

# Chapter 4

## Transnational Influence and Educational Policy in Iceland

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### 4.1 Context

Jónasson (2008) observes that the shaping of the Icelandic educational system has been continuous since the enactment of the laws on compulsory schooling in 1907. Kjartansson (2008) observes that OECD statistics and research began to influence the development of the educational system in Iceland in the late 1960s, enhancing its role of preparing a skilled workforce for economic growth. The current organisation of the educational system in Iceland dates back to 1974, when the Law on the Structure of the Educational System (Lög um skólakerfi 55/1974) and the Law on Basic Schools (Lög um grunnskóla 63/1974) were passed in parliament. The previous elementary and lower secondary schools were restructured and defined as a unified whole, exemplified by the term *grunnskóli* or basic school. The system was divided into three major levels: the compulsory level, the upper secondary level and the university level. Twenty years later in 1994, a Law on Preschools was enacted, stating that the preschool level was the first level in the Icelandic educational system (Lög um leikskóla 78/1994). Before 1994, the preschool level was not defined as a formal part of the educational system. The emphasis in the 1974 Basic School Law was primarily to further enhance the policy of education for all, irrespective of student learning capacities and location in the country.

The governance of schools at these four levels varies somewhat. In general, preschools and basic schools are operated by the municipalities, upper secondary schools and universities by the state. Independent or private schools are primarily funded by the municipalities at the preschool and basic school levels, while the state funds the upper secondary school and the university levels.

The policy development in Iceland during the last few decades has emphasised decentralisation and the empowerment of schools. This emphasis was stipulated in

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the 1994 policy document report on educational policy formation (Skýrsla nefndar um mótun menntastefnu 1994). The emphasis on decentralisation is supported with references to ministerial evaluation reports, OECD documents and laws and regulations from neighbouring countries. This report has to a large extent guided the development of changes in educational laws and regulations concerning basic schools and upper secondary schools.

The governance of basic schools was transferred from the state to the municipalities with the 1995 Basic School Act (Lög um grunnskóla 66/1995). This law, and subsequent laws at other school levels, contained more articulate provisions for the establishment of independent or private schools in comparison to older laws and regulations. Educational management and school development are also emphasised, along with strategic parental linkages. All these elements are reinforced in the 1998 Basic School Law (Lög um grunnskóla 91/2008).

Curriculum guides are produced by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for all school levels, except the university level. The status of curriculum guides is that of regulations outlining the official educational policy for the school levels. The purpose of the curriculum guides is to inform headmasters, teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders about educational goals and operation of schools. Another major goal of the curriculum guides is to ensure equality of opportunity for students. The curriculum guides also stipulate policy ends concerning internal and external evaluations of schools, with the rationale of enhancing quality and accountability. The main curriculum guides are to be adapted by the schools, based on their priorities.

Námsmatsstofnun, the Educational Testing Institute of Iceland, is an independent institute established by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Its main task is to create and administer national tests in the basic schools in fourth, seventh and tenth forms in selected subjects. The test scores of individual basic schools are listed by the institute on their home page. Another task of the institute is to engage in various research projects, national and international. International research projects such as PISA, TALIS, PIRLS, SITES and TIMSS are managed by the institute. The institute produces research reports based on all these studies. Its reports often stimulate public discussions and provide a basis for national and international comparisons and benchmarking.

The structural arrangement of the compulsory level in Iceland is accordingly based on the general ideology of empowering and decentralising the operation of basic schools, while the state stipulates centralised curriculum guides and manages accountability and quality checks.

## 4.2 Issues: Basic Schools

The shaping of the Icelandic educational system is an ongoing process, as observed by Jónasson (2008). The educational discourse is variable, depending on the context at each given time. The discourse is, on the one hand, guided by contextual knowledge

and relevance and, on the other, by external forces. Both these discourses contribute to the shaping of the educational system. PISA results are always discussed in the public media, particularly in relation to scores in other Nordic countries. Results on standardised tests in basic schools also stimulate public discussions, but the results are usually published in the major newspapers. Open access and school choice are also topics of discussion. Inclusion is an issue, both in terms of teaching pupils with special needs and pupils with multicultural backgrounds. At the present, public discussions are very focused on finance and the small size of schools, but the fiscal crisis in Iceland has left many municipalities in a critical financial situation. The development of the role of headmasters is also of concern in this context. This is only to mention a few of the issues that receive the attention of educators and the general media and influence schools and school leaders and have apparent linkages to transnational policies and tendencies.

### ***4.2.1 Accountability: Tests***

Accountability has been an issue regarding basic schools in Iceland for long periods of time. Standardised tests in basic schools have since 1977 been administered by the Educational Testing Institute of Iceland in order to determine access to upper secondary schools, but in 2008, the emphasis was changed to use the tests more diagnostically. Based on the 1995 Law on Basic Schools, in 1996, standardised tests were also administered in the fourth and seventh forms. The rationale for these tests is to ensure that schools are accountable for their practices. Value-added figures are calculated for all schools, and the final scores for the different forms are published in the form of league tables for the country as a whole. Outcomes on standardised tests often create public discussion and are used by municipal authorities to rationalise the quality of their schools or to influence reorganisation of their practices.

PISA tests have been conducted in Iceland since 2000. All basic schools in Iceland participate in the PISA surveys, but in most PISA countries, the participation of schools is based on sampling. The PISA findings usually gain considerable public attention in Iceland. Moreover, due to the participation of all basic schools with tenth form pupils, PISA findings can be disseminated on a school level and contain analytical information that can be useful to the individual schools. Primarily, however, the PISA findings generate discussions about the benchmarking of schools, particularly in relation to other Nordic countries and countries in Western Europe. Furthermore, the PISA findings influence public policy, for example, concerning pupils' literacy levels. Policy elements concerning literacy have, for example, been included in major curriculum guides and, to some extent, elements in science and mathematics.

The TALIS results have also gained public attention, but not in the same manner as PISA. In Iceland, all basic schools participated in the TALIS surveys, but TALIS has only been administered once. In other partaking countries, participation was delimited to lower secondary schools (ISCED-2 schools). In the future, TALIS

findings have the potential of having significant influence on management practices in schools by benchmarking various administrative elements in schools in Iceland as well as in the participating countries.

#### **4.2.2 Accountability: Evaluation**

School evaluation was stipulated in the 1995 Basic School Law (Lög um grunnskóla 66/1995). The law states that every basic school must conduct self-evaluation that focuses on teaching and learning, management, staff communication and relations with stakeholders. The law also stipulates that the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture administers external evaluations of basic schools every 5 years. This emphasis on evaluation was highlighted in the policy document report on educational policy formation (Skýrsla nefndar um móttun menntastefnu 1994) in order to enhance school development and accountability. It also says in the report that in many of Iceland's neighbouring countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, the consumer orientation of schools had increased. The report accordingly highlights the importance of decentralisation and the significance of increasing evaluation practices in schools. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of enhancing site-based management and control, stating that the role of the ministry should be delimited to making curriculum guides and administering external evaluations of schools. An OECD report from 1987 on the educational system in Iceland is used as a reference point in the report on educational policy formation as well as the 1992 OECD report on International Educational Indicators: A Framework for Analysis.

This evaluation policy, with minor changes, has been a part of the formal educational policy in Iceland at all school levels during the last decades. Basic schools have, for example, engaged in self-evaluations on a regular basis since the enactment of the 1995 Law, and they have participated in the external evaluation programme administered by the ministry. During the period of 2001–2003, the ministry conducted evaluations of self-evaluation practices in all basic schools in the country. The ministry's 2004 report states that there was a great difference between schools, but does not provide information on why there is such a difference or of what nature. A study was conducted by Hansen et al. (2005) to examine the views of headmasters and teachers in six basic schools on the implementation of self-evaluation practices. The findings showed a considerable difference amongst the schools regarding self-evaluation activities. The findings indicate that the critical factors are the knowledge and skills of headmasters and teachers of self-evaluation methods, clear leadership within schools and the attitudes of headmasters and teachers towards self-evaluation as a means for change and development.

It seems as though this situation has not changed radically, but the latest ministerial report on the conduct of self-evaluation in basic schools states that it was satisfactory in less than half of the schools studied (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið 2008). The report states that during the autumn of 2008, 39 schools were studied, and only 16 of them or 41% engaged in systematic self-evaluation activities. A group established by the Ministry of Education, Science

and Culture and the Association of Municipalities released a report in 2011, stating a reinforcement of the evaluation policies with various practical ramifications concerning the role of the schools as well as the ministry (Ytra mat á grunnskólum: Tillögur til mennta- og menningarmálaráðherra og skólamálanefndar Sambands íslenskra sveitarfélaga um tilhögun á ytra mati í grunnskólum 2011). Based on this development, it is likely that the conduct of evaluation will be further enhanced in the near future.

### 4.3 Open Access and School Choice

The value of independent schools is often discussed in the public media in Iceland. These discussions are usually centred on the value of free choice for parents when selecting schools for their children. The most recognised of the independent schools is the organisation Hjallastefnan. On its website, it says that the organisation's schools are devoted to the 'Hjalli pedagogy', which is primarily based on the method of 'segregating girls and boys in preschool classes and by this trying to liberate the children from traditional sex-roles and stereotypic behaviors' (Hjallamiðstöðin 2011a). This organisation runs ten preschools and three basic schools for children up to 11 years of age. There are in total around 1,400 students in Hjallastefnan schools, with approximately 490 pupils at the elementary basic school level (Hjallamiðstöðin 2011b).

The Hjallastefnan basic schools, as well as other independent basic schools, are funded by the municipalities based on the provisions in the subsequent school laws. The 2008 Law on Basic School states, for example, that independent schools can be established by groups or individuals but in cooperation with a given municipality. Based on an agreement (contract/charter) with the municipality, the school can be accredited by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture as a formal institution with a permit for operation. Independent schools can claim funding from the participating municipality. The minimum is 75% of the total cost per basic school student as calculated by Hagstofan or Statistics Iceland. In practice, independent basic schools get 100% funding from the given municipalities and charge no tuition fees.

Open access can be seen as a subissue of the free choice ideology. When the governance of basic schools was transferred from the state to the municipalities in 1995, open access became an issue. On the one hand, this was an issue for students who wanted to attend basic schools run by municipalities other than where they had their legal addresses. This was solved by most municipalities with contracts concerning individual students. On the other hand, open access is an issue in municipalities that have more than one school. In the 1995 Law on Basic Schools, as well as in newer basic school laws, it is stated that it is up to the municipalities to decide how they determine access to their schools. Traditionally, municipalities are divided into catchment areas, and access to schools is determined on the basis of that structure. In the municipality of Garðabær, a suburb area in the outskirts of Reykjavík, open access for students became the guiding policy. Garðabær abandoned the catchment area structure and emphasised that all their schools were open to students

irrespective of where they lived in the municipality. A recent study shows that the vast majority of parents are very pleased with this policy of open access. The study also showed, however, that most of the parents choose schools near their homes (Sigurðardóttir 2011). In other municipalities, placement of students outside a given catchment area is decided upon in cooperation with parents, schools and municipal education authorities.

#### 4.4 Inclusion: Students with Special Needs

The Salamanca statement and framework for action accepted at the world conference on special needs education in Salamanca, Spain, in 1994 was well received in Iceland. The statement focuses on special needs, access and quality. It states, for example, that ‘those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs’ (UNESCO 1994, viii). The framework influenced the 1999 Special Education Regulation in Iceland, the 2002 Municipality of Reykjavík Education Policy and the 2006 Main Curriculum Guide for Basic Schools. Most of the specialised schools or divisions within regular schools for students with special needs, like the blind, deaf or handicapped, were abandoned and their functions included in regular basic schools with the teaching of regular classes. In these cases, students with special needs of this kind were taught in regular classes with the aid of specialised teachers.

The implementation of this inclusion policy created public discussion about the status of specialised schools and divisions within regular schools. Many parents and teachers were in favour of their existence, while others favoured the inclusion approach. These discussions have died down, and a general acceptance of the inclusion approach seems to be taking place. However, there are sometimes critical public discussions about the abandoning of specialised schools.

The Salamanca statement also implies that the needs of students with learning difficulties should be met with inclusive practices in regular classes. Mixed-ability teaching has been a guiding value in Icelandic basic schools for a long time but was reinforced by the Salamanca statement. Many schools have, however, during the last few years, been developing more individualised teaching practices, and the phrases *school for all* and *individualised learning* are frequently used in this context. The municipality of Reykjavík, for example, put forth an official policy of individualising instruction to be implemented in all its schools. Cooperative practices like team-teaching are becoming common, particularly in lower forms, where a team of experts in the schools teach the classes.

In this context, Jóhannesson (2006) says, when studying changes in the work of teachers, ‘we see that “different children” and cooperation concerning inclusion are the areas that Icelandic primary school teachers talk about as having the greatest impact on their working lives’. Björnsdóttir (2009) concludes in her study on mixed-ability teaching that teachers are very conscious of trying to change their practices but feel a lack of necessary support from headmasters and educational authorities. Similarly,

Gunnþórsdóttir (2010) says in her study on the inclusive practices of Icelandic and Dutch teachers that the teachers ‘don’t get the necessary support they need’.

#### ***4.4.1 Inclusion: Immigrant Students***

Despite the isolation of Iceland and its homogenous population, immigration has been in the increase during the last decade. In 2000, there were 1,039 pupils in basic schools with a different mother tongue than Icelandic, and in 2010, the number was 2,318 or 5.4% of the total number of basic school pupils. These pupils had more than 43 different mother tongues, but the specific mother tongues of these pupils are not specified in the Statistics Iceland databank (Hagstofan 2011).

When the number of immigrant pupils began to increase, specific immigrant reception and learning centres were established in a few basic schools. In the city of Reykjavík, such centres were established in four basic schools. The purpose of these centres was to adapt immigrant children to Icelandic society, particularly by teaching them Icelandic as a second language. With the 2006 Main Basic School Curriculum Guide, the policy of inclusion of immigrant children was reinforced. This policy stipulated that all children, including immigrant children, should be able to attend schools near their home – their home schools (Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneytið 2006). Accordingly, funding arrangements were changed and money allocated directly to schools with immigrant students based on their number.

The implementation of this policy and the restructuring or abandoning of reception and learning centres are gradually taking place. They are, however, in operation to some extent in a number of basic schools in Reykjavík. The majority of immigrant children in Reykjavík, however, are enrolled in two basic schools. Ólafsdóttir (2011) says that considerable experience has been accumulated in these two schools that can be of use to other schools with less experience in working with immigrant children. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir and Börkur Hansen (in press) see one of these schools as a leading school in multicultural education in Reykjavík and claim that multicultural working practices are embedded in its organisational culture: ‘Many aspects of the school, such as its organization, leadership, teaching and home-school collaboration bear witness to an educational setting which openly values diversity’. Accordingly, experience in multicultural teaching may be lost if successful practices are not disseminated effectively to other schools with less experience in working with immigrant children. Furthermore, despite extensive research, support and guidance, there is still a lot to be learned in most schools with immigrant children.

#### ***4.4.2 Consolidation and the Size of Schools***

The fiscal crisis in Iceland has left many municipalities in a critical financial situation. In the municipality of Reykjavík, several amalgamations of preschools, basic schools and afterschool sport and recreational centres are being established. Several



other efficiency procedures are in the process. The plan is to save money in the management of schools and use of facilities and establish more harmony in policy-making and the operation of preschools, basic schools and afterschool sport and recreational centres. The estimated accumulated savings in operational and capital cost in facilities according to the report prepared by Reykjavík central office is around 2,000 million Icelandic kroner in 2014 (Reykjavíkurborg 2011). In 2010, Reykjavík had 50 regular and independent/private basic schools and 95 regular and independent/private preschools.

The rationale for these steps is based on the fact that schools in Reykjavík are relatively small, but many basic schools in Reykjavík enrol between 200 and 350 pupils. The same accounts for preschools. The stated purpose is to save money and create a richer learning environment for the pupils by using existing resources (housing, equipment, staff, etc.) more effectively. The report was presented to the public, and official feedback came from various stakeholders. One of the criticisms made reference to an Icelandic PISA report by Halldórsson et al. (2010) about the small size of Icelandic basic schools; their average size is approximately half of the average OECD size. Another critique was based on references to the report on consolidation of schools by Hawley et al. (2011). Their report states that the merging of schools and school districts is contextual, but the '[f]inancial claims about widespread benefits of consolidation are unsubstantiated by contemporary research about cost savings' (2011, 11). Despite critical discussions in the public media, Reykjavík central office is continuing with its plan on the merger of preschools, basic schools and afterschool sport and recreational centres. Similar steps, although smaller in scope, have been taken in other municipalities.

## 4.5 Role of Basic School Headmasters: Prospective Changes

The decentralisation of basic schools, when their control was moved from the state to the municipalities in 1995, changed the working environment of basic school headmasters. The 1995 Basic School Law prescribes considerable power to headmasters as directors and educational leaders of their schools. The role of basic school headmasters in the previous legal framework was considered unclear in the basic school hierarchy, and they were believed to have little decision-making authority (Jónasson 1992). In an extensive survey from 2001 amongst basic school headmasters, Hansen et al. (2002a, b) examined their views concerning the transfer to municipal control and how the working environment that followed affected their role. The majority of headmasters were very positive towards their new environment. This study revealed that the task areas they spent most of their time on had changed considerably since 1991, when a similar study on their role was conducted by the same research team (Hansen et al. 1997).

The findings of the 1991 and 2001 studies show that the ideal rankings of their major task areas are similar. The actual ranking, on the other hand, had changed considerably during this period. Also, the gap between the actual and the ideal rankings



of these tasks had widened. Hansen et al. (2002a, b) concluded that the headmasters were drifting away from their ideal rank emphasis by engaging in more and more managerial tasks and duties at the expense of educational or pedagogical tasks.

A third study was conducted in 2006 by the same team. Again, the same framework was used concerning the tasks areas as in the previous studies in 1991 and 2001 (Hansen et al. 2008). The findings suggested that the headmaster's role has stabilised somewhat, the gap between their actual and preferred rank orderings of tasks had narrowed since the 2001 study and they did not seem as overwhelmed by managerial duties as in 2001. However, the study showed an increase in the time headmasters were spending on personnel issues. However, the ideal ranking of task areas remained similar to the rankings in 1991 and 2001. This can be seen as a representation of ambitious pedagogical values which they have difficulty realising due to managerial tasks. Also, the increased time headmasters seem to spend on personnel can be seen as a result of the strengthening of their role as leaders and directors of their schools.

The fiscal crisis has reduced most municipal schools' budgets considerably. In most basic schools, the cutbacks have led to a considerable reduction of the number of middle managers. Generally, middle managers, such as assistant headmasters and division leaders for age groups (e.g. 1–4, 5–7, 8–10), were active in managing change and development for the units they were responsible for. The abandoning of these positions has obviously increased the workload of headmasters and home-room teachers, that is, teachers responsible for curriculum planning and coordination of parent liaisons for individual classes. It will be interesting to explore how this environment changes the role of headmasters: Will it give them more managerial duties? How will it affect their role as educational leaders? In private discussions, many headmasters claim that they are drifting away from their ideal rank ordering of tasks.

## 4.6 Concluding Remarks

It may be concluded that the emphasis on decentralisation and accountability has influenced the shaping of education policy in Iceland quite extensively and influenced the role of schools and their leaders. Discussions of PISA results and outcomes on standardised tests can be seen as part of the accountability movement stimulated by the OECD and other forces. The same applies for internal and external school evaluation policies. This emphasis is reinforced with new public management ideologies of increased consumer control. Open access and school choice can be seen as a part of that ideology. Inclusion was reinforced by the Salamanca statement and framework developed by the UNESCO in 1994. The implementation of this policy in Iceland is an ongoing task, both in terms of teaching students with special needs and students with multicultural backgrounds. Iceland is sparsely populated with many relatively small schools. The fiscal crisis has stimulated the amalgamation of schools, facilitating discussions about the ideal size of schools.

The present situation also seems to be influencing the role of school headmasters as educational leaders.

## 4.7 Facts and Figures

- The total number of people living in Iceland in 2010 was approximately 320,000.
- In 2010, there were 76 municipalities in the country; in 1950, there were 229. For a long time, there has been political pressure to amalgamate and enlarge municipalities in order to enhance their capacity and efficiency.
- The size of the municipalities is quite variable: 42 municipalities have less than 1,000 inhabitants, 27 have between 1,000 and 10,000 inhabitants and only six municipalities have more than 10,000 inhabitants. Reykjavík is far the largest municipality with around 118,000 inhabitants.
- In 2010, Iceland had 277 preschools (ages 1–6), 172 basic schools (ages 6–16) and 32 upper secondary schools (ages 16–20). Out of these schools, 39 preschools, 10 basic schools and four upper secondary schools were independent.
- The total number of basic school pupils in Iceland today is 42,539.
- There is an average of 247 pupils in each basic school. Fifty-eight basic schools have 100 pupils or less. Only one school has more than 700 pupils.
- The number of pupils varies considerably between regions. The Reykjavík region is the largest with 13,797 pupils, and the Vestfjord region is the smallest with 942 pupils.
- The ratio of foreign citizens was 2.6% of the population in 2000 and 6.8% in 2010. The number of basic school pupils with another mother tongue than Icelandic was 1,039 in 2000 and 2,318 in 2010.
- The number of basic school headmasters and teachers has declined a little during the last few years, primarily due to amalgamations of schools in sparsely populated areas. In 2005, there were 180 headmasters, 136 assistant headmasters and 4,065 teachers in Iceland, but in 2010, the numbers had dropped to 178, 123 and 3,814, respectively.
- The majority of basic school teachers hold B.Ed. degrees from the Iceland University of Education, which merged with the University of Iceland in 2008.

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