**The Icelandic Educational system**

Most students in Iceland enter the educational system at age 2 in Leikskoli, an early childhood education school. A high number of students continue to further education and higher education. Mandatory education between the ages of 6 to 16 is provided by Grunnskolar (Basic Education Schools) who follow a national curriculum. There is very little involvement by the private or non-profit sector and very few special schools. There is some standardised testing including PISA. While special schools are rare there is usually a special needs department within mainstream schools.

Half of the nation lives outside the capital region. Rural areas are often poorer and have difficulties in attracting qualified staff in education, health and social care. Nearly all specialised social and health services are based in Reykjavik. Studies indicate that parents to children with disabilities or additional needs are frequently dissatisfied with the support offered in basic education schools.

**The composition of Basic Education Schools**

The number of students identified as needing additional support increased by 55% between 2005 and 2012. By 2012 26% of pupils in foundation schools received additional learning support, of those 63% had a formal diagnosis of specific learning difficulties, psychological, behavioural or developmental disorders.[[1]](#footnote-1)16% of all pupils had both a formal diagnosis and received additional learning support. The gender distribution of students was relatively even. Yet 22% of boys had received a formal diagnosis of learning or behavioural difficulties, compared to 11% of girls.

37% of students who required additional learning support received that support within mainstream classes, 45% received support both within and outside mainstream classes. 17% were educated exclusively outside of mainstream classes, often in a special department within the school. There were more students with a formal diagnosis in the higher levels of basic education schools.

There are some fluctuations in the number of students with a formal diagnosis and/or receiving additional support between regions. This fluctuation could either be due to a genuine variation in frequency or it could indicate an inconsistency in standards and procedure. A teacher is classified as a special needs education teacher if he/she spends 50% or more of their working hours providing additional learning support or special needs education. In 2012 most special teachers were 55 or older. The number of teachers was stable from 2005 to 2012 but the number of unqualified teachers[[2]](#footnote-2) reduced from 20% to 4% and the number of teaching assistants increased by 19% with slight regional fluctuations.

**Attitudes towards inclusive schools.**

Research is consistently demonstrating that attitudes towards the policy of inclusive education are mixed. Greater financing, time and specialist knowledge within schools is needed for the policy to be successful. Teachers feel that the policy has increased pressure and changed the nature of their job. Greater expertise is demanded and more time is devoted to paperwork. They feel unable to provide additional support to the few students with special needs without neglecting other students.

There is a more positive attitude in smaller districts. While they did encounter difficulties in attracting specialised employees and accessing services. The smaller class sizes enabled greater support within mainstream classes. According to a large study conducted from 2008 to 2013, 93% of parents believe that education that meets every individual students needs is vital yet only half of those believed that the teachers had the capacity to do so. Nearly half of qualified teachers agreed with this assessment. 62% of parents and nearly half of teachers think it is important that all children are able to study in their local school regardless of disability, health or Icelandic language skills. 24% of students in basic education schools believed that children with developmental disorders should be in a mainstream class in their local school, 22% believed that they should be in a special department within a mainstream school. Parents to children with special needs stated that they did not feel that their children were given the same opportunities as other students. A common perception was that there was no place for children with special needs within a rigid educational system that is incapable of accommodating diversity.

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

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

I have since transferred to a smaller school with a higher teacher to student ratio. Although I have a higher number of students with special needs. I am better able to accommodate their needs within the mainstream class. For example when a couple of students with autism joined our class we prepared one of the smaller rooms for them to take a break from the stimulus of the class, it is not a time out for bad behaviour. The time out room is an option for everyone, not just for them. As the students with autism are in a mainstream class they have developed friendships and the other students seem to understand and accept their differences.

Due to the higher number of staff I am able to divide the students into smaller groups, for specific subjects and assignments. The groups are fluid and not exclusionary and allow me to provide the additional support to those who need it without it being conspicuous to their peers. In this school the policy of inclusive education has led to changes that have benefitted everyone.

What is needed for the policy to work in Iceland is more finance, higher staffing numbers and specialists such as developmental therapists within schools. However, children are not statistics, the policy of inclusive education should be the norm but first and foremost we need to be able to meet the individualistic needs of each student. We must have options for those exceptions whose best interests are not served within mainstream schools.

**Conclusion**

Only 32% of parents and 44% of teachers agreed that the policy of inclusive education has improved the education system. The policy of inclusive education was a part of a wider reform of the Icelandic education system that included revising standardised testing and increasing the educational requirements of teachers both in early childhood education and in basic education schools. However, the policy of inclusive education increased the workload of teachers without providing them with the means to achieve the new standards. The legal rights of children and persons with disabilities are well established through national legislations and international obligations. However, the resources provided to the educational, health and social services were not increased in line with their new obligations. Iceland does not lack resources needed. It has a high number of professionals and quality higher education and research available in the fields of social services, education and disability studies. Reforms are needed at ministry level to increase the budget to enable schools and teachers to reach their full potential in providing education for everyone.

**Sources**

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1. Students without a formal diagnosis include students whose first language is not Icelandic and need additional learning and language support on that basis. That number may also include students who are going through a diagnostic process or on a waiting list after being referred, yet are already provided with some additional support. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In recent years the government has introduce various measures to reduce the percentage of unqualified teachers while simultaneously raising the education requirements. Currently a person needs a MEd to be considered a qualified teacher. This is a fairly new development. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)