Chapter 4
The Intricacies of Educational Development in Iceland: Stability or Disruption?

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Abstract The chapter will explore the development of the Icelandic education system by using a twofold historical perspective. More specifically, the analysis will look at the very long-term development and then the period 1990–2020. Using only the latter focus in isolation may lead to an erroneous interpretation of recent developments and that is why we also include the longer perspective. In the first of three sections, we describe examples of educational development with reference to six characteristics, arguing that these reflect distinctive developmental dynamics, and these are very important in order to grasp the nature of this development. Second, we address educational governance to clarify what changes can clearly be attributed to this important component of an educational system. Thirdly, we note that there are additional examples of specific efforts to influence educational development that could equally have been taken up for discussion to clarify our main argument, which is that specific actions rarely have the intended effects. In this discussion, we claim that Icelandic education has certainly developed and is being governed, but it is argued that the latter has mainly a facilitatory influence on the former. We see little sign of hard governance and perhaps minor signs of soft governance and the influence from outside, in particular from OECD through the mechanisms of social technology.

Keywords Iceland · Development of education · Compulsory education · Governance

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Introduction

Educational development in Iceland is here placed in a historical perspective, using as a pivot the landmark law on compulsory education passed in 1974 (Compulsory School Act No. 63/1974). The importance of the historical account will be emphasized throughout the paper, underlining the slow but gradual and very clear development of education, taking into account participation, organization, and content. This is contrasted with the argument that government statutes, policy initiatives or educational governance act as the prime determinants and movers of change; changes that are signposted by certain landmarks set by government. The paper thus presents an extension of the arguments about the role of the state, as discussed by Müller (1987) where he argues that "the consequences of state intervention must not be overestimated" (p. 16) and in the special case of the expansion of education discussed in Fuller and Rubinson (1992) and explored by Jónasson (2003) for the Nordic countries. From this vantage point, we claim that a crucial way to understand education is to adopt the long-term perspective (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), where landmarks or milestones such as legal statutes and government policies certainly play a role, but mainly a facilitatory one.

We will focus on compulsory education but also note the increasing interconnections with both preschool and upper secondary education. The main emphasis will be on development during the period between 1990 and 2020, but with focus on their roots. We argue that a historical analysis of educational development must be part of the picture when recent developments are attributed to modern rhetoric or social technologies. For the sake of clarity, we argue our initial case by showing clearly visible developments, even though the less visible ones may be more interesting.

In order to emphasize the historical aspect, we introduce six developmental characteristics that we claim are useful for describing and understanding the development of Icelandic education. We then turn to the thematic issue of governance and the role it manifestly plays in shaping our educational edifice. There is a question whether the actual governance operating within our system should be classified as hard or soft and, additionally, whether we see signs of international influences, perhaps through social technologies, in particular involving international organizations, such as the OECD (as discussed below and extensively in Chap. 9). We will also note examples of relatively recent initiatives to improve or modify educational practice, some of which are still going strong. In the light of these foci we will start to draft an emerging picture.

Educational Structures: A Developmental Overview

Iceland has a population of 364 thousand, whereof 90 thousand are in the age range 0–19. There are 72 municipalities, where 70% of the population live in the six largest ones, with 36% living in Reykjavík, the capital city (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The formal education system in Iceland consists of preschool (ages 1–6 years), compulsory (ages 6–16 years), followed by upper secondary and university education. The upper secondary school has both academic and vocational tracks and is intended for the age groups 16–19, but the age range at this level is actually much wider as age does not limit access to the system.

Despite the close administrative relationship with Denmark until 1918, the Icelandic school system, at least at the lower levels, has developed quite independently. This was partly due to the loose connection to Denmark, but also due to the spread of the Icelandic population, which lived for a long time largely in rural areas. For centuries, general education in Iceland was carried out in the homes for a limited group of elite students, particularly boys, under the supervision of parents and the State Church (Guttormsson, 2008). With notable independence acquired in 1874 and then again in 1904, the Icelandic schools developed quite substantially and gradually. The first law on compulsory education was passed in 1907, for 10–14 years old students. The system then gradually developed, with the last addition in 1990 (extending compulsory education to 6–15), thus totaling 10 years of compulsory education (Jónasson, 2008a, p. 176).

An important point in our description is the emphasis on the regularity or continuity of the development of education. Even though the major laws mentioned tell an interesting story, several other laws were passed in the meantime. Many of these are largely statutory changes, which were an acknowledgement or confirmation of what had already taken place or served as clarification of procedure. We also emphasize that many of the developments were in the direction of homogeneity and simplification of the system, largely with the intention of increasing equity between schools and among students. This has been the major guiding principle both behind the educational discourse and government action, and also to ensure more equal status among the teachers at different levels in the system. The system expanded not only by adding compulsory years. Various gradual transformation took place. Different forms of day care or kindergartens and play-schools were merged as a homogeneous level in the system and then defined as a part of the school system in 1994 (Preschool Act No. 78/1994), adopting the term pre-school[2] with the professional staff titled as teachers (even though the children in pre-schools are hardly ever called pupils). All teachers at the three school levels have essentially the same formal status and now all receive 5-year preservice education (Act on the Education and Recruitment of Teachers and Administrators of Preschools, Compulsory Schools and Upper Secondary Schools No. 87/2008). The changes in upper secondary education have led to the gradual increase of the academic part (the role played by the school) in vocational programs. But, even more importantly, a very consistent effort has been made to strengthen the status of various types of vocational

tracks relative to the academic tracks, *inter alia* by strengthening the comprehensive schools, first established already in the 1970s. We have moved a long way from the situation nearly a century ago when all the upper secondary schools had their own dedicated law.

Landmarks and Six Characteristics of Development in Icelandic Educational History

We observe six characteristics of educational development (Jónasson & Óskarsdóttir, 2016). These are described in order to emphasize both the very gradual and continuous change in a certain direction and also the nature of some of these changes.

The first characteristic of change refers to a certain constancy or recurrence of ideas in the educational discourse, which gradually influences the developments taking place through time. This is meant to show that few of the current ambitions, concerns and debates are in fact new. A most obvious example is the steady lengthening of compulsory schooling, both in terms of years of schooling and the length of each school year, which was repeatedly changed step by step by new laws (Jónasson & Óskarsdóttir, 2016, p. 20).

The second characteristic of development, closely related to the first, refers to gradual changes taking place, which are not driven by laws, but many (if not most) may however subsequently be acknowledged by a new statute or institutional developments (Jónasson & Óskarsdóttir, 2016, p. 21). The cohorts grew and so did the system itself (run by the municipalities) and for a considerable period there were more students within the basic education system than were obliged to be there. Thus, the important laws set during this period, and referred directly or indirectly to the number of compulsory years, did not have direct influence on the number of students actually attending. In addressing these matters, the laws were largely a housekeeping exercise.

The third characteristic of educational development concerns the importance of a long-term perspective, of which the underlying long-term regularity of the change taking place is an intriguing and overriding characteristic. Thus, any short-term changes, seemingly abrupt (showing the impact of a given law), may rather be considered as fluctuations in a process of development that is basically robust. For example, the overall growth of the non-compulsory upper secondary education has been quite regular for the last 70 years, in terms of numbers attending relative to the cohort. However, some short-term changes can be seen, particularly in relation to laws passed in the period, without really affecting change in the long-term pattern (Jónasson, 2008a, Figure 6).

The fourth characteristic of educational change is somewhat paradoxical, because it is partly about not changing. This is slowness or inertia to change (Jónasson, 2016), related to what Tyack and Cuban (1995) call the grammar of schooling, but we relate also to whole systems. Some things are simply difficult to change, such as

the mode of teaching and testing and the status of some subjects, and often for very understandable reasons. We mention here two related categories where one contains initiatives proposed in a law, which hardly made a mark and another where changes took a very long time to materialize.

It is very rare to see initiatives set by law that are genuinely new – most are only new in a very formal sense and not in essence. Examples of initiatives that signaled something new and did not succeed are therefore particularly interesting. An attempt, in 1946, to divide compulsory education into vocational and academic tracks failed to get off the ground. Similarly, according to the background notes to the law establishing the unified compulsory education in 1974 (Althingi, 1973, p. 61), there was a clear intention to emphasize assessment *for* learning (formative), rather than *of* learning (summative). However, that did not materialize until two decades later and then perhaps more in form than practice, for example, with examinations in 4th and 7th class (see Chap. 9). The law in 1974 also set the stage for inclusion – a school for all – but the financial support given did more to strengthen the segregation ambitiously promoted with the development of special institutions motioned by the law from 1946 (Jónasson, 2008c). Formal attempts to correct this, were made in the 1990s. But this is a very complex issue as is clarified by Bjarnason, Jónsson, and Gunnþórsdóttir (2016) and analyzed in an audit on the inclusion situation within the compulsory system in 2017 (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017), showing that despite considerable effort, at times, the progress made is very slow.

The last two characteristics we use for describing features of Icelandic educational development are of a different type and place the focus on the nature of the change that has occurred. At all levels in our system (notably not only at the tertiary level) we see clear examples of what we categorize as an *academic drift*, which is our fifth characteristic. Academic drift is characterized by programs or institutions, moving gradually towards academic tracks, or towards traditionally dominating subjects, but more importantly revealing a *modus operandi* characterizing academic programs. Some of the impetus for these changes can be detected in the legal texts, even though we maintain that very rarely is there an explicit policy to move in this direction. It is very difficult to attribute these developments to a particular set of actors. The sixth characteristic is what we term the institutional drift and refers to developments where loosely defined and quite heterogeneous practices turn into rather homogeneous institutions, which then gradually merge. Perhaps the clearest example is at the preschool level. Then a host of different establishments caring for young children, during the middle and latter part of the twentieth century, gradually merged into one, namely, the pre-school (Felixson, 2007; Jónasson, 2006). It was established as a unified institution (essentially for the 0–5 year olds) and then became the first stage in the formal school system in 1994 (Preschool Act No. 78/1994). The 1974 law on compulsory education established a unitary compulsory – basic school uniting primary and lower secondary school. Practically every law passed on the upper secondary level aims to take steps towards constructing upper secondary education as an increasingly homogeneous unitary level, e.g. an insistence that students obtain a university entrance examination from whichever

track they choose, and thus diminish the status difference between the academic and vocational tracks and thus reduce the tracking implicit in the system. The rationale behind all these changes is the explicit and sustained intention, as seen in the background text to the proposed laws during the whole of the twentieth century, to develop an open egalitarian system with gradually fewer signs of tracking (seen in the perspective of a century), either within each stage or between them.

We deduce these six characteristics from the development of Icelandic education in order to emphasize the slow, but continuous drift of educational development which we maintain overshadows the effects of the individual laws and regulations set, i.e., the landmarks we normally pay much attention to. These characteristics are also in line with soft governance being the norm and social technology not having an overriding effect (see discussion below and in Chap. 9). Understanding and observing these characteristics of development is of fundamental importance when attributing changes to specific policy initiatives and when one speculates about likely future developments.

Governance, as a Tool for Development

The previous section begs the question: Who govern Icelandic education and what is their influence? Is Icelandic education held within a fairly strict regime (hard governance) or a softer suggestive regime with considerable guidelines? Or is it essentially shaped by tradition and run by the professionals within? In addition, are there signs of influence from outside, e.g. from the Nordic countries or international organizations such as the OECD, (see below and in Chap. 9) through soft governance and mechanisms of social technologies?

All compulsory schools in Iceland, public and private, follow the same legislative frameworks and fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education Science and Culture (hereafter MoESC). The MoESC has an overarching responsibility for the quality of the compulsory school system in Iceland, administered partly through the Directorate of Education. The administrative responsibility for operating the compulsory level lies squarely with the municipalities. However, other national organizations (in particular the teacher unions) and international agencies influence different levels and their interrelations are often complex, as has been pointed out by several scholars (Robertson, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). First, we explore the domestic influences and then turn to those from outside.

Governance in the Icelandic System

Jóhannesson, Geirsdóttir, and Finnbogason (2002) describe how the compulsory schools became more hierarchical and business-like after the implementation of the reform in 1995 (when the compulsory education was transferred back to the

municipalities), with also an increasing emphasis on performance management and efficiency. This development is in line with global trends in education, involving an emphasis on decentralization of the education sector within nation states while simultaneously strengthening monitoring and evaluation by the state (Daun, 2007). Hansen, Jóhannsson, and Lárusdóttir (2004) argue that there are some contradictions attached to the idea of decentralization in Icelandic compulsory education. They point out that the lines laid in the national curriculum, contradicts to some extent the idea that teaching should be almost entirely under the authority of teachers and individual schools. Drawing on Moos (2009), the national examinations and other evaluation measures by the state are examples of social technologies intended to regulate and monitor the conduct of teaching and learning, but there is little evidence that these exert major operational influence on the system.

The issue of decentralization of governance and in particular the role and independence of the municipalities has been central since the school system was formally initiated in the 1907 law. By virtue of their independence, the influence of municipalities tends to be fragile or disjointed. The formal municipal association (The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities), established in 1945, has no direct control over the municipalities but can and does promote discussions and coordinate responses on difficult common issues. It can give advice on policy-making, on professional development and on issues raised by evaluations within education (e.g. Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, n.d.), but there is a clear limit to its authority.

In order to ensure educational quality, not least in the interest of equality, there is a structured external and internal evaluation system in operation (see Chap. 9). A notion of an external evaluation system has been implicit in the laws since in the early 1900s and often modified, whereas the current form came into being in 1995 (Compulsory School Act No. 66/1995). Each school is required to regularly evaluate its success and quality through internal evaluation, and further develop methods in accordance with the school's preferences and local context. The evaluation should lead to an action plan that municipalities are encouraged to follow through with (Ólafsdóttir, 2016). The Directorate of Education (n.d.) has the task to organize and monitor the external evaluation process on behalf of the MoESC, and in cooperation with the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities. The aim of the external evaluation is to monitor the quality of the schools by: (1) Providing the main stakeholders with information on school practices, effectiveness, and development; (2) ensuring operation according the laws, regulations and the national curriculum; (3) improving the quality of learning and school practices; (4) ensuring school reform, and (5) guaranteeing students' rights and legal services (MoESC, 2010). Therefore, the system can perhaps be classified as hard governance, even though no punitive measures are taken when these stakeholders fail to comply.

It would seem when looking at the structure of the evaluation system for compulsory education that the municipalities have a clear responsibility to ensure the quality of education as determined by the operational paragraphs in the laws and the National curriculum (see also Chap. 9). However, by publishing the national curriculum and taking charge of the inspection mechanisms (including the national

tests), much control seems nevertheless to be in the hands of the central government, or its agency, the Directorate of Education. In light of these apparent contradictory notions of control, we will briefly explore the relationship between these levels of the system.

The municipalities in Iceland vary greatly in terms of size and financial capacity and are therefore in unequal positions to meet central demands and standards. Reykjavík is the largest municipality with approximately 36% of the children in the age range 0–16. The four largest municipalities include 60% of children and over 80% of the children live in the 10 largest municipalities, whereas only 10% of the children in Iceland inhabit the 50 smallest (Statistics Iceland, 2020). Some of the small municipalities lack resources readily available to the larger ones, such as access to specialized service and support, which largely depends on their financial strength. Thus, Hansen (2016) claims the system to be weaker overall than it was 1974–1995, where it was covered by eight educational districts under the supervision of superintendents. This raises questions about equality and social justice, perhaps mainly in some of the smaller municipalities.

The pedagogical role of principals is implicit in the act on compulsory education, but so is also their role of distributing finances and keeping to a budget. Principals are, by law, responsible for daily administration of the schools according to the law, regulations, and the national curriculum guide, but also dictated by municipality rules.

According to the Compulsory School Act No. 92/2008, principals have a considerable role in professional leadership (even though it is not absolutely transparent what this entails). There seems to be a gap between the formal role of principals and their actual daily work, as principals in Iceland claim they have too much formal administrative work, which in turn reduces their opportunity to pursue pedagogical leadership role (Hansen, 2013; Moos, Hansen, Bjørk, & Johansson, 2013). Even if principals tend to transfer the responsibility for educational leadership to their assistants, informed partly on the ideology of distributed leadership, it does not solve the problem. Sigurðardóttir (2019) found that assistant principals, conversely, are often swamped with daily administrative work which can have the unwanted consequence of them neglecting their role as educational leaders. The status of educational leadership within the schools in compulsory education therefore remains uncertain. Perhaps the main problem is that the notions of professional or educational leadership may fall into the category of floating signifiers, i.e. may lack the necessary substance or a common understanding. Furthermore, the 2008 act is silent about the financial responsibility the principals may have and their role vis-à-vis the municipalities. It is perhaps generally understood that school administration and professional leadership necessarily includes management of financial resources. However, Hansen, Jóhannsson, and Lárusdóttir's (2002) study shows very clearly that financial management usually takes over the principals' work. Furthermore, principals in Iceland describe different degrees of financial independence, varying among the municipalities in Iceland (Hansen et al., 2004). In an agreement between the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (2015) and the union of principals, the role of the principal is specified in much detail. Nevertheless, neither the

pedagogical ("shall be a professional leader") nor the financial responsibilities ("shall be responsible for the school's finances"), is adequately spelled out, leaving it unclear how far the responsibility of the principal reaches, in particular how to go about prioritizing different tasks.

A potentially important actor governing the schools are the school boards, elected by the local government in each municipality (Compulsory School Act No. 92/2008, article 6). In addition to the politically appointed members, principals, teachers and parents within the municipality are represented at meetings as observers. The formal legislative power of school boards in Iceland is mainly constructed around supervision and inspection. According to Ásmundsson, Hansen, and Jóhannsson (2008), the legislative framework is not explicit with respect to role and authority on the division of labor between the school boards and principals, which causes uncertainty among both parties. Nonetheless, the authors claim that the actual influence of the school boards is significant given that many municipalities have written school policies to influence the schools within the district (see also Hansen, 2016). But it seems that the influence is normally indirect, with no punitive measures, and thus acquires all the hallmarks of soft governance.

The tradition for active governance of parents, students, and teachers is perhaps not as strong in Iceland as it is in the other Nordic countries (Moos, Nihlfors, Paulsen, & Merok, 2016), even though school councils and parents' associations exist within each school (Compulsory School Act No. 92/2008, articles 8 and 9). Parents, teachers, other staff, and students have representatives in school councils, which then agree on a representative from the local neighborhood to participate in the meetings and the decision processes. The role of the school council is to provide support and advice to the principal, participate in policy-making within the school and discuss the school curriculum, annual activities, business plans, and other school related activities. Furthermore, the school council monitors the safety, facilities and the general welfare of students (Regulation on Compulsory School Councils No. 1157/2008). Parent associations support school practices as well, but they have a weaker role (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, article 9).

The Icelandic Teachers' Union is an actor that has considerable influence in Icelandic education (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). The union negotiates bargaining agreements, advises when rules and acts in the field of education are designed, guards the teacher's profession and their working environment, has a seat on several councils and advisory panels, and participates actively in public discussion on education. Traditionally, teachers have not had a clear legal governance function, however, there is a provision for a teacher council in a recently issued act, which includes a wide ranging advisory role, and where the Icelandic Teachers' Union will have three out of eleven representatives (Act on the education, competency and recruitment of teachers and administrators of preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools No. 95/2019).

External Influence

The significance of the Nordic influence with regard to the development of Icelandic education is generally accepted (see Chap. 9), but the education system in the country has certainly been influenced from other directions as well. Iceland has for a long time been an active participant in a number of international organizations, notably being one of the founding members of OEEC (later OECD) in 1947. The influence of OECD on education in Iceland can be traced to the 1960s. Iceland became a member of the Council of Europe in 1950 (Government of Iceland, n.d.-a) and UNESCO in 1969 (Government of Iceland, n.d.-b). Though not a member of the European Union, Iceland has participated in its programs (e.g. Erasmus+ programs) through the European Economic Area (EEA). It is always difficult to establish when similarities among systems reflect direct influences from other systems, models or ideologies (such as neo-liberal ideas) or from international agencies, steered by social technologies such as indicators and comparisons (Moos, 2009). The main challenge is to distinguish between ideas that are in line with a certain ideology or discourse and those that are directly influenced by it. The specific question from that perspective is to probe the extent to which ideas are borrowed or adapted, or perhaps developed relatively independently.

Iceland took some progressive international actions within the education system from 1965–1985, in particular through the establishment of a department of school development within the Ministry of Education (Kjartansson, 2008). But despite the OECD's increasing emphasis on the connection between human capital and education, it failed to markedly influence Icelandic education policy. A new emphasis in the curriculum (objectives) was added as a result of OECD policies, but more importantly there followed a redefinition of subjects and new approaches to student evaluation. The emphasis on objectives fitted well with the emerging quantitative scientific emphasis within educational research (partly under influence of psychology) which again created fertile grounds for measurement gurus. Policy makers looked for foreign educational models rather than focusing on national traditions, for that purpose turned to the west, north and east (see also Chap. 9).

There is a 30-year history of international performance comparisons, starting with the IEA reading tests in 1990 and then PIRLS and TIMSS (Jónasson, 2008b). Out of all OECD activities in Iceland, the PISA measures have attracted most public attention. The PISA results and ranking once more bring about discussions on benchmarking and accountability of schools, groups, and districts. The outcome of the measures is usually discussed for a short period of time with reading literacy scores receiving the most attention. The international ranking of the nation also enters the public debate explicitly, but overwhelmingly the comparison is with the Nordic countries (Hansen, 2013; MoESC, 2014).

In 2020, the performance of Icelandic students once again dropped in the international PISA scores, particularly when compared to the performance of Nordic students. But the domestic comparisons were also a concern. Boys scored worse than girls. Some rural districts underperformed compared to the capital area, even

though the validity of such comparison has been questioned, because it neglects to account for social background, such as socio-economic or immigration status (Jónsson, 2019). The ministers of education usually express concern when the results are published, and following the 2018 PISA results the incumbent minister launched an action plan as a response to the PISA recommendation (Directorate of Education, 2019; MoESC, 2019a). The action plan mainly focuses on professional development of teachers, an action that had already been partly adopted as policy (MoESC, 2019b). The Ministry, in line with the previous reaction, also emphasized the need to increase the study time in Icelandic (as a basis for reading comprehension). The focus is clear, but perhaps narrow and seems to reinforce existing subject hierarchy, which is line with developmental characteristic five, as delineated above. The problem is that PISA measures address certain academic performance and thus marginalize other potentially important competences. Neither student well-being nor diversity are given top priority, even though both issues are discussed. Overall, there is a lack of focus on the local context as the results are discussed in a general context (e.g. either Nordic or OECD) of outcome and actions. The recommendations emerging from those OECD data collections are undoubtedly the most powerful examples of soft governance within the education system in Iceland.

The institutional message from OECD is well developed (OECD, 2013) and noticeably reflected in the 2014 white paper (MoESC, 2014) and also in the 2016 OECD policy paper on Iceland (OECD, 2016). The same message was clearly delivered at a meeting in 2016 (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2016), organized by the municipalities, the School of Education, the Union of school leaders, and the newly established Directorate of Education. A stronger evaluative model of the school system was in preparation, possibly along the lines suggested by the OECD. An expert from OECD presented the current OECD ideas on the issue. Yet there was a completely different general message implicit in the presentation of PISA 2018. This was clearly evident in the report on the Icelandic results (Directorate of Education, 2019) which bore witness to close cooperation between the Directorate of Education and the University of Iceland in the analysis of the data. A clear tone of reflection and deliberation was presented, also echoing that of the minister. It may be concluded that the increasingly direct influence of the OECD on Icelandic policy, hovering between hard and soft governance, had softened and perhaps showed a perfect example of social technologies at work. This might also echo the broader perspective adopted by OECD in its recent 2030 plans (OECD, 2018a, b).

The influence of the OECD, in particular, but also of the Council of Europe (CoE), is within the realm of social technology, but their influence is not the same. CoE has from the beginning focused on human rights and democracy (Council of Europe, 2020), and thus there is less direct emphasis on the economically relevant skills that are more evident in the OECD work.

A major development at the system level is the introduction of a new national curriculum in 2011. This has definitely had a major effect on the curricular discourse in Iceland, but it remains to be established just how extensive and longlasting the effects will be (see Tyack & Cuban, 1995, on the fate of several ambitious reforms in the US). Nearly 10 years after their introduction, assessing their impact

remains difficult. The explicit intention of the 2011 curriculum guide was to create a holistic education policy with shared aims and the same fundamental pillars for pre-, compulsory -, and upper secondary schools. The pillars, identified as literacy, sustainability, health and well-being, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity, are supposed to be woven into education at the three school levels (MoESC, 2013). One of the fundamental curricular pillars are democracy and human rights, which reflects the Council of Europe's policy on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (Council of Europe, 2010; MoESC, 2013). We see the principles promoted by Council of Europe's documentation emerging at many levels within Icelandic education. Democracy is notably stipulated in the legislative frameworks for the three first school levels. Many compulsory and upper secondary schools teach the subject life skills or similar ideas as a cross curricular theme. Life skills focus on democracy and human rights among other related topics. A similar trend is possible to identify in the actions initiated by UNESCO. Even though these ideas were present in the early discourse on Icelandic education, they seem to have stagnated and were not emphasized or developed in policy documents in the latter part of the twentieth century (Jónsson, 2014), but they are, perhaps, returning. Among the most interesting features of this is the notion of student participation and influence of their own education, which seems perhaps less than might be expected given the emphasis on democratic processes. Democracy in Icelandic schools is foremost practiced through representative practices, in which decisions concerning the social life and events are dominant (Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Kaldalóns, 2015). Here we reiterate the same point, i.e., that important, but complex ideas are difficult to develop in the Icelandic educational system. The 2014 white paper on education (MoESC, 2014) did not place these curriculum changes in focus but emphasized the time-honored issues of literacy, vocational education and dropout from upper secondary education.

The reform travelling around the Western world entered public administration in Iceland noticeably in the early 1990s. The reform has been associated with the term New Public Management (NPM) (Mýrdal, Jóhannesson, Geirsdóttir, & Finnbogason, 2001). The main focus of the actions taken in Iceland, as summarized by Kristinsson (2006), was to increase privatization within public institutions, transfer activities from the state to the municipalities and change strategies in budgeting, performance, and human resources. When looking at this development within education, it has been argued that the system of external and internal evaluation implemented in the mid 1990s emerged partly from the governing structure suggested in NPM (Ólafsdóttir, 2016). The budgeting and performance management systems in schools (National Audit Office, 2014) can also be traced to the reform as well as the decentralization of the compulsory education in 1995 (Hansen, 2013) even though we observe that the move in 1995 was essentially a return to the well-established operational mode for Icelandic education. As is argued in detail in Chap. 9, there is a long history of inspection and evaluation in Iceland. In some important ways the characteristics of the system, as we know it today, is similar to what it was early in the twentieth century. Secondly, we have a history of decentralized compulsory education, but there have been fluctuations in how this has functioned. In 1946, a certain

restructuring of a fragmented system took place and the state's role became more important than before, as the school system became centralized and coordinated by the state (Björnsson, 2008). About half a century later, the previously discussed reform, that is often associated with NPM, was implemented in order to increase decentralization within compulsory education (Compulsory School Act No. 49/1991; Hansen et al., 2004). Until then, or from 1974–1995, the administration of compulsory education had been in the hands of the state and the country was divided into eight educational districts (Hansen, 2016). Hansen (2013) claims that the argumentation for the decentralization at the time was grounded in evaluation reports, documents from OECD, and trends from neighboring countries. He also argues that the aim of the transfer was to increase accountability and promote change and thus the reform is traced, at least partly, to international influences, thus making it a candidate for the category of policy borrowing. We would, however, point out that within the education system in Iceland some of the essential features of these ideas already existed way before the 1990s (see Chap. 9). We therefore question if these ideas can to some extent be attributed to international agencies and ideas. The national education history and context should be closely scrutinized when making such attributions and care should be taken to respect the local, i.e., the national context.

Discussion

For the compulsory stage, there have been several distinctive developments, many of which have been discussed or alluded to earlier in this chapter. There are clear signs that both those governing and operating the system have a genuine ambition to move forward. The principal question here is the extent to which these developmental efforts have been initiated and implemented through legislation or governance and how they have fared. By introducing the six developmental characteristics, we essentially argue that it is more the implementation rather than the initiation that has been in the hands of government and the general developmental flow has been relatively stable, seen in the long-term perspective.

At the system level we have, above, emphasized the strive for unity or homogeneity of the 10-year school, by moving away from the primary and lower secondary division of the system towards a unitary compulsory school, "the basic school". This is gradually being achieved. We have also noted the roughly 20 year period (1974–1995) when the administrative responsibility of the compulsory schools was transferred to the state from the municipalities, in a very ambitious attempt, once again, to ensure equity and educational quality as it was felt that the rural areas did not have local support the urban areas had. This is a brief and a very interesting fluctuation in an otherwise robust system, where the municipalities were traditionally viewed as the agents in control, and this position they have recaptured, at least to a certain extent. The larger municipalities were able to cope with the revoked arrangement, but this left some of the smaller municipalities in a vulnerable

situation (which was, indeed, an important reason for the earlier change). Looking in a different direction, Jónsson (2014) has argued that important parts of underlying educational ideals introduced in 1974 have gradually lost their impact, even though it may have partially regained some support in the 2011 national curriculum. It has also been pointed out that the major initiative of implementing the concept of the inclusive school, given considerable impetus in the 1974 law, and much influenced by both practicing professionals and academics, has still some way to go. In terms of governance, the idea of the inclusive school is perhaps the biggest challenge for the municipalities in Iceland, large and small – it is both a very sensitive and a truly complex issue.

During the previous decades, the policy discourses inside the system have been quite vigorous and visible, but it is difficult to ascertain their origin and their actual transformative effects. Here we will briefly note some additional but loosely defined arenas of reforms, that are closely connected to the curriculum and the ways schools are operated. In keeping with the age-old emphasis on reading as the major determinant of the quality of education, and more recently on literacy, major efforts have been initiated by teachers and academics (Eggertsdóttir, 2019; Sigþórsson & Marinósson, 2017), e.g. Byrjendalæsi (e. Beginning literacy) and the "National Literacy Pact" initiated by the MoESC in 2015 (Government of Iceland, n.d.-c). In an attempt to introduce new approaches, perhaps the biggest steps have been within multicultural education, formulated by teachers, municipalities and academics (Ragnarsdóttir, Berman, & Hansen, 2017). This has been crucial given the increase of the number of children from markedly different cultures and countries in Icelandic schools, who also have a first language, which is not Icelandic. There are no signs yet that the momentum of this effort is being attenuated. Moving onto a totally different arena, much interest and even awe, towards the end of the twentieth century, was related to the introduction of ICT into education (Arnardóttir, 2007), as it was expected to totally transform schools. Now many of those ideas have faded in the wake of fascination with the internet and social media. The potential importance of artificial intelligence has not yet entered the Icelandic educational discourse.

In addition, a host of important developments have taken place inside the system, initiated by the individual teachers, or professional groups, some by municipalities and often supported or facilitated by the government. What needs to be established for all of these developments, especially given the characteristics of educational development discussed above, is to locate where the substantive practice and discourse starts, and to what extent it gets off the ground, even before the authorities move in, to formalize, and often to support. We claim that the Icelandic system can be characterized both by strong traditions (which make externally driven modifications difficult), but also by professional strength and independence, which allows initiative, but also makes external modulation difficult.

We have explored certain aspects of the progress made within Icelandic education over a century, with focus on the last four decades. The main question is to whom or to what we should attribute the progress made or the developments noted within the system. In order to address this question we described what we suggest may be six significant characteristics of educational development in Iceland in order

to establish the slow but consistent developments in the Icelandic system. We then looked in particular to governance, the mechanism geared to steer and change. We deliberate if the changes we see are the work of national or local governing bodies or perhaps complex and often implicit interactions of hard and soft governance from within and outside of the national education system. We ask, if the developments we see are primarily due to specific acts or ordinances dictated by governments at the time, or due to specific external policy pressures, or are we essentially witnessing rather gradual developments of a slow-moving robust system in line with very general principles about which there has been consensus? By looking at the arena from several different angles, we practically always conclude the latter. There have of course been several notable statutes on education passed by parliament, and governmental regulations or ordinances, but we claim that in most cases these were to facilitate the ongoing change or acknowledge formally changes that had taken place and may thus be considered essentially as housekeeping exercises that made sense in light of how things developed but were not radical in themselves. Here we echo the conclusion of Müller (1987) and Jónasson (2003), noted at the beginning of the chapter, where the latter analyzed the development of the Nordic upper secondary schools during the twentieth century. A crucial aspect of that story is that very similar changes took place in all the Nordic countries, but it was suggested that these affinities were not due to policy borrowing but rather originated from similar underlying dynamics within the respective systems.

Governance has received much attention in recent decades, both internationally and in the Icelandic policy discourse. Within this discussion we find many important aspects of an ambitious and modern system. Within the educational arena there is clearly much emphasis both on quality (with particular emphasis on literacy education) and equality (in particular equal access and school for all), and governance must address various challenging contradictions dealing with these important foci of education. In order to achieve both equality within the student population and quality for each student a decentralized system has been developed, but with some central constraints. It is based on professional trust towards the municipalities, schools and individual teachers as well as other professionals within the system. This, however, is not the end of the story. Society, embodied in its government considers it necessary to ascertain its responsibility by ensuring that an inspection system is in place, over and above trusting the governing mechanisms at the various levels in the system. At the same time an effort is made to ensure that the routine governing mechanisms are well functioning, at the national, the municipal and the school level.

Our view is that the Icelandic education system has developed substantially, but gradually during the last century and a half, from being non-existent as a system into being a well-developed system as indicated by data underpinning the six characteristics of development discussed above. It is open (and increasingly non-tracking, taking the long perspective) and relies on relatively independent professionalism of the teachers and principals with little emphasis on standardized testing, in particular as the students move from one level to the next. We conclude that the freedom the system has enjoyed to develop gradually has been

beneficial – even though it could, without doubt have reached further in many areas. And governments have, along the line, accepted their role as guardians of educational equality, even though their views vary considerably on exactly how to play that role.

Conclusion

Thus, we conclude that in order to understand the character of an education system and what shapes it, it is important to understand its basic inertial character and thus its historical and cultural somewhat conservative modulation. Even though the outlines and fundamental operations in Icelandic education are in line with other systems, especially the Nordic ones, as demonstrated using a particular example by Jónasson (2003), there may be an Icelandic touch to the character of the system. But, we also observe that there may be something approaching essential universality when considering the dynamics of education, or rather educational change, as our basic thesis seems to bear a strong resemblance to the story Tyack and Cuban (1995) tell about the slow educational developments in the US spanning a whole century.

Thus our strong historical approach draws attention to how gradual the development of education is and suggests that it is not easy to change an educational system. This is perhaps the case when the state and municipal intervention can be characterized by soft governance and external influence, though very visible, has not had very clear effects on either structure or operation. We also imply that efforts to change given those conditions stand and fall by a thorough understanding of the underlying dynamics of an education system as a whole.

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