Innovation, the Spice of Iceland’s School Life

by Keneva Kunz

The surest sign of autumn in Iceland is neither the red and gold leaves on trees and shrubs, nor the first fingers of ice stretching out across the puddles. It’s youngsters trotting along the streets bearing brightly colored school bags on their backs. This autumn in Húsavík, a fishing community of some 2,500 people in northern Iceland, all youngsters in the third grade will not only carry their books in their school bags but also sheet music and instruments. They are to take part in a special three-year project called “Music for Everyone,” a cooperative venture between the local elementary and music schools to involve all the pupils in music study.

“During the first year all pupils take an introductory course where they learn the rudiments of musical theory, play simple tunes on a recorder, and practice rhythmical routines,” explained Halldór Vaidimarsson, principal of the elementary school. “The following year, with the assistance and advice of teachers, they select instruments of their own choice.” Cooperation between the music school and the elementary school in Húsavík has long been close (the schools share the same premises and the teachers take their coffee in the same lounge), and some 50-60% of the pupils presently attend music lessons. But the new project aims at reaching every youngster, and the principal pointed out that the demands of learning
music encouraged other facets of the children’s development which were no less important than the academic ones.

On the conclusion of the project the children will be tested, and both their academic progress and attitudes towards the experiment and school in general will be scrutinized and compared with similar results in the same age group in other schools. And in coming years, as school draws to a close in late May, these youngsters will celebrate the end of the academic year and the beginning of their long, three-month summer holiday with a concert, in which literally every youngster in the class will be able to participate.

**Innovation Needs Encouragement**

New ideas and the means to put them into practice need support and encouragement in any situation. The experiment in universal music education was the result of a special cooperative project funded by a grant from the national Development Fund for Elementary Schools, which every year supports innovative projects proposed by individual teachers or teams, or entire schools. In charge of administering the fund is Hrúður Kjartansson, head of the Elementary Division of the Ministry of Education of Iceland. “The fact that we get applications for support each year amounting to between three and five times the funding we have to distribute,” Kjartansson points out, “says a lot about the interest shown by teachers in innovation, and perhaps the need for it.”

Funding for the coming year, the third year of the Fund’s operation, amounts to 10 million ISK (slightly less than $175,000) or the equivalent of about ten full-time teaching positions. Those in charge of selecting the projects to be supported, senior teachers and administrators from the teachers’ unions, the Universities and the Ministry, have given priority to language arts, environmental study, and practical or artistic subjects, such as music and handwork. Another smaller fund encourages nursery and kindergarten teachers to try out their new ideas, while for secondary schools support for new ideas is limited to subsidies for teachers who prepare new instructional materials.

**Education for a Developing Nation**

The school system in Iceland developed from the top downwards in the days when the Danish colony needed educated civil servants, such as ministers for the churches and lawyers to administrate. As a result the first schools taught mainly Latin and theology, and were only supplemented within the past hundred years by
gagnfraðaskólar (which literally means “practical schools”) for youths of about 12-17 and finally barnaskólar (schools for younger children). Icelanders are not only few in number (250,000 at the beginning of this year, double the population in 1945), they are also spread around the perimeter of a large country with rugged, mountainous terrain that has made communication and transportation a major problem through the ages.

As a result, the developing school system had its work cut out for it simply to provide all youngsters with the required instruction, and it is only in recent decades that educators have been able to turn their attention to further development and innovation. In 1974 new laws introduced wide-reaching changes to elementary schools which emphasized the need to provide all students with a basic education suited to their needs and which would encourage them to develop as active citizens in a democratic society. Ten years of school, from age six to sixteen, are compulsory for all children.

Many of the new school provisions were very ambitious, calling for extensive increases in special education, for instance, and introducing new emphases in almost all curriculum areas. Apart from the changes introduced by the new system there were also a few experiments made with open or flexible elementary schools and, more recently, with integrating school, nursery school, and after-school activities. Almost without exception, the impetus to try out new ideas has come from the schools themselves. Hrókur Kjartansson de-
scribed several of the projects recently supported by the Development Fund.

One fairly new, urban school in the Selás suburb of Reykjavík set up an interdisciplinary project to examine our man-made environment in contrast to the natural environment. In cooperation with several local architects, landscape architects and planners—who, as you can imagine, are not frequent guests in elementary schools—they looked at the positive and negative sides, both within and outside their school and community. In the end they attempted to determine what sort of an environment they themselves wanted and how they could contribute to creating it.

Rural and Urban Projects

Most schools have traditionally been in close contact with the community. In rural areas the school year is often shorter than the prescribed nine months, to allow youngsters to work at haying in the early summer and to take part in the traditional sheep round-up in the autumn. When the fjords of northeast Iceland teem with herring and the factories cannot handle the deluge, local secondary and even elementary schools are often closed for days or weeks while students help out with salting the catch. But organizing the actual curriculum of schools to reflect the reality of the pupils' lives and preparing them to take their place in the community has often been lacking.

Kjartansson continued:

Another Reykjavík school decided to replace the traditional language arts program, which includes spelling, reading and grammar, with a program built up of text readings. These texts were selected from a variety of media and involved a wide range of subjects, from pop music to ghost stories. They were read and discussed in class, with the teachers naturally mentioning many of the same points the youngsters would otherwise have been studying. For many of the pupils, who read little if at all outside of school, covering fairly lengthy texts was a new experience. A series of language arts tests taken by the youngsters in this and other schools showed afterwards that these youngsters had learned at least as well, and their attitude both towards the subject and towards school in general was much more positive.

Building on Local Initiative

Kjartansson maintained that this was perhaps enough reason in itself to proceed with innovative projects in schools. Involving both the students and teachers in creating something new cannot help but stir up interest. And, more often than not, ideas coming from the grass roots have some basis in local reality, as was the case in the town of Kirkjubæjarstaður on the south coast of Iceland. A special project to discover local traditions and introduce school youngsters to...
these was integrated with the town's preparations for a Festival of Culture, an annual event, held in one or another rural community each year. As a result, pupils made a large contribution to the official program, attended by the President of Iceland and the Minister of Education and Culture, and hundreds of other guests. The emphasis was local, and entertainment included dramatizations of folk tales and local events, and exhibitions of local art and history all organized and performed by school children, their parents and teachers in this small community of only 600 residents. The official continued:

I think it's very important that the ideas come from the people who plan to carry them out. We offer support in terms of assistance, and sometimes special summer courses for teachers interested in learning about or carrying out innovative work, but we don't control it. After the conclusion of the projects, those involved submit reports. We collect and edit them and publish them as a source of inspiration for others, which I think is also important. Naturally, some projects are less successful than others, but there is a lot to be learned even from those that turn out less favorably.

Since the Icelandic economy has been going through a periodic but severe downturn for the past several years, the government has made extensive cutbacks to the public sector, and education has not been spared. How can one expect innovation to thrive at a time when schools are trimming even their very necessary expenditures severely?

Kjartansson explained:

I think what we learn from experiments in education is perhaps even more important when we are cutting back and re-examining our institutions. Hard times force us to look for new possibilities, to see how we can restructure systems, and to look at whether we can save money in so doing.

Several of the experimental projects of former years have been developed into permanent curriculum options for elementary teachers, thus providing continuing fuel for educational development long after the original seed money has gone.

In this way innovative experiments can point the way for future developments: successes encourage others to follow, and mistakes are limited to a small scale. At a time when society is undergoing constant and scarcely predictable changes, and schools are expected to prepare pupils for a future one can only guess at, encouraging pioneers must be viewed as an investment well spent.

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