



Netla – Vef tímarit um uppeldi og menntun

## Sérít 2016 – Námsrými félagslegs réttlætis og menntunar án aðgreiningar/Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice

Menntavísindasvið Háskóli Íslands

Ritrynd grein birt 31. desember 2016

►► Yfirlit greina

Anh-Dao Tran, Samúel Lefever and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir

# Equitable Pedagogical Practice in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

## Perspectives of Teachers and Students in Upper Secondary Schools

► About the authors ► Key words

This article discusses the findings from a qualitative study in three Icelandic upper secondary schools which form part of the Nordic research project; *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries*. One of the aims of the study was to map teachers' contributions towards the positive outcomes of students with immigrant backgrounds in upper secondary schools in Iceland. This article explores teachers' perspectives about their teaching and their interaction with immigrant students at the upper secondary level as well as their students' school experiences.

The theoretical framework used in this study draws on the work of Banks et al. (2005), Cummins (1996), Gay (2000) and Nieto (2000) on culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education. The aim of culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education is to acknowledge and integrate the cultural knowledge, experiences and learning styles of ethnically diverse students in school instruction with the purpose of creating learning spaces that are relevant, supportive and effective for all students. Culturally responsive pedagogy includes teacher-student dialogue; valuing students' academic, language, social, and cultural backgrounds; teachers' high expectations of students; and inclusive pedagogical practices.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine teachers and twenty four students and former students from three upper-secondary schools. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling from the participating schools which, based on criteria used in the larger study, were judged to be successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. All the teachers were actively involved in teaching immigrant students; either as teachers of Icelandic as a second language or other subjects such as life skills, ethics, social studies or foreign languages. The students were purposefully selected by asking school principals and teachers to identify students who were considered to be examples of success. Former upper secondary students were selected through the snowballing method.

The findings of the study give insight into factors which impact on the teachers' pedagogical practices in culturally diverse classrooms. The teachers' diverse backgrounds gave them a greater understanding of multicultural issues and a sense of empathy for their immigrant students. The teachers recognized the importance of believing in students' capabilities, having high expectations for them and acknowledging their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They were also willing to take extra steps to assist and support students, both with schoolwork and issues in their personal lives. In this way they were instrumental in creating supportive, caring and inclusive learning environments for their students.

## Kennsluaðferðir í anda jafnréttis með fjölbreyttum nemendahópum: Sjónarhorn kennara og nemenda í framhaldsskólum

### ► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Í greininni er fjallað um helstu niðurstöður eiginlegs rannsóknarverkefnis í þremur framhaldsskólum. *Verkefnið er hluti af norræna rannsóknarverkefninu Námsrými félagslegs réttlætis og menntunar án aðgreiningar: Frásagnir um velgengni nemenda af erlendum uppruna og skóla á fjórum Norðurlöndum (2013-2015)*. Meginmarkmiðið er að kanna viðhorf kennara til kennslu og samskipti þeirra við nemendur af erlendum uppruna á framhaldsskólastigi, auk reynslu nemendanna af náminu. Fræðilegur grunnur verkefnisins byggist á skrifum Banks ofl. (2005), Cummins (1996), Gay (2000) og Nieto (2000) um menningarnæma kennslu og fjölmenningarlega menntun. Markmið menningarnæmrar kennslu og fjölmenningarlegrar menntunar er að viðurkenna og samþætta menningarlega þekkingu og reynslu sem fjölbreytilegur nemendahópur notar til að læra í skólanum í þeim tilgangi að búa til viðeigandi námsrými, styðja nám nemenda og gera skólustarf skilvirkt fyrir alla nemendur. Ítarleg einstaklingsviðtöl voru tekin við níu kennara og 24 ungmenni af erlendum uppruna. Helstu niðurstöður benda til þess að fjölbreyttur bakgrunnur kennara skapi betri skilning á málefnum innflytjenda. Kennararnir viðurkenna mikilvægi þess að trúá á getu nemenda, að hafa miklar væntingar til þeirra og viðurkenna menningar- og tungumálabakgrunn þeirra. Þeir voru einnig tilbúnir til að taka aukaskref til að aðstoða nemendur og styðja þá, bæði við nám og þætti í persónulegu lífi þeirra. Þannig voru þeir í lykilhlutverki við að skapa styðjandi námsumhverfi án aðgreiningar sem veitir nemendum umhyggju. *as they perceive it to be for “the others”; that is, the immigrant students, instead of for the student body as a whole.*

## Introduction

Icelandic society is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of languages, religions and backgrounds, and the number of students of minority backgrounds is simultaneously growing in the Icelandic education system. Findings from studies on the experiences of students of minority backgrounds in upper secondary schools in Iceland indicate that despite a few success stories, these students face many difficulties (Garðarsdóttir & Hauksson, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir, 2011; Tran, 2007; Tran, 2015; Tran & Ragnarsdóttir, 2013).

In this article we introduce and discuss findings from a study in three Icelandic upper secondary schools which form part of the Nordic research project; *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries* (LSP). The aim of the article is to explore teachers' perspectives and pedagogical practices with students of immigrant backgrounds. The article draws on data from interviews with nine teachers and twenty four students in three upper secondary schools in Iceland.

## Literature review

There is a growing but still limited number of research studies which look at the educational issues of immigrant students at the upper secondary school level in Iceland. In this article we use the definition of immigrant according to the OECD (2016), referring to persons who have migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence. In this study the upper secondary students of immigrant background have entered the Icelandic school system at different ages. Conclusions from the few studies that are available indicate that despite a few success stories, upper secondary students of immigrant background face many hurdles in the school system (Garðarsdóttir & Hauksson, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir, 2011; Tran, 2007; Tran, 2015; Tran & Ragnarsdóttir, 2013). Some studies have revealed lack of adequate teacher education and professional development concerning effective pedagogical practices with students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Aðalbjarnardóttir, Guðjónsdóttir, & Rúnarsdóttir, 2005; Karlsdóttir, 2013;

Tran, 2007, 2015). Tran's (2015) research concluded that teachers in Icelandic upper secondary schools perceived students of immigrant heritage as deficient in Icelandic language and culture. The students' discourse indicated that they struggled in the classrooms because the teachers did not have specific skills in applying culturally responsive pedagogy. According to Banks et al. (2005) and Giroux (2011), teachers' worldviews are influenced by their own environment, their experiences and who they are. Without self-reflection teachers projected their own worldviews onto the minority language students and saw them as deficient. They did not take into account the students' learning styles or their background knowledge and incorporate these in their pedagogical practice (Banks et al., 2005; Giroux, 2011).

Studies in Iceland also draw attention to more encouraging findings. Tran (2015) reported that one of the consistent positive experiences that immigrant students expressed was their appreciation of their teachers. They characterized their teachers as caring and helpful and praised them for their inclusive attitudes and creative teaching methods (Daníelsdóttir, 2009; Guðmundsson, 2013; Karlsdóttir, 2013; Tran, 2015). Students who managed to acquire proficiency in Icelandic usually chose to continue their education at upper secondary level or even embark on professional study at university level, but their educational paths were not easy and required considerable resilience and hard work (Tran, 2015).

The theoretical framework used in this paper draws on the work of Geneva Gay (2000) on culturally responsive teaching. This concept has also been theorized by Ladson-Billing (1995) as "cultural pedagogy," or by Nieto (2000) as "culture-specific teaching."

Gay views culturally responsive teaching as "teaching which centers classroom instruction in multiethnic cultural frames of reference" (Gay 2000, p xix). Teachers respond to students' cultural frames of reference by using the cultural knowledge, experiences and learning styles of ethnically diverse students in their teaching with the purpose of creating learning spaces that are more relevant and effective for them. According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive pedagogy is grounded on four pillars of practice – teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, culturally congruent instructional strategies.

Gay (2000) argues that culturally responsive teaching practices benefit students in a number of ways. They validate student worth by giving recognition to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds and taking into account different learning styles. They also build bridges between home and school experiences. By tapping into a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences and perspectives of students, culturally responsive teaching becomes multidimensional and encompasses curriculum content, learning environment, student-teacher relationships and instructional techniques. Culturally responsive teaching empowers students and enables them to become better human beings and more successful learners by increasing their self-confidence and willingness to participate. High expectations from teachers and support for students increase the likelihood of student achievement. Teachers can empower students through positive encouragement and by believing in them, providing them with resources and personal assistance, and by recognizing their achievements. In other words, culturally responsive teaching practices "encourage and enable students to find their own voices, to contextualize issues in multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become more active participants in shaping their own learning" (Gay, 2000, p. 35).

Culturally responsive teaching makes demands on teachers above and beyond those of traditional teaching. Teachers must take on roles and responsibilities which draw attention to and enhance the value of cultural diversity. Gay believes that teachers should act as cultural organizers and cultural mediators in culturally diverse classrooms. These roles entail:

- creating learning environments that recognize cultural and ethnic diversity
- providing opportunities for students to clarify their ethnic identity and honor other cultures
- giving students opportunities to freely express themselves and engage in critical dialogue

- developing positive cross-cultural relationships between students and reducing the proliferation of prejudice, stereotypes and racism.

2

Also central to Gay's beliefs about culturally responsive teaching is the power of caring. This is shown by teachers' concern for the emotional and social well-being of their students, as well as their academic achievement. Teachers who care about their students show their respect for them as individuals, have high expectations of them, and freely assist them with personal and academic matters. In return, students strive to meet their teachers' high expectations and perform accordingly in many ways; academically, socially, morally and culturally.

Research findings and conventional wisdom confirm the importance of the caring teacher-student relationship for academic achievement and personal development. Unfortunately, not all teachers recognize the cultural and personal worth of all students. Instead of recognizing and utilizing student diversity, some teachers expect all students to fit the same mold and conform to a predetermined set of cultural norms. Just as positive attitudes and high expectations encourage students to excel both academically and personally, negative teacher attitudes and expectations can have a damaging impact on students (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

Affirming diversity lies at the core of multicultural education. In other words, all differences, whether cultural, linguistic, religious, social, economic, racial or otherwise, should be recognized, respected and used as a basis for learning and teaching (Banks, 2007; Cummins et al., 2005; Nieto, 2000). Through positive recognition of student diversity, schools can ensure social justice and equality for all students. Teachers have a profound role in students' development. Instead of viewing students' differences as a problem or a deficiency, teachers should see them as an opportunity to broaden knowledge and understanding and enrich the learning of all students and teachers (Cummins, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Nieto (2000) proposes a model of multicultural education that has four levels of support: *tolerance*; *acceptance*; *respect*; and *affirmation, solidarity and critique*. *Tolerance* represents the lowest level of multicultural education and each subsequent level is a step above with regard to the strength of support it entails. In Nieto's view, *tolerance* means being able to endure differences, but not necessarily embrace them. This level of support is fragile because it can easily be reversed. However, the next level of support, *acceptance*, implies that differences are acknowledged and addressed. This can be done, for example, through programs that make students' languages and cultures visible in schools. The third level of support, *respect*, places even more emphasis on diversity by making it the basis of educational programs. Examples include offering bilingual programs and using students' values and experiences as the basis for their language and academic development. *Affirmation, solidarity and critique* are the highest level of support because the most powerful learning results when students confront and work together on issues of diversity. Since multicultural education is, in Nieto's words, "concerned with equity and social justice for all people, and because basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is inevitable" (p. 340). At the highest level of multicultural education conflict is not avoided - students work together to challenge and critique accepted beliefs and issues in order to come to a deeper understanding.

As the number of students with diverse backgrounds increases in our schools, the more important it becomes that all teachers are prepared to deal with the varying needs of those students. The responsibility for educating language minority students must be shared by all teachers, not only the few who have special training in bilingual education. Nieto (2002) points out the type of knowledge that teachers of language minority students should have:

- knowledge about second language acquisition and language development
- ability to adapt curriculum to minority language students
- awareness of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds
- competence in pedagogical approaches suitable for culturally diverse classrooms.

But above all, Nieto (2000, p. 196) argues, teachers must "change their attitudes towards the

students, their languages and cultures, and their communities.”

Nieto (2000) also stresses the importance of teachers' positive relationships with students - for both teachers and students. Students in her case studies mentioned several qualities and characteristics of teachers that had meaningful impact on them as students. Among them were pedagogical skills such as being able to make effective curricular and instructional accommodations and skills in multicultural communication and understanding. Caring and a willingness to help, even if not asked, were also important attributes in the eyes of students. Providing students with academic and/or personal assistance helps develop 'interpersonal networks' of support and shows that teachers care.

Students in Nieto's case studies also mentioned the positive role model that teachers of color or ethnic background provide them with. In schools where no or few teachers of diverse background exist, students of minority background can feel invisible or alone. Thus, teachers that share students' racial, cultural and ethnic background can have significant impact on students and enrich the school environment and curriculum (Nieto, 2000).

Like Gay, Nieto emphasizes the importance of teachers' high expectations of students. Some teachers lower their expectations of language minority students, for example, in an attempt to accommodate instruction to student differences. When these 'accommodations' are based on the assumption that students are incapable of high-quality work because of language or cultural differences, they send students a message that their differences are perceived as deficiencies rather than assets.

To conclude, multicultural education involves using a variety of culturally and linguistically relevant materials and teaching approaches to develop students' cognitive skills and understanding. High expectations of students create challenging and different opportunities for students to learn but, in Nieto's view, what matters most are supportive teacher-student relationships which help motivate and inspire students to succeed (Nieto, 2000).

## Methodology

The aim of this article is to explore teachers' perspectives and pedagogical practices with students of immigrant backgrounds in three upper secondary schools in Iceland. The study reported on is part of the Nordic research project, Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries (LSP). In the LSP study, learning spaces were defined as "school communities as well as learning environments and practices other than schools, which may be important or instrumental for the young immigrants' participation and success" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015, p. 6). Student success was defined as the students' feeling of achievement based on personal goals relating to their well-being in school, family and society. For further information about the Learning Spaces study, see the introductory article in this special edition.

The research questions which guided the investigation in this study are: What are teachers' perspectives of their pedagogical practices and their interactions with immigrant students? What do immigrant students say about their school experiences and interactions with teachers at upper secondary school in Iceland?

Qualitative research methods utilizing semi-structured interviews were chosen for the study. Principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) and multicultural education (Banks et al., 2005; Nieto, 2000) were used as analytical tools. Qualitative research enables the researcher to elicit detailed data about the participants' experiences and perspectives (Lichtman, 2006). In order to gain a deep understanding of teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching, data were collected through face to face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with teachers from each of the three participating upper-secondary schools, altogether nine teachers. In order to learn about immigrant students' school experiences, data were collected through face to face, semi-structured interviews with twenty four students or former students in the same schools.

The interviews were conducted in English or in Icelandic, allowing the participants to choose the

language in which they felt most comfortable expressing themselves (Lichtman, 2006). The interviews were taken in September and October, 2013, ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data were initially coded before they were grouped together according to emerging themes applicable to the research questions (Silverman, 2006; Wolcott, 2001). The interview data were analyzed in the original language and excerpts of the interviews in Icelandic were then translated by the authors into English.

Teachers were selected using purposive sampling from the participating schools which, following the criteria of the LSP study, were judged to be successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). Students were chosen by asking school principals and teachers to identify students who were considered to be examples of success. Former upper secondary students were selected through the snowballing method (Silverman, 2013). All participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research study and gave their written consent prior to participation. Anonymity was closely guarded throughout the research process.

The main criteria for selection of the teachers who participated in the LSP study were that they teach immigrant students at the upper-secondary school level. Even though the majority of them taught Icelandic as a second language some of them also taught other subjects such as life skills, ethics, social studies and foreign languages. The teacher participants were both of Icelandic and immigrant background. All the teachers were certified to teach in upper-secondary schools and two of them had completed formal studies in multicultural education. All three schools provided instruction in Icelandic as a second language and offered additional services and assistance such as tutors, mentors and counselling.

The study focused on teachers' and students' perspectives and did not include classroom observations or other methods of triangulation. However, data collection in the larger LSP study included qualitative interviews with school leaders in the participating upper secondary schools. Data from those sources supported the findings emanating from the teacher and student interviews.

The main themes which emerged from the interviews center on the teachers' backgrounds, their visions for teaching, their relationships with students and pedagogical practices. In the following sections the findings will be presented and discussed.

## Findings

### Teachers' backgrounds

The teachers' understanding and appreciation of the immigrant students' language, cultural and academic backgrounds were drawn from their professional and personal life experiences. Their academic backgrounds were in different disciplines, ranging from philosophy, sociology, ethnology, business administration, multicultural education to teacher education. Many of the teachers had traveled, studied and worked in different parts of the world and had experienced living in another country with limited language knowledge. Their diverse backgrounds gave the teachers a greater understanding of multicultural issues and what it means to be a newcomer in a new country. One of the teachers described his deep sense of connection with immigrant students as "something of a kinship." Another teacher had a passion for teaching students of foreign heritage because she was interested in sharing her knowledge of different countries and cultures with them and, at the same time, learning more from them. She explained:

I normally travel a lot and I work as a tourist guide. I went very often as a guide to other Asian and European countries. I'm kind of inquisitive; I want to know other cultures and other countries.

The teachers' backgrounds and prior experiences seemed to influence their empathy, understanding and commitment to students of immigrant background and guide them in their interactions with the students.

## Vision for teaching

A common characteristic of the teachers was their strong vision for teaching with regard to immigrant students. They believed in their students and set clear goals in their teaching to set their students up for success. One of them specified his primary goals in teaching as preparing his students for the readiness of learning, for becoming critical thinkers and for understanding the value of learning:

My main goal, ... just the idea of getting them into a place where they are ready to learn, in terms of learning... I want them to be aware of what they are learning and why ... and if it is something that they can use in life.

Another teacher reiterated the importance of believing in students' potential:

I find it is very important to believe in my students, that they can. I often say to them, you can...It is not impossible...I don't make any difference between students of foreign origin and Icelandic students in this respect.

There was no doubt in the teachers' minds that their immigrant students were resilient and diligent. They wanted to learn and do their very best. A teacher gave an example:

They [the students] are so excited to know what they can do themselves, and that is what it is all about. If I start a grammar lesson and say "how do you decline this word?" Then, everybody is prepared to apply themselves... This is because the foreigners want to learn the language and want to write and speak correctly.

The teachers were dedicated to their students' needs and believed in their capabilities. They felt it was important to provide immigrant students with opportunities to continue their studies and be successful in their future work lives. They trusted that support and encouragement from all the people in their lives would help them continue their education and achieve. Their wishes were that these students would not be bound in their present jobs where they sit at cash registers and work for cleaning companies. They supported their hopes with examples of former immigrant students who had graduated from upper secondary school, some even with honors, and had become professionals in, for example, computer science, nursing, and carpentry. One of the teachers said:

It is about encouraging and supporting them to continue their education. I want to see these children become someone, and not just working at the cash register in [a shop] or in a restaurant or in some cleaning company like they are doing now. They will succeed at something if someone believes in them.

The visions of the teachers were reflected in the interviews with the students. One of the students talked particularly about the respect he experienced from the teachers:

In Iceland all of them are good teachers. They explain well what is going on and they don't explain very fast. When I ask for help they really help me. The way they respect us is different from [home country], there students have to respect teachers, but here teachers respect their students. Sometimes I see Icelandic students have no respect for teachers.

## Teacher/student relationships

The teachers established a personal dialogue with their students in order to get to know them as individuals. They attentively listened to their students both in and outside of class about different issues related to their learning or their personal life experiences. One of the teachers gave an example of such a personal dialogue with a student while they were on a field trip:

When we sit on the bus and a student from Syria tells me about Syria and that he hadn't heard from his grandmother for a year...They always tell me their stories and things like that, what they had been doing...

One teacher thought that room for personal dialogue with immigrant students should be created within the school curriculum:

I would like for us teachers... that maybe it would be required that we have one hour a week in the schedule where we can talk to the students about how they are doing, of course I often ask them, but it would be different if we had a set time for talking.

Some of the teachers felt it was their responsibility to serve as advocates for immigrant students if needed. They were willing to assist their students with translating letters, writing emails and handling bureaucratic matters.

By getting to know their students they also learned from them how to make their teaching more relevant and effective. One of the teachers used the process of reflection to modify her teaching to make it suitable for each individual student.

It takes the first two weeks to figure out the composition of the group [of students]. If they are at a similar level, then maybe I can go over things quickly. If they are at different levels, I try to identify what is suitable for this student and the next, and try to do it during class time since I don't get to tutor them individually...

They trusted that their teaching would be more effective once the students got to know them. A teacher shared his philosophy:

They [students] don't really get to know a teacher very often as a person, they know them as an academic instructor, so once you break down that barrier, they kind of get the idea, hey, these guys have some kind of experience ... they might start listening to you when you start teaching them life skills and the knowledge that they need to get to the next level.

The teachers' interest and effort in getting to know the students individually were received by the students with deep appreciation. The students felt validated and the teachers were more effective in their practices. Some of the student participants explained:

What I find important about all the English teachers is how funny they are and they always have something to say. They want to help me when I don't understand. They know the subject they are teaching and they are very interesting...I can always go to them or talk to them...they treat you, not on the basis of what you are learning as student, but on the basis of who you are as a human being.

## **Pedagogical practices**

The teachers' descriptions of their pedagogical practices followed multicultural education principles. Instead of regarding the students' languages, religions and cultural backgrounds as deficits because they differ from the majority language and culture, the teachers respected them and recognized them as valuable resources for their education. A teacher explained: "I mean these kids don't come here just as empty vessels; we have to continue to build upon what matters most to them...we need to build upon the knowledge that is there."

In other words, the teachers' mindfulness of the students' resources helped students to learn by allowing them to use the languages and the previous knowledge they brought with them. A student described how she used translanguaging to learn History:

I had to learn in Icelandic, Polish and English when I studied History. When I studied for a test I had all kinds of papers and questions in English, Icelandic and Polish. That helped me a lot. The explanations in various languages helped me with what I didn't understand. The teacher also told me I could answer in English and she would ask me questions in English... if I wanted. I also could choose whether I wanted to write in English or in Icelandic. I often added words in English because I didn't know how to say them in Icelandic.



Another teacher emphasized the importance of having high expectations of students:

I would like to see variety in their studies, allow them to try different things, and ...not forget to build on what is there. We always have to expect something from them... we need to make demands, that's what matters the most.

The teachers incorporated the students' insights about their home countries, religions and heritage languages into their everyday teaching and discussion for the purpose of facilitating their study of Icelandic and Icelandic culture, and at the same time enriching the multicultural classroom learning environment. They gave the students opportunities, for example, to introduce their countries' language and literature by encouraging them to share them with their classmates. The teacher explained:

[In literature classes] they have had presentations about their home countries and religions. There we have used what they know and are familiar with, so that they could enjoy what they were strong in. They, for example, have introduced poets from their home countries to the class by reading their poems to us in their heritage language, then explained them to us. In that way we have used their background knowledge in our teaching.

One student talked positively about his experience in Sociology class where the teacher facilitated class discussion and provided students with space for telling their 'own stories'. He said "I like discussions, especially when I get to listen to people tell their stories or something important. I find that very compelling." The student valued the opportunity to actively participate in lessons and simultaneously learn from other classmates.

The teachers were careful and thorough with their immigrant students, and tried not to take things for granted. Realizing that the students came from different cultures and learning systems, they took extra steps in preparing students, giving them the necessary background information about the readings and exercises before the students started their actual work.

Often I need to explain things [to immigrant students] that everybody thinks are obvious and everyone who lives in Iceland would know. There were times we ran into things [words/concepts] in books that I knew needed to be explained. So, sometimes I start by explaining before we start reading the text.

Many of the student participants welcomed the extra attention these teachers gave them and considered these caring teachers to be examples of "good" teachers.

Some teachers come directly to us when, for example, they know we are foreigners and probably won't understand everything. They want us to be able to participate. Sometimes they give us additional work to learn and to practice. They send us emails to let us know what we need to do next. They always give us the powerpoints so we can study at home. They point out to us how to study better for tests and stuff. This is to my mind what a good teacher is.

The teachers adopted various ways of teaching to facilitate the students' learning process, for example using visuals, electronic devices, audio books, play acting, and dictations. Some teachers used specific teaching approaches such as the Rassias Method of language instruction, and Cooperative Learning in Multicultural Groups (CLIM). The Rassias Method of language instruction emphasizes spoken language and familiarity with the culture of the country of the target language. The method (n.d.) replicates relevant, life-like situations by using dramatic techniques for teaching. CLIM, on the other hand, uses strategies that help heterogeneous groups to work together on projects using the principles of conceptual learning, multiple abilities and student interaction. These cooperative projects promote equal participation in interaction and equal access to learning.

Another pedagogical practice initiated by teachers in one of the schools was a mentor system between older immigrant students and new immigrant students. The teachers organized opportunities for the two groups to meet, giving the new students the chance to ask questions and the older

ones the opportunity to share their experiences of integration and of learning Icelandic. The older ones could also act as role models for the new students, as indicated by this teacher:

...let them [the two groups] have more communication so they [the new group] get to know more. If you see your countryman, maybe from a country very far away from Iceland: "Yes, he can speak Icelandic. I must be able to do so also." That must have an impact.

One teacher with an immigrant background was very pleased with the teaching environment in the school. In general, the teacher felt that the school's policy was rather inclusive and empowering for its students. In the eyes of the teacher, the focus in the school was on the student and there was an understanding that the school should "change with every generation of students." The teacher depicted an inclusive school as follows:

... I think that the proper school would be not only the, er, the removal of structures and rules that divide teacher and student as well as teacher and teacher, depending on what their position is in the school, but also student from student and culture from culture. I mean a multicultural school wouldn't necessarily be a focus on multiculturalism, it would simply be a focus on school, for all cultures and embracing everything that everybody is, regardless of what that is.

A student attested to one of the aspects of diversity in her school:

...my school is full of people. They are not only of my own age but there are people who are in their fifties and thirties. There are many of them whom I never got acquainted with before but now we are good friends. I listen to their stories. They are both foreigners and Icelanders. They didn't finish school before, and now they are [older] and they want to finish their education.

The main findings from the teacher interviews provide insight into their diverse backgrounds, their pedagogical practices and relationships with students, as well as their visions for teaching. In the next section these findings will be discussed with regard to multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The focus of this article is to explore the perspectives of nine teachers from three upper secondary schools on their teaching and interaction with immigrant students and their pedagogical practices. The findings revealed that the teachers believed in their students and deeply cared for them. Their reported pedagogical practices were in line with culturally responsive pedagogy and the multicultural education model that have been theorized particularly by Gay and Nieto (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

The teachers' own diverse life experiences as travelers and professionals have equipped them with a sense of empathy for their immigrant students. They regularly dialogued with their students to give them support and encouragement, both in their studies and in their social and everyday lives. In that respect they developed what Nieto (2000) refers to as 'interpersonal networks' of support with students and acted as advocates for them and their families. The teachers' concern for the academic, emotional and social well-being of their students resonates with Gay's (2000) description of culturally responsive teaching and the power of caring. The teachers had high expectations for the students and believed in their ability to learn and build a future for themselves. They strove to empower these youths through their encouragement and support in furthering their education (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

The teachers found themselves in varying roles in their interaction with students; they were both teachers and learners. As learners, in their efforts to communicate with their language minority students, they gained knowledge and awareness about the differences of their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As teachers, they reflected on what they had learned from their students and used that knowledge to make their teaching more relevant for the students (Nieto, 2000).

They were able and willing to adapt their teaching to better meet the needs of immigrant students and exhibited the type of knowledge that, according to Nieto, teachers of language minority students need to possess (Nieto, 2000).

The teachers also recognized the students' personal strengths and enthusiasm to learn. They tapped into the wealth and diversity of the students' resources to create inclusive learning spaces where their religious, linguistic and cultural heritages were visible and respected. These spaces also validated the youths' backgrounds, empowered them and gave them a voice. Last but not least, the teachers strove to create learning environments which recognized the value of all students, regardless of academic, religious, linguistic or cultural background. This type of inclusive learning space was articulated by one of the teachers:

... sometimes we have to be a little more aware of the world around us and everybody's part in it, and that's what we see in a lot of these classes, everybody has a different thing to add, so I think the proper school would be less multicultural and more just school.

Findings from interviews with immigrant students confirm the visions and pedagogical practices of the teachers.

This article provides insight into nine teachers' understandings of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching, based on their beliefs and their descriptions of their teaching practices. It focuses on teachers' perspectives and their reported practices as well as students' experiences of these practices. Even though findings from previous studies in Iceland have indicated that pedagogical practice informed by culturally responsive teaching is lacking in Icelandic schools, this study provides evidence of effective multicultural education. The teachers in the study have illustrated the value of recognizing student resources, empowering them and learning from them. It is our hope that the 'lenses' of culturally responsive teaching, as described by Gay (2014), will eventually be used in all schools in Iceland:

Culturally responsive teaching is about using your knowledge about heritages and experiences of various kinds of diverse populations to help you teach more effectively, whether or not you want to teach math, or science, or reading, or computer science, or PE. All those kinds of things should be filtered through these lenses about culturally responsive teaching. The simple fact is that kids learn in different ways and many of the different ways they learn are influenced by their culturalization and heritage. In that case, you could say, culturally responsive teaching is a moral endeavor, because it is the right thing to do for the rest of the population (Gay, 2014).

Multicultural education, as defined by Banks (2007), is not just a method of teaching, it is a philosophy that serves to benefit all students.

## References

- Aðalbjarnardóttir, S., Guðjónsdóttir, H., & Rúnarsdóttir, E. M. (2005). Fjölmennningarleg kennsla: Sjónarhorn skólafólks [Multicultural education: Educators' viewpoints]. In Ú. Hauksson (Ed.), *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum* (pp. 707–720). Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.
- Banks, J. A. (2007). Multicultural education: Characteristics and goals. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education - Issues and perspectives* (6th ed., pp. 3–26). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Banks, J. A., Cochran-Smith, M., Moll, L., Richert, A., Zeichner, K., LePage, P., ... M. McDonald. (2005). Teaching diverse learners. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 232–274). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cummins, J. (2001). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J., Bismilla, V., Chow, P., Cohen, S., Giampapa, F., Leoni, L., & Sastri, P. (2005). Affirming identity in multilingual classrooms: By welcoming a student's home language into the classroom, schools actively engage English language learners in literacy. *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 38-43.

Daníelsdóttir, S. (2009). "Kennarnir eru góðir": Reynslusögur sex erlendra ungmenna af skólagöngu í íslenskum grunnskólum ["The teachers are good": How six foreign youths experienced attending Icelandic primary schools] (M.Ed thesis). School of Education, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.

Garðarsdóttir, Ó., & Hauksson, G. (2011, December 11). Ungir innflytjendur og aðrir einstaklingar með erlendan bakgrunn í íslenskum samfélagi og íslenskum skólum 1996–2011 [Young immigrants and other youths with foreign background in Icelandic society and in Icelandic schools 1996–2011]. *Netla – Vef tímarit um uppeldi og menntun*. Retrieved from <http://netla.hi.is/menntakvika2011/020.pdf>

Gay, G. (2014). Culturally Responsive Teaching. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZrqpQmr1\\_c&index=3&list=PLqCacpwT8RyBbINtjbQKyOg8f3DOlph3u](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZrqpQmr1_c&index=3&list=PLqCacpwT8RyBbINtjbQKyOg8f3DOlph3u)

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Guðmundsson, G. (2013, December 31). Innflytjendur í íslenskum framhaldsskólum [Immigrants in upper secondary education in Iceland]. *Netla – Vef tímarit um uppeldi og menntun*. Retrieved from [http://netla.hi.is/serrit/2013/rannsoknir\\_og\\_skolastarf/003.pdf](http://netla.hi.is/serrit/2013/rannsoknir_og_skolastarf/003.pdf)

Karlsdóttir, B. R. (2013). "Það er auðveldara að hætta bara öllu": Ástæður brotthvarfs nemenda af erlendum uppruna úr framhaldsskóla á Íslandi ["It's easier just to give up": Reasons why students of foreign origin drop out of Icelandic upper secondary schools] (M.Ed. thesis). Retrieved from <http://skemman.is/item/view/1946/15684;jsessionid=24F539A3F6CC719D0447E24ECB3357A8>

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 469–491.

Lichtman, M. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

OECD. (2016). International migration outlook 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/8116101e.pdf?expires=1478272213&id=id&accname=oid020862&checksum=31918C41595BF3D30EE20373B0E1D3EA>

Ragnarsdóttir, H. (Ed.). (2015). *Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice: Success stories from immigrant students and school communities in four Nordic countries*. Report on main findings from Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Retrieved from [http://lsp2015.hi.is/sites/lsp2015.hi.is/files/eddakjar/lsp\\_final\\_report\\_formatted.pdf](http://lsp2015.hi.is/sites/lsp2015.hi.is/files/eddakjar/lsp_final_report_formatted.pdf)

Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2011). Líf og störf ungra innflytjenda: Reynsla ungmenna af tíu ára búsetu á Íslandi [The life and work of young immigrants. Young people's experiences of ten-year residence in Iceland]. *Uppeldi og menntun*, 20(2), 53-64.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting qualitative data*. London: Sage

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research* (4th ed.). London: Sage

The Method. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://rassias.dartmouth.edu/>

Tran, A.-D. (2015). *Untapped Resources or Deficient 'Foreigners': Students of Vietnamese Background in Icelandic Upper Secondary Schools* (Ph.D. thesis in Education). University of Iceland, School of Education, Reykjavík. Retrieved from [http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/23419/53028/3/Anh-Dao\\_Tran\\$002c\\_Ph.D.\\_dissertation\\_Aug\\_2015.pdf](http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/23419/53028/3/Anh-Dao_Tran$002c_Ph.D._dissertation_Aug_2015.pdf)

Tran, A.-D. (2007). Factors Affecting Asian Students' Academic Achievement in Iceland. In K. Bjarnardóttir & S. K. Hannesdóttir (Eds.), *Þekking - Þjálfun - Þroski: Greinar um uppeldis- og fræðslumál. Delta Kappa Gamma - 30 ára afmælisrit* [Knowledge – Training – Maturity: Articles on pedagogy and education. Delta Kappa Gamma – publication to celebrate 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary] (pp. 191-214). Reykjavík: Delta Kappa Gamma - Félag kvenna í fræðslustörfum [Society of Leading Women Educators]

Tran, A.-D. & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2013, December 3). Framtíð í nýju landi: Þróunarverkefni með innflytjendum í framhaldskólum [A future in a new country: A development project in cooperation with immigrant students in upper secondary schools]. *Netla – Vef tímarit um uppeldi og menntun*. Retrieved from <http://netla.hi.is/greinar/2013/ryn/008.pdf>

Wolcott, H. (2001). *Writing up qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

### About the authors

Anh-Dao Tran ([adt@hi.is](mailto:adt@hi.is)) is a post-doctoral researcher at the Educational Research Institute. The research project she is conducting is about educational attainment of immigrant heritage students. Her field of research for her Ph.D. was on multicultural education. Her M.A. was in education of the hearing impaired, and her B.A. was in French. She participates in two research projects led by Hanna Ragnarsdóttir and teaches at the School of Education.

Samúel Lefever ([samuel@hi.is](mailto:samuel@hi.is)) is an Associate professor at the University of Iceland and teaches language teaching methodology at the School of Education. He completed a BA degree in Sociology from Kansas State University in 1978 and a MA in Education with emphasis on Teaching English as a Second Language from the University of Kansas in 1993. He has done research on the English skills of young children in Iceland and on English teaching at all school levels. He is currently looking at immigrants' language use and participation in Icelandic schools and society.

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir ([hannar@hi.is](mailto:hannar@hi.is)) is a professor at the School of Education, University of Iceland. She completed a BA degree in anthropology and history from the University of Iceland in 1984, an MSc degree in anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1986, and a Dr.philos in education from the University of Oslo in 2007. Her research has mainly focused on immigrants (children, adults, and families) in Icelandic society and schools, multicultural education, and school reform.

### Keywords

Culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, immigrant students, inclusion, social justice.

### Um höfunda

Anh-Dao Tran ([adt@hi.is](mailto:adt@hi.is)) er nýdoktor við Menntavísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands. Rannsóknarverkefnið sem hún vinnur að fjallar um skólaárangur nemenda af innflytjendaættum. Rannsóknarsvið hennar í doktorsnáminu var í fjölmennings-

fræði. Hún er með M.A.-próf í kennslu heyrnarkertra og B.A.-próf í frönsku. Hún er þátttakandi í tveimur rannsóknarverkefnum sem Hanna Ragnarsdóttir stýrir, og kennir við Menntavísindasvið.

Samúel Lefever ([samuel@hi.is](mailto:samuel@hi.is)) er dósent og kennir kennslufræði erlendra tungumála á Menntavísindasviði Háskóla Íslands. Hann lauk B.A.-prófi í félagsfræði frá Kansas State University árið 1978 og M.A.-gráðu frá Háskólanum í Kansas í uppeldis og menntunarfræði með kennslufræði annars máls sem sérsvið árið 1993. Hann hefur rannsakað enskukunnáttu barna á Íslandi og enskukennslu og -nám á grunn- og framhaldsskólastigi. Hann vinnur nú að rannsóknum á málnotkun og þátttöku nemenda af erlendum uppruna í íslenskum skólum og samfélagi.

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir ([hannar@hi.is](mailto:hannar@hi.is)) er prófessor við uppeldis- og menntunarfræðideild Menntavísindasviðs Háskóla Íslands. Hún lauk B.A.-prófi í mannfræði og sagnfræði frá Háskóla Íslands árið 1984, M.Sc.-prófi í mannfræði frá London School of Economics and Political Science árið 1986 og Dr.philos-prófi í menntunarfræði frá Háskólanum í Osló árið 2007. Rannsóknir hennar hafa einkum beinst að börnum og fullorðnum af erlendum uppruna í íslensku samfélagi og skólum og ýmsum þáttum fjölmennningarlegs skólustarfs.

### Efnisorð

Menningarnæm kennsla, fjölmennningarleg menntun, nemendur af erlendum uppruna, menntun án aðgreiningar, félagslegt réttlæti.



Anh-Dao Tran, Samúel Lefever og Hanna Ragnarsdóttir (2016).

Equitable Pedagogical Practice in Culturally Diverse Classrooms: Perspectives of Teachers and Students in Upper Secondary Schools.

Sérít Netla – Vefítímarit um uppeldi og menntun: Sérít 2016 – Námsrými félagslegs réttlætis og menntunar án aðgreiningar/Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice

Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands.

[http://netla.hi.is/serrit/2016/namsrymi\\_felagslegs\\_rettlætis\\_og\\_menntunar\\_an\\_adgreiningar\\_learning\\_spaces\\_for\\_inclusion\\_and\\_social\\_justice/005.pdf](http://netla.hi.is/serrit/2016/namsrymi_felagslegs_rettlætis_og_menntunar_an_adgreiningar_learning_spaces_for_inclusion_and_social_justice/005.pdf)