

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ICELAND: BIG STEPS, BUT ARE WE TAKING STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is about ensuring equal access to education for all pupils, regardless of disability or special needs. It is based on the fact that the education system adapts to the needs of students rather than students having to adapt to the system. Inclusive schooling is a fundamental concept of inclusive education and means that all pupils, regardless of disability, have access to the same school environment where they participate in learning and social life as they wish. This article examines the development of the current education policy in Iceland and the challenges that the policy brings.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Iceland, social pedagogy, children with special needs, disability, assistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive school is a basic concept of inclusive education? "Every teacher wants to be informed about and supportive of their pupils. Working in a group is challenging for the teacher, if pupils have any problems with learning, social relationships or overall performance, the teacher is the one who should be a supportive tool for the pupil and approach them individually. If the teacher observes inappropriate behavior in the whole group, it is essential to address existing problems immediately. Activities focused on individual problems in the group contribute to effective problem solving" (Pošteková, 2022 p. 294). According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education is education that is based on the right to the same quality of education for all learners, whereby education must meet their basic learning needs and enrich them. Inclusion is manifested in the classroom when teachers teach in ways that facilitate the achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, and social groups. Academic achievement increases when cooperative learning activities are used. Students from different racial, ethnic, and other groups must feel equal in intergroup interactions. Collaboration among teachers is also a principle of positive impact activities, and teachers must value and encourage inclusive relationships or interactions alongside students who are actively working in teams to achieve common goals (Mugambi 2017). It is important that inclusion is brought to the attention of teachers and that activities are implemented to further develop inclusive education. Teachers need to be continuously educated in this area to be able to understand the concept of inclusive education and the possibilities of implementing activities (Sanagi 2016). Inclusive education is a way to reduce exclusion and increase participation in a way that effectively responds to the diverse needs of all learners without differentiating based on their weaknesses and strengths (Farooq, 2019). The World Conference on Special Education recommends that all states implement inclusion policies in their education systems. The concept of inclusion is also supported by the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which declares participation and equality for all (Khanna, 2023).

2. METHODOLOGY

Icelandic and international research has provided important insights into the development of validation education. The research by Óskarsdóttir et al. (2021) highlights that although the Education for All policy is in line with international requirements, major obstacles such as lack of resources and specialized staff are encountered that hinder its actual implementation. This study highlights the need for increased funding and staff specialization to ensure that all students receive the support they need.

De Beco (2022) discusses the right to inclusive education in the context of international agreements, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and puts it in the context of how the rights of individual students are implemented in education systems. It stresses that education systems must be flexible and provide special support so that pupils with disabilities have access to education on an equal basis. In Iceland, this concept is still in development and its implementation must be improved to ensure real access for all.

Magnúsdóttir (2016) discusses the concept of inclusive schools, which is one of the basic ideas of inclusive education. An inclusive school offers all pupils access to the same school environment regardless of maturity or disability. It is about the right to belong to society and to participate according to one's own ideas. Conflicts have emerged between those who support inclusive schools and those who believe that special schools offer better support for pupils with special needs. Some believe that special schools can contribute to social exclusion, while others see them as essential

for certain groups of pupils who need special support to succeed. This raises questions about how to ensure that all students receive the support they need without discrimination or segregation.

Armstrong (2008) stresses that the education system should adapt to the needs of students rather than students having to adapt to the system. This is based on human rights and equal access to education for all. Armstrong notes that validation of education is not just a technical task but a fundamental approach to education. We need to ask the question: Are we providing students with special needs real access to education, or are we limiting their potential? In this context, developmental coaches play an important role.

3. ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

The role of social educators in validating learning is essential. Björnsdóttir and Össurardóttir (2015) emphasise the importance of these professionals who play a key role in providing the necessary support for students with disabilities and special needs. They support students' participation in learning and social life within public schools. Social educators work to create a support system based on individualized learning and social participation for students with diverse needs. Educational staff also believe that frequent violations of ethical principles should be sanctioned. "Educational staff are also of the opinion that frequent violations of ethical principles should be sanctioned" (Hrobková, Pošteková, 2023, p. 83).

The philosophy of Social Educators is based on values such as respect, equality, self-determination and human sacredness. Social educators emphasize that all individuals have the right to equal access to society and services without discrimination.

They work with individuals based on their needs and goals, promoting an open and responsive society where everyone has the opportunity to participate (Íslands Developmental Therapy Association et al.) As Postek says: "Sufficient motivation of the teacher then has a positive effect on his/her work and the motivation is further transferred to the pupils. Research has found that teachers with higher motivational autonomy experience less burden and are more satisfied with their work than colleagues with lower motivation" (Pošteková, 2023, p. 11).

The number of children attending learning centres is growing slightly in line with the trend of opening new centres in Western European countries. Western European and global countries that have educational facilities for children of emigrants include countries such as Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Great Britain, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2019, In Pošteková 2025).

In the school context, developmental therapists help teachers, students, and parents to ensure an equitable approach to learning, adapt curriculum, develop teaching methods, and provide individual support.

In their article, Rauterberg and Hauksdóttir (2023) also stress the importance of professional collaboration in school validation.

They show how teamwork between social pedagogues, teachers and other professionals can contribute to better support for students with special needs. When professionals work together with shared responsibility, a strong support system is created that improves the learning environment for all students.

4. CONCLUSION

In inclusive education in Iceland, great strides have been made towards ensuring that all students have equal access to education, regardless of disability or special needs.

The concept of 'inclusive schools' emphasizes that the education system should adapt to the needs of pupils, not the other way around. Although this policy goal has been internationally recognized and accepted in Iceland, implementation still faces various obstacles, such as lack of funding and lack of specialized staff, which hinder meeting all students' needs.

"Promoting children's pro-social behavior and inclusion should be interlinked. Children with special needs, talents, or life experiences are accepted and supported with others in the school environment through inclusive education" (Pošteková, 2024 p. 35).

Social pedagogues play a vital role in this context, ensuring that students with special needs get the support they need. Their professional teamwork with other school and health professionals is an essential element in creating a strong support system that promotes social inclusion and equity.

Are we taking steps in the right direction? Despite important developments, the situation is not ideal. It is clear that more investment and specialization is needed to improve policy implementation and ensure real access to education for all. It is also clear that continuous teamwork among professionals and an educational philosophy based on equality and human rights are essential for creating continuous and valid education in Iceland.

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