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# **Student demands and a thematic approach to teaching and learning at the University College of Education in Iceland in 1978**

► About the authors ► Key words

In the second half of the twentieth century teacher training in many Western countries was upgraded from secondary school to university level, sometimes through mergers. In 1971 teacher training at the Iceland College of Education<sup>1</sup>, established in 1907, was upgraded by law to university level. For a few years the new University College of Education had a hybrid function serving students enrolled both at secondary and tertiary levels.

The purpose of this study was to analyse forces affecting teacher education around the time of the upgrading. The response of the administration when the university level programme did not meet the expectations of some students and teachers is examined. So too is why and how the introduction in 1978 of the so-called ‘thematic approach’ (í. þemanám) accounted for some of the factors affecting the teacher education programme, including the questions of theory and practice and the status of education as a field of study in academia.

The study is based on documentary analysis of published and unpublished material and data from interviews taken in 2002 and 2003 with ten key informants<sup>2</sup> who had participated in most of the changes being studied.

Much was unsettled during the first years after the upgrading to university level and especially after the grammar school function was finally phased out in 1977. Most of the staff had to teach at both levels, and those appointed to academic positions were also expected to carry out research. Enrolment in B.Ed. studies was low to begin with so the experience of providing university-level teacher education

was slow to develop, and students became restless. The establishment of the School Research Division (SRD) in 1966 and the law on compulsory education from 1974 influenced developments in teacher education, although the University College of Education functioned independently of the SRD and the law in 1974 did not address teacher education.

### Kröfur nemenda og tilurð þemanáms við nám og kennslu í Kennaraháskóla Íslands 1978

#### ► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Í rannsókn þeirri sem þessi grein byggir á beinum við sjónum að breytingum á kennaramenntun sem komu til framkvæmda við Kennaraháskóla Íslands haustið 1978. Kennaramenntun við skólann var á framhaldsskólastigi fram til 1971 en þá var menntunin færð upp á háskólastig með nýjum lögum frá Alþingi. Fyrstu ár Kennaraháskólans einkenndust af óróa og gagnrýni innan stofnunarinnar. Nemendur gagnrýndu bæði innihald og skipulag kennslunnar og sumir kennarar innan skólans tóku undir þá gagnrýni. Afleiðingin varð sú að nemendur og kennarar áttu saman viðræður um úrbætur og niðurstaða þeirra viðræðna varð ný nálgun að kennaramenntuninni sem oftast hefur verið kennd við þemanám.

Rannsóknin var eigindleg tilviksrannsókn og markmið hennar er að nálgast hugmyndafræðina og ástæðurnar að baki breytingunum og hvaða öfl lágu að baki þeim. Rannsóknargögn koma frá skrifuðum heimildum og viðtölum. Tekin voru hálf opin viðtöl við tíu einstaklinga sem allir voru virkir í áður nefndu breytingaferli, bæði nemendur og kennarar. Í greiningunni er lögð áhersla á að nálgast þemu: stöðugleika og óstöðugleika innan stofnunarinnar, þörfina á að brúa bilið á milli fræðanna annars vegar og hins raunverulega kennarastarfs hins vegar, rými Kennaraháskólans innan háskóla-samfélagsins og ytri áhrifavaldar.

Í niðurstöðum koma fram vísbendingar um að öll þessi atriði hafi haft þýðingu í tengslum við breytingarnar og erfitt er að aðgreina þýðingu þeirra í breytingaferlinu. Það sem e.t.v. er áhugaverðast í niðurstöðum er hversu mikil áhrif ytri áhrifavalda virðist hafa verið. Áhrif Skólarannsóknardeildar og þeirrar hugmyndafræði sem þar var unnið eftir og birtist ef til vill best í þeim námskrám sem ritaðar voru í framhaldi af setningu grunnskólaganna frá 1974, virðast hafa haft veruleg áhrif á það breytingaferli sem fjallað er um í þessari rannsókn.

## Introduction

After many years of discussion, teacher training in Iceland was upgraded to university level in 1971 (Jóhannesson, 1961, 1969) and the Iceland College of Education (ICE) became the University College of Education (UCE). During the 1970s, a university level programme for teacher education was introduced as programmes at a secondary school level for those who had enrolled in the late 1960s were being phased out (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002). Internal criticism emerged by the mid-1970s as student teachers were increasingly dissatisfied with both the content and organisation of the new university programme. In 1977 and 1978 students and teachers worked together to respond to the criticism. The proposed reform focussed on a 'thematic approach' to teacher education. In the spring of 1978 it was decided that the main theme for first year UCE students in the fall term of 1978 would be *School and society*, through which there would be an attempt to integrate pedagogy with social sciences, relate theory to practice and move some of the responsibility for learning to the students. The general theme of *School and society* was to be divided further into six smaller themes (*Table 1*). Only Icelandic and physical education were not included in this development, which spanned the entire first semester.

This study focuses on events surrounding the criticism and the response of students and teachers. The aim is three-fold: first, to identify some general reforms in teacher

education in the 1960s and 1970s; second, to describe some of the events leading to the emergence of the thematic approach at the UCE in 1977-1978; and third, to explore reasons why some students and teachers supported the proposed reform. The complexity of working with pedagogical sciences becomes visible as we analyse the demands by student teachers for a revised programme in teacher education, both in the context of the upgrading of teacher education to university level in 1971 and with regard to changes in the law and national curriculum for compulsory schools in the 1970s.

First we contextualise the problem through a review of factors surrounding change in teacher education in Western countries at the time. Next there is a brief section on the methodology of the study. This is followed by a synopsis of the events in the UCE in 1977 and 1978 that led to the introduction of a thematic approach to teacher education, and an analysis of factors affecting the changes unfolding at the UCE in the late 1970s. We conclude with a short discussion on the findings.

## Changes in teacher education

Research on how educational institutions develop over time has identified three factors to be significant where change in teacher education is concerned (Goodlad, 1990). These are instability arising from increased numbers of school children and those school leavers choosing teacher education as an option for further education; the perceived need to link theory and practice; and the status of teacher education in academia, particularly with regard to research. In Iceland research has shown that teacher education did not change much from 1941–1962, but pressures and developments in education from 1962–1978 found Icelandic teacher training in turmoil (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002; Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003; Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003).

## Stability/instability in teacher education

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century training institutions operated according to traditions that were slow to change, for example, with regard to views of knowledge, assessment and the roles of teachers (Acker, 2003, Acker & Weiner, 2003). Teacher education institutions in the USA and Canada, called *normal schools*, were at the secondary level and were characterised by a low turnover of teaching staff (Goodlad, 1990, pp. 18–19), which was also the case in Iceland until the 1960s (Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003; Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003). The role of primary school teachers was to maintain the culture of the nation and instill basic values into the next generation, as well as provide children with knowledge and skills needed to become useful citizens who would further the societal values of coming generations (Mýrdal, 1996). Teacher training was to strengthen the ability of teachers to carry out this role. This type of secondary level teacher training started to disappear in the USA after the Second World War, but continued for longer in Europe and elsewhere (Judge, Lemosse, Paine, & Sedlak, 1994, pp. 100–101).

This level of teacher training for compulsory schools finally disappeared in Iceland in 1977, a few years after the advent of university level training with raised entry requirements in 1971 (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). During the 1960s, the college had been swamped with students who did not at the point meet entrance requirements to the academic secondary schools (*í menntaskólar*) but wanted more education and were willing to undergo further content-based teacher training.

Instability increased with more pupils, demands for more schooling, better schools and more competent teachers, leading in many instances to an upgrading of teacher training to the university level. Only nine students enrolled in the university-level programme at the UCE in 1971–1972, rising to 27 in 1973–74, 98 in 1975–76 and 164 in 1977–78 (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). By the winter of 1977–78 there were 336 B.Ed. students in the

UCE. In addition there had been several other cohorts with different entrance qualifications in the UCE up until 1977. The UCE building was crowded and staff overloaded.

Instability in the provision of teacher education was common in many countries, especially where teacher education became a department within larger universities through a merger or was upgraded as an independent institution to university level, as was the case in Iceland (Chetty & Lubben, 2010). One effect of institutional change and upgrading to university level was the demand for a wider range of scholarship, including the ability to carry out basic or applied research (Boyer, 1990). This increased pressure on teacher educators who found that they needed to change their professional identity and indeed may have been unwilling or unable to do so (Mýrdal, 1992, 1996). Staff in teacher education have sometimes been 'expert teachers' prior to being employed or having their posts upgraded in a training college, while others have come in with graduate degrees, for example in sociology or history. For either group, doing educational research was a new challenge (Chetty & Lubben, 2010; Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). In the Icelandic case only six lecturers were appointed in the first two years after the upgrading despite provision in the law for 12. By 1976 there were 21 lecturers, including nine in arts and crafts. With heavy teaching loads, only a few of the lecturers carried out research. Three professors were appointed in 1973, 1974 and 1976, two of whom took on research projects in psychology (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006).

### **Theory and practice in teacher education**

During the first half of the 20th century specialised teacher education colleges taught according to well-established routines (Acker & Weiner, 2003). The choice of content and skills to be developed was not controversial and there was a general consensus on tried and tested methods. The stability seen in the ICE in the 1940s and 1950s is a case in point (Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003). It was an island of stability with few changes of staff, content or organisation, although student intake had changed in such a way that applicants were more likely to be younger women by the early 1960s, unlike the early 1940s where the applicants were mainly older men (Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003). Societal and economic changes in the 1940s and 1950s had little effect on the work of the ICE, although increased enrolment finally led to new housing in 1962. The curriculum of the ICE did not reflect any conflict between theory and practice; it was content-based and classroom skills were acquired through teaching practice in a classroom in the cellar of the ICE building. Teaching practice was such that two students watched while two students each taught half a lesson.

The contrast and conflict between theoretical considerations and practical implementation came into focus once teacher education was elevated to university level, where there were policy-driven expectations that research would be carried out by both staff and students and that research knowledge would inform practice (Chetty & Lubben, 2010). At the tertiary level there was and is a stronger demand for theoretical knowledge. Student teachers were expected to develop skills in academic and independent work and to question conventional wisdom (Cowen, 2002; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Mýrdal, 1992, 1996).

Teacher education has been challenged by the demand that theory and praxis form one whole (Imig & Switzer, 1996, pp. 213–220). In teacher education people are being trained for a particular profession, a specialised job often protected by law. Society therefore has a legitimate expectation that teachers are professionals in possession of basic knowledge and skills required when they enter the classroom to teach. The balance between theory and practice in teacher education is a critical issue: How can a training programme

provide enough theory without it being provided at the expense of practice? This issue lies at the core of professionalism. Mýrdal (1996) has suggested that the Post War reforms in Iceland raised questions about the professional identity of teachers as education moved from a nationalistic paradigm in the 1940s and 1950s into a mechanical paradigm that through centralised organisation and technical solutions actually de-professionalised teachers. The latter paradigm was reinforced by the establishment of the School Research Division by the Ministry of Education, which was mandated to develop and implement change in compulsory education. It was staffed by many teachers and had no formal institutional relationship with teacher education (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002; Mýrdal, 1996).

Another pressure in theory and practice in teacher education can arise from changes in society and in a national curriculum (Chetty & Lubben, 2010). The good match in the nationalistic paradigm between teacher training in Iceland and the *de facto* curriculum of national culture began to change after World War II, with Iceland becoming an independent republic in 1944. Change in teacher education was slow to come however (Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003; Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003; Mýrdal, 1996). By the mid-1960s within the so-called 'technical paradigm' curriculum and instruction were being handled as independent fields with the curriculum increasingly disassociated from traditional culture and instruction being underpinned by psychological approaches with an emphasis on development (Mýrdal, 1996). The reform work of the SRD accompanied by the new law on primary schools (Act on Compulsory Schools, 1974) promoted the development and implementation of new or newly-defined curriculum areas and teaching methods. The lack of cooperation between the SRD and the UCE reinforced the gap between what was happening in schools and in teacher education, adding eventually to the pressure for change in teacher education as student teachers became increasingly aware of the changes in the school system.

The interaction of theory and practice, of research in academia and practice in the field, is rarely simple, whatever the context. The reform promoted as the 'thematic approach' at the UCE was developed as an experiment in working towards both these goals at the same time, that is, to strengthen the relationship between schools and the UCE in an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to meet expectations of academic studies. Teacher education can choose to focus more on its role as a professional education institution, for instance, by a more school-based approach in which research and student courses are shifted to schools, as was the case in England in the 1980s (Young, 1998). This would be done by increasing fieldwork or practice teaching components and by identifying topics and materials within the classroom.

Four dimensions of professional knowledge are identified by Maynard and Furlong (1995): 1) direct practice in schools; 2) indirect practice in the training context; 3) critical studies of practical principles; and 4) disciplinary theory involving critical studies of practice and principles. Similar dimensions were to be part of the thematic approach, which will be discussed below. In the UK a more school-based approach can be considered as a cognitive change and a structural change. Changes in the balance between theory and practice led to a decline in the status and extent of disciplinary training with an accompanying increase in the role of reflection on personal experiences. These changes in turn led to a more equal role of tutors in colleges and teachers in schools, and finally to an increase in the role of the teachers (Wilkin, 1993).

### **The status of teacher education within academia**

The challenge for professional teachers is not only the demand for research, but the fact that educational research is weakly positioned in academia (Labaree, 1998). Hargreaves

and Goodson (1996, pp. 7–8) suggest that when schools of education joined universities they may have struck a ‘devil’s bargain’. On the one hand, new types of knowledge were needed to educate teachers as professionals and on the other types of knowledge were needed to raise the academic status of university-level teacher education. The move to academia was not as productive as hoped, as university knowledge was not necessarily practical knowledge, and may have lacked relevance for teacher educators in their efforts to provide a research basis to their practice. In the attempt to attain status, teacher education put practical knowledge at risk.

When teacher education was discussed after the war years, particularly in the USA and England, the discussion was primarily centred on teacher education departments within large universities. These departments, often termed ‘peripheral institutions’, carried out little research had difficulty earning respect within the university community (Goodlad, 1990). Peripheral institutions seek to move closer to the centre, trying to obtain the same level of respect as other university departments (Hargreaves, 1996). This can be accomplished in more than one way. For instance, in the case of the USA, university-based departments of education attempted to enhance the research role of the university teacher. Increased research activities, increased numbers of publications in peer-review research journals and participation in international conferences would increase the success and effectiveness of the department (Goodlad, 1990; Imig & Switzer, 1996.) Upgrading in other parts of the world followed much the same pattern (Chetty & Lubben, 2010). As Jóhannsdóttir (2006) points out, this shift to research in Iceland is representative of the desire of teacher education to gain respect and influence within academia.

However, the upgrading of teacher education to university level in Iceland in 1971 did not involve a merger as in many other international settings, for example in Canada and New Zealand (Arreman & Weiner, 2003; Smith & Tinning, 2011; Smyth, 2003; Webber & Sanderson, 2003). The bill on teacher education discussed but not passed in 1978 proposed a merger of an unusual kind in that it suggested that staff from the University of Iceland be moved to the UCE (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). It could be inferred from this movement of faculty that the students at the UCE, many of whom wanted a change in the teacher education programme, were operating from a position of strength.

## Background and methodology

This research had its origins in a multi-national research project on *Traditions and transitions in teacher education* conceived by Sandra Acker from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) and Gaby Weiner, a British scholar who was working at the University of Umea at the time (Acker, 2003; Acker & Weiner, 2003). Several projects on changes in teacher education were carried out by researchers in Canada, Sweden and Iceland in connection with the research project, and a special issue of the *Journal of Teacher Education*, published by Umea University in 2003, was devoted to papers from the project (Acker & Weiner, 2003). Allyson Macdonald and Guðrún Kristinsdóttir were co-supervisors of the master’s project on which this article is largely based (Jónasson, 2003, 2004) and authors of two of the journal articles.

The research questions are:

- What was the substance of the thematic approach towards teacher education which was discussed in the UCE in 1978?
- What were the main forces behind the changes, and why?
- Who supported the changes, and why?
- What were key features of the programme offered in the autumn of 1978?

Data were drawn from articles in the student magazine and unpublished notes and minutes of meetings and by taking interviews with some of those involved in the events of 1977 and 1978. The discussion of the events leading up to the thematically based course offered in the autumn term of 1978 is built in part on articles in the student journal *Höður* which was published three times, once in 1977 and twice in 1978, and papers from the personal records of Gunnar Árnason, a UCE lecturer at the time.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting participants for the interviews. The group consisted of four student teachers, four UCE teacher educators and two individuals who worked closely with the UCE in the 1970s and were connected with other changes in education and teacher education. These individuals were active during 1977 or 1978 in the changes or had a 'ringside view' of the events. Interviews were taken by the first author. The interviews, taken in 2002 and 2003, were semi-structured, recorded, transcribed and coded.

The main findings are presented in two sections, one on the development and structure of *School and society* offered in the fall of 1978, the other on changes in the discourse and context at the time, including changing expectations of education, the legal changes and key agents of influence. This is followed by a discussion on the extent of external influence on the changing programme. The comments made by the participants are generally interwoven into the text and not attributed to individuals.

## **Development and structure of *School and society***

The university level programme had come under criticism by the mid-1970s. By the beginning of the school year 1977–1978 student criticism of the structure of teacher education at the UCE could not be ignored. The main thrust of the student argument was that the programme was not practical for teacher trainees and also that the proportion of time allocated to pedagogy and didactics was too small and insufficiently related to the reality that faced teachers in compulsory schools.

### **Early deliberations 1977–1978**

In order to create a venue to address the criticism, the student council established a working group which had the task of carrying out a general assessment of the teacher education programme and suggesting reforms. Some teacher educators recognised the criticism and were in agreement while others were not. As a result of discussions between students and teachers, a 'cooperative' committee with representatives from both parties was set up in the autumn of 1977.

The committee was not active at first, but in early 1978 a conference on teacher education held by the teacher unions breathed new life into its work. Instead of tackling individual subjects and/or courses, the committee members felt it would be more effective to work on the whole policy of teacher education and revise the entire programme. The committee was of the opinion that in the revision it would be natural to consider the aims of compulsory education and prepare relevant changes because it was from schools that the nature and content of teacher education should emerge.

The committee presented a proposal from the pedagogic division that the programme could be organised on the basis of themes, giving a firm foundation in several key themes in education, and later students would have some freedom in the choice of topics within the thematic approach. The students and teachers did not entirely agree on this proposal, although the disagreement was not about the thematic approach itself. According to the interviews, the students wanted a more radical version than the teachers, in which the students would run parts of the programme themselves. The students wanted to be able

to choose themes within their own areas of interest rather than having to choose from topics that the teachers had decided on. This viewpoint is in accordance with the ideas of students which had appeared in articles critical of 'piggy bank teaching' and the inadequate compromise which had been made between the law on compulsory education from 1974 and the national curriculum on the one hand, and the form of teacher education on the other. The term 'piggy bank teaching' refers to the idea of viewing students as empty piggy banks which could be filled bit by bit by teachers with knowledge and skills involving no critical reflection.

The cooperative committee comprised of seven students and several teacher educators developed a working model for the programme which was discussed at a conference of students and teachers on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April 1978. Under discussion was the proposed model, as well as the relationship between core and elective subjects, the connection with compulsory school and philosophical topics in the programme. In some cases students and teachers had different perspectives, and there was also disagreement among some of the teachers.

### **A decision taken**

An administrative board meeting of the UCE was held on May 10, 1978, and the following statement was entered into the minutes (*Höður*, 1978, p. 42):

Following on the discussions which have been in progress over the last school year between students and teachers on essential changes to the organisation and content of studies at UCE, the administrative board has made the following decisions:

- 1) A reform of the organisation of teacher education will be undertaken. Fundamental to this work will be the reforms which the cooperative committee of teachers and students have emphasised:
  - That certain themes will be developed which involve the integration of individual subjects;
  - That students and teachers will take part in organising the entire programme, as well as individual topics;
  - That the programme will increasingly recognise the role of the teachers in social development;
  - That academic studies in development courses and electives will be more closely related to the practical side of the work of the school and projects of a diverse nature;
  - That students will become more engaged and independent in their studies.
- 2) In June teachers and student representatives will work on the above reforms. During this work the following will be discussed and decisions reached:
  - General policy development and considerations of opportunities for implementation;
  - Changes which can be implemented in the next school year;
  - The organisation of teaching and learning.

Seven students were to be part of a new committee to work on the proposed reforms. Teacher educators and the students were to be paid by the Ministry of Education. A work plan was developed in June, which saw the main changes in the organisation of courses to take place in the first term.



## Developing the 'thematic' concept

The thematic approach carried with it the notion that traditional subjects could be integrated, so that a topic or theme could be addressed from a variety of perspectives. The programme was to promote coherence by avoiding subject-based teaching which could lead to overlap and a lack of context. It was important to recognise ideas coming from the work of compulsory schools and develop themes in accordance with the experiences of student teachers working in schools. Student teachers were to be as engaged as possible by developing their own studies in cooperation with their teachers. The intention in the new programme was for students to become aware of their own role as compulsory school teachers. The proposal for a thematic approach demanded that UCE teachers would have to work together and not independently of each other, although two subjects remained outside the new approach, physical education and Icelandic. The main theme for the first semester 15-week period was *School and society*.

## An integrated approach to *School and society*

The first two weeks of the first semester were organised as an introduction to the teacher education programme at the UCE, as well as covering the development of group work and methodologies such as observation in schools in preparation for school visits during the third week (*Table 1*). This arrangement was grounded in the emphasis mentioned above, i.e. the motive for learning would be found in the actual work in schools.

The thematic work related to *School and society* started in the fourth week, after the school visits, and was divided into six subthemes of varying length (*Table 1*). For each subtheme activities were of three kinds: lectures in a whole class setting, discussion groups, and finally, work groups.

For the first two weeks the first year students were divided into two groups for *lectures*. Teacher educators distributed materials relevant to the current subtheme. The two halves were then split into three equally sized *discussion groups* or study groups, each led by one teacher educator from the coordinating team, six teachers in all. The goal of the discussion stage was to dissect the lecture material and find out what would be interesting to work with in more detail in even smaller *work groups*. It was hoped that in the work groups the initiative for learning would move to the students.

Six subthemes were to be covered in the first term *School and society* (*Table 1*):

1. The social function of the school and social class
2. Language and communication
3. Social development: family, norms, society
4. Public schooling, age grouping
5. Stages in development – society, human sciences, epistemology
6. Social conditions and education as a social force.

In all, 21 periods a week were allocated to the integrated work and thematic approach. Four periods were for lectures, three for discussion and 14 for group work. In all, 44 hours were allocated to lectures, 30 hours were used for discussion and about 150 hours for group work, in addition to the two-week introduction to the law, the curriculum and research methods and one week in schools.

The emphasis on group work was clear from the time allocation (*Table 1*). Students were also given some measure of choice, although perhaps not as much as they wanted. Members of each discussion group decided on projects that would be interesting to pursue. Work groups of different sizes were then formed according to the interests of the students. These work groups presented their findings to other work groups and to the

responsible teacher. The work groups could vary in composition from one theme to another but there was always one teacher connected to a discussion group. It was anticipated that the third-year students would become involved in the work groups and also in the discussions. Evaluation was to be carried out continuously. It was hoped that assessment methods would be diverse and enable students to experience how theory was reflected in reality.

<b>Table 1 – Course schedule, 1st term 1978 (prepared from the personal notes of the late Gunnar Árnason lecturer at UCE in 1978)</b>		
<b>Week</b>	<b>Subthemes and topics</b>	<b>Lectures</b>
<b>1–2</b>	<b>Introduction</b> Studying at the UCE and the thematic approach Learning in schools; the law and the curriculum Observation and research in schools A theoretical approach Discovery approaches Analysis and presentation of findings	
<b>1–2</b>	Group dynamics	
<b>3</b>	School visits	
<b>4–11</b>	<b>1st subtheme</b> The school and the class as a social system The social function of the school  <b>2nd subtheme</b> Language as communication, language acquisition Other ways of communicating; crafts, arts The role of children’s literature in development: a national perspective  <b>3rd subtheme</b> The effect of family, school and others on social development Values and norms in development, personality formation School and changes in society  <b>4th subtheme</b> The origin of public school, its development and the school system Age grouping and social meaning: children and teenagers, now and earlier, here and elsewhere The origin and development of children’s literature	2 2  2 4 2  2 2 4  4 2 2
<b>12 –13</b>	<b>5th subtheme</b> Stages in the development of education and human understanding The historical roots of human science: human behaviours as an object of science Differing epistemologies, positivism, experientialism, religious education/secular education  <b>6th subtheme</b> The social conditions of education Social hierarchy, equal opportunities, performance Conflict resolution Education as an economic and social force	3 3 2  4 2 2

## Drivers of change

In this section we explore which individuals or organisations supported the change in the teacher education programme at the UCE and why the thematic approach was the outcome of the calls for change in the period 1975–1978.

Only eight students in the first cohort (first enrolled in 1971) reached the third year of study (1973–1974) but by 1977–78 this number increased to 164 starting their studies, and 85 students in the third year (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). Some of the UCE teachers had studied abroad, although only a few had doctoral degrees, in areas such as psychology, sociology and history. Education was changing in Iceland through the law on compulsory education of 1974 (Act on Compulsory Schools, 1974), but given the country's small population (about 214,000 in 1974 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.) several people had more than one role.

## Instability and new expectations of education

The Icelandic school in the 1940s and 1950s was in essence a tool to maintain national culture (Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003). The number attending secondary school rose sharply in the 1960s, as did applications to study at the ICE. Educational issues were widely discussed, including teacher education (see for example issues of the journal *Menntamál* from this period). Legal change came with Act 63, 1974, the first major law on compulsory education since 1946.

The new education law (Act, 1974) stated in its second article that the school should be organised in such a way that the nature and needs of each and every student should be met. It further stated that the basis should be laid for the development of students' independent thinking and their ability to work with one another (Act on Compulsory School, 1974). New school curricula emerged in the 1970s, developed by staff at the School Research Division (SRD), but the UCE did not have an official role in their development.

Ideas on education started to change in Iceland in the 1960s (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002; Mýrdal 1992). For some, the focus was increasingly on child-centredness, developmental psychology and the pupil as an individual, as captured in the 1974 law. A mechanical model began to pervade pedagogy and teaching studies, for instance, in the spirit of Bloom's taxonomy (Edelstein, 1988, pp. 81–85; Jóhannesson, 1993; Mýrdal, 1996). This view was characterized by technical rationality, that is to say, a 'centre-periphery' model that could work as long as those on the receiving end were willing and careful to follow prescribed actions. These two views, focusing on the child but adopting a centre-periphery approach to school innovation, caused tensions which were difficult to resolve.

Some UCE teachers were severely criticised by students, apparently with the tacit support of other teachers, for their traditional teaching and content-based courses, making the discussion of change unavoidable. It was apparent from the interviews and the documentary analysis that some students and teachers made it clear they wanted the nature of studies in teacher education to change. There were also speculations about the nature, purpose and significance of research.

The period from 1974 to 1978 was characterised by conflict between teachers and students and among some teachers themselves (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002). A consensus was evident among those interviewed for this study that the main problem was the hybrid function of the college which made it difficult for teacher educators to serve both secondary and tertiary level students at the same time. The first few cohorts were aware of the lack of change, and there were some impatience student protests in 1974. After that the debate about developing a new programme and meeting university standards was more

vocal, not least because of changes in compulsory education as the law passed in 1974 began to take effect.

### **Linking theory with practice in university-level teacher education**

The criticism of the teacher education curriculum in 1974 did not disappear but its substance changed as changes in schools and universities made themselves felt. The issues raised by students in 1977 were based on two main arguments. Firstly, as discussed above, they felt that the content and teaching methods at the UCE still reflected a secondary school approach. Secondly, they felt studies were divorced from reality and from the new developments in the compulsory schools. The law of 1974 and the new curricula became the 'Bible' of teacher educators, as one former student phrased it in an interview. At the same time, as the compulsory schools were being criticised in *Höður*, its editors were publishing interviews and articles by school teachers on thematic work in the student-run college journal (*Höður*, 1978, pp. 31–46) in the spirit of the law and not least the new National curriculum guide (1977) for social studies, which was a challenge to many teachers (Jóhannesson, 1993).

A parallel development to change at the UCE was that occurring in the Ministry of Education. In the mid-1960s the School Research Division (SRD) was established, which was mandated to develop and implement curriculum change in compulsory education. Of particular relevance to the thematic approach being done at the UCE was the curriculum approach taken by the social studies group at the SRD (Jóhannesson, 1993).

Some specialists recruited as teacher educators by the UCE had been active within the SRD. In spite of the new law and new curricula, the changes suggested by the SRD were slow in reaching teacher education, schools and classrooms. These changes had to be accelerated, according to those interviewed about this period. The main idea behind introducing the thematic approach at the UCE was to give student teachers opportunities to gain experience in such education and thus speed up the changes being proposed by the SRD in the schools. That was to happen by modelling the same type of approach to education within the UCE as was stipulated by law and in the curricula in the schools. The student teachers felt that if they were exposed to such methods in their own studies, then they would be more likely to use the new methods when they started teaching. One respondent said:

The SRD was until the early 1980s an influential institution within the Icelandic school system. Experts wrote new teaching materials and functioned as national subject coordinators whose role was not only to monitor and review the strategic directions within the school system but also to come up with practical innovations.

The push for innovation by the students and some teachers was an attempt to shape the studies within the UCE in such a way that the theoretical, technically in the hands of the UCE, and the practical, technically in the hands of the SRD, could support one another. There was however only a small measure of formal cooperation between staff of the UCE and the SRD and three of the participants interviewed for this study pointed out that the two organisations seemed not to share the same ideological foundation. It was noted that progressive educationists within both institutions criticised teaching practices within the compulsory schools and the same can be said for the students at the UCE. Several in the group of participants felt that the school system had stagnated and served the interests of the dominant interest groups in society. The real and hidden curriculum appeared to be based on the needs of society, but it ignored the fact that the pupils are individuals who develop at different rates. All individuals were entitled to an education that suited their

needs and it was felt that teaching practices within compulsory schooling should increasingly be adapted to the interest, ability and needs of all pupils, not just the chosen few. This debate on meeting the needs of the child is seen in several articles in issues of the student magazine *Höður* published in 1977–1978, one source for this research.

The 1974 legislation and the ensuing developments embodied a different ideology than that introduced in the 1960s. Rather than being based almost exclusively on Bloom's typologies of learning goals, increased emphasis was placed on the cognitive development of children, inspired by the theories of Jean Piaget and John Dewey (Edelstein & Helgadóttir, 1981, pp. 12–13). The participants and the first author experienced the changes in education in the late 1970s as a move away from memorisation and skills and a primary emphasis on product or outcome towards an emphasis on process, where topics or frameworks were suggested, giving teachers had a large degree of freedom regarding teaching materials and methods. The primary emphasis was on discovery methods, approaches that were unfamiliar to many Icelandic primary school teachers who had graduated before 1977.

If such new teaching ideas were to take hold then just introducing new materials would not suffice. More support was needed, so the plan of the social studies group of the SRD with regard to change was therefore three-pronged: first, they wrote the curriculum; second, they wanted student teachers to be provided with appropriate teaching in social studies and insight into the foundational ideology of the curriculum; and third, they wanted practising teachers to have access to inservice education to acquaint themselves with the changes which the social studies curriculum stipulated. The subject coordinators at the SRD addressed the third component through holding courses and meetings across the country, and some SRD staff took part in structuring the undergraduate program to be adopted at the UCE (Edelstein & Helgadóttir, 1981), in particular the thematic approach which could link theory and practice.

### **Teacher education and the academy**

The UCE survived its first few years as a university but the institution did not bear much resemblance to academic counterparts although it had been given a research mandate. The UCE was different from many of the teacher education institutions undergoing change and discussed in the literature, in that it was an independent university, and not a department within a university. Academic staff with tenure carried a research responsibility as part of their contract. This independence from the University of Iceland is likely to have had some effect on the development of teacher education in Iceland as compared with developments in other countries.

There is however no doubt given the views expressed in the interviews that the development of the curriculum and the need to do research was in many ways comparable. After the 'secondary school' function had been eradicated, the real battle for where the University College of Education should be headed began. Students criticised study materials and teaching methods within the UCE. Participants in this study reported wanting to be real university students in a real university. One participant said:

I think that people, without saying whether they are the older or the younger generation, or people who worked in the old college or came from outside, I think that part of moving the organisation up to university level led to a changed attitude to students and that which they needed to do to pass their examinations. (Teacher educator)

Students wanted the 'secondary school' mentality out and to be in a position to express themselves directly and clearly. Some teacher educators in the interviews wanted the

'secondary school' mentality to disappear, but had to be careful in their methods to achieve that goal. They, too, wanted to be real university teachers in a real university. Neither of these groups wanted their peers from the University of Iceland to look down on them or consider them to be part of an inferior institution. As one former student said:

In a way it was that people didn't want others to treat them as a secondary school student but on the other hand the school was to be an educational institution. We wanted our studies to be about theory versus practice. Not just how we ought to teach and move in front of the blackboard, rather to make us capable of organising themes, make us capable ... many ... really think about preparation for the work of a teachers and not just 'repeat after me'. (Former student teacher)

In 1977 draft legislation on teacher education, the first revision since upgrading in 1971, was introduced in parliament but never passed into law. The essence of the bill constituted an attempt from within the UCE to increase its academic standing. The proposals were fairly drastic, including merging all teacher education in the country with the UCE, which would require some staff to be moved from the University of Iceland (UI) to the UCE. Some faculty members at the UI could not accept such proposals, according to one participant in this research, who also took part in writing the new laws. Gyða Jóhannsdóttir reached the same conclusion in her doctoral dissertation on teacher education during the period 1963–1978 (Jóhannsdóttir, 2002, pp. 172–182). This draft of the legislation created a severe conflict of interest between the UI and the UCE. The parliament called for comments from institutions and others but the bill was never passed, probably because of this conflict of interest between the two universities. This resulted in the UCE legislation from 1971 not being reviewed until 1988, 17 years after the initial upgrading. The later legislation sailed through parliament, and there was no mention of moving teacher education from the UI to the UCE. The main change in 1988 was a proposal to lengthen the course of study for teacher education from three to four years.

The thematic approach introduced at the UCE was intended to elevate studies towards university level. This is evident in the interviews with teacher educators and student teachers from that period. It was an attempt to combine theory and practice, but it was also an attempt to elevate studies to a higher level. In all the interviews, both teachers and students were worried that the UCE in the late 1970s would become the same sort of research-oriented institution as the University of Iceland, a situation not deemed appropriate for teacher education where they wished theory and practice be linked. One respondent put it this way:

I think that the emphasis in the criticism has been two things – theory and practice, and university status. People were looking for some kind of image for the UCE, as 'academic' and at the same time they were conscious that UCE had to have a different 'profile' than the University of Iceland. For example, this was often written about by groups in the thematic work e.g. what sort of research should be carried out at the UCE and what sort of 'academy' it should be, unlike the 'academies' in a traditional university. (Teacher educator)

## Summary and discussion

The research questions in this study were: What was the substance of the thematic approach adopted in the UCE in 1978? What were the main forces behind the changes? Who supported the change and why, and what were the key features of the schedule offered in the autumn of 1978 (*Table 1*)?

The thematic approach developed for the first semester was a concerted attempt to link theory and practice through the main theme of *School and society*, based on new expectations in the law and the curricula. The new first-year programme in 1978 was divided into subthemes, involving mixed methods, giving students more choice and voice than earlier options, combining lectures with both discussion groups and work groups, and requiring teachers to take on new roles, coordinating activities across groups and nurturing innovative projects (*Table 1*). The thematic programme was also intended to challenge perceived ideas of university level education, both by moving away from an accumulation of knowledge as education and developing and retaining a necessary link between the academy and the field. The main ideas behind the change were to better prepare teachers to work in schools by giving them more experience in independent work and promoting critical thinking, in accordance with the spirit of the law and the curricula emerging in the 1970s. Students wanted the change and they were supported by some UCE teachers.

The surprise in this study was how much influence external parties had on the development of the 'thematic approach'. It was clear from the interviews that some staff members at the University of Iceland had considerable influence on the development of the new approach in teacher education at the UCE. The same can be said about members of parliament, e.g. with the passing of the law on compulsory education in 1974 or stalling the 1978 bill on teacher education.

The UCE and the SRD appear to have operated as separate entities since there was no formal cooperation and they did not share a common ideology. In fact, interaction between them was characterised by distrust. This was the opinion of all those interviewed, without any explanation being offered. Two committees, one that negotiated the primary school legislation and the other that served as the legislative committee for the UCE, were supposed to collaborate, but the research participants felt that this had turned out to be impossible, mainly due to ideological differences. This tension is not clear or is avoided in written sources, but was evident in the interviews with the UCE teacher educators. On the whole, though, students were not aware of this tension at the time, and despite the fact that the curricula released around 1974 and the accompanying primary school legislation became a 'Bible of sorts for working with children, student teachers did not 'take sides' or attribute this approach to the SRD. However, the teacher educators did so.

It was surprising to find out just how much influence the activities of the SRD seem to have had regarding the introduction and execution of the thematic approach, and the ideology behind it. This is however more likely to be the result of individuals engaged in some 'boundary crossing', rather than effects at an institutional level. The primary school legislation in 1974 and the curricula being developed at the time is based on the same philosophy as the thematic approach. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that many of the teacher educators had been active in the SRD and had been involved in the development of the curricula.

## Notes

1. From 1907/08 until 1971 the teaching training college was called the Iceland College of Education. With the upgrading in 1971 it became the University College of Education. When this merged with the University of Iceland in 2008 the institution became the School of Education.
2. List of interview participants and dates when interviews were taken:  
Björn Þráinn Þórðarson, 02.09.2003, Gísli Ásgeirsson, 11.08.2003, Guðbjörg

Pálsdóttir, 02.12.2003, Gunnar Árnason, 31.10.2003, Haukur Viggósson, 27.07.2003, Hrafnhildur Ragnarsdóttir, 29.09.2003, Jónas Pálsson, 26.03.2002, Loftur Guttormsson, 12.08.2003, Ólafur H. Jóhannsson, 26.04.2002, Sigurjón Mýrdal, 15.12.2003.

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### Key words

*teacher education – upgrading – university level – thematic studies  
– integrated studies*

### Um höfunda

Gunnar Börkur Jónasson (gborkur@hi.is) hefur verið grunnskólakennari til margra ára og þar af sjö ár sem æfingakennari við Æfingaskóla Kennaraháskóla Íslands. Samhliða grunnskólakennslunni hefur hann verið í hluta-stöðu við Kennaraháskóla Íslands og síðar við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Hlutverk hans þar er að kenna kennslufræði og veita kennaranemum ráðgjöf um grunnskólakennslu. Sem kennari hefur hann langa reynslu af kennslu barna frá 6–15 ára aldri. Hann var nemandi við Kennaraháskóla Íslands á því tímabili sem fjallað er um í þessari grein.

Allyson Macdonald (allyson@hi.is) er fædd og uppalin í Suður-Afríku þar sem hún lauk námi í eðlisfræði við University of the Witwatersrand í Jóhannesborg vorið 1976. Þá um haustið hélt hún til Bandaríkjanna þar sem hún stundaði framhaldsnám í kennslufræðum vísinda við Oregon State University. Hún flutti til Íslands með íslenskum manni sínum haustið 1983 og bjó í Skagafirði þar sem hún starfaði við rannsóknir, ráðgjöf og kennslu. Hún var forstöðumaður Rannsóknarstofnunar Kennaraháskóla Íslands frá 1999 til 2004 og hefur verið prófessor í menntunarfræðum frá árinu 2001.

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### Efnisorð

*kennaramenntun – yfirfærsla – háskólastig – samþætt verkefni – þemanám*



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