

## Inclusive Education in Iceland, an analysis by Hildur Kristjana Onnudottir

### Introduction

The policy of inclusive education in its current form entered into law in 2008. The policy has a very good legal basis both in local regulations, national laws and international obligations. The small population made the creation of a segregated special needs school system a practical impossibility and the right of children to be educated within their community was ensured in the 1970s. When the policy of inclusive education was introduced in 2008 it encountered little resistance or concern, many believed that implementation would be simple. Yet, in a governmental report in 2014 it was revealed that only 32% of parents and 44% of teachers agreed that the policy of inclusive education had improved the education system. An interview with a Basic Education School teacher in Iceland added context to the statistics and provided a vital insight into what teachers feel that they need for inclusive education to be successful. Inclusive education has been criticised for being a mere ideology, with Basic Education Schools in particular being criticised for failing its obligations.

### The Icelandic Educational system

Mandatory education is between the ages of 6 to 16 and is provided by Basic Education Schools who are governed by local authorities and follow a national curriculum. There is very little involvement by the private or non-profit sector. While special schools are rare, all mainstream schools have a special needs department. The special needs departments have been a source of controversy, with some regarding them as being consistent with inclusive education as they are within mainstream schools, while others regard them as segregating.

The number of students identified as needing additional support increased by 55% between 2005 and 2012. By 2012, 63% of students who received additional learning support had a formal diagnosis of specific learning difficulties, psychological, behavioural or developmental disorders.<sup>1</sup> 37% of students who required additional learning support received that support within mainstream classes, 45% received support both within and outside mainstream classes. 17% were educated exclusively outside of mainstream classes in a special needs department. A teacher is classified as a special needs education teacher if he/she spends 50% or more of their working hours providing additional learning support or special needs education. The number of unqualified teachers has radically decreased from 20% in 2005 to 4% in 2012, though that number varies between regions.

Rural communities encounter difficulties in attracting qualified staff in education, health and social care. The majority of specialised social and health services are based in Reykjavik. Despite difficulties in accessing necessary resources, small rural schools have a smaller class size and seem to be able to provide a more individualised education and support, and demonstrate a more positive attitude from parents and staff towards inclusive education.

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<sup>1</sup> Students without a formal diagnosis include students whose first language is not Icelandic and need additional learning and language support on that basis. That number may also include students who are going through a diagnostic process or on a waiting list after being referred, yet are already provided with some additional support.

### **Attitudes towards inclusive schools**

A common sentiment expressed is that greater funding, time and expert knowledge within schools is needed for the policy to be successful. Teachers feel that the policy has increased pressure and changed the nature of their job. Greater expertise is demanded and more time is devoted to paperwork. They feel unable to provide additional support to the few students with special needs without neglecting other students. According to a large study conducted from 2008 to 2013, 93% of parents believe that education that meets every individual student's needs is vital yet only half of those believed that the teachers had the capacity to do so. Nearly half of qualified teachers agreed with this assessment.

62% of parents and nearly half of teachers think it is important that all children are able to study in their local school regardless of disability, health or Icelandic language skills. 24% of students in basic education schools believed that children with developmental disorders should be in a mainstream class in their local school, 22% believed that they should be in a special department within a mainstream school. Parents to children with special needs stated that they did not feel that their children were given the same opportunities as other students. A common perception was that there was no place for children with special needs within a rigid educational system that is incapable of accommodating diversity.

### **Interview with Herdis Alberta Jonsdottir MEd from the University of Akureyri, Special Teacher in a basic education school**

Herdis has specialised in special needs education and taught both within special needs department and mainstream classes. She expresses the same concerns as highlighted in a report from the Ministry for Education in 2015. She says:

*"The discontent derives from bad implementation of the policy and inflexibility of the educational system a whole. The issue of staffing is the main problem. When the policy was introduced special teachers were transferred from the special departments to teach mainstream classes. When a child with multiple disabilities came to my mainstream class, I was unable to provide that child with the assistance it needed without failing my duties to the rest of the class."*

This sentiment, that teachers feel they are forced to choose between the welfare of the many or provide support to a handful of students, is echoed by many teachers and parents in Iceland. Herdis lays the blame on funding and staffing numbers. When asked what she thinks is needed for inclusive education to be a success in Iceland Herdis states that:

*"What is needed for the policy to work in Iceland is more finance, higher staffing numbers and specialists such as developmental therapists within schools."*

She transferred recently to a smaller school. The local authority gives additional funding to the school and a higher teacher to student ratio due to the demographics of the area. Herdis says that this has allowed her to create an inclusive environment within the mainstream class.

*"Although I have a higher number of students with special needs. I am better able to accommodate their needs within the mainstream class. For example, when a couple of students with autism joined our class we prepared one of the smaller rooms for them to take a break from the stimulus of the class,*

*it is not a time out for bad behaviour. The time out room is an option for everyone, not just for them. As the students with autism are in a mainstream class they have developed friendships and the other students seem to understand and accept their differences.”*

Herdis feels that the policy of inclusive education has been used as a smoke screen for cost-cutting. *“It comes down to money. There is a special needs school here in the town that specialises in children with severe behavioural problems. The aim of that school is to rehabilitate and for the student to re-join a mainstream school. But the cost per student is much higher for that school than for the mainstream schools.”*

While Herdis maintains her support for special schools she does emphasis that such resources should only be used in the most extreme and exceptional cases. Herdis emphasises that *“children are not statistics, the policy of inclusive education should be the norm but first and foremost we need to be able to meet the individual needs of each student. We must have options for those exceptions whose best interests are not served within mainstream schools.”*

## Conclusion

Iceland underestimated the level of reform and resources needed to make inclusive education a success. The sentiment that is consistently repeated by parents and teachers, in studies, surveys and the media is that currently the policy is nothing but an ideology, there is no true implementation leaving children with special needs without the assistance and adjustments they need. Both parents and teachers offer the same solution, increase staff numbers. The policy of inclusive education increased the workload of teachers without providing them with the means to achieve the new standards. Iceland does not lack the resources, and was successful in decreasing the number of unqualified teachers in a few years using policy changes and incentives for teachers for further training. Ultimately, a successful implementation of inclusive education relies on the understanding that it is not an opportunity for cost-cutting.

## Sources

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