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## **Intercultural Education: Cases of good practice in Iceland**

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### **Introduction**

Most countries in Europe are facing an increase in immigration, even countries like Iceland which have had little or no tradition for immigrants and have been ethnically homogeneous for centuries. However, in the past decade the number of immigrants in Iceland has increased rapidly and in 2005 around 4.5% (14,000) of the population had foreign citizenship, compared with less than 2% in 1990. The migration is from various countries; about 15% are from the other Nordic countries and about 55% from other European countries, the majority from Poland (1,903). The number of native languages among immigrant pupils reflects the variety; those who attended compulsory school (ages 6-15) in 2004 spoke a total of 43 languages.

In April 2005 a committee whose role was to advise the government on immigrant affairs came to the conclusion that Iceland urgently needed a public policy on immigrants. The report's suggestions were based on the principle that 'new Icelanders' are to be acknowledged as active citizens without being expected to forfeit their national characteristics and language or lose contact with their native countries. The suggestions emphasise that immigrants hold equal status, comparable with that of Icelanders with regard to their rights and duties in their new society (Felagsmálaraduneytið, 2005). Recently an immigrant council was established to propose a policy regarding the integration of immigrants ('Innflytjendarad skipad,' 2005).

The increased number of immigrants has given schools and school authorities new roles and new responsibilities and we might add, opportunities. The national curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Iceland outlines the aims and ways to welcome and work with immigrant students, emphasising the teaching of Icelandic. Moreover, in designing its own school-based curriculum guidelines, each compulsory school has been encouraged to outline how to teach and support the immigrant students who attend the school (The Ministry of Education, 2004). Despite its interest in and understanding of the importance of maintaining students' mother tongues, the Icelandic school system has only been able to offer such teaching at a limited level.

Reykjavik Education Service Centre is responsible for the policy and services for immigrant pupils and their families, especially in the city. As of 2006, two teaching consultants work with teachers and schools where immigrant pupils attend. One consultant works with schools in Reykjavik and the other with schools outside Reykjavik. Several in-school and after-school programmes are offered for new immigrants.

We have elsewhere (Ingvarsdóttir, Rúnarsdóttir, & Adalbjarnardóttir, 2005) illustrated how ill prepared many teachers felt they were for working in multicultural settings and how little support they seemed to be getting from the authorities. It has therefore been

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admirable to experience how individual schools and individual teachers have met this new challenge.

In this paper we will present and discuss six such cases of good practice, projects which have all been recognised as successful by teachers, students and school authorities. It is important to have in mind that these cases of good practice at school represent the first steps taken in Iceland in responding to increased multicultural settings.

### **Cases of good practice**

In choosing the cases we tried to provide as broad a picture as possible and the six cases represent all school levels. Four of the multicultural projects are examples from the primary school and lower secondary; one describes a programme developed for students at the upper-secondary level and finally there is one example from teacher education. The schools and teachers in this report are given pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality; the one exception is the Iceland University of Education.

In our research we make a distinction between *multicultural* and *intercultural* education. In multicultural education, as we understand it, the aim is to educate *about* other cultures and to adapt the immigrant group to the new society. But intercultural education specifically values diversity:

Intercultural education focuses on living and learning with diversity: how to organise your classes in such a way that you, as a teacher, can make optimal use of the diversity inherent in the class group in order to teach the pupils how to live and learn through this diversity in an active and most efficient way. (Intercultural Iceland, n.d.)

In this paper we use the term multicultural education when the projects being discussed are based on adapting the immigrant students to the society and/or educating all students about other cultures. When the principles of intercultural education, as reflected in the definition, apply to the projects being discussed, we use that term. The concepts of multiculturalism and a multicultural society are used to refer to a culturally diverse society. In the context of languages, we notice several concepts involved in presenting the language of the host community as it applies to immigrants. In Iceland the tradition has been to think of the *Icelandic language as a second language* (ISL) for those who have another mother tongue but live in Iceland. As Iceland's multicultural society is such a recent phenomenon, and there is only a small group of second- or third-generation immigrants, we refer to inhabitants of foreign origin as *immigrants* or simply *students of foreign origin*. Finally, for convenience we use the concept *compulsory school level*; in Iceland it includes the primary and lower secondary school levels (6- to 16-year-olds).

### **Intercultural Education at Town School**

Our first case, the Town School, is located in the centre of Reykjavik, in an area where relatively many immigrants live and therefore has a higher rate of immigrant pupils than other schools. Given the increasing number of immigrant pupils attending Icelandic compulsory schools shortly after 1990, the Reykjavik Education Service Centre decided

to establish an immigrant department in Town School, the first of its kind in Iceland. This department, which is still operating, is the country's oldest such department. In 2004-2005 it had 89 pupils aged 9-16 and six teachers, all of whom also teach in other departments. Additionally, immigrant pupils aged 6 to 9 receive support teaching. As the department proved to be quite successful the Reykjavik Education Service Centre suggested that the school take on a special programme in intercultural education.

### **The programme**

The programme started formally in the autumn of 2000. There were three particularly interesting angles: firstly, the planners emphasised from the very beginning a whole-school approach including all pupils and staff. Secondly, the aims of *intercultural education* i.e. emphasising living and learning in a diverse community were from the start chosen over those of *multicultural education* i.e. learning about diversity. And thirdly, the programme put continuing professional development (CPD) and teacher support at the forefront.

The school administrators sought help from a consultant who drew their attention to prejudice. The school staff started to reflect intensely on their own prejudices as well as those they noticed in the larger society and found in the textbooks. In the long run this approach was found to be too narrow and they invited a Belgian consultant to join the project. Since then the school has been involved in implementing a holistic approach with a focus on the pupils learning *from* each other and not only *about* each other.

The intercultural education project is aimed at raising pupils' awareness of intercultural issues; promoting their empathy, solidarity, collaboration, knowledge about and respect towards different cultures, and understanding the danger of prejudice and the narrow-mindedness of nationalism and racism. One of the teachers emphasises that the aim of the intercultural project in which all students participate is to pay more attention to what all students have in common than to what puts them apart. One of their projects illustrates this thinking with this slogan: 'No one can do everything and everyone can do something.'

In working towards these aims the group has used cooperative learning in multicultural groups (CLIM). The CLIM strategies, based on 'cooperative learning' and 'complex instruction,' were developed by Elizabeth Cohen (1994) at Stanford University. The focus is on the status of pupils in a multicultural group so everyone has equal access to the learning process. In order to create this equal status, teachers must convince pupils of three basic points:

1. The cooperative task requires many different intellectual abilities.
2. No one will have all these abilities.
3. Everyone will have some of these abilities (Cohen, 1998, p. 20).

Often the group projects are organised in such a way that they cannot be solved unless the whole group works well together.

As a result of the challenging tasks of the intercultural education project, the principal senses changes in several areas: teachers' attitudes and teaching strategies, their increased collaboration, and a more positive school culture revealed in pupils' social interactions and pleasure, as well as attitudes at home towards the school. The structure of the programme is thus an ambitious continuing professional education programme in the area of intercultural education.

### **'*Prándur úr Götu*.' A reception plan in Reykjanesbær**

Our second case bears the name *Prándur í Götu*, a character in the ancient sagas of the Faroe Islands, who was perceived as being firm in business and whose name today symbolises an obstacle. The title of the project described here makes reference to the phrase, although the meaning of '*Prándur úr Götu*' in this case indicates that the obstacle has been removed, i.e. the obstacles pupils of foreign origin can face when they move to Iceland and start attending school in a new country.

The project '*Prándur úr Götu*' was developed in Reykjanesbær, a town of about 10,900 inhabitants in the southwest of Iceland. The project was started in 2001 with a course for teachers on teaching immigrants at the compulsory level. Teachers from all four of the compulsory schools in the area attended the course and the group defined a developmental project for supporting and welcoming new pupils of foreign origin. The project was formulated as a 'reception plan' and received a grant from the Icelandic Compulsory Level Developmental Fund.

Originally the project had six objectives but as they received less funding than they had expected they decided to focus on three aims: the work inside each school, cooperation with parents, and the support role of institutions in the municipality (e.g. libraries).

The reception plan is based on the structure of all pupils attending their neighbourhood school instead of being placed in one reception school within the municipality. The plan defines the number of hours each pupil should receive instruction in Icelandic as a second language (ISL) and it also describes the classroom each school is encouraged to set aside for that teaching. The schools recommended that each school established one full position for the head of the subject ISL. In addition, based on the needs of each school additional teachers will be employed.

The plan suggests developing a team to focus on teaching the immigrants in each school, including a package of information that the pupil and parents need. The plan provides detailed information on teaching ISL according to the needs of pupils at different levels of skill in the language. Suggestions are made as to how progress should be assessed. Additionally, outside sources are mapped, such as the role of libraries around the schools, teaching in the mother tongue, interpretation services, and social services.

In order to explore how the reception plan has been implemented, we took a closer look at South-Hill School, one of those schools participating in this developmental programme.

### **South-Hill School**

South Hill is a compulsory school for pupils aged 6 to 16. In the school year 2004-2005, 383 pupils attended the schools in 20 classes. The staffs include 37 teachers and 18 other staff. The school has specialised in receiving pupils of foreign origin over other schools in Reykjanesbær by establishing a 'multinational' department. It is emphasised that the department is not an immigrant department but a place where pupils of foreign origin receive teaching in ISL and support in other subjects as needed. Two teachers are responsible for teaching in the department. In the fall of 2005, 31 pupils received lessons in the multinational department of South Hill School.

Each pupil attends several hours of classes per week in the department, depending on his/her level of skills in the Icelandic language. The pupils are grouped together according to their level of skills in the language and attend the multinational department in groups of four to six. The department also supports the pupils in other subjects.

In all of its main principles the reception plan generated in the project 'Þrándur úr Götu' has been followed in the multinational department. In particular the staff felt that the plan has proved to be very valuable in organising the teachers' work and in providing them with support as they encountered these new circumstances. The teachers claim that the work on the reception plan was valuable as a way to learn about a new reality and new tasks.

At the time when the team worked on the plan '*Þrándur úr Götu*' there were only a relatively few pupils in Reykjanesbær who could be defined as immigrants. Shortly after they had outlined the reception plan, the municipality welcomed a group of refugees and by then the ball started to roll. The head of the multinational department at South Hill is grateful for this course of events and says that in return the school's teachers were more prepared for their new role than they otherwise would have been. The reception plan has been used as a model in other schools around the country.

### **The Intercultural Website of the River School**

The Internet has opened up new possibilities in intercultural teaching. Our next two cases are examples of this. The first is a website which in 2003 received an award from the Reykjavik School Board for innovatory practice in teaching immigrant pupils.

As of 2006, six schools, three of them in Reykjavik, are functioning as reception schools with special immigrant departments. One of these schools is Town School, presented earlier. A second one is the River School, which hosts the Intercultural Website.

On the website, under the links to each continent, users find introductions to the countries of origin and cultures of all pupils attending the immigrant department. The history and present status of each country is described and links to several national websites are provided. In addition to offering substantive information about the countries, the website is a collection of hundreds of pictures of places and people. Links from the page for each country direct the user in every possible direction.

In the process of designing the website, one of the teachers reflected on herself as a pupil and wondered how she would have liked to learn geography. She thought about how to present geographical material on a website in the most interesting and educational ways and how to make it accessible to those who want to know more. She also admits that she originally designed the web for other teachers and Icelandic pupils.

As time passed and she continued working with pupils who had recently moved to Iceland she found out how the website could be of tremendous help in her work with those pupils. Resources for teaching immigrant pupils in their first language are limited in Iceland. This teacher wanted to give her pupils the opportunity to use their mother tongue in everyday work as well as learning Icelandic, so she provided links into their own language areas.

Her aims were to provide:

- Interesting material for use in geography lessons in Iceland.
- Information available to everyone, especially teachers working with immigrant pupils.
- Language stimulation for pupils who have mother tongues other than Icelandic.
- An opportunity to maintain their relationships to their home countries.
- Educational material for anyone who may be interested.

Up until now she has encouraged her pupils to visit their home country on the website, find new links and prepare their own homepages. The links to the different countries thus serve as a gate for pupils in the immigrant department to enter their own cultural and language areas. Each pupil in the immigrant department has his/her own space within the home area of his/her country. By opening this window she believes her pupils feel more valued and secure when given the opportunity to use their own language and surf familiar websites.

Like other children and adolescents, her pupils use the computer for internet chats. Nearly every day they enter chat rooms and speak to other children living in their home country and read the news from home. She says she can see how many of her pupils become more engaged and energetic when they are using the website. This applies particularly to those pupils arriving without any common language to use at school, such as English. They become more relaxed when they have this opportunity to 'have a voice.' Additionally, she would like the website to become a tool for her pupils in the immigrant department, so they can learn about other countries in Icelandic.

It seems that teachers in compulsory schools are using the website in their classroom work. Some university teachers at the Iceland University of Education have referred to her website and used it as a learning tool for student teachers.

The teacher who designed the website reflects that she has learnt several things through her work with the website. First, a valuable lesson for her was to learn about the customs and traditions of each country. She found how much she could learn about human nature and felt she understood her pupils much better in return and thus became more tolerant. Secondly, in learning about different customs and traditions she realised that we always

carry some prejudices within ourselves although we do not believe we do. Thirdly, she claims that her pupils widen her horizons when she has to surf the internet for information when she does not understand some of the things her pupils are doing. And fourthly, she learnt to design websites.

### **Katla: An educational website**

Another example of using the information communication techniques (ICT) is its use for creating curriculum material. The issue of curriculum material arises almost every time teachers discuss the conditions they face in teaching immigrant pupils in Iceland. Teachers agree on the great need for more textbooks and other resources suitable for the different groups of pupils. Some report having designed their own material. An example of such work is the website Katla, designed by teachers/administrators of two immigrant departments in Reykjavik.

Since 2000, the leaders of two of the Reykjavik schools running departments for immigrant pupils have collaborated closely in developing their programme. One result of their collaboration was the creation of the Katla website.

Katla is an educational website for pupils of foreign origin who are studying Icelandic in compulsory schools. This is the first website created for this purpose in Iceland and serves as a resource centre with curriculum material, ideas, assignments, pictures, etc. The material on the website has been used with pupils at all ages within the compulsory school levels (6-16 years old), and by individual pupils, in tutorials, and in small-group teaching. Schools or individual teachers subscribe to the website and obtain access to various pupil assignments, exercises, ideas and research findings in the field.

The aim of the website is to share the authors' experience of teaching immigrant pupils and the teaching material they have prepared during that work. The authors claimed they had difficulties finding material themselves when they began teaching in the departments and thus they prepared their own material based on their pupils needs. One underlying motivation for creating Katla was to prevent important knowledge and work on curriculum material from going to waste.

The emphasis in the material and assignments is placed on basic skills in the Icelandic language. The teachers have adapted successful teaching strategies to teaching ISL, such as the Madeline Hunter Model in preparing teaching and Direct Instruction in explaining (Allen, 1998; Becker & Gersten, 2001), Precision Teaching in skills training (Lindsey, 1992) and the Montessori Method in grammar (Montessori, 2006).

The material presented on the website is intended for ISL teachers. It is not only suitable for immigrant departments but can be of help to any school in teaching immigrant students at any age. It provides two different curriculum and educational packages, developed by each teacher. Teachers can choose between the two but the designers also claim that the two packages can work well together as they designed them to support each other. The two different ways of approaching ISL teaching are also important because teachers tend to work differently towards their aims.

As of January 2006, 23 schools from across the country had bought access to the website. The designer reports that some additional information or support for teachers is needed for the website to reach its fullest capabilities. This particularly applies to teachers who are less experienced in teaching immigrant pupils. She concludes that the website is not used as much as intended because of a lack of knowledge among teachers who have not had received any guidance in how to use it. Today the material is only of use to those who are familiar with ISL teaching.

### **The Reykjavík Comprehensive College**

After having presented the four cases from the compulsory school we now turn to the upper secondary level. The Reykjavík Comprehensive College is a comprehensive upper-secondary school with emphasis on vocational studies and was the first school at that level to offer immigrant students a course in Icelandic as a second language (ISL). Around 2100 students are enrolled in the school and the staff, including teachers, numbers about 200.

The New Citizens Programme started off in the spring of 1993 when five students received four hours of ISL teaching per week. In the beginning it was built on an agreement between the school and the Ministry of Education to do this as an 'experiment.' The experiment proved to be successful, and many more students were interested, but they wanted more than the four hours offered. By 2004 the 'experiment' had become a two-year programme for students of foreign origin including 100 immigrant students from 32 countries.

The Programme is organised into four semesters. It is geared towards young people who have recently moved to Iceland and do not have Icelandic as their mother tongue. In this programme students can take lessons in several subjects, such as English and Maths, which allow them to pursue courses at the level of Icelandic upper-secondary schools. The main emphasis is on courses in ISL, both written and spoken. In these courses students are also introduced to Icelandic society and the importance of maintaining one's original identity. Students can attend other sessions at the school along with those provided in the programme. After completing one or two semesters the students can apply to other mainstream programmes within the school, but receive their Icelandic classes and educational support within the programme.

In general, the head of the programme emphasises individual needs when discussing appropriate aims. The educational needs of each person are different and the aims of each of the courses carefully consider individual differences.

The overall aims of the New Citizens Programme are 'to prepare pupils for further education in Icelandic colleges' and 'to systematically build up [students'] Icelandic vocabulary in various areas.' Additionally, it aims to teach students about Icelandic society.

The development of the programme reflects the ever increasing need of better service for in-immigrants. In a few years the number of lessons grew from four hours a week to around twelve to fourteen lessons a week. The next step was to group students by

different proficiency levels and their different backgrounds. Now, ten years later, there are four levels of courses in ISL and special training courses in spoken Icelandic.

Students in the programme earn credits that are transferable to programmes in other schools. Some students only plan to complete the programme to become more successful on the job market while others pursue further studies either in the Reykjavik Comprehensive College or elsewhere. Several former students are also attending university programmes.

The great variety in the background and proficiency of the students has been challenging for the teachers and it has demanded that they build great flexibility into the courses. The teachers felt they were not well prepared; the programme had developed through optimism and motivation. They soon found out that foreign language teachers were best suited for this kind of teaching. Accordingly now almost all teaching in ISL is in the hands of the school's foreign language teachers.

### **Multicultural Education<sup>1</sup> at Iceland University of Education**

Finally we take an example of new development within teacher education. The Iceland University of Education has been the leader in educating primary and lower-secondary school teachers in Iceland for over 100 years. The university consists of two departments: the Department of Undergraduate Studies with six programmes of study, and the Department of Graduate Studies. The university has around 200 faculty and staff members and a student population of around 2500.

The programme in Multicultural Education was first offered in 2002 as a 15-unit (30 ECTS) diploma study. As of 2003 students have been able to take 15 units or 30 units and earn a diploma or extend their study with further courses and research work and earn a M.Ed. degree (60 units).

The programme aims to provide practicing teachers and administrators at all school levels with knowledge and skills to educate students in a multicultural society and to raise their awareness of multicultural issues. The aims of the programme are that toward the end of the programme the students have:

- Gained more strength as teachers and administrators through increased self-confidence, skills and knowledge in the field,
- Increased their theoretical and practical understanding on issues concerning minorities and education in a multicultural society,
- Become more professional in using concepts and theories in the field and developing strategies based on them,
- Become more confident in analysing situations, and conducting small-scale surveys and developmental projects in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> The organisers of the programme prefer to use the term 'multicultural education' rather 'intercultural education' like the principals and the teachers at the Town school prefer explained earlier in this paper.

The focus is on children's rights, languages (mother tongue and new languages), adaptation and identity, as well as the theoretical basis of multicultural teaching and school development in a multicultural society.

Students are offered two core courses and five elective courses. All students must finish the two core courses (10 units, 20 ECTS) but to complete their degree they can choose among the five optional courses or take optional courses in other programmes. Each course is provided through distance education with a few on-campus sessions during the term.

In 2002 the first students were enrolled in the programme, which at that time was called The Education of Bilingual Children. The two courses focused on the multicultural society and school and on teaching Icelandic as an additional language.

It soon became apparent that there was need for more time to discuss the issues raised in the two courses. The result was the addition of more courses, providing better distinctions between the issues and emphasising equally working with a multicultural society as opposed to focusing only on the new language.

The programme in Multicultural Education offers flexible study as it is adapted to the needs of each student group. Most of the students have a teaching experience in various circumstances and know the needs of their pupils. Their insights and experiences have been influential in developing the programme. They are encouraged to suggest which issues they want to explore and what is missing from the programme. Much emphasis is placed on their collaboration.

Among those attending the programme are pre-school and elementary school teachers, a few upper-secondary school teachers along with students from the University of Iceland and employees from various institutions dealing with foreign affairs. Administrators from the pre-school and primary school levels have shown great interest in the programme. As of Spring 2006, 18 students were attending the programme and 39 have graduated. From the beginning of the programme 15 specialists and university teachers, apart from the two lecturers responsible for the programme, have given lectures. In addition, several guest lecturers, for example pre-school and primary school teachers and researchers, have given lectures.

### **A reflective return**

The six cases of good practice we have presented have as a common goal to enhance intercultural understanding and thus remove the barrier which frequently meets new immigrants. The cases show that teaching immigrants is a multifaceted undertaking and the tools and settings are and need to be different and varied. Once again it has become apparent how individual teachers can and do make a difference for their pupils and, as in this case, for society as a whole.

It has been informative for us to experience how teachers in the cases at all levels have used the challenges of intercultural teaching to develop and grow in their work. This

work on the cases has also highlighted the importance of doing research with teachers and reporting cases of good practice to learn from.

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