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Navigating the complexity of theory: Exploring Icelandic student teachers' perspectives on supporting cultural and linguistic diversity in compulsory schooling

Artëm Ingmar Benediktsson

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Holsetgata 31, 2318 Hamar, Norway

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ABSTRACT

The pupil population has become more diverse in Icelandic schools. However, there remains a need for teachers to be better prepared to work in this changing context. Drawing on critical multiculturalism, multicultural education theory, and tenets of culturally responsive teaching, this paper explores student teachers' perspectives on various methods which support cultural and linguistic diversity, challenge prejudice, and promote cooperation with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. The findings indicate that the student teachers value culturally responsive teaching methods and have been able to utilise them to some extent in practice. However, despite the preparation received from their teacher education programmes, their understandings of the theoretical constructs are inconsistent and influenced by personal interests and specialisation within the programme.

1. Introduction

The cultural and linguistic composition of the pupil body in Icelandic compulsory schools reflects the cultural diversity of Iceland, which is currently home to more than 52,000 first-generation immigrants, who make up approximately 15% of the Icelandic population (Statistics Iceland, 2022a, b). Although diversity brings various opportunities to Icelandic schools, previous studies reveal that school personnel overall feel underprepared to work with children from diverse cultural backgrounds and rarely utilise teaching methods designed with pupils' cultures and languages in mind (e.g., Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017; Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022). Hence, teacher education programmes must provide a sufficient knowledge base and prepare future teachers to work in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, which are an everyday reality in Iceland. For the purposes of this study, the term *diverse cultural background* refers to first-generation immigrants and Icelandic-born individuals whose parents were born in a country other than Iceland or have a mother tongue other than Icelandic.

This paper reports on the findings obtained from conducting qualitative individual interviews with ten Icelandic Master's students who have completed the on-site schoolteacher training and have relevant work experience from compulsory schools in Iceland. During the interviews, the participants got an opportunity to reflect on the theoretical and practical knowledge that they received and discuss the place of various subjects in the programme, including multicultural education. The paper aims to answer the following research questions:

E-mail address: artem.benediktsson@inn.no.

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- How do the participants perceive culturally responsive teaching?
- What are their perceptions and experiences of prejudice reduction interventions?
- How do they experience cooperation with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds?

The study provides important insights into the future teachers' understanding of methods to support cultural and linguistic diversity in compulsory schools in Iceland. It allows for discussion of implications for higher education institutions and teacher educators, who can identify good practices, recognise the gaps, and adjust teacher education programme based on the students' experiences. Furthermore, the findings are beneficial to school personnel, who can make informed decisions about teaching methods and interventions that are likely to contribute to building empowering learning environments in multicultural schools.

2. Icelandic context

Compulsory education in Iceland is structured as a unified system of primary and lower secondary education. According to the Education Act ([Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008](#)), all children within the age range of 6 to 16 years old are required to attend school and receive a basic education that covers a wide range of subjects, including Icelandic, English, Danish (or another Scandinavian language), mathematics, social studies, sports, and more. The Education Act ([Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008](#)) strongly emphasises the promotion of equality, inclusion, equal opportunities, and access to education for all children regardless of cultural, religious, socioeconomic, or any other status.

In order to ensure that all children receive a quality education that meets national standards, Icelandic compulsory schools are required to follow the national curriculum guide [*ís. aðalnámskrá*] ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013](#)). The curriculum guide emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to education based on six fundamental pillars: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013](#)). Despite the positive objectives in the governing documents and the emphasis on creating equitable learning environments, the outcomes of the PISA study strongly indicate that the reading comprehension of children who have Icelandic as a second language is worse than their peers and is deteriorating ([Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2018](#)). According to [Statistics Iceland \(2023\)](#), in 2022, there were 6570 children with a mother tongue other than Icelandic in compulsory schools in Iceland, who made up 13.9% of the pupil body. The top five largest groups by mother tongue are Polish, English, Arabic, Spanish and Filipino, with Polish being by far the largest group ([Statistics Iceland, 2022b](#)).

In 2021, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture added several subchapters to the national curriculum guide, with the aim of ensuring better education for plurilingual children in Iceland. The newest subchapters acknowledge the value of children's languages, encourage teachers to get acquainted with pupils' cultures and languages, and use them in teaching ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021](#)). In addition to the curriculum guide, the ministry published guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools and afterschool programs ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020](#)). The guidelines define the key terms, such as plurilingualism [*ís. fjöltyngi*], as a general language proficiency regardless of the level of skills and points out that most children in Iceland are plurilingual to some extent ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020](#)). The guidelines consistently use the term mother tongue [*ís. móðurmál*] to describe children's heritage languages, also called home languages and languages of origin. Great emphasis is attached to developing active plurilingualism, which includes support for the development of both the school language (Icelandic) and children's mother tongues to achieve positive learning outcomes ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020](#)).

Teacher education in Iceland is regulated by several legal acts, primarily by the Teacher Education Act, formally known as 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](#)), and the Higher Education Act ([Lög um háskóla nr. 63/2006](#)). The Teacher Education Act underscores the importance of teachers possessing the ability to create positive learning environments based on democracy, respect, and equality. To attain professional teacher status in Iceland, a candidate must successfully complete a teacher education programme accredited by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri offer a variety of teacher education programmes to prepare teachers to work at all school levels – preschool, compulsory and upper secondary. Reykjavík University offers sports teacher education programme, and the Iceland University of the Arts offers arts teacher education programme. All teacher education programmes are highly structured and mainly consist of mandatory courses to develop a teacher's fundamental expertise. Multicultural and multilingual perspectives are occasionally included as a part of mandatory courses or as free elective courses within the programmes (e.g., see online course catalogues of the University of Iceland or the University of Akureyri).

3. Theoretical framework and international perspectives on multicultural education

Multicultural education theory, as described by [Banks \(2016\)](#), serves as a point of departure for the theoretical framework of this study. According to [Banks \(2016\)](#), multicultural education tradition endeavours to eliminate discriminatory discourses from educational institutions by incorporating culturally relevant content, promoting critical thinking and knowledge construction, and applying teaching methods that acknowledge the diverse learning styles, languages, and cultural backgrounds of pupils.

Although the term multicultural education is often used interchangeably with intercultural education by both theorists and researchers (e.g., [Gorski, 2006](#); [Hill, 2007](#); [Rego & Nieto, 2000](#)), there is an extensive body of literature discussing potential conceptual differences between these terms (e.g., [Grant & Portera, 2011](#); [Holm & Zilliacus, 2009](#)). However, [Holm and Zilliacus \(2009\)](#) argue that

the differences are often unclear, highly context-dependant and in many cases, the researchers refer to the same concept whilst using these terms. The differences in use are, therefore, mainly geographical. For example, multicultural education is a commonly used term in Australia, Finland and Great Britain, while in Netherlands and Sweden, researchers prefer the term intercultural education (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009). In the Icelandic context, the term multicultural education [ís. fjölmennningarleg menntun] is normally used (e.g., Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017; Tran & Lefever, 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching is conceptualised by Gay (2000) as an approach to creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment where every pupil's culture, experiences, and languages are respected and integrated within the learning process. The teaching process is considered to be a knowledge exchange between pupils and teachers (Gay, 2000). Acquiring a knowledge base about cultural diversity in education and developing multicultural competence are seen as crucial steps for teachers to become culturally responsive (Gay, 2000). The concept of multicultural competence is complex and involves confronting one's own cultural biases, recognising the diversity of cultural practices found in various societies, and reflecting on how one's own beliefs and behaviours might influence communication with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bennett, 2001).

For teachers to establish welcoming school environments, they need to be committed to humanising practices, which necessitates being thoughtful and inclusive of multiple stakeholders' voices, including parents. Building meaningful connections with parents and other family members can help teachers develop multicultural competence and understand children's cultural backgrounds (Bennett, 2001; Gay, 2000). Previous research has suggested that successful collaboration with parents is an essential aspect of a holistic teaching approach in culturally diverse schools, as parents from diverse cultural backgrounds may often feel compelled to remain silent, accept teachers and school leaderships' actions and avoid openly criticising existing discriminatory discourses (Björk et al., 2019; Matthiesen, 2015).

Although the ideas of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching are well known in the Western world, the practitioners who claim to adopt them have been criticised for trivialising the theoretical constructs and viewing education as a neutral process by ignoring the political nature of schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2021; May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). Hence, critical multiculturalism emerged as a response to liberal manifestations of multicultural education, which have been overused by practitioners (May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). The ideas of critical multiculturalism challenge dominant cultural narratives and structural discrimination while recognising the diversity, complexity, and dynamics of cultures (May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). Furthermore, Schachner et al. (2016) point out that some schools incline towards the assimilation of pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds into the mainstream culture. Instead of simple assimilation, schools are expected to embrace cultural pluralism that views cultural experiences as a valuable resource and prerequisite for a successful learning process (Schachner et al., 2016). Hence, Paris (2021) suggested re-evaluating the concept of culturally responsive teaching to reflect better the theoretical constructs in which it is grounded. As a solution, Paris (2021) proposed a notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy that focuses on openly rejecting false beliefs and biased practices, and actively challenging policies that reinforce ideologies of superiority, extraction, and dispossession.

Culturally responsive teaching has also been criticised by practitioners. Young (2010) conducted a study with a group of administrators and teachers to investigate the theory's feasibility in classroom practice. The findings indicated the participants' preferences for content integration, which has been criticised for being superficial (Young, 2010). Moreover, the teachers found it difficult and, in some cases, even impossible to implement the theory in practice due to limited time and pressure to cover the material included in the standardised curriculum (Young, 2010). These findings correspond to the conclusions made by Morrison et al. (2008), who highlighted that to fully implement the dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, teachers need smaller pupil loads and more time to collaborate with colleagues and build relationships with families.

Evidently, the focus is shifting away from easy solutions, such as content integration, towards holistic approaches that challenge discrimination within educational institutions (Grapin et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2021). Prejudice reduction is described by Banks (2009) as a critical component of multicultural education and an active process of engaging pupils in learning about diversity and developing positive attitudes towards people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Prejudice reduction interventions provide privileged and minoritised pupils with opportunities to understand intergroup dynamics, reflect on issues of power and equity, and develop skills in cross-cultural interaction to ensure their full participation in a globalised society (Grapin et al., 2019). However, these interventions should be carefully planned and promote cultural pluralism rather than leaning towards colour-blind ideology, which ignores cultural differences, does not ensure equitable treatment, and may contribute to maintaining discriminatory discourses (Dovidio et al., 2015; Jones & Rutland, 2018). Previous studies suggest various meaningful prejudice reduction interventions, including offering safe spaces for youths to share experiences about discrimination, hateful speech, and harassment, and encouraging discussions about how these affect their and their peers' lives (Losinski et al., 2019; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). A study by Miklikowska et al. (2019) indicated that schools should also consider offering prejudice reduction interventions for parents, since addressing parental biases might yield greater benefits in the long run. Furthermore, it is equally important for teachers to engage in interventions to challenge their own prejudices. Emdin et al. (2021) encourage teachers to immerse themselves in the communities their pupils live in and participate in community events to convey the message that their culture has value.

Educating schoolteachers and equipping them with the necessary knowledge to successfully create empowering school environments seems to be a focal point in current discussions about multicultural education. Teachers aiming to establish a positive classroom climate for diversity often face a discrepancy between their actual experiences and their desired outcomes (Skrefsrud, 2022). Despite issues of cultural diversity being addressed in educational policies, there is a lack of specific guidelines and appropriate training for school leaders and teachers to navigate through the theoretical concepts and find a way to implement them (Hummelstedt-Djedou et al., 2018; Skrefsrud, 2022). Hence, higher educational institutions are expected to take the initiative to integrate the ideas of multicultural education across teacher education programmes by engaging student teachers in self-reflection, developing their multicultural competences, and encouraging them to identify and challenge discriminatory discourses (Carter Andrews, 2021;

Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Numerous studies have been conducted in Iceland about cultural diversity in preschools, compulsory, and upper secondary schools. Various stakeholders' opinions and experiences have been investigated, including pupils, parents, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. The findings from the most recent and relevant studies are summarised in the following section.

4. Recent research on cultural diversity in Icelandic schools

Cultural diversity is a relatively new phenomenon in compulsory schools in Iceland. According to Statistics Iceland (2022b, 2022c), in the year 1997, there were 377 children (0.9%) with a mother tongue other than Icelandic in compulsory education. In 2022, that number had risen to 6570 children (13.9%) (Statistics Iceland, 2023). This change in the pupils' demographic resulted in a change of policies and evoked researchers' interest in multicultural education. A recent study by Jónsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2022) investigated teaching methods used by teachers when working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their findings suggest that despite Iceland's official policies advocating for teaching practices with cultural diversity in mind, there is a significant gap between policy and reality, since the observed teaching practices showed little evidence of culturally responsive teaching (Jónsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2022).

Linguistic diversity was studied by Emilsson Peskova (2021), who found that plurilingual children draw on their linguistic repertoires to navigate their social and educational settings with the support of motivated parents and heritage language teachers. The study highlighted the importance of recognising and supporting children's plurilingualism and utilising their whole linguistic repertoire in educational and social settings. Moreover, it emphasised the shared responsibility of parents and teachers in maintaining and developing children's linguistic repertoires (Emilsson Peskova, 2021).

Belonging seems to be a topic of interest in recent studies on cultural diversity in preschools and compulsory schools in Iceland. Egilsson et al. (2021) analysed parental experiences of belonging, and argued that parents from culturally diverse backgrounds were either unable to invest their time and effort in building relationships with the preschool community or felt marginalised from engaging in any activities. These findings align with the conclusions made by Einarsdóttir and Rúnarsdóttir (2022), who revealed that parents from culturally diverse backgrounds were less confident in expressing their opinions and views despite being concerned for their children's belonging in the learning environments. Compulsory schoolteachers' points of view were elicited in the study by Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2017), who underlined that there are issues in cooperation between families and schools, and teachers generally find communication more difficult when both parents are of non-Icelandic origin.

When it comes to children's views on their sense of belonging, Gunnþórsdóttir and Aradóttir (2021) carried out research with six- to ten-graders from diverse cultural backgrounds in a compulsory school in the Icelandic countryside. Their participants were quite positive towards their school and communicated well with their teachers. However, some of them found it difficult to build connections with their Icelandic peers and instead sought out friendship in their countries of origin entirely through electronic communication (Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021). Moreover, the participants' social participation in extracurricular activities was low, and most of them went home alone after school (Gunnþórsdóttir & Aradóttir, 2021). Similar findings were reported by Tran and Lefever (2018), who interviewed twenty youths from diverse cultural backgrounds in their final year of compulsory schooling. The analysis of the interviews indicated that although half of the participants had experienced minor racial or ethnic teasing, most felt socially accepted and optimistic about their future (Tran & Lefever, 2018). Despite youths' positive attitudes, the study showed evidence of prejudice and subtle racism that can contribute to feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Tran & Lefever, 2018).

The themes of subtle racism and ethnic teasing are also elevated in Halldórsdóttir's (2016) paper on micro-aggressions, which often manifest in unconscious and unintentional actions or verbal comments and can harm an individual's learning process and overall well-being. The researcher emphasised that many educational stakeholders consider themselves free from prejudice which leads to active refusal of the existence of injustice and structural discrimination in schools (Halldórsdóttir, 2016). Such attitudes can have a negative impact on the sense of belonging of minority groups. Hence, in order to build empowering learning environments in Icelandic schools, teachers and school leaders should actively challenge discriminatory discourses, such as micro-aggressions, starting by engaging in self-reflections (Halldórsdóttir, 2016). However, this knowledge is not something that every teacher naturally possesses. Therefore, it raises a question about the quality of teacher education and whether it equips teachers with the necessary knowledge to work in multicultural schools in Iceland. This paper addresses this question explicitly, since its goal is to analyse future teachers' reflections on methods to support cultural and linguistic diversity, based on the knowledge they received during their university studies and their experience from on-site training and previous work in compulsory schools.

5. The study at two universities in Iceland

This paper presents the findings from interviews with Icelandic Master's students. The data were collected as a part of a large comparative qualitative project entitled *Multicultural Education: A Utopia or a Functional Framework for Successful Teaching Practices?* The project is conducted in nine different universities and university colleges in Iceland, Denmark, and Norway.

In Iceland, the participants were ten Master's students who were, at the time of the study, enrolled in a teacher education programme specifically designed to prepare them for their careers as professional teachers. The average age of the participants was 39 years old. The relatively high average age of the participants can be explained by the selection criteria, which aimed at recruiting participants with relevant work experience with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Prior to enrolling in Master's studies, all participants had work experience from compulsory schools in Iceland varying from several years to over a decade. The work experience provided the participants with valuable insights into the Icelandic school environment and the process of working with diverse

groups of children.

Within the teacher education programme, the participants had different specialisations: teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), primary education, foreign language teaching, and inclusive special education. They were in the second year of their Master’s studies and had completed the on-site schoolteacher training. At the time of the study, all participants indicated their desire to continue their careers in Iceland in compulsory education.

The participants were informed about the aims of the project and their involvement. They received an information sheet and a consent form prior to the interviews and were encouraged to ask questions about their participation. The participants gave written consent to participate and be audio recorded. The privacy considerations of the study are in line with the regulations specified in the Icelandic Personal Information Protection Act (Lög um persónuvernd og vinnslu persónuupplýsinga nr. 90/2018). Pseudonyms have been exclusively used to refer to the participants throughout the project.

The paper maintains professional and ethical standards of qualitative research with human participants by including only the necessary and relevant background information. In Sections 6–8, information about the participants’ previous work experience and specialisations within the teacher education programme is revealed. This is to give the readers an idea of the participants’ educational background and expertise that may have influenced the findings. However, to protect the participants’ identities, other background

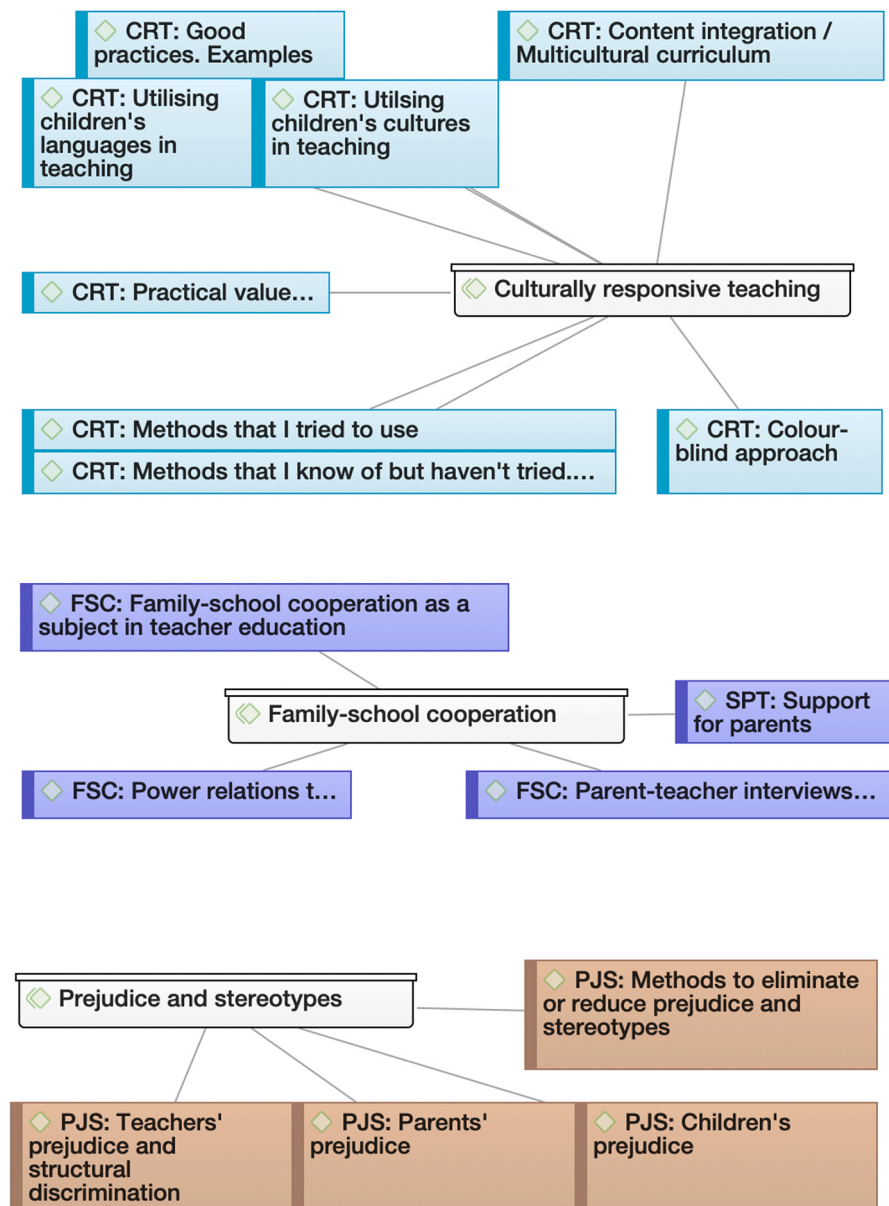


Fig. 1. Code networks illustrating three themes presented in the findings.

information that may be personally identifiable or irrelevant to the study is omitted (such as the exact age, civil status, or socio-economic status). Iceland has a relatively small population which makes it easier for individuals to identify each other. Unlike larger countries where there is a greater degree of anonymity, participants in Iceland are at risk of being easily identified, which could lead to unintended consequences.

Data were obtained via in-depth and semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The average length of the interviews was 48 min. The quotations presented in this article have been translated by the researcher and verified by an independent translator. The original Icelandic quotations are available upon request.

The interviews were analysed utilising a thematic analysis approach, as described by [Braun and Clarke \(2013\)](#). Atlas.ti analytical software was used to code the data. The initial codebook consisted of researcher-derived codes determined based on the study's theoretical constructs. Additional data-derived codes were added to the codebook during the coding process to include contextual and supplementary information given by the participants. Subsequently, the codes were evaluated and assembled into categories, which further developed into various themes. The codes associated with the themes were mapped into code networks that helped to visualise the findings. Three themes were chosen to be featured in this paper: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Family-School Cooperation, and Prejudice and Stereotypes. [Fig. 1](#) shows code networks that illustrate these themes.

The themes were analysed through the lens of the study's theoretical framework and previous relevant research on cultural diversity in Icelandic schools. In particular, the ideas of culturally responsive teaching ([Gay, 2000](#)), culturally sustaining pedagogy ([Paris, 2012](#)), and prejudice reduction ([Banks, 2009](#); [Grapin et al., 2019](#)) were used as a guiding light throughout the analytical process.

6. Utilising culturally responsive teaching in multicultural classrooms

During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on the theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching methods designed with cultural diversity in mind. Although all participants were familiar with the ideas of culturally responsive teaching, their understanding thereof varied greatly between being minimal to rather advanced. The data analysis revealed that various factors had a direct impact on the participants' levels of knowledge. [Fig. 2](#) illustrates these factors.

Amongst the institutional factors that have had an impact, the most significant were students' specialisations within the teacher education programme and the emphases in the on-site training. When it comes to individual factors, students' personal interest in the topic and family background seem to have the utmost influence on their level of understanding.

The students who chose specialisation in inclusive special education were required to take courses on diversity and multicultural education, which increased their theoretical knowledge of the topic. Ísgerður was one of them. During her interview, she attached great importance to acknowledging the value of children's languages and cultures.

I think multicultural education is about giving you the opportunity to utilise what you have in your backpack that you have from where you come from, including your language and your family culture. The family and its culture should have a voice within

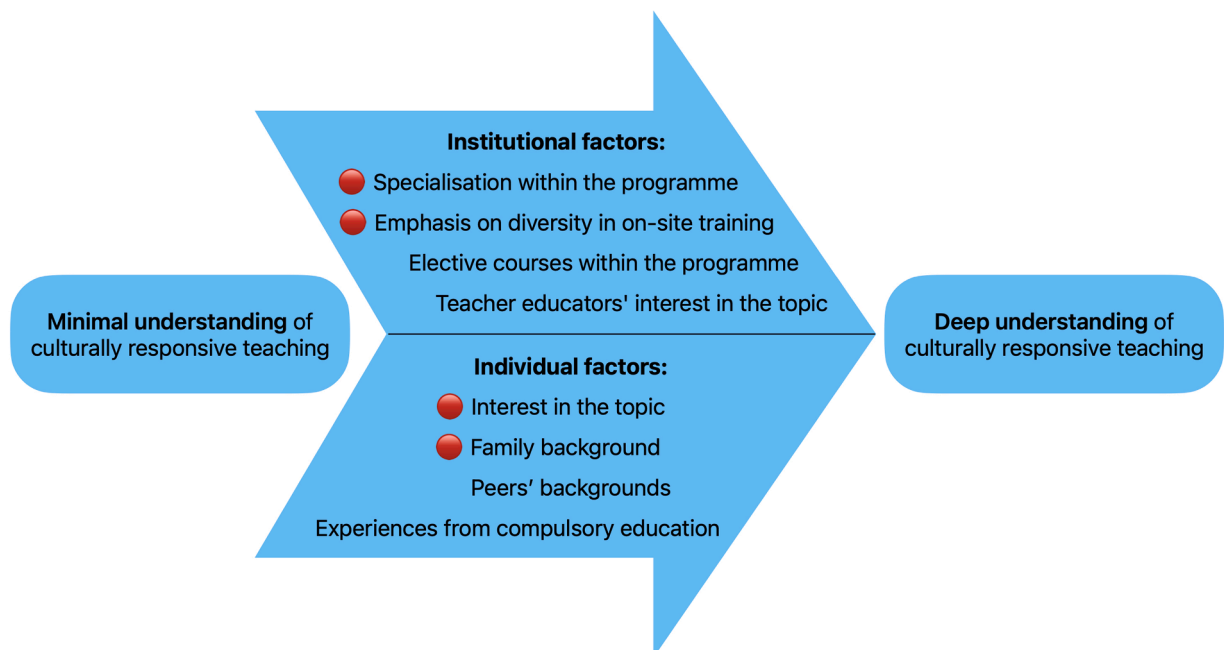


Fig. 2. Institutional and individual factors that have had an impact on students' understanding of culturally responsive teaching.

the school. But that's exactly why I think people are so afraid of it. Because I hear this: 'I don't know all languages!' How should I, as a teacher, help this student?' (Ísgerður) Quot.34:11

Prior to enrolling in the Master's programme, Ísgerður also had many years of experience working in compulsory education in Iceland. She shared that many of her colleagues have concerns about the feasibility of culturally responsive teaching. Their concerns are rooted in misinterpretations of the teaching methods. They feel that in order to integrate pupils' mother tongues into the learning process, they need to learn them first, which is obviously an impossible task. Íshildur is a student who specialises in teaching young children (grades 1 to 4). During the interview, she expressed a deep interest in multicultural education. She researched the topic herself and took some elective courses which focus on multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, Íshildur revealed that her interest in diversity is shared with her partner, who has a diverse cultural background. All these factors contributed to Íshildur's rather deep understanding of culturally responsive teaching, which allows her to think creatively about integrating pupils' languages into the learning process.

Maybe I would get all the kids in the class to go home on Friday and find one word in the language [Somali] with the help of their parents. Then they come back on Monday, and everyone would have one word, and we would discuss how it is in Somali and how it is in Icelandic. For example, doing this weekly for a few weeks. (Íshildur) Quot.31:29

Although studying children's mother tongues is neither expected from schoolteachers nor a part of their job, some participants are ready to step out of their comfort zone and make an effort to get acquainted with basic vocabulary. Ísabella's specialisation is inclusive special education, and she has completed on-site training at an international division of a compulsory school that strongly emphasises sustaining cultural diversity. She finds getting acquainted with children's languages essential to provide better support, especially for newly arrived immigrants.

I was getting acquainted with Arabic this winter just to be able to help pupils. And now Ukrainian these last few days. I'm working on creating a word list and various materials to help pupils. (Ísabella) Quot.35:7

Whilst the participants had some ideas about integrating pupils' languages, they found the question about pupils' cultures to be challenging. They shared that there had hardly ever been a discussion in teacher education about integrating pupils' cultures. Some participants observed activities such as international events or thematic weeks about various cultures during the on-site training. On the one hand, they considered these types of activities to be a good option for bringing cultural pluralism to schools. On the other hand, they realised the limitations of such events, which rather serve as entertainment and often lack depth. Besides cultural events, the participants often mentioned content integration as a method of acknowledging different cultures. This could involve selecting teaching materials focusing on the countries or regions pupils originate from. For instance, Íris, whose specialisation is primary education, had a vague understanding of the theoretical constructs underlying multicultural education. Despite this limitation, Íris proposed some form of cultural content integration into subjects like home economics and music. However, she was full of doubts about whether this approach was feasible and whether she had enough knowledge of the content to be able to incorporate it into teaching.

I think that with such a multicultural education and curriculum, I would try to take into account the composition of the group I'm with. For example, if I were teaching home economics and cooking, maybe I would cook dishes from their countries, or if I were teaching music, maybe introduce music culture from their country. You know, to consider their needs too. So, it is not just Icelandic. (Íris) Quot.27:32

Ísak is a future English language teacher. He has been working in a compulsory school for several years. He regarded content integration as a good method to welcome pupils' cultures in the classroom. However, unlike the other participants, he shared the responsibility and power of choosing the content with his pupils.

I'm not a big fan of textbooks. You may be a little spoiled in Iceland because the national curriculum is very open in Iceland. So, I'm kind of good at creating my own teaching material based on the students I have. And especially with grades 5 to 7, sometimes I allow them to influence the themes in teaching sessions. (Ísak) Quot.32:27

Of all the participants, Ína possessed the deepest knowledge of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching. During the interview, Ína shared that her life experiences influenced her career choices and triggered her interest in multicultural education. Ína's family lived in different countries, and as a child, she was exposed to cultural diversity. Currently, her family and circle of friends are multicultural, since she has a partner of a diverse cultural background. Ína's specialisation is teaching young children (grades 1 to 4). She strongly emphasised the importance of starting challenging discriminatory discourses as early as possible.

I would like to have a story that has some kind of value, a message. And make sure to have books that appeal to everyone.

Researcher: what kind of message is important?

Communication, how we receive... how we are as friends. We are in this together. For example, bullying is not okay nor prejudice. Maybe to introduce a fable about it. To find a fable that we can discuss. How was this? Was this correct? Did this one react correctly? How could we have done it differently if it were us? This is what creates discussion and thought. If this is a story of bullying or prejudice - how could we have changed this? How could we have changed the outcome? Something like that, something that can be emphasised, some discussions and thoughts. (Ína) Quot.33:34

In addition to suggesting content integration and bringing discussions to her classroom, Ína emphasises two other essential dimensions of multicultural education – knowledge construction and prejudice reduction. Involving young children in critical discussions about discrimination and how prejudice can influence their and their peers' lives is important in developing children's multicultural competence. Other participants also reflected on various approaches to prejudice reduction, and their reflections are presented in the following section.

7. Approaches to prejudice reduction

During the interviews, all participants shared that they rarely witnessed direct discriminatory behaviour in compulsory schools in Iceland. In most cases, discrimination manifested in teasing on the grounds of nationality, language, or accent. According to the participants, they did not receive formal training in conflict handling and had little knowledge of prejudice reduction intervention. Nevertheless, they shared their views and experiences from the on-site training and own career in compulsory schools.

Ída specialises in teaching young children (grades 1 to 4). She has a diverse cultural background herself and is interested in teaching Icelandic as a second language. Although she had little knowledge of approaches to prejudice reduction, she touched upon an important discussion about compulsory schools' responsibility of creating culturally pluralistic environments and demonstrating cultural caring, rather than merely talking about it and including it in written policies.

The school needs to be a role model in the way that there are not only Icelanders but also personnel from other countries and other cultures [...] And encourage heads of divisions and other teachers to listen to pupils and people of foreign origin and recognise their resources and strengths. (Ída) Quot.29:21

Although, according to the participants, direct discriminatory behaviour was a rare phenomenon in their schools, some of them observed situations when children from diverse cultural backgrounds were made fun of by their peers because of their accents or lack of ability to speak Icelandic. While reflecting on children's prejudice, Íris, who had been working in compulsory education for several years, spoke about racial teasing which she once witnessed. At that moment, instead of simply shaming those who teased, Íris decided to use this opportunity to discuss the history of racial discrimination with the class.

I initiated a discussion and showed pictures from the American Civil War. And I explained why it was. And I explained why using the n-word to call Black people is ugly. They were enslaved; they did not have freedom. How would you feel if you were just taken and put there and had no freedom and endured violence and such? [...] So, I think it is important to be flexible and if there is an incident like this happen to seize it. The syllabus can wait. (Íris) Quot.27:35

The participants admitted that schoolteachers had prejudice as well, which manifested in preconceived ideas about their pupils' knowledge and abilities solely based on their backgrounds. Similarly to discrimination amongst children, teachers' biased behaviour was seldom observed by the participants. Ísgerður tried to counteract discriminatory discourses and common preconceptions about children from diverse cultural backgrounds. For instance, she condemned the usage of the adjective mute [ís. mállaus] to describe newly arrived immigrant children who do not speak Icelandic.

Maybe you just have to stand up in your school and admit that you have prejudice and what you are going to do about it. [...] I mean, I took up the glove for the 'Polish boys who never learn anything'. Or this - 'He is mute' [ís. 'Hann er mállaus']. He is not mute! I've taken up the glove and am ready to defend my position. These are prejudice. But they [teachers] may not understand what they are saying. Or 'here we only speak Icelandic'. I have taken that conversation with teachers. Yes, okay, when we are teaching Icelandic, then let's say we speak Icelandic there. But these pupils have every right to speak and communicate in their mother tongue during the breaks or even in mathematics lessons if they are just helping each other out. [...] We think this is just something so trivial, but it is much bigger in the ears and feelings of the one who hears it. (Ísgerður) Quot.34:34

Besides challenging her colleagues' preconceived ideas, Ísgerður emphasised the importance of reflecting and working on her own prejudices. Furthermore, she defended children's right to use mother tongues in school. Most participants shared Ísgerður's point of view on languages and said they never forbid pupils to use their mother tongues to communicate with their peers. However, some participants mentioned that language diversity in schools is not always appreciated. For instance, Ísbjörg, whose specialisation is primary education, shared that she had to confront parents' prejudice towards school personnel from diverse cultural backgrounds. Parents made comments about school personnel who spoke foreign languages or made grammatical errors in Icelandic.

[It was] great personnel, really great, really hard-working. They always came to work. But then I heard from parents about how their child is supposed to learn Icelandic when there is spoken foreign language [around them]. 'They will never learn Icelandic'. And then I said, yes, if they receive language input at home and if you speak with your children, they will first and foremost learn Icelandic. They belong to the Icelandic language community, and their mother tongue is Icelandic. It doesn't matter that this staff member of a foreign origin who is teaching them arts cannot speak perfect Icelandic. That was the kind of prejudice that I felt from the parents. (Ísbjörg) Quot.28:42

Later in the interview, Ísbjörg shared that it is crucially important to work on eliminating parents' prejudice. However, she admitted that it is challenging because she was not trained to design prejudice reduction interventions involving parents. Overall, the participants considered the topic of family-school cooperation to be difficult to reflect on, particularly cooperation with culturally diverse parents, since little to no attention was given to it in the teacher education programme. Their reflections were mainly based on their experiences from the on-site training and previous work in compulsory schools.

8. Cooperation with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds

When the participants were asked to reflect on cooperation with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, they admitted that they had rudimentary theoretical knowledge thereof and that their reflections would be solely based on their experiences in the field. Ína expressed that she was disappointed in the programme for not addressing this topic properly.

What about cooperation with parents? It has become very difficult - the cooperation with parents - this is such a diverse group now! [...] As a teacher, you are dealing with so many things. I feel that I am not really prepared for many things after five years of study. I would like to have more hands-on knowledge. (Ína) Quot.33:47

Other participants shared Ína's concerns. For instance, Ísveig, whose specialisation is teaching young children (grades 1 to 4), has working experience in both preschool and compulsory education. Ísveig emphasised that family-school cooperation extends beyond simply inviting parents for an occasional interview, particularly in the case of newly arrived families. For these families, school is usually their initial point of contact with Icelandic society, and schoolteachers are a crucial source of information. Ísveig revealed that she had to assist families with opening bank accounts and accessing various social services. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach because each family requires individual assistance. Initiating the first contact and fostering an environment of trust can present a challenging endeavour. Municipal school boards provide a range of services to aid schools in developing effective practices for collaborating with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. These services are designed to support schools in their efforts to establish positive relationships with families and facilitate effective communication between the school and parents who may have unique needs or circumstances.

This last semester... A person came and introduced us to the centre of language and literacy and their website with all kinds of information [...] It was mainly to tell us that we were intermediaries between parents and society. And on their website, there was various information that parents might need. (Ísveig) Quot.30:40

Several participants took the discussion about establishing an environment of trust further and reflected on power relations between teachers and newly arrived immigrant parents. These participants underlined that parents meet many challenges while getting acquainted with the Icelandic school culture. One of them is trust issues - some parents are not used to providing constructive critique via an open dialogue with school leaders and teachers. Ísbjörg, who has years of experience in compulsory education, shared that newly arrived immigrant parents often feel shy and even scared to talk to the school's leadership.

It does not matter if it's a principal or an assistant principal. Everyone welcomes you, and you don't have to be afraid. [...] And they [parents] feel like it is a bit strange to be able to talk directly to the principal. (Ísbjörg) Quot.28:45

While reflecting on approaches to helping parents to overcome this fear of direct communication, several participants suggested that schoolteachers are responsible for taking the initiative and inviting parents to engage in an open dialogue. Ísadóra, who specialises in inclusive special education, emphasises that schoolteachers should take the first step in establishing contact.

The school needs to take the initiative to talk to parents. Don't wait for them to come because maybe they are just afraid, or don't dare to come, or don't trust themselves to do so. We should take the initiative to communicate and inform and look after them. And not just by sending emails but maybe rather by calling or meeting them. (Ísadóra) Quot.36:13

The analysis of the findings revealed that the participants were genuinely positive towards pupils and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. They were also curious about culturally responsive teaching methods and were willing to explore them further. However, at the time of the study, the participants' understandings of the theoretical constructs were notably inconsistent and heavily influenced by their individual interests in the topic. The following sections will delve into the discussion of the findings and implications thereof by drawing upon the theoretical framework and previous research on multicultural education.

9. Discussion of findings

The findings presented in Sections 6–8 indicated that all participants had some knowledge of culturally responsive teaching, and most of them tried to utilise it to some extent in practice. However, the participants doubted whether they had enough expertise to fully benefit from culturally responsive teaching, as their theoretical knowledge seemed rudimentary.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that the participants concentrated mainly on content integration as a method of acknowledging pupils' languages and cultures. This manifested in selecting teaching materials from pupils' countries and areas of origin. However, content integration has been criticised for ignoring the political nature of schooling and merely focusing on material aspects of culture (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2021). While content integration is an essential feature of culturally responsive teaching, it is not a universal solution for addressing all issues related to cultural diversity in compulsory education. Rather, culturally responsive teaching should encompass broader strategies beyond content integration. This perspective aligns with Banks' (2009) model of multicultural education, which emphasises the interconnectedness of the dimensions of multicultural education and their equal significance. Only by adopting a holistic approach can teachers contribute to establishing an empowering learning environment that meets the needs of all children. None of the participants in the study at two universities in Iceland had a fully realised idea of a holistic teaching approach grounded in the multicultural education theory and the tenets of culturally responsive teaching. Their levels of understanding of the theoretical constructs varied significantly and were influenced by institutional and individual factors (see Fig. 2). The participants who displayed a strong personal interest in the topic not only suggested content integration but also

underscored the significance of introducing discussions about discrimination in the classrooms. The inclusion of discussions has also been emphasised by previous studies, which indicate that offering safe spaces for youths to share experiences and opinions on discrimination can raise awareness of the realities of societal inequality and promote critical thinking (Losinski et al., 2019; Wyster-Hoyte et al., 2019). The Icelandic student teachers specialising in inclusive special education underlined the importance of self-reflection and self-exploration, concepts that align with Gay's (2000) framework of culturally responsive teaching. According to Gay (2000), teachers' self-reflection and self-exploration can foster a deeper understanding of the personal biases and cultural assumptions that may influence their interactions with children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The question of the feasibility of culturally responsive teaching has been addressed in prior literature by Morrison et al. (2008) and Young (2010), who concluded that teachers often found it difficult and, in some cases, impossible to implement culturally responsive teaching in practice due to limited time and pressure to cover the material included in the standardised curriculum. The Icelandic student teachers also shared their concerns that it might be too time-consuming to implement culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. However, whilst discussing the viability of the teaching methods, which encourage teachers to incorporate pupils' languages into the teaching process, some participants criticised their colleagues for rejecting these methods due to misinterpretations of relevant theoretical constructs. These colleagues asserted that they must embark on an impossible task of learning all of their pupils' languages to effectively use them in teaching, despite the fact that such a requirement was never expected of them nor suggested in theory.

Regarding culturally sustaining pedagogy, the concept suggested by Paris (2012), the participants could not recall any knowledge thereof, and wondered if it has ever been explicitly mentioned in any of the courses within the programme. Despite the absence of theoretical knowledge, some participants indicated an understanding of various individual features of culturally sustaining pedagogy. For instance, open rejection of false beliefs and biased practices were brought to discussion by one participant who condemned the usage of the adjective *mute* [ís. *mállaus*] to describe newly arrived immigrants. Furthermore, several participants reflected on the valuable role of families in shaping the cultural identities of children, which is also highlighted in the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy. It is important to underline, though, that none of the participants attempted to openly challenge educational policies. This can be explained by the fact that there is a strong foundation for inclusive indication in educational policies and legislation in Iceland. This is especially reflected in recent changes in the Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools, which aimed at ensuring better education for plurilingual children and in the guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, 2021). However, previous research suggests that educational policies alone are not enough to create empowering and culturally pluralistic environments; school leaders and teachers require appropriate theoretical and practical knowledge to be able to implement them (Hummelstedt-Djedou et al., 2018; Skrefsrud, 2022).

Prejudice and discrimination are explicitly addressed in various official documents regulating compulsory education in Iceland, including the Education Act and the national curriculum guide (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013). These documents aim at rooting out prejudice from educational institutions to provide everyone with equal opportunities regardless of background. Despite positive goals in the policies, the analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants did not receive formal training in conflict handling and had little knowledge of prejudice reduction interventions. The on-site training and previous work experience compensated for the participants' knowledge gaps, allowing them to reflect on prejudice reduction interventions in compulsory schools. In line with the findings on culturally responsive teaching, the participants mentioned content integration, self-reflections, and dialogues with colleagues as methods of challenging prejudice. An interesting idea was suggested by a participant who called on compulsory schools to increase school personnel diversity and employ teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds. It is important to underline that overall, the participants rarely witnessed direct discriminatory behaviour in compulsory schools. However, they would appreciate the knowledge of the methods of addressing teasing on the grounds of nationality, language, or accent. These findings correlate with Halldórsdóttir's (2016) work on micro-aggressions in Icelandic society, who argues for appropriate school personnel training to equip them with the knowledge and skills to counteract discrimination, helping to build welcoming and empowering learning environments.

Although the participants reported that the topic of cooperation with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds was slightly touched upon in the teacher education programme, it was far from sufficient to prepare them for everyday reality in compulsory schools. Previous studies in Iceland suggested that parents from diverse cultural backgrounds felt marginalised from engaging in school activities and were less confident in expressing their opinions and views (Egilsson et al., 2021; Einarsdóttir & Rúnarsdóttir, 2022). This has also been reported by Matthiesen (2015), who studied Somali diaspora mothers' struggle to be recognised by teachers in Danish public schools as equitable partners in their children's education. The findings from the current study aligned with the results in previous research. The participants shared that parents were reluctant to initiate contact and involve in constructive dialogue with school leadership and teachers. This indicates the need for interventions to establish trust between the school and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The participants emphasised the importance of actively inviting parents to open dialogue and encouraging criticism. However, as previously mentioned, their rudimentary theoretical knowledge often stood in the way of creating meaningful connections with parents. According to the participants, the municipalities provide some support through short courses and occasional assistance to aid school personnel in working with diverse families. For instance, the centre of language and literacy provides counselling on effective practices for collaborating with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, these municipal services have little capacity and are only able to provide limited assistance. Hence, better long-term support is needed to develop school personnel's multicultural competence to build and sustain welcoming school environments where every parent feels they belong and are valued.

10. Conclusion and implications for teacher education

This paper explored Icelandic student teachers' perspectives on supporting cultural and linguistic diversity in compulsory schools in Iceland. The analysis of the findings indicated various gaps in teacher education programmes in Iceland. One is insufficient attention to cultural and linguistic diversity in schools and methods for supporting and maintaining this diversity.

In recent publications by Ladson-Billings (2021) and Dixson (2021), the authors emphasise the importance of holistic approaches to preparing future teachers to work in culturally diverse classrooms. It is not enough to be familiar with teaching methods designed with diversity in mind; the teachers need to be appropriately trained on how to implement them in the classrooms (Dixson, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). For instance, Dixson (2021) argues that the education accountability movement has led educational stakeholders to believe that everything in teaching and learning must be measurable and quantifiable. This goes against culturally responsive pedagogy's dynamic and complex nature, which cannot be monitored and assessed using a rubric (Dixson, 2021). As a result, educational stakeholders become *hearers*, but not *doers* of the teaching methods grounded in the multicultural education theory (Dixson, 2021). The findings from the current study reflect Dixson's arguments in the way that although Icelandic student teachers were familiar with the topics of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching, their theoretical and practical knowledge was inconsistent and hindered them from becoming active doers of these teaching methods. Additionally, the participants found it difficult to navigate the complexity of the theoretical constructs underlying culturally responsive teaching and criticised teacher education for not addressing this topic properly.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, it is evident that cultural and linguistic diversity in schools is still treated as an additional subject in most teacher education programmes, except for the specialisation of inclusive special education, where cultural diversity is given more attention. This strategy of assigning cultural and linguistic diversity a limited space within teacher education has been criticised (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Due to limited space in the programme, teacher educators tend to embark on a superficial journey through the tenets of multicultural education, which may even result in student teachers' confusion (Dixson, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Instead, the tenets of multicultural education should be incorporated into teacher education as a mindset in all subjects to provide students with deep theoretical knowledge that they can put into practice in their future careers. Furthermore, teacher educators need to utilise culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and not just give lectures on it. This would establish a better link between theory and practice, enabling student teachers to experience an empowering learning environment and carry this knowledge with them to compulsory schools, where they will be able to create and sustain such environments.

About the author

Artëm Ingmar Benediktsson holds a PhD in Educational Sciences from the University of Iceland. He is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Faculty of Teacher Education and Pedagogy at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. His current research focuses on exploring student teachers' perceptions of multicultural education, culturally responsive/sustaining teaching, and assessment methods in Denmark, Iceland, and Norway. He is also a member of a research group that studies language policies and practices of diverse immigrant families in Iceland and their educational implications.

Data statement

The original Icelandic quotations from the interviews are available upon request. If interested, please contact the author.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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