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Professional identities of teachers with an immigrant background

► **About the authors** ► **Key words**

A growing number of teachers with immigrant backgrounds are teaching in Icelandic schools, each of whom brings different resources to the educational setting. This article discusses the findings of a narrative study of teachers with an immigrant background who teach in compulsory and upper secondary schools in Iceland. The purpose of the study was to explore the teachers' stories in order to develop a better understanding of how they draw on their personal and cultural resources in their teaching and develop their professional identities. Six teachers were asked to reflect on opportunities and challenges they had faced in their teaching careers. Findings from the study draw attention to hurdles the teachers have met and successes they have experienced.

The teachers confirmed the importance of being able to speak Icelandic in order to be accepted in society and in their profession. Learning the majority language had been challenging but they had all successfully crossed that barrier. Additionally, each of the teachers had found and used opportunities to expand their knowledge and develop professionally. The teachers believed that their diverse experiences and backgrounds had given them a broader knowledge base and helped them to become better teachers. They had also experienced freedom within the school context to shape their identities and teaching practices according to their beliefs, which contributed positively to their self-efficacy, professional identity and vision for teaching. The teachers were happy with their professional success and were very committed to the teaching profession.

The study exemplifies the success of immigrant professionals in Iceland, demonstrating how support and encouragement from the close environment such as family and the workplace, and personal strengths contribute to the co-construction of professional identity.

Fagvitund kennara af erlendum uppruna á Íslandi

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Aukinn fjöldi kennara af erlendum uppruna kennir í íslenskum skólum og flytur með sér ýmsan auð inn í skólakerfið. Greinin fjallar um rannsókn sem byggð var á frásagnarrýni og gerð með kennurum af erlendum uppruna sem kenna á grunn- og framhaldsskólastigi á Íslandi. Tilgangur rannsóknarinnar var að skoða sögur kennara til að öðlast betri skilning á því hvernig þeir byggja á persónulegum og menningarlegum auðlindum við kennslu og mótun eigin fagvitundar. Sex kennarar voru beðnir um að ígrunda áskorarnir og tækifæri sem þeir höfðu staðið frammi fyrir í kennslu sinni.

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar beina athygli að þeim áskorunum sem kennararnir höfðu mætt og þeim árangri sem þeir höfðu náð. Þeir staðfestu mikilvægi þess að geta talað íslensku til að öðlast viðurkenningu í samfélaginu og í sinni stöðu. Að læra tungumálið reyndist þeim áskorun en þeir höfðu allir náð góðum tókum á því. Að auki leituðu kennararnir að og nýttu öll tækifæri sem þeir fengu til að auka þekkingu sína og fagvitund. Kennararnir trúðu því að fjölbreytt reynsla þeirra og bakgrunnur hefði fært þeim víðari þekkingargrunn og hjálpað þeim að verða betri kennarar. Þeir upplifðu einnig frelsi innan skólanna til að móta eigin fagvitund og starfshætti í samræmi við eigin gildi, sem hafði aftur jákvæð áhrif á trú þeirra á eigin getu, fagvitund og sýn á kennslu. Kennararnir voru ánægðir með árangur sinn í starfi og sýndu mikla skuldbindingu til þess.

Rannsóknin dregur fram árangur kennara af erlendum uppruna á Íslandi og sýnir hvernig stuðningur og hvatning frá nærumhverfi, eins og fjölskyldu og starfsvettvangi, sem og persónulegur styrkur, fléttast saman í mótun fagvitundar.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, radical changes have taken place around the world as well as in Iceland. The shift in demographics, the growth of migration and the implementation of the policy of inclusive education is leading to increased diversity in schools and groups of pupils (Jóhannesson, 2006). A growing number of pupils with different racial, ethnic, linguistic and family backgrounds are studying in schools at all levels. Scholars have argued that school policies and practices must also develop in response to this diversification of students with more emphasis being placed on multicultural education, second language teaching and inclusive education (Banks, 2007; Nieto, 1999). In fact, a number of such initiatives and programs addressing issues of diversity and multicultural education have been implemented in Icelandic schools and other service organizations over the last decade (Lassen, et al., 2007).

Multicultural education builds on fairness and equity, considers the multiple purposes of education and looks at the role of schooling in a democratic society. It consolidates the idea that all students should have equal opportunities to learn at school, irrespective of their gender, social class, ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics (Banks, 2007). The need for teachers trained in the areas of multicultural education, intercultural understanding, Icelandic as a second language and mother tongue instruction has been recognized, as has the fact that teachers with immigrant backgrounds may fill some of this need, noting that they bring with them different worldviews, languages and understandings of what it means to be different (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubíaga, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Santoro, 2007).

A growing number of teachers with immigrant backgrounds now teach in Icelandic schools. We can assume that each teacher brings different resources to the educational

setting, building on his or her experience, education, upbringing and interests. In the OECD (2005) report, *Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers – Final Report: Teachers Matter*, the authors note that expectations for schools and teachers around the world are becoming increasingly complex, with the community expecting teachers to teach according to students' needs, respond to their diverse backgrounds and be sensitive to cultural issues (OECD, 2005). These changes call for a just and equitable multicultural education that helps students find personal happiness and fulfilment, develop curiosity, enjoy learning and practice critical thinking. It also calls for diverse teachers, teachers who have insight into students' diverse backgrounds and are willing and able to create new knowledge that is useful for teaching in classrooms of diverse learners (Grant & Gibson, 2011). Research has shown that experiences of teachers with immigrant backgrounds, such as being excluded and marginalized, are often similar to those of children with minority backgrounds (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007; Santoro, 2007). Therefore, the experiences, understanding and insight of teachers with immigrant backgrounds are valuable resources, which can be utilized to help prepare all students for life in a multicultural society.

The purpose of this study was to explore the stories of teachers with an immigrant background in order to develop a better understanding of how they draw on their cultural and personal resources in their teaching, develop their professional identities, respond to the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of their students and to understand how they use their resources and experiences as teachers in their new community. The research questions that guided the inquiry were:

- Who are the teachers with an immigrant background in the Icelandic school system?
- How do they draw upon personal and cultural resources in the constructing of their professional identity?

This study is part of a group project carried out by members of the Diverse Teachers for Diverse Learners network, a research network funded by NordForsk.

Theoretical background

The number of teachers with immigrant backgrounds in Iceland is increasing, raising questions concerning the professional roles and identity of teachers. Commitment and engagement are the keys to effective teaching and learning and relate to teachers' agency and professional identity (Day, 2002). Like students, teachers bring valuable resources and experiences to the classroom. These resources are teachers' talents, strengths and skills, built upon their personal and professional experience, knowledge and beliefs. We seek to understand how teachers draw upon these resources in their teaching, in crafting their professional identities, and in supporting students' academic and social needs (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Teachers do not enter schools as empty vessels; the resources they bring with them help shape their practice and professionalism (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Rodriguez (2007) defines resources as personal qualities and strengths emerging from and shaping life experiences and actions drawn upon in practice. In so doing, Rodriguez draws on the work of Wertch (1998), who sees cultural resources as tools for teachers to make meaning and act in the world, as well as on Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) discussion of personal practical knowledge to describe how teachers use past experience to inform practice.

Teacher professionalism is based on an individual knowledge base, ethical commitment to students, professional responsibility and the management of classroom practice (Day & Gu, 2010). Effective teachers are passionate about their work, their students, their subject, and believe that the way they teach can make a difference in students' lives. In constructing their professional identity, teachers draw on their upbringing, their schooling and social participation, whilst at the same time being subjected to different school contexts. For example, in their socialization process, teachers often need to negotiate the school culture and their own knowledge, understanding and practices. As they come to understand and articulate the interplay between their practice, knowledge and ethics, their crafting of professional identities is mediated by their personal values, beliefs and cultural orientations.

Teachers' awareness of their professional and personal identity is the key to their passion and self-efficacy, but of course teachers' commitment and resilience can be both negatively and positively affected by events in their lives (Day, 2004). Shaw and Barrett-Power (1998) discuss the difficulties that immigrants often experience in the new country due to differences in language, cultural beliefs and values, race or ethnic background, religious beliefs and practices, educational background and social status. Deters (2008) discusses similar findings in her review of studies which looked at the professional acculturation of internationally educated teachers in Israel, Australia and North America. Findings from the studies showed that language proficiency, personal traits such as self-confidence and resilience, and support from colleagues and students were instrumental for successful acculturation. Kim (2001) points out other factors which are important for positive adaptation: whether the move to the new country is one's own choice; whether the person is prepared for the changes; how different the cultures are between countries; and how open, strong and positive one is (Kim, 2001). Such factors are naturally as relevant for immigrant teachers as for any other people moving from one cultural milieu to another.

Sleeter and Milner (2011) argue that schools need teachers with immigrant backgrounds in order for the school staff to mirror the demographics of society. However, this may pose the risk that these instructors are positioned as "ethnic" teachers or spokespersons who deal with multicultural matters, rather than as teachers and well-educated persons with expertise to benefit all students (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubigala, 2012; Santoro, 2013).

Findings from a study in Israel indicate that the majority of immigrant teachers are subject teachers, and a small minority are classroom teachers. Although recognising that immigrant absorption is of significant national value, findings indicate that there are underlying barriers that prevent immigrant teachers from becoming homeroom teachers. This exclusion limits their participation in school decision-making and can affect their professional commitment (Michel, 2006). To deal with the challenges of diversity, Michel (2006) suggests that schools integrate immigrant teachers more fully, although pointing out that such integration entails transforming the entire school system.

Recent studies that have explored experiences of teachers with immigrant backgrounds have produced some interesting findings. A study done in Sweden (Boyd, 2003) found that school administrators were reluctant to hire foreign-born teachers. Furthermore, teachers who had a foreign accent were seen as being less capable or professional than others. Classroom difficulties and misunderstandings were attributed to language deficiencies, whereas similar difficulties in classrooms with Swedish teachers were explained by a lack of training or experience. Similarly, in a Canadian study (Deters, 2008), the authority and legitimacy of a teacher whose second language was English (and had a non-native accent) was challenged by students, particularly at the beginning of her teaching career in the new country.

A study conducted in 2007–2008 in Iceland examined the views and experiences of teachers and teaching assistants with immigrant background working in six preschools (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2010). Findings drew attention to teachers' wishes for successful integration into Icelandic society and feelings of isolation, prejudice and marginalization in the workplace. Nevertheless, many of the teachers were happy with their jobs and their professional successes. They all agreed that learning Icelandic was a difficult hurdle but also an important key to society. On the other hand, they felt that their education and knowledge of other languages were undervalued in the workplace, especially in their interaction with parents with immigrant backgrounds.

The most comprehensive study of immigrant teachers in Iceland was carried out from 2004–2006 among compulsory level teachers (Lassen, 2010). Information was collected from 81 teachers, and interviews taken with 29 of them with the purpose of shedding light on their perspectives, beliefs and experiences. Findings indicate that factors such as education and family relationships facilitated teachers' adjustment to Icelandic society and their school situations, as did their positive attitudes and desire to "belong". Personal characteristics such as social skills, openness, and a willingness to take risks also contributed to the teachers' successful assimilation. Most felt that they had been well received by the schools. Contrary to the findings of the Swedish and the Icelandic preschool studies, the compulsory level teachers felt that more importance was placed on their education than their knowledge of Icelandic. Only a few teachers expressed feelings of isolation or marginalization in their workplace. Some attributed this to differences in educational background or beliefs.

Overall, the teachers in Lassen's study (2010) experienced professional autonomy and felt capable of influencing school matters. They had positive attitudes towards the Icelandic school system and appreciated the opportunities it gave them to develop professionally. They believed that their broad range of experiences and backgrounds had positively contributed to school development in Iceland. In this article, we will take a deeper look at how immigrant teachers use their resources and experiences to succeed in, and contribute towards, their schools.

Methods

In this qualitative study, we used the methodology of narrative inquiry to learn about six teachers with immigrant backgrounds who teach in primary and secondary schools in Iceland. The focus was on the opportunities and challenges inherent in the educational discourses they live by as teachers in a new society. We used their stories to explore the cultural resources they bring into their practice. The goal was to understand how they used their resources and experiences to become teachers in a new community. The research questions guiding the inquiry were:

- Who are the teachers with immigrant backgrounds in the Icelandic school system?
- How do they draw upon personal and cultural resources in the crafting of their professional identity?

Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that as human beings we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story. It is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through collaboration between a researcher and participants. Teachers' narratives can show how teacher knowledge, teacher context and teacher identity are interlinked (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). Narrative approaches are advantageous in teacher research because they are

flexible and allow participants to explore and express their thoughts in interaction with “the teachers’ living life” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Participants

The participants in this study were six immigrant teachers at compulsory and secondary school levels in Iceland. They were selected using purposive sampling on the basis of their particular experiences and specialized knowledge (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Participants had to meet two criteria: having immigrated to Iceland and currently working as teachers. Personal contacts, as well as information found on school websites and the snowball method were used to locate possible participants. The information was then used to contact teachers by telephone or email and ask them to participate in the study. Efforts were made to choose participants with varied backgrounds and subject specializations. Six teachers with immigrant backgrounds agreed to participate in the study, five women and one man, all of them white, educated individuals.

The teachers had lived in Iceland from eight to thirty years at the time of the study. They came from different countries in Europe, North America and South America. They had all studied at university in their home countries before moving to Iceland. Four of them had completed teaching degrees in their home country, which were accepted by the Ministry of Education. One of them completed an additional degree in Iceland to become certified to teach at the compulsory level. Another took her entire teacher training program in Iceland and the remaining teacher has a university degree but does not have teacher certification in Iceland. Four teach at compulsory school level: two of these are general classroom teachers and the other two teach students with immigrant backgrounds. The remaining two are upper secondary school teachers with several years of teaching experience. One is a language teacher and the other teaches a science subject. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities.

The teachers’ reasons for immigrating to Iceland varied. Nina and Frida are married to Icelanders and moved to the country with their husbands. Telka came to Iceland as an au-pair to get to know the Icelandic culture and language, and Jan and Stephan came on adventures. Elin immigrated with her husband; both had been hired by an Icelandic company as experts in their field but after some years Elin decided to switch careers and entered teaching.

Data generation

Data were gathered by inviting the teachers to tell their professional stories and reflect on opportunities and challenges they had faced as teachers with immigrant backgrounds. The interview sessions took place during the spring of 2013. All the interviews, which took from 60 to 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were taken in Icelandic or English, according to the teachers’ preferences.

The teachers were encouraged to elaborate on their stories to fully encompass the complexities and dynamics of their experiences. By gathering written, oral, or visual narratives and focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, narratives become both the method and the phenomena of the study. Issues are examined in depth through exploratory, open-ended conversations and holistic understanding situated in lived experience (Merriam, 2009). We used the stories to explore the cultural resources teachers bring into their practice and to understand the teachers’ representations of their educational settings and their actions and interactions within them.

Data analysis

Analysis was based on exploring the transformational dimensions of storytelling from different perspectives and within the social, cultural, and situated context. We looked at the different experiences and backgrounds of these teachers and deconstructed their responses to reveal how they positioned themselves and interpreted various interactions and school practices. Each narrative was analysed to draw out themes and subthemes which informed the research questions. Next the narratives were analysed collectively for shared experiences, repeated themes or variations.

Findings

Narrative inquiry allowed us to understand the teachers' representations of their educational settings and their actions within those settings. Teachers' professional identities are co-constructed through interactions with administrators, colleagues, students and parents. These interactions, however, are further influenced by the educational discourses surrounding their work, which either facilitate or hinder them in drawing on the resources they bring to the classroom. Four main themes extracted from the teacher narratives are presented in the findings section: language learning and negotiating a new culture; teacher identity; vision; and professional development. Quotations from the narratives in Icelandic have been translated into English by the authors.

Language learning and negotiating a new culture

As our participants confirmed, one of the major challenges that immigrants face is learning the language of the adopted society. Being able to speak the language of the majority is seen as crucial for employment, acceptance and participation in society. For example, Tekla says, "When people arrive in Iceland they have all kinds of education. Some even have a degree from the university, but in Iceland you need to speak good Icelandic to get a good job."

For most of the teachers the process of adapting to a new culture and learning a new language was extremely challenging, and although Nina was aware of the challenging process of adapting to a new culture when she moved to Iceland it still surprised her. Nina describes her experience:

When I moved to Iceland I felt prepared to adapt to a new country. ... I was ready to experience misunderstandings between cultural worlds. ... Once in Iceland, it was really hard to learn Icelandic. To tell the truth, the first two years in this country were very sad... I could not put my thoughts into words and because of that I did not feel as being myself ... All the communications I had were very fragile and not good ... But this is just the way it is. I needed to go through this experience in order to develop my life here in Iceland. (Nina)

Elin also worked very hard to learn the language so that she could get a job as a secondary school teacher. She was determined to teach her subject in Icelandic from the very beginning:

I told the principal, "You should hire me and you will see I can [teach] in Icelandic." And I did it in Icelandic, from the first year. But the thing was that I was learning by heart, the words, at home... every evening! It was a very, very, very, busy year for me! (Elin)

The experience of learning Icelandic was a little different for Stephan, who teaches immigrant children in reception classes. He came to Iceland speaking several languages.

In recalling memories from childhood, he talks about how he enjoyed “hanging out” with his grandparents learning their languages.

I came to Iceland as a tourist and ended up working in a hotel. There I began to use those languages and thought of grandma, ‘Thank you so much - this is so valuable...’ Being in Iceland I got exposed to Icelandic and because I knew German the declensions did not appear as a monster to me. (Stephan)

Several of the teachers had their first teaching experiences at the preschool or primary school levels. Positive interaction with school staff and students and encouragement from them played a large role in their language learning process. For example, Nina explains:

Like many foreigners I began to work in a preschool setting. ... There, I began to learn the language. To begin with, I worked with the youngest children. They were two years old and could not distinguish between whether something was pronounced correctly or not. The preschool set the policy of not speaking English to me. In that way I was given time to stay in the setting and learn Icelandic. After two years in Iceland I had the feeling that I could finally express myself properly to other people. (Nina)

The teachers in the study sought out different opportunities to learn Icelandic, although their circumstances varied. Some had a spouse, family or friends who spoke the language; one had even begun to learn the language prior to moving to the country. The teachers utilized different ways of learning the language; some took language courses or studied on their own while others learned it primarily ‘on the job’.

Teacher identity

Teachers’ identities play an important role in their professional practices. The process of negotiating their professional identity in a new context requires great effort. They have to negotiate their linguistic and cultural resources within the context of a school culture that may be quite different from what they are used to. However, they draw on their experiences and knowledge as they create learning opportunities for their students.

In working with students of foreign background, Stephan’s knowledge of multiple languages provided him with an opportunity to engage his students in learning languages at a deep level. In fact, Stephan incorporates his own identity as a successful learner of many languages into his teaching:

Because I know how grammar works in many of the pupils’ first languages, I can see how their “mistakes” in Icelandic make sense for them. For instance if they say “I have 10 years old” I can relate it to the way they would say this in Polish and explain that if you say it in Icelandic you say it in a different way. (Stephan)

Teachers in Elin’s subject are in high demand, meaning that her advanced education and teacher certification from her home country make her an especially highly valued teacher. Elin’s identity as an expert in her field has influenced her teaching. For example, she abandoned the high school texts that had been used and instead brought in university textbooks, written in English. Her identity gives her the confidence to make her own decisions. Elin enjoys teaching and finds it rewarding, as she says, partly because of the respect she receives for her expertise: “I am very happy with my teaching job. I like my students... The students really respect knowledge... [The job] is very alive and keeps you young in your mind.”

Elin adds that she is always happy when former students come and thank her for her teaching.

Likewise, being a native speaker of English gave Jan an important advantage as an English teacher. She also identifies very strongly with her role as a teacher. It is both challenging and fulfilling. Jan says:

I like teaching. ... Because it gives me a chance to be creative. It's challenging. I'm hoping that it betters me as a human being. Makes me more competent in my own social skills and making myself a better person. ... So there is something I get out of [it] ... I want people to succeed. (Jan)

In general, the teachers believe that having different backgrounds has strengthened them as teachers. They have a wider range of experiences, which increases their empathy and intercultural awareness. Jan says, "because I have the experience of both worlds... it adds perspective. I can use my experience... to kind of bring teaching material to life."

Elin adds that being an immigrant gives her "a different view. Maybe I can understand better how the things are going." Tekla says, "I know what it is to be an immigrant, I know how it is to begin to learn Icelandic, I know what it is to enter University with Icelandic as a second language."

Although the teachers are largely happy with their adaptation to living in Iceland, several of them have experienced incidents of prejudice and stereotyping. Some of them felt uncomfortable being labelled because of their background. For example, Jan felt pressured by people's stereotypical view of Americans. Sometimes she felt that her ideas were dismissed because of "perceived differences and attitudes." She went on to say, "...you put forward ideas and they are kind of dismissed as being 'foreign'."

On a similar note, Elin says, "At the beginning [the students] were afraid of me because... I was coming from [Eastern Europe] and they were expecting... like an army general, or something... very strict, which I'm not."

On the other hand, the teachers are aware that immigrants often experience prejudice and discrimination and it is important to find ways to cope with those negative occurrences. Elin expresses it this way: "There is some prejudice, of course. Now the problem is you have to have a hard skin and not think about it when you move to another country, because you will get in to some prejudice, of course."

Jan mentioned one case of possible discrimination when she applied for advancement within her school:

I: Did you get the job?

J: No, no no no no. They stonewalled me... Totally stonewalled me! Cronyism at its worst... there is a barrier... But then you get kind of into the part where you don't know... You can't know if it's because you are a woman or is it because you are foreign! Or both! Maybe it's both!

I: Did the other person have more education?

J: ... this person actually had less education than I did.

It seems clear that this was a case of injustice, but Jan was unable to confirm that discrimination on the basis of her national background – rather than on her gender or her not being a "crony" – was at play. Significantly, Jan fought the decision out of pride and

her own self-esteem, because if she had not “challenged this and taken it all the way, then I wouldn’t have been able to look [my children] in the face.”

Vision

The teachers who participated in this study had all formed a vision for their teaching. In some cases the teachers’ visions were in part shaped by their teaching contexts. Nina and Frida are general classroom teachers. They talk about the importance of students “learning to learn”, and establishing learning habits that enable them to succeed in school. Frida says: “I want the students to learn and that they learn to learn and [my role] is to support them. I can’t learn for them.”

Tekla and Stefan teach students with foreign backgrounds. Their vision for teaching is to help these students take responsibility for their lives and to be happy individuals in the future. They teach the students Icelandic, but they think that learning Icelandic in itself is not enough to succeed in Icelandic society. They feel that in order to succeed, students with immigrant backgrounds need to develop a strong self-concept and a clear vision for their future:

In working with students, I want them to be happy individuals who know Icelandic and who can do what they want in the future, instead of being forced to do something because they don’t have the language or education to do what they would really like to do. (Tekla)

In working with students of immigrant background Stephan emphasizes building conceptual understanding in different subjects through the use of the students’ first language, in order to ultimately teach them in Icelandic:

As we teach science we find it important to know how students express different topics in their first language. For example, in talking about health with a student of Portuguese background, I begin finding out how he talks about it in his first language. If that is difficult I create an opportunity to develop that vocabulary in his first language, which I then use to teach it in Icelandic. (Stephan)

Both Jan and Elin strive to establish good relationships with their students. They base their interaction with students on mutual respect, high expectations and caring. Jan says, “getting people to do the best they can” is important, as is mutual respect: “I respect you, you respect me and we respect each other.” She uses a lot of humour and active teaching methods in her classroom. Elin says that she has one “great challenge,” which is “how to make them [students] work in the classroom. I try every year to improve this.”

Professional development

Professional development was taken seriously by all of the teachers in the study, all of whom actively used opportunities to learn and develop their practice:

... teachers need to stay on top of what’s happening in the field, talk to other teachers, share their experience, go to conferences to get new ideas and learn about new technology, teaching strategies ... I love trying out new things and I find myself having the freedom to do so. (Nina)

On the same note, Fríða adds: “I try to use all the opportunities I get to add to my education - I go to workshops, conferences and participate in developmental work.”

Moreover, some teachers search for additional opportunities to expand their knowledge. As Tekla says, “I use my education, my interest, my experience... I seek out information, read on the Internet and look through books when something new is published.”

This teacher, feeling somewhat isolated, looked beyond her school for development and collaboration:

I find myself alone in my setting but I have worked my way around it. I have connected with other English teachers, teachers that are interested in working together. I am also working with different European projects – Comenius, where I got a student teacher to work in my classroom and e-Twinning where we work on different projects in collaboration with other classrooms in Europe.
(Nina)

A common characteristic of the teachers is their commitment to their profession. Some of them have taken on extra responsibilities and leadership roles in their schools, such as serving as department heads, and one of the teachers is the chair of the teacher's association in her field. The teachers have been able to make changes within their departments and introduce new teaching ideas.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the stories of six teachers in Iceland with immigrant backgrounds, in order to develop a better understanding of how they draw on their resources in their teaching and develop their professional identities. Within the term resources we include their experience, knowledge, strengths and understanding (Rodriguez, 2007).

Our findings draw attention to a number of important issues. As to be expected, the teachers' experiences of adjusting to a new culture were, at times, difficult. One of the greatest challenges was that of learning the new language. The teachers also reported incidents of prejudice and stereotyping, such as being labelled by their background or on occasion having their ideas dismissed as being “foreign”. But they were not prevented from carrying through with their initiatives, nor did they suffer from a lack of recognition within their profession. While Jan did not receive the promotion for which she applied, she wondered whether this setback was a consequence of her being a woman, rather than an immigrant – or simply her not being the person whom the principal considered to be in line for the job.

However, for the most part, the daily relationships of these teachers with students, other teachers and administrators looked much like those of teachers in general in Iceland. This is in line with the outcome of other research of immigrant teachers in Iceland, where they claim to be well received and get many opportunities to use their resources and knowledge in school development (Lassen, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2011). This relative lack of negativity could be an indication that multicultural discourse is not prevalent, or is not a part of discussion within Icelandic education in general. On the other hand, these teachers did make reference to matters such as fairness and respect, which they cultivated in their classrooms, meaning that certainly some of the positive features of multicultural education were alluded to – albeit not in the context of “multicultural education” but rather simply in reference to their teaching in general.

All of these teachers negotiated a new culture and successfully learned a new language for their professional practice, and, in fact, this new second language became a part of their professional identity (Day, 2002, 2004; Day & Gu, 2010). In many cases, their

acquisition of Icelandic was undertaken quickly, though not without difficulty nor challenge, with an eye on these teachers' perceived need to project Icelandic proficiency to their students and within the professional community. In the literature we can find that being able to speak the language of the majority is crucial for professional acceptance and full participation (Deters, 2008; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998). Today these teachers build on this successful experience in their teaching.

Most of these teachers had spouses or close friends from Iceland, which may have accounted in part for their successful integration into the new environment (Kim, 2001). It would be fair to say that family relationships aided most of them in their integration process. Many other important factors for positive adaptation (Kim, 2001) were exhibited by the teachers: positive attitudes towards the new country, their professions and their workplaces, as well as a desire to integrate. Perhaps simply through reciprocity, they received positive encouragement from students, colleagues and community members. This type of emotional support and acceptance plays an important role in teachers' professional acculturation (Deters, 2008).

Our teachers, without exception, were noteworthy for their possession of rich personal resources including a well of valuable experience, knowledge, self-confidence, a strong identity and a clear vision of who they were and what they wanted to do, both within and beyond teaching. They were, in short, strong, resourceful people. These confident, professional teachers possessed what Day (2004) refers to as self-efficacy. In this sense, it is critical to realize that sometimes the way people behave is not necessarily related to their different cultures (Erickson, 2003). Sometimes human character itself is salient.

It should be pointed out that none of these teachers fit into the immigrant experience of arriving in a country with little or no training, job opportunities, family or contacts. All were white, educated individuals who had considerable resources (for example, self-confidence and knowledge), which they used to overcome hurdles they faced. However, since none of the teachers were of colour, it could be said that they did not fully "test the boundaries" of acceptance and tolerance in Icelandic schools.

On the other hand, the teachers saw their diverse backgrounds as beneficial. They gave them a useful perspective to understand and succeed in their adopted country, both as individuals and as members of the teaching profession. While it is fair to say that their wide range of experiences increased their empathy and intercultural awareness, it should also be pointed out that in only two of the six cases did these teachers specifically teach children from culturally diverse backgrounds. In the Israeli study referred to in the literature, Michel (2006) points out that immigrant teachers should be included in whole-school activities and not only teaching that is limited to immigrant students. In fact, this was the case with most of these teachers.

These teachers' focus was not exclusively on teaching school subjects but also on teaching their students about life and participating in society. They talked about the importance of students "learning to learn" and establishing learning habits that would enable them to succeed beyond school. They felt the responsibility to support the students not only in their learning but in their personal growth. Part of their vision for teaching was believing in students' abilities and making demands on their learning, which Nieto (1999) emphasizes are important aspects of multicultural education.

It is of note that the teachers' education and knowledge were valued, both by their employers and their students. In the cases of Tekla, Elin, Frida and Nina, their previous education was recognized by educational authorities. Jan's obvious potential talent as a language teacher was recognized by an employer, who encouraged her to become

educated in the field locally. All teachers either continued their education, used opportunities to develop professionally, and/or took on leadership positions within their schools or professional associations. In other words, professional development was taken seriously and they actively used opportunities to learn and develop their practice.

Clearly, these teachers' rich personal resources allowed them to take advantage of what they saw to be a large degree of professional autonomy in Iceland. As discussed by Deters (2008) and Day & Gu (2010), these teachers could, and did, use their resources and the freedom to construct their professional identities and teaching practices according to their beliefs, for the benefit of their students and their schools.

Our findings confirm those of Lassen (2010), that teachers' education and personal relationships ease the process of integration and aid their ability to live successfully in a bicultural context. These teachers' diverse experiences and backgrounds have given them a broader knowledge base and helped them to become better teachers and active participants in society. Their experiences have contributed positively to their self-esteem, professional identity and vision and have made them, without exaggeration, model teachers.

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Key words

*professional identity – teachers with immigrant background
– teacher resources – teacher narratives – teacher vision
– second language learning*

Um höfunda

Samúel Lefever (samuel@hi.is) er dósent og kennir kennslufræði erlendra tungumála á Menntavísindasviði Háskóla Íslands. Hann lauk M.A.-gráðu frá Háskólanum í Kansas, Bandaríkunum, í uppeldis- og menntunarfræði með kennslufræði annars máls sem sérsvið. Hann hefur rannsakað enskukunn- áttu barna á Íslandi og enskukennslu og nám á grunn- og framhaldsskóla- stigi. Hann vinnur nú að rannsóknum á málnotkun og þátttöku nemenda af erlendum uppruna í íslenskum skólum og samfélagi.

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*fagvitund – kennarar af erlendum uppruna – auðlindir kennara
– sögur kennara – sýn kennara – nám annars tungumáls*



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