



## ARTICLE

### **Working together for the inclusion of immigrant pupils: A case study of a rural community in Iceland**

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## **Working together for the inclusion of immigrant pupils: A case study of a rural community in Iceland**

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### **Abstract**

Global migration brings new challenges and opportunities for schools, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of pupils' mother tongues, ethnicities, religions, and sociocultural resources. In case of Iceland, this is a relatively new reality. While there has been some research with immigrant pupils internationally, most studies focus on urban areas.

This article reports on a case study in a rural compulsory school in Iceland. The research question was: How does a rural school understand and work for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils? In-depth interviews with immigrant pupils and their teachers together with observations were applied. The simultaneous thematic analysis included coding of the data and sorting it into themes by discovering recurrent routines and interaction patterns. The concepts of inclusion and local agency were used as a theoretical framework.

Findings suggest that teachers are the key agents in inclusion of immigrant pupils. Despite lack of extensive experience or special agenda regarding immigrant pupils, the teachers and school principal manage to involve all pupils in the process of learning. Moreover, the support of local municipality and caring relations with the school personnel have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging and encourage their participation.

Keywords: immigrants; rural school; inclusion; participation; local agency

## **Introduction**

Global migration brings new challenges and opportunities for schools around the world, as they are becoming more diverse in terms of pupils' mother tongues, home language practices, ethnicities, religions, and sociocultural resources. In case of Iceland, this is a comparatively new reality, as the rapid, demographic shift started only two decades ago. In the year 2000, 2.6% of the population were immigrants (Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015) and by 2016, with second-generation immigrants included, the total percentage of immigrants reached 10.7% (Haraldsson, 2018). Most immigrants in Iceland come from Europe, including Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Denmark (Haraldsson, 2018). The share of children with a foreign mother tongue in Icelandic compulsory schools increased from 3.1% in 2004 to 8.2% in 2015 (Haraldsson, 2018). Most of them had Polish, Philipino, English, Lithuanian and Thai mother tongues (Ministry of Welfare, 2016). 63.3% of these pupils lived in the Reykjavik area and 36.7% elsewhere in Iceland (Haraldsson, 2018).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the right of all children and youth to participation in decision-making in any area affecting their lives, including education (United Nations, 1989). However, this right tends to remain at the level of rhetoric. In case of immigrant pupils, educational policies and curricula often focus on host language proficiency and culture, rather than implementing a lens of inclusion and participation of all pupils, as argued by Gay (2000), Guðmundsson (2013) and Tran (2015). According to the latest National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools in Iceland, compulsory schools are obliged to work towards inclusion of all pupils and address their diverse academic and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012), similarly to the local laws in other Nordic countries. In praxis, a recent research in Finland (Lakkala, 2019) and in Sweden (Rosvall and Öhrn, 2014) indicates that inclusive view of education is constantly questioned and has not been implemented to a satisfying extent yet. Moreover, despite differences in educational systems and in patterns of immigration in the Nordic countries, local studies demonstrate exclusion of immigrant children and youth in Finland (Holm and Londen, 2010), Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Guðmundsson, Beach and Vestel, 2013; Von Brömssen and Rodell Olgaç, 2010).

While most of the educational research has revealed marginalisation of pupils with immigrant backgrounds, some studies present success stories from pupils and schools at different educational levels (Coard, 2005; Gundara, 2000). Still, most of the research focuses on the situation of immigrant pupils in urban and/or highly populated by immigrant communities and its findings may not represent the diverse realities and experiences in other communities. This is evident in Iceland, where most studies in the field are conducted in schools with high share of immigrant pupils and with immigrant units and focus on challenges the pupils and the schools are facing in the particular context. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration different demographics and characteristics of the local communities and provide research from across the country to deepen understanding of the diversity of experiences in the rapidly changing Icelandic society.

This paper reports on a case study in one compulsory school in a rural area in Iceland, which has only a few immigrant pupils and no special policy regarding their matters. The purpose of this study was to explore how a rural school understands and works for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils.

## The context of the study

Since extensive immigration is a relatively new issue in the Icelandic society, the use of different concepts for naming immigrants and immigrant pupils is problematic. In the past, members of Icelandic population were grouped mostly according to citizenship and the land of birth. These groups had however some limitations, because, for example, many Icelanders had a child while studying abroad (Garðarsdóttir and Hauksson, 2011). In the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012), rather than using a word 'immigrant' other concepts, including: 'pupil with a foreign background' or 'pupil with another mother tongue than Icelandic' are applied. However, in this study I apply the term 'immigrant pupil', to comply with the terminology used widely in the research, especially in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the term 'immigrant pupil' is understood here as an individual who has immigrant parent(s) and was born abroad.

Currently, there are 177 primary schools in Iceland. Majority of them, 74, is located in the capital area and 62% of the total number of pupils attend these schools (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2016). One of the biggest concerns regarding immigrant pupils in Iceland is their language proficiency. The current National Curriculum for the first time includes a clause that compulsory schools in Iceland are required both to support the acquisition of Icelandic, but also to strengthen immigrant pupils' mother tongue (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Yet to date, there are no obligatory courses for current and prospective teachers (of different subjects) on how to work with pupils for whom Icelandic is not a first language, which often results in teachers' insecurity in working with immigrant pupils (see e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2017). Moreover, Icelandic schools have autonomy in how they work with immigrant pupils in terms of letting them join mainstream class immediately or begin in a separate immigrant unit, supporting acquisition of Icelandic and/or maintenance and development of pupils' mother tongues. There has been a pressure towards more structured and detailed curriculum that would better guide teachers in their work (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). The capital city, Reykjavik, which has the highest number of immigrants, has recently implemented a new policy about school integration and work with immigrant pupils that emphasises diverse teaching methods, support of active bilingualism and cooperation with parents (Reykjavíkurborg, 2014).

In 2006, the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs conducted a research and prepared a report on pupils with immigrant background in primary and secondary schools in Iceland, with an emphasis on rural areas. The survey included questions such as: Is your school prepared for receiving a child with immigrant background? Does a child receive special Icelandic classes? Does a child receive mother tongue classes? Does a child receive any other service? The data from questionnaires showed that generally children with immigrant background in rural areas of Iceland received some special Icelandic classes. On the other hand, they did not get assistance in maintaining or developing their mother tongue and neither were they offered services other than the regular ones, including counselling and psychological assistance. According to the report, neither schools nor municipalities cooperated in the field of immigrant issues (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006). No similar data has been collected in the last decade.

## Theoretical background and state of the art

### Inclusive education

According to the social justice perspective, people and their different capacities, characteristics and backgrounds should be “celebrated and valued, not quashed, ignored or assimilated” (Ryan and Rottmann, 2007, p. 15). This concept does not support the idea of treating everyone the same, because such approach may, unintentionally, increase already existing inequalities. Rather, it advocates that individuals be approached according to their needs and abilities. The social justice perspective is intertwined with the concept of inclusion, understood in this paper as an ongoing process of responding to and valuing a diverse group of pupils. Inclusion aims at increasing learning opportunities and social participation for all pupils, by reducing segregation, which excludes or groups pupils by gender, socioeconomic class, learning abilities or nationality (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2009). One way to investigate immigrant pupils’ inclusion is to look into funds of knowledge they bring to school (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) and into how they are valued within educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rodriguez (2007) uses the concept of resources, which she characterises as personal strengths and qualities that emerge from and shape life experiences. Similarly, Wertch (1998) considers resources as mediational tools to act in the world and draw upon in the process of learning, meaning making and empowering of pupils.

Several studies on/with immigrant pupils were conducted in Iceland in recent years. Case studies in several urban compulsory schools indicate that the schools developed effective procedures to meet the needs of immigrant pupils and had a clear vision for teaching and learning, based on active participation, collaboration and communication with parents (Ólafsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir and Hansen, 2012; Ragnarsdóttir and Hansen, 2014). Moreover, findings from Icelandic studies suggest that using immigrant pupils’ resources, including experience, knowledge, abilities and interests, should be recognised and nurtured to support pupils’ learning and promote their well-being and success (Guðjónsdóttir, Gísladóttir and Wozniczka, 2015; Guðjónsdóttir and Karlsdóttir, 2010). Research on teachers’ perspective on the situation of immigrant pupils shows teachers’ concern with immigrant pupils’ well-being and a will to respond to their abilities and needs on the one hand (Karvelsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir, 2010) and teachers’ doubts whether they are sufficiently prepared and supported to work with immigrant pupils on the other hand (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). Studies built on interviews with immigrant pupils, mainly in urban areas, suggest that they experience marginalization and that their contributions to schools are not organised or undervalued (Magnúsdóttir, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Tran, 2015). Various research in Iceland indicates also that immigrant pupils lack academic vocabulary necessary to fully comprehend what is being taught and participate in the classroom (Ólafsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Þórðardóttir and Júlíusdóttir, 2012). The support they receive in Icelandic and their mother tongues is often insufficient and varies between schools and municipalities in terms of structure and numbers of hours and financing allocated (Dánielsdóttir and Skogland, 2017).

Indeed, school is often considered as one of key spaces where issues of inclusion, cultural hybridity, multiculturalism and other forces of change meet a certain resistance (Bourdieu 1998; Dyre, 2001). However, it is argued that research in school urban areas, where the “population is much more diverse

in terms of immigration and the possibilities this might give” cannot be generalized (Andersen and Sand, 2011, p. 29). Hargreaves, Kvalsund and Galton (2009) claim that urban schools settings tend to be selected for educational research and its results usually taken for granted and as a norm. At the same time, it has been argued that while researching pupils’ lives and evaluating processes and outcomes of learning, teaching and schooling it is important to consider and understand local socio-demographic conditions (Andersen and Sand, 2011; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2009; Theobald and Herley, 2009).

### **Rurality and local agency**

The concepts of ‘rural’ and of ‘rural schools’ are subject to scholarly debate and there are numerous definitions of rural and urban areas, as well as of a countryside. There is no joint definition of a ‘rural area’ in the Nordic countries that would include Iceland, but when it comes to ‘rural schools’, most definitions refer to the number of enrolled pupils, and are either setting a limit of pupils (see e.g. Sörlin, 2005) or stating that it is any school with few pupils and teachers. Another characteristic of a rural school could be the presence of multi-grade teaching (see e.g. Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009). In this paper, a rural school is any school that has no more than fifty pupils and has at least one multi-grade classroom.

De Lima (2007) points out that the research on rurality and ethnicity has been evolving significantly since the 90s, from focusing on the rural areas as exclusionary, portraying minority groups in rural areas as homogeneous to exploring the role of place and context in creating diverse experiences and influencing one’s identity. Indeed, the role of the local agency - the capacity to act in any given environment is a crucial concept when investigating developments in rural areas (Árnason and Skúlason, 2016). The agency does not only mean being ready for a change (the growing diversity in the community in this case) but rather enacting transformation. This requires being open and curious toward new influences, people and habits and using own resources in creative and versatile ways of responding to the change. It entails also the ability to engage with differences of individuals living in the area in order to create a sense of togetherness (Árnason and Skúlason, 2016; Uusitalo and Assmuth, 2013).

In a recent joint study in Norway, Sweden and Finland the focus was in particular on mapping the current situation in rural schools from the perspective of responding to the needs of pupils with special educational needs. The study indicated that all seven investigated rural schools, regardless of location, were examples of learning environments where inclusion and diversity existed as an integral and natural part of the school. This diversity was displayed in teachers’ creative solutions, including the use of local community and environment as an educational resource, which compensated for the lack of diverse teachers or access to services (Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016). On the other hand, the reality of being a teacher in a rural school differs from the one of an urban teachers. Rural teachers tend to handle different administrative and organisational issues, as well as deal with challenges or possible conflicts with the community all by themselves (McHenry-Sorber and Schafft, 2014). Finally, various studies suggest that there is more parental involvement in rural schools than it is in urban schools (Thelin and Solstad, 2005). In Iceland, there is a lack of research with rural children and youth, and in particular with immigrant pupils. However, a few studies that investigated the social role of schools and inclusive education in rural settings in Iceland demonstrated the ability of Icelandic rural schools to

adapt to rapid socioeconomic changes, create opportunities for community members and be an active force in the local sociocultural life (Ásgeirsdóttir, 2002; Ásgeirsdóttir, 2007).

In this paper, we take the stance that as researchers we should try to situate the particular school and its inclusive practices within the community, to investigate the importance of the context (Hargreaves, 2009; Pini, Carrington and Adie, 2014). Therefore, we use the concept of possible agency enacted in the particular context as a critical lens in data analysis (Corbett, 2007).

## **Methods**

This research is a case study aimed at gathering first-hand information and gaining a profound understanding of one's reality rather than generalisation (Esterberg, 2002; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

### **Participants**

For this case study, a rural school with relatively few immigrant pupils was chosen using opportunistic sampling (Creswell, 2008). Lava community is an area with approximately 400 inhabitants situated in the south of Iceland. There are two bigger employers in agriculture and several tourist-related services in the area. Seeking work in neighbour municipalities, where the opportunities for diverse employment matching education and competences are greater, is also quite popular. There is an insufficient supply of housing and public transport in the area, which might deter immigrants from moving there. Yet, those immigrants who live in the community seem to be welcomed and some of them are active participants in community's social and artistic life. The only compulsory school and preschool in the area are located in the same building. 40 children were enrolled in the compulsory school in the school year 2015/2016, three of them had an immigrant background. Ten employees, including eight employees with a teacher degree, worked in the compulsory school department. None of the employees had an immigrant background. The staff retention in the Lava compulsory school has always been comparatively small and majority of its employees have been working in the school for more than five years. The school did not have any policy regarding working with multicultural pupils, but preparing of such policy was, according to the school principal, on the agenda for the coming months.

Three pupils - Tom (8), Lisa (12) and Laura (13) were selected in cooperation with the school principal and agreed to participate in the study. So did their teachers and the school principal. Lisa and Laura were born in continental Europe, while Tom comes from the Middle East. While Tom has arrived in Iceland a few months prior to the study and had only attended Icelandic educational settings, Lisa and Laura had already some educational experience abroad. Due to the small size of Icelandic population and rural communities, we decided not to disclose participants' countries of origin or any further details that might help in revealing their identities.

### **Data collection**

The data collection took place in the spring term of 2016. The pupils were observed in different classes for three school days and then interviewed. The visits were repeated to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Carspecken, 1996). We employed the Visit Guide, built on the ideas of Caroline Moore (1995)

and adjusted to Icelandic context by Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir and Sigríður Pétursdóttir (2003). It is a tool for teachers, administrators, as well as for researchers to see diverse, and sometimes elusive dimensions of schooling. It is divided into two parts; the first one provides a space and structure for the observer to write field notes while being in the educational setting (including structure of the school and information about school's mission and goals and whether and how they are displayed in practice); the second part is to be completed afterwards and it encourages an observer to reflect holistically and synthesize what she learned during the observation into the school profile.

Lisa and Laura chose to be interviewed together. Instead of using an interpreter, which is considered challenging and often limited (Berman and Tyyskä, 2011), the story-crafting was applied to encourage Tom who did not feel confident in any language planned for interviews (Icelandic and English) to tell his own story in an informal way. This strategy is helpful in language development and increases self-respect and sense of inclusion (Lulle and Assmuth, 2013). It began by Anna introducing an imaginative pupil of a similar age and background to Tom's and him gradually opening up and contributing his own ideas and experiences. The story was discussed with Tom to give him a chance to explain it and go in more detail.

Pupils' teachers and school principal were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of observed practices and interactions. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes and was semi-structured. We used interview protocol with a set of questions, based on questions prepared for the *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice* (LSP) project (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015) and a space for brief notes as a backup. However, we allowed for flexibility and tailored the length, content and model of interviews to the participants' preferences and abilities (Lichtman, 2010).

### **Data analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and the visual data described in line with the characteristics of a qualitative inquiry. The simultaneous thematic analysis consisted of several stages, including: becoming familiarised with data, generating initial codes, looking for themes among codes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). We were interested in searching for patterns of meanings across participants, practices and relationships (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Each theme was developed in relation to the research question and the other themes, so that together they could provide a coherent picture of patterns in the collected data. We made sure to provide extracts from across the data, in order to show the breadth of each theme (Sandelowski, 1994). The excerpts have been translated into English when necessary after data analysis.

### **Data protection and ethical considerations**

The Data Protection Authority has been informed of the purpose and details of the research and the anonymity of the participants ensured during the entire study period. The written permission to conduct the research was collected from teachers and parents of pupils and informed assent from pupils obtained.



## Findings

Below is an account of the first visit to the Lava school:

I was immediately assisted by one of the teachers and brought to the teacher's room, where I could observe and listen to teachers' interactions. I noticed that the atmosphere was relaxed. Information for the coming days was available on the whiteboard and teachers were going together over the schedule of the day. This, as I was told, was a typical start of the day in the school. As soon as a real school bell rang, I was led by Sóley, a supervisory teacher, to a classroom [Supervisory teachers are, more than other school personnel, responsible for their pupils' studies and general welfare and play crucial role in cooperation between school and home]. When we entered, I noticed a group of children sitting in a circle on a carpet. Sóley pointed out at Tom. In total there were eight pupils in the classroom, two girls and six boys, accompanied by Sóley and another person, Helgi, who was immediately presented to me as a temporary assistant to Tom. I looked carefully around me and noticed that classroom walls were covered with pupils' drawings, including rules of "do's" and "don't's" of being a friend, alphabet and numbers. I could notice that above the Tom's desk there was his photo, together with his phone number, alphabet, numbers and some drawings. I was invited to join the group in the circle. Later, Sóley asked us to introduce ourselves, by saying our name, age, where we live and come from. I found out that one pupil was in her second grade, while all remaining pupils were in their first grade. I explained the purpose of my visit and they accepted me as a guest. When I revealed my origin, they replied with enthusiasm that two more pupils beside Tom had one parent of an immigrant origin as well. Sóley began to discuss the schedule of the day with pupils, by using a printed document with drawings. We all listened with anticipation. (Anna, Field notes from Lava school, February 2016)

The data analysis provided a meaningful and coherent picture of overarching themes of how a rural school understands and works for inclusion and participation of immigrant pupils and its impact on immigrant pupils' academic and social experiences of inclusion. The themes: *Acknowledgement of pupils' resources and needs; Teachers' inclusive and democratic practices; Pupils' participation; and Enacting transformation* are presented below.

### **Acknowledgment of pupils' resources and needs**

Since acknowledging pupils' language and knowledge resources may be considered as a first step to inclusive education, we were interested in finding out whether and how these resources of immigrant pupils were untapped in the Lava school. Sóley explained:

I know that they speak mother tongue at home. I'm not sure whether they work on it especially, which is of course important when it comes to vocabulary and comprehension of concepts in the future... It was so great, I, we went to the conference in Reykjavik last fall and we attended all seminars related to literacy and two seminars

that were about immigrant children and I found it very important to listen to the researchers who studied concepts' comprehension and how important it is to have these concepts in your mother tongue. (Sóley)

Teachers understood the importance of mother tongue in language and comprehension development. Birna, a special education needs teacher, discussed the importance of strengthening pupils' mother tongue. When discussing the language proficiency of Laura and Lisa, she mentioned:

Thanks to the small size of the school, we don't have to wait until a child gets a diagnosis of having any problem, we can start immediately to offer him or her extra support rather than to wait. [...] We've heard about a woman in the neighbouring municipality who was teaching their mother tongue. She has been living in Iceland for many years and she was already very good in Icelandic, so she came, and she took care of the teaching, once or twice a week (Birna)

When asked if getting an approval from the municipality to get an extra support for the girls was difficult, she explained:

We knew they don't have to do that, they are not obliged to do that, we knew it, but we could use the argument that it is important to both maintain the mother tongue and learn Icelandic. And it helped that I had just finished the course at the university and learnt about the importance of it (Birna)

Similarly, the teachers acknowledged Tom's needs and resources. Fjóla, the school principal, said: "We've noticed that Tom was doing so well in the classroom. So, rather than taking him out of his mainstream class, we decided to get a teacher's assistant for him, because he is so young and he finds it uncomfortable to be taken away from his friends".

Among the learning materials that Tom and Helgi, the teacher's assistant prepared together we have noticed a memory game with photographs that Tom made of items that he was surrounded by at home and in the school. Helgi explained:

He loves games, so we decided to do something like that. So, he took pictures and when we play it, each time he turns the picture over, he has to say what it is in Icelandic. Sometimes he does it also in his mother tongue. Other children like it too. (Helgi)

Indeed, the personnel in the Lava school used various creative ways to reveal and use pupils' resources to bridge their background and knowledge, and at the same time, to support their learning process.

### **Teachers' inclusive and democratic practices**

Teachers in different classes, including arts and physical education, had high expectations for all their pupils, in line with the national curriculum. None of the teachers talked about immigrant pupils as of a problem or in terms of deficiency, but rather as of resourceful members of a diverse learning environment. They were supportive, but at the same time they let pupils experience things and seek answers on their own. The importance of Helgi's presence was observed when pupils were learning

about forms in the math class. First, the teacher and pupils sat in a circle and discussed forms together, and later the pupils were asked to work in pairs. In this case, Tom practised vocabulary related to different forms together with Helgi. I have noticed that both Helgi and Tom were very patient and calm. Helgi went over each exercise several times, spoke slowly, used repetitions, asked questions and encouraged Tom to find answers. Tom, primarily unsecure about several words, including 'thick' and 'thin', found the correct meaning of the words and in the end, answered Helgi by constructing whole sentences, for example: "This is a big, red, thick circle".

On many occasions, we could see how teachers' use opportunities for discussing and/or practising with pupils the ideas of equality and democracy, one of the fundamental pillars on which the national curriculum guidelines are based. During art classes, when pupils were working on creating baby mobiles, Ragnhildur, an art teacher used the opportunity to incorporate these ideas. When she asked children to switch the coloured pieces that they have picked up with eyes shut so that everyone could use different colours while constructing own baby mobiles. Pupils welcomed the idea and then exchanged the pieces until everyone was satisfied with his/her pieces.

The school has recently incorporated PALS (*Peer assistant learning strategies*) to work with the youngest pupils (for details see e.g. Maheady and Harper, 2003; McMaster, Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Sóley noticed that this method was very helpful:

At the beginning, those who were better at reading found the method slow and boring, but now they are all enjoying it and supporting each other. And it is also good for the pupils who are just starting to learn the language, so I hope we can use it for the entire school. (Sóley)

One time we observed pupils during PALS, as they were practising the letter 'o'. After group activity, pupils sat down in pairs by the desks around the classroom. They were practising pronunciation and reading of the letter 'o' and various words and listening to each other. They were working hard on the task, correcting and praising each other but at the same time smiling. Tom was proud to say "I'm finished" when he managed to finalise the exercise.

One of the biggest challenges mentioned by teachers was that the communication and cooperation between teachers and sharing experiences and good practices was often insufficient. To improve that, they decided to work in teams and have regular meetings to discuss these issues.

### **Pupils' participation**

Lisa, Laura and Tom all said that they felt comfortable around school personnel. The atmosphere in the classrooms was positive and children and school personnel seemed to know each other well. During one math class with Ásdís, pupils were divided into two groups of four and invited to play Ludo, a game through which they could practise counting and democracy. Tom was clearly an active participant and a part of the group, joking and laughing with others. Helgi commented: "I can see a huge progress in this short time. It's great to see him how he blends with others, how he becomes one of them. He is a fighter; he loves to play games and to read".

At another point, when leaving the classroom, we noticed a drawing and said: "This is a nice picture" I could hear one girl saying: "Tom drew this one. He is so good at drawing". This short, unconstrained statement of acknowledgement of Tom and his talent was another indicator of how Tom is perceived by his peers. This was again reflected while observing children during after-school activities. A group of pupils of different age sat by the table, Tom among them. All pupils, except Tom, chose drawing sheets to colour, while Tom chose a blank paper. Children started to colour their drawings, while Tom began to draw a house, tree, birds and skies with a huge precision. When he was almost finished, his friend Matti asked him: "Whom are you drawing it for?". Tom replied: "You". Matti repeated: "Is it for me, really?". Tom answered with a smile on his face: "Yes". When they finished drawing, they exchanged the sheets and Matti gave Tom a hug.

Laura and Lisa said that they were doing very well at school and teachers confirmed that they were strong learners. Nevertheless, although Lisa claimed: "We are not treated differently by our teachers because we are foreigners, maybe because we don't use our mother tongue that much", they felt socially excluded from their female peers. While discussing this issue with Birna, she explained:

We encouraged the girls to interact with others after school. But also, they live in such a community here that there are long distances between places, so kids here don't have as many interactions as kids in towns. And it was more difficult when they got older and we are sad about it, that the interactions are so scarce [...] What is more difficult with them, and this might be related to one's personality, is that it is difficult to get them to ask for help. Though we tried to explain them that there is no shame to ask for it. (Birna)

At the same time, the girls emphasised that their relations with male peers were positive, and observations revealed that Lisa and Laura talked more with boys at school.

### **Enacting transformation**

The study provided many examples of the local agency of the Lava community. Sóley told us a story of how the school took the initiative to respond to the arrival of Tom:

We had some changes in the leadership before Christmas. So, there was much more to do for our special education needs teacher who worked with Tom from time to time. So, we decided to ask the municipality whether there was some money to employ the assistant. We are very lucky, we receive a lot of help from the municipality. They are very good to us. And it worked out perfectly, because Tom used to sit by my side, but then I couldn't have as much discussion with him as I wanted to, as Helgi can. I'm not sure how it's going to be in the future, but this is the method that really works. He can construct whole sentences for example. It's something that I could dream would happen by the end of this school year, but he can already do it. (Sóley)

Enacting transformation may however result difficult in some contexts. Ragnhildur argued that:

It is all about how the local community receives these pupils, it plays a huge role. I know communities that are open toward immigrants and those who are totally closed and that let you hear it. And this is a situation of Glacial community and Seashore community. The Glacial community has always been very open toward immigrants or you could say, multicultural. Well, there are immigrants coming to the Seashore community as well, but they hear every day: "Speak Icelandic. You are not trying hard enough!" (Ragnhildur)

Fjóla agreed on the importance of building positive relationship with the local environment:

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)

Fjóla explained that Tom's parents received assistance in finding job when they first came to Iceland. The interconnectedness and positive relationships between school, municipality personnel and elderly members of the local community was also observed during everyday shared lunch at school.

## Discussion

Findings suggest that the characteristics of Lava school and community play an important role in influencing experiences of inclusion of immigrant pupils, similarly to previous research (e.g. Hargreaves, 2009). Although the school did not have any extensive experience nor a special agenda regarding issues of immigrant pupils, the school leaders and teachers used the ideas of inclusion to build on the resources of pupils and to involve all of them in the process of learning, as suggested by Ainscow (2005) and Rodriguez (2007).

The school seemed to be an example of a learning environment where inclusion was displayed in teachers' creative solutions and sense of togetherness, which compensated for their lack of experience and/or professional preparation. These findings are in line with previous studies in Finland (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009) and joint studies in Finland, Norway and Sweden (Pettersson *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the Lava school personnel was encouraged by the principal to seek additional courses and training that would help in developing knowledge and skills necessary for work with immigrant pupils, which is in opposition to the experiences of teachers from another Icelandic study (Gunnþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). This, together with employing an assistant, was highly supported by the authorities from the local municipality. Unlike examples presented in other studies, mostly from the capital area (see e.g. Ragnarsdóttir, 2015), the economic crisis of 2008 did not affect the financial support for the Lava school.

The support and caring relations with the Lava school personnel seemed to have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging. Despite the fact that Laura and Lisa felt excluded from their female peers, they had positive experiences in school and felt appreciated their teachers. Moreover, neither pupils

themselves, nor the school personnel considered them as immigrants or 'others' and Tom managed to develop his language and academic skills and to become an active participant in the classroom in less than six months of attending the school. These findings do not reflect the strong signs of marginalisation and undervaluation encountered in Magnúsdóttir (2010) and Ragnarsdóttir (2010) studies in urban areas in Iceland. Rather, the findings second the argument from previous research (e.g. Aberg-Bengtsson, 2009), that one-to-one teaching and working with small groups of pupils tend to lead to safe atmosphere and a good relationship between individuals at school and, as a result, support a positive school environment. Although Fjóla's, the principal's answer indicated that some matters might be easier to deal with in a smaller community, this might not always be the case, as experienced by Ragnhildur, the art teacher.

Finally, the findings suggest that it is not only the Lava school, but the entire community, including local municipality, that work together for inclusion of immigrant pupils. They do so by engaging with differences of individuals living in the area and approaching each one according to their needs and abilities, as argued previously by Árnason and Skúlason (2016), as well as by Uusitalo and Assmuth (2013). Immigrant pupils' participation is encouraged and acted upon and the growing diversity in the local community seem to bring forward positive and sometimes unexpected outcomes for all. Yet, there are some concerns as to the fact that teachers in the Lava school did not have enough time and space for sharing the knowledge and cooperation. This is in line with the findings from other Icelandic studies (see e.g. Ragnarsdóttir, 2015) as well as from the recent TALIS study (OECD, 2019) and might result in fragmented implementation and in the lack of sustainability of inclusive practices in the school.

## **Conclusions**

The study suggests that teachers in the Lava school are the key factors in the integration process of immigrant pupils and together with the characteristics of the Lava school and community play an important role in influencing pupils' experiences. The support of local municipality and caring relations with the school personnel have a positive impact on pupils' feeling of belonging and encourage their participation. Although it is challenging for schools and teachers to have an impact on demography or resources available in the local community, the Lava school showed initiative and the capacity to adapt to change. Despite lack of extensive experience or special agenda regarding immigrant pupils, the school principal and teachers use the ideas of inclusion to involve all pupils in the process of learning.

The empirical material of this study is small to allow for a more general conclusions, as it is limited only to one school, but it is part of a larger multiple-case study that aims at researching immigrant pupils in diverse contexts in Iceland. We could, however, argue that this limitation is outweighed by the strength of drawing attention to the perspectives of immigrant pupils and their teachers. Obtaining such knowledge is essential to inform the discussion on how to work towards inclusion of all pupils and respond to immigrant pupils' needs in diverse contexts.

This case study is also important for the more general debate in Iceland and internationally on the pupils' diversity and challenges and opportunities it brings to schools. Iceland is currently experiencing

a growing number of political refugees and asylum seekers, coming mostly from Middle East, as well as from African and Balkan countries – unlike the previous streams of economic immigrants mostly from Europe, America and Asia. Some quota refugee families (accepted and invited by the Icelandic government) settle in rural municipalities, so it is important to expand the research in the field to include these new members of the society. Moreover, future research could focus on the sustainability of inclusive teacher practices and the importance of teachers' continuous cooperation in developing practices responding to the needs of diverse pupils.

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