

Chapter 26

Student–Teachers Reflecting on Student Diversity in Schools and Their Future Role as Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Icelandic society and schools are becoming more diverse than ever before and teachers need to be prepared and skilled to teach in multicultural and inclusive schools that account for student diversity. This article reports findings on how two groups of student-teachers see student diversity as an element in their future job as teachers in Icelandic schools. Data were gathered by reflective diaries through two terms in a mandatory course (fourth year/master) in the teacher education programme at the University of Akureyri in Iceland. The students reflected on the course reading material that was based on both international and local literature on inclusive education, bilingualism, multicultural education, social justice and democracy. The findings indicate that a majority of the student-teachers had not thought critically about how student diversity would affect their future work as teachers, but their ideas about their role as teachers show that they want and hope to be responsible for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Icelandic society has changed in recent years with regard to every kind of human diversity, to some extent because of increased immigration but also due to a diverse lifestyle. Schools are the first institutions where these changes can be recognised and it is therefore important that schools react appropriately to a diverse body of students and adapt learning and teaching to their background and culture. The current legislation on pre-, compulsory and upper secondary schools in Iceland emphasises principles of equality in all contexts. Article 2 explains the role of each school level and for preschools it is stated that practice and methods “shall be characterized by tolerance and affection, equality, democratic cooperation, responsibility, concern, forgiveness, respect for human values” (Pre Schools (Nursery Schools) Act No.

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90/2008Dy). Compulsory schools “shall also seek to organize their work in a way that corresponds as fully as possible with the circumstances and needs of pupils, and to promote the all-round development, well-being and education of each individual” (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). The role of upper secondary schools “is to promote the all-round development of all students and their active participation in democratic society by offering studies suiting the needs of each student (Upper Secondary Education Act No. 92/2008). This emphasis is reiterated in relatively new national curriculum guidelines for each of the three school levels (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Teachers play a crucial role in bringing educational policy and emphasis forward and are the main actors in making changes in schools. Teachers’ practices and attitudes towards student diversity can make a difference if changes go through and become an established culture in schools. It is, therefore, important that teacher education should prepare future teachers for working in schools that recognise, respect and respond to a diverse group of students.

The idea of diversity in the context of this paper involves a broad understanding of the diversification of mankind. The schools in Iceland thus represent a diverse body of students in terms of social and cultural background, ethnicity, religion, abilities and needs, and so on.

This paper looks at two groups of student-teachers at the teacher education department at University of Akureyri in Iceland and their reflections on student diversity in schools and their future role as teachers. The research question is: How do student-teachers see student diversity as an element in their future job as teachers in Icelandic schools?

BACKGROUND

Icelandic schools represent the diversity of students in many ways, with various backgrounds and criteria for study. The role of schools has changed by the years (Jóhannesson, Geirsdóttir & Finnbogason, 2002) and today the main objective of preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school is to promote the general education of the citizens. Schools should make an effort to operate according to the status and needs of children and youth. Educational work is to encourage their active participation in democratic society, within and outside school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). These areas of emphasis correspond to international developments relating to human rights, social justice, inclusion and equity in education (OECD, 2010; UNESCO, 2015).

The notion of “inclusion” in the literature has for years referred mainly to students with disabilities or special needs (Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Kaldalóns & Marinósson, 2007) but recently, inclusion has been recognised as a much broader concept, signifying how students differ from each other in multiple ways (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014; Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Sapon-Shevin (2007) maintains that inclusion calls into question many aspects of the traditional classroom and pushes them to change in many ways. Actually, the prerequisite for inclusive and multicultural practices to become inherent in schools and teaching is a reform in the system (Banks & Banks, 2010; Kozleski, Artiles & Lacy, 2013). Such a reform includes looking at student diversity as a norm rather than a problem. It seems that different school levels have focused on this aim in various ways and levels for younger students show more flexibility in changing structures and cultures. The findings of Björgvinsson (2016) on how upper secondary schools in Iceland support foreign students in their studies show that schools need to support them better and there is a need for improved cooperation with families. Practices in schools characterised by an inclusive approach to students and their learning aim at empowering members in the school com-

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