Thematic Article

A Nordic model in policy and practice? The case of immigrants and refugees in rural schools in Iceland and Sweden

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Abstract

Through a cross-national analysis of Iceland and Sweden, we investigate How are the two countries' national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees? How do immigrant and refugee students talk about their agency in their classrooms, schools, and peer communities in rural contexts? Our analysis builds on fieldwork including classroom observations and interviews with immigrants (Iceland) and refugees (Sweden) aged 12–16 years, their teachers, and school principals, in four compulsory schools. The concept of ecology of equity is used to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency. The analysis also includes investigation of the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity. Findings show that although some students describe that they do not feel "othered," the majority, especially refugee students in Sweden, do feel excluded from their peers. The Icelandic and Swedish rural schools are on their own in tackling issues of working with these students, despite the fact that their practices may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions of the two countries. In this sense, the approach of the two countries does not reflect the ideals of the Nordic welfare system.

Keywords: immigrants, refugees, rural schools, Nordic model, inclusion, agency

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Introduction

The growth of immigration in Europe has led to increasing diversity in schools. During the mid-20th century, immigration was directed mostly toward cities and often motivated by labor opportunities. Since the 1990s, due to changes in politics and the reasons behind immigration (from freer movement and cheaper travel, through student mobility, to ethnic conflicts and political persecutions), migration has grown significantly, and some immigrants and refugees have been settling in rural areas of the receiving countries (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Haraldsson, 2016; OECD, 2019; SCB, 2016).

Several studies in urban schools describe effects of pedagogic practices that marginalize immigrant students (Möller, 2010; Schwartz, 2010). Similar tendencies have been identified in rural schools (Meador, 2005). Yet, some studies have demonstrated the ability of rural schools to adapt to changes and their importance in creating opportunities for all community members (Ásgeirsdóttir, 2002; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). Although there is some research investigating the circumstances of immigrant students in rural schools, such studies are sparse, especially in the Nordic context.

In this article, we conduct a cross-national analysis of experiences of place and agency of immigrant students in rural areas in Iceland and Sweden, taking into consideration the issues of *within*, *between,* and *beyond* schools (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012). Therefore, we begin by situating the research problem in the context of wide-ranging global changes, particularly changes in Europe. Then, we move on to the country level of Iceland and Sweden, characterized often in the literature as Nordic welfare systems; finally, we depict the context of the rural areas in the two countries. This approach allows us to cast light on (a) the impacts of large-scale global changes in such areas; (b) how these areas are affected by national and/or local policies, particularly educational policies; (c) how in turn this may affect the agency of immigrant and refugee students who live there.

Aims and Theoretical Approach

To understand immigrant individuals' agency, it is important to understand their local context. Immigration is a global process, but as Massey (1994) argues, globalization is taking place some*where* – in other words, it is also a local process. Thus, we use Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of *ecology of equity* as a tool to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency of immigrant students. This involves exploration of the demographics of the areas served by schools and the histories, cultures, and economic realities faced by immigrant and refugee populations. Analysis also includes investigation of the politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity.

To use Ainscow et al.'s (2012) concept of *ecology of equity* as an analytical tool, we apply their division of *within*, *between,* and *beyond* schools. In our analysis, we are interested in relations of local and national policy and practices in rural schools. The division of within, between, and beyond then allows us to deepen understandings of different levels of education policy and practice through cross-national analysis.

Ainscow et al. (2012) describe within schools as

> *the ways in which students are taught and engaged with learning; the ways in which teaching groups are organised and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organisation; the kinds of social relations and personal support that are characteristic of the school; the ways in which the school responds to diversity in terms of attainment, gender, ethnicity and social background; and the kinds of relationships the school builds with families and local communities.* (Ainscow et al., 2012, p. 2)

Between schools is described as competition and collaborations between schools, which might be of lesser interest in this article because of the geographical positioning of the rural schools investigated. However, it is not of no interest, since lack of collaboration and competition creates certain contexts that are important to analyze, especially (a) in relation to educational research in urban areas, where competition and collaboration are more accessible because of their geographical positioning; and (b) due to the growing importance of online collaboration between schools.

The last concept forming ecology of equity, beyond schools includes

> *the wider policy context within which schools operate; the family processes and resources which shape how children learn and develop; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by schools. Beyond this, it includes the underlying social and economic processes at national and – in many respects – at global levels out of which local conditions arise.* (Ainscow et al., 2012 p. 3)

Ainscow et al. (2012) argue that although the impact of individual schools on students' experiences is important, and they may play a vital role in fighting inequalities, they cannot tackle the global processes underlying migration patterns on their own. Change is possible only if the representatives of these three areas collaborate on a common agenda.

Thus, in this paper, we are analyzing immigrant and refugee students' experiences in compulsory schools in rural areas of Iceland and Sweden. Our research questions are:

How are the two national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in everyday practice? How do immigrant and refugee students talk about their agency in their classrooms, schools, and peer communities in rural contexts? This study's value for European research lies in deepening understanding of immigrant and refugee students' agency in different contexts of rurality in so-called Nordic welfare systems (cf. Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Gustafson, 2009).

Global and European contexts of immigration and educational policies

Global and European patterns of migration have varied over the past few centuries. Until a century ago, most migration took place either within or outward from Europe. More recently, as documented in the media, there has been a strong surge of migration into Europe. Much of this can be characterized as having a "push-dynamic": that is, it is driven by escape from poverty, war, political instability, persecution on religious or ethnic grounds, and associated threats such as torture and starvation. This contrasts with earlier post-World War II migrations, which were underpinned by a "pull-dynamic," particularly the movement of labor from areas of high unemployment to areas with high demand for labor (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Labor market conditions today are rather different, with both more widespread unemployment and higher demands on workers to have academic qualifications and language skills to secure long-term employment (Statistics Sweden, 2008). This has an impact on the decision of where any remaining "pull-migrants" go, as they gravitate toward distinct locations that offer the best work opportunities. Meanwhile, "push-migrants," who are relocated by national Migration Boards, are spread more diffusely across host countries, with some living in remote areas far away from major urban centers and accessible opportunities for employment. In Sweden, for example, push-migrants are known to have settled in remote regions where they sometimes remain for many years (Statistics Sweden, 2008). The same is true of various other European countries (Collantes, Pinilla, Sáez, & Silvestre, 2014; Maiztegui-Oñate & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2008).

This example can be juxtaposed to Long's (2013) problematization of differences between immigrants and refugees. Even though most immigrants encounter problems of learning a new language or different cultures, there are differences between refugees and economic immigrants in terms of their ability to return if things are not working out as expected. The main difference is that refugees have their legacy in protection, whereas economic immigrants search their legacy in production (Long, 2013). Moreover, immigrants and refugees may be perceived differently by individuals in the receiving country (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017; Long, 2013), and the attitude of natives may influence well-being, opportunities, and decision-making of the newly arrived (Einarsdóttir, Heijstra, & Rafnsdóttir, 2018; Hatton, 2016).

Geddes and Hadj-Abdou (2018) point to a more restrictive immigration policy among European Union officials with established approaches, particularly of policies that rely on deterrence, and seek to make it much more difficult for migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Although the political restrictions toward refugee immigration seem to have hardened, European policies in education toward inclusion and cooperation between member states have widened significantly in recent years, and now include aspects such as social inclusion and intercultural education (Faas, Hajisteriou, & Angelides, 2014).

Educational systems are considered crucial actors in the process of inclusion and creating opportunities for immigrant and refugee students (OECD, 2013). Although there are examples of successful schools that manage to move immigrant students and their families from the periphery of school participation to the center (Diez, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011), many educational studies demonstrate the marginalization of students with immigrant backgrounds (see, e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Hannover et al., 2013; Welply, 2015). Exclusionary tendencies can also be found in some educational policies (Popkewitz, 2008). These findings are supported by international reports, including those of the European Policy Centre (EPC, 2011) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015).

The OECD (2015) report – which builds, among other resources, on the results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – names several factors that may cause this marginalization and, as a result, challenge immigrant students' progress, well-being, and aspirations. These factors include concentration of immigrant students in certain schools, language barriers, and certain school policies (grade repetition and tracking; that is, separating students by their academic ability; OECD, 2015). One of the aims of PISA 2009 was to determine how school systems in different countries address the needs of diverse students (OECD, 2013). The results indicated that immigrant students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and of same origin tended to perform differently across different school systems. The disparities between immigrant students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and origin suggest that it may be schooling and school policies that, together with host culture and social policies, influence students' well-being and performance.

According to the PISA 2009 study (OECD, 2013), immigrant students seem to perform better in school systems with relatively large immigrant student populations and where students are generally diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status. As an example, in countries like Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United States, where every fourth or fifth student has an immigrant background, all students with similar socioeconomic status perform equally well, regardless of whether they are immigrants or not. Still, in the aforementioned countries, immigration policy is much stricter compared to many

European countries. This results in immigrant students often outperforming native students, because former ones tend to come from privileged backgrounds (OECD, 2013). On the contrary, in countries with a small percentage of immigrant students, and those where immigrant students are more socioeconomically diverse than the general student population, the differences in performance between immigrant and non-immigrant students are relatively large, even if socioeconomic background is taken into account. Moreover, immigrant students tend to perform better in school systems that are flexible and willing to respond to diverse students' resources and needs (OECD, 2013).

Methods, Data, and Analyses

The analysis in this paper is theory-driven and acknowledges Ainscows et al.'s (2012) interlinked areas within which equity issues arise: i.e., within schools, between schools, and beyond schools. To produce a comparative analysis, we place the young immigrants and refugees' experiences of agency in rural settings in the context of the global/European and national contexts and policies. Due to space limitations, the global and European trends are referred to in the literature review section above. Thus, the findings section starts with presenting the historical contexts of education and immigration in Iceland and Sweden and characterizing commonalities and differences between the two countries. Then, each rural case study context is presented in terms of demographics and local conditions. Finally, immigrant students' experiences are portrayed. The analysis can be described by three levels.

First, the analysis of *global and European trends* is, as stated above, foremost in "Introduction" section, since the focus of the research is the comparative analysis between the two Nordic countries. Although we have performed a substantial search of policy documents and policy research on educational issues related to immigration, the selections we have space to present here should be seen as a literature review.

Second, given that the research communities on educational issues related to immigration in both Sweden and Iceland are small, we started our data collection by looking for relevant information on *historical national contexts* and for known researchers in the field, checking their publication reference lists to find relevant research and policy texts at the national level. We scoured the national agencies for education for policy documents and reports and examined relevant statistics agencies' reports as well. The texts have been located and analyzed with relevance to the research aim and synthesized in the first part of the findings section.

Third, in the analysis of each case study, we draw on a cross-national perspective (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). This perspective, together with the conceptual framework of Ainscow et al. (2012) of *within*, *between* and *beyond* schools, allows us to analyze

observations, interviews (with students and school staff), and locally produced policy text data generated in Iceland and Sweden.

In this joint work, we have utilized analysis-through-discussion as a methodological principle (Gordon et al., 2000). We read and discussed together data concerning our chosen themes, paying attention to similarities and differences in patterns of experience and processes related to immigration between these two Nordic welfare states.

A more extensive description of the data used in each country's case studies is presented below. It is important to note that the participants in the Swedish material are non-European refugee immigrants; in the Icelandic material, they are economic immigrants from Europe. However, looking into experiences of immigrants and refugees in a single paper is justified because it reflects the immigration patterns in the two countries – refugee immigration is more common in Sweden and economic immigration more common in Iceland. Nevertheless, as Long (2013) has described, these two groups are different in some respects – e.g., those related to law and political regulations – while they may have commonalities in other aspects, i.e., experiences of integration and social inclusion. In addition, it is important to mention that during data collection, there was a peak in refugee influx in the most recent history of Europe. Sweden was one of the biggest receivers of this group, whereas Iceland at this time received only a small group of quota refugees, who settled mainly in urban areas.

Before data collection, all necessary permissions and informed consents were obtained in both countries. Participants were informed about the aim of the research and were assured that they would be anonymous and could withdraw at any phase of the research process.

The Swedish data collection in more detail

The empirical material that comprises the Swedish case comes from a wider project – "Rural Youth: Education, Place and Participation" (cf. Beach, Johansson, Öhrn, Rönnlund, & Rosvall, 2019; Rosvall, Rönnlund, & Johansson, 2018) – which altogether employs an ethnographic approach that incorporates classroom observations and interviews (Walford, 2008). For this comparative analysis between Sweden and Iceland, in the Swedish material, the focus has been on interviews and classroom interactions with peer groups of newly arrived migrants; it can be seen as a small-scale study within the larger Swedish project. It also includes analysis of interviews with teachers and school principals.

The research took place in two municipalities, River and Mountain (pseudonyms) in northern Sweden. The former grew around a military base and the latter around a mining

industry, both of which have closed, leading to a decline in population. Throughout the history of both towns, there have been economic activities associated with forestry. Currently, both have a developed tourism industry, which provides most of Mountain's employment opportunities. In addition to tourism, River also has power plants (water and wind) and a small food industry. In 2015, Mountain had fewer than 3,000 inhabitants and River had fewer than 9,000: the latter is a relatively large population for a rural place in Sweden, but both River and Mountain are classified as rural by Swedish standards due to their remoteness, low population density, and relative lack of production or industry (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2010). These municipalities can further be understood as rural – in both material and imagined ways (Cloke, 2006; Massey, 1994) – because they display characteristics typical of rural areas: proximity to nature, remoteness from higher education and some social services (career guidance, paramedic services, healthcare specialists, and legal systems), poor infrastructure, and depopulation.

There are no reliable statistics on the proportion of immigrants during the data collection period. The immigrant population fluctuated substantially due to lack of organization in meeting the immigrant wave during 2015/2016, and refugees were moved throughout the country. Nevertheless, newly arrived immigrants were a presence in both Mountain and River. There were few employment opportunities in general, especially for immigrants. Immigrants with academic backgrounds found it almost impossible to find work matching their competences. The local media reported both on people opening their homes or working voluntarily to support immigrants, and on threats against those hosting refugees.

Onsite visits started with 25 days of classroom observations in each school during a term of a 9th grade class (students ranging from 14–16 years old). All students were then invited to be interviewed, both those born in Sweden and those who had recently immigrated. However, newly arrived immigrants who were not proficient in Swedish were excluded, because we did not have economic resources to hire an interpreter. Since very recent immigrants spoke no proficient Swedish or English, we considered it impossible to do a meaningful interview or to meet the ethical recommendation of participants understanding the consequences of participating in the study. The observations both provided issues to explore in the interviews and enabled a form of data triangulation (Walford, 2008). This article specifically focuses on the immigrants who accepted the invitation to be interviewed: three boys and three girls. All of them were 15 years old and spoke Persian dialects as their mother tongues. All of them were push-migrants and asylum seekers. During the period 2011–2015, when they were registered by Swedish authorities, about 104,000 immigrants were registered in total, of whom about 16,000 were from Afghanistan or Iran (Statistics Sweden, 2016). Their real names

are concealed here to maintain their anonymity, and they are referred to pseudonymously as Reza, Rostam, Roshini, Roya, Roshanek (River school), and Majid (Mountain school). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 35–50 min. Roshanek and Majid were interviewed individually and the others in pairs. The interviews were conducted in Swedish.

The Icelandic data collection in more detail

The data for the Icelandic case studies obtained from a larger study of inclusion of immigrant students in four schools, but this paper discusses schools in two communities, Lava and Volcano (pseudonyms) in southern Iceland. Although the Volcano community is characterized by a significant share of immigrant population, immigrants are scarce in the Lava community. Lava is an area with approximately 400 inhabitants. There are two large employers in agriculture and several tourist-related services in the area, but many residents, including immigrants, work in other municipalities – typically in the main town in the area, where the opportunities for diverse employment matching their education and competences are greater. In addition, there is an insufficient supply of affordable housing and public transport in the area, which might deter economic immigrants from moving there. The only compulsory school and preschool in the area are located in the same building, with a compulsory school enrollment of around 40 children. The school does not have any policy regarding working with immigrant students, but preparing such policy is on the agenda, according to the school principal. Immigrants seem to be welcomed in the local community and are active participants in its social and artistic life. Volcano has about 500 inhabitants and is more distant from the capital area than Lava, although better located in terms of public transport. It has several employers in agriculture and tourism, who often offer cheap or free housing, which seems to attract economic immigrants. About 50 children in total attend the compulsory school, which has a policy regarding receiving new students, but does not specifically reference immigrant students. The municipality has recently organized a well-attended cultural festival, where residents of various backgrounds were able to share and learn about diverse customs and traditions.

Four students – one boy, Vincent (Volcano school), and three girls, Vera (Volcano school) and Lisa and Laura (Lava school) of age 12–16 years – were selected in cooperation with school principals and teachers and agreed to participate in the study. They were all born in continental Europe, but because of the small size of the communities and related risk of identification, their countries of their origin are not disclosed in this paper. Vincent had only attended Icelandic school, and Vera, Lisa, and Laura had educational experience in other countries as well. The students were observed in different classes for three whole consecutive school days and then interviewed in several languages. Each interview lasted

from 30 to 45 min. Lisa and Laura chose to be interviewed together. Their teachers and school principals were also interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of observed practices and interactions.

Overall data analysis

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated (if needed) prior to analysis. We analyzed the interviewees' comments and our field notes according to ecology of equity (Ainscow et al., 2012) and understanding of place (Massey, 1994). Rather than coding, the interview transcripts, and field notes, they were subjected to iterative cycles of reading, interpretation, and formulation of theory, as described by Walford (2008, p. 13). To meet the aim of deepening understanding of immigrant and refugee students' agency in different contexts of rurality in Nordic welfare systems, this article mainly reports on the interviews with 10 immigrants. However, field note observations and the interviews with the students of native origin and school staff (in the case of Sweden), and with immigrant students' teachers and school principals (in the case of Iceland), are used to support the interview data and raise questions about discrepancies, as a form of method and source triangulation (Denzin, 1989).

The small samples have, we argue, validity in praxis (Cho & Trent, 2006). That is, the small sample size is justified by the need to redefine the status quo by generating new knowledge about understudied research participants, while recognizing that the emerging claims may be subject to later revision in the light of new evidence. There is very little existing knowledge about refugees and immigrants living in rural areas; thus, understanding their situation through comparative analysis is important in terms of how geographical positioning and local culture entail certain conditions for immigration. Although the findings will not be directly generalizable, one benefit of small samples is the ability to scrutinize how immigration plays out in the lives of a group of people without disregarding the research participants' individuality and differences (Blumer, 1956).

Historical National Contexts of Two Nordic Welfare States and Their Migration Policies

Nordic countries are often assumed to be similar and referred to as using a "Nordic model" (Holm, 2018; Nylund et al., 2018). This itself makes a comparison between Nordic countries interesting. However, in case of immigrants and refugees as well as schooling and place, a comparison between Sweden and Iceland is even more compelling, since we have both similarities and differences in rurality, welfare state policies, and causes of immigration.

In Sweden and Iceland, there are large areas that are regarded as rural by officials and by European standards (due to geographical positioning, remoteness, low population density, and lack of infrastructure), even though the term "rural" is difficult to define. However, in proportion to overall population, in Sweden (compared to Iceland), there are fewer small rural schools with age-integrated schooling. For geographical and historical reasons, Iceland (like Norway), even though threatened of the global trend of metrocentrism (see, e.g., Beach et al, 2019), has been more successful in creating policies beneficial for rural areas (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009).

If considering the Nordic welfare state model, Iceland and Sweden have somewhat different policies of inclusion, and Iceland could be considered as having more progressive ones. Inclusion in Iceland is understood in a broader sense, i.e., in relation to the ideas of social justice (Ragnardsóttir, 2015). Swedish policies also include ideas of social justice but have since the late 1980s turned from a strong social democratic agenda to a market-oriented agenda. This means that currently the choice of the individual overshadows the agenda of social justice (cf. Dovemark et al., 2018).

Moreover, in recent years, Iceland has been undergoing change, from almost no immigration, to extensive economic immigration, and recently refugee immigration and relocation in different areas of Iceland, including rural areas (cf. Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2016; Haraldsson, 2016), while Sweden continues to receive mostly refugee immigrants.

Swedish context

The Swedish statistics report called *From Finland to Afghanistan* describes well how Swedish immigration has changed from being foremost economic immigration from Finland and Greece in the 1950s and 1960s. Economic crises in the 1970s almost stopped immigration, and conflicts and wars from the 1980s onward led to an increase in refugee immigration, which is the dominant form today. Immigrating individuals come foremost from Iran–Iraq, former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and most recently from Syria.

The change in immigration patterns has influenced policy and regulations. Initially, the growing number of Yugoslavian refugee immigrants was settling primarily in larger cities. This resulted in the political decision to implement regulations to distribute immigrants more geographically evenly among Swedish municipalities. However, the regulations were later abandoned. Today, municipalities are more or less forced to accept a quota of refugee immigrants who cannot find a place to settle by themselves. Rural areas of Sweden were more or less unaffected by the first economic immigrant wave, except for a few small industrial places. In the later refugee wave during the Yugoslavian wars, a few refugee immigrants settled initially in rural areas. During ongoing immigrant waves, mostly from Afghanistan and Syria, many rural municipalities accepted statistically more

refugee immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants than the most largest cities, especially in the north of Sweden (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2014). However, the local municipality still has quite a lot of influence over whether or not to accept immigrants, and thus the number of accepted immigrants can differ substantially between municipalities. For example, Lidén and Nylén (2014) noted that strong support for the nationalistic right-wing party in some municipalities has actual influence on local immigration policy.

For a long time, the government systems of the Nordic countries have been characterized by a high degree of local discretion, but starting in the 1990s, Sweden extended this considerably by transferring many responsibilities to the 290 municipalities. The responsibility and freedom of schools and municipalities to be proactive and efficient within wide legal frames have resulted in large local variations in number of refugees accepted, integration of immigrants in education and language support, to mention a few (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014).

Sweden has been acknowledged for some successful structures and curriculums for integrating immigrant children in education, e.g., no tracking in general compulsory education, additional language support after entering mainstream education, and the option to enroll directly in mainstream classes while benefiting from introductory classes (Koehler, 2017). However, the policies governing whether to place students in introductory classes or directly in regular classes have been criticized for being based on categorical thinking rather than a rationale based on individual needs (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

To date, most research on immigrant youth in Sweden has been conducted in urban areas, including that of Nihad Bunar and his associates (2017). He concludes that most of their interviewed newly arrived students in compulsory school were

> *pervaded by a strong feeling of wanting to be 'normal', to be 'just like everybody else' [. . .] the thing most detrimental to students' self-esteem and ambition were low expectations from significant stakeholders such as teachers and study counsellors, and having a feeling that they were stuck in a separate system (introductory classes) designed for the newly arrived.* (Bunar, 2017, p. 7)

However, some studies show that a quick transfer of newly arrived immigrants into mainstream classrooms results in their experiences not being acknowledged, and even results in them being physically placed at the margins of the classroom (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2017; Obondo, Lahdenperä, & Sandevärn, 2016).

A study on school principals by Norberg (2017) concludes that principals have "*no or little training in how to implement national and local policy on how to support teachers*

regardless of subject to ensure, regardless of students' grades, the development in language and subjects as well as social and academic goals" (p. 643). In sum, Swedish municipalities' lack of restrictions concerning how to organize education for newly arrived immigrants can lead to quite different outcomes in how national policy plays out in practice (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014).

Even though a substantial portion of refugee immigrants in Sweden are placed in areas that are sometimes referred to as holding few future economic opportunities, research has found that some immigrant students decide nevertheless to stay in those communities, since they argue that social relations are more easily developed in those areas. Paradoxically, these students also points at the risk of feeling like outsiders if they stay in their neighborhoods, since they do not feel to be regarded as full members in their local community. This sometimes also refers to interactions in social relations (Bunar, 2017; Rosvall, 2017).

Icelandic context

Iceland has long been considered a homogenous country, with immigration rates not exceeding 3% throughout the 20th century. In the year 2000, 2.6% of the population were immigrants (Haraldsson & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015). However, in the past two decades, the country has been experiencing a rapid demographic shift. Most immigrants come from Europe, including Poland (45% of all immigrants in 2016), Lithuania, Germany, and Denmark (Haraldsson, 2018). By 2016, with second-generation immigrants included, the total percentage of immigrants reached 10.7% (Haraldsson, 2018). The number of children with a foreign mother tongue in Icelandic compulsory schools increased from 3.1% of all students in 2004 to 8.2% in 2015; 63.3% of these students lived in the Reykjavik area, with 36.7% elsewhere in Iceland (Haraldsson, 2018).

This change has had a significant impact on Icelandic schools, because they are obliged to work toward inclusion of immigrant students and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). However, different municipalities and schools have autonomy in how they work with immigrant students. Therefore, one can find Icelandic schools with separate immigrant student units and schools where immigrants join mainstream classes immediately. In addition, depending on the municipality and school, and their financial and staffing resources, schools may employ teachers or teacher assistants tasked with supporting acquisition of Icelandic and/or maintenance and development of students' mother tongues. Reykjavik, which has the highest number of immigrants, has recently implemented a new policy about school integration and work with immigrant students that emphasizes diverse teaching methods, support of active bilingualism, and cooperation with parents (Reykjavíkurborg, 2014).

Several studies on immigrant students in urban areas in Iceland have been conducted in recent years. Research on Icelandic teachers' perspectives about immigrant students has shown teachers' concern with immigrant students' well-being and a will to respond to their needs (Karvelsdóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2010). Case studies in exemplary compulsory schools in Iceland have indicated that the schools developed procedures to meet the needs of immigrant students and had a clear vision for teaching and learning based on collaboration, active participation, and communication with parents (Ólafsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir, & Hansen, 2012; Ragnarsdóttir & Hansen, 2014). Moreover, Icelandic research supports international findings that using students' resources, including experience, knowledge, abilities, and interests, should be recognized and cultivated to support and promote all students' well-being (Guðjónsdóttir, Gísladóttir, & Wozniczka, 2015; Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2010). Nevertheless, studies built on interviews with immigrant students, mainly in urban areas, suggested that they experience marginalization and that their contributions to schools are undervalued (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). Despite warm feelings toward their teachers, immigrant students have largely felt socially isolated from their Icelandic peers and were perceived by many teachers as deficient due to their lack of Icelandic language proficiency (Tran, 2015).

Various research in Iceland also shows that immigrant students lack academic vocabulary necessary to fully understand what is being taught (Ólafsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Þórðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2012). The support they receive in Icelandic and their mother tongue is insufficient and differs between schools and municipalities in terms of organization and numbers of hours and financing dedicated to the task (Daníelsdóttir & Skogland, 2017). A recent study conducted in the north of Iceland (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, & Meckl, 2017) indicated that teachers in compulsory schools felt they were not sufficiently prepared and lacked the support and encouragement to work with immigrant students. The authors recommended increased dialogue between schools and families of immigrant students, focusing on student needs and parental expectations toward schooling (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017).

Case Studies

Reflecting the immigrant patterns in each country, the Swedish participants all had refugee backgrounds, most of them are young boys without parents. In case of Iceland, the participants were economic immigrants from Europe.

Pedagogic practices and student responses

Since municipalities and schools in Sweden to a large extent can organize their education as they want, River School practiced integration in general classes as soon as possible, starting with physics, arts, and mathematics. Mountain School, in contrast, waited to

integrate immigrant students until they more or less spoke proficient Swedish. During this study, only one student had been integrated into the mainstream classes at Mountain School. He had fought to be integrated in an ordinary class, arguing that it was important to be integrated in society as a whole. In both rural schools in Iceland – Lava and Volcano – immigrants started immediately in general classes, but while in Lava School a teacher was hired specifically to assist the immigrant students in their first months, the other school did not offer that possibility. In this sense, Icelandic and Swedish schools were autonomous in deciding on reception and integration policies, depending on resources/students' language proficiency. However, to be included in the group is one thing; to feel included is another. In River School, the immigrant students met both teachers who were supportive and others who did not manage the situation or affirmed the immigrants' presence in class, but seemed merely interested to help. Teachers in the arts and crafts had students who could not communicate in Swedish or English or write in any language. Significantly, those students have not been interviewed for ethical reasons, as it was difficult to meet the ethical guideline of consequences of participation. In those classes, the students more or less sat in the classroom, either talking with their peers in their own language, doing nothing school-related, or working on a task introduced earlier. In mathematics, the teachers worked hard on reading in tasks where reading was needed to sort out the mathematical task. For those who had learned more Swedish and were included in more classes, the situation was far more positive, as they participated in group work with other students born in Sweden. Nevertheless, those students did not feel fully integrated in class and the boys thought they would never be integrated in society as "full citizens":

> Reza: As I said, I was thinking of being a lawyer, but there are no jobs for lawyers here. I think I will do something in the municipality office. You do not need good friends to get a job there as in the private companies.
>
> Interviewer: Good friends, what do you mean with good friends? You said you have friends in the football team.
>
> Rostam: We have friends there, or, we play in the team, but we are not really friends. You have been in the classroom. You see how it is. They are nice, but they seldom talk to us. But we do not care, we have each other.

In Mountain School, all but one student were educated in a special classroom. The two teachers there were very supportive and even created a prayer room for students practicing Islam. The single student in this study was fairly well-integrated, although he said he had experienced some comments of prejudice from one teacher. However, even though some boys experienced prejudice and were not fully integrated, they declared that they wanted to stay in their rural areas. They thought of urban areas as more segregated, having suburbs with almost no Swedish born residents, and associated them with cultural

fights between different ethnic groups. Yet, the boys had little direct experience with Sweden's larger cities and built their assumptions on media reports or through talking with friends and relatives living there.

In Iceland, immigrant students received academic and social support from their teachers, often despite limited financial resources or professional preparation for work with immigrant students. The two schools and municipalities tried to build relationships with their families as well, and in some cases were supportive to parents too – for example, assisting them with finding jobs.

Icelandic participants used superlatives when talking about their teachers, even though none of them was fond of certain subjects, including mathematics and Danish. When asked how he feels as an immigrant in Volcano School, Vincent answered:

> Vincent: Sometimes my teachers forget that I'm an immigrant, because I have good Icelandic.
>
> Interviewer: And is it good that they forget?
>
> Vincent: Yes, I guess so.
>
> Interviewer: But can you use your mother tongue during classes.
>
> Vincent: Yes, I can use it. I use it sometimes when I work with my friends.

It seems that Vincent was not considered as "other," but rather acknowledged as an individual who brings various resources to the classroom. Asked about general atmosphere at school and any possible conflicts between students, the Icelandic participants said they did not recall any situation of this kind. However, Lisa and Laura in Lava School felt excluded from their female peers, both in the classroom and outside of school, and could explain why girls behaved negatively toward them. Simultaneously, the girls emphasized that their relations with male peers were positive, and observations revealed that Lisa and Laura talked more with boys.

In a related vein, it is also relevant to ask how content was adapted to the immigrant students. There was little recognition of the immigrants in Swedish schools in terms of content-related tasks. For example, when learning about World War II in both River and Mountain School, what happened in the countries of origin of the immigrants was not addressed. Nevertheless, the students with immigrant backgrounds stressed that it was important to include pedagogic content involving their countries of origin:

> Interviewer: In the classes I have been to, the local place and what happened and happens here has been mentioned; for example when you had classes in the Second

World War and when you had thematic work on indigenous people. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Majid: Yes, it is very interesting!

Interviewer: What do you find interesting?

Majid: It is interesting to learn more about the local place where you live.

Interviewer: Sorry for being straightforward, but you said earlier that you were brought up in X [a multimillion-population city in Asia] and that you most probably will move after 9th grade [a few months after the interview]. Why is it interesting to learn more about Mountain?

Majid: Because it is here that I live now. It is important to know things about the places you lived. And things get more real when you know where they took place.

Interviewer: I also recognized that they did not talk much about Asia during your work with the unit on World War 2. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Majid: It is important to include both.

In the Icelandic context, rather than expanding the content of teaching to multicultural issues, the cultures and languages of the students were welcomed on different occasions, including language and natural sciences classes, where they were often used as a tool to bridge knowledge and support learning. In addition, the emphasis was on inclusion and democracy in general, rather than on focusing particularly on immigrant students, so that any student could benefit from the class. This resulted in students being considered part of a group, rather than as separate individuals or a group unto themselves. In terms of equity and the Swedish case, the most obvious thing is that in River school the immigrant student had the opportunity to meet Swedish-born students. The students who could speak Swedish said this was positive, a sentiment the student in Mountain school reiterated. However, their presence in class did not seem to orientate the teaching content toward greater intercultural understanding. The immigrant students' experiences from other countries or as new citizens were not used as an opportunity for learning.

Politics of the teaching profession in response to students' diversity

In considering the expansion of immigration in Iceland during the 2000s and the immigrant wave during 2015 in Sweden, it could be interesting to investigate whether the teachers or heads of school have gone through courses focusing on immigration. A plethora of such courses have been offered, mainly by The Swedish National Board of Education. The problem has been that most attendees have been from cities and wealthy municipalities (Bunar, 2017). The empirical findings from Sweden corroborate this

statement, since none of the teachers or principals we interviewed mentioned such capacity building.

In the case of Iceland, awareness of the importance of inclusive and multicultural education has been growing. Some courses for teachers and teacher candidates have been developed in the past decades that cover these topics, but many of them are selective. Moreover, research (Ólafsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Tran, 2015; Þórðardóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2012) shows that one of the biggest concerns of immigrant students in Iceland is their language proficiency. All schools in Iceland are required not only to support the acquisition of Icelandic, but also to strengthen immigrant students' mother tongue (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Yet, to date, there are no obligatory courses for teachers (of different subjects) on how to work with students for whom Icelandic is a second language. Reykjavík has been a pioneer in writing and implementing a multicultural policy. The schools there receive funding for reception of students with a different mother tongue than Icelandic, cooperation with their parents and teaching Icelandic as the second language. Still, other municipalities and schools approach these issues differently, and this determines whether school staff are encouraged and supported to seek additional courses and training that would develop their knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2017). As Fjóla, the principal of Lava School explained:

> *We have a good cooperation with the local community. I think we can get almost anything we ask for, with a good argument of course . . . In bigger municipalities, it is much more difficult, stricter. I worked in other small schools and there the situation was similar. If you have a good argument . . . They trust that we are professionals. We also have good cooperation with the social services in the area.* (Fjóla, Principal of Lava school)

The principal's answer indicates that some matters might be easier to deal with in a smaller community. In terms of the Icelandic Lava and Volcano municipalities, it could be explained by the personal and professional closeness and interconnectedness of members of the community, which was mentioned by both students and school professionals and considered supportive. It was also observed in one of the schools when community members participated in the school lunch. Similarly, researchers in Sweden (Beach et al., 2019) found differences between River school, which was situated in a larger municipality, and Mountain school, which was situated in a smaller one. In Mountain school, there were more examples of adaption of content, support (praying rooms), and collaboration with local facilities (e.g., collaborations with a museum as source for information, and a free church as source for workplace practice). There were few examples of such collaboration in River school.

Discussion

Although both Iceland and Sweden are understood to belong to a Nordic model with developed welfare systems, they have different patterns of migration (immigrants in rural Iceland vs. refugees in rural Sweden) and educational strategies to ensure their inclusion.

The two countries' educational systems tackle the refugee/migration issue in a somewhat different way on a teacher level. They have adopted basic policies regarding access to education and social inclusion of immigrants, but these seem to be more developed in practice in urban areas (cf. Bunar, 2017). Our findings show that in case of Sweden, principals and teachers in rural schools seem insufficiently prepared to work with immigrant students in terms of continuous capacity building. In the case of Iceland, unlike in urban schools, where teachers routinely receive training in working with immigrant students, the investigated schools use a strategy of inviting specialists from the capital area to prepare whole school communities to better receive and work with immigrant students. Yet, it is uncertain whether this practice is true for all rural schools. Such autonomy and flexibility *within school* in both countries in terms of implementation of policies and unregulated support and evaluation of their implementation may therefore lead to uneven opportunities for immigrant and refugee students on the one hand, and for teachers and schools working with these students on the other (cf. Ainscow et al., 2012).

When it comes to *beyond school* (Ainscow et al., 2012) and to the underlying social and economic processes at the national (and European and global) level out of which local conditions arise, the context of the social space seems to influence immigrant students' experiences of inclusion. In Iceland, immigrant students are active participants in the classroom and report that they do not feel "othered," although immigrant girls do report feeling excluded from other girls. In the case of Sweden, even though the refugees in River School and Mountain School were in the classroom, they were not always part of the group. However, it is possible that these differences might be a reflection of the fact that Iceland and Sweden are experiencing different kinds of immigrant influxes – mostly economic migration in Iceland and mostly refugee migration in Sweden. Research in Sweden indicates that European economic immigrants seem less stigmatized and more socially included by school staff and peers than refugee immigrants (Öhrn & Beach, 2019). This study might implicitly reflect this when comparing economic immigrants in Iceland and refugees in Sweden. Based on our findings, one might ask what it means to be part of a group? Or to put it differently, what does social inclusion and equity mean in this context?

Our research question was: How are the two national and local educational systems ensuring access to education and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in everyday practice? We believe that we should start by asking whether it is something that can be achieved at a school level, or is it more of a societal issue – and a good example of how

within school and beyond school can work or fail to work together toward inclusion. This is also related to the concept of nested relationships between school and community (and the system) – but are these relationships hierarchical or can schools and teachers be the actual agents of change?

Considering Ainscow et al.'s (2012) ecology of equity, it seems that Icelandic and Swedish rural schools stand on their own in tackling issues within school, but their practices have an important impact on student experiences of inclusion and agency and may lead to reinforcing inequalities between schools and regions of the two countries. In this sense, this does not reflect the characteristics of Nordic welfare system. At the same time, the four schools seem to tackle between- and beyond-school issues in different ways.

Although it is difficult for schools, teachers, and administrators to have an impact on demography or resources available, some of them show initiative and are positive examples that both teaching institutions and policy makers (*beyond* school), as well as other schools (*between* school) can learn from. Yet, as Ainscow et al. (2012) argue, none of the three areas of the ecology of equity exists in a vacuum. Therefore, even if schools improve their practices, in order for the educational system to be equitable, the underlying social and economic conditions need to change as well. Improvement on the path toward equity is only possible if representatives from all areas manage to strengthen collaboration and to work together on a common agenda.

Conclusions

This article explored, through case studies, how educational systems and national policy and immigration patterns played out in different local contexts in two Nordic countries. As we can see, there are differences and commonalities between the rural contexts in the two welfare states, both between rural schools in the same country and between the different countries. We conclude that a Nordic model with strong state policy and intervention that tries to secure an equal welfare system to all does not have a significant impact on pedagogical practices in the schools (cf. Dovemark et al., 2018; Holm, 2018). Instead, it seems that schools have strong autonomy and flexibility when it comes to implementing policies and practices for immigrant students. Thus, implementation depends largely on school staff initiative. In the case of Iceland especially, it is schools that are proactive in adjusting their policies to meet the needs of immigrant students.

Since most studies of integration in educational settings are from urban areas, one might ask if we could find differences or commonalities related to findings in urban areas. In this study, it seems that our findings are somewhat contradictory. Our findings in both countries indicate that the smaller the place, the better the immigrant feels integration works, and school practices seem more adapted toward the immigrant's needs for

support and content adaptation. In addition, some Swedish immigrant boys depicted rural areas as less violent and involving fewer "cultural" fights. Still, we need to bear in mind that some economic immigrants in both Iceland and refugee immigrants in Sweden (especially teenage girls) declared that they do not feel fully integrated in school and in society in general.

The scope of this study did not allow us to explore thoroughly whether the situation is harsher for refugee immigrants, in terms of integration and xenophobia, than for economic immigrants (cf. Long, 2013). There are, however, some studies based on larger data collections in Sweden that indicate that this could be the case in Sweden (Öhrn & Beach, 2019). Similar studies have yet to be conducted in Iceland. Therefore, considering the limited sample of this study, this topic needs to be researched further. Another argument for continuing research relates to the current changes in immigration patterns in both countries. In Iceland, quota refugees are now being resettled more and more frequently in rural areas; in Sweden, on the one hand, there has been a general decline of refugee immigrants since the period of data collection (2015/16), while the rural schools have had more time to adjust to a greater proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds.

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About the Authors

AKW is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Iceland. Her research focuses on immigrant students in various contexts and on culturally responsive and inclusive teacher practices. She has recently coauthored two chapters: "*Research Methodologies for a Culturally Diverse Educational Context*" and "*The Story of My Teaching: Constructing Learning Spaces for Diverse Pupils*" in the book "*Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories From Four Nordic Countries*" edited by Hanna Ragnarsdóttir and Lars Anders Kulbrandstad.

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Ethics

The Icelandic part of the study was conducted in accordance with the University Scientific Ethical Guidelines (Vísindasiðanefnd Háskólans, 2014) and The Data Protection Authority has been informed of the purpose and details of the research (S7572/2015). The Swedish part of the study procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by The Swedish Research Council.

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