

# TEACHER EDUCATION FOR AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL SYSTEM: CONNECTING POLICY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines how pre-service teachers are prepared to teach linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Document analysis examined the current policy framework in Iceland and provided an insight into how the policy is guiding praxis in teacher education. The findings reveal contrasting ideologies in education policies and measures in Iceland, as well as a missing link from theory to didactics in teacher education regarding teaching in diverse classrooms. To ensure equity in education, developing teacher knowledge and perspectives about diversity is crucial, as well as providing teachers with solid pedagogical tools. These enable them to practice inclusive pedagogy in multicultural and multilingual school environments where neoliberal and neoconservative voices have gained influence.

## FORMATION DES ENSEIGNANTS POUR UN SYSTÈME SCOLAIRE INCLUSIF : RELIER LES POLITIQUES ÉDUCATIVES À LA PRATIQUE EN CLASSE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article examine comment les enseignants en formation initiale peuvent enseigner à des élèves issus de milieux linguistiques et culturels diversifiés. Une analyse de documents a examiné le cadre politique actuel en Islande et a fourni un aperçu de la manière dont ces politiques orientent la praxis dans la formation des enseignants. Les résultats révèlent des idéologies contrastées dans les politiques et les mesures éducatives en Islande, ainsi qu'un lien manquant entre la théorie et la didactique dans la formation des enseignants en ce qui concerne l'enseignement dans des classes diversifiées. Afin d'assurer l'équité en éducation, il est essentiel de développer les connaissances et les perspectives des enseignants concernant la diversité, ainsi que de leur fournir des outils pédagogiques solides.

In today's democratic multicultural societies, governments and institutions need to ensure the representation, contribution, and inclusion of people of multiple cultures and ethnicities. However, policymakers, as well as educators, are often influenced by popular, yet possibly conflicting, ideologies – such as social justice, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism – and they are forced to make sense of them in their professions (Biesta et al., 2015; Tabrizi, 2014). A key factor for ensuring that education facilitates and strengthens the creation of a cohesive, inclusive society is to address such ideologies critically. To this end, increased attention must be paid to teacher education given the reach and impact that teachers have in their day-to-day practice. Teacher education and the professional development of teachers have a crucial role in creating a foundation for enabling inclusivity, equality, and social justice in education for diversity (Goltsev et al., 2022).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the necessity to prepare pre-service teachers to work with learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The aim is to understand how the current educational policy in Iceland influences the structure of teacher education that prepares pre-service teachers to work with and educate multicultural and multilingual learners in inclusive school settings. Inclusive education is fundamentally grounded in the ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights, and full participation of all (Black-Hawkins, 2017; UNESCO, 2020), and it is the official educational policy in Iceland.

Document analysis was applied to gain a deeper understanding of how the current policy framework in Iceland guides praxis in teacher education. The research question we aim to answer is: How does current educational policy in Iceland shape teacher education so that teachers are prepared to educate students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

### ***The policy environment in Iceland***

The primary educational policy in Iceland centres on inclusion, a stance articulated in official policies since 2008. The Icelandic policy context for education is mainly influenced by policy developments in the neighbouring Scandinavian countries, but also international contracts and agreements that Iceland is a party to (such as the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*), as well as decrees of the European Council that have been incorporated into Icelandic law. Furthermore, the work of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has been influential in developing the policy framework for inclusive education in Iceland. However, the academics who research and write about the Icelandic school system are

heavily influenced by theories and ideas from Canada, the USA, and the UK due to many of them having been educated in these countries and due to the accessibility of research in English.

### ***Language diversity in Icelandic schools***

Iceland is categorized as a small nation-state, with just under 400,000 inhabitants. Historically, the country has been monocultural and monolingual with a homogenous population, but this has changed in the last 3 decades. Immigrants now comprise around 18.9% of the total Icelandic population (Statistics Iceland, 2025), and they represent around 109 languages from all corners of the world (Móðurmál, 2025). The largest minority languages are Polish, Lithuanian, and Filipino (Statistics Iceland, 2025).

This change in demographics has impacted education at all levels and has drawn attention to how schools and teachers are able to respond to the increased diversity of learners, and how teacher education is preparing teachers to work with learners of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in schools. Simultaneously, there has been an ongoing discussion about the danger of the Icelandic language disappearing or losing its vitality as the national language because of the small number of its speakers and because of the substantial presence and influence of English in the society (see, for example, Albury, 2014; Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018). The presence of more than 100 additional heritage languages used by immigrant communities increases these perceived dangers for Icelandic. These ongoing tensions between the maintenance of Icelandic and pursuing culturally responsive, linguistically sensitive approaches in education seem to be confusing to many teachers.

### ***Teacher education in Iceland***

Currently, comprehensive teacher education in Iceland is provided by two state-governed universities: the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri. Since 2008, a 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) bachelor's degree and a 120 ECTS master's degree are required by law to gain a license to teach in preschools, compulsory schools, and upper secondary schools in Iceland. The *Act on the Education, Competency and Recruitment of Teachers and Administrators of Preschools, Compulsory Schools and Upper Secondary Schools* includes specifications for the general and specialized knowledge, skills, and competencies that teachers and school administrators must possess (Lög um menntun nr. 95, 2019). However, as there are no centrally defined compulsory core subjects in teacher education, the two universities set their curriculum guidelines

and determine content areas, competencies, and learning outcomes. Among the general competencies stated for graduated teachers is the competency to mediate knowledge in Icelandic (Lög um menntun nr. 95, 2019). The ensuing regulation specifies that competency in Icelandic must be on Level C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Reglugerð um hæfniramma, 2022).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, societies have become more multicultural and multilingual, both globally and in the Nordic context. In response to increasing diversity in schools, the Nordic countries have focused their policies and reforms on inclusive education to advocate for social cohesion, promote citizenship, and shape more equitable societies (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Internationally, inclusive education is rooted in the ideologies of full participation of all, social justice, democracy, and human rights, and can be viewed as both an ongoing process and a goal (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2020). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) explains inclusive education in this way: “All learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers” (p. 1). Social justice is at the heart of inclusive education, with a broad spectrum of intersected concerns for human diversities, such as individual abilities, gender, sexuality, culture, language, and socio-economic background (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Inclusive education emphasizes that learning differences or difficulties in school stem from social circumstances and school systems rather than from individual learners’ identities or qualities (Schuelka et al., 2019). Thus, inclusion focuses on pedagogical work with diverse groups of students and schools’ responses to diversity, rather than mending individual disabilities (Florian, 2021). It embraces individual learners and searches for ways to support marginalized individuals and groups through structural changes, curricula, and the involvement of all stakeholders (Sleeter, 2015). However, the emphasis on equity and equality of opportunity has come under criticism, as it is believed to jeopardize efforts to produce excellence in learning outcomes (Sahlberg, 2023). In contrast, Sleeter (2015) has claimed that the efficacy in teaching to achieve high academic levels is an inherent dimension of socially just education.

Besides the ideas of social justice, two dominant ideologies continue to impact Nordic and Icelandic education policies: neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Neoliberal approaches conceive of education as

influenced by market values such as competition, emphasis on standardization, deregulation, and privatization (Magnúsdóttir, 2013). These values are visible in the prioritization of competition between schools via parents' (as consumers) choice in where to send their children, in teachers and educational options, as well as in the focus on increased measurement of standardized information about school achievement (Sahlberg, 2023). Neoconservative approaches in education, on the other hand, envision a strong state, focus on sciences, trust in national testing, national curricula and standards, morality, and uncritical patriotism (Tabrizi, 2014). Although the Nordic countries' educational policies strive to promote ideas of inclusion and social justice, policy implementation relies on the availability of funds, qualified teachers, and other resources that differ between and within each country (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023). Thus, it is partially dependent on the economy and the political situation.

The field of multicultural education has developed since the initial work of James Banks in the US in the second half of the 20th century. Banks (2016) identified dimensions that together would lead to just schooling for diverse learners. These dimensions were: integrating subject content, constructing knowledge from students' perspectives, aiming at the achievement of all students (or equity pedagogy), reducing prejudice, and creating an empowering school culture and social structure. Gradually, critical holistic approaches that challenge discrimination in educational settings and aim at creating empowering educational spaces are also being developed in the Nordic countries (Benediktsson, 2023). Such approaches employ the cultural and linguistic assets of learners as tools that facilitate learning rather than viewing them as obstacles. These approaches incorporate personal experiences and interests to enhance the learning process and utilize learners' cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds as a foundation for interactive and collaborative teaching methods (Byrd, 2016).

Overall, the school outcomes of students with immigrant backgrounds are worse than their peers, as can be seen in the results from the 2015 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test (OECD, 2019). Other studies have shown that there is cause for concern for this group of learners, as they are less likely to graduate from upper secondary school, have a poorer social status, and are less likely to report feeling well in school (Ragnarsdóttir & Lefever, 2018). Recent findings also show that youth with an immigrant background are less likely than Icelandic-born youth to report that they feel they belong in school and are more likely to feel like outsiders (Guðjohnsen et al., 2023). Furthermore, research has

shown that many teachers consider themselves ill-equipped to teach this group of learners and find it difficult to tailor schoolwork to their needs (Ólafsson, 2019).

Teacher education plays a key role in increasing teachers' capacity to critically examine how neoliberal, neoconservative, and other ideologies shape policy and practice (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021), and how these influences may relativize social justice values. Recent research has shown that such policy emphases are reflected in teacher education course offerings in Iceland (Gunnþórsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2025), confirming that policy discourses shape programme design. The research has confirmed that participation in these courses supports teachers in implementing theoretical ideas about multicultural and inclusive education. Few courses, however, are aimed at working with pedagogy and didactics, thus generally leaving the practical application of the theories to teachers in classrooms. Research on the perspective of teacher educators at the University of Iceland has shown that they were aware of the importance of preparing pre- and in-service teachers to teach students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, the teacher educators felt that a special focus on the pedagogical application of multicultural education in the teacher education programs at the University of Iceland was not sufficient (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2025).

The challenge of ensuring educational equity, particularly in preparing teachers to instruct diverse learners who learn the school language as an additional language, is significant (Emilsson Peskova, 2021). Students' ability to use complex language in speech and writing is crucial for accessing education within school settings. For immigrant students, proficiency in the majority language is important for engaging in various learning processes and interacting with teachers and peers. Addressing these issues in teacher education enhances teacher efficacy in using appropriate pedagogical tools, building up their own competence, and raising awareness of linguistic diversity (Goltsev et al., 2022).

Teachers' pedagogical approaches and decisions are significantly influenced by their own cultural perspectives and belief systems (Byrd, 2016; Pujata, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir, 2023; Rodríguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013; Smith et al., 2016). Teachers' experiences and identities play vital roles in shaping their teaching practices and perspectives on education (Smith et al., 2016). Consequently, a teacher's willingness and capacity to reflect on their own experiences and attitudes toward diverse learners can form the foundation for a strong commitment to students and a genuine interest in their academic success and emotional well-being (Byrd, 2016). As

conveyors of the dominant culture, teachers may have a worldview differing from that of their students. Studies suggest that a notable challenge in schools lies in the lack of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity among teacher groups compared to learner groups (Ragnarsdóttir, 2023). In this context, teachers with immigrant backgrounds may bring a wealth of knowledge and experience from various cultures, fostering an understanding of the diverse needs of students as they carry their experiences to the school setting and broader socio-political discourse (Pujata, 2018). Such teachers have the potential to establish an inclusive environment where immigrant experiences serve as a foundation for cultivating critical perspectives, respect, and appreciation for the contributions of both educators and learners (Rodríguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013). In cases where teachers belong to the dominant culture, collaborating with educators from diverse backgrounds can enhance their understanding of the immigrant experience and underscore the importance of an inclusive teaching approach. Consequently, the active involvement of teachers in fostering a culture of respect and acknowledgment may foster a sense of belonging and security among learners in the educational environment, thereby facilitating the learning process.

To ensure the implementation of inclusive education in today's classrooms, teachers need to be aware of dominant ideologies and policies and be able to critically discern ideas that are in contrast with the goals of inclusive education. Appropriate teacher education helps teachers to become aware of their own biases, collaborate with others, and build upon the linguistic and cultural assets of students.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

Given the current situation in Iceland, it is pertinent to explore existing policies and frameworks and identify areas that require development to ensure that education caters to the needs of all learners, including those from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The aim of this research was to understand how the current educational policy in Iceland influences the structure of teacher education that prepares pre-service teachers to work with and educate multicultural and multilingual learners in inclusive school settings. To gain a comprehensive understanding, we conducted a qualitative analysis of relevant official documents in Iceland to discern how current policies guide practices in inclusive education. Analyzing documents serves as a method for tracking developments and changes (Bowen, 2009) while aiding in uncovering meaning, fostering deeper understanding, and revealing new insights into a research problem

(Merriam, 2009). The data were systematically selected through a review of various forms of printed or electronic documents.

The document selection process entailed identifying the most relevant documents that offer an insight into government policies addressing compulsory education and learners from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. The criteria for choosing parts of documents for analysis were that the text focused on compulsory education, teacher roles or teacher competencies, and/or linguistic and cultural diversity. Table 1 outlines the selected documents, how they are referenced, the sections within each document chosen for analysis, and the criteria used for selection.

Document analysis generates data organized into major themes and categories (Labuschagne, 2003). The analytical process involved finding, selecting, making sense of, and synthesizing the data that each document contains. As we started our document analysis, we skimmed the documents selected for the study and marked the content related to our research question. After the first round of reading the documents separately, we compared our markings and developed the themes from the data. After carefully re-reading the selected sections, discussing, and examining every marking, we interpreted and organized the themes into categories related to our question. These categories are introduced in the section on findings.

## FINDINGS

Findings are represented by two themes: (a) the overly general messages from policies to schools, and (b) teacher preparation for working with diversity. Within the theme on messages from policies, the issues of the right to learn Icelandic as a second language and the right to education in heritage languages are discussed. Under the theme of teacher preparation, the issues of teacher education are discussed.

### *The overly general messages from policies to schools*

According to regulations governing various educational levels, every learner is entitled to an equitable education at the preschool, compulsory, and upper secondary school stages (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021). Schools are expected to offer all students access to suitable teaching and learning experiences, irrespective of their physical or mental abilities, emotional and social circumstances, or linguistic development. The *Draft of the Policy on Education of Children and Youth With Diverse Linguistic and Cultural Background* underscores the importance of embracing multicultural education, which celebrates

diversity and is founded on the resources and strengths of children and young people, as a defining feature of the future education policy within the school system (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020a). This perspective is reinforced in amendments to the *National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools* from 2021, emphasizing the incorporation of multicultural values in task selection, teaching materials, teaching and learning methods, and overall school practices (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021).

TABLE I. Overview of documents selected for analysis

Type of document	Documents and document sections chosen for analysis	Criteria for selecting the document
Legal acts	<p><i>Compulsory School Act</i> (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008)                      Chapters 1, 2, and 7 were chosen for analysis.</p> <p><i>Act on the Education, Competency and Recruitment of Teachers and Administrators of Preschools, Compulsory Schools and Upper Secondary Schools</i> (Lög um menntun nr. 95, 2019)  <i>Regulation on a Competency Framework with Criteria for the General and Specialized Qualifications of Teachers and School Administrators at Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Schools</i> (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022)</p>	They provide the policy framework within which schools and teachers operate and thus directly influence the preparation of teachers.
Draft policy	<p><i>Draft of the Policy on Education of Children and Youth With Diverse Linguistic and Cultural Background</i> (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið,<sup>1</sup> 2020a)                      The section on recommendations for teachers was chosen for analysis.</p>	Information about the policy vision for the education of learners with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
Policy guidelines	<p><i>Guidelines for the Support of Mother Tongues and Active Plurilingualism in Schools and Afterschool Programs</i> (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020b)                      For analysis, the first three sections were chosen. These include definitions of key concepts, explanation of children's linguistic rights, and the roles of teachers and schools in supporting the rights.</p>	Explanations and lists of examples of how to encourage and promote active plurilingualism.
National curriculum guide	<p><i>National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools</i> (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021)                      For analysis, the general section (Chapters 1-16) was chosen, as well as the recent amendments from 2021 for Icelandic as a second language.</p>	It provides the policy frame within which schools and teachers operate.

The documents analyzed for this study all emphasize the importance of achieving competence in Icelandic as a second or additional language for learners with immigrant backgrounds as a precondition for taking an active part in society, acquiring knowledge in school, supporting further education, and participating in workplaces (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008; Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020a). The recent amendment to the *National Curriculum Guide* provides competency criteria for Icelandic as a second language, as well as overall guidelines on how to assess learners' language competencies and accordingly plan support and organize their education (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021). The specific instructions for teachers and schools on how this should be carried out in practice are, for example, that each learner's competencies and strengths should be built upon across the curriculum. This relatively abstract message provides limited guidance to teachers.

The amended *National Curriculum Guide* states that languages are a resource and that maintaining active multilingualism is in the interest of multilingual children and society, as the educational goal for children with immigrant backgrounds is to achieve active plurilingualism. (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021). Yet, the guide provides limited information on how to implement this vision. However, parents are mentioned as the key persons in making sure that their children learn their heritage language and they should be encouraged and supported in “emphasizing linguistic upbringing at home by nurturing the pupil's heritage language” (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021, p. 106). The *Guidelines for the Support of Mother Tongues and Active Plurilingualism in Schools and Afterschool Programs* is the only document that specifically explains and lists examples of encouraging and promoting active plurilingualism in school practice (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020b).

The amended *National Curriculum Guide* recommends schools and after-school centres to adopt a language policy as a guide for staff and learners in their daily work and communication:

[A] language policy must state how language is used in communication and daily work, and what methods are used to make the best use of learners' language resources, as well as to activate and maintain the interest of all learners in multilingualism. (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021, Section 7.14)

### **Teacher preparation for working with diversity**

The *Draft of the Policy on Education of Children and Youth With Diverse Linguistic and Cultural Background* builds on the premise that the Icelandic school system does not efficiently accommodate children and youth with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020a). The *National Curriculum Guide* describes the teachers' roles in teaching diverse groups of learners in aspirational terms, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of learners, a focus on equity, and employing diverse teaching and assessment methods to accommodate learners (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021). Although multiculturalism is mentioned in the *National Curriculum Guide* several times, guidance on how to carry out and achieve its aims is not specified. The draft policy suggests a new emphasis in the overall school policy to ensure that the pedagogy of teaching learners with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is an intrinsic part of the basic education of all teachers and others working with children and youth (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020a).

The *Regulation on a Competency Framework* (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022) builds on the aspirations stated in the draft policy and provides clear outlines of what is expected of teachers as they graduate from teacher education. The regulation requires competencies such as being able to understand how learners' background and experience can influence their ability to learn, well-being, behaviour, and communication skills. Also, teachers are expected to utilize the influence of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and Icelandic as an additional language to support the learning of all. The framework is more demanding than the draft policy in that it requires teachers to have the competence to identify and respond to the needs of children with diverse backgrounds, and to organize learning and teaching that creates a supportive learning environment (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022).

Finally, the draft policy suggests that efforts should be made to systematically increase the number of pre-service teachers with an immigrant background (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020a). This could be problematic, as the explicit requirement outlined in the act on teacher competencies is that a general competency for teachers is to have the ability to teach in Icelandic (Lög um menntun nr. 95, 2019). This requirement was further specified in the *Regulation on a Competency Framework*, which states that teachers' competency in Icelandic needs to be on Level C1 of the CEFR, a rather steep demand that might be an

insurmountable barrier for those learners of immigrant origin who want to become teachers (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022).

### *Summary of findings*

The current educational policy in Iceland provides teacher education with general guidelines. These state that teachers need to acquire competencies to build on the linguistic, cultural, and other resources of students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There are, however, no concrete guidance measures on how to implement the lofty goals included in the policy framework.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to discuss the emphasis on teacher education in Iceland required for preparing pre-service teachers to work with learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The aim was to gain knowledge and understanding of how the concepts of inclusion and multicultural education are reflected in teacher education policy in Iceland. Below, educational policy is discussed, and then its implications for the development of teacher education in Iceland are stated.

There is a consensus that inclusive education aims to eliminate educational inequalities among people with various socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic identities (Imsen et al., 2017). Thus, teacher education needs to instill an understanding of the macrocosmic social forces that lead to exclusion and inequality (Slee, 2010), as well as promoting a critical stance to recognize the influences of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology on policy and practice (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021). To inculcate this spirit, proper guidance, support, and knowledge must be woven into the very ethos of teacher education by providing the necessary tools to transfer theory into praxis. The way forward for teacher education is then to entrench the values of equity, inclusion, and social justice in educational discourse and action for pre-service teachers (Gunnþórsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2025), and to help pre-service teachers to translate these values into pedagogical approaches and methods.

Contrasting ideological tendencies can be identified in Icelandic policies, teacher education, and measures in schools. Neoliberal influences have become more evident in the past decade, as can be seen for example in the shortening of upper secondary education from 4 to 3 years, set into effect to push for increased productivity. There are indeed voices that warn that such measures would have a large impact on vulnerable immigrant student populations, as this gives them a shorter time to prepare for university and

they are more likely to drop out (Ragnarsdóttir & Lefever, 2018). Iceland has centralized national curricula and competency criteria, yet schools also have much flexibility and independence in their decisions. In the fashion of decentralization, preschools and compulsory education are in the hands of municipalities that have incompatible budgets to finance them (Emilsson Peskova, 2021). It can be stated, however, that these neoliberal and neoconservative influences are in a dialectic relationship with the strong emphasis on provisions for inclusion and social justice, both in policies and in teacher education. Examples of those are the cancelling of state exams in mathematics, Icelandic, and sciences, a strong focus on the inclusion of all children in mainstream neighbourhood schools, the lack of private schools, and the flexibility of the national curriculum provided to teachers.

Unlike in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, second language teaching in Iceland is not a fully independent school subject with an allocated number of hours and appropriate specialized teacher education (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023). Research has shown that the vagueness of the guidance for schools and teachers has led to a disparity between municipalities and schools in the quality and quantity of support that learners of Icelandic as an additional language receive (Danielsdóttir & Skogland, 2018). One main root of this disparity is that policies for allocating funds and resources in schools are not the same in all municipalities, and thus each school creates different rules for how many hours are allocated for support, who is supported, and for how long (Emilsson Peskova, 2021; Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023). Research has shown that immigrant learners seem to have limited opportunities to use their languages in education, and some have experienced negative attitudes toward their use in school (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019; Ragnarsdóttir & Hama, 2018; Tran & Lefever, 2018). Heritage language education in Iceland, unlike the other Nordic countries, is mostly in the hands of grassroots organizations, working independently of the state and the municipalities (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023).

The education policies in Iceland seem to be, to some extent, influenced by the public neoconservative perception that the Icelandic language is under threat of extinction because of the vulnerability of being spoken by a small group of speakers under the heavy influence of English. This may be unwittingly contributing to the exclusion of meaningful participation of immigrants in society and their professional development. This also has implications for the recruitment of pre-service teachers with immigrant backgrounds, teaching of additional languages, and the role of heritage languages in education. A sole focus on achievement in the language of

education and in learning global languages while implicitly aiming at students losing their mother tongues would also correspond with neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies.

A collaboration between pre-service teachers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and those with a dominant Icelandic background may develop knowledge and enhance understanding of the needs of learners' diversities (Pujata, 2018). Together, they may be able to critically examine what is called for in building an inclusive space on the tenets of critical perspectives, respect, and regard for what each brings to the discussion (Rodríguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013). Currently, it is difficult for immigrant pre-service teachers to acquire a license to teach, even if they have teacher qualifications from their country of origin. The stipulation that teaching must be in Icelandic, except in foreign language teaching, is set out in the *Compulsory School Act* (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008) and supported in the recent *Act on the Education, Competency and Recruitment of Teachers and Administrators at Preschools, Compulsory Schools and Upper Secondary Schools* (Lög um menntun nr. 95, 2019) and the ensuing *Regulation on a Competency Framework* (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022). How this precludes immigrant pre-service teachers from offering their services to learners in an inclusive setting needs a critical examination. This also implies that their knowledge of how to cope with linguistic and cultural diversity, and of the challenges involved in learning a foreign language as immigrants, cannot be used actively in the learning environment (Pujata, 2018). However, some recent efforts have been made to counterbalance this development. For example, at the behest of the Ministry of Education and Children, the School of Education at the University of Iceland developed the program Icelandic Support to support pre-service teachers with immigrant backgrounds, who are not fully proficient in Icelandic, to attend the university (Háskóli Íslands, n.d.).

Recently, a review of the curriculum concerning teaching Icelandic as a second language has been performed so that the competency criteria are similar to those provided for other language instruction (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021). However, Icelandic as a second language is not a specific subject and has no allocated hours in the curriculum structure, which creates uncertainty and unequal support structures between schools. As access to education and society is dependent on knowledge of the dominant language, every effort must be made to ensure functional proficiency in the language for immigrant learners at all stages in the system.

Our findings further indicate that the educational policy in Iceland is getting clearer in terms of how to support teachers and schools to work systematically with learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, teachers have found it challenging to translate abstract terms from policies into pedagogical praxis to fulfill curricular demands (Óskarsdóttir, 2017).

Multicultural education requires a focus on students' cultures, languages, and experiences (Goltsev et al., 2022; Ragnarsdóttir, 2023), as evidenced in the competency framework (Reglugerð um hæfniramma nr. 1355, 2022), the amendments to the national curriculum (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021), and the *Guidelines for the Support of Mother Tongues and Active Plurilingualism in Schools and Afterschool Programs* (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020b). Many teachers at the compulsory school level are, however, still insecure about including learners' use of their heritage language in school, especially as the *National Curriculum Guide* states multiple times that the official language should be the language of instruction (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011/2021).

## CONCLUSION

Iceland, like most other countries, can be characterized by an increasingly diverse population, and recent policies reflect these developments. Our findings show that the policies are grounded in values of inclusion, social justice, and multicultural education, yet teacher education and various measures in schools hint at influences of other education ideologies. This indicates a gap in the implementation of laws and policies in school settings, and as Emilsson Peskova et al. (2023) have concluded, laws and policies need to be complemented by regulations and action plans to follow up on indicated issues. In order to promote the democratic values of inclusion and social justice in the Icelandic school system, policymakers and teacher educators need to be aware of the dialectic relationship of the various ideologies present in society. It is important that teacher education aims at critical understanding and discussion of the politics behind education, and also provides a concrete pedagogical foundation for teachers to implement the policies in diverse classrooms.

Our document analysis and recent research have shown that multicultural education and working with diverse learners are a focus in several courses at both the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri. Some of the measures taken recently in Icelandic educational settings are informed by the ideas of social justice and inclusion (e.g., language support for students in upper secondary schools), while other measures reflect ideas of

neoliberalism and neoconservatism (e.g., shortening of the study period in upper secondary schools from 4 to 3 years and the requirement that teachers master Icelandic to Level C1 according to the CEFR). We would like to caution that it may be hard to tell what long-term consequences such decisions will have on marginalized groups in society. The current Icelandic education policies provide a framework of social justice and inclusion in education; however, the influences and discussions of conflicting ideologies at all levels of the system and society are present and thriving.

## NOTES

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