Chapter 6
The Development of a School for All in Iceland: Equality, Threats and Political Conditions

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The history of public schools in Iceland is relatively short compared to that of other Nordic countries, spanning about 100 years. It has been underpinned by a focus on different aspects of equity, involving equal educational opportunities for children regardless of place of living, gender or learning ability. This has been reflected in legislation and curricula. Despite several obstacles, the Icelandic school system seems to have succeeded quite well in this respect, since international studies have shown high equity among comprehensive schools, meaning that student outcomes rely only to a small extent on what school they attend. This has been supported by centralisation, with a small private sector at the compulsory level. The main challenges lie at the secondary level (up to 18 years old), concerning equity within schools, or the inclusive school and School for All.

The main purpose of this chapter is to unfold the development of School for All using the following tasks and questions:

- Analyse the development of the Icelandic school system towards School for All with the following questions in mind: How has equality in education developed through the years and what are the main emphases and methods today? The history of the initial concept of *School for All* is included, as are current trends, which uniquely bring together *School for All* and inclusive pedagogies and active democracy and social justice.
- What has threatened the emphases on equality and how have they possibly affected the policy formation, the emphases and methods?

The concept of School for All has meant different things at different times. After 1974 the concept refers to equal opportunities for education in mainstream schools, regardless of background or physical or mental abilities. Prior to 1974, the term School for All was mainly used to communicate the right of all children to attend

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school regardless of place of living or social status. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the inclusive school emerged, emphasising equity and social justice within the mainstream school. Jóhannesson (2006a) argues that the vision on inclusion in the turn of a new millennium might have had silencing effects on other equality politics such as gender, class and culture. Consequently, inclusion tends to be the dominant focus in the discussion of School for All. In this chapter those terms are used in accordance with different meanings at different times.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the whole school system was under revision, with new laws going into force for all school levels in 2008, and new laws for teacher education and a new curriculum in 2011. The new curriculum guide focuses on definitions of learning outcomes and pillars that are meant to act as a foundation for the educational system. The most dramatic change is, however, lengthening teacher education by requiring a master's degree for teacher certification at all school levels. This decision can be seen as an example of transnational influences driven by the desire to rank higher in comparative studies such as PISA and TIMMS. Finland has been pointed out as an exemplar for this. The process for the change was initiated soon after the publication of results from an OECD study on the best performing school systems in the world (McKinsey & Company 2007), which indicated that good results rely primarily on teachers' competences.

The issues mentioned above are discussed in further detail in this chapter. It begins with brief information on the structure of the school system in Iceland. Next the discussion is divided into three main parts. First, the history of the development of School for All is described, including discussion on arguments and foundations for education in Iceland. Second, empirical evidence on School for All is given. The third and final part provides reflections and thoughts about current trends and matters of dispute, within a political context.

6.1 The School System in Iceland

The educational system in Iceland is divided into four levels: preschools, comprehensive (compulsory) schools, upper secondary schools and universities. Additionally, a fairly extensive adult education arena, parts of which are within the formal system of education, is provided. The system operates within the public sector and very few private schools exist in the school system (except at preschool level). Private schools receive public funds. There is no school inspection at a national level, but there are nationally coordinated examinations in grades four, seven and ten in comprehensive schools. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for monitoring the educational system at all levels. Municipalities operate the preschools and comprehensive schools, while the upper secondary schools and universities operate under the state.

As defined by law, preschools are the first level of the educational system, providing education for children until 6 years of age, at which point compulsory education begins. It is not a part of compulsory education but around 95 % of

Preschools 1–5 years	Comprehensive schools (primary and lower secondary) 6–15 years	Upper secondary schools 16–20 years
Attended by approx. 95% of children	Compulsory	School for All students up to 18 years old
Led by municipalities	Led by municipalities (since 1996)	Led by the state
National curriculum	National curriculum	National curriculum
Approx. 14% in independent public funded schools	Approx. 2% in independent public funded schools	–
Parents pay around 25–30% of total cost	Full public funded	Students pay low registration fee and book costs
Free school choice, limited number of children in each school	Restricted school choice, neighbourhood schools	Restricted school choice – student choice

Fig. 6.1 Overview of the Icelandic school system, legislations, level of governance and financial issues

children from the ages of 2–6 attend these schools. There is a long tradition of 'private' preschools that are funded by the local authorities to a similar extent as the official preschools operating under the same legislation (Fig. 6.1).

The comprehensive school (grunnskóli) became a reality by law in 1974, when the common practice changed from a selective school system to a school system that does not group the students on the basis of academic achievement or abilities. It is compulsory for pupils aged 6–16 years old. The most common form of organisation is that all ten grades are in one school building, although different arrangements exist. Compulsory education in Iceland has extended rapidly over the last century, from 4 years in 1907 to 8 years in 1946, 9 years in 1974 and then to 10 years as it has been since 1990. School hours each day have increased as well as the number of schooldays in a year.

Upper secondary education (ages 16–20) is not compulsory, but anyone who has completed compulsory education, and is under 18 years old, has the right to enrol in studies at an upper secondary school. The secondary education has two main roles: to award final degrees for vocational training and to prepare students for university studies. The length of the courses in vocational education varies, lasting from one semester to ten, but the most prevalent are 4-year study programmes. Most teenagers attend upper secondary school, but there is a high dropout rate, and about 30 % of people aged 25–34 have not graduated from secondary school (Blöndal and Jónasson 2010). This is regarded as one of the big challenges in the Icelandic educational system. According to an act on secondary schools from 2008 (Lög um framhaldsskóla 92/2008), all students that so wish are entitled to at least 2 years in secondary school or up to the age of 18. However, each school can set their own rules for selection of students based on grades at the compulsory level, which tends to lead to classification.

The Icelandic school system has for most of its history been centralised at the national level, with a small private sector, and with tendencies for decentralisation emerging by the end of the twentieth century. Municipalities have always led

preschools, with a national curriculum defining the main roles and overall means. The responsibility for compulsory education was at the national level until 1996 when municipalities became financially and professionally responsible, within a legal framework and national curriculum that at this time became quite detailed in objectives for each age level and subject (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 1999). Few private schools exist at the compulsory level and are attended by a small number of children, around 1.2 % in the year 2000 up to 2.18 % in the year 2011 (Statistics Iceland 2012). They receive public funds but are also allowed to charge tuition fees from parents.

The state is responsible for secondary schools. They are steered directly from the ministry, which until 2008 gave the schools very little freedom to decide on curriculum issues. Legislation for secondary schools (Lög fyrir framhaldsskóla 92/2008) provided each school with much more independence, requiring them to decide on curriculum matters and make their own plan.

Teacher education is at university level in Iceland and has been since 1971 for teachers at the comprehensive school level, and since 1994 for teachers at the preschool level. A 3-year bachelor's degree in education was required for teacher certification at the preschool and compulsory level until 2011. Teachers in upper secondary schools were required to add 60 ECTS in pedagogy to their BA or BS in their special subject. In June 2008, new legislation was adopted for all school levels in Iceland as well as for teacher education. The act on teacher education (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda no. 87/2008), which took effect in July 2011, requires a master's degree (5-year study programme) for teachers at all levels: preschools, comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools. Teacher certifications according to older laws are still valid, meaning that no teachers will lose the right to call themselves a teacher and work in schools. There are no requirements for them to update or renew their certification.

6.2 Historical Emergence: The Development of the School System for All

The history of public schools in Iceland is described and discussed in an extensive study led by Loftur Guttormsson (2008), a study that was published to mark 100 years from the first Educational Act in 1907. In this chapter the development of School for All is discussed with a special focus on different aspects of equity.

6.2.1 The First Educational Laws: The Main Emphases, Rationales and Threats for Equity

Since the first Educational Act, the Icelandic education system has been growing relatively fast into the well-developed school system that it is today. For centuries, children were normally educated in their homes by their parents and later by teachers who travelled around as part of an ambulatory school system. This arrangement

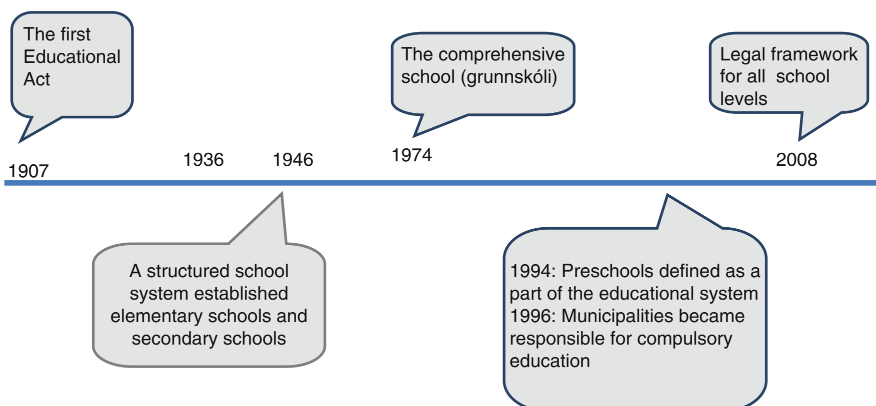

Fig. 6.2 Timeline for main turning points in educational legislation in Iceland

continued for many decades and well into the twentieth century in rural areas (Guttormsson 2008). Beginning with the first Educational Act in 1907, and subsequent acts in 1936 and 1943, Fig. 6.2 displays the timeline of some of the main turning points in educational legislation in Iceland. An act ratified by the Parliament in 2008 covered all tiers of the educational system.

The compulsory education was gradually lengthened throughout the twentieth century, stipulating parents' obligation to send their children to school. Legislation from 2008 introduced a student's right to complete the first 2 years of secondary school, which might be the first step to 12 years of compulsory education.

At the time of the first act in 1907, it was clear that Icelandic children had far less educational opportunities than children in neighbouring countries (Guttormsson 2008), which was the main argument for formal schooling. However, due to strong disagreement on compulsory education, the local authorities were allowed to decide whether they established formal schools or provided ambulatory schools. That accounted for all legislation until 1974. This resulted in a big gap between school attendance in rural areas and in villages or towns. This inequality of educational opportunities became one of the main discussion points until the year 1974 when the parliament agreed on a new educational act that focused on equal opportunities for all children with no exceptions (Garðarsdóttir 2008).

The first Educational Act, in Iceland as elsewhere, brought about discussion of establishing one school for the 'common people' and another for the 'elite', but with the small population running two different school systems was not realistic. In spite of the lack of private schools for upper-class society, there was a great difference in the educational opportunities offered to the upper and lower classes, such as preparation classes, available to upper-class children. This meant that these children received additional education and more preparation before attending the compulsory school and therefore most often did better at school (Garðarsdóttir 2008).

As the pupils attended compulsory school, they were grouped according to their reading skills but not by the year they were born. As a result of less preparation, pupils from the lower-class society were most often grouped in less skilled classes and often

received less stimulation to study (Garðarsdóttir 2008). After discussions and debates about the matter, the rules were changed in bigger towns and grouping depended on the year pupils were born. In bigger schools, the problem did not disappear because with additional groups at each age level pupils were still grouped according to their reading ability as they started school. More educated parents, or financially better off, prepared their children for the reading test and therefore the discrimination continued (Garðarsdóttir 2008). This did not change until the mainstreaming of the compulsory school in 1974 with equal opportunities for access to school.

6.2.2 Children with Special Needs in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The first resource for children with disabilities was a school for deaf children, established in the year 1867. In the beginning it was organised for children aged 10–14, but in 1922 it was opened up for children aged 8–17. In 1933 the association for blind people founded a school for the blind, whose operation was off and on and finally it merged into a general school. Around 1945 a committee was organised to come up with plans for educating children that did not fit with other children in school due to their behaviour or home situation. The most common solution at this time was to send children with family or behaviour difficulties to the countryside to stay on a farm. The discussions from this period seemed to focus on finding solutions for these children that were far away from the city or towns. It is also worth noting that hardly ever was there a discussion about children in the countryside having behaviour problems or other challenges.

According to the school legislation passed in 1936, school boards could expel children with behaviour problems from school. Often children from low-class society and children with behaviour problems were grouped together as having the same problem. Many children did not attend school because of illness, and it does not look like the authorities responded to their needs until the legislation in 1946. Children who were physically or mentally disabled did not receive their education with other children, and it appears that the legislation in 1946 did not address this or come up with any solutions in the general school. On the other hand, institutions were established to provide appropriate upbringing and education for this group.

Institutionalising people with disabilities was the norm from the mid-twentieth century through the next 30–40 years. At first the institution was a place for caring, but little by little education was added to the programme. Often the placement and the education for children with disabilities depended on their families or people with a special interest in this group. On behalf of these children, they fought to establish a place for them to live and later on for their right to education. Another challenge is that by grouping children by their disability, discrimination continued because it was easier to deal with or organise education for children with certain disabilities. It has been a challenge to come to an agreement on how to address the needs of children with emotional and behaviour problems. At the beginning the

emphasis was placed on offering homes for these children, but as time went by they developed into a certain type of boarding school. This movement is related to changes in attitudes built on theories of mainstreaming that refers to the practice of educating students with special needs in regular schools and classes based on their skills. The education of children with disabilities began at institutions but moved little by little to special schools.

6.2.3 The Establishment of 10 Years of Comprehensive School

A shift in educational policy and school practices in the early 1970s was highlighted in the legislation from 1974 (Lög um grunnskóla 1974). It mandated education for all children in school, regardless of their ability. Instead of grouping students by ability, this law required that classes be organised into mixed-ability groups. Jónasson (2008) describes this as the final attempt to ensure schooling for all children, regardless of their place of residence, social background or their learning ability. Terms like social justice and democracy appeared in laws and national curriculum papers. After 1974, all changes in educational law and regulations have been aimed at providing education to all pupils in their neighbourhood school, without grouping them by learning abilities or disabilities. In actual practice, however, ability grouping remains in certain schools, especially among older pupils or those labelled with a certain kind of disability.

Lengthening of compulsory education was still the main debate at the national level. Children were needed as part of the workforce in the countryside as well as at the seaside, which was one of the main arguments against the lengthening of compulsory education. Inside the schools, the main discussions were concerned with social justice and equal opportunities for learning, regardless of learning ability or social status (Jónasson 2008). In response to these changes in educational law and international trends, Icelandic educators began to engage in innovative efforts in teaching methods and curriculum. They created a field of educational reform in which they assumed joint dominion over these tasks. Ensuing years brought a variety of workshops and summer institute programmes that focused primarily on preparing teachers to teach different subjects and to use newly published schoolbooks, followed by workshops on how to plan and organise the classroom (Guðjónsdóttir 1994; Jóhannesson 1992).

6.2.4 Some Obstacle for the Mainstream School in the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century

Despite the legislation built on mainstreaming, the neighbourhood school was not for all children in reality. Mainstreaming strives for the placement of exceptional students to be in the least restrictive environment possible, which means that students with special needs will go to their neighbourhood school and receive their education in the special education environment if they cannot function in a regular

classroom. A school for mildly disabled pupils was established in 1960 and in 1980 another for severely disabled pupils. A school for physically disabled children was established in 1969 but was integrated into a general school in the year 1974. Still another school for pupils with behaviour or social problems was established in 1974. Most special schools were situated in the southwest part of the country, but a school for pupils with disabilities was also established in the northeast. Later, the school in the northeast merged into a mainstream school, but the two in Reykjavík remained as founded until 2011 when they merged. The number of students attending these schools has become smaller, and in 2011 it was less than 1 % of the student population. The mainstream schools set up special classes for children with learning and behaviour difficulties and emotional or social problems. In some cases these special classes were initiated for certain types of diagnosis disabilities, such as autism, behaviour problems or deaf children. To respond to pupils with learning difficulties, the special education schools offered teaching resources, and the most common practices happened outside the classroom. Support was mainly provided for reading or mathematics challenges. As noted, special schools were established, but children with disabilities received education at school like their peers. It can be said that this was the first movement towards integration where all pupils were educated in the same school building.

In the 1960s students who were previously excluded from school began to enter the school system. This trend has continued and children of immigrants have added to the diversity. This increasing diversity in the student population caused challenges for teachers, which were met by offering opportunities for professional development programmes (Marinósson and Bjarnason 2011).

6.3 School Policy and Trends at the Turn of a Century and Empirical Updates

This chapter discusses some trends in the turn of a new millennium and research findings that could inform consequences of political actions for School for All. New public management influenced political decisions during this period, which might have threatened the main idea of inclusive, regular School for All. However, equity is highly valued in different policy papers about education, but evidence on how it may or may not be realised in practice is controversial. This section discusses political trends and more recent empirical findings on issues concerning School for All. These are the inclusive school, management, national curriculum, individualised learning, school accountability and international comparisons.

6.3.1 The Inclusive School

The Salamanca Declaration that was confirmed in 1994 (Salamanca statement and framework for action 1994) and declared every child's right to education in a mainstream setting influenced the discussion in Iceland. The focus was no

longer on the obligation for each child to go to school but rather on the right of every child. As this goal was achieved, the focus moved to inclusive schooling, whether every child could or should fully participate in normal school life in their neighbourhood school.

Even though the inclusive school has been emphasised since the late twentieth century, research results on the success of the inclusive school are somewhat controversial. The percentage of students that are educated in mainstream schools is relatively high in Iceland compared to other OECD countries (Meijer et al. 2003). At the preschool level all children are in inclusive settings, with very rare exceptions, while at the compulsory level less than 1 % of all students attend special schools (Menntasvið Reykjavíkur 2008). However, the location of students with disabilities within the mainstream schools does not mean that they are included or acknowledged as participants in the school life. Participation has not been measured generally in Iceland, but authors of a recent study of the education of mentally disabled students concluded that the ground rules were that the school is still considered a 'normal' place where all major deviations were considered problems in need of 'fixing' (Marinósson 2007). On the other hand Bjarnason (2010a), who investigated how Icelandic parents of disabled children experienced support for the family and the child over a 33-year time span (1974–2007), noticed a shift in paradigm from focusing on disability in the family as a private trouble towards a public issue based on the child's rights as a citizen. It is also evident from Bjarnason's (2010a) study that Icelandic parents of disabled children do not seem to suffer from poverty and housing problems in the same way as parents of disabled children in Britain, the USA and to some extent the Scandinavian countries.

In general it can be said that the discussion about inclusive education is stronger at the policy level among school authorities than it is among teachers or within teacher education, as discussed in Sigurðardóttir (2010). The educational authorities at a national level and some of the local ones emphasise inclusion in their policy papers. Through the lenses of science for all, in inclusive school systems, Þórólfsson and Finnbogason (2010) analysed two policy documents that were used as the foundation for the national curriculum in 1999. They found that 'despite promising effects to meet the needs of a diverse student population and offering "science for all", the findings indicated a stronger emphasis on standardisation according to academic goals than multiform learning opportunities and originality' (Þórólfsson and Finnbogason 2010, p. 1).

The discussion is not so prevalent among teachers and in teacher education. Inclusion does not appear in teachers' union policy papers nor has it been a prominent feature in the overall policy for teacher education until 2011. Teachers in compulsory schools believe that they respond to students' needs in their teaching, but they call for various resources for students with special needs if they are going to be included in regular schools (Marinósson 2004; Ólafsson and Björnsson 2009). Teachers feel that today's pupils differ those in years past, in the ways they express themselves, behave and learn; to be able to respond to the diverse group of pupils, they call for knowledge that is more specialised (Jóhannesson 1999, 2006b).

Gunnþórsdóttir (2010) compared teachers' attitudes and understandings towards inclusion in two schools in Iceland and two in Holland. Her results indicate that after 30 years of process towards inclusion, the teachers in the participating Icelandic schools claimed that they did not have sufficient support for inclusive practice. Teachers in her study claimed to have little knowledge on inclusive schools, and if they did they had acquired it from work outside schools or from personal experience rather than from professional discussions or practice within the school or their teacher education programme. These results are somewhat in accordance with TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Study) where dealing with disabled students ranked highest among Icelandic teachers when asked where they would need further knowledge or skills (Ólafsson and Björnsson 2009). On the contrary, Karlsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir (2010) concluded that the teachers participating in their qualitative study had positive attitudes and knowledge on inclusive practice through collaboration and policy work within the schools. These schools considered themselves inclusive schools (Guðjónsdóttir and Karlsdóttir 2009). Guðjónsdóttir (2000) studied the practice of six general teachers, whose students included those with identified disabilities in their classrooms. She found that these teachers were innovative and responsive professional educators who practised differentiated teaching and learning.

Preliminary results from a recent study on teaching and learning in Icelandic schools indicate that only about 49% of Icelandic teachers find it important that all pupils attend their neighbourhood school (Björnsdóttir and Jónsdóttir 2010). An explanation could lie in the fact that a large proportion (83 %) claim that teachers in general are not prepared to teach all pupils; around half of the teachers believe that the policy of inclusion has not improved school practices. Guðjónsdóttir and Karlsdóttir (2009) observed that only about a quarter of comprehensive schools mentioned inclusion in their policy statements as presented on their websites, while about half of the schools published policy statements regarding support to students with special educational needs in the comprehensive schools.

The number of students defined by the schools in need of special support in school has increased. In the year 2000 about 18 % of pupils in compulsory schools in Reykjavík received special support (Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavíkur 2000). Five years later this percentage was 21 %, out of which around 75 % received their support outside the classroom (Helgadóttir 2006). The school year 2011–2012 about 27 % of pupils at a national level received special support, according to data from Statistics Iceland (2012), the majority of them outside the classroom. In preschools the percentage has remained the same since 2000 or around 5 % (Statistics Iceland 2012).

Johannesson (2006a) claims that different technological and market approaches at the policy level can hinder successful inclusive practices in schools. He stresses three aspects in this respect: students are seen as consumers of clinical services and diagnosable subjects; inclusion is a matter of management and an accountability rather than pedagogic; and the strong focus on inclusion has had a silencing effect on other types of equality such as gender, place of living, class and culture.

6.3.2 Management Policy and National Curriculum

Continuing school improvement in Iceland is reflected in changed curricula and new evaluation procedures. A national curriculum for compulsory school was published in 1989. In 1999, 10 years later, this curriculum was re-evaluated and new guidelines were published emphasising detailed descriptions of objectives for each school subject and age level.

The school policy from 1998 focused on creating a flexible education system that should be able to address (a) the needs of each individual student, (b) wider choices for students, (c) good work skills, (d) healthy competition and (e) enhanced student responsibility towards their studies (Menntamálaráðuneytið 1998). A critical aspect of the new school policy states that the equal right to education must offer teaching and learning opportunities in line with each student's abilities and interests and must provide education appropriate for each student. The goal is not to teach all the students the same things, but to provide them all with a solid educational foundation through flexible schooling and diverse teaching methods (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 1999).

The first part of a national curriculum for all school levels, based on the legislative acts from 2008, was published in 2011. The educational authority moved away from detailed objectives towards defining learning outcomes and basic educational ideas. Six fundamental pillars were defined to sit at the centre of educational discussions and to be a platform for school improvements at all levels. They are literacy, education for democracy and citizenship, education for equality, education for sustainable development, creativity and health. These pillars are intended to form a thread throughout the whole educational system and in doing so create a congruency between different school levels (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 2011). They are in accordance with the ideology behind the inclusive school as described in different materials from UNESCO where quality and equity is thought of as central for inclusive education (UNESCO 2009).

Free school choice was implemented in many of the larger municipalities in Iceland in the late twentieth century, which is stipulated in the act on compulsory education (Lög um grunnskóla 91/2008). The aim was to increase quality by encouraging school competition and the establishment of private schools through the 'money goes with child' approach. This could threaten the emphasis on equality in School for All, as it paves the way for greater sorting and segregation of students by ability or socioeconomic background as discussed by the OECD (2012a, Equity and quality in education). That has, however, not been the case since more than 90% of parents choose the neighbourhood school even though they could choose another one. The parents that participated in Sigurðardóttir's (2011) study on free school choice in one of the cities (Garðabær) expressed a high level of satisfaction with the school choice, although the majority of them still chose the neighbourhood school for their children.

6.3.3 School Policy at a Local Level: Individualised Learning

Having been made responsible for the operation of the compulsory schools (1996), many of the municipalities made an effort to establish their own policy and strengthen the quality of education in their district. One major example is the term *individualised learning* that was put at the forefront of policy documents in Reykjavík at the turn of the century as a response to inclusive education. This became a strong wave for school development all over the country in the new millennium, despite different opinions among educationalists (Sigurgeirsson 2005). The main argument for this policy was to emphasise education according to individual needs, which has been stressed in educational legislation since 1974 (Sigurðardóttir 2007). In order to avoid individualised learning being mistaken for individualism, it was referred to as 'individualised learning and student collaboration' in policy papers after 2001 (Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavíkurborgar 2003). The focus moved from teaching to learning and pupils were supposed to take more responsibility for their learning and individual learning plans. Some of the larger schools, though, might have used that policy to justify grouping students by learning ability.

More open ways of working involving flexible learning spaces and team teaching were suggested at all levels (Menntasvið Reykjavíkurborgar 2007). As an example of this, results from a study on teaching and learning indicate that different designs of school buildings emerged under the provision of individualised learning, with open classrooms and transparency around the building. It is too soon to tell whether this will result in different ways of teaching or a good learning outcome. However, teachers do claim they collaborate more often with colleagues in open classroom environments than in traditional classrooms and allow students more choice concerning content and ways of working (Sigurðardóttir and Hjartarson 2011).

This policy was not criticised so much for political implication, but rather for the lack of transparency in the use of terms (Sigurgeirsson 2005) and the focus on learning instead of teaching. For example, Guðjónsson (2005) claimed that learning is always individualised and therefore individualised teaching would be more appropriate, and Sigurgeirsson (2005) suggested that the term *differentiated learning* might be more in accordance with the intention.

6.3.4 School Accountability

There are no formal inspections at the national level in Icelandic schools, but schools at all levels are required to do self-evaluations every year and publish the results (Lög um grunnskóla 91/2008). The ministry monitors schools through information from the municipalities and carries out its own evaluations on a few randomly selected schools every year. In addition, some of the larger municipalities, such as Reykjavík, have implemented an external evaluation in schools, a holistic evaluation covering most aspects of schoolwork (Sigurjónsdóttir 2010).

The national coordinated tests in grades four, seven and ten are also meant to measure students' outcomes under the provision of the national curriculum. Increased emphases on national tests appeared at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a growing number of subjects tested nationally in grade 10. This changed again in 2009 when the tests were made optional for pupils (Reglugerð um samræmd könnunarpróf 2009). They were also moved from being final tests carried out at the end of the spring term to being conducted in the autumn term at the beginning of the school year for students in grade 10.

The effects for schools, based on results from evaluations or national tests, are not prominent, except for the effect on their reputation as the results of national tests are published in the media every year. Resources are not decreased or withheld based on results. Consequences for pupils first appear when they are entering secondary school, which might be difficult for those with lower scores from national tests, as the schools choose the students. Furthermore, pupils' grade repetition within compulsory schools is an exception, and pupils are rarely delayed in going from preschool to primary school.

6.3.5 International Comparison and Transnational Influences

Iceland participated in international comparative research studies including Pisa 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009; TALIS 2009; PIRLS 2001 and 2006; TIMSS 2001; and SITES 2001. In general, Icelandic pupils score close to OECD average or below. The effectiveness of the schools is considered to be low compared to the allocated budget. Many factors are a benefit for schools such as resources, parent level of education, cultural possessions at home, student-teacher ratio and equipment for teaching and learning (Halldórsson et al. 2010a), while teachers' level of education is relatively low (Ólafsson and Björnsson 2009). TALIS results indicate more teacher collaboration than in other participating countries. On the other hand, Icelandic teachers do not take part in professional development activities to the same extent as teachers in other participating countries. They have, however, relatively strong self-efficacy and are satisfied in their job (Ólafsson and Björnsson 2009).

In spite of the individualised learning approach, PISA results indicate that literacy among 15-year-old pupils is below average and scores became lower between 2000, 2003 and 2006 on all tested literacy skills (Halldórsson et al. 2010a). These results worried Icelandic teachers and educational authorities who launched various projects in schools with considerable positive results, according to PISA 2009 (Halldórsson et al. 2010b).

The differences between the highest and lowest scores are relatively small for social and economic conditions as well as student outcomes. Relatively few scores are in the highest level compared to comparative countries and fewer at the lower ends as well (Halldórsson et al. 2010a). This could indicate that the Icelandic school system is supporting pupils with special educational needs.

Based on information from the year 2008, Iceland spends the highest percentage of GDP on education at the compulsory and preschool levels of all OECD countries (OECD, Education at a glance 2011). This percentage was lower in the year 2009 (OECD, Education at a glance 2012b) but still well above the average of all OECD countries. Two factors seem to be the main explanation for this outcome; the number of students per teacher is among the lowest in the compulsory schools, and the percentage of teachers' working time spent teaching is also among the lowest. The teacher salaries are, however, relatively low and the length of compulsory education is similar to other countries.

Even though the Icelandic school system is organised according to the Nordic tradition, it has been influenced by ideas from other parts of the world as well. The influence from international comparative studies has already been discussed, but the further education of teachers abroad also brings international influences. It may in part be caused by a lack of opportunities for further education for teachers throughout the twentieth century. As a consequence of this lack of opportunities, teachers and other educationalists went abroad for further education to different countries, mostly other Nordic countries, the USA or the UK. They came back with new ideas and traditions and took on different leadership roles in education in Iceland. Currently these transnational influences find their ways through international comparative studies.

6.4 Summary and Reflections

The structure of compulsory education in Iceland is in accordance with the Nordic model, with 10 years of schooling, most often in one school. Most of the time it has been centralised, directed from the Ministry of Education, with tendencies for decentralisation over the last decades, as the municipalities became responsible for these schools in 1996. There are curricula at the national level defining pupils' learning outcomes and underpinning themes for education. Equity has been in focus at all school levels with the general understanding that the public school is for all students.

For most of the twentieth century, the educational debate in Iceland was characterised by conflicts between those who argued for formal, public School for All regardless of place of living and, although fewer, those who argued against formal schooling and for decentralisation, allowing municipalities to arrange the education of children according to the work life needs. The length of compulsory education was a central point in this debate. The concept School for All had different meanings in different periods. The Icelandic school system has always been underpinned by emphases on public education and equity. The focus on equity has moved from pupils living in the cities or villages and those living in rural areas to gender equity and the inclusive school.

As explained in the discussion above, the Icelandic school system has developed relatively fast since the comprehensive school was established in 1974. Put simply,

it can be said that the comprehensive school (grunnskólinn) was developed and built up in a social democratic atmosphere during the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. However, continuing with such simple definitions, the 1990s and the 2000s can be characterised by technological and market-oriented approaches in education (Jóhannesson 2006a), involving deregulation, school competition and public choice. This technical approach was viewed as an inevitable condition for progress in the education system (Jóhannesson et al. 2002). During this period, increased privatisation of different public services took place (Kjartansson 2008).

The economical downfall in October 2008 influenced the political debate of the subsequent years. It is viewed by many as not only an economic downfall, but in a sense also an ideological and political turning point, as people started to review and question different fundamental values that underpinned decision making at a political level. It can be considered a turning point, since people refer to the period before the downfall or after it. In education, the downfall can be seen as a turning point in several different ways, and only a few of them are touched upon here. A debate about the role of the school system in society, touching on some ethical issues such as democracy involving societal responsibility, was revitalised. Educationalists or maybe rather educational authorities questioned whether the schools had failed in this respect. In addition, reacting to the cutback of resources in education has been an urgent task and has forced people to prioritise, which may provoke some worries about lack of additional support for students with disabilities. One reaction to fewer resources is the merging of schools, which was mostly done in rural districts, but during the years after the downfall, this happened in all districts including Reykjavík city. Furthermore, the downfall led to disbelief in political ideas, rooted in new public management and a neoliberal atmosphere, such as privatisation, competition and accountability. As a consequence, growing interest for private schools at the compulsory level and school competition slowed down, at least temporarily.

A new government took over at the beginning of 2009 (ruled until 2013), consisting of two parties, *the Social Democratic Alliance* and *the Left Green Movement*. In their political statement they gave a tone that challenges the neoliberal perspective. They emphasised the importance of protecting the national level of education. 'Basic education, free of charge, is the key to social equality and national success in the long term. …. and the policy of the inclusive school will be respected' (The political agreement, January 2009). New national curricula for all school levels, based on the acts from 2008 and published in 2011 (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 2011), reflect this policy with the six basic elements that are meant to be at the centre of educational discussions and a platform for school improvements at all levels. The inclusive school is emphasised more strongly in the 2008 legislation than it has been before, involving neighbourhood public schools for everyone.[1]

[1] Still a new government took over in the spring 2013 consisting of two parties on the liberal side, Independent party and Progressive party. They do not mention issues such as equity or inclusion in their political agreement, but instead stress variety in the schoolwork as a key to strong and creative community. http://www.stjornarrad.is/Stefnuyfirlysing/

PISA 2009 indicates that equality among Icelandic 15-year-olds is at a high level, among the highest in the OECD, in the sense that their achievement does not depend on their socioeconomic background. Differences in outcomes between schools seem to be increasing, which might be seen as a consequence of the decentralisation in the 1990s when the municipalities became responsible for the schools and individual schools were encouraged to create their own policy and uniqueness (Halldórsson et al. 2010b). In the OECD (2012) report about equality and quality, the Icelandic educational system is considered to be among those that manage to combine high performance and quality.

Even though the inclusive school can be considered one of the main challenges in the development towards School for All in Iceland, Bjarnason (2010b) concluded that the school system is on its way to inclusive education for all and that schools seem to have opened their doors to a diversity of students. There are, though, different perceptions and experiences of the process and obviously there is still some way to go. It could well be that the main threat against the School for All idea in Iceland comes from within the schools, rooted in the disbelief of teachers, rather than from political emphases. This should be taken seriously. Other aspects of equality also need more attention, such as gender, as Jóhannesson (2006) pointed out. We have argued that the idea one School for All survived, at least temporarily, through the strong neoliberal movement in Iceland at the turn of the new millennium. Which direction will be taken in the future depends largely on global movement and local political conditions.

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