einstaka atburði sem áttu sér stað á sem skýrastan og nákvæmastan hátt (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). Þessi nálgun gerði rannsakendum kleift að skipuleggja innihald viðtalanna um leið og hún gaf tækifæri fyrir opnar umræður. Þátttakendur voru beðnir að lýsa því hvernig þeir ynnu og lærðu og segja frá tækifærum og áskorunum sem þeir tækjust á við í starfi. Öll viðtölin voru hljóðrituð og afrituð orðrétt til að ná frásögnum kennaranna. Óformlegar samræður voru skráðar lauslega fyrst og síðan af meiri nákvæmni en þó eftir minni.

Gagnagreining

Gögnin voru greind með aðferðafræði eigindlegra rannsókna, nánar tiltekið með þemagreiningu, innihaldsgreiningu, kóðun og sífelldum samanburði (Braun og Clarke, 2006, 2013). Í fyrstu skoðuðum við og lásum gögnin hver fyrir sig og kóðuðum þau. Í næstu umferð unnum við fjórar saman og greindum gögnin nánar með aðferðafræði frásagnarýni (e. narrative inquiry) (Clandinin og Connelly, 2000). Áhersla var lögð á að draga fram atvik sem vörpuðu ljósi á sem flestar birtingarmyndir námsrýmis í menningarnæmri kennslu (Braun og Clarke, 2006, 2013). Við nýttum einnig forritið Atlas.ti við gagnagreininguna til að ná fram og kanna þýðingarmiklar upplýsingar sem finna má í stóru gagnasafni. Markmiðið með gagnagreiningunni var að greina það hvernig auðlindir nemenda af erlendum uppruna eru virkjaðar til að skapa námsrými sem eykur þátttöku þeirra og valdeflir þá.

Námsrými fyrir alla

Í þessum kafla verður fjallað um menningarnæma kennslu og þau þrjú meginþemu sem birtust í þátttökuathugunum, verkefnum nemenda og viðtölum við kennara. Fyrsta þemað lýsir því hvernig kennarar taka eftir og nýta auðlindir nemenda, þar með talið tungumál þeirra, menningu og þekkingu, til að skapa námsrými þar sem fjölbreyttir kennsluhættir eru hafðir í fyrirrúmi. Annað þemað lýsir samvinnu milli kennara og nemenda og hvernig kennarar skapa námsrými þar sem nemendur geta stutt hver annan í námi. Þriðja þemað lýsir næmni kennara á ólík tungumál og menningarheima og hvernig hann nýtir það til að skapa merkingarbært nám. Þemun birtast í frásögnum úr skólastofunum og eru þau dæmi um það hvernig félags- og menningarlegar auðlindir nemenda nýttust til að skipuleggja nám og kennslu fyrir nemendur af erlendum uppruna og hvernig námsrýmin urðu til.

Þema 1: Fjölbreytt kennsla

Í vinnu með nemendum af erlendum uppruna þurfa kennarar að búa yfir ólíkum leiðum í kennslu til að bregðast við nemendum á merkingarbæran hátt. Elsa, kennari á yngsta og miðstigi í móttökudeild, leggur sig fram um að finna leiðir til að byggja námið á reynslu og þekkingu nemenda eins og sjá má í eftirfarandi dæmi.

Á dimmum janúarmorgni 2015 tekur Elsa á móti fimmtán nemendum. Þeir eru á mismunandi aldri og búnir að búa mislengi á Íslandi. Í stofunni hangir mikið af myndrænu efni á veggjum. Þar eru meðal annars upplýsingar um hvernig styrkja megi tvítyngi í kennslu og gefnar eru nokkrar ábendingar, eins og að kenna nemendum hvernig þeir geti nýtt sér það tungumál sem þeir kunna til að læra fleiri tungumál, að sýna að það sé hægt að leika sér með tungumálin og að vekja athygli allra nemenda á hversu dýrmætt það er að kunna tungumál. Þar eru einnig stafróf á nokkrum tungumálum og sömuleiðis upplýsingar um íslenska jólasveina. Þennan janúarmorgun eru nemendur að læra um lýsingarorð. Níu nemendur sitja saman við þrjú borð – fjórir við eitt borðið, þrír við annað borð og tveir saman við það þriðja. Þeir eru að vinna einstaklingsverkefni í *Vinnubók: Listin að lesa og skrifa*. Fimm nemendur sitja við kringlótt borð og eru að spila *Lestrarspil*. Spilið samanstendur af spjöldum með myndum, orðmyndum og setningum og skiptist í fjóra hluta í samræmi við vinnubækurnar. Markmið spilsins er að þjálfa hljóðgreiningu, lestur stakra orða og stuttra setninga á fjölbreytilegan hátt. Francis, 8 ára nemandi frá Filippseyjum, situr einn við borð og er með blað með árstíðum fyrir framan sig. Verkefnið hans er að teikna myndir sem tengjast árstíðunum.

„Ég skil þetta ekki," kallar hann til Elsu. Elsa kemur til hans og sest hjá honum. Hún byrjar að útskýra orðin *vor*, *sumar*, *haust* og *vetur*. Hún sýnir honum verkefni eftir aðra nemendur og spyr,

„Viltu finna hvar er vor?" „Hvar er hlýtt?",

„Hvar eru blómin að vaxa?",

„Hvernig eru trén á litinn á haustin?"

Francis situr hljóður.

Elsa sýnir honum mynd af vetri: „En gaman á skautum" segir hún. „Já, ég elska að prófa," svarar Francis. Elsa ákveður að nota tölvu til að hjálpa Francis að tengja við viðfangsefnið og færir sig að henni ásamt honum. Í tölvunni skoða þau myndband um árstíðir. Elsa fer aftur yfir orðaforðann með áherslu á lýsingarorð. Hún vísar í mismunandi myndir sem birtast á skjánum – *hús*, *tré*, *gras*. Út frá þessum nafnorðum fer hún að spyrja um lýsingarorð,

„Hvernig eru tré á litinn?" spyr Elsa.

„Gult, rautt, brúnt. Hér, þetta er brúnt" svarar Francis og bendir á tré.

„En hvernig er húsið, er það stórt?" heldur Elsa áfram að spyrja.

„Nei, ekki stórt. Lítið," svarar hann.

Francis spyr líka mikið þegar hann bendir sjálfur á myndirnar: „Hvað kallast þetta?" Allt í einu birtist íkorni á skjánum. Francis brosir.

„Kannast þú við hann?" spyr hún. Francis jánkar.

„Veistu hvað hann heitir?" spyr hún.

„Nei," svarar Francis.

„Þetta er íkorni," útskýrir Elsa. Francis endurtekur: „Íkorni."

„Hvenær sérðu íkorna?" spyr Elsa. Francis hugsar aðeins.

„Haust," svarar hann.

Þau fara að tala um íkorna á Filippseyjum og reyna að tengja árstíðir þar og á Íslandi. Francis er spenntur að segja frá veðráttu og náttúru í sínu heimalandi. Eftir þessi sam-

> skipti yfir tölvunni sest Francis aftur við borðið sitt. Hann tekur blaðið og velur liti og byrjar að teikna árstíðarmyndirnar. Það er rólegt í kennslustofunni og nemendurnir vinna í verkefnunum sínum. „Jess," heyrist öðru hverju þegar einhver vinnur í *Lestrarspilinu*. Elsa er á ferð um stofuna og athugar hvernig öllum gengur. Í lok kennslustundarinnar fara allir í flöskustút til að æfa lýsingarorð. Þá setjast allir nemendur og kennarinn í hring. Fyrir framan hvern nemanda eru blöð á hvolfi með myndum af manneskjum. Einn nemandinn snýr flöskunni og sá sem flöskustútur lendir á þarf að útskýra það sem er á myndinni með því að nota lýsingarorð en án þess að segja hvað er á myndinni. Það eru myndir af fjölbreyttum einstaklingum á blöðunum. Hinir nemendurnir eiga að giska á hverju verið er að lýsa. Ef nemendur eiga erfitt með að útskýra lýsingarorðin á íslensku mega þeir nota líkamann eða orð á eigin móðurmáli til að tjá sig. Allir nemendurnir eru spenntir að giska á orðin og Elsa gætir þess að allir komist að og fái að tjá sig (Vettvangsathugun, 25. janúar 2015).

Þegar litið er inn í kennslustundina má sjá hvernig Elsa leggur sig fram um að skapa hlýlegt og þægilegt andrúmsloft með því að nálgast nemendur á fjölbreyttan hátt. Hún fylgist vel með hvort og þá hvernig nemendur læra. Þegar hún tekur eftir að Francis á erfitt með að skilja orðin á blaðinu beitir hún ýmsum kennsluaðferðum til að styðja hann. Hún byrjar á að setjast niður hjá honum þannig að þau sitji í sömu hæð og útskýrir verkefnið. Þegar hún sér að það hefur ekki tilætluð áhrif ákveður hún að nota tölvuna. Myndbandið með íkornanum kveikir áhuga Francis. Elsa tekur strax eftir því og grípur tækifærið til að draga fram auðlindir Francis og nýta þá reynslu og þekkingu sem hann býr yfir. Hún spyr hvort hann viti hvað dýrið heiti og þegar hann neitar því gefur hún honum íslenska orðið yfir það. Í gegnum þessi samskipti eflist Francis og hann nær að vinna verkefnið sjálfstætt. Það sem einkennir þessa kennslustund er næmni Elsu og hæfni hennar til að skapa fjölbreytt námsrými sem koma til móts við ólíka stöðu og þarfir nemenda.

Þema 2: Samvinna

Samvinna er leið sem mikilvægt er að nýta, bæði til að dýpka þekkingu og skilning á ólíkum viðfangsefnum og efla félagsleg tengsl milli nemenda. Þekking á kennsluaðferðinni *samvinnunám* getur komið að góðu gagni þegar hópvinna er skipulögð. Með því að fá nemendum ákveðin hlutverk og ábyrgð er hægt að auka samvinnuna og gildi og árangur hópvinnu verður markvissari. Margrét, stærðfræðikennari á unglingastigi, leggur mikið upp úr samskiptum nemenda í að finna lausnir á stærðfræðiverkefnum sem nemendur fást við, eins og eftirfarandi dæmi ber vitni um.

> Um leið og gengið er inn í kennslustofu Margrétar má finna leiðbeiningar til nemenda á veggjum um hvernig þeir geta unnið saman og aðstoðað hvern annan. Í stærðfræðitíma hjá 10. bekk byrjar Margrét kennslustundina á að fara yfir markmið dagsins. Í dag verður unnið með annars stigs jöfnur. Hún byrjar á að vinna með jöfnu sem nemendur áttu að gera heima. Fer yfir öll skrefin og teiknar upp fallið í hnitakerfi og um leið skráir hún á töfluna. Hún biður nemendur um að gæta þess að vera með allar teikningarnar sínar í stílabókinni því þær séu mikilvægar til að skilja hvað þeir eru að gera. Í bekknum eru 18 nemendur, ellefu eru tvítyngdir og átta þeirra eru af fyrstu kynslóð innflytjenda.
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> „Ég ætla að byrja á því að útskýra dæmið hérna fyrir ykkur og þið verðið bara að vera dugleg að hlusta," segir Margrét yfir hópinn. Hún skrifar dæmi á töfluna og teiknar gröf, spyr nemendur reglulega út í næstu skref og talar um ákveðin hugtök sem hún útskýrir sérstaklega. Hún notar orð eins og lóðrétt lína, samhverfur, speglun og núllstöðvar. Það eru aðallega tveir til þrír nemendur sem svara þegar hún spyr út í bekkinn, tvisvar kallar hún á aðra nemendur með nafni að svara. Þegar þeir geta ekki svarað kallar hún bara á annan – gerir ekkert mál úr því að sá fyrri hafi ekki svar á reiðum höndum. Ef nemendur biðja um útskýringu þá bakkar hún og fer betur í það sem hún var að gera.
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> Þegar Margrét er búin að fara yfir innlögn á töflunni setur hún fyrir heimavinnu og skrifar á töfluna hvaða dæmi á að vinna heima. Sum dæmin segir hún að séu þung og að hún ætli þeim sem eru í framhaldsskólaáfanganum að taka þau – hinir megi reyna við þau ef þeir vilja. Margrét minnir á að hún eigi eftir að fá bækurnar þeirra í hendurnar í apríl til að fara yfir og meta vinnu þeirra þannig að þau verði að vera samviskusöm.

> Nemendurnir byrja að vinna og Margrét gengur á milli og aðstoðar, minnir þá á að hjálpast að og spyrja næsta mann því það sé alltaf einhver nærri sem veit. Stofan er skipulögð þannig að nemendur sitja þrír til fimm saman í hópum og segir Margrét að hún raði í nýja hópa á þriggja vikna fresti. Við eitt borðið sitja Agnieszka, Monika, Darma, Patrick og Saraswati og ræða saman um dæmið sem þau eru að vinna. Þau hjálpast að við að útskýra hvað orðin þýða, grípa stundum til móðurmálsins til að útskýra fyrir hvert öðru, og komast síðan að niðurstöðu um hvaða leið sé best að fara við lausn verkefnisins. Nálægt kennaraborðinu situr Matas og er með aðra námsbók, svokallaða *Stjörnubók*. Margrét segir mér að hann sé nýkominn frá Litháen og sé ekkert kominn inn í málið og því gott fyrir hana að sjá stöðuna á honum í bók sem er ekki með texta. Hann situr á móti Andrius sem er líka frá Litháen en er kominn lengra í málinu og þeir spjalla saman (Vettvangsathugun, 24. febrúar 2014).

Af þessu dæmi má sjá að Margrét er vel meðvituð um stöðu nemenda og næm á þarfir þeirra. Þegar nýr nemandi kemur inn í bekkinn reynir hún að setja hann hjá nemanda af sama þjóðerni til að hann geti hjálpað honum að átta sig á aðstæðum og námsefninu á sameiginlegu tungumáli þeirra. Þá gerir hún ekkert úr því þegar nemandi getur ekki svarað spurningum hennar um efnið heldur snýr sér að næsta nemanda. Þannig gefur hún til kynna að það sé eðlilegt að nemendur skilji efnið misvel og að ábyrgðin á að öðlast skilning á námsefninu liggi bæði hjá nemandanum og henni. Enginn er píndur til að taka þátt. Margrét hvetur nemendur til að leita hver til annars ef þeir þurfa aðstoð því það sé alltaf einhver sem viti hvernig eigi að leysa verkefnið, og með því sýnir hún nemendum traust og virðingu. Þeir sem eru góðir í stærðfræði aðstoða aðra og Margrét segir að nýir nemendur sem eru sterkir í stærðfræði séu býsna fljótir að aðlagast hópnum því hinum nemendunum þyki gott að láta þá hjálpa sér. Í viðtali tók hún algebru sérstaklega sem dæmi því ef nemendur eru sterkir þar þá séu þeir fljótir að blómstra í stærðfræðinni þar sem áherslan er á *samvinnunám*. Í kennslustundinni mátti finna hvernig nemendahópurinn og Margrét mynduðu heildstætt námssamfélag; að kennarinn sýnir ábyrgð gagnvart nemendum og ber hagsmuni þeirra fyrir brjósti. Námið verður sameiginlegt verkefni kennarans og nemendanna.

Þema 3: Menningarnæmni

Næmni kennara fyrir ólíkum tungumálum og þeim menningarheimum sem liggja þar að baki gerir þeim kleift að skapa námsrými þar sem nemendur geta tengt saman ólík tungumál og menningu á merkingarbæran hátt. Það er þó ekki þar með sagt að kennarar þurfi að hafa þekkingu á móðurmáli nemenda til að gera þessar auðlindir sýnilegar. Námsrými sem byggjast á því að athygli er beint að auðlindum nemenda grundvallast á virðingu og trausti þannig að nemendur ekki aðeins þora að vera þeir sjálfir, heldur eru stoltir af bakgrunni sínum og skilja hvernig þeir geta nýtt hann til náms. Dæmi um slíka menningarnæmni má finna í kennsluháttum Maríu eins og eftirfarandi frásögn sýnir.

> Snemma í desember 2013 hitti María fjóra nemendur af erlendum uppruna til að kenna þeim um meltingarkerfi líkamans. Þetta voru þrír drengir og ein stúlka. Tomek og Bartek frá Póllandi, Aamina frá Sýrlandi og Hainad frá Thailandi. Aamina var alin upp við að nota þrjú tungumál, arabísku, búlgörsku og ensku. Nemendur voru komnir mislangt í íslenskunámi. María er sjálf af pólskum uppruna. Á meðan á kennslustundinni stóð notaði María ólíkar leiðir til að koma viðfangsefninu til skila. Hún talaði um meltingarveginn og notaði bæði myndir og líkan af beinagrind til að útskýra heiti líffæra og sýna hvar þau væru staðsett í líkamanum. María talaði íslensku allan tímann en nemendur voru hvattir til að finna fagorð á eigin tungumáli á sama tíma og þeir lærðu heitin á íslensku. Einnig benti María þeim á að vinna saman og nota tölvu við námið ef það hentaði. Hún hvatti nemendur í hvívetna til að nota móðurmálið sitt, sama hvaða aðferð þeir nýttu sér við námið.
>
> Í upphafi tímans sagði María nemendum að í dag ætluðu þau að læra um meltinguna.
>
> Hún lét nemendur búa til smáorðabók og leiðbeindi þeim um að búa til tvo dálka á blaðsíðurnar. Í fyrri dálkinn áttu þeir að skrifa fagorðin á íslensku. Í aftari dálkinn áttu þeir að skrifa orðin á þeim tungumálum sem þeir búa yfir. Eftir að hafa útskýrt þetta fyrir nemendum las hún upp nokkur orð sem hún hafði skrifað á töfluna; *að melta*, *melting*, *meltingarvegur*, og bað nemendur um að byrja á að skrifa þessi orð í orðabókina.

„Þegar ég borða morgunmat fer morgunmaturinn minn hér ... og ég þarf að melta hann," útskýrir María um leið og hún bendir upp í munninn og notar eigin líkama til að benda á leiðina ofan í maga. Hún snýr sér að Aaminu og spyr; „veistu hvað það mundi vera á búlgörsku?"

"Smilam" svarar Aamina. María gengur að tússtöflu og gerir sig líklega til að skrifa orðið á töfluna með kýrillísku letri. Hún hefur ekki notað það lengi og biður Aaminu um að endurtaka orðið og hallar sér fram til að heyra betur framburð hennar um leið og hún skrifar orðið á töfluna: смилам.

„Svona?" spyr hún og bendir á orðið. Hún fær jákvæð viðbrögð frá Aaminu. María brosir um leið og hún biður Aaminu um að skrifa arabíska orðið yfir meltingu því hún sjálf sé ekki búin að ná tökum á því tungumáli. Aamina kemur að töflunni og skrifar orðið á arabísku. María biður hana að lesa það. „Hljómar vel," segir hún þegar Aamina hefur lesið orðið. Á sama tíma horfa pólsku strákarnir á töfluna og ræða saman. María snýr sér að þeim og bendir á orðið „melting".

„Vitið þið hvað þetta er?" spyr hún. Þeir kinka kolli og um leið og þeir segja orðið skrifar María það á töfluna. „Ókei, flott," segir hún, „en hvað er þá *meltingarvegur*?" Hún horfir á strákana. Þeir gefa sér smá tíma til að hugsa.

„*Proces trawienia,*" svarar Bartek.

„Nei, ekki alveg," segir María hvetjandi „meltingarvegur, hvað er *vegur*?" Hún brýtur orðið niður til að gefa strákunum frekari vísbendingar.

„*Sciana,*" giskar Tomek.

„Nei," svarar María.

„*Scianka*," segir Bartek.

„Nei," svarar María, „*veggur sciana*. *V-e-g-u-r*, eins og Laugavegur, Reykjanesvegur." Hún leggur ríka áherslu á að gera greinarmun á að í fyrra orðinu er lokhljóð/ og í seinna orðinu er önghljóð.

Bartek prófar sig áfram.

„To jest *ulica,*" segir hann hikandi. María gengur um og gefur nemendum tíma til að hugsa.

„Segir það ykkur ekkert?" spyr hún, „Nýbýla*vegur*, meltingar*vegur*". Hún leggur áherslu á orðið *vegur*. Allt í einu virðist kvikna ljós hjá Bartek.

„*Droga* pokarmowa," svarar hann. María segir ekkert, en brosir til Bartek.

„Já, vegur er það sem við keyrum eða löbbum, svona," segir Maria um leið og hún setur báða handleggi beint fram til að mynda veg.

"Melting, þið vitið hvað það er. Meltingarvegur er vegurinn hér," segir Maria og notar sjálfa sig til að sýna leið meltingarvegarins frá munni og ofan í maga.

„Tomek, vilt þú sýna mér hér hvar meltingarvegurinn er?" spyr María um leið og hún bendir á beinagrindina. Hún bíður eftir viðbrögðum. Eftir smástund endurtekur hún spurninguna „Viltu sýna mér?" Tomek stendur upp og gengur að beinagrindinni, bendir á hálsinn og fer svo niður eftir meltingarveginum á sama tíma og hann segir; „*Zaczyna sie od gardla, tutaj leci tedy, do zoladka, potem przez zoladek do flaki, pozniej przez grube jelito, cienkie i dolem*."

„Ókei," segir María og Tomek sest aftur í sætið sitt (Vettvangsathugun, 2. desember 2013).

Samskipti Maríu við nemendur sýna hvernig hún virkjar þá með því að gefa móðurmáli þeirra sérstakt gildi þegar hún kannar bakgrunnsþekkingu þeirra á viðfangsefninu sem þeir eru að fást við, í þessu tilviki meltingunni. Með því að draga fram tungumálaauðlindir nemenda á þennan hátt og þróa þær áfram um leið og nemendur eru að byggja upp skilning, þekkingu og orðaforða á þessu fagsviði á íslensku beinir María athygli nemenda að því að þeir kunna heilmikið þó þeir kunni ekki allt. Þeir búa yfir ákveðinni grunnþekkingu sem þeir geta nýtt til frekara náms. María sýnir tungumálum nemenda áhuga og virðingu. Þetta má sjá í samskiptum hennar við Aaminu þar sem hún leggur sig fram um að skrifa orðin sem hún kemur með á töfluna. Í samskiptum við pólsku drengina má sjá hvernig kunnátta og þekking Maríu á íslensku og pólsku og þeim menningarheimum sem liggja að baki þessum tungumálum hjálpar henni að greina og bregðast við þeirri merkingu sem drengirnir leggja í orð og draga fram í gegnum samræður. Þegar Bartek dregur orðasambandið „proces trawienia“, sem á íslensku yrði þýtt sem *meltingarferli*, inn í samræðurnar getur hún sagt honum að hann sé nálægt réttu merkingunni. Það vanti aðeins örlítið upp á, og hún gefur honum vísbendingar með því að leggja sérstaka áherslu á orðið *vegur* í *meltingarvegur*. Tomek giskar á orðið *sciana* sem á íslensku þýðir *veggur*. Þegar María svarar því neitandi kemur Bartek með orðið *scianka* sem á íslensku þýðir *lítill veggur*. María áttar sig á hvað nemendur eru að gera. Þeir eru að reyna að þýða orðið *vegur* yfir á pólsku en vandi þeirra liggur í að gera mun á framburði lokhljóðsins í orðinu *veggur* og önghljóðsins í orðinu *vegur* því slíkur greinarmunur er ekki til í pólsku. Þeir þekkja greinilega orðið *veggur* á íslensku og koma því með pólska þýðingu á því orði inn í umræðuna. Þegar María áttar sig á í hverju vandi nemenda liggur staðfestir hún að orðið *veggur* sé *sciana* á pólsku en þau séu að leita að þýðingu á orðinu *vegur* og hún leggur ríka áherslu á framburð lokhljóðsins í *vegur*. Með því að vinna svona með hljóðkerfisvitund nemenda tekst henni að samþætta íslenskunám nemenda og náttúrufræðikennsluna á merkingarbæran hátt. Í kjölfarið dregur hún fram götuheitin Laugavegur og Reykjanesvegur til að gefa vísbendingu um hvernig orðið *vegur* er notað til að tákna einhverja leið. Bartek prófar sig áfram út frá þeirri vísbendingu með því að setja inn orðastrenginn *to jest* ***ulica*** en á íslensku þýðir það *hér er gata*. Í Póllandi er orðið *ulica* oft notað í lok gatnaheita og er því rökrétt að hann prófi að nota það orð til að þýða íslenska orðið *vegur*. María gefur nemendum bæði tíma til að hugsa og hvatningu og vísbendingar til að giska í leit að réttri merkingu. Að lokum kemur Bartek með pólska orðasambandið *droga pokarmowa* sem þýðir *meltingarvegur*. María samþykkir það og dregur svo umræðuna saman með því að biðja Tomek að sýna sér á beinagrindinni hvar meltingarvegurinn liggur.

Framangreind dæmi sýna hvernig þau námsrými sem verða til og þróast á milli kennara og nemenda einkennast af umburðarlyndi og trausti. Nemendur þora að prófa sig áfram, gera mistök og ræða hlutina. Við undirbúning kennslu er aðeins hægt að skipuleggja stóra rammann í kringum svona námsrými, þ.e. að ákveða viðfangsefni og undirbúa verkefnin sem nemendur takast á við. Í kennslunni þarf kennarinn svo að nýta innsæi sitt og þekkingu til að skapa aðstæður sem hvetja nemendur til að nýta eigin auðlindir svo að merkingarbært nám geti átt sér stað.

Umræður

Í niðurstöðum höfum við dregið fram hvernig kennarar skapa námsrými fyrir nemendur af erlendum uppruna út frá félags- og menningarlegum auðlindum nemenda. Ef horft er með gleraugum menningarnæmrar kennslu á námsrýmin sem kennararnir sköpuðu innan kennslustofu sinnar má sjá hvernig þeir leggja sig fram um að nýta auðlindir nemenda í námi og kennslu til valdeflingar (Florian og Linklater, 2010; Freire, 2009; Giroux, 1997, 2001). Kennararnir nota þá þekkingu og faglega reynslu sem þeir búa yfir, sýna nemendum af erlendum uppruna áhuga og nálgast kennslu sína og viðfangsefni á skapandi hátt. Þegar þeir koma inn í kennslustofuna eru þeir vel skipulagðir og með skýr markmið til að byggja á en um leið meðvitaðir um að vera vel vakandi og nýta innsæi sitt til að bregðast við aðstæðum hér og nú. Til að koma til móts við ólíkan bakgrunn nemenda nýta þeir fjölbreyttar leiðir í kennslunni, eins og sjá má í kennsluháttum Elsu þar sem nemendur takast á við ólík viðfangsefni á margvíslegan hátt þegar þeir vinna með lýsingarorð (Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir og Edda Óskarsdóttir, 2016).

Námsumhverfið einkenndist af hlýju, þolinmæði og umburðarlyndi og við það sköpuðust námsrými fyrir nemendur til að prófa sig áfram, læra nýja hluti og æfa sig. Samvinna kennara og nemenda sem og nemenda á milli var stór þáttur í að skapa þessar aðstæður. Dæmi um samspil kennara og nemenda birtist í vinnu Margrétar þegar hún vann með allan hópinn í einu. Með upp-

röðun í skólastofunni og með því að biðja nemendur að hjálpa sér að útskýra mismunandi hugtök stærðfræðinnar virkjar hún ólíkar auðlindir við lausn verkefna. Þegar nemendur vinna í hópum endurspeglast þessi samvinna í því hvernig þeir hjálpa hver öðrum og verða þannig auðlindir í námi (Banks, 2007; Freire, 2007).

Kennarar tengja þekkingu og reynslu nemenda við námið og ná þannig meiri dýpt í kennslunni (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Villegas og Lucas, 2002). Næmni kennara og ábyrgðartilfinning gagnvart nemendum var sýnileg. Dæmi um þetta birtist í kennsluháttum Maríu þegar hún vinnur með tveimur drengjum af pólskum uppruna. Þar sjáum við hvernig hún greinir og bregst við tilraunum nemenda til að leggja merkingu í hugtök náttúrufræðinnar út frá þekkingu sinni á pólsku og íslensku og menningarheimunum sem liggja þar að baki. Öll dæmin sýna að móðurmál nemenda eiga greiðan aðgang að kennslunni og eru nýtt til að byggja undir grunnþekkingu nemenda á hugtökum eða tiltæku efni og kennararnir hvetja nemendur til að ræða við samnemendur á sínu móðurmáli. Meðvitund kennaranna um mikilvægi þess að nýta auðlindir nemenda, reynslu, tungumál, áhugamál, hæfileika, styrkleika gerir þessi námsrými að góðum dæmum um kennslu sem hægt er að læra af.

Fyrri rannsóknir benda til þess að kennsla virðist einblína um of á vankunnáttu nemenda af erlendum uppruna í ríkjandi máli og vanþekkingu á menningu komulandsins (Nieto, 1996, Tran, 2015). Það sem einkennir hinsvegar námsrýmin í þessari rannsókn er að kennararnir hafa skýrar væntingar til nemenda um nám og árangur um leið og þeir gefa nemendum rými til að vinna og hvetja þá til þátttöku, ígrundunar, umræðna og samvinnu. Þannig er opnað á margvísleg námsrými í skólasamfélaginu sem eru byggð á hugmyndafræði félagslegs réttlætis þar sem nemendur eru hvattir til að taka ábyrgð á eigin námi og þroska (Villegas og Lucas, 2002).

Við vonum að dæmin í þessari grein verði hvatning fyrir aðra til að ígrunda og prófa sig áfram í því að koma til móts við margbreytilega nemendahópa í margvíslegum aðstæðum.

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Um höfunda

Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir er prófessor við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Áður en hún hóf störf þar kenndi hún í 26 ár við grunnskóla og sinnti bæði bekkjar- og sérkennslu. Hafdís leggur áherslu á hugmyndir skóla án aðgreiningar, fjölmenningarlega kennslu, þróun námskrár og kennsluhátta í skóla án aðgreiningar, fagmennsku kennara og samstarf þeirra aðila sem koma að skólastarfi. Hafdís hefur tekið þátt í alþjóðlegu samstarfi í Evrópu, Bandaríkjunum og Ástralíu. Hún leggur áherslu á eigindlegar rannsóknir, starfendarannsóknir og faglega sjálfsrýni háskólakennara.

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Efnisorð

Námsrými – skóli án aðgreiningar – menningarnæm kennslufræði - auðlindir – valdefling.

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Edda Óskarsdóttir (edo6@hi.is) is a doctoral student at the School of Education at the University of Iceland. She finished her BEd degree as a teacher from Iceland University of Education in 1990 and a MA degree in special needs education from University of Oregon in 1993. Edda began her part time doctoral studies in 2008 and her research focus is on inclusive education and how special needs education can be inclusive.

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Karen Rut Gísladóttir is an assistant professor at the University of Iceland. She is a former elementary teacher. She completed her PhD from the University of Iceland in March 2011. Her theses is an action research where she explored her own practice to understand how she could base students learning on their linguistic and cultural resources. Karen's research interest is in socio-cultural perspective on language and literacy teaching and learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. Her research methodology is action research, qualitative research methodology and self-study.

Key words

Learning spaces – inclusion – culturally responsive pedagogy - resources – empowerment.

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Learning spaces built on students' resources

In the last few decades, technological, social and cultural changes have brought the education systems of the world new challenges to deal with. In this context, global migration between countries, as well as increased emphasis on the school policy of inclusive education has attracted people to an awareness of the diversity of students and the expectations of families and communities towards education. One of the biggest challenges in education in modern times is to find pedagogies and ways to accommodate this diversity.

Our vision is based on the idea that teachers create learning environments to support students and give them space to strengthen their minds and develop their skills. Empowering students can occur when teaching methods are based on social and democratic accountability and social justice, with trust and diversity prevailing in school. In such an environment teachers have the possibility of creating a learning space that supports students to participate actively (Duckworth, 2006; Gee, 2004; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers design learning spaces based on the resources of immigrant students. Immigrant students, in this study, are students who were born abroad or whose parents were born abroad (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). The aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of how social and cultural resources of students are analysed and used to plan teaching and learning for students of foreign origin. The research question is: How do learning spaces emerge based on the social and cultural resources of immigrant students?

The theoretical framework builds on a culturally responsive pedagogy and a critical education and pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of human intervention in transforming education. One way of empowering children through education is by noticing and making use of their cultural and linguistic resources. Rodriguez (2007) characterises resources as personal strengths and qualities, which emerge from and shape life experiences. We use these ideas to understand how teachers are working with their students and how they design their teaching. Finally, we explore the concept of learning spaces that allows us to investigate how the issues of social justice, equity, democracy, and human rights are embedded in the learning process.

The study is part of a larger Nordic research project, *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*. In this article we present the data collected in three compulsory schools in Iceland, two in the capital area and one outside the capital area. Sampling was

purposive in that all the participating schools were evaluated as being successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. Indicators such as average grades, test scores and dropout rates were used for school selection, as well as evaluations of school authorities (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). School administrators were asked to nominate teachers for participation who are effective in meeting diverse learners' needs. Twelve teachers and their students participated in the study, all of whom have been given pseudonyms. Qualitative data was collected through field observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

Results indicate that teachers set out clear expectations for learning and achievement, while students get space to work and are encouraged to participate, discuss and reflect on their learning. It is understood that solution-based teaching, encouragement to use native languages and a warm reception of students all contribute to the success of schools in meeting the diverse backgrounds of students. Thereby, creating a learning space where learning is based on students' resources and relates to their interest allows students to maintain ownership of their learning processes.

Introduction

In recent decades, technological, social, and cultural changes have introduced new challenges for education systems worldwide. In this context, global migration and the increased emphasis on inclusive education policies have raised awareness of student diversity and the expectations of families and communities regarding education. One of the greatest challenges teachers face in schools is finding ways to respond to this diversity and developing teaching methods that accommodate the varied backgrounds of all students (Ainscow, 2008; Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir & Edda Óskarsdóttir, 2016; Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, 2003; Meijer, 2003). Teaching that considers students' diverse social and cultural backgrounds in all aspects of learning and aligns with diverse student groups must be prioritized (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In an environment where teachers base their teaching practices on social and democratic responsibility, and where social justice, trust, and diversity are central values in schools, space is created for students' intellectual development, skills enhancement, and active participation (Duckworth, 2006; Nieto, 2002; Ryan, 2006).

The study presented here is part of a larger research project. This article describes how learning spaces that build on the resources of immigrant students are created. When discussing students' resources, we refer to their strengths as well as the culture, experiences, knowledge, and skills that underpin them (Rodriguez, 2007). Immigrant students are defined as those born abroad or those whose parents were born abroad (Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). The aim of the study was to develop a better understanding of how students' social and cultural resources are identified and used in the planning of learning and teaching for immigrant students. The focus was on learning and teaching, examining how teachers and students create learning spaces guided by principles of social justice, equity, democracy, and human rights. The research question of this study was: How do learning spaces emerge in teaching that is based on the social and cultural resources of immigrant students? This was a qualitative study. The article discusses the teaching of immigrant students, primarily drawing on findings from field observations, supplemented by results from interviews and informal conversations with the teachers who participated in the study.

Theoretical Framework

Learning spaces are spaces that emerge under specific conditions and are shaped by their context each time. They encompass social contexts that provide opportunities for mutual

communication while nurturing factors that encourage, develop, and stimulate learning, and supporting individuals in actively participating in education and society (Gee, 2004; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). According to critical theory, learning spaces cannot be neutral. To promote social justice, equity, democracy, and human rights, learning spaces must be structured around students' resources (Banks, 2007; Gee, 2004). This ensures that individuals are approached according to their interests, strengths, skills, and needs. Equity does not mean treating everyone exactly the same but rather responding to each individual's unique background (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007).

The concept of a learning space differs from the concept of a learning environment, which refers more to the location, conditions, and culture in which students learn. Many learning spaces exist within every school and classroom, forming part of the broader learning environment. Learning spaces are not limited to school settings; they also exist in daily life. Within the school environment, both students and teachers have the opportunity to create and open such spaces. When this process is successful, students' participation in these spaces increases, strengthening their sense of belonging in school and society (Banks, 2007; Booth, 2010; Gee, 2004). In this context, it is crucial for students to engage in tasks that matter to them and align with their interests (Gee, 2004). We use the concept of learning spaces to highlight how education is built on students' social and cultural resources.

To empower students, it is essential that their learning is based on the resources they bring to school (Freire, 2007). The concept of resources has evolved in education science over the past decades and is based on the idea of funds of knowledge developed by Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) and further expanded by González et al. (2005). Resources are linked to discussions about students' strengths but have a broader scope (Rodriguez, 2007). Strengths are resources that can be recognized and utilized, but not all resources are necessarily seen as strengths. In some cases, resources may be hidden from others or even perceived as weaknesses. Thus, strengths and weaknesses are context-dependent and shaped by perceptions, while resources inherently exist, awaiting to be activated. Viewing students' resources as strengths enables teachers to create conditions where these resources become an integral part of individual's learning. Cultural traditions and community practices shape an individual's resources, which become tools people develop in diverse contexts and use to understand and navigate their environments (Wertch, 1998). In schools, it is crucial that teachers recognize and activate students' resources. Such awareness can enhance students' self-esteem and help them integrate into peer groups through daily interactions (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). One way to empower students is by acknowledging their cultural resources and encouraging them to use them in their education and work.

To analyze different learning spaces, we employ the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, sometimes referred to as culturally relevant teaching. This approach involves mapping students' knowledge and experiences and using them as a foundation for further learning (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers who develop this type of practice must avoid relying on stereotypes about different cultures. Instead, they must be socially aware and emphasize respect for diversity. This can be achieved by learning about students' lives, skills, perspectives, and attitudes, viewing them as capable individuals, and advocating for them (Nieto, 2002; Palmer & Martinez, 2013; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Sandhu, 2012). Various methods have been identified to highlight students' strengths, ranging from role-playing with young children (Riojas-Cortez, 2001) to culturally relevant literacy practices for older students (Sandhu, 2012). By applying these strategies, teachers create spaces where students' cultural backgrounds become valuable educational content (Riojas-Cortez, 2001).

Culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrates how teachers can utilize students' resources to support their learning and social participation in school settings. This framework also allows for an exploration of how teachers and students navigate historical, institutional, and political

forces that shape learning spaces (Giroux, 2001). Education and pedagogy is not just about learning about others, it is also about understanding and reflecting on one's own attitudes and recognizing how they influence our perceptions of schools and classroom practices. By becoming aware of their attitudes towards different languages, religions, cultures, nationalities, and status of various social groups, teachers can develop social consciousness and work against discrimination. Culturally responsive pedagogy requires diverse and creative teaching methods that break away from traditions and redefine power structures to address the realities that students face (Erickson, 1986).

In this study, we examine examples of learning spaces where teaching is based on both students' and teachers' resources. These examples enhance understanding of interactions, practices, and discourse that contribute to development of pedagogies aimed at social justice.

Research Methodology

This was a qualitative study, aimed at deepening understanding of learning spaces that teachers and students create through their daily interactions and togetherness. The purpose was to explore how learning spaces emerge in teaching practice when teachers build on the resources of immigrant students. The research question was: How do learning spaces emerge in teaching which is based on the social and cultural resources of immigrant students?

The research was reported to the Icelandic Data Protection Authority and approved. Informed consent, translated into several languages, was obtained from all participants, including teachers, students, and their parents or legal guardians. The biggest challenge in the research was utilizing the diverse backgrounds and expertise of the researchers in data collection and analysis. However, this diversity was also a key strength of the study. To ensure credibility, data were collected through various methods over two school years, involving four researchers in data collection and analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Participants

This research is part of a Nordic research project, *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice*. This article is built on data collected from three Icelandic primary schools: two in the capital area and one outside of it. The schools were selected based on purposeful sampling, considering the share of immigrant students, success in national exams, and positive external and internal evaluations. The schools' curricula and policies were also reviewed, focusing on aspects regarding social justice and inclusive education. Schools where these factors were prominent were chosen for the study. School administrators nominated teachers whose work with immigrant students was exemplary. Twelve teachers, both Icelandic and foreign-born, and their students participated in this part of the project. Teachers were involved in different teaching roles, including reception classes, Icelandic as a second language, specific subjects, and general classroom teaching. All teachers and students were given pseudonyms in the study.

Data Collection

The study employed qualitative methods and various data collection tools. This article primarily relies on data from field observations and formal and informal teacher interviews.

Researchers conducted fourteen field observations in nine classrooms, lasting between two and six hours each. Data collection included notetaking, audio and video recordings, and photographs of classrooms and student work. Field notes were created through video recordings, photographs, and researcher documentation. For observations to be as natural as

possible, researchers participated in teaching activities by assisting students when needed, to gain firsthand insight into teaching methods and student engagement.

Additionally, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, lasting one to two hours each, along with informal conversations that followed up on data from field observations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to capture teachers' descriptions and perspectives on their teaching practices and specific events in a clear and precise manner (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). This approach allowed researchers to structure interview content while also enabling open discussions. Participants were asked to describe their teaching and learning methods, as well as the opportunities and challenges they faced in their work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the teachers' stories. Informal conversations were initially recorded as brief notes and later expanded with more detail from memory.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative research methodology, specifically thematic analysis, content analysis, coding, and constant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Initially, each researcher reviewed and coded the data individually. In the next stage, a team of four researchers conducted further analysis using narrative inquiry method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The focus was on identifying instances that illustrated diverse manifestations of learning spaces in culturally responsive teaching (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). We used the Atlas.ti software as well to extract and explore significant information within the extensive dataset. The goal of the analysis was to examine how immigrant students' resources are activated to create learning spaces that enhance their participation and empowerment.

Findings: Learning spaces for all

This section discusses culturally responsive teaching and the three main themes that emerged from classroom observations, student projects, and interviews with teachers. The first theme describes how teachers recognize and utilize students' resources, including their language, culture, and knowledge, to create learning spaces that emphasize diverse teaching approaches. The second theme focuses on collaboration between teachers and students and how teachers establish learning spaces where students can support one another in their learning. The third theme highlights teachers' sensitivity to different languages and cultural backgrounds and how they leverage this awareness to create meaningful learning experiences. These themes are illustrated through classroom narratives that showcase how students' social and cultural resources were used to structure teaching and learning for immigrant students and how these learning spaces emerged.

Theme 1: Diverse teaching methods

When working with immigrant students, teachers must employ various teaching strategies to ensure meaningful learning experiences. Elsa, a teacher at the lower and middle primary levels in a reception class, actively seeks ways to base learning on students' experiences and knowledge, as demonstrated in the following example.

> On a dark January morning in 2015, Elsa welcomes fifteen students into her classroom. They vary in age and have lived in Iceland for different lengths of time. The walls are covered with visual materials, including information on how to support bilingualism in teaching. Several posters offer suggestions, such as encouraging students to use their native language as a resource for learning new languages, demonstrating that language can be playful, and highlighting the value of

multilingualism. The classroom also features alphabets in multiple languages and information about Icelandic Yule Lads. On this particular morning, the students are learning about adjectives.
Nine students are seated at three tables—four at one, three at another, and two at the third—working individually on exercises from *Vinnubók: Listin að lesa og skrifa* (The Art of Reading and Writing) workbook. Meanwhile, five students are gathered around a circular table playing *Lestrarspil*, a literacy-based game. The game consists of cards with images, words, and sentences, divided into four sections corresponding to their workbooks. The goal of the game is to practice phonemic awareness, reading single words, and short sentences in a variety of ways. Francis, an eight-year-old student from the Philippines, sits alone at a table with a worksheet about the four seasons. His task is to draw pictures related to each season.

“I don’t understand this,” he calls out to Elsa. She approaches and sits beside him. She begins explaining the words spring, summer, autumn, and winter. She shows him work from other students and asks:

“Can you find where spring is?”

“Where is it warm?”

“Where are the flowers growing?”

“What color are the trees in autumn?”

Francis remains quiet. Elsa then shows him a picture of winter. “Isn’t ice skating fun?” she says.

“Yes, I love trying it,” Francis replies.

Elsa decides to use technology to support Francis’s understanding, and she moves with him to a computer, where they watch a video about the seasons. She reviews the vocabulary again, focusing on adjectives. Referring to different images on the screen—houses, trees, and grass—she prompts him to describe them:

“What color are the trees?” she asks.

“Yellow, red, brown. Here, this one is brown,” Francis says, pointing to a tree.

“And what about the house? Is it big?” she continues.

“No, not big. Small,” he responds.

Francis also becomes inquisitive, pointing to images and asking, “What is this called?” Suddenly, a squirrel appears on the screen, making him smile.

“Do you recognize this?” Elsa asks. Francis nods.

“Do you know what it’s called?” she asks.

“No,” he replies.

“This is *íkorni* (a squirrel),” Elsa explains. Francis repeats: “*Íkorni*”.

“When do you see squirrels?” she asks. Francis thinks for a moment.

"Autumn," he answers.

They then discuss squirrels in the Philippines, comparing the seasons there to those in Iceland. Francis becomes excited, eager to share stories about the weather and nature in his home country. After working on the computer, Francis returns to his desk. He picks up his worksheet, selects colors, and begins drawing seasonal illustrations. The classroom is calm, and students are engaged in their assignments. Occasionally, cheers of "Yes!" can be heard from those playing the literacy-based game. Elsa moves around the room, checking on each student's progress. At the end of the lesson, the students participate in a descriptive word game called *Flöskustútur* (Bottle Spin). In this activity, all the students and the teacher sit in a circle. In front of each student, face down, is a sheet with an image of a person. One student spins the bottle, and the person it points to must describe the image using adjectives without naming what is on it. The images depict diverse individuals. The other students must guess what is being described. If students struggle to explain in Icelandic, they are allowed to use gestures or words in their native language. The game is met with enthusiasm, and Elsa ensures that all students have a chance to participate and express themselves (Field observation, January 25, 2015).

Observing this lesson, it is clear that Elsa makes a deliberate effort to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere by engaging students through various approaches. She carefully monitors if and how each student learns. When she notices that Francis struggles with understanding the words on his worksheet, she applies multiple teaching strategies to support him. She first sits down to be at eye level with him and explains the task. When this does not have the desired effect, she decides to use the computer. The video featuring the squirrel sparks Francis's interest. Elsa immediately recognizes this and seizes the opportunity to draw on his resources, using his experiences and knowledge. She asks if he knows what the animal is called, and when he doesn't, she provides the Icelandic word. Through this interaction, Francis becomes more confident and is able to complete his assignment independently. What stands out in this lesson is Elsa's attentiveness and her ability to create varied learning spaces that cater to the diverse needs of her students.

Theme 2: Collaboration

Collaboration is an essential strategy for deepening knowledge and understanding of various subjects while also strengthening social connections among students. Understanding the collaborative learning method can be particularly beneficial when organizing group work. By assigning students specific roles and responsibilities, teachers can enhance collaboration, making group work more valuable and effective. Margrét, a mathematics teacher at the lower secondary level, places significant emphasis on student interactions to solve mathematical problems collaboratively, as illustrated in the following example.

Upon entering Margrét's classroom, one immediately notices instructional posters on the walls providing students with guidelines on how to work together and support one another. In a 10th-grade mathematics lesson, Margrét begins by outlining the day's objectives. The focus of today's lesson is solving quadratic equations. She starts by reviewing a problem that students were assigned as homework, going through all the steps, sketching the function on a coordinate plane, and simultaneously writing explanations on the board. She reminds students to include all their sketches in their notebooks, emphasizing their importance in understanding the process. The class consists of 18 students, eleven of whom are bilingual, and eight of them are first-generation immigrants.

> “I’m going to start by explaining this example to you, and you need to listen carefully,” Margrét tells the class. She writes a problem on the board, draws graphs, and regularly asks students questions about the next steps, explicitly defining key concepts. She uses words such as vertical lines, symmetry, reflection, and roots of equations. Primarily, two or three students respond when she poses questions to the class. Twice, she calls on other students by name to answer. If they struggle, she simply moves on to another student without making a big deal about it. If a student requests further explanation, she goes back and clarifies the steps.
>
> After completing the instructional part of the lesson, Margrét assigns homework and writes the exercises on the board. She notes that some of the problems are particularly challenging and are intended for students taking an advanced-level course, while others may attempt them if they wish. She also reminds the class that she will be collecting their notebooks in April to review and assess their work, encouraging them to be diligent in their studies. The students start working and Margrét walks between them and assists, reminding them to help out and ask the next person because there is always someone close by who knows. The classroom is organized so that students sit three to five together in groups and Margrét says that she arranges new groups every three weeks.
>
> At one table, Agnieszka, Monika, Darma, Patrick, and Saraswati discuss a math problem they are solving. They help each other by explaining the meaning of words, occasionally switching to their native language to clarify concepts, and ultimately reach a consensus on the best method to solve the problem. Near the teacher’s desk, Matas is working with a different textbook called the *Stjörnubók* (Star Book). Margrét explains that he recently arrived from Lithuania and has yet to grasp the language, so she assesses his understanding using a book with no text. He sits across from Andrius, another Lithuanian student who is more proficient in Icelandic, and they chat with each other (Field observation, February 24, 2014).

This example demonstrates Margrét’s awareness of her students' status and sensitivity to their needs. When new students join the class, she pairs them with a peer of the same nationality to help them acclimate to the learning environment and subject in their shared language. She does not pressure students who are unable to answer her questions but instead moves on to the next student, signaling that it is natural for students to grasp the material at different paces and that the responsibility for gaining an understanding of the course material lies with both the student and her. No one is forced into participating. By emphasizing that students should seek help from one another if they need help because there is always someone who knows how to solve the task, Margrét fosters a sense of trust and mutual respect within the classroom. Students who excel in mathematics assist their peers, and Margrét notes that new students who are strong in math tend to integrate quickly because their classmates appreciate their help. In an interview, she specifically highlighted algebra as an example, explaining that if students are proficient in it, they tend to thrive in mathematics due to the collaborative nature of learning in her classroom. Observing the lesson, one could feel that Margrét and her students formed a cohesive learning community where the teacher takes responsibility for her students and prioritizes their interests. Learning becomes a shared endeavor between the teacher and the students.

Theme 3: Cultural sensitivity

Teachers' sensitivity to different languages and the cultures associated with them enables them to create learning spaces where students can meaningfully connect their languages and cultures. However, this does not mean that teachers need to be proficient in their students' native languages to make these resources visible. Learning spaces that emphasize students'

cultural and linguistic resources are built on respect and trust, allowing students not only to feel comfortable being themselves but also to take pride in their backgrounds and understand how they can use them in learning. An example of such cultural sensitivity can be found in María's teaching methods, as illustrated in the following account.

> In early December 2013, we entered a classroom where María, a teacher of Icelandic as a second language, was having a lesson with four immigrant students about the human digestive system. The group consisted of three boys and one girl: Tomek and Bartek from Poland, Aamina from Syria, and Hainad from Thailand. Aamina had grown up speaking three languages—Arabic, Bulgarian, and English. The students had varying levels of proficiency in Icelandic. María herself was of Polish origin. During the lesson, María used various methods to convey the subject matter. She explained the digestive tract using images and a skeletal model to illustrate the names and locations of organs in the body. She spoke Icelandic throughout the lesson but encouraged the students to find the terms in their own languages while simultaneously learning them in Icelandic. She also suggested that they collaborate and use a computer for their studies if they found it helpful. María consistently encouraged the students to use their native languages, regardless of the methods they chose to engage with the subject matter.
>
> At the beginning of the lesson, María told the students that they would be learning about digestion that day.
>
> She had them create a small glossary and instructed them to divide their notebook pages into two columns. In the first column, they were to write technical terms in Icelandic. In the second column, they were to write the corresponding words in the languages they spoke. After explaining this task, María read aloud a few words she had written on the board—to digest, digestion, digestive tract (*að melta, melting, meltingarvegur*)—and asked the students to start by writing these terms in their glossaries.
>
> "When I eat breakfast, it goes here... and I have to digest it," María explains as she points to her mouth and uses her body to illustrate the path down to the stomach. She turns to Aamina and asks, "Do you know what that would be in Bulgarian?"
>
> "Smilam," Aamina responds. María walks to the whiteboard and prepares to write the word in Cyrillic script. Since she hasn't used it in a while, she asks Aamina to repeat the word and leans in to hear her pronunciation better as she writes it on the board: смилам.
>
> "Like this?" she asks, pointing at the word. She receives a positive response from Aamina. María smiles and then asks Aamina to write the Arabic word for digestion, explaining that she hasn't yet mastered that language. Aamina comes to the board and writes the word in Arabic. María asks her to read it aloud. "Sounds good," she says after Aamina pronounces the word. Meanwhile, the Polish boys are looking at the board and discussing among themselves. María turns to them and points at the word "melting".
>
> "Do you know what this is?" she asks. They nod, and as they say the word, María writes it on the board. "Okay, great," she says. "But what about *meltingarvegur*?" She looks at the boys. They take a moment to think.
>
> "*Proces trawienia*," Bartek answers.

"No, not quite," María encourages him. "Meltingarvegur, what is vegur?" She breaks the word down to give the boys more clues.

"*Ściana*," guesses Tomek.

"No," María replies.

"*Ścianka*," says Bartek.

"No," María responds, "*veggur* is *ściana*. *V-e-g-u-r*, like Laugavegur, Reykjanesvegur." She emphasizes the distinction between the stop consonant in one word and the fricative in the other.

Bartek tries again. "To jest *ulica*," he says cautiously. María walks around, giving the students time to think.

"Does that mean anything to you?" she asks. "Nýbýla*vegur*, meltingar*vegu*r." She emphasizes the word *vegur*. Suddenly, Bartek seems to have a realization.

"*Droga* pokarmowa," he answers. María doesn't say anything but smiles at Bartek.

"Yes, vegur is something we drive or walk on, like this," María says, extending both arms straight ahead to illustrate a road.

"Melting, you know what that is. Meltingarvegur is the road here," María says, using herself to show the digestive tract's path from the mouth to the stomach.

"Tomek, can you show me where the meltingarvegur is?" María asks, pointing to the skeleton. She waits for his response. After a moment, she repeats, "Can you show me?" Tomek stands up, walks to the skeleton, points at the throat, and traces the digestive tract downward, saying: "*Zaczyna się od gardła, tutaj leci tędy, do żołądka, potem przez żołądek do flaki, później przez grube jelito, cienkie i dołem*."

"Okay," María says, and Tomek returns to his seat (Field Observation, December 2, 2013).

María's interactions with students demonstrate how she engages them by valuing their native languages when exploring their prior knowledge of the topic, in this case, digestion. By highlighting and further developing students' linguistic resources while they build understanding, knowledge, and vocabulary in Icelandic within this subject area, María helps students recognize that they already possess significant knowledge, even if they do not know everything yet. They have a foundational understanding that can be expanded upon.
María shows interest in and respect for students' languages. This is evident in her interactions with Aamina, where she makes an effort to write down the words Aamina provides on the board. In her exchanges with the Polish boys, María's knowledge of both Icelandic and Polish, as well as the cultural contexts associated with these languages, enables her to interpret and respond to the meanings the students assign to words through conversation. When Bartek introduces the phrase "proces trawienia", which translates into Icelandic as *meltingarferli*, María acknowledges that he is close to the correct meaning. She provides hints by emphasizing the word *vegur* in *meltingarvegur*.
Tomek guesses *ściana*, which is a wall, *veggur* in Icelandic. When Maria gently corrects him, Bartek comes up with the word *ścianka*, meaning small wall, *litill veggur* in Icelandic. María realizes that the students are attempting to translate *vegur* into Polish but are struggling due to a phonetic distinction that does not exist in Polish between the stop consonant in *veggur* and the fricative in *vegur*. They clearly recognize the Icelandic word v*eggur* and provide its

Polish equivalent, *ściana*, in the discussion. Once María identifies the issue, she confirms that *veggur* translates to *ściana* but emphasizes that they are searching for the Polish equivalent of *vegur*. She carefully highlights the pronunciation of *vegur*, integrating phonological awareness into the lesson, effectively merging Icelandic language learning with science instruction in a meaningful way.
She then introduces Icelandic street names such as Laugavegur and Reykjanesvegur to provide context for how vegur denotes a road. Bartek, prompted by this clue, continues to try by suggesting *to jest* ***ulica***, meaning *this is a street* in Polish. In Poland, *ulica* often appears at the end of street names, making it a logical choice for translating *vegur*. María gives the students time to think while offering encouragement and guidance to help them arrive at the correct meaning. Eventually, Bartek provides the Polish phrase *droga pokarmowa*, meaning digestive tract, *meltingarvegur*. María acknowledges his response and wraps up the discussion by asking Tomek to point out the meltingarvegur on the skeleton model.

The examples demonstrate how learning spaces that emerge and develop between teachers and students are characterized by tolerance and trust. Students feel comfortable experimenting, making mistakes, and discussing ideas openly. When preparing lessons, teachers can only plan a broader framework for such learning spaces by deciding on topics and preparing tasks for students to engage with. However, in everyday practice, teachers must use their intuition and knowledge to create conditions that encourage students to utilize their own resources so that meaningful learning can take place.

Discussion

In the findings section we highlighted how teachers create learning spaces for immigrant students by building on students' social and cultural resources. By applying the lens of culturally responsive teaching when exploring the learning spaces created by teachers in their classrooms, we could see their efforts to empower students by integrating students' resources into teaching and learning (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Freire, 2009; Giroux, 1997, 2001). The teachers draw on their own knowledge and professional experience, show interest in immigrant students, and approach their teaching creatively. When they enter the classroom, they are well-prepared with clear objectives as a foundation but remain alert and responsive to the present moment, using their intuition to adapt to the context. To accommodate diverse student backgrounds, they employ a variety of teaching strategies, as seen in Elsa's approach, where students engage with adjectives in multiple ways (Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir & Edda Óskarsdóttir, 2016).

The learning environment was characterized by warmth, patience, and tolerance, fostering spaces where students felt encouraged to experiment, learn new concepts, and practice their skills. Collaboration between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, played a significant role in creating these conditions. An example of teacher-student interaction can be observed in Margrét's practice, where she worked with the entire group simultaneously. By organizing the classroom seating and encouraging students to help explain mathematical concepts to one another, she activated various student resources to support problem-solving. When students worked in groups, this collaboration was reflected in how they assisted one another, becoming valuable resources for learning (Banks, 2007; Freire, 2007).

Teachers connected students' knowledge and experiences to their learning, adding greater depth to instruction (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers' sensitivity and sense of responsibility toward students were evident. This was particularly visible in María's teaching, where she worked with two Polish boys. Her ability to recognize and respond to their attempts to make sense of scientific concepts based on their knowledge of Polish and Icelandic, as well as the cultural contexts behind these languages, exemplifies this approach. All the examples illustrate that students' native languages had a place in the classroom and

were used to build foundational knowledge of concepts and subject matter, and that teachers encouraged students to discuss topics with their peers in their native languages. The teachers' awareness of the importance of leveraging students' resources, including experiences, languages, interests, talents, and strengths, made these learning spaces exemplary models of teaching from which others can learn.

Previous studies indicate that teaching tends to overly emphasize immigrant students' lack of proficiency in the dominant language and their unfamiliarity with the host country's culture (Nieto, 1996; Tran, 2015). In contrast, the learning spaces in this study were characterized by teachers maintaining high academic expectations for students' learning and achievement while also allowing them space to engage, reflect, discuss, and collaborate. This approach facilitated the creation of diverse learning spaces within the school community, rooted in social justice principles, where students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and development (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

We hope that the examples presented in this article inspire others to reflect on and experiment with ways to accommodate diverse student groups in various contexts.

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Key words

Learning spaces – inclusion – culturally responsive pedagogy - resources – empowerment

Paper II

Working together for the inclusion of immigrant pupils: A case study of a rural community in Iceland

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Abstract

Global migration brings new challenges and opportunities for schools, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of pupils' mother tongues, ethnicities, religions, and sociocultural resources. In case of Iceland, this is a relatively new reality. While there has been some research with immigrant pupils internationally, most studies focus on urban areas.

This article reports on a case study in a rural compulsory school in Iceland. The research question was: How does a rural school understand and work for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils? In-depth interviews with immigrant pupils and their teachers together with observations were applied. The simultaneous thematic analysis included coding of the data and sorting it into themes by discovering recurrent routines and interaction patterns. The concepts of inclusion and local agency were used as a theoretical framework.

Findings suggest that teachers are the key agents in inclusion of immigrant pupils. Despite lack of extensive experience or special agenda regarding immigrant pupils, the teachers and school principal manage to involve all pupils in the process of learning. Moreover, the support of local municipality and caring relations with the school personnel have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging and encourage their participation.

Keywords: immigrants; rural school; inclusion; participation; local agency

Introduction

Global migration brings new challenges and opportunities for schools around the world, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of pupils' mother tongues, home language practices, ethnicities, religions, and sociocultural resources. In case of Iceland, this is a comparatively new reality, as the rapid, demographic shift started only two decades ago. In the year 2000, 2.6% of the population were immigrants (Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015) and by 2016, with second-generation immigrants included, the total percentage of immigrants reached 10.7% (Haraldsson, 2018). Most immigrants in Iceland come from Europe, including Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Denmark (Haraldsson, 2018). The share of children with a foreign mother tongue in Icelandic compulsory schools increased from 3.1% in 2004 to 8.2% in 2015 (Haraldsson, 2018). Most of them had Polish, Philipino, English, Lithuanian and Thai mother tongues (Ministry of Welfare, 2016). 63.3% of these pupils lived in the Reykjavik area and 36.7% elsewhere in Iceland (Haraldsson, 2018).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the right of all children and youth to participation in decision-making in any area affecting their lives, including education (United Nations, 1989). However, this right tends to remain at the level of rhetoric. In case of immigrant pupils, educational policies and curricula often focus on host language proficiency and culture, rather than implementing a lens of inclusion and participation of all pupils, as argued by Gay (2000), Guðmundsson (2013) and Tran (2015). According to the latest National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools in Iceland, compulsory schools are obliged to work towards inclusion of all pupils and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012), similarly to the local laws in other Nordic countries. In praxis, a recent research in Finland (Lakkala, 2019) and in Sweden (Rosvall and Öhrn, 2014) indicates that inclusive view of education is constantly questioned and has not been implemented to a satisfying extent yet. Moreover, despite differences in educational systems and in patterns of immigration in the Nordic countries, local studies demonstrate exclusion of immigrant children and youth in Finland (Holm and Londen, 2010), Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Guðmundsson, Beach and Vestel, 2013; Von Brömssen and Rodell Olgaç, 2010).

While most of the educational research has revealed marginalisation of pupils with immigrant backgrounds, some studies present success stories from pupils and schools at different educational levels (Coard, 2005; Gundara, 2000). Still, most of the research focuses on the situation of immigrant pupils in urban and/or highly populated by immigrant communities and its findings may not represent the diverse realities and experiences in other communities. This is evident in Iceland, where most studies in the field are conducted in schools with high share of immigrant pupils and with immigrant units and focus on challenges the pupils and the schools are facing in the particular context. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration different demographics and characteristics of the local communities and provide research from across the country to deepen understanding of the diversity of experiences in the rapidly changing Icelandic society.

This paper reports on a case study in one compulsory school in a rural area in Iceland, which has only a few immigrant pupils and no special policy regarding their matters. The purpose of this study was to explore how a rural school understands and works for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils.

The context of the study

Since extensive immigration is a relatively new issue in the Icelandic society, the use of different concepts for naming immigrants and immigrant pupils is problematic. In the past, members of Icelandic population were grouped mostly according to citizenship and the land of birth. These groups had however some limitations, because, for example, many Icelanders had a child while studying abroad (Garðarsdóttir and Hauksson, 2011). In the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012), rather than using a word 'immigrant' other concepts, including: 'pupil with a foreign background' or 'pupil with another mother tongue than Icelandic' are applied. However, in this study I apply the term 'immigrant pupil', to comply with the terminology used widely in the research, especially in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the term 'immigrant pupil' is understood here as an individual who has immigrant parent(s) and was born abroad.

Currently, there are 177 primary schools in Iceland. Majority of them, 74, is located in the capital area and 62% of the total number of pupils attend these schools (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2016). One of the biggest concerns regarding immigrant pupils in Iceland is their language proficiency. The current National Curriculum for the first time includes a clause that compulsory schools in Iceland are required both to support the acquisition of Icelandic, but also to strengthen immigrant pupils' mother tongue (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Yet to date, there are no obligatory courses for current and prospective teachers (of different subjects) on how to work with pupils for whom Icelandic is not a first language, which often results in teachers' insecurity in working with immigrant pupils (see e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2017). Moreover, Icelandic schools have autonomy in how they work with immigrant pupils in terms of letting them join mainstream class immediately or begin in a separate immigrant unit, supporting acquisition of Icelandic and/or maintenance and development of pupils' mother tongues. There has been a pressure towards more structured and detailed curriculum that would better guide teachers in their work (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). The capital city, Reykjavik, which has the highest number of immigrants, has recently implemented a new policy about school integration and work with immigrant pupils that emphasises diverse teaching methods, support of active bilingualism and cooperation with parents (Reykjavíkurborg, 2014).

In 2006, the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs conducted a research and prepared a report on pupils with immigrant background in primary and secondary schools in Iceland, with an emphasis on rural areas. The survey included questions such as: Is your school prepared for receiving a child with immigrant background? Does a child receive special Icelandic classes? Does a child receive mother tongue classes? Does a child receive any other service? The data from questionnaires showed that generally children with immigrant background in rural areas of Iceland received some special Icelandic classes. On the other hand, they did not get assistance in maintaining or developing their mother tongue and neither were they offered services other than the regular ones, including counselling and psychological assistance. According to the report, neither schools nor municipalities cooperated in the field of immigrant issues (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006). No similar data has been collected in the last decade.

Theoretical background and state of the art

Inclusive education

According to the social justice perspective, people and their different capacities, characteristics and backgrounds should be "celebrated and valued, not quashed, ignored or assimilated" (Ryan and Rottmann, 2007, p. 15). This concept does not support the idea of treating everyone the same, because such approach may, unintentionally, increase already existing inequalities. Rather, it advocates that individuals be approached according to their needs and abilities. The social justice perspective is intertwined with the concept of inclusion, understood in this paper as an ongoing process of responding to and valuing a diverse group of pupils. Inclusion aims at increasing learning opportunities and social participation for all pupils, by reducing segregation, which excludes or groups pupils by gender, socioeconomic class, learning abilities or nationality (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2009). One way to investigate immigrant pupils' inclusion is to look into funds of knowledge they bring to school (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) and into how they are valued within educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rodriguez (2007) uses the concept of resources, which she characterises as personal strengths and qualities that emerge from and shape life experiences. Similarly, Wertch (1998) considers resources as mediational tools to act in the world and draw upon in the process of learning, meaning making and empowering of pupils.

Several studies on/with immigrant pupils were conducted in Iceland in recent years. Case studies in several urban compulsory schools indicate that the schools developed effective procedures to meet the needs of immigrant pupils and had a clear vision for teaching and learning, based on active participation, collaboration and communication with parents (Ólafsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir and Hansen, 2012; Ragnarsdóttir and Hansen, 2014). Moreover, findings from Icelandic studies suggest that using immigrant pupils' resources, including experience, knowledge, abilities and interests, should be recognised and nurtured to support pupils' learning and promote their well-being and success (Guðjónsdóttir, Gísladóttir and Wozniczka, 2015; Guðjónsdóttir and Karlsdóttir, 2010). Research on teachers' perspective on the situation of immigrant pupils shows teachers' concern with immigrant pupils' well-being and a will to respond to their abilities and needs on the one hand (Karvelsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir, 2010) and teachers' doubts whether they are sufficiently prepared and supported to work with immigrant pupils on the other hand (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). Studies built on interviews with immigrant pupils, mainly in urban areas, suggest that they experience marginalization and that their contributions to schools are not organised or undervalued (Magnúsdóttir, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Tran, 2015). Various research in Iceland indicates also that immigrant pupils lack academic vocabulary necessary to fully comprehend what is being taught and participate in the classroom (Ólafsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Þórðardóttir and Júlíusdóttir, 2012). The support they receive in Icelandic and their mother tongues is often insufficient and varies between schools and municipalities in terms of structure and numbers of hours and financing allocated (Daníelsdóttir and Skogland, 2017).

Indeed, school is often considered as one of key spaces where issues of inclusion, cultural hybridity, multiculturalism and other forces of change meet a certain resistance (Bourdieu 1998; Dyre, 2001). However, it is argued that research in school urban areas, where the "population is much more diverse

in terms of immigration and the possibilities this might give" cannot be generalized (Andersen and Sand, 2011, p. 29). Hargreaves, Kvalsund and Galton (2009) claim that urban schools settings tend to be selected for educational research and its results usually taken for granted and as a norm. At the same time, it has been argued that while researching pupils' lives and evaluating processes and outcomes of learning, teaching and schooling it is important to consider and understand local socio-demographic conditions (Andersen and Sand, 2011; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2009; Theobald and Herley, 2009).

Rurality and local agency

The concepts of 'rural' and of 'rural schools' are subject to scholarly debate and there are numerous definitions of rural and urban areas, as well as of a countryside. There is no joint definition of a 'rural area' in the Nordic countries that would include Iceland, but when it comes to 'rural schools', most definitions refer to the number of enrolled pupils, and are either setting a limit of pupils (see e.g. Sörlin, 2005) or stating that it is any school with few pupils and teachers. Another characteristic of a rural school could be the presence of multi-grade teaching (see e.g. Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009). In this paper, a rural school is any school that has no more than fifty pupils and has at least one multi-grade classroom.

De Lima (2007) points out that the research on rurality and ethnicity has been evolving significantly since the 90s, from focusing on the rural areas as exclusionary, portraying minority groups in rural areas as homogeneous to exploring the role of place and context in creating diverse experiences and influencing one's identity. Indeed, the role of the local agency - the capacity to act in any given environment is a crucial concept when investigating developments in rural areas (Árnason and Skúlason, 2016). The agency does not only mean being ready for a change (the growing diversity in the community in this case) but rather enacting transformation. This requires being open and curious toward new influences, people and habits and using own resources in creative and versatile ways of responding to the change. It entails also the ability to engage with differences of individuals living in the area in order to create a sense of togetherness (Árnason and Skúlason, 2016; Uusitalo and Assmuth, 2013).

In a recent joint study in Norway, Sweden and Finland the focus was in particular on mapping the current situation in rural schools from the perspective of responding to the needs of pupils with special educational needs. The study indicated that all seven investigated rural schools, regardless of location, were examples of learning environments where inclusion and diversity existed as an integral and natural part of the school. This diversity was displayed in teachers' creative solutions, including the use of local community and environment as an educational resource, which compensated for the lack of diverse teachers or access to services (Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016). On the other hand, the reality of being a teacher in a rural school differs from the one of an urban teachers. Rural teachers tend to handle different administrative and organisational issues, as well as deal with challenges or possible conflicts with the community all by themselves (McHenry-Sorber and Schafft, 2014). Finally, various studies suggest that there is more parental involvement in rural schools than it is in urban schools (Thelin and Solstad, 2005). In Iceland, there is a lack of research with rural children and youth, and in particular with immigrant pupils. However, a few studies that investigated the social role of schools and inclusive education in rural settings in Iceland demonstrated the ability of Icelandic rural schools to

adapt to rapid socioeconomic changes, create opportunities for community members and be an active force in the local sociocultural life (Ásgeirsdóttir, 2002; Ásgeirsdóttir, 2007).

In this paper, we take the stance that as researchers we should try to situate the particular school and its inclusive practices within the community, to investigate the importance of the context (Hargreaves, 2009; Pini, Carrington and Adie, 2014). Therefore, we use the concept of possible agency enacted in the particular context as a critical lens in data analysis (Corbett, 2007).

Methods

This research is a case study aimed at gathering first-hand information and gaining a profound understanding of one's reality rather than generalisation (Esterberg, 2002; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

Participants

For this case study, a rural school with relatively few immigrant pupils was chosen using opportunistic sampling (Creswell, 2008). Lava community is an area with approximately 400 inhabitants situated in the south of Iceland. There are two bigger employers in agriculture and several tourist-related services in the area. Seeking work in neighbour municipalities, where the opportunities for diverse employment matching education and competences are greater, is also quite popular. There is an insufficient supply of housing and public transport in the area, which might deter immigrants from moving there. Yet, those immigrants who live in the community seem to be welcomed and some of them are active participants in community's social and artistic life. The only compulsory school and preschool in the area are located in the same building. 40 children were enrolled in the compulsory school in the school year 2015/2016, three of them had an immigrant background. Ten employees, including eight employees with a teacher degree, worked in the compulsory school department. None of the employees had an immigrant background. The staff retention in the Lava compulsory school has always been comparatively small and majority of its employees have been working in the school for more than five years. The school did not have any policy regarding working with multicultural pupils, but preparing of such policy was, according to the school principal, on the agenda for the coming months.

Three pupils - Tom (8), Lisa (12) and Laura (13) were selected in cooperation with the school principal and agreed to participate in the study. So did their teachers and the school principal. Lisa and Laura were born in continental Europe, while Tom comes from the Middle East. While Tom has arrived in Iceland a few months prior to the study and had only attended Icelandic educational settings, Lisa and Laura had already some educational experience abroad. Due to the small size of Icelandic population and rural communities, we decided not to disclose participants' countries of origin or any further details that might help in revealing their identities.

Data collection

The data collection took place in the spring term of 2016. The pupils were observed in different classes for three school days and then interviewed. The visits were repeated to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Carspecken, 1996). We employed the Visit Guide, built on the ideas of Caroline Moore (1995)

and adjusted to Icelandic context by Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir and Sigríður Pétursdóttir (2003). It is a tool for teachers, administrators, as well as for researchers to see diverse, and sometimes elusive dimensions of schooling. It is divided into two parts; the first one provides a space and structure for the observer to write field notes while being in the educational setting (including structure of the school and information about school's mission and goals and whether and how they are displayed in practice); the second part is to be completed afterwards and it encourages an observer to reflect holistically and synthetize what she learned during the observation into the school profile.

Lisa and Laura chose to be interviewed together. Instead of using an interpreter, which is considered challenging and often limited (Berman and Tyyskä, 2011), the story-crafting was applied to encourage Tom who did not feel confident in any language planned for interviews (Icelandic and English) to tell his own story in an informal way. This strategy is helpful in language development and increases self-respect and sense of inclusion (Lulle and Assmuth, 2013). It began by Anna introducing an imaginative pupil of a similar age and background to Tom's and him gradually opening up and contributing his own ideas and experiences. The story was discussed with Tom to give him a chance to explain it and go in more detail.

Pupils' teachers and school principal were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of observed practices and interactions. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes and was semi-structured. We used interview protocol with a set of questions, based on questions prepared for the *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice* (LSP) project (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015) and a space for brief notes as a backup. However, we allowed for flexibility and tailored the length, content and model of interviews to the participants' preferences and abilities (Lichtman, 2010).

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and the visual data described in line with the characteristics of a qualitative inquiry. The simultaneous thematic analysis consisted of several stages, including: becoming familiarised with data, generating initial codes, looking for themes among codes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). We were interested in searching for patterns of meanings across participants, practices and relationships (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Each theme was developed in relation to the research question and the other themes, so that together they could provide a coherent picture of patterns in the collected data. We made sure to provide extracts from across the data, in order to show the breadth of each theme (Sandelowski, 1994). The excerpts have been translated into English when necessary after data analysis.

Data protection and ethical considerations

The Data Protection Authority has been informed of the purpose and details of the research and the anonymity of the participants ensured during the entire study period. The written permission to conduct the research was collected from teachers and parents of pupils and informed assent from pupils obtained.

Findings

Below is an account of the first visit to the Lava school:

> I was immediately assisted by one of the teachers and brought to the teacher's room, where I could observe and listen to teachers' interactions. I noticed that the atmosphere was relaxed. Information for the coming days was available on the whiteboard and teachers were going together over the schedule of the day. This, as I was told, was a typical start of the day in the school. As soon as a real school bell rang, I was led by Sóley, a supervisory teacher, to a classroom [Supervisory teachers are, more than other school personnel, responsible for their pupils' studies and general welfare and play crucial role in cooperation between school and home]. When we entered, I noticed a group of children siting in a circle on a carpet. Sóley pointed out at Tom. In total there were eight pupils in the classroom, two girls and six boys, accompanied by Sóley and another person, Helgi, who was immediately presented to me as a temporary assistant to Tom. I looked carefully around me and noticed that classroom walls were covered with pupils' drawings, including rules of "do's" and "dont's" of being a friend, alphabet and numbers. I could notice that above the Tom's desk there was his photo, together with his phone number, alphabet, numbers and some drawings. I was invited to join the group in the circle. Later, Sóley asked us to introduce ourselves, by saying our name, age, where we live and come from. I found out that one pupil was in her second grade, while all remaining pupils were in their first grade. I explained the pupils the purpose of my visit and they accepted me as a guest. When I revealed my origin, they replied with enthusiasm that two more pupils beside Tom had one parent of an immigrant origin as well. Sóley began to discuss the schedule of the day with pupils, by using a printed document with drawings. We all listened with anticipation. (Anna, Field notes from Lava school, February 2016)

The data analysis provided a meaningful and coherent picture of overarching themes of how a rural school understands and works for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils and its impact on immigrant pupils' academic and social experiences of inclusion. The themes: *Acknowledgement of pupils' resources and needs; Teachers' inclusive and democratic practices; Pupils' participation; and Enacting transformation* are presented below.

Acknowledgment of pupils' resources and needs

Since acknowledging pupils' language and knowledge resources may be considered as a first step to inclusive education, we were interested in finding out whether and how these resources of immigrant pupils were untapped in the Lava school. Sóley explained:

> I know that they speak mother tongue at home. I'm not sure whether they work on it especially, which is of course important when it comes to vocabulary and comprehension of concepts in the future… It was so great, I, we went to the conference in Reykjavik last fall and we attended all seminars related to literacy and two seminars

> that were about immigrant children and I found it very important to listen to the researchers who studied concepts' comprehension and how important it is to have these concepts in your mother tongue. (Sóley)

Teachers understood the importance of mother tongue in language and comprehension development. Birna, a special education needs teacher, discussed the importance of strengthening pupils' mother tongue. When discussing the language proficiency of Laura and Lisa, she mentioned:

> Thanks to the small size of the school, we don't have to wait until a child gets a diagnosis of having any problem, we can start immediately to offer him or her extra support rather than to wait. […] We've heard about a woman in the neighbouring municipality who was teaching their mother tongue. She has been living in Iceland for many years and she was already very good in Icelandic, so she came, and she took care of the teaching, once or twice a week (Birna)

When asked if getting an approval from the municipality to get an extra support for the girls was difficult, she explained:

> We knew they don't have to do that, they are not obliged to do that, we knew it, but we could use the argument that it is important to both maintain the mother tongue and learn Icelandic. And it helped that I had just finished the course at the university and learnt about the importance of it (Birna)

Similarly, the teachers acknowledged Tom's needs and resources. Fjóla, the school principal, said: "We've noticed that Tom was doing so well in the classroom. So, rather than taking him out of his mainstream class, we decided to get a teacher's assistant for him, because he is so young and he finds it uncomfortable to be taken away from his friends".

Among the learning materials that Tom and Helgi, the teacher's assistant prepared together we have noticed a memory game with photographs that Tom made of items that he was surrounded by at home and in the school. Helgi explained:

> He loves games, so we decided to do something like that. So, he took pictures and when we play it, each time he turns the picture over, he has to say what it is in Icelandic. Sometimes he does it also in his mother tongue. Other children like it too. (Helgi)

Indeed, the personnel in the Lava school used various creative ways to reveal and use pupils' resources to bridge their background and knowledge, and at the same time, to support their learning process.

Teachers' inclusive and democratic practices

Teachers in different classes, including arts and physical education, had high expectations for all their pupils, in line with the national curriculum. None of the teachers talked about immigrant pupils as of a problem or in terms of deficiency, but rather as of resourceful members of a diverse learning environment. They were supportive, but at the same time they let pupils experience things and seek answers on their own. The importance of Helgi's presence was observed when pupils were learning

about forms in the math class. First, the teacher and pupils sat in a circle and discussed forms together, and later the pupils were asked to work in pairs. In this case, Tom practised vocabulary related to different forms together with Helgi. I have noticed that both Helgi and Tom were very patient and calm. Helgi went over each exercise several times, spoke slowly, used repetitions, asked questions and encouraged Tom to find answers. Tom, primarily unsecure about several words, including 'thick' and 'thin', found the correct meaning of the words and in the end, answered Helgi by constructing whole sentences, for example: "This is a big, red, thick circle".

On many occasions, we could see how teachers' use opportunities for discussing and/or practising with pupils the ideas of equality and democracy, one of the fundamental pillars on which the national curriculum guidelines are based. During art classes, when pupils were working on creating baby mobiles, Ragnhildur, an art teacher used the opportunity to incorporate these ideas. When she asked children to switch the coloured pieces that they have picked up with eyes shut so that everyone could use different colours while constructing own baby mobiles. Pupils welcomed the idea and then exchanged the pieces until everyone was satisfied with his/her pieces.

The school has recently incorporated PALS (*Peer assistant learning strategies*) to work with the youngest pupils (for details see e.g. Maheady and Harper, 2003; McMaster, Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Sóley noticed that this method was very helpful:

> At the beginning, those who were better at reading found the method slow and boring, but now they are all enjoying it and supporting each other. And it is also good for the pupils who are just starting to learn the language, so I hope we can use it for the entire school. (Sóley)

One time we observed pupils during PALS, as they were practising the letter 'o'. After group activity, pupils sat down in pairs by the desks around the classroom. They were practising pronunciation and reading of the letter 'o' and various words and listening to each other. They were working hard on the task, correcting and praising each other but at the same time smiling. Tom was proud to say "I'm finished" when he managed to finalise the exercise.

One of the biggest challenges mentioned by teachers was that the communication and cooperation between teachers and sharing experiences and good practices was often insufficient. To improve that, they decided to work in teams and have regular meetings to discuss these issues.

Pupils' participation

Lisa, Laura and Tom all said that they felt comfortable around school personnel. The atmosphere in the classrooms was positive and children and school personnel seemed to know each other well. During one math class with Ásdís, pupils were divided into two groups of four and invited to play Ludo, a game through which they could practise counting and democracy. Tom was clearly an active participant and a part of the group, joking and laughing with others. Helgi commented: "I can see a huge progress in this short time. It's great to see him how he blends with others, how he becomes one of them. He is a fighter; he loves to play games and to read".

At another point, when leaving the classroom, we noticed a drawing and said: “This is a nice picture” I could hear one girl saying: “Tom drew this one. He is so good at drawing”. This short, unconstrained statement of acknowledgement of Tom and his talent was another indicator of how Tom is perceived by his peers. This was again reflected while observing children during after-school activities. A group of pupils of different age sat by the table, Tom among them. All pupils, except Tom, chose drawing sheets to colour, while Tom chose a blank paper. Children started to colour their drawings, while Tom began to draw a house, tree, birds and skies with a huge precision. When he was almost finished, his friend Matti asked him: “Whom are you drawing it for?”. Tom replied: “You”. Matti repeated: “Is it for me, really?”. Tom answered with a smile on his face: “Yes”. When they finished drawing, they exchanged the sheets and Matti gave Tom a hug.

Laura and Lisa said that they were doing very well at school and teachers confirmed that they were strong learners. Nevertheless, although Lisa claimed: “We are not treated differently by our teachers because we are foreigners, maybe because we don’t use our mother tongue that much”, they felt socially excluded from their female peers. While discussing this issue with Birna, she explained:

> We encouraged the girls to interact with others after school. But also, they live in such a community here that there are long distances between places, so kids here don’t have as many interactions as kids in towns. And it was more difficult when they got older and we are sad about it, that the interactions are so scarce […] What is more difficult with them, and this might be related to one’s personality, is that it is difficult to get them to ask for help. Though we tried to explain them that there is no shame to ask for it. (Birna)

At the same time, the girls emphasised that their relations with male peers were positive, and observations revealed that Lisa and Laura talked more with boys at school.

Enacting transformation

The study provided many examples of the local agency of the Lava community. Sóley told us a story of how the school took the initiative to respond to the arrival of Tom:

> We had some changes in the leadership before Christmas. So, there was much more to do for our special education needs teacher who worked with Tom from time to time. So, we decided to ask the municipality whether there was some money to employ the assistant. We are very lucky, we receive a lot of help from the municipality. They are very good to us. And it worked out perfectly, because Tom used to sit by my side, but then I couldn’t have as much discussion with him as I wanted to, as Helgi can. I’m not sure how it’s going to be in the future, but this is the method that really works. He can construct whole sentences for example. It’s something that I could dream would happen by the end of this school year, but he can already do it. (Sóley)

Enacting transformation may however result difficult in some contexts. Ragnhildur argued that:

> It is all about how the local community receives these pupils, it plays a huge role. I know communities that are open toward immigrants and those who are totally closed and that let you hear it. And this is a situation of Glacial community and Seashore community. The Glacial community has always been very open toward immigrants or you could say, multicultural. Well, there are immigrants coming to the Seashore community as well, but they hear every day: "Speak Icelandic. You are not trying hard enough!" (Ragnhildur)

Fjóla agreed on the importance of building positive relationship with the local environment:

> We have a good cooperation with the local community. I think we can get almost anything we ask for, with a good argument of course […] In bigger municipalities, it is much more difficult, stricter. I worked in other small schools and there the situation was similar. If you have a good argument […] They trust that we are professionals. We also have good cooperation with the social services in the area. (Fjóla)

Fjóla explained that Tom's parents received assistance in finding job when they first came to Iceland. The interconnectedness and positive relationships between school, municipality personnel and elderly members of the local community was also observed during everyday shared lunch at school.

Discussion

Findings suggest that the characteristics of Lava school and community play an important role in influencing experiences of inclusion of immigrant pupils, similarly to previous research (e.g. Hargreaves, 2009). Although the school did not have any extensive experience nor a special agenda regarding issues of immigrant pupils, the school leaders and teachers used the ideas of inclusion to build on the resources of pupils and to involve all of them in the process of learning, as suggested by Ainscow (2005) and Rodriguez (2007).

The school seemed to be an example of a learning environment where inclusion was displayed in teachers' creative solutions and sense of togetherness, which compensated for their lack of experience and/or professional preparation. These findings are in line with previous studies in Finland (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009) and joint studies in Finland, Norway and Sweden (Pettersson *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the Lava school personnel was encouraged by the principal to seek additional courses and training that would help in developing knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant pupils, which is in opposition to the experiences of teachers from another Icelandic study (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). This, together with employing an assistant, was highly supported by the authorities from the local municipality. Unlike examples presented in other studies, mostly from the capital area (see e.g Ragnarsdóttir, 2015), the economic crisis of 2008 did not affect the financial support for the Lava school.

The support and caring relations with the Lava school personnel seemed to have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging. Despite the fact that Laura and Lisa felt excluded from their female peers, they had positive experiences in school and felt appreciated their teachers. Moreover, neither pupils

themselves, nor the school personnel considered them as immigrants or 'others' and Tom managed to develop his language and academic skills and to become an active participant in the classroom in less than six months of attending the school. These findings do not reflect the strong signs of marginalisation and undervaluation encountered in Magnúsdóttir (2010) and Ragnarsdóttir (2010) studies in urban areas in Iceland. Rather, the findings second the argument from previous research (e.g. Aberg-Bengtsson, 2009), that one-to-one teaching and working with small groups of pupils tend to lead to safe atmosphere and a good relationship between individuals at school and, as a result, support a positive school environment. Although Fjóla's, the principal's answer indicated that some matters might be easier to deal with in a smaller community, this might not always be the case, as experienced by Ragnhildur, the art teacher.

Finally, the findings suggest that it is not only the Lava school, but the entire community, including local municipality, that work together for inclusion of immigrant pupils. They do so by engaging with differences of individuals living in the area and approaching each one according to their needs and abilities, as argued previously by Árnason and Skúlason (2016), as well as by Uusitalo and Assmuth (2013). Immigrant pupils' participation is encouraged and acted upon and the growing diversity in the local community seem to bring forward positive and sometimes unexpected outcomes for all. Yet, there are some concerns as to the fact that teachers in the Lava school did not have enough time and space for sharing the knowledge and cooperation. This is in line with the findings from other Icelandic studies (see e.g. Ragnarsdóttir, 2015) as well as from the recent TALIS study (OECD, 2019) and might result in fragmented implementation and in the lack of sustainability of inclusive practices in the school.

Conclusions

The study suggests that teachers in the Lava school are the key factors in the integration process of immigrant pupils and together with the characteristics of the Lava school and community play an important role in influencing pupils' experiences. The support of local municipality and caring relations with the school personnel have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging and encourage their participation. Although it is challenging for schools and teachers to have an impact on demography or resources available in the local community, the Lava school showed initiative and the capacity to adapt to change. Despite lack of extensive experience or special agenda regarding immigrant pupils, the school principal and teachers use the ideas of inclusion to involve all pupils in the process of learning.

The empirical material of this study is small to allow for a more general conclusions, as it is limited only to one school, but it is part of a larger multiple-case study that aims at researching immigrant pupils in diverse contexts in Iceland. We could, however, argue that this limitation is outweighed by the strength of drawing attention to the perspectives of immigrant pupils and their teachers. Obtaining such knowledge is essential to inform the discussion on how to work towards inclusion of all pupils and respond to immigrant pupils' needs in diverse contexts.

This case study is also important for the more general debate in Iceland and internationally on the pupils' diversity and challenges and opportunities it brings to schools. Iceland is currently experiencing

a growing number of political refugees and asylum seekers, coming mostly from Middle East, as well as from African and Balkan countries – unlike the previous streams of economic immigrants mostly from Europe, America and Asia. Some quota refugee families (accepted and invited by the Icelandic government) settle in rural municipalities, so it is important to expand the research in the field to include these new members of the society. Moreover, future research could focus on the sustainability of inclusive teacher practices and the importance of teachers' continuous cooperation in developing practices responding to the needs of diverse pupils.

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Paper III

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A Nordic model in policy and practice? The case of immigrants and refugees in rural schools in Iceland and Sweden

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Abstract

Through a cross-national analysis of Iceland and Sweden, we investigate How are the two countries' national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees? How do immigrant and refugee students talk about their agency in their classrooms, schools, and peer communities in rural contexts? Our analysis builds on fieldwork including classroom observations and interviews with immigrants (Iceland) and refugees (Sweden) aged 12–16 years, their teachers, and school principals, in four compulsory schools. The concept of ecology of equity is used to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency. The analysis also includes investigation of the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity. Findings show that although some students describe that they do not feel "othered," the majority, especially refugee students in Sweden, do feel excluded from their peers. The Icelandic and Swedish rural schools are on their own in tackling issues of working with these students, despite the fact that their practices may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions of the two countries. In this sense, the approach of the two countries does not reflect the ideals of the Nordic welfare system.

Keywords: immigrants, refugees, rural schools, Nordic model, inclusion, agency

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Introduction

The growth of immigration in Europe has led to increasing diversity in schools. During the mid-20th century, immigration was directed mostly toward cities and often motivated by labor opportunities. Since the 1990s, due to changes in politics and the reasons behind immigration (from freer movement and cheaper travel, through student mobility, to ethnic conflicts and political persecutions), migration has grown significantly, and some immigrants and refugees have been settling in rural areas of the receiving countries (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Haraldsson, 2016; OECD, 2019; SCB, 2016).

Several studies in urban schools describe effects of pedagogic practices that marginalize immigrant students (Möller, 2010; Schwartz, 2010). Similar tendencies have been identified in rural schools (Meador, 2005). Yet, some studies have demonstrated the ability of rural schools to adapt to changes and their importance in creating opportunities for all community members (Ásgeirsdóttir, 2002; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). Although there is some research investigating the circumstances of immigrant students in rural schools, such studies are sparse, especially in the Nordic context.

In this article, we conduct a cross-national analysis of experiences of place and agency of immigrant students in rural areas in Iceland and Sweden, taking into consideration the issues of *within*, *between,* and *beyond* schools (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012). Therefore, we begin by situating the research problem in the context of wide-ranging global changes, particularly changes in Europe. Then, we move on to the country level of Iceland and Sweden, characterized often in the literature as Nordic welfare systems; finally, we depict the context of the rural areas in the two countries. This approach allows us to cast light on (a) the impacts of large-scale global changes in such areas; (b) how these areas are affected by national and/or local policies, particularly educational policies; (c) how in turn this may affect the agency of immigrant and refugee students who live there.

Aims and Theoretical Approach

To understand immigrant individuals' agency, it is important to understand their local context. Immigration is a global process, but as Massey (1994) argues, globalization is taking place some*where* – in other words, it is also a local process. Thus, we use Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of *ecology of equity* as a tool to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency of immigrant students. This involves exploration of the demographics of the areas served by schools and the histories, cultures, and economic realities faced by immigrant and refugee populations. Analysis also includes investigation of the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity.

To use Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of *ecology of equity* as an analytical tool, we apply their division of *within*, *between,* and *beyond* schools. In our analysis, we are interested in relations of local and national policy and practices in rural schools. The division of within, between, and beyond then allows us to deepen understandings of different levels of education policy and practice through cross-national analysis.

Ainscow et al. (2012) describe within schools as

> *the ways in which students are taught and engaged with learning; the ways in which teaching groups are organised and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organisation; the kinds of social relations and personal support that are characteristic of the school; the ways in which the school responds to diversity in terms of attainment, gender, ethnicity and social background; and the kinds of relationships the school builds with families and local communities.* (Ainscow et al., 2012, p. 2)

Between schools is described as competition and collaborations between schools, which might be of lesser interest in this article because of the geographical positioning of the rural schools investigated. However, it is not of no interest, since lack of collaboration and competition creates certain contexts that are important to analyze, especially (a) in relation to educational research in urban areas, where competition and collaboration are more accessible because of their geographical positioning; and (b) due to the growing importance of online collaboration between schools.

The last concept forming ecology of equity, beyond schools includes

> *the wider policy context within which schools operate; the family processes and resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by schools. Beyond this, it includes the underlying social and economic processes at national and – in many respects – at global levels out of which local conditions arise.* (Ainscow et al., 2012 p. 3)

Ainscow et al. (2012) argue that although the impact of individual schools on students' experiences is important, and they may play a vital role in fighting inequalities, they cannot tackle the global processes underlying migration patterns on their own. Change is possible only if the representatives of these three areas collaborate on a common agenda.

Thus, in this paper, we are analyzing immigrant and refugee students' experiences in compulsory schools in rural areas of Iceland and Sweden. Our research questions are:

How are the two national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in everyday practice? How do immigrant and refugee students talk about their agency in their classrooms, schools, and peer communities in rural contexts? This study's value for European research lies in deepening understanding of immigrant and refugee students' agency in different contexts of rurality in so-called Nordic welfare systems (cf. Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Gustafson, 2009).

Global and European contexts of immigration and educational policies

Global and European patterns of migration have varied over the past few centuries. Until a century ago, most migration took place either within or outward from Europe. More recently, as documented in the media, there has been a strong surge of migration into Europe. Much of this can be characterized as having a "push-dynamic": that is, it is driven by escape from poverty, war, political instability, persecution on religious or ethnic grounds, and associated threats such as torture and starvation. This contrasts with earlier post-World War II migrations, which were underpinned by a "pull-dynamic," particularly the movement of labor from areas of high unemployment to areas with high demand for labor (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Labor market conditions today are rather different, with both more widespread unemployment and higher demands on workers to have academic qualifications and language skills to secure long-term employment (Statistics Sweden, 2008). This has an impact on the decision of where any remaining "pull-migrants" go, as they gravitate toward distinct locations that offer the best work opportunities. Meanwhile, "push-migrants," who are relocated by national Migration Boards, are spread more diffusely across host countries, with some living in remote areas far away from major urban centers and accessible opportunities for employment. In Sweden, for example, push-migrants are known to have settled in remote regions where they sometimes remain for many years (Statistics Sweden, 2008). The same is true of various other European countries (Collantes, Pinilla, Sáez, & Silvestre, 2014; Maiztegui-Oñate & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2008).

This example can be juxtaposed to Long's (2013) problematization of differences between immigrants and refugees. Even though most immigrants encounter problems of learning a new language or different cultures, there are differences between refugees and economic immigrants in terms of their ability to return if things are not working out as expected. The main difference is that refugees have their legacy in protection, whereas economic immigrants search their legacy in production (Long, 2013). Moreover, immigrants and refugees may be perceived differently by individuals in the receiving country (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017; Long, 2013), and the attitude of natives may influence well-being, opportunities, and decision-making of the newly arrived (Einarsdóttir, Heijstra, & Rafnsdóttir, 2018; Hatton, 2016).

Geddes and Hadj-Abdou (2018) point to a more restrictive immigration policy among European Union officials with established approaches, particularly of policies that rely on deterrence, and seek to make it much more difficult for migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Although the political restrictions toward refugee immigration seem to have hardened, European policies in education toward inclusion and cooperation between member states have widened significantly in recent years, and now include aspects such as social inclusion and intercultural education (Faas, Hajisteriou, & Angelides, 2014).

Educational systems are considered crucial actors in the process of inclusion and creating opportunities for immigrant and refugee students (OECD, 2013). Although there are examples of successful schools that manage to move immigrant students and their families from the periphery of school participation to the center (Diez, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011), many educational studies demonstrate the marginalization of students with immigrant backgrounds (see, e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Hannover et al., 2013; Welply, 2015). Exclusionary tendencies can also be found in some educational policies (Popkewitz, 2008). These findings are supported by international reports, including those of the European Policy Centre (EPC, 2011) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015).

The OECD (2015) report – which builds, among other resources, on the results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – names several factors that may cause this marginalization and, as a result, challenge immigrant students' progress, well-being, and aspirations. These factors include concentration of immigrant students in certain schools, language barriers, and certain school policies (grade repetition and tracking; that is, separating students by their academic ability; OECD, 2015). One of the aims of PISA 2009 was to determine how school systems in different countries address the needs of diverse students (OECD, 2013). The results indicated that immigrant students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and of same origin tended to perform differently across different school systems. The disparities between immigrant students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and origin suggest that it may be schooling and school policies that, together with host culture and social policies, influence students' well-being and performance.

According to the PISA 2009 study (OECD, 2013), immigrant students seem to perform better in school systems with relatively large immigrant student populations and where students are generally diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status. As an example, in countries like Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United States, where every fourth or fifth student has an immigrant background, all students with similar socioeconomic status perform equally well, regardless of whether they are immigrants or not. Still, in the aforementioned countries, immigration policy is much stricter compared to many

European countries. This results in immigrant students often outperforming native students, because former ones tend to come from privileged backgrounds (OECD, 2013). On the contrary, in countries with a small percentage of immigrant students, and those where immigrant students are more socioeconomically diverse than the general student population, the differences in performance between immigrant and non-immigrant students are relatively large, even if socioeconomic background is taken into account. Moreover, immigrant students tend to perform better in school systems that are flexible and willing to respond to diverse students' resources and needs (OECD, 2013).

Methods, Data, and Analyses

The analysis in this paper is theory-driven and acknowledges Ainscows et al.'s (2012) interlinked areas within which equity issues arise: i.e., within schools, between schools, and beyond schools. To produce a comparative analysis, we place the young immigrants and refugees' experiences of agency in rural settings in the context of the global/European and national contexts and policies. Due to space limitations, the global and European trends are referred to in the literature review section above. Thus, the findings section starts with presenting the historical contexts of education and immigration in Iceland and Sweden and characterizing commonalities and differences between the two countries. Then, each rural case study context is presented in terms of demographics and local conditions. Finally, immigrant students' experiences are portrayed. The analysis can be described by three levels.

First, the analysis of *global and European trends* is, as stated above, foremost in "Introduction" section, since the focus of the research is the comparative analysis between the two Nordic countries. Although we have performed a substantial search of policy documents and policy research on educational issues related to immigration, the selections we have space to present here should be seen as a literature review.

Second, given that the research communities on educational issues related to immigration in both Sweden and Iceland are small, we started our data collection by looking for relevant information on *historical national contexts* and for known researchers in the field, checking their publication reference lists to find relevant research and policy texts at the national level. We scoured the national agencies for education for policy documents and reports and examined relevant statistics agencies' reports as well. The texts have been located and analyzed with relevance to the research aim and synthesized in the first part of the findings section.

Third, in the analysis of each case study, we draw on a cross-national perspective (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). This perspective, together with the conceptual framework of Ainscow et al. (2012) of *within*, *between* and *beyond* schools, allows us to analyze

observations, interviews (with students and school staff), and locally produced policy text data generated in Iceland and Sweden.

In this joint work, we have utilized analysis-through-discussion as a methodological principle (Gordon et al., 2000). We read and discussed together data concerning our chosen themes, paying attention to similarities and differences in patterns of experience and processes related to immigration between these two Nordic welfare states.

A more extensive description of the data used in each country's case studies is presented below. It is important to note that the participants in the Swedish material are non-European refugee immigrants; in the Icelandic material, they are economic immigrants from Europe. However, looking into experiences of immigrants and refugees in a single paper is justified because it reflects the immigration patterns in the two countries – refugee immigration is more common in Sweden and economic immigration more common in Iceland. Nevertheless, as Long (2013) has described, these two groups are different in some respects – e.g., those related to law and political regulations – while they may have commonalities in other aspects, i.e., experiences of integration and social inclusion. In addition, it is important to mention that during data collection, there was a peak in refugee influx in the most recent history of Europe. Sweden was one of the biggest receivers of this group, whereas Iceland at this time received only a small group of quota refugees, who settled mainly in urban areas.

Before data collection, all necessary permissions and informed consents were obtained in both countries. Participants were informed about the aim of the research and were assured that they would be anonymous and could withdraw at any phase of the research process.

The Swedish data collection in more detail

The empirical material that comprises the Swedish case comes from a wider project – "Rural Youth: Education, Place and Participation" (cf. Beach, Johansson, Öhrn, Rönnlund, & Rosvall, 2019; Rosvall, Rönnlund, & Johansson, 2018) – which altogether employs an ethnographic approach that incorporates classroom observations and interviews (Walford, 2008). For this comparative analysis between Sweden and Iceland, in the Swedish material, the focus has been on interviews and classroom interactions with peer groups of newly arrived migrants; it can be seen as a small-scale study within the larger Swedish project. It also includes analysis of interviews with teachers and school principals.

The research took place in two municipalities, River and Mountain (pseudonyms) in northern Sweden. The former grew around a military base and the latter around a mining

industry, both of which have closed, leading to a decline in population. Throughout the history of both towns, there have been economic activities associated with forestry. Currently, both have a developed tourism industry, which provides most of Mountain's employment opportunities. In addition to tourism, River also has power plants (water and wind) and a small food industry. In 2015, Mountain had fewer than 3,000 inhabitants and River had fewer than 9,000: the latter is a relatively large population for a rural place in Sweden, but both River and Mountain are classified as rural by Swedish standards due to their remoteness, low population density, and relative lack of production or industry (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2010). These municipalities can further be understood as rural – in both material and imagined ways (Cloke, 2006; Massey, 1994) – because they display characteristics typical of rural areas: proximity to nature, remoteness from higher education and some social services (career guidance, paramedic services, healthcare specialists, and legal systems), poor infrastructure, and depopulation.

There are no reliable statistics on the proportion of immigrants during the data collection period. The immigrant population fluctuated substantially due to lack of organization in meeting the immigrant wave during 2015/2016, and refugees were moved throughout the country. Nevertheless, newly arrived immigrants were a presence in both Mountain and River. There were few employment opportunities in general, especially for immigrants. Immigrants with academic backgrounds found it almost impossible to find work matching their competences. The local media reported both on people opening their homes or working voluntarily to support immigrants, and on threats against those hosting refugees.

Onsite visits started with 25 days of classroom observations in each school during a term of a 9th grade class (students ranging from 14–16 years old). All students were then invited to be interviewed, both those born in Sweden and those who had recently immigrated. However, newly arrived immigrants who were not proficient in Swedish were excluded, because we did not have economic resources to hire an interpreter. Since very recent immigrants spoke no proficient Swedish or English, we considered it impossible to do a meaningful interview or to meet the ethical recommendation of participants understanding the consequences of participating in the study. The observations both provided issues to explore in the interviews and enabled a form of data triangulation (Walford, 2008). This article specifically focuses on the immigrants who accepted the invitation to be interviewed: three boys and three girls. All of them were 15 years old and spoke Persian dialects as their mother tongues. All of them were push-migrants and asylum seekers. During the period 2011–2015, when they were registered by Swedish authorities, about 104,000 immigrants were registered in total, of whom about 16,000 were from Afghanistan or Iran (Statistics Sweden, 2016). Their real names

are concealed here to maintain their anonymity, and they are referred to pseudonymously as Reza, Rostam, Roshini, Roya, Roshanek (River school), and Majid (Mountain school). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 35–50 min. Roshanek and Majid were interviewed individually and the others in pairs. The interviews were conducted in Swedish.

The Icelandic data collection in more detail

The data for the Icelandic case studies obtained from a larger study of inclusion of immigrant students in four schools, but this paper discusses schools in two communities, Lava and Volcano (pseudonyms) in southern Iceland. Although the Volcano community is characterized by a significant share of immigrant population, immigrants are scarce in the Lava community. Lava is an area with approximately 400 inhabitants. There are two large employers in agriculture and several tourist-related services in the area, but many residents, including immigrants, work in other municipalities – typically in the main town in the area, where the opportunities for diverse employment matching their education and competences are greater. In addition, there is an insufficient supply of affordable housing and public transport in the area, which might deter economic immigrants from moving there. The only compulsory school and preschool in the area are located in the same building, with a compulsory school enrollment of around 40 children. The school does not have any policy regarding working with immigrant students, but preparing such policy is on the agenda, according to the school principal. Immigrants seem to be welcomed in the local community and are active participants in its social and artistic life. Volcano has about 500 inhabitants and is more distant from the capital area than Lava, although better located in terms of public transport. It has several employers in agriculture and tourism, who often offer cheap or free housing, which seems to attract economic immigrants. About 50 children in total attend the compulsory school, which has a policy regarding receiving new students, but does not specifically reference immigrant students. The municipality has recently organized a well-attended cultural festival, where residents of various backgrounds were able to share and learn about diverse customs and traditions.

Four students – one boy, Vincent (Volcano school), and three girls, Vera (Volcano school) and Lisa and Laura (Lava school) of age 12–16 years – were selected in cooperation with school principals and teachers and agreed to participate in the study. They were all born in continental Europe, but because of the small size of the communities and related risk of identification, their countries of their origin are not disclosed in this paper. Vincent had only attended Icelandic school, and Vera, Lisa, and Laura had educational experience in other countries as well. The students were observed in different classes for three whole consecutive school days and then interviewed in several languages. Each interview lasted

from 30 to 45 min. Lisa and Laura chose to be interviewed together. Their teachers and school principals were also interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of observed practices and interactions.

Overall data analysis

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated (if needed) prior to analysis. We analyzed the interviewees' comments and our field notes according to ecology of equity (Ainscow et al., 2012) and understanding of place (Massey, 1994). Rather than coding, the interview transcripts, and field notes, they were subjected to iterative cycles of reading, interpretation, and formulation of theory, as described by Walford (2008, p. 13). To meet the aim of deepening understanding of immigrant and refugee students' agency in different contexts of rurality in Nordic welfare systems, this article mainly reports on the interviews with 10 immigrants. However, field note observations and the interviews with the students of native origin and school staff (in the case of Sweden), and with immigrant students' teachers and school principals (in the case of Iceland), are used to support the interview data and raise questions about discrepancies, as a form of method and source triangulation (Denzin, 1989).

The small samples have, we argue, validity in praxis (Cho & Trent, 2006). That is, the small sample size is justified by the need to redefine the status quo by generating new knowledge about understudied research participants, while recognizing that the emerging claims may be subject to later revision in the light of new evidence. There is very little existing knowledge about refugees and immigrants living in rural areas; thus, understanding their situation through comparative analysis is important in terms of how geographical positioning and local culture entail certain conditions for immigration. Although the findings will not be directly generalizable, one benefit of small samples is the ability to scrutinize how immigration plays out in the lives of a group of people without disregarding the research participants' individuality and differences (Blumer, 1956).

Historical National Contexts of Two Nordic Welfare States and Their Migration Policies

Nordic countries are often assumed to be similar and referred to as using a "Nordic model" (Holm, 2018; Nylund et al., 2018). This itself makes a comparison between Nordic countries interesting. However, in case of immigrants and refugees as well as schooling and place, a comparison between Sweden and Iceland is even more compelling, since we have both similarities and differences in rurality, welfare state policies, and causes of immigration.

In Sweden and Iceland, there are large areas that are regarded as rural by officials and by European standards (due to geographical positioning, remoteness, low population density, and lack of infrastructure), even though the term "rural" is difficult to define. However, in proportion to overall population, in Sweden (compared to Iceland), there are fewer small rural schools with age-integrated schooling. For geographical and historical reasons, Iceland (like Norway), even though threatened of the global trend of metrocentrism (see, e.g., Beach et al, 2019), has been more successful in creating policies beneficial for rural areas (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009).

If considering the Nordic welfare state model, Iceland and Sweden have somewhat different policies of inclusion, and Iceland could be considered as having more progressive ones. Inclusion in Iceland is understood in a broader sense, i.e., in relation to the ideas of social justice (Ragnardsóttir, 2015). Swedish policies also include ideas of social justice but have since the late 1980s turned from a strong social democratic agenda to a market-oriented agenda. This means that currently the choice of the individual overshadows the agenda of social justice (cf. Dovemark et al., 2018).

Moreover, in recent years, Iceland has been undergoing change, from almost no immigration, to extensive economic immigration, and recently refugee immigration and relocation in different areas of Iceland, including rural areas (cf. Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2016; Haraldsson, 2016), while Sweden continues to receive mostly refugee immigrants.

Swedish context

The Swedish statistics report called *From Finland to Afghanistan* describes well how Swedish immigration has changed from being foremost economic immigration from Finland and Greece in the 1950s and 1960s. Economic crises in the 1970s almost stopped immigration, and conflicts and wars from the 1980s onward led to an increase in refugee immigration, which is the dominant form today. Immigrating individuals come foremost from Iran–Iraq, former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and most recently from Syria.

The change in immigration patterns has influenced policy and regulations. Initially, the growing number of Yugoslavian refugee immigrants was settling primarily in larger cities. This resulted in the political decision to implement regulations to distribute immigrants more geographically evenly among Swedish municipalities. However, the regulations were later abandoned. Today, municipalities are more or less forced to accept a quota of refugee immigrants who cannot find a place to settle by themselves. Rural areas of Sweden were more or less unaffected by the first economic immigrant wave, except for a few small industrial places. In the later refugee wave during the Yugoslavian wars, a few refugee immigrants settled initially in rural areas. During ongoing immigrant waves, mostly from Afghanistan and Syria, many rural municipalities accepted statistically more

refugee immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants than the most largest cities, especially in the north of Sweden (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2014). However, the local municipality still has quite a lot of influence over whether or not to accept immigrants, and thus the number of accepted immigrants can differ substantially between municipalities. For example, Lidén and Nylén (2014) noted that strong support for the nationalistic right-wing party in some municipalities has actual influence on local immigration policy.

For a long time, the government systems of the Nordic countries have been characterized by a high degree of local discretion, but starting in the 1990s, Sweden extended this considerably by transferring many responsibilities to the 290 municipalities. The responsibility and freedom of schools and municipalities to be proactive and efficient within wide legal frames have resulted in large local variations in number of refugees accepted, integration of immigrants in education and language support, to mention a few (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014).

Sweden has been acknowledged for some successful structures and curriculums for integrating immigrant children in education, e.g., no tracking in general compulsory education, additional language support after entering mainstream education, and the option to enroll directly in mainstream classes while benefiting from introductory classes (Koehler, 2017). However, the policies governing whether to place students in introductory classes or directly in regular classes have been criticized for being based on categorical thinking rather than a rationale based on individual needs (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

To date, most research on immigrant youth in Sweden has been conducted in urban areas, including that of Nihad Bunar and his associates (2017). He concludes that most of their interviewed newly arrived students in compulsory school were

> *pervaded by a strong feeling of wanting to be 'normal', to be 'just like everybody else' [. . .] the thing most detrimental to students' self-esteem and ambition were low expectations from significant stakeholders such as teachers and study counsellors, and having a feeling that they were stuck in a separate system (introductory classes) designed for the newly arrived.* (Bunar, 2017, p. 7)

However, some studies show that a quick transfer of newly arrived immigrants into mainstream classrooms results in their experiences not being acknowledged, and even results in them being physically placed at the margins of the classroom (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2017; Obondo, Lahdenperä, & Sandevärn, 2016).

A study on school principals by Norberg (2017) concludes that principals have "*no or little training in how to implement national and local policy on how to support teachers*

regardless of subject to ensure, regardless of students' grades, the development in language and subjects as well as social and academic goals" (p. 643). In sum, Swedish municipalities' lack of restrictions concerning how to organize education for newly arrived immigrants can lead to quite different outcomes in how national policy plays out in practice (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014).

Even though a substantial portion of refugee immigrants in Sweden are placed in areas that are sometimes referred to as holding few future economic opportunities, research has found that some immigrant students decide nevertheless to stay in those communities, since they argue that social relations are more easily developed in those areas. Paradoxically, these students also points at the risk of feeling like outsiders if they stay in their neighborhoods, since they do not feel to be regarded as full members in their local community. This sometimes also refers to interactions in social relations (Bunar, 2017; Rosvall, 2017).

Icelandic context

Iceland has long been considered a homogenous country, with immigration rates not exceeding 3% throughout the 20th century. In the year 2000, 2.6% of the population were immigrants (Haraldsson & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015). However, in the past two decades, the country has been experiencing a rapid demographic shift. Most immigrants come from Europe, including Poland (45% of all immigrants in 2016), Lithuania, Germany, and Denmark (Haraldsson, 2018). By 2016, with second-generation immigrants included, the total percentage of immigrants reached 10.7% (Haraldsson, 2018). The number of children with a foreign mother tongue in Icelandic compulsory schools increased from 3.1% of all students in 2004 to 8.2% in 2015; 63.3% of these students lived in the Reykjavik area, with 36.7% elsewhere in Iceland (Haraldsson, 2018).

This change has had a significant impact on Icelandic schools, because they are obliged to work toward inclusion of immigrant students and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). However, different municipalities and schools have autonomy in how they work with immigrant students. Therefore, one can find Icelandic schools with separate immigrant student units and schools where immigrants join mainstream classes immediately. In addition, depending on the municipality and school, and their financial and staffing resources, schools may employ teachers or teacher assistants tasked with supporting acquisition of Icelandic and/or maintenance and development of students' mother tongues. Reykjavik, which has the highest number of immigrants, has recently implemented a new policy about school integration and work with immigrant students that emphasizes diverse teaching methods, support of active bilingualism, and cooperation with parents (Reykjavíkurborg, 2014).

Several studies on immigrant students in urban areas in Iceland have been conducted in recent years. Research on Icelandic teachers' perspectives about immigrant students has shown teachers' concern with immigrant students' well-being and a will to respond to their needs (Karvelsdóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2010). Case studies in exemplary compulsory schools in Iceland have indicated that the schools developed procedures to meet the needs of immigrant students and had a clear vision for teaching and learning based on collaboration, active participation, and communication with parents (Ólafsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir, & Hansen, 2012; Ragnarsdóttir & Hansen, 2014). Moreover, Icelandic research supports international findings that using students' resources, including experience, knowledge, abilities, and interests, should be recognized and cultivated to support and promote all students' well-being (Guðjónsdóttir, Gísladóttir, & Wozniczka, 2015; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2010). Nevertheless, studies built on interviews with immigrant students, mainly in urban areas, suggested that they experience marginalization and that their contributions to schools are undervalued (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). Despite warm feelings toward their teachers, immigrant students have largely felt socially isolated from their Icelandic peers and were perceived by many teachers as deficient due to their lack of Icelandic language proficiency (Tran, 2015).

Various research in Iceland also shows that immigrant students lack academic vocabulary necessary to fully understand what is being taught (Ólafsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Þórðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2012). The support they receive in Icelandic and their mother tongue is insufficient and differs between schools and municipalities in terms of organization and numbers of hours and financing dedicated to the task (Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2017). A recent study conducted in the north of Iceland (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, & Meckl, 2017) indicated that teachers in compulsory schools felt they were not sufficiently prepared and lacked the support and encouragement to work with immigrant students. The authors recommended increased dialogue between schools and families of immigrant students, focusing on student needs and parental expectations toward schooling (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017).

Case Studies

Reflecting the immigrant patterns in each country, the Swedish participants all had refugee backgrounds, most of them are young boys without parents. In case of Iceland, the participants were economic immigrants from Europe.

Pedagogic practices and student responses

Since municipalities and schools in Sweden to a large extent can organize their education as they want, River School practiced integration in general classes as soon as possible, starting with physics, arts, and mathematics. Mountain School, in contrast, waited to

integrate immigrant students until they more or less spoke proficient Swedish. During this study, only one student had been integrated into the mainstream classes at Mountain School. He had fought to be integrated in an ordinary class, arguing that it was important to be integrated in society as a whole. In both rural schools in Iceland – Lava and Volcano – immigrants started immediately in general classes, but while in Lava School a teacher was hired specifically to assist the immigrant students in their first months, the other school did not offer that possibility. In this sense, Icelandic and Swedish schools were autonomous in deciding on reception and integration policies, depending on resources/students' language proficiency. However, to be included in the group is one thing; to feel included is another. In River School, the immigrant students met both teachers who were supportive and others who did not manage the situation or affirmed the immigrants' presence in class, but seemed merely interested to help. Teachers in the arts and crafts had students who could not communicate in Swedish or English or write in any language. Significantly, those students have not been interviewed for ethical reasons, as it was difficult to meet the ethical guideline of consequences of participation. In those classes, the students more or less sat in the classroom, either talking with their peers in their own language, doing nothing school-related, or working on a task introduced earlier. In mathematics, the teachers worked hard on reading in tasks where reading was needed to sort out the mathematical task. For those who had learned more Swedish and were included in more classes, the situation was far more positive, as they participated in group work with other students born in Sweden. Nevertheless, those students did not feel fully integrated in class and the boys thought they would never be integrated in society as "full citizens":

> Reza: As I said, I was thinking of being a lawyer, but there are no jobs for lawyers here. I think I will do something in the municipality office. You do not need good friends to get a job there as in the private companies.
>
> Interviewer: Good friends, what do you mean with good friends? You said you have friends in the football team.
>
> Rostam: We have friends there, or, we play in the team, but we are not really friends. You have been in the classroom. You see how it is. They are nice, but they seldom talk to us. But we do not care, we have each other.

In Mountain School, all but one student were educated in a special classroom. The two teachers there were very supportive and even created a prayer room for students practicing Islam. The single student in this study was fairly well-integrated, although he said he had experienced some comments of prejudice from one teacher. However, even though some boys experienced prejudice and were not fully integrated, they declared that they wanted to stay in their rural areas. They thought of urban areas as more segregated, having suburbs with almost no Swedish born residents, and associated them with cultural

fights between different ethnic groups. Yet, the boys had little direct experience with Sweden's larger cities and built their assumptions on media reports or through talking with friends and relatives living there.

In Iceland, immigrant students received academic and social support from their teachers, often despite limited financial resources or professional preparation for work with immigrant students. The two schools and municipalities tried to build relationships with their families as well, and in some cases were supportive to parents too – for example, assisting them with finding jobs.

Icelandic participants used superlatives when talking about their teachers, even though none of them was fond of certain subjects, including mathematics and Danish. When asked how he feels as an immigrant in Volcano School, Vincent answered:

> Vincent: Sometimes my teachers forget that I'm an immigrant, because I have good Icelandic.
>
> Interviewer: And is it good that they forget?
>
> Vincent: Yes, I guess so.
>
> Interviewer: But can you use your mother tongue during classes.
>
> Vincent: Yes, I can use it. I use it sometimes when I work with my friends.

It seems that Vincent was not considered as "other," but rather acknowledged as an individual who brings various resources to the classroom. Asked about general atmosphere at school and any possible conflicts between students, the Icelandic participants said they did not recall any situation of this kind. However, Lisa and Laura in Lava School felt excluded from their female peers, both in the classroom and outside of school, and could explain why girls behaved negatively toward them. Simultaneously, the girls emphasized that their relations with male peers were positive, and observations revealed that Lisa and Laura talked more with boys.

In a related vein, it is also relevant to ask how content was adapted to the immigrant students. There was little recognition of the immigrants in Swedish schools in terms of content-related tasks. For example, when learning about World War II in both River and Mountain School, what happened in the countries of origin of the immigrants was not addressed. Nevertheless, the students with immigrant backgrounds stressed that it was important to include pedagogic content involving their countries of origin:

> Interviewer: In the classes I have been to, the local place and what happened and happens here has been mentioned; for example when you had classes in the Second

> World War and when you had thematic work on indigenous people. Do you have any thoughts about that?
>
> Majid: Yes, it is very interesting!
>
> Interviewer: What do you find interesting?
>
> Majid: It is interesting to learn more about the local place where you live.
>
> Interviewer: Sorry for being straightforward, but you said earlier that you were brought up in X [a multimillion-population city in Asia] and that you most probably will move after 9th grade [a few months after the interview]. Why is it interesting to learn more about Mountain?
>
> Majid: Because it is here that I live now. It is important to know things about the places you lived. And things get more real when you know where they took place.
>
> Interviewer: I also recognized that they did not talk much about Asia during your work with the unit on World War 2. Do you have any thoughts about that?
>
> Majid: It is important to include both.

In the Icelandic context, rather than expanding the content of teaching to multicultural issues, the cultures and languages of the students were welcomed on different occasions, including language and natural sciences classes, where they were often used as a tool to bridge knowledge and support learning. In addition, the emphasis was on inclusion and democracy in general, rather than on focusing particularly on immigrant students, so that any student could benefit from the class. This resulted in students being considered part of a group, rather than as separate individuals or a group unto themselves. In terms of equity and the Swedish case, the most obvious thing is that in River school the immigrant student had the opportunity to meet Swedish-born students. The students who could speak Swedish said this was positive, a sentiment the student in Mountain school reiterated. However, their presence in class did not seem to orientate the teaching content toward greater intercultural understanding. The immigrant students' experiences from other countries or as new citizens were not used as an opportunity for learning.

Politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity

In considering the expansion of immigration in Iceland during the 2000s and the immigrant wave during 2015 in Sweden, it could be interesting to investigate whether the teachers or heads of school have gone through courses focusing on immigration. A plethora of such courses have been offered, mainly by The Swedish National Board of Education. The problem has been that most attendees have been from cities and wealthy municipalities (Bunar, 2017). The empirical findings from Sweden corroborate this

statement, since none of the teachers or principals we interviewed mentioned such capacity building.

In the case of Iceland, awareness of the importance of inclusive and multicultural education has been growing. Some courses for teachers and teacher candidates have been developed in the past decades that cover these topics, but many of them are selective. Moreover, research (Ólafsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Tran, 2015; Þórðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2012) shows that one of the biggest concerns of immigrant students in Iceland is their language proficiency. All schools in Iceland are required not only to support the acquisition of Icelandic, but also to strengthen immigrant students' mother tongue (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Yet, to date, there are no obligatory courses for teachers (of different subjects) on how to work with students for whom Icelandic is a second language. Reykjavík has been a pioneer in writing and implementing a multicultural policy. The schools there receive funding for reception of students with a different mother tongue than Icelandic, cooperation with their parents and teaching Icelandic as the second language. Still, other municipalities and schools approach these issues differently, and this determines whether school staff are encouraged and supported to seek additional courses and training that would develop their knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017). As Fjóla, the principal of Lava School explained:

> *We have a good cooperation with the local community. I think we can get almost anything we ask for, with a good argument of course . . . In bigger municipalities, it is much more difficult, stricter. I worked in other small schools and there the situation was similar. If you have a good argument . . . They trust that we are professionals. We also have good cooperation with the social services in the area.* (Fjóla, Principal of Lava school)

The principal's answer indicates that some matters might be easier to deal with in a smaller community. In terms of the Icelandic Lava and Volcano municipalities, it could be explained by the personal and professional closeness and interconnectedness of members of the community, which was mentioned by both students and school professionals and considered supportive. It was also observed in one of the schools when community members participated in the school lunch. Similarly, researchers in Sweden (Beach et al., 2019) found differences between River school, which was situated in a larger municipality, and Mountain school, which was situated in a smaller one. In Mountain school, there were more examples of adaption of content, support (praying rooms), and collaboration with local facilities (e.g., collaborations with a museum as source for information, and a free church as source for workplace practice). There were few examples of such collaboration in River school.

Discussion

Although both Iceland and Sweden are understood to belong to a Nordic model with developed welfare systems, they have different patterns of migration (immigrants in rural Iceland vs. refugees in rural Sweden) and educational strategies to ensure their inclusion.

The two countries' educational systems tackle the refugee/migration issue in a somewhat different way on a teacher level. They have adopted basic policies regarding access to education and social inclusion of immigrants, but these seem to be more developed in practice in urban areas (cf. Bunar, 2017). Our findings show that in case of Sweden, principals and teachers in rural schools seem insufficiently prepared to work with immigrant students in terms of continuous capacity building. In the case of Iceland, unlike in urban schools, where teachers routinely receive training in working with immigrant students, the investigated schools use a strategy of inviting specialists from the capital area to prepare whole school communities to better receive and work with immigrant students. Yet, it is uncertain whether this practice is true for all rural schools. Such autonomy and flexibility *within school* in both countries in terms of implementation of policies and unregulated support and evaluation of their implementation may therefore lead to uneven opportunities for immigrant and refugee students on the one hand, and for teachers and schools working with these students on the other (cf. Ainscow et al., 2012).

When it comes to *beyond school* (Ainscow et al., 2012) and to the underlying social and economic processes at the national (and European and global) level out of which local conditions arise, the context of the social space seems to influence immigrant students' experiences of inclusion. In Iceland, immigrant students are active participants in the classroom and report that they do not feel "othered," although immigrant girls do report feeling excluded from other girls. In the case of Sweden, even though the refugees in River School and Mountain School were in the classroom, they were not always part of the group. However, it is possible that these differences might be a reflection of the fact that Iceland and Sweden are experiencing different kinds of immigrant influxes – mostly economic migration in Iceland and mostly refugee migration in Sweden. Research in Sweden indicates that European economic immigrants seem less stigmatized and more socially included by school staff and peers than refugee immigrants (Öhrn & Beach, 2019). This study might implicitly reflect this when comparing economic immigrants in Iceland and refugees in Sweden. Based on our findings, one might ask what it means to be part of a group? Or to put it differently, what does social inclusion and equity mean in this context?

Our research question was: How are the two national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in everyday practice? We believe that we should start by asking whether it is something that can be achieved at a school level, or is it more of a societal issue – and a good example of how

within school and beyond school can work or fail to work together toward inclusion. This is also related to the concept of nested relationships between school and community (and the system) – but are these relationships hierarchical or can schools and teachers be the actual agents of change?

Considering Ainscow et al.'s (2012) ecology of equity, it seems that Icelandic and Swedish rural schools stand on their own in tackling issues within school, but their practices have an important impact on student experiences of inclusion and agency and may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions of the two countries. In this sense, this does not reflect the characteristics of Nordic welfare system. At the same time, the four schools seem to tackle between- and beyond-school issues in different ways.

Although it is difficult for schools, teachers, and administrators to have an impact on demography or resources available, some of them show initiative and are positive examples that both teaching institutions and policy makers (*beyond* school), as well as other schools (*between* school) can learn from. Yet, as Ainscow et al. (2012) argue, none of the three areas of the ecology of equity exists in a vacuum. Therefore, even if schools improve their practices, in order for the educational system to be equitable, the underlying social and economic conditions need to change as well. Improvement on the path toward equity is only possible if representatives from all areas manage to strengthen collaboration and to work together on a common agenda.

Conclusions

This article explored, through case studies, how educational systems and national policy and immigration patterns played out in different local contexts in two Nordic countries. As we can see, there are differences and commonalities between the rural contexts in the two welfare states, both between rural schools in the same country and between the different countries. We conclude that a Nordic model with strong state policy and intervention that tries to secure an equal welfare system to all does not have a significant impact on pedagogical practices in the schools (cf. Dovemark et al., 2018; Holm, 2018). Instead, it seems that schools have strong autonomy and flexibility when it comes to implementing policies and practices for immigrant students. Thus, implementation depends largely on school staff initiative. In the case of Iceland especially, it is schools that are proactive in adjusting their policies to meet the needs of immigrant students.

Since most studies of integration in educational settings are from urban areas, one might ask if we could find differences or commonalities related to findings in urban areas. In this study, it seems that our findings are somewhat contradictory. Our findings in both countries indicate that the smaller the place, the better the immigrant feels integration works, and school practices seem more adapted toward the immigrant's needs for

support and content adaptation. In addition, some Swedish immigrant boys depicted rural areas as less violent and involving fewer "cultural" fights. Still, we need to bear in mind that some economic immigrants in both Iceland and refugee immigrants in Sweden (especially teenage girls) declared that they do not feel fully integrated in school and in society in general.

The scope of this study did not allow us to explore thoroughly whether the situation is harsher for refugee immigrants, in terms of integration and xenophobia, than for economic immigrants (cf. Long, 2013). There are, however, some studies based on larger data collections in Sweden that indicate that this could be the case in Sweden (Öhrn & Beach, 2019). Similar studies have yet to be conducted in Iceland. Therefore, considering the limited sample of this study, this topic needs to be researched further. Another argument for continuing research relates to the current changes in immigration patterns in both countries. In Iceland, quota refugees are now being resettled more and more frequently in rural areas; in Sweden, on the one hand, there has been a general decline of refugee immigrants since the period of data collection (2015/16), while the rural schools have had more time to adjust to a greater proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds.

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Each author has been responsible for their country's data and for obtaining local funding. AKW has been responsible for concepts and design. Both authors have read and approved the final analysis and manuscript. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics

The Icelandic part of the study was conducted in accordance with the University Scientific Ethical Guidelines (Vísindasiðanefnd Háskólans, 2014) and The Data Protection Authority has been informed of the purpose and details of the research (S7572/2015). The Swedish part of the study procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by The Swedish Research Council.

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Paper IV

Creating spaces for inclusion and innovation in a teacher education course: A collaborative self-study

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Abstract

Inclusive education is an ongoing process grounded in social justice and democracy. Learning to teach builds on teacher educators' ability to foster classroom dialogue, moving beyond technicist teaching to a deep understanding of learning and teaching. The purpose of this research was to understand how to create an inclusive space for student teachers to cultivate critical dialogue about inclusive education. The aim of the research was to unveil how our different knowledge and methodological approaches affected the creation of dialogical spaces in our teacher education classroom.

This research is a narrative collaborative self-study of five university teachers who developed the graduate course *Working in Inclusive Practices*. The course focuses on ideas of inclusive pedagogy and innovation education, emphasizing creative, solution-oriented approaches and developing students' Professional Working Theories. Data collection spanned nine years and included our self-reflection journals, field notes, and photos of students' projects, as well as discussions and meeting minutes. Findings show how the interplay of our collective professional identities gave us the courage to apply creative and transformative pedagogies. We felt that opening a space for a classroom dialogue was crucial to engaging with the diversity in the student group and to elevate learning outcomes. The courage to experiment was rooted in the collective strengths of our teacher group and the trust we had in each other.

Introduction

Inclusive education is an on-going process, grounded in ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights, and access to education for all (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2008). It calls for teachers to take responsibility for developing learning environments where all learners receive quality education and enjoy a sense of belonging. Breaking away from the discourses of disability, or the (mis)understanding that inclusive education equals special needs, is essential for the development of inclusive practices (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). Thus, knowing their students and focusing on those students' resources are factors that help teachers create inclusive learning environments (Guðjónsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2016). Resources include each person's strengths and qualities that emerge from and shape their life experiences (Rodriguez, 2007). Working with student teachers to cultivate dialogue and develop educational practices for inclusive education is a key factor in teacher education, but it requires teacher educators to move out of their comfort zones and explore new and diverse ways of working (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019).

The purpose of this research was to understand how to create an inclusive space for student teachers to cultivate critical dialogue about inclusive education. The aim of the research was to unveil how our different knowledge and methodological approaches affected the creation of dialogical spaces in our teacher education classroom. The research question is: *how does the interplay of our collective professional identities open opportunities for cultivating critical dialogue about inclusive education?*

Theoretical background

The pedagogy of teacher education is more than simply delivering the curriculum, content, and method using 'tools and tricks.' Rather, it builds on a practice that is developed, connected, and piloted in a real teaching practice, and then reflected upon. Therefore, learning to teach builds on teacher educators' ability to create pedagogical experiences and conditions that allow students to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct individual and collective understandings (Loughran, 2006). Teacher education pedagogy emphasizes learning about teaching that occurs through an interplay between learning and teaching, most often through real practices in schools or by providing opportunities for creative and thoughtful pedagogical experiences using problem solving methods (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017; Jónsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2017; Loughran, 2006).

Reflection is widely used in education but does not always lead to optimal learning or the intended professional development. It is not a linear process of identifying challenges and responding to them, but a complicated act of dialogic creation and re-creation (Freire, 1970 Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Russell & Martin, 2017). According to Freire, the word is the essence in analyzing dialogue (1970). He further explains that there are two dimensions within the word: reflection and action. If these two core elements are not equally present, the word either becomes 'idle chatter' or the actions are taken for action's sake, which makes dialogue impossible. Through dialogue on different topics, reflection and action come together to create and recreate understanding and knowledge, giving those participating in dialogue opportunities to develop and widen their individual and collective understandings through the ideas of others (Freire, 1970). In this way, dialogue is an important space for people to develop an agency and stance for taking up social action for themselves and others (Skukauskaite & Green, 2010).

An agentive stance calls for teachers to equip themselves with analytical skills and develop competences that allow them to create learning for all. It involves teacher research and inquiry, posing challenges and solving them, and recognizing that inquiry both stems from and generates questions (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Self-study teacher educators play a significant part in this as they not only create pedagogical experiences, but also engage in reflective self-study of their practice. If reflection is to be more than superficial recollection it needs to be paired with action (Freire, 1970) and practiced "many times in many ways" to become a habit of mind and heart (Allen, 2010; Senese, 2017). In Freirean terms, the true word does not exist without praxis, or as he wrote, "to speak the true word is to transform the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 75).

Dialogue is important for teachers to identify, understand and analyze their professional and personal identities, as well as their practical theory or professional working theory (PWT) (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2002). PWT is a process that frames teachers' reflections on the living theories implicit in their practice. PWT enables teachers to systematically explore socio-cultural and historical influences on the practice of teaching. PWTs are based on reflection in and on practice, indicating that they originate from, and develop through, experiences. PWT has three key strands: professional practice, educational theories or knowledge, and ethics or moral principles. PWT is a living phenomenon that continuously evolves in the interplay between these three key strands as teachers develop their understanding. The teachers are encouraged to reflect on how their life experiences influence their identities and professionalism and vice versa in how professional knowledge, educational theories and practice influence beliefs and identity (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2023). Teachers' PWTs are the conceptual structures and visions that provide them with reasons for acting in certain ways in order to be effective. They are propositions

that undergird and guide teachers' appreciation, decisions, and actions. Such theories are crucial to the success of teaching because educational problems are practical problems (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017). Schön (1987) suggests that the problems of everyday practice are rarely predetermined but are uncertain and puzzling. Through dialogue, teachers can explore the situations they encounter and "converse" with them, to situate them in theoretical framework and develop a better "awareness" for their practice (Biesta, 2019). Thus, dialogue supports a constructivist approach to learning. By making connections to dialogue, teachers are encouraged to create and recreate their own practices (Gauna et al., 2020).

Although creativity is commonly used, it is a complex concept. While it seems intuitive, it is not easily defined. In this research, creativity is viewed as a generic personal trait in all individuals which can be developed as a skill (Craft, 2006). We adhere to a wide definition of creativity, understanding it as the ability to come up with ideas or produce work that is novel, high-quality, and useful (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Sternberg et al., 2003). We also believe that creativity can produce new insights about a situation and change one's approach to a problem (Kneller, 2005). Creativity helps us to produce ideas that are both relevant and unusual, to see beyond the immediate situation, and to redefine a problem or a challenge (Kneller, 2005).

In our course, we apply artistic and unconventional approaches to inculcate creative and critical thinking and encourage critical dialogue among our students. To help ensure these outcomes, we teach the core approaches of Innovation Education (IE). IE is an area of teaching and learning that is sometimes a school subject, sometimes a project, and sometimes a method used within other subjects (Jónsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2017). The core of IE is the process "need-solution-product" where the product can be an artifact, a model, an action, or a process. In IE the learners identify needs or problems they find important, analyze them, and practice finding solutions (Jónsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2017). We use creative ways for students to find new solutions and attempt to dissuade them from thinking that the answers to the challenges of inclusion are more money, more specialists, or more staff in school (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021).

Methodology and methods

This research is a collaborative self-study, focusing on how we, as researchers and teacher educators, support the dialogical interplay of our collective professional identities. We also examine how creativity emerges in our educational practice and cultivates critical dialogue on inclusive education (Bodone et al., 2004). Self-study is a way for us to engage in ongoing professional development; it encourages us to develop dialogical spaces to examine the implications of our experiences and to discuss our practice (Tidwell & Staples, 2017). In this narrative self-study into our situated practice, we sought to reconstruct our process of working with PWT. We attended to moments in our planning and teaching, considered the context of our practice, and retrospectively reviewed our development. Our ontological orientation grounded our study in our relationships with each other (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

Participants

Our research team consists of five teacher educators (Hafdís, Svanborg, Karen, Edda, and Anna) collaborating on developing the graduate course *Working in Inclusive Practices* (WIP) in teacher education. Our experience comes from our elementary and university teaching. While our theoretical backgrounds stem from different disciplines, including inclusive

education, innovation education, language and literacy education, and multicultural education, we adhere to similar pedagogies in that we all emphasize building on student lives and contexts rather than being constrained by their limitations. Our aim is to support students in becoming creative and active learners, teachers, and generators of knowledge for the teaching profession.

The course *WIP* is a graduate level course. A diverse group of about 60 students attend each year. They are diverse in terms of their experience, as some are in-service while others are pre-service teachers, and also in terms of their attitudes towards inclusive education and the school level at which they work or aim to work (preschool, comprehensive or upper-secondary school). The course employs inclusive pedagogy and innovation education, emphasizing creative, solution-oriented approaches and developing students' PWTs.

Data collection

The data consist of our journals about the course, discussions, and meeting minutes. The journals include field notes, incidents and stories from lessons, and photos of students' projects; they also contain our reflections, concerns, and responses and 'I remember' accounts. The data collection spanned over nine years. From this data we extracted signs of how the interplay of our collective professional identities supported us and gave us courage to teach creatively.

Analysis

Analyzing the data, we first wrote an 'I remember' list. Next, we chose incidents or issues and created vignettes describing essential elements we have noticed in our practice. First, we wrote the vignettes in a flow, and then read them over and marked critical issues in relation to the research question, while excising irrelevant or added elements. Finally, we read the story again to see if we had identified how our feelings impacted our practice and if our professional identities were evident; then we rewrote the narrative once more.

Ethical issues and trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, we analyzed the data individually and collaboratively. In the research we were critical friends to each other. Critical friends in self-study can highlight features that are successful, identify the assumptions underlying practices, and suggest how teaching practices could be modelled to student teachers in ways that influence their professional learning (Russell, 2022). Transforming the data into findings and identifying the linkages between data, findings, and collective interpretations yielded meaningful insights into our practice (LaBoskey, 2004).

Creating spaces for critical dialogue

The narratives we share in this section are examples of how we used our collective resources to apply creative approaches to give students space to develop their understandings and to realize the possibilities and many sides of inclusion through classroom dialogue.

This section is built on the three key strands of PWT: professional practice, educational theories, and knowledge and ethics. It follows us, the teacher educators, as we invite our student teachers to develop their PWTs, and encourage them to reflect on practice and theories through poetic inquiry and creative activities. Finally, as we open space for critical dialogue, we encourage them to reflect on ethics, beliefs, and values. Furthermore, it describes the tensions we have experienced throughout the course that make progressive

teacher-education theory and apprenticeship a challenging but at the same time worthwhile pursuit.

Developing the PWT process

One of the main projects that students work on throughout the course, and deliver by the end, is the PWT project. The course is based on the fundamental belief that awareness of professional identity is the core competence of teachers in inclusive practices. To create this awareness, we design tasks where participants take part in ongoing and critically reflective professional dialogues as they build their PWT.

Using the PWT instrument, student teachers are asked to reflect on each strand to identify their professional identity:

- By looking at their practice, participants are provided a space to explore their experience of their professional work and roles, including teaching, assessment, collaboration with colleagues, and relationships with students and parents.
- By looking at theories, participants are provided a space to reflect on their knowledge and the way they understand and relate practice to theory.
- By looking at the ethics, participants are provided with space to explain the reasons behind their practice and relate them to their beliefs and values. It reflects what they are becoming, and what they want to be as teachers.

Hafdís's story illustrates the core issue of developing a space for student teachers to identify and work on their PWT:

> For 13 years the student teachers in my graduate courses used the PWT to frame their reflections on their professional living theories. While they enjoyed reflecting on their PWT, they found it complicated. Using the questions from the PWT instrument, when my student teachers reported interesting stories from practice, their values and beliefs would come through. Going beyond and relating their practice and ethics to theories was a hurdle. Through my reflections, analysis, and interpretation, I concluded this work needed reconstruction.

Wrestling with this hurdle, Hafdís encouraged her colleagues to collaborate and create more versatile opportunities for students to identify their PWT. Her journal from this time reflects their positive responses, while Hafdís was cautious, experiencing tension, reminding herself that "working on the PWT was never meant to be a onetime task but an ongoing process." Hafdís was not sure if she "would get that living nature of the PWT across, but trusted that together we would develop creative opportunities to reflect on the PWT."

Co-creating space for inclusion and innovation

As an elementary teacher, Svanborg experienced how Innovation Education engaged the versatile group of young learners to be creative on their own premise. She was just pleased to get to teach those methods in the graduate course. She recognized the affordances innovation education brought for engaging the students in creating possibilities and solutions for the challenges of practice. At first, some of the students found the methods of innovation education odd in a course for graduate students. However, supported by her colleagues, Svanborg encouraged students to express versatile solutions.

> It was very rewarding to see how the methods encouraged collaboration and active engagement. It gave me genuine joy to see how the innovation process came to life in meeting the requirements of inclusive education dealing with practical problems. I felt again the enjoyment of seeing students being creative, believing in their own power to

> find solutions, and encouraging their agency to make changes. I felt that we collectively were making a difference.

The elements and approaches in the course allowed Svanborg to cultivate the core of her PWT, being creative and supporting her students' creativity in opening dialogical spaces.

Edda joined us in the course when we had been developing it for a few years:

> Coming to teach in the course recently, I struggled to grasp the role of the creative tasks, other than being fun. My field is inclusive education and I never thought of myself as creative. But I then came to appreciate how the methods of innovation education were instrumental in bringing our students to understand that reaching inclusive education was not the responsibility of the government or administrators, but that they themselves and their creative problem-solving were the key.

Some student teachers felt that Innovation Education was a strange element to include in a course about inclusive education, but most gradually discovered that the processes and approaches were appropriate and helpful. We analyzed this process collectively and concluded that the creative tasks pushed students to articulate their experiences as they began to develop the agentive stance needed when teaching diverse groups of learners.

Anna joined our teaching team as Hafdís's doctoral student. She has taught in the course for six years. She is originally from Poland and has studied at universities in three different countries. She wrote that

> Being a student of Hafdís was eye-opening. It was the first time as a learner that I was encouraged to reflect, by building on my background and experience in diverse, creative ways. I felt anxious at first, as I was not used to expressing my thoughts and opinions in my previous studies, but soon I saw the positive impact of innovative approach and classroom dialogue on my attitudes and practice.

Having Anna on our teaching team provided an insider perspective into understanding the tensions that some students experience when they are encouraged to work and dialogue in creative and innovative ways. She shared with us:

> I can empathize with students who sometimes feel a bit lost or even intimidated having too much freedom in approaching the tasks. But reading their initial comments about the course and then seeing their projects and themselves evolving in the process is the biggest reward.

A few students in the course have expressed that hands-on activities are "childish" and are meant for pre-school students. These students call for structured reading and writing tasks which they believe are the core measures of learning in school. Given a choice of how to work and having to work on unconventional tasks makes them insecure. However, we have seen deep critical thinking and dialogue emerge through the artistic ways of working. These hands-on and creative ways have afforded an additional language that has helped to deepen student understanding and expand the space for dialogue.

Using poetic inquiry to connect theory and practice

As former elementary teachers, we have experienced the empowerment of revealing the educational practices we believe in. Therefore, we find it important to provide student teachers opportunities to engage in reading and writing about research in working with their PWTs. When Karen joined the team, Hafdís and Svanborg had been teaching the course

together for two years. In her attempt to respond to Hafdís's encouragement, she reflected on what had been important for her in working on her PWT:

> As a novice teacher, one of my challenges working on my PWT was to identify and critically engage with the living educational theories guiding my actions. I wrote stories about my teaching experiences -- puzzled over the complexity I encountered daily and reading the literature, nodding my head over ideas I read – they made so much sense. It was as the concepts took on new forms until I realized how my task as a teacher was to understand what these ideas meant and how they emerged within the context of the classroom.

Karen suggested we incorporate poetic inquiry into students' writing to support them in identifying critical concepts and ideas related to inclusive education in their writings. She saw it as a way to distill and intertwine their ideas with different aspects of PWT. We wanted to nurture the understanding that theories are not something to be implemented from the outside, but to be lived and composed from within. Svanborg described how she felt about Karen's suggestion:

> I felt Karen was taking a chance taking this untrodden path, and I was hesitant and curious to see how poetic inquiry would work out. I had doubts. Proceeding, however, I saw that this was a constructive way to analyze core concepts and main thoughts and present them as unrhymed poetry. I am so happy to see that this approach is in harmony with the other creative elements in this symphony we are creating in this course on the multiple approaches to meet diversity.

We realized that the pedagogical affordances of poetic inquiry were to get students to dwell with, highlight, rearrange and share main ideas from their writings to gain alternative perspectives on what they were thinking and dive under the surface. Experimenting with this method, we began to see how it opened a dialogical space for students to reflect together.

Motivating students' thinking through creative activities

We provide our students with a plethora of practical and theoretical reading materials. Some of the readings are obligatory, but we also offer them a wide selection of optional readings to give them choices to deepen their understanding according to their interests and school levels. This includes watching and analyzing films as well as reading texts. Groups of students meet to discuss a film, or sometimes multiple films. When they have discussed their understanding and drawn out the main message of the film, we ask them to turn to a selection of reusable materials they have brought with them, and we provide some as well. As a group project, they then design and make a symbolic expression from the materials to exemplify the message their film represented.

> The first time I (Svanborg) suggested students could express their understandings of the films they watched, using recyclable materials, I was a bit hesitant. But Hafdís was immediately excited and willing to try. The outcome was better than I had hoped for, as the students seemed to take the task seriously; the artifacts they made displayed deep understanding of the messages the films provided about education, good and bad.

When Karen joined the course, she suggested an additional task in the film-interpretation process that helped the students to step back and reflect on a particular moment they found interesting or moving. The students first wrote down a descriptive text of the moment in the film. Then, they began their discussion by sharing their writings in small groups and used them to shape their collective interpretation of the educational messages from the film. Image X.1 shows students' symbolic interpretations of the film Dead Poets Society.

Image X.1 Imprisoned in school *(film: Dead Poets Society)*

This is about the film Dead Poets Society which is about a teacher who has considerable influence on his students. We had all written individual reflections about the film but the common thread in our writing was that the students in the school system were much bigger than the school system.
Our artifact is a prison that is symbolic for this particular school, and you can see that there is quite a bit of the student within the school system but also a whole lot of him exists outside of the system. This school was old-fashioned, and students sat in rows reading. This is our symbolic artifact showing that students are more able and can reach further than the boundaries that the school sets for them. The orange sleeves symbolize a prison garment, and blue shoes represent depression and the student's face is sad. The teacher's emphasis was on supporting students to become creative and free thinkers rather than making geniuses. It was a challenge for us to analyze and integrate our different points and we feel that this artefact catches the ideas we collectively want to convey.

The creative hands-on work demands that students really dive into and reflect on what kind of educational messages the films they watched presented. Collaborating on articulating, interpreting, and developing a shared message of the film allows students to expand and deepen their understandings and visions of inclusive education. These visual, expressive interpretations have become a language that mediates between their feelings, thinking, and reflections on the one hand and the vocal and written language of text on the other.

Creating space for critical dialogue on ethics, beliefs, and values

Part of PWT is to develop the courage to address difficult subjects. This can be an emotional process for students. In approaching this dialogue through the medium of creativity and using tangible materials, the methods invite students to step into and tackle difficult or emotional issues. These media also give our multilingual student teachers a chance to approach the tasks on an equal basis.

During the course we discuss our attitudes and confront our prejudices, as we believe it is crucial for us, teacher educators, as well as for our students. In collaboration with the other *WIP* teachers, Anna developed a session using a multicultural lens with the aim of exploring and understanding the ideas of inclusion. To address these issues, the session began with short thought-provoking texts to open a space for dialogue. In this first phase, we used a word cloud to give everyone a chance to express their thoughts freely but also to reflect, individually and collectively. We asked our students to finish a sentence: “The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of Africa is...” The word cloud in Image X.2 shows the first responses.

Image X.2 "The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of Africa is..." (translated from Icelandic)

As the word cloud began to form, social and cultural assumptions began to emerge. Students were shocked as they identified racist conceptions appearing. We then invited students to use this task to look deeper into their educational practice, teaching material, and learning environment through an inclusive, multicultural lens and share their reflections. After one such lesson Anna wrote in her journal:

> I noticed how shocked, but at the same time relieved the students were when they realized that their peers have similar ideas about Africa, often built on the information available in books and media while they were growing up. I was pleased to see that this small activity triggered vivid discussions that are crucial for the teaching profession. In approaching such tasks, we need to ensure that all students feel safe and are provided space to express their ideas in diverse ways, ask questions, and find solutions. It is also important for us, the teacher educators, to participate actively in the process.

By approaching sensitive topics like discrimination, othering, and prejudice in an inviting manner and in a space that is prepared for and encourages critical dialogue, we and our students become aware of our own personal and professional selves. This has deepened our understanding of how we can make teaching and learning processes inclusive for diverse student populations. We gained courage in breaking out of the traditional university teaching models by using hands-on, creative methods in our teaching. Even when meeting online, we have requested that our students bring LEGOs to the screen or prepare different recyclable material that they can use to make models of their understanding.

This means that in working on their PWTs, our students are both encouraged and ready to choose an authentic form for their project. Many of them hand in unusual and creative projects. Others adhere to the thesis form, which we also welcome, and some of those certainly also show creative thinking and originality.

Discussions and Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to understand how to create an inclusive space for student teachers to cultivate critical dialogue on inclusive education, and thus unveil how our different knowledge and methodological approaches affected the creation of dialogical spaces in our teacher education classroom. Findings show how the interplay of our collective

professional identities multiplied the opportunities to apply creative and transformative pedagogies. We felt that opening a space for a classroom dialogue was crucial to engage with the diversity in the student group and improve learning outcomes. Drawing upon the collective strengths of our teacher group and the trust we had in each other, we managed to experiment and support these endeavors.

Through self-study of our practice, we constantly analyzed and reevaluated our approaches (Biesta, 2019; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Creating a dialogue in a large group of students can be challenging, as some are silent and others dominate the conversation. To work through this challenge, we tapped into our diverse resources and applied creative methods to open up a space for critical dialogue. The artistic, hands-on, visual ways of working provided students with an additional language to enhance their understandings and encourage them to express their feelings and views in dialogue with other students and themselves (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2021).

An inclusive space for dialogue is important. In creating this inclusive space for our student teachers, we as teachers and educators think of ourselves as living role models. Therefore, we attend to the equilibrium between us in bringing up innovative ideas and critically discuss them without being judged. Trusting others to embrace your ideas and support you in bringing them forward is a crucial aspect of an inclusive learning space where critical dialogue takes place. Through the interplay of our PWT, we gained courage to step outside of our comfort zones and develop spaces for critical dialogue. This dialogue cannot be transferred because it is context-bound (Freire, 1970), but by being living role models we can invite students to step into these processes and embrace them.

In restructuring the course through self-study, we strived to create and develop pedagogy that provides opportunities for creative and thoughtful pedagogical experiences using problem solving methods (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017; Jónsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2017; Loughran, 2006). As a team, we have found that having space and trust to express our ideas and feelings about the course is significant for developing it. Inclusive education can be a contested and difficult topic (Florian, 2008). We have witnessed how the methods we use have allowed students teachers to develop an agentive stance to move from feeling powerless or stuck in a conventional framework of schooling to developing awareness of practice, finding solutions, and taking steps towards social change in their local settings (Biesta, 2019; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Skukauskaite & Green, 2010). Thus, the tensions related to the challenge of inclusion have been problematized through a critical dialogue that builds on creative processes and sharing different perspectives. Being aware that we as teacher educators need to model inclusive practice and pedagogy in our course, we endeavor to be creative, flexible and listen to our students. We are aware of the tensions involved in exploring unknown and even uncomfortable territories of the creative process. The unknown is often scary and unpredictable, and it is tempting to choose the well-trodden path. However, to articulate these reservations is a constructive step in and of itself. Embracing these voices as we continue to challenge ourselves and push our students to step beyond their comfort zone opens new avenues for professional understanding and growth. By modeling how to make connections through dialogue, we prepare, practice, and encourage teacher students to use dialogue in their own practices to build inclusive pedagogy (Gauna et al., 2020).

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Paper V

Fostering researchers' reflexivity in research with immigrant students

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Fostering researchers' reflexivity in research with immigrant students

This article examines the role of researchers' reflexivity in research with immigrant students. It is a personal narrative from author's experience of a multiple-case study in Iceland, written in line with the tradition of critical autobiography, which helps a researcher to deconstruct a story in terms of the audience for the research, purposes for telling the story, and social critique of one's subjectivity. In this article I illustrate how, during the process of becoming a researcher with immigrant students, I moved from reflection toward a critical and reflexive approach. I applied various research practices, including giving participants time to gain trust and using diverse methods, which allowed me to capture stories that otherwise might have been omitted. Findings show how important it is for a researcher to constantly renegotiate her role and ensure that she does not position participants according to her own experience.

Keywords: immigrants; students; reflexivity; positionality, critical autobiography

Introduction

Being a qualitative researcher requires constant judgement of actions applied throughout the research process. One of the fundamental principles of qualitative research is to ensure that data collected during interviews and observations reflect participants' voices. This is particularly challenging in doing research with immigrant students, where a researcher should consider, among other things, issues of power and control (Mayall, 1994), the position of children in the research (Kirova, 2006) and possibilities of empowering or changing children's lives through research (Veale, 2005). Researchers who adopt a critical perspective in their inquiry are concerned with emancipation of the participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Critical researchers researching children or with children consider them to be knowledgeable and powerful members of society. As social actors, children can be active participants in the research process, capable of providing information about their own lives (Christensen & James, 2000; O'Kane, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to shed light on researchers' reflexivity while doing research with immigrant students. The aim of the paper was to present the path of my development as a critical researcher. The research question was: How can reflexivity in research with immigrant students influence different phases of the research process? This article discusses the role of researcher's reflexivity in negotiating

sensitive issues that may arise while preparing and conducting research with immigrant students. These issues include developing participants' trust, negotiating the role of the researcher, giving children voice, and looking at the collected data through a critical lens.

There is a long tradition of addressing methodological and ethical issues of researching in a cross-cultural environment and with vulnerable groups. The focus has been mostly on social and health sciences (Denzin, 2003; Fisher & Ragsdale, 2005). In educational research, a growing discourse has recently evolved in which authors often aim attention at ethical and methodological challenges of researching with immigrant populations (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2024; Buchanan, 2024; Robinson-Plant & Wolf, 2016; Yip, 2023). Educational researchers are said to hold a great responsibility, because their studies may be used to inform policies and practice that have an impact on people's lives (Birman, 2005). Thus, with the current changes in demographics resulting in growing populations of immigrant students across the world, there is need for further discussion of whether and how to conduct research with young immigrants. In that respect, the value of this article lies in scrutinizing the challenges of educational research with immigrant students; but it also contributes to a general understanding of the ethical and methodological complexity of conducting interviews and field observations in broader contexts.

Reflexivity in qualitative educational research

Researchers might see education in "technological terms," or in other words, as a practice "that is ultimately understood as being governed by cause–effect relationships." They might also approach it as a "human event of communication, meaning making and interpretation in which questions of cause and effect actually have no place" (Biesta, 2015, p. 12). Qualitative research entails the educational researcher's presence in diverse social contexts in which various methodological and ethical issues and challenges of handling them in practice may arise not only while analyzing data, but also while collecting it. Thus, although educational researchers aim at knowledge production, they shall also commit to minimizing harm, respecting participants' autonomy and protecting their privacy (Buchanan, 2024).

Reflexivity is a process that is useful and relevant in the context of both knowledge production and research design (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). Reflexivity is distinct from reflection in that the latter can be understood as thinking about something that has already happened, a thought turned back on itself (Finlay, 2012; Mann, 2016). Reflexivity, on the contrary, is an ongoing process applied on a process -- a process of being self-aware of one's own assumptions, preconceptions, and beliefs, and examining how these may influence the research process, including for example the dynamics of the interviews (Mann, 2016). In other words, reflexivity is a form of an inner dialogue and evaluation of the impact of behavior, values, and perceptions of a researcher on data collection, analysis, and findings (Pillow, 2003).

Reflexivity can be used by a researcher as a strategy to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon that she studies and reassure its accurate portrayal

(Morrow, 2006). Reflexivity is strongly related to the ethics of research, and as Pillow (2003) suggests, it means that a researcher takes a non-exploitative and compassionate stance toward research participants. Being reflexive implies scrutinizing the relationship between researcher and participants, as well as data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

The idea of reflexivity stresses the positioning of a researcher based on personal traits such as gender, origin, age, professional and personal experience, and preferences (Berger, 2015). In her research with different populations, including immigrant women and stepfamilies, Berger (2015) suggests that positioning may influence research in three areas: a) access to the field; b) the nature of researcher-participant relationship; and c) the ways in which the researcher conducts the study -- e.g. the language she uses, the techniques she incorporates, the questions she asks, or the conceptual lenses she applies. Being a responsible educational researcher therefore requires constant decision-making and discretionary judgement about the actions and methods applied in the research process.

Hoveid (2012) argues that educational research should address intrinsic values in education. She understands such educational research as a form of self-evaluation, where a researcher should constantly ask herself, 'What do I care about when I do educational research?' (Hoveid, 2012, p. 60). This means that the identity of a researcher is in a process of continuous reconfiguration and development, together with the changing context. Similarly, a study with indigenous people by Martin (2010) shows that a qualitative inquiry requires a researcher to constantly deal with the knowledge of self and others, and with power, as important ethical issues.

Reflexivity is considered crucial in research with children (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Through the act of researching children, a researcher can, rather than empowering them, present them in a way that reproduces 'suffering and stigmatisation' (Te Riele & Brooks, 2013, p. 185). There is also 'a dangerous tendency to under-estimate or pre-judge the abilities and concerns of the participants', especially in contexts in which a researcher is unexperienced (Coady, 2010, p. 79). Chesworth (2018) argues that research with children calls for an openness to uncertainty and an ethical responsiveness throughout the process, including interpretation and presentation of the data.

Research on and with immigrants, including immigrant student populations in educational systems, is often used in debates about immigration and immigration policies (Carens, 1996). This fact requires a researcher to face a 'dual imperative' – a concern about reducing suffering (or not perpetuating marginalization in this specific case) on the one hand, and the responsibility to conduct research and provide research results conforming to the highest scientific standards on the other. These are imperatives that remain relevant for a researcher regardless of existing ethical principles (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003, cited in Birman, 2005).

Questions arise concerning how, on the one hand, researchers can ensure they capture immigrants' voices; and on the other hand, whether and how they can guarantee that the process of thinking through and conducting research does not make the immigrant populations even more marginalized than they were before the research began. These questions are appropriate in the ongoing debate about the relevance of

educational research not only for academia, but also for practitioners, policymakers, and other potential users (Landri, 2012; Lingard et al., 2011).

Some authors discuss the importance of either being a 'cultural insider' oneself or including one in a research team. Cultural insiders are individuals who possess knowledge of the language and are familiar with the culture of a certain group through shared lived experience (Birman, 2005). Both positions, that is insiders and outsiders, are said to have their advantages. Insiders may possess cultural or linguistic skills which may be helpful in gaining access to participants and conducting research (Yip, 2023). At the same time, a researcher who is a cultural outsider may be more likely to encourage participants to explain their accounts in detail, rather than taking them for granted (Carling et al., 2014; Ganga & Scott, 2006). With the growing number of not only immigrants, but also refugees and asylum-seeking unaccompanied children, researchers who want to understand their realities need to be able to address these issues.

Methodology and methods

The purpose of this research was to shed light on my reflexivity while doing research with immigrant students. My data derive from a multiple case-study aimed at exploring and informing policies on situation of immigrant students in primary schools in different contexts of Iceland. The forthcoming analysis draws mainly upon my own experiences as a researcher, trying to situate myself within the research project and to deal with challenges I encountered while conducting the research. However, I have also incorporated some of the data collected in the schools throughout the research project. Those included video-recorded observations of immigrant students' interactions with other students and teachers, photographs of students' projects, semi-structured, formal interviews, and informal conversations. Participants included 18 immigrant students ages 6-16 in four compulsory schools.

As Creswell (2013) suggests, it is important for qualitative researchers to disclose the background, social position, and personal experiences they bring to a study to reflect on how these aspects may have influenced their understanding of the topic and relationships with participants. I am originally from Poland, but I have experiences of studying at the university in Spain and working in France as well. I moved to Iceland in 2006 and since then I have worked as a preschool assistant, project manager, Icelandic language teacher for immigrant adults, and a teacher assistant and researcher at the School of Education, University of Iceland. I have also experience managing a refugee reception program and leading an association of women with multicultural backgrounds in Iceland.

During almost two decades in Iceland, I have encountered various challenges, including learning the Icelandic language; recognizing, respecting, and reconciling cultural similarities and differences; validating my previous education and work experience; and building up professional connections and friendships. I have my success stories, but I also have moments of feeling excluded and not belonging. Therefore, when embarking on the research journey, I assumed I had a shared immigration experience -- if not with the students I was about to interview, then at least

with their parents. This, I believed, would help me gain access to participants, and grant me a better understanding of my participants' realities. Although I was aware of the possible challenges of doing research with immigrant children, I thought that being an insider would facilitate tackling any issues arising in the research process.

The collected data are representative of the sensitive issues problematized in the article and illustrate critical moments of my study. My visits to the schools were repeated, starting with observing students' behaviors and discourses and followed by my dialogue with participants to generate meaning and ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Carspecken, 1996). While conducting the research I kept a journal where I wrote field notes, reflections, and questions. I used interview protocols to record additional information, and to describe characteristics of the setting and the body-language and gestures of the interviewees (Creswell, 2008). The interviews were transcribed, and visual data were described in line with the characteristics of a qualitative inquiry. Additionally, I employed a Visit Guide, built on the ideas of Moore (1995) and adjusted to the Icelandic context by Guðjónsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2003). This tool helps teachers, administrators, policymakers, and researchers to see the diverse and sometimes hidden dimensions of schooling.

What follows in this article is a personal narrative, written in the tradition of critical autobiography (Felski, 1989; Gilmore, 1994). Critical autobiography allows a person to tell a story from her own point of view (Gilmore, 1994). It is not neutral, but positioned and contextualized, in a way that is presented from the perspective of a person with certain intentions and at a certain moment, and is "actively constructed, by a person in a social and cultural space" (Eisenhart, 2000, p. 45). Critical autobiography helps a researcher to deconstruct a story in terms of: a) audiences of the research, b) purposes for telling the story, and c) social critique of one's subjectivity (Eisenhart, 2000). The simultaneous thematic analysis included initial revision and coding of the data and sorting it into themes by discovering patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013).

Findings

During the analytical process, I located four themes that present methodological and ethical issues: developing participants' trust, negotiating my role as a researcher, giving children voice, and looking at the collected data through a critical lens. I will begin however, by contextualizing my experience and describing the first stage of joining a research team.

Beginnings

In this specific project, I, the researcher whose story is presented in this article, joined an already established research team. This meant that the study plan, together with the methodology, research questions, and objectives, had already been decided in accordance with the University of Iceland Scientific Ethical Guidelines, and initial literature review had been completed. By the time I began my fieldwork, the purpose and details of the study had already been reported to the Data Protection Authority and

permission obtained from school principals. Therefore, the actual path of my research started rather unusually -- that is, by preparation of study visits and interviews.

At the beginning of the process, I re-established contacts with school principals previously made by others from the research team and thoroughly explained to them the aims of the research. Later the participants were chosen, bearing in mind the objectives of the project. Finally, an informed consent translated into several languages was signed by all participants' parents or caretakers; throughout the study, the anonymity and confidentiality of the immigrant children and their families and schools was ensured. I did not know much about participants before meeting them, other than their age, nationality, number of years in the Icelandic school system, and the fact that they were chosen by school principals and/or teachers purposefully.

Developing reflexivity

Rather than proceeding with the interviews immediately, I began by visiting schools and selected classrooms several times to observe and engage in informal discussions with teachers and students. At one point, while I was present in Geysir school, I received confirmation from one teacher that two girls who were 12 years old at that time were ready for a pair interview. The girls and I went to a separate classroom and started to talk. As we were discussing the social life at their school, the girls started to open up:

> Lisa: Because some kids tolerate foreigners, and some have this very specific approach: 'I'm the best.' [changing voice]
> Joanna: 'I'm the best, all the girls are my friends, I'm the queen.' [changing voice]
> Lisa: And for example, boys are friends with foreign girls rather than girls.
> I: Icelandic girls?
> Lisa: Yes.
> I: And is that your experience, that you have more Icelandic male friends than girlfriends?
> Lisa: Yes, unfortunately. (Interview with Lisa and Joanna, Geysir school)

During this interview, I started to ask myself questions that I later wrote in my research diary: "Why did the girls share this information with me? How would they behave if they were interviewed by an Icelandic male researcher? What story would they tell an Icelandic female researcher?" As I was listening to the girls, I began to reflect on my own experience. I caught myself trying to put myself in their shoes. At the same time, I was constantly thinking about whether the way I acted and asked questions was appropriate.

In this example, having same gender as the interviewees, as well as an immigrant background, seemed to be beneficial in obtaining the girls' insights. Moreover, being able to spend time in the school and observe students in and outside of the classrooms several times before conducting the interview helped me to gain the trust of the girls, and thus gather important data that otherwise might have been overlooked. It was important to listen to the data repeatedly and use my own experience. It was also crucial that I, myself was an immigrant too, so I became reflexive -- it turned out to be a

process applied to a process. I wrote in my journal: “What made me believe that I gained the girls’ trust to open up? Could I relate to their story and show it in the process of interviewing?" Before I began to interview children, I had a chance to observe them inside and outside of the classrooms and see their interactions. While interviewing the girls, these images popped up again. As I listened to their stories, I immediately could link them to some other stories I was aware of and it led me to ask more questions; however, it was also important that they got a chance to discuss it together.

Negotiating my role as a researcher

Initially, I believed that being an immigrant in Iceland myself was very useful for the research. I assumed that I had a relatively broad practical knowledge of immigrant issues in Iceland, including patterns of migration, the situation of immigrants and refugees, and their home language environments due to previous research and work in the field. In one specific case in Moss school, a good insight into local news helped me to link the interviewee to a sensitive story of his family’s relative and, as a result, avoid questions that could have been harmful to him. In this story, I could sense the interviewee’s pain. I felt that it was hurtful, and when I decided to change the subject I could immediately see that the student was relieved. My knowledge of his story and my experience helped me respond “in the process” and with respect.

However, being an immigrant myself, I had to be sure not to position participants according to my personal experience as an immigrant in Iceland or to previous research. During one of my visits to Northern Lights school, I met Luke, an eight-year-old boy. As we finished talking about school in general and different subjects, I started asking him about the attitudes of his teachers toward immigrant students:

> I: What is the approach of your teachers to you as an immigrant?
> Luke: Good, sometimes teachers forget [hesitating]…
> *As Luke started to hesitate, I gave him time to answer, but at the same time I was expecting to hear a negative story, similar to the findings from many studies with immigrant students (reference). Suddenly Luke continued:*
> Luke: … forget that I’m an immigrant. Because they say that my Icelandic is good.
> I continued: And what do you think about it that they forget?
> Luke: Well, it’s good. I suppose so. (Interview with Luke, Northern Lights school)

This is only one example of many when I needed to renegotiate my role as a professional and ensure that I reflected on my positionality and assumptions. Being aware of that fact helped me make the most of my position for the sake of my research team and participants in the research.

Reflexivity on giving children voice

One challenge that I encountered while interviewing students was their different levels of understanding of questions previously prepared by the research team. I felt that at

times the questions were not appropriate, not well-formulated, or not applicable to certain students, so I had to find ways of asking that would work with my interviewees. Thus, I decided to adjust the questions not only to the age of the students, but also to their Icelandic language fluency and their background.

I quickly noticed that some of the children had difficulty opening up, although they could understand the questions and the aim of the interview. One day during my visit to Geysir school, I met two boys, 11 and 12, who consented to participate in a pair interview. They had arrived recently and were very shy at first, so I chose to use story-crafting:

> I: Jugo Fernandez is 11 years old and he lives in Iceland. Now, you have to think what does his life look like? You can discuss it between yourselves - what does his life look like now, what will his future be like? How is his school, what kind of friends does he have? Is he from Iceland or not? His name is Jugo Fernandez and he is 11 years old, these are the only facts we know.
> Mark: He is for sure shy, because he has just arrived in Iceland and he can't speak yet.
> Jack: He is from Portugal for sure.
> Mark: And he probably has friends from Portugal at school. He might feel bad at school.
> I: Why might he feel bad?
> Mark: Because he doesn't understand the language and everybody is staring at him. And everybody has negative looks.
> I: And does it last for long, these negative looks? Or is it changing?
> Mark: It's changing.
> I: Why?
> Mark: Because people get to know him better.
> Jack: He will for sure make friends with someone later, and with staff and in general.
> I: And with children?
> Jack: Yes.
> Interviewer: And how does he learn?
> Jack: There's one Portuguese teacher.
> Mark: I also think that there is one teacher. For example, when I came here, I had this Helga and she taught me. She put sticky notes for example on a wall and I had more than 130 sticky notes that I have collected in two months. So, this one is teaching probably the same way.
> I: 130 sticky notes with words?
> Mark: Yes. And I had to write the words down in Polish below. And I learnt it at home and at school.
> I: And did you like this method, did you learn something?
> Mark: Yes, and then I had to do little tests.
> I: OK. And do you think that Jugo learns the same way?
> Mark: Yes. (Interview with Jack and Mark, Geysir school)

It took me some time to get the boys to start talking. I wrote down this dialogue, and all the others, exactly the way they occurred. Then the authors, immigrant children,

had a chance to reflect on them and make any changes they wanted. Because children could see my interest in listening to their stories, they spoke more freely. They used their own ways of communication to provide information about the imaginary person. By warming the students up, giving them time to talk about an imaginary person, they got a chance to talk about themselves and to link their own experience. It empowered them, and at the same time revealed their perspectives and views on their own lives. Being reflexive about the process enabled me to make a U-turn. I saw that there was an opportunity for the students to switch to talk about themselves, because it seemed that it was not a problem for them anymore. By making the U-turn and adding a question about an analogue for the students themselves, I managed to change the focus of the story toward them. That was possible because I used story crafting, but also because I was being reflexive.

Looking at the data through a critical and reflexive lens

Being an immigrant myself and having experienced various challenges, as well as working with immigrants who had had both positive and negative experiences for more than a decade, I felt that it was important not only respect immigrants, but also find ways of empowering them. Therefore, I aimed to investigate students' stories and offer them space to speak out. I continued to address methodological and ethical issues during the process of data analysis. To culturally validate this phase, I decided to work not only individually, but also with other members of the research team, who had various backgrounds and experience. Sessions, usually in a group of up to four people, included reading over interviews, analyzing the photos and artwork of students, and watching video recordings. The meetings lasted sometimes for several hours, but it was time well invested. We could discuss specific situations and reflect on them, as well as clarify and explain language and cultural nuances that otherwise could have been left unexamined.

One day, another research team member and I were watching a video that she recorded during a field visit, prior to my appointment as a researcher. In this case, a teacher and four students from three different countries were discussing the process of digestion. The team member suddenly paused the video and asked me, "Do you know what they are talking about?" while pointing at two boys sitting near each other. Both had a Polish background, as did the teacher, so I could easily understand their words. I answered that they were discussing the subject of the lesson and explaining the concepts to each other in Polish. This was a revelation to my research partner. Neither she nor others from the team knew whether there was something interesting taking place at this specific moment because they did not understand the language the two students were using to communicate. What was happening was an example of a translingual practice that we later explored together.

In this case, my being a cultural insider helped the entire research team to spot a nuance that not only made that moment meaningful, but allowed me to make these students' voices heard. Performing both individual and group analysis helped me locate and make use of students' resources and reflect on the gathered data.

Discussion

My story indicates that neither a non-stigmatizing research question, nor a thorough preparation and reflection prior to the study, are sufficient in conducting research with immigrant children. Rather, such research requires the constant self-awareness of the researcher and her ability to be not only reflective, but also reflexive. During the entire study and dissemination of findings, I encountered various challenges related to marginalization, identity, knowledge-power relations, and ethics; therefore, I had to constantly reflect upon and re-negotiate my role, in the manner that Hoveid (2012) and Te Riele and Brooks (2013) point out.

The findings show that interviewer's background, knowledge, and experience can be helpful in reaching interviewees and gaining their trust. The divide between cultural outsiders and insiders is often fuzzy, and many researchers look at it rather as a continuum and take a 'hybrid' or 'third' position that acknowledges internal divisions within a group (Carling et al., 2014; Ganga & Scott, 2006). Age, social class, migration history, education, or religion can make individuals who are considered similar in terms of language and culture only partial insiders to one another's worlds (Griffith, 1998). In order not to position participants according to a researcher's experience, I needed to be able to reflect on my own identity as well. Being an immigrant, I considered myself to be well equipped to research immigrant children. On the one hand, similar experiences of migration helped me to avoid harming or re-traumatizing several participants. On the other hand, it was challenging when I, perhaps understandably, tended to negotiate and compare my own experiences and perceptions with the stories of immigrant children, as observed in previous research (Birman, 2005).

As Day (2012) argues, our social position has an impact across all stages of research – it determines the lens through which we approach, investigate, and analyze data. It is not to be viewed as a weakness of research, but we need to be explicit about it and how it may influence our research. Assuming such a position may allow the researcher to spot the advantages and shortcomings of the different cultures that she identifies with (Hamdan, 2009). Therefore, Warin (2011) suggests that it is important to recognize similarities with participants of our research -- or "me too moments" -- and, at the same time, to revisit our own experiences and assumptions and acknowledge dissimilarities. The notion that a researcher is both an insider and an outsider while doing research within a community she is familiar with happened to be true in my case (Chaitin, 2003; Griffith, 1998). It is argued that, although having a cultural insider is not a solution to all ethical challenges that arise in researching in culturally diverse contexts, it may help in pointing out challenging issues and ensuring the negotiation of research approaches (Birman, 2005).

There is a danger of generalizing or assuming that all immigrants have the same experiences or share same challenges and hindrances. Hamdan (2009) uses the term "reflexivity of discomfort" to stress her concern of unintentionally generating stereotypical images of the population one researches. The ability to respond and be reflexive while in the process of doing research is something that I noticed as I looked back to what occurred during my interviews and observations and when I read my

journal. Previous research shows that "there may be times when a researcher believes that particular aspects of their identity will generate more impact on their work than others but later learn to their surprise that it was actually a different, unexpected aspect that had a greater impact." (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 10). Thus, it is important for the researcher to be actively reflexive about aspects of her identity that impact the work throughout the research process as their relevance may differ from one stage (i.e., design and preparation) to another (i.e., data collection), (Day, 2012; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).

The ability to understand and speak the language of interviews and observations may refer to all individuals involved in the research. In the case of a researcher and/or participant with insufficient knowledge of a certain language, the process of planning and conducting a study often involves working with interpreters. Instead of using an interpreter, which is not only challenging (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011), but, in the case of Iceland, often costly and limited, other forms of data collection may be considered. These involve a participatory approach to research and facilitation of children's views by allowing them to choose topics and methods of communication, as well as giving them opportunities to interpret data by themselves (O'Kane, 2000). I decided to incorporate one such approach called story-crafting. It was developed in Finland and is used especially with younger children or those immigrant students who are still insecure in a selected language (Lulle & Assmuth, 2013). This strategy is considered supportive in language development and helpful in strengthening the participant's self-respect and sense of inclusion (Karlsson, 2005). In my study, it helped to create a friendly atmosphere and motivate children to open up and tell their own stories in an informal way.

Another possibility is to explore various artefacts, including projects, drawings, and diaries, together with participants of the research to elicit narrative accounts of their experiences (Lichtman, 2010). In my research, some children decided to share their previous projects and/or diaries, which were used as a starting point for our discussions. In the case of young participants, including immigrants, these tools support the argument that listening to children is "a pedagogy and a way of researching life, a culture and an ethic, a continuous process and a relationship" (Clark et al., 2005, p. 13). Through focusing on listening to and observing what each participant wants to share rather than judging how they do it (O'Kane, 2000) and by using a 'story-crafting' strategy that can be tailored to the needs of a specific research area and/or specific participants, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of immigrant students' perspectives (Lulle & Assmuth, 2013).

In implementing certain strategies, I needed to make sure not to underestimate or judge the abilities of the participants beforehand by making assumptions based on their age, knowledge of Icelandic and their mother tongue, years of schooling, or the information received from school principals and/or teachers. This could have perpetuated marginalization (Hjörne & Säljö, 2013; Mowat, 2015; Skovlund, 2014). Rather, I had to get to know the students better and help them to speak openly, and even discuss the most appropriate research tools with them. This required repeated visits to educational settings, patience, flexibility, and ongoing self-awareness. The beneficial

impact of repeated visits has been previously stressed in research (Brockmann, 2011; Rosvall, 2015; Vincent & Warren, 2005). It not only serves to develop trust among participants, but also to give the researcher time to (re)formulate research questions and adjust interviews based on observations and initial discussions, in order to get more detailed and in-depth informed data.

The study helped me to realize that no immigrant story is the same. Therefore, I tried to avoid any categorization of immigrant children or perceiving and interacting with them through the prism of immigration alone. In this way, I could see the wide spectrum of different resources each child possesses, but participation in the study was for me an inevitable self-study as well, a process of re-examining my own story through new lenses, enriched with this revelation. As Warin (2011) argues, while researching with children, a researcher needs to delve into her own past to enhance self-awareness and to get better insight into the stories of participants.

In the case of this research, the possibility to work in a diverse, multicultural, and multidisciplinary team was clearly a helpful tool for discussing and renegotiating the researchers' role in the project. I was not afraid to ask questions, use the suggestions of others, learn from mistakes, and share my experience with the rest of the team. I discovered that even much more experienced team members encountered similar challenges and, as Christensen and James (2000) argue, they gained from becoming involved in a dialogue and from being ever conscious about sensitivity when doing research with immigrant children. Being constantly self-aware and reflexive means realizing that there is "no easy story to tell, nor for the reader to hear, but a whirling of voices, figures, and histories" (Chaudhry, 2000, p. 108).

Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to shed light on researcher's reflexivity while doing research with immigrant students. Although the role of reflexivity in qualitative research has been previously widely addressed in literature, the practice of reflexivity in research with immigrant students and its impact on different phases of the research process needs further exploration. Such personal accounts as the one presented above may be crucial in strengthening future research with immigrant students (Eisenhart, 2000). This research may benefit education researchers on the one hand, and practitioners and policymakers on the other. With the number of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees growing in various countries, the discussion of the need of responsible research with these groups of students is becoming very vibrant. My story, as well as many other studies (Kirova & Emme, 2008; Lulle & Assmuth, 2013) show that research with immigrant students is important, but we need to focus on how to do it in a conscientious and ethical way.

This paper examines only a few areas where reflexivity is important in dealing with challenges that a researcher may meet while researching with immigrant students. Further research in the area with diverse groups of students and in different contexts is necessary. This research should demand "a more modest 'immature' ethical sensibility,

one that does not confidently claim to know it all – or be prepared for it all – before the event" (Horton, 2005, p. 99).

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