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Reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren in Iceland: Exploring challenges and dilemmas concerning teaching and assessment practices

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ABSTRACT

Greater cultural and linguistic diversity in Icelandic compulsory schools has resulted in various changes in educational policies, which, for instance, have been manifested as recent additions to the Icelandic national curriculum guide aimed at ensuring better education for plurilingual children. However, schoolteachers still require further preparation to enhance their skills to accommodate the educational and social needs of children from diverse cultural backgrounds and to create empowering learning environments. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study with Icelandic Master's students who completed most courses included in their teacher education programme and had various work experience from compulsory schools in Iceland. The primary goals were to examine challenges and dilemmas that the student teachers faced when implementing different types of educational assessment of newly arrived schoolchildren and to analyse whether the teaching practices described by them align with theoretical tenets of culturally relevant and sustaining teaching. The findings indicated that, although the participants were willing to promote cultural pluralism, they were limited by their lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of relevant teaching and assessment practices. The study sheds light on some gaps in teacher education programmes in Iceland and suggests possible ways of addressing them.

KEYWORDS

Compulsory education; newly arrived children; first-generation immigrants; teacher education; Iceland

Introduction

Cultural and linguistic diversity in Icelandic compulsory schools has been steadily increasing in recent decades. In 1997, there were only 377 children with a mother tongue other than Icelandic in compulsory schools in Iceland, making up 0.9% of the pupil body (Statistics Iceland, 2022b, 2022d). Twenty-four years later, in 2021, that number had increased by 15 times to 5,810 children, representing 12.4% of the pupil body (Statistics Iceland, 2022b, 2022d). Out of 5,810 children, 2,550 were first-generation immigrants to Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2022b, 2022c).

When entering compulsory schools, newly arrived immigrant children and their parents encounter a range of challenges, which may include difficulties related to

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adapting to the Icelandic school culture, understanding teaching and assessment methods, and facing concerns related to belonging and social inclusion (Einarsdóttir & Rúnarsdóttir, 2022; Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021; Ragnarsdóttir & Hama, 2018). School personnel evidently also find it challenging to accommodate the educational and social needs of children from diverse cultural backgrounds and to create empowering learning environments (Danielsdóttir & Skogland, 2018; Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022b). Furthermore, previous research revealed Icelandic schoolteachers' knowledge gaps on the topics of multiculturalism and culturally relevant teaching methods (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, & Meckl, 2017; Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022b). Hence, it is highly relevant to look into teacher education and to analyse whether current programmes equip future teachers with the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge to work in compulsory Icelandic schools, which have become culturally and linguistically diverse.

Drawing on interviews with ten Icelandic Master's students, who shared their experience from the on-site training and previous work in compulsory schools, this paper explores their perspectives on ways of creating empowering and culturally pluralistic learning environments for newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren. The guiding research questions are: What challenges and dilemmas do the student teachers face when implementing different types of educational assessment of newly arrived children? To what extent do the teaching practices described by the student teachers align with theoretical tenets of culturally relevant and sustaining teaching?

The study presented aligns with the global and especially Nordic context, where there is growing interest in researching ways of building empowering learning environments and providing all children with equal educational opportunities. For instance, a recent study conducted in the Faroe Islands, a close neighbour of Iceland, indicated an emphasis in the official educational policies on developing and utilising effective teaching methods for Faroese as a second language (Vijayarathan-R, 2023). However, the ambitious intentions described in the policies are not implemented in practice, since school personnel lack clear guidelines and professional development opportunities (Vijayarathan-R, 2023). Similarly, the lack of support and guidelines for school personnel were reported by Mock-Muñoz de Luna, Granberg, Krasnik, and Vitus (2020), who investigated how schools address the health and well-being issues of newly arrived immigrant and refugee children in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Malmö, Sweden. Their findings revealed that the lack of external support services, professional training for teachers, and the inflexible systems hindered schools in building equitable learning environments in both cities. Teachers in Copenhagen also described challenges with internal resources, including the lack of professional psychologists trained to address the specific issues of newly arrived families. In Malmö, instead of embracing cultural pluralism, some teachers adopted a colour-blind approach to diversity and considered subject teaching their sole responsibility (Mock-Muñoz de Luna, Granberg, Krasnik, & Vitus, 2020). A study conducted in a smaller municipality on the west coast of Sweden revealed that schools regarded good academic achievement as the general solution for the successful integration of newly arrived immigrant children, neglecting the significance of social integration (Lundberg, 2020). Hence, the author argued that a re-evaluation of reception practices is necessary, together with a redefinition of the concept of social integration in Swedish schools (Lundberg, 2020).

The current study of Icelandic Master's students' perspectives on relevant teaching and assessment for newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren sheds light on good practices and gaps in teacher education in Iceland. Furthermore, it gives an insight into reception practices in Icelandic compulsory schools, since the participants share their experience from previous work and on-site training in the field. Hence, the findings will benefit various educational stakeholders, including teacher educators, school leaders and schoolteachers, as well as immigrant pupils and their families.

Icelandic context

Compulsory education in Iceland is regulated by the Education Act (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008), which requires all children aged 6 to 16 to attend school. The running of compulsory schools is the responsibility and part of the budget of local municipalities. Educational goals, performance standards, subject offering, teaching methods and assessment criteria are described in the national curriculum guide for compulsory schools [ís. aðalnámskrá] (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013). The Education Act and the curriculum guide strongly emphasise democracy, human rights and equality as core education principles (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013).

The Education Act gives special attention to the reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren in Iceland. Paragraph 16 emphasises that the good reception of new pupils with Icelandic as a second language is crucial at the start of schooling (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008). Schools must follow their own or the municipality's reception plan, assess pupils in their strongest language, and cooperate closely with parents (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91, 2008). In 2021, several subchapters were added to the national curriculum guide to ensure better education for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021). A special subchapter was added on reception strategies that encourage schools to develop their own reception plan and language policy based on the current Icelandic and supranational law, municipal policies, and the Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools. Furthermore, the new subchapters encouraged schools to provide parents with comprehensive information about the Icelandic school system, the results of their children's educational assessment, and educational expectations.

In addition to the national curriculum guide, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2020) developed and published guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools and afterschool programmes in three languages: Icelandic, Polish and English. Polish has been chosen because Poles are by far the largest immigrant group in Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2022a). These guidelines provide schools with practical information on sustaining linguistic pluralism and viewing it as a valuable resource. Furthermore, the guidelines offer definitions of important terms, which are also used in this paper. The term *mother tongue* [ís. móðurmál] is consistently used in the text throughout the document and is defined as “the child's first language and the language to which the child has the greatest affinity, which [their] parents speak and where the child's language skills are the best” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, p. 8). The guidelines recommend using the term *plurilingual children* [ís. fjölyngd börn] “to refer either to children who do not have Icelandic as

a mother tongue where Icelandic is, therefore, their second language, or to children born to plurilingual households and who have Icelandic as their mother tongue” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, p. 8).

Teacher education in Iceland is regulated by the Higher Education Act (Lög um háskóla nr. 63, 2006) and the Act on the Education, Competence and Employment of Teachers and Heads of Preschools, Compulsory and Upper Secondary Schools (Lög um menntun, hæfni og ráðningu kennara og skólustjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla nr. 95, 2019).

To become a licenced teacher in Iceland, a candidate must hold a Master’s degree in education and receive official accreditation from the Ministry of Education. The University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri offer a variety of teacher education programmes, including a five-year integrated programme, a two-year Master’s programme for candidates who hold a Bachelor’s degree in a school subject or subject field, and a one-year postgraduate diploma for candidates who hold a Master’s degree in a school subject or subject field. Each programme offers various specialisations, such as inclusive special education, preschool education, primary education, etc. The Iceland University of the Arts offers an arts teacher education programme, and Reykjavík University offers a sports teacher education programme. The programmes are highly structured and allow only a few free elective courses. The content of the programmes varies between the universities and different specialisations, but usually includes general pedagogy, curriculum theory, language development and literacy. Occasionally, the candidates are exposed to multilingual and multicultural perspectives, which are included as free elective courses or as part of some mandatory courses (see the online course catalogues of the University of Iceland or the University of Akureyri).

Multicultural education, cultural and linguistic pluralism

Multicultural education theory, which has been known for decades, emphasises the significance of recognising and valuing cultural diversity in educational institutions, and using that diversity to create a more equitable and empowering learning experience for all students (Banks, 2009). Five dimensions of multicultural education were suggested by Banks (2009), who emphasised the interconnections between the dimensions and their equal importance. These dimensions include content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and empowering school culture (Banks, 2009). Multicultural competence is considered a key skill for individuals seeking to succeed in culturally pluralistic environments, especially in educational settings (Bennett, 2001). Developing multicultural competence is a complex process consisting of reflections on cultural self-awareness and an individual’s own cultural biases and assumptions. Furthermore, one must also possess knowledge of different cultural values, beliefs and practices, interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and be willing to engage in ongoing learning to stay current with changing cultural norms and practices (Bennett, 2001).

After its introduction, multicultural education gained momentum in schools, especially in the United States, where it was viewed as a ready and easy solution to the issues of cultural diversity (May & Sleeter, 2010). However, several weaknesses of liberal multicultural education were identified and confronted, including inattention to untidy

power relations that underpin inequality, as well as disregard for the political nature of schooling (May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). A colonial view of culture has been highly criticised for portraying culture as a stable set of characteristics that can be described and taught through simple content integration (Ladson-Billings, 2014; May & Sleeter, 2010). In a search for an easy solution to integrate cultural perspectives, teachers often tend to romanticise and objectify cultures while rarely pushing students to critically explore and confront discriminatory discourses in policies and practices that impact their own and their peers' lives (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The concepts of equality and inclusion have also been criticised for their simplistic and often colour-blind approaches to *dealing* with cultural diversity (Schachner, 2019). The criticism is based on a false sense of social justice that may be given by simple inclusion enforcing mistaken beliefs that a person's social status is solely based on their individual achievements, ignoring institutional discrimination (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lundberg, 2020). Schachner (2019) draws parallels between inclusion and assimilation, since inclusion, directly and indirectly, orients all students towards the mainstream culture, consequentially promoting colour-blind perspectives. Previous studies highlighted that adopting a colour-blind ideology creates a myth of equality, which can be harmful, since it rejects any differences and views them as a danger to inner-group harmony (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2015; Jones & Rutland, 2018). For instance, a study conducted in Finland and Sweden to challenge colour-blind and religion-blind ideologies in the context of multicultural schooling pointed out that colour blindness emerged as a prevalent ideology and a strategy frequently employed concerning Muslim minority pupils (Rissanen, 2021). Hence, schools are encouraged to move forward and embrace cultural diversity by adopting the ideas of cultural pluralism (Schachner, 2019). Promoting cultural pluralism means showing appreciation for various cultural backgrounds and viewing cultural diversity as a prerequisite for learning (Schachner, 2019). The tenets of cultural pluralism are comparable to the concepts of plurilingual competence and plurilingualism, which challenge the traditional definitions of bi- and multilingualism. Plurilingual competence is defined as a person's entire language repertoire, regardless of their level of competence in different languages (Marshall & Moore, 2013). A plurilingual speaker is a social actor who embraces their language repertoire and uses it according to the circumstances each time (Marshall & Moore, 2013).

Viewing cultural and linguistic backgrounds as valuable learning resources is an important dimension of culturally relevant pedagogy, which Ladson-Billings (1995) conceptualised as an educational approach to empowering students and fostering academic success by promoting their cultural identity and enhancing their sense of belonging in the classroom. These ideas align with the underpinnings of culturally responsive assessment, which refers to evaluation methods that are sensitive and respectful of the assessed individuals' cultural values and previous educational experiences (Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Adopting a holistic approach to assessment is essential as it enables teachers to move away from deficit-based judgements and gain a comprehensive understanding of each learner's unique needs. According to Kirova and Hennig (2013), a holistic view of assessment entails considering not only learners' academic performance, but also their sociocultural backgrounds, experience and personal strengths. Moreover, Kirova and Hennig (2013) emphasise that various power dynamics can influence standardised assessments and may favour certain cultural

norms and ways of expression, disadvantaging students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive assessment, as advocated by Kirova and Hennig (2013) and Nortvedt et al. (2020), acknowledges and values different cultural perspectives, ways of knowing and forms of participation within multicultural classrooms. By doing so, teachers can create an empowering learning environment that embraces diverse cultural identities and experiences.

Evidently, the ideas of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy were not clear enough and were quickly trivialised by practitioners who failed to sustain and support linguistic and cultural pluralism (Dixson, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014). A new term, culturally sustaining pedagogy, was introduced by Paris (2012), who required “that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people” (p. 95). Culturally sustaining pedagogy necessitates active support for youths in sustaining their cultural and linguistic competencies, together with ensuring their access to dominant cultural competence (Paris, 2012).

A holistic approach that considers pedagogical aspects, such as teaching and assessment methods as well as pupils’ well-being and sense of belonging in the learning environment, is crucial, especially when it comes to the reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren. Hilt (2017) conducted a study of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Norwegian introductory classes. The study revealed that these classes, as currently organised, posed significant barriers for pupils placed lower in the school hierarchy, particularly newly arrived immigrants. The educational system’s requirements based on dominant cultural, linguistic and academic factors excluded these pupils, thereby impeding their communication and future educational opportunities (Hilt, 2017). A group of Canadian researchers studied peer relationships and their impact on the well-being of newcomer youths (Crooks, Kubishyn, Noyes, & Kayssi, 2022). Their findings emphasised the necessity of peer-focused programmes to support newly arrived youths, mentioning interventions such as mentoring to promote peer relationships and teacher-led approaches to reducing discrimination (Crooks, Kubishyn, Noyes, & Kayssi, 2022).

Multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural pluralism in the context of Icelandic schools have been studied from different perspectives. The following section summarises the findings from recent relevant studies.

Recent relevant research in multicultural schools in Iceland

The increase in the number of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in compulsory education in Iceland has led to a rise in research of cultural and linguistic pluralism in Icelandic schools. Inconsistencies between the intentions in the official policies and the reality in schools were revealed in a report by Daníelsdóttir and Skogland (2018) about children with a mother tongue other than Icelandic in compulsory education. Schoolteachers reported a lack of support and training to develop appropriate competence to work with children who learn Icelandic as a second language (Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2018). They also expressed a great need for relevant teaching and learning materials developed with pupils’ age, abilities and cultural backgrounds in mind (Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2018). Moreover, Vijayarathan-R and Óskarsdóttir (2023) argued that the sensitivity of Icelandic language teaching has led to diminished

attention to pupils' mother tongues. This lack of awareness of the value of children's languages and cultures is reflected in teaching practices which, according to two recent studies, showed little evidence of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021; Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022a).

An interesting discovery was made by Jónsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2022b), who explored the professional support available to teachers working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their findings indicated that the teachers rarely sought municipal services for their professional development, despite facing challenges with teaching pupils who had Icelandic as a second language, suggesting that the municipal services were perceived as inaccessible (Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022b).

Parents' perspectives on schooling were explored by Ragnarsdóttir and Hama (2018) in their study of the reception of newly arrived refugee families. The parents complained about a shortage of information, especially regarding their children's assessment. The criteria for assessment were not clearly explained, resulting in a lack of comprehensive understanding amongst parents regarding their children's academic progress (Ragnarsdóttir & Hama, 2018). Furthermore, the parents shared concerns about their children's sense of belonging in new schools, since they could not communicate with their peers in Icelandic (Ragnarsdóttir & Hama, 2018). Children's sense of belonging was also investigated by Gunnþórsdóttir and Aradóttir (2021), who interviewed eight children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Several children encountered challenges in forging social bonds with their Icelandic peers and expressed a preference for engaging with peers from their countries of origin via online communication platforms (Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021).

Research studies summarised in this section have indicated a need for teachers to be better prepared to work in multicultural schools. To address this, it is crucial to provide appropriate support and resources to schools, to help them develop the professional competence necessary to work with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. The responsibility of preparing future teachers falls on teacher education programmes, which must take a proactive approach to ensuring that graduates are equipped with relevant theoretical and practical knowledge.

The study with Icelandic Master's students

This paper presents findings from qualitative interviews with ten Icelandic Master's students, who shared their perspectives on multicultural education in Iceland. The data derive from a comparative research project entitled *Multicultural Education: A Utopia or a Functional Framework for Successful Teaching Practices? (2021–2024)*, which involves student teachers from Iceland, Denmark and Norway, and aims to explore and compare their perspectives on multicultural education, and its advantages and limitations.

In Iceland, the data were collected at two universities. According to the selection criteria, the participants had to be enrolled in a teacher education programme, had completed most courses included in the programme, as well as the on-site training, and planned to graduate within one year from the time of the study. The researcher contacted teacher educators at the participating universities, who assisted with the recruitment. The teacher educators sent emails with invitation letters to the potential

participants. Ten students showed an interest and agreed to participate in the study. The average age of the participants was 39 years. They had different specialisations within the programme: teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), primary education, foreign language teaching and inclusive special education. In addition to the on-site training, all participants had various work experience from compulsory schools in Iceland, ranging from a couple of years to over a decade. Their motivations for pursuing education also varied. Some participants aimed primarily at obtaining a teacher's licence, while others, particularly those with extensive work experience, sought to enhance their professional skills to better meet the needs of their pupils. The participants' prior experience in the field is considered a strength of the current study. This is because they were able to draw parallels between their theoretical knowledge and practical experience, enabling them to reflect on the extent to which different theories were applicable in the context of their workplaces. Participant information, including their specialisations within the programme and work experiences, is presented in [Table 1](#).

Prior to the interviews, the participants received a detailed information sheet and a consent form in Icelandic. By signing the consent form, the participants confirmed that they understood the information about the project and their involvement, and agreed to be audio recorded during the interviews. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research – Sikt assessed this project no 837,482 and concluded that the processing of personal data is in accordance with the data protection legislation. The participants' personal information and contact details have never been shared with third parties. Throughout the project, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the participants.

The interviews were conducted in Icelandic, and their average length was 48 minutes. They were transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas.ti analytical software. A complete coding approach with researcher-derived codes was applied to identify the patterns in the interviews. Data-derived codes were subsequently added during the coding process to cover the topics that were not included in the interview guide and occurred naturally during the interviews. Later, the data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2013). The patterns were

Table 1. Participant information.

University	Pseudonym	Specialisation within the programme	Work experience
A	Íris	Primary education	1–5 years in compulsory education in Iceland
A	Ísbjörg	Primary education	10–15 years in compulsory education in Iceland
B	Ída	Teaching young children (grades 1 to 4)	1–5 years in compulsory education in Iceland
B	Ísveig	Teaching young children (grades 1 to 4)	1–5 years in preschool and compulsory education in Iceland
B	Íshildur	Teaching young children (grades 1 to 4)	1–5 years in compulsory education in Iceland and abroad
B	Ína	Teaching young children (grades 1 to 4)	1–5 years in preschool and compulsory education in Iceland
B	Ísak	Teaching foreign languages	1–5 years in compulsory education in Iceland and abroad
B	Ísgerður	Inclusive special education	15+ years in compulsory education in Iceland
B	Ísabella	Inclusive special education	5–10 years in compulsory education in Iceland
B	Ísadóra	Inclusive special education	15+ years in compulsory education in Iceland

thematically assembled into categories, which were subsequently developed into themes. Two themes have been chosen to be featured in this paper: *Educational assessment of newly arrived immigrant children* and *Teaching practices in culturally pluralistic learning environments*. The following section presents the findings related to these themes. The quotations from the interviews were translated from Icelandic by the researcher, who aimed to maintain the accuracy and essence of the original text as far as possible. An external translator was engaged to verify the translated content as an additional quality control measure, ensuring that the translations were aligned with the source text. The original Icelandic quotations are available upon request.

Reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren

The findings section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection, entitled *Educational assessment of newly arrived schoolchildren*, presents the participants' descriptions of and reflections on various assessment approaches, including pre-instructional, formative and summative methods. Additionally, it highlights cooperation with parents concerning their children's assessment. The second section, entitled *Teaching practices in culturally pluralistic learning environments*, explores the teaching practices observed or applied by the participants during the on-site training or while working in compulsory schools. This section focuses on practices used in classrooms with newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren.

During the interviews, the participants revealed that the topic of the reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren was rarely discussed in the courses included in their teacher education programme. Hence, their reflections were mainly based on experience from the on-site training and working experience from compulsory schools. However, their field experience was not holistic, and they learned about the reception strategies mainly by observing or participating in them. Overall, the participants had limited knowledge of local reception plans and language policies. They were aware of their existence but could not comment on the content and draw parallels between the policies and practices.

Educational assessment of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren

While reflecting on the reception of newly arrived immigrant children, all study participants raised the issue of educational assessment. Drawing on their prior experience in compulsory schools, they emphasised the significance of conducting pre-instructional assessments to determine newly arrived pupils' knowledge, experience and skills.

One case stood out in particular, since it indicated why good communication with parents about their children's educational assessment is crucial. Ísgerður is a student teacher who, prior to enrolling in the Master's programme, had many years of experience from working in compulsory education in Iceland. She told a story about a newly arrived pre-teen child. The child's mother tongue was non-Germanic, and they had no knowledge of Icelandic and minimal knowledge of English. According to Ísgerður, the pre-instructional assessment was performed by a special education teacher who worked closely with the Icelandic language

teacher, Ísgerður, and the child's parents. Following the assessment, the teachers decided to provide the child with learning materials designed for the youngest grades. However, the child disagreed and was willing to use the same materials as the rest of their peers. Ísgerður had regular meetings with the parents, and she felt that they were satisfied with the pre-instructional assessment and the school personnel's effort to accommodate the child's needs.

There was a pupil, and of course, [they] didn't speak any Icelandic and didn't understand anything. What did we do? As expected, [they] got an appointment with a special education teacher. And they met regularly, every day to begin with [...] The class showed [the pupil] a warm reception. But we had virtually no material. [They] couldn't read Icelandic, and [they were] just kind of imitating the others. Then we naturally started teaching [them] letters. [They] didn't really know the Icelandic alphabet. [...] We applied special assessment based on [their] abilities. And [they were] always so diligent but [they] didn't necessarily always speak correctly and perhaps never attained proficient reading abilities. (Ísgerður)

Further, Ísgerður reflected on the formative assessment of the child's academic development. Communication with parents continued to be productive, and they expressed satisfaction with the child's academic progress. In the interview, Ísgerður emphasised several times that the child was assessed using special criteria. This decision was motivated by the child's lower level of proficiency in Icelandic. However, Ísgerður was unable to elaborate on the rationale for selecting the criteria for special assessment, as she could not confirm whether they were derived from research-based evidence, theoretical frameworks, or policy guidelines.

Looking back at this case, Ísgerður admitted that despite good overall communication with the parents, there was a lack of clarity in the information regarding their child's assessment. Specifically, it turned out that the parents were under the impression that the child was assessed using the same set of criteria as their peers. This misinterpretation resulted in a number of issues towards the end of compulsory schooling, when a summative assessment was applied. In Iceland, the grades attained on the completion of compulsory education are a significant determinant of the future prospects of young people, given the competitive nature of the admissions process for highly rated upper secondary schools. As such, these grades can substantially impact the opportunities available to young people in terms of further education and career pathways.

We just wanted to support [the pupil] in order to enable [them] to progress to upper secondary school and realised, so to speak, where the shoe pinched. It was Icelandic, of course. Like in math – [they] kind of followed the group if [they] understood the assignments [...] Then there was a little bit of a shock for the parents. The father pointed out to us, which he was absolutely right about, that we [teachers] had been talking about since the [X]th grade ... we always praised [the child] for how well [they were] doing. And now suddenly [the father] faced the fact that [the child] was actually far behind the others in the study material. "What have you been talking about that everything has been going well?" [said the father]. And then, we actually started to reflect on the assessment. [...] I really learned the lesson and understood very well why the father was so angry and did not fully understand this. (Ísgerður)

Ísgerður shared that the aforementioned case was a valuable lesson for herself and her colleagues regarding the significance of ensuring parents' comprehensive understanding of the assessment criteria.

Other study participants also reflected on various types of assessment. For instance, Ína, whose specialisation is teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), emphasised that assessing children's well-being might be even more significant than assessing their academic development. Furthermore, she underscored the importance of building good relationships between children and ensuring that everyone felt welcomed.

I would look primarily at well-being to begin with because it does not matter if they understand *hello* and *bye* today, or *book* or *turn off the lights*. How is the child feeling? Is the child adjusting? Is the child trying to approach the other children? Are the other children approaching? To try to figure out where the child really stands socially. (Ína)

Ísbjörg, whose specialisation is primary education, underlined that teachers need to carefully assess the personal educational needs of every child and make sure that they receive relevant knowledge. She reflected specifically on the relevance of teaching Icelandic to all newly arrived children. While the national curriculum mandates teaching Icelandic, Ísbjörg advanced an argument that this may not be wise for all pupils, given that some families may only reside in Iceland for a brief period before relocating elsewhere. Consequently, Ísbjörg took a proactive approach and made the decision to prioritise teaching English, given its practical benefits for some pupils.

But then we have also had children who stop very briefly, like Roma people. Then you think, what is the most necessary thing to teach those kids who may only be here for a month or two? [...] Should I just try to teach them English? Something that will be useful to them in other countries, rather than teaching them Icelandic, which they are not going to use. (Ísbjörg)

The common pattern that emerged from the interviews was that participants relied solely on their field experiences and observations while discussing approaches to the educational assessment of newly arrived children. According to the participants, their theoretical knowledge of assessment strategies was rudimentary. They identified the lack of focus on the reception of newly arrived children in teacher education as a major contributing factor to the shortage of this knowledge. Furthermore, the participants expressed a desire for more substantial support from teacher educators, particularly in the use of culturally relevant teaching methods that incorporate children's languages in the learning process.

Teaching practices in culturally pluralistic learning environments

Although all participants indicated that they were somewhat familiar with the ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy, their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings varied significantly. The participants who were personally interested in the topic and who specialised in inclusive special education had the most profound understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, even they indicated doubts about its feasibility, since they did not have many opportunities to utilise it during their work in compulsory education.

Íris, who specialised in primary education and had several years of working experience in compulsory schools, shared that she had only a vague understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, as it was not a focal point in her specialisation. While reflecting on teaching methods suitable for newly arrived children, she told a story about a plurilingual teenager who, prior to arriving in Iceland, had resided in several countries and learned several languages. Íris shared that she cooperated closely with her colleagues to develop teaching methods to accommodate the pupil's unique needs.

[They speak] six languages, and then [they were] learning Icelandic too. We created a card game that included word sets and numbers [...] There is not a lot of learning material at my workplace for pupils with Icelandic as a second language. We actually used easier material for the youngest level. [They were] quick to learn both with the workbooks that were at the teenage level and the workbooks in Icelandic, maybe at the youngest level, just to understand perhaps the basics. (Íris)

Similar to the case described by Ísgerður in the previous subsection, the teachers initially provided the newly arrived teenager with learning materials intended for younger Icelandic children. They focused solely on developing competency in the Icelandic language. When asked if they attempted to incorporate the pupil's diverse linguistic repertoire, Íris replied that they were only able to utilise the pupil's languages in the word games that were still primarily focused on Icelandic language learning. Additionally, Íris and her colleagues attempted to incorporate cultural elements in storytelling assignments by choosing international names to call protagonists rather than using only Icelandic names.

And when we had an assignment, and maybe it was – *Write about Jón and Gunna* or something like that. But we didn't use Icelandic names; we also had foreign names. So [they] would feel that [they were] also a part of our group. And we tried to have it like that, so [they] had something to say, so it was not just Icelandic. (Íris)

Íris also underscored the importance of a collaborative effort amongst multiple stakeholders to effectively meet the needs of newly arrived immigrant pupils. Considering the case described by Íris, the pupil was a teenager who would soon need to transition into upper secondary education. Therefore, it was necessary for compulsory school teachers to communicate with upper secondary school teachers and the municipality to ensure that the child had the opportunity to continue their education.

In their reflections on culturally relevant pedagogy, most participants primarily focused on content integration, specifically the benefits of introducing stories from children's countries of origin. All participants revealed that translation software on mobile phones was frequently used to communicate with newly arrived children. They emphasised the utility of this approach, particularly in STEM subjects, as it provided them with means of clarifying assignments for pupils. Some participants took the initiative to get acquainted with pupils' languages. Ísveig, whose specialisation is teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), revealed that even a few words could make a big difference.

[They were] naturally insecure and cried a lot. So, I tried my best to say different words in [their] mother tongue, like *outdoor clothing*, you know. Then [they] understood a bit – “yes, okay” – “okay, here”. Then I had a good relationship with [their] parents and shared everything and took care of [the child] socially. It went just fine, and then a year later, [the child] just started speaking very good Icelandic. (Ísveig)

During the on-site training, the study participants were either assigned a school or permitted to continue working in the schools where they held part-time or full-time employment, while pursuing their university studies. Ísabella, whose specialisation is inclusive special education, got a chance to complete on-site training at an international division of a compulsory school which strongly emphasises cultural diversity. The international division was established to support children from diverse cultural backgrounds, especially newly arrived immigrants. Although the emphasis was mainly on teaching Icelandic as a second language, the teachers worked on improving pupils’ sense of belonging and well-being. The teachers also shared power with pupils by allowing them to make decisions about classroom decorations and choosing reading materials. Furthermore, Ísabella revealed that the personnel of the international division repeatedly emphasised that all languages were welcome in their classroom, and children could freely decide which language to use in communication with peers.

It was so valuable and life-changing to be able to participate in this project [the international division] and to be allowed to be there. Over there, I felt that I finally understood what this [multicultural education] was all about. What you see when you enter – there are all the flags you can think of and the names of languages, and there is room for everyone. The cultures of the countries they come from are visible. (Ísabella)

Ísabella shared that the international division’s personnel worked consistently on creating their own teaching and learning materials, which included bilingual picture books and word lists. This work required close cooperation with the parents, since they assisted teachers with translations into the children’s mother tongues. Ísabella observed that children appeared to be highly engaged in all activities, suggesting that they were enjoying the learning environment. For Ísabella, this experience was inspiring, and she expressed a desire to incorporate similar approaches into her own teaching.

During her interview, Ída, who has a diverse cultural background and specialises in teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), shared her thoughts on creating empowering and culturally pluralistic school environments. She emphasised that while supporting pupils’ cultural diversity is crucial, this effort alone is insufficient. Ída underlined that schools ought to serve as role models by facilitating teacher diversity, for instance, by hiring teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Ída described her current workplace as an example.

The school hired me, and also one person who speaks Arabic, so he can help the pupils and explain what they don’t understand. And there is also one from France, and she speaks Spanish too. Currently, no pupils speak French in my school, but some speak Spanish. It helps a lot! The school wanted to do this to create opportunities for us and help the pupils. (Ída)

The study participants outlined a range of issues pertaining to the reception of newly arrived immigrant children. The primary challenges centred around insufficient

resources within schools, as well as a lack of theoretical and practical knowledge, both on the part of the participants themselves and their colleagues. The participants stressed the need for enhanced theoretical guidance and support from teacher education programmes, particularly in relation to cultural and linguistic pluralism within compulsory schooling. The following section examines the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and earlier research in the field. Additionally, the implications for teacher education are discussed.

Discussion of findings and implications for teacher education

The reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren is a relevant topic in Iceland and other European countries, as the youth population has become increasingly diverse due to internal and external migration (Eurostat, 2022a, 2022b). The findings from the current study indicated a pressing need for educational institutions to equip school personnel with relevant teaching and assessment practices with the unique needs of newly arrived children in mind.

Although all study participants were somewhat familiar with culturally relevant pedagogy, the analysis of the interviews revealed deficiencies in their theoretical knowledge and applicable pedagogical skills. However, there is also a need to consider a broader picture. For instance, the responsibility should not solely rest upon teacher education programmes but also extend to governing bodies and institutions responsible for creating and implementing educational policies and legislation. This holistic approach to strengthening teacher education is rooted in the tenets of critical multiculturalism, which focuses attention on the power structures that often perpetuate monocultural viewpoints and favour a colour-blind ideology rather than delving deeper to confront institutional discrimination (May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010).

Despite the reported lack of theoretical knowledge, most participants expressed cultural caring and sought to establish an atmosphere of trust in their classrooms. Assessment of newly arrived pupils was described by the participants as a significant step in the reception process, especially pre-instructional assessment, which aims at determining pupils' knowledge, experiences and skills. Despite the importance of pre-instructional assessment for newly arrived immigrant students, the study participants reported a lack of practical guidelines in teacher education for culturally responsive assessment. As a result, they had to rely on their own and their colleagues' judgement. Furthermore, the participants emphasised that they often used an individual approach to assessment, which can be beneficial. However, the effectiveness of such an approach can vary, depending on many factors, including the appropriateness of the criteria, the reliability and validity of the assessment, and the impact of cultural and linguistic biases (Brookhart & Nitko, 2019; Kirova & Hennig, 2013; Padilla & Borsato, 2008).

When it comes to cooperation with parents concerning children's assessment, previous research conducted by Ragnarsdóttir and Hama (2018) indicated that parents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of information on their children's assessments. The findings of the present study revealed a somewhat different perspective. In a case described by one of the participants, the parents initially believed that the criteria for assessment were clearly communicated. However, towards the end of compulsory

schooling, when a summative assessment was applied, they became aware that the criteria used to evaluate their child were distinct from those applied to other children. Consequently, this led to confusion amongst those parents, dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency in the information on the nature of the assessment, and increased anxiety about the child's further education opportunities. Parallels can be drawn between these findings and those from a Norwegian study by Hilt (2017), which proposed that educational requirements should better match the language skills, cultural experiences and competencies of newly arrived schoolchildren, to establish a stronger foundation for their educational development. This is important because poorly designed interventions, together with institutional barriers, can have a detrimental impact on immigrant children's access to further education in the future.

The topic of children's belonging and well-being was also discussed by some participants, who were aware of newer research that indicated challenges faced by children from diverse cultural backgrounds in feeling a sense of belonging in their school environment (e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021). These participants emphasised that assessing children's well-being might be even more critical than evaluating their academic progress. This aligns with the tenets of multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasise the importance of pupils' well-being and sense of belonging in creating empowering learning environments (Banks, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Furthermore, a recent Canadian study suggests that supporting the mental health of newly arrived children needs to go beyond developing their individual competencies (Crooks, Kubishyn, Noyes, & Kayssi, 2022). It should also consider the importance of peer-to-peer interactions. This can be achieved by implementing strategies such as mentoring and prejudice-reduction interventions to foster equality and an ethos of togetherness within the school environment (Crooks, Kubishyn, Noyes, & Kayssi, 2022).

When it comes to teaching methods described by the participants, they all evolved mainly around language teaching, specifically teaching Icelandic as a second language. Acquiring proficient Icelandic language skills is indeed of great consequence for ensuring that pupils can communicate with their peers, acquire new knowledge, and later gain access to further education. Nonetheless, supporting active plurilingualism is equally significant, but as the findings in the presented study show, this tends to be overlooked, despite its emphasis in the official document and policies, including the national curriculum and the guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in Icelandic schools. Expressing that all languages are welcome is not sufficient. The guidelines suggest numerous methods that actively support plurilingualism in schools, such as learning or playing songs in various languages, encouraging children to use their mother tongue for writing cards on Environment Day, poems for mothers on Mothers' Day, etc (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, pp. 20–24).

The findings indicated the participants' challenges when attempting to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy in their teaching practices. Although they exhibited a willingness to promote cultural pluralism, they were limited by their lack of knowledge and resources. The methods employed or observed during the training were primarily confined to content integration or visual displays of cultural pluralism, such as decorating the classroom with flags. While such

strategies are undoubtedly important, they should not be viewed as a universal solution, as they have been criticised for being simplistic and overused, and failing to address the underlying structural issues that are perpetuating education inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Overall, the Icelandic participants found integrating and working with children's cultures more challenging than embracing linguistic diversity. These findings align with previous studies, such as the one conducted by Rissanen (2021) in Finland and Sweden. The study highlighted that Finnish and Swedish school principals' diversity ideologies varied according to the type of diversity. Specifically, language diversity was more frequently addressed through multicultural perspectives, compared to religious diversity (Rissanen, 2021).

The findings of this study have important implications for teacher education programmes. As Ladson-Billings (2021) and Dixon (2021) highlighted, merely giving lectures on multicultural education and cultural pluralism is insufficient; teacher educators should aim to provide future schoolteachers with culturally relevant learning experiences in higher education institutions by incorporating the mindsets of cultural pluralism in teacher education programmes. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a stronger connection between higher education institutions and schools where students undergo on-site training, including better support to on-site supervisory teachers. This collaboration should facilitate deeper and more critical reflection on legislation and various policy documents during on-site training, moving beyond mere awareness to fostering a genuine capacity for practical implementation. In summary, the priority in teacher education must shift towards a holistic approach that encompasses the development of both theoretical and practical knowledge to support and sustain cultural and linguistic pluralism in compulsory education.

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