Abstract
The purpose of the chapter is to give an overview of special education in Iceland, historically and with reference to modern use of terms, research, policy, legal trends and funding. Recent data is provided on demographic developments amongst children in Iceland and detailed account is given of practices in schools, including collaboration with parents and teacher education. Finally some issues and challenges are discussed that still remain to be solved with respect to meeting the special needs of students in school. One of the findings is that only 1.3% of students attend special schools and special classes and that the term special education has outlived its usefulness except perhaps in the context of the three segregated special schools that still remain in the country. Official papers have replaced it with the term special support. Despite a diversity of views and practices the main implication is that a new model of education is required, in line with that proposed by Slee (2011) where the needs of individuals are served in all schools and the binary thinking related to regular vs. special education is no longer necessary.

Keywords: General review, special education, support, Iceland.
Introduction

Iceland: Country and Nation

Given its geographical size of 100,000 square kilometres and a population of just one third of a million inhabitants, Iceland is one of the most sparsely populated country and smallest independent nation states in the world. The island’s location in the middle of the north Atlantic makes it relatively isolated but also well situated for the interception of cultural currents from both sides of the Atlantic. Icelanders have a distinct language and culture, which historically is closely linked to other Nordic nations. Reykjavik, the capital city, is by far the largest municipality with a population of about 120,000.

At the time of the establishment of the first public schools around 1850 Iceland was a Danish dependency and one of the poorest countries in Europe, its economy being largely based on farming and fishing. The population, numbering approximately 70,000, over 80% of whom lived in rural areas, was homogenous but literate (Guttormsson, 1983). The country gained independence step by step in the late 19th and early 20th century and became a republic with parliamentary democracy in 1944. Executive power lies with the cabinet formed usually by coalition of two or more political parties.

Iceland took a leap forward in the 20th century to become an urban, highly modern, capitalistic market society; from the 1960s it has ranked as one of the 10-15 most affluent nations within the OECD (Jónsson, 2009). Communication with other nations has always been dynamic, particularly with the Nordic states but also elsewhere. Economic prosperity after the Second World War was thus largely based upon transactions with Eastern Europe, Northern America, the European Union and, lately, Japan and China. More recently the bank crisis, the fall of the krona and the currency embargo since 2008 has seriously affected both public and private spending and set the nation’s economy back several years.

Education in Iceland

For centuries children were educated in their homes by their parents and later by peripatetic teachers. This system continued well into the 20th century in rural areas. The history of public schools in Iceland is relatively short, compared to that of neighbouring countries, spanning merely 160 years (Guttormsson, 2008). The first Education Law on public schooling was passed in 1907 followed by subsequent Education Acts in 1926, 1936 and 1946. However, it was not until the 1974 Education 1974 that all children, including those with special needs and disabilities, were required to attend school. Legislation and curricula in the 20th century reflect continuing efforts towards increased equality between children in different parts of the country, of different gender and of varying learning ability. Recent PISA (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment) results show that this endeavour has borne fruit in relative homogeneity of school performance, at least at the compulsory school level (Halldórsson, Ólafsson, & Björnsson, 2013).

The educational system is structured at four levels of schooling:
The preschool ("playschool" as it is called in Iceland), ages 2-5 years. Operated by local authorities.

The compulsory school ("basic school"), ages 6-16 years. Operated by local authorities.

The upper secondary school ("continuing school"), ages 16-20 years. Operated by the state.

Universities and adult education provision. Independent but financed largely by the state.

This chapter deals with special education at the three first school levels, the preschool, the compulsory school and the upper secondary school. The university level is mostly left out, although students with a variety of disabilities are admitted for university study. Readers interested in more detailed information about the extent to which Iceland’s seven universities cater to students with special needs are referred to Stefánsdóttir (2013) comprehensive description.

The majority of Iceland’s public schools operate under municipalities (preschools and compulsory schools) or the state (upper secondary schools and universities). Only a few schools are privately run with 70% contributions from the municipalities or the state. Students at compulsory schools are the only ones obliged to attend school but 95% of children attend preschools and up to 95% of children start upper-secondary schools although up to a third discontinue their studies before completion (Statistics Iceland, 2013). Today the annual public expenditure on education per student is slightly above the average for 21 Europe Union (EU) nations at preschool, primary school and upper secondary school levels but considerably lower at the tertiary/university level. The same applies when compared to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2000) average.

Special Education in Iceland

A review of the literature reveals little consensus on the meaning of the term ‘special education’, what it should contain, where it should ideally be practiced and how (Bjarnason, 2010a). Does the term refer to location, pedagogic methods and contents, the professionals who carry it out or to the additional resources needed to implement the special needs education? Indeed the term ‘special support’ is now used in official documents in Iceland in place of the term ‘special education’ that is seen to have outlived its usefulness except in the context of segregated special schools.

Although special education may strictly be understood as referring to what happens within the education system, the other side of the coin is what happens within the child. The term impairment is used here in the ‘individual’ or ‘medical’ theoretical perspective about what happens within the child (WHO, 1980). The term ‘disability’ is similarly debated but is used here as an overarching term for all major barriers that prevent an individual from participating in society (and school), including personal impairments, social structures, physical structures and social prejudices. The term ‘special educational needs’ is used here to refer to all educational needs that the school does not manage to adjust to and meet in its daily work. This term overlaps with disability at the same time as it also extends beyond it to ‘cover those who are failing for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to be likely to impede a child’s optimal progress’ (OECD, 2000).

The same perplexity applies to ‘special educational needs’ as to special education and disability. Does the term refer to all kinds of special needs or only some; should, for example, difficulties related to behaviour (e.g. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder[ADHD]), social interaction (e.g. bullying), giftedness and multiculturalism be categorised as special educational needs? Does the term only refer to difficulties experienced or observed in connection with education? Do these needs exist irrespective of whether they have been identified as such,
diagnosed or met (OECD, 2000)? Discussing students with special educational needs implies that such a category can be identified. Many would argue that this is not so, and that such construction contributes to the maintenance of the status quo as regards meeting students’ individual needs at school (see e.g. Goodey, 1999).

However, the terms special education and special educator are mentioned neither in Icelandic law, ordinances nor the National Curriculum Guides for the pre-primary, primary or secondary sectors of the school system. Nor are they mentioned in a recent policy document on educational provision by the largest municipality, the City of Reykjavik. Instead the term ‘special support’ is used. It is considered contradictory to maintain a system of education that should be inclusive of all children and still have special education. This makes for a rather peculiar point of departure for a chapter on special education. Notably, however, two Ordinances on students with special educational needs exists, one for Education Act-compulsory school (1995) and another for the Education Act-Upper Secondary School (2008), three special schools exist at the compulsory school level and special classes within mainstream schools exist at these two levels. Special educators still function in mainstream schools at three school levels, although their professional status is no longer recognised by law or regulation. The situation regarding this branch of the education system is, therefore, complicated today as it always has been.

The policy of inclusive education has gained support in Iceland, as in most other countries in the world in recent years, following a runaway increase in the number of students placed in segregated special educational provision in the 1960s and 1970s. The policy shift in Iceland was based on developments in Sweden, Denmark, Italy and the United States in the 1970s and later public missions, first on “Education for All” in Jomtien, Thailand (UNESCO, 1990), Salamanca Declaration and Plan of Action for Students with Special Needs (1995) and Dakar, Senegal (UNESCO,2000) and in between on “Inclusive Education for All Learners” in Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). In a world where millions of children are deprived of education altogether, not the least girls with disabilities, the inclusion mission by UNESCO sounds utopic. Nevertheless most governments in the world have chosen inclusion as their central education policy. To what extent or how they manage to make it a reality is another matter. There is indeed a large measure of integration of students with disabilities and special needs into mainstream schools in Iceland, as only 1.3% of the school age population attends special schools (0.5%) and special classes (0.8%) (Statistics Iceland, 2013). However, there are at present an increasing number of so-called “participation classes” being established in Reykjavik mainstream schools, as branches from special schools, primarily for children who find it difficult to keep up with the speed of learning or exhibit difficult behaviour in mainstream classes (Hrund Logadóttir, City of Reykjavik, personal communication). This is an example of local interpretation of the policy of inclusive education

**Research on Special Education in Iceland**

Although special needs education is probably among the fields of education in Iceland where there has been greatest research activity over the past 50 years, the total number of research projects is less than 100 (Marinósson, 2005). The studies divide easily into two groups. On the one hand there are projects carried out by pedagogues studying school responses to student diversity in some form, from a social-relational theoretical perspective. On the other hand there are investigations of children’s impairments by clinicians guided by an individual-medical perspective. Half of the projects carried out by the pedagogues are quantitative in their methodological approach and half qualitative.
In addition there are a few action research projects. All the projects carried out by the clinicians are basically quantitative although they may include some interview or open observation data. Half of the projects by the pedagogues are (masters or doctoral) theses submitted as part of their research training. The overwhelming majority of research projects are initiated by individuals or groups, only a few are initiated by official institutions such as the Ministry of Education. It is difficult to talk about trends in research in this field where the number of research projects is as limited as this and significantly dependent on individual researchers. However, one can broadly portray the available research as belonging to either holistic or inclusive educational research or more categorical, clinical research.

The educational research is institutionalized at university education departments, the latter to a large extent at state assessment units and a university psychology department. The institutional basis for all educational research (indeed all social science research) in Iceland is weak on account of lack of resources: under funding, lack of trained researchers and the embryonic state of research institutions. It would therefore be considered essential for those few who engage in research within similar fields to collaborate. This is, however, rarely the case. The researchers at the different institutions hardly ever meet to discuss their research, probably precisely because of the weak structure that they operate within. As regards research in special education this reflects the present uneasy relationship between the individual and the social theoretical perspectives in disability research (Op. cit.; Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). In the last few years, greater stress has been laid on research and publication within the universities, partly for reasons of international race for a place amongst the top 100, 300 or 500 universities in the world, partly because the value of research for society is better understood. At the same time, there has been a change in policy in allocation of competitive funds so that larger sums go to fewer applicants whilst there has been no increase in total sums, partly because of the bank crisis and the collapse of the Icelandic currency in 2008. The surge of research within special education that was felt before the bank crisis has therefore now slowed down.

Special education should not be studied separately from mainstream education but as an inherent part of it. One implication of such context-oriented approach is that the methodology should not solely be based on logical positivistic assumptions of truth and objectivity but also assumptions of the contextual nature of social phenomena. In an era where emphasis is on the strengths of individuals and the failings of the system to meet their needs, increasing collaboration between researchers within social, health, and educational institutions is called for. There is a need for larger and longer term projects that can gain an overview of the situation in education from policy to grass roots level over an extensive time period. This necessitates comparison with similar research projects in other countries.

**Origins and History of Special Education in Iceland**

The development of Iceland’s response to disability mirrors closely that of neighbouring countries, albeit at a slower pace and on a smaller scale. Thus small institutions for people with intellectual disability were established by the middle of the 20th century and abandoned before the end of the century. The exclusion of children from school on the grounds of ‘amorality’ and ‘illness’ as stipulated in the Education Act 1936 was annulled by the passing of the Education Act 1974 when the right of education was extended to all children and the concept of integration was introduced. Then for the first time the school was obliged to take account of its students’ educational needs whereas before its major task was to teach prescribed subjects. To follow up on this policy legal responsibility for
compulsory education was moved first from the state to 8 education authorities (Lög um grunnskóla, 1974) and then to the municipalities (Lög um grunnskóla, 1995). The first ordinance on special education 1977 was revised in 1990 and the categorical system of provision replaced by a system geared to meeting special educational needs of all students in their home schools (Reglugerð um sérkennslu, 1990). It was considered possible to evaluate more accurately each student’s special needs in their daily context than by diagnostic labels alone, made on the basis of snapshots taken in a clinic in Reykjavik. This context bound assessment of special needs only survived a few years until funding was made conditional on diagnosis by ‘recognised authorities’.

Since 1996, compulsory schools have been under the jurisdiction of the municipalities where Preschools were since 1994 while Upper-Secondary Schools were under the state. Universities have gained authority over their own affairs (Lög um opinbera háskóla, 2008) and the education of all pedagogic personnel has been moved to university level and extended from three years (Bachelor) to five (Master) (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda, 2008). Discussion of the compulsory school’s response to the diversity of students has developed in character from exclusion to inclusion to rights and thereby also through change in ideas and accompanying terminology from special education through integration to inclusion. This, however, is not a linear development in time as older theoretical perspectives, nomenclature and special educational provisions live alongside the more recent ones. Moreover the discourse on inclusion as a response to student diversity in Icelandic schools must be linked to similar policies in neighbouring countries.

Looking back in time at the institutionalisation of special education, schools for deaf and blind students started around 1870 and these students have moved increasingly into mainstream schools since. Special education for physically disabled students started in the mid-20th century and was provided in special schools and units after World War II but since 1970 it has increasingly taken the form of personal support within mainstream school surroundings (Sigurðsson, 1993). Children with intellectual disabilities who were considered uneducable were first offered a place in an institution in Sólheimar, a residential care home established in 1931 by a private individual. In the 1950s and ‘60s the population of children with intellectual disability in institutions expanded considerably with the establishment of other homes under the Ministry of Social Affairs and a medical institution, Kópavogshæli. Höfðaskóli, the first special school for children with IQs of 50-70 was opened in Reykjavik in 1961 and, after the education authorities had taken over the education and training of children who had been considered uneducable, special classes were established in mainstream schools. Special education for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties started in residential facilities in the countryside in the late 1940s. These two major categories of special educational needs have since gradually become an assignment for the Preschool and compulsory school to solve largely inside the mainstream but the special classes and the special schools have also survived. In addition a surprising number of students with new and previously unknown diagnostic labels have demanded the attention of teachers and school managers (e.g. autistic spectrum and ADHD).

Special education in Iceland has thus in general developed from categorization and segregation towards individualisation and inclusion. However, the development is more complicated as categorization does not always have a corollary in segregation and individualisation is not always the result of inclusion. In fact the processes can work totally independently of each other and run parallel in time. Furthermore the process from categorization to individualisation has turned back on itself so that the trend now is towards greater categorization in the school system under the influence of funding control and medical diagnosis that support each other (Marinossón, 1999).
The development of disability studies as a sociological alternative to the medico-psychological paradigm of handicap was influential in moving the development of special education in the direction of looking more closely at the context of school problems and not merely at the students themselves (Bjarnason, 2010). This social focus overshadowed special education and marginalised it, at least academically and politically.

The introduction of “individualisation of instruction”, promoted by the Director of Education for Reykjavik, further diverted attention from special education to the work of the class teacher. The idea behind “individualised instruction” was indeed that by realising the aim of providing for individual educational needs the requisite for special education was done away with and with it the considerable cost to the education directorate (Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavíkur, 2000).

A fundamental principle of the Icelandic educational system is that everyone should have equal opportunities to acquire an education, irrespective of sex, economic status, residential location, religion, possible impairment, and cultural or social background. Only recently, however, was education seen as a medium for democratic aims in society: That by educating each and every individual to his or her full potential (s)he could be given an opportunity to take full part in society, this being considered the foundation of a fully democratic society (European Agency, 2011).

Earlier research in Iceland and elsewhere indicate, however, a number of factors that stand in the way of equal access to education for disabled people, such as badly co-ordinated official policy, lack of collaboration between service systems, lack of information, devaluation of students with disability, attitudes that regard diversity in the student group as a problem, lack of financial support, narrow definition of curriculum for disabled students, inflexible teaching methods and segregation of support from other types of schoolwork (Bjarnason, 2004; Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, in press; Marinósson, 2011; Marinosson & Bjarnason, 2007)). These are some of the challenges that still face Iceland and impact on the quality of education for special needs.

**Legal Trends, Litigation and the Financing of Special Education**

**Legal Trends**

Although the needs of poor and disabled people for subsistence had been provided for since the middle ages, the first legislation that specifically concerned disabled people was the Law on institutions for imbeciles 1936 (Flóvenz, 2004). This legislation was a shift of emphasis ‘from passive support, in the form of subsistence payments for disabled people, towards active welfare policies’ (Ólafsson, 2005). Since the Second World War the Icelandic legislative assembly has passed various acts of education designed to work towards equality of educational opportunity and against social inequality. Thus a general Law on the affairs of the disabled was passed in the early 1990s (Lög um málefni fatlaðra, 1992). However, there is no separate legislation for special education at any of the four levels of education.

The legal context for what was to follow as regarded education for children with disabilities was the passing of three vital social legislations in 1936; the Law on social security (Lög um alþýðutryggingar), the Law on state subsistence for the sick and disabled (Lög um ríkisframfærslu sjúkra manna og örkumla) and the Law on institutions for imbeciles (Lög um fávitahæli) (Margeirsdóttir, 2001). The Education Act of 1936 explicitly excluded those from school who were unfit for reasons of ‘moral deficiency or singular disobedience’. Those whom the doctor deemed lacking in mental or physical abilities, and were seen unable to learn with other children were
excused from school (Lög um fræðslu barna, 1936). Perhaps the law’s main purpose was to make school attendance mandatory for 7-14 year olds (previously 10-14 years), should be understood in the context of the social legislation passed at that time, as some of these children were provided with instruction and support elsewhere than in school. The Education Act of 1946 was the first piece of legislation in Iceland to mention the school’s role in adjusting to the needs of the students:

Schools shall endeavour to organise their work in accordance with the nature and needs of their students, to help them to adopt healthy attitudes and habits, observe their physical health and instruct them in subjects stipulated by law, each according to his or her developmental capacity. (Lög um fræðslu barna, 1946) (Authors’ translation and emphasis)

At that time, it indicated a shift from a systems orientation to a more child centred view. This was consistent with the child-centred view that had its provenance in the ‘age of enlightenment’ onwards. Under its banner, it was considered necessary to ‘take account of the child’s nature and adjust one’s expectations of children to their development and ability’ (Guttormsson, 1983).

Whilst the 1946 Education Act shifted the main focus from school subjects to the students’ needs, it was not until the 1974 Act that it was recognised in law for the first time that all children of a given age had an equal right to education in the state school system and that the school had a role in meeting the full diversity of student needs (Lög um grunnskóla, 1974). The view that this should be done in the child’s neighbourhood school rather than as a segregated provision has been stated since in an increasingly unequivocal fashion by those who formulate official education policy (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla-Almennur hluti, 2011). Following this legislation in 1974, the field of intellectual disability was transferred from under the jurisdiction of health authorities to education. This coincided when special schools replaced instruction within the subnormality institutions with the first Ordinance on special education 1977.

The Law on the Affairs of People with Disabilities, which was passed in 1992, stipulates that all individuals with disabilities (defined as intellectual disability, psychiatric illness, physical disability, blindness and/or deafness as well as disabilities resulting from chronic illness and accidents) are to be enabled to live and function in the community. For this purpose, where a disabled person's needs are not covered by general services within the fields of education, health and social services, special services, detailed in the law, shall be provided. The law has been criticized for interpreting the concept of disability too narrowly since it does not cover groups that undoubtedly need this service, such as children with ADHD, epilepsy and dyslexia. These and some other groups with special needs are not defined as disabled, which perhaps throws a light on the influence of the funding system on medical criteria. The aim is now to bring this policy of social inclusion into practice by covering the rights of people with disabilities by common law and thus make special legislation unnecessary. Thus service would be provided on the basis of what an individual needs within his or her social context instead of on the basis of a diagnosis of disability (Margeirsdóttir, 2001).

Next, the legislative assembly passed an Education Act-Pre schools in 1994 providing for special needs of preschool children in their local preschools. The Education Act - compulsory schools in 1995 stipulated 10 years of compulsory schooling for children aged 6 to 16 years. However, there is no mention of special education in that law (Lög um grunnskóla, 1995). The idea is that the ‘basic school’ shall be inclusive, catering for all educational needs of all its students. Around the same time, an Ordinance from 1986 stipulating the sole right of those having a particular university degree to practise special education was annulled by the Ministry of education and culture. Thereafter a school principal could hire any qualified teacher to provide support for those students who needed it. Another landmark in the 1995 Education Act was the transfer of compulsory schools from the state
to the municipalities. According to law of 1995 on the upper secondary schools everyone is entitled to education at that school level and students with special needs are to be provided with support and instruction according to their needs. Although students are expected to follow the ordinary curriculum as far as possible there is the possibility of establishing special units for students with disabilities (Eurypedia, 2014).

New Education Acts of Law were agreed in 2008 for all educational levels, i.e. the Preschool, Compulsory School, Upper Secondary School and Higher Education Act. In addition a number of implementing Ordinances have been issued providing for various policy details. The Icelandic government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) in 2012, the UN Convention on the Rights of Child (1989) in 2013 and adopted the Salamanca Declaration (1994) in 1995.

The Education Acts for Preschools, Compulsory Schools and Upper Secondary Schools all stipulate that students shall have education according to their needs (Lög um leikskóla, 2008; Lög um grunnskóla, 2008; Lög um framihaldsskóla, 2008). If this stipulation was followed to the extreme and individualization of instruction was complete there would be no need for special education as there would be no special educational needs at school. However, there is an escape clause saying that for those, whose needs the school does not meet there shall be a service that assesses these needs and advises the school on how to meet them. This also applies to children with Icelandic as a second language. Guidelines for services for students with special educational needs in preschool and compulsory schools are given in Ordinance on students with special needs and Ordinance on municipalities’ expert services in schools. Here students with special educational needs are defined as students who find learning hard for reasons of specific learning difficulties, social or emotional difficulties or disabilities according to paragraph 2 of the Act on the Affairs of the Disabled nr. 59/1992, students with dyslexia, students with chronic illness, developmental impairment, mental disorders and other students with health related special needs” (Reglugerð um nemendur með sérþarfir í grunnskóla, 2010; Reglugerð um sérfræðiþjónustu sveitarfélag, 2010). Responsibility for providing this service is divided between the schools, the local authority’s services and services provided by the four state diagnostic and advisory centres for disability, hearing, sight and psychiatric problems. Three of these state institutions fall under the Ministry for Social Affairs and one under the Ministry of Health but none under Education.

According to the Preschool Act, Compulsory School Act and Upper Secondary School Act, the staffs of each school is obliged to write a working guide, a kind of school policy, which is to be based on the National Curriculum Guidelines. However, each school has an opportunity to take into account its circumstances and special characteristics. The school working guide is also an administrative plan for each school. It is to account for the school year and to include an annual calendar, the organization of teaching, the aims and content of the education offered, student assessment procedures, assessment of the work that goes on in the school, extra-curricular activities and other aspects of the operation of the school including how it is going to meet students with special needs. Compulsory schools display their policy on special needs education on their website and introduce it to teachers and parents (European Agency, 2011; Reykjavíkurborg, 2012).

Inclusive education is mentioned in the Education Act 2008 for the first time as the basic education policy in Iceland from early years to the period of transition to university or the labour market. The general aims of the legislation on each school level apply to all students including those with disabilities and special needs. This means addressing and responding to the learning needs of all students. In short Education for All means that:
- There is equal opportunity for all to attend school and acquire education in accordance with their ability and needs.
- Schools must attend to the ability and needs of all students.
- Students and/or their parents decide on which school they attend.
- Students in need of special support have the right to special provision.

(European Agency, 2011)


Compulsory schools must educate all children in an effective manner. According to law, all children are entitled to appropriate education in compulsory school, academic, vocational and artistic, and local authorities are required to offer appropriate study opportunities regardless of their children’s physical or mental capabilities, emotional or social situations or linguistic development. This applies to all children; children with or without disabilities, with long-term illnesses, exceptionally intelligent children and children with mental disabilities, children from remote communities and children from ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities. (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla – Almennur hluti, 2012)

Similar stipulations of inclusive education appear in the curriculum guides for the preschool and the upper secondary school. The central principle as laid down in the Act and the National Curriculum Guides is to make it possible for all children to study in their local inclusive schools.

A National Curriculum Guide for special units in upper secondary schools, called ‘practical departments’, was published in 2005. The programme offered by the units has three levels depending on the needs of students and lasts four years (Mennta-og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011b).

Litigation

Litigation regarding educational issues is not common in Iceland. There is, however, no dearth of disputes dealing with everything from the violation of privacy to hospital mistakes at the birth of a child. The most common cases concern compensation for a loss of some kind. There is a trend to solve educational disputes at a lower level of administration before taking them to court. Thus the Education Acts refer disputes to the Ministry of Education that publishes its arbitration on its website. The following is an example of such a case.

**Ruling on a charge brought by parents stating that a ruling by the City of Reykjavik to refuse entry into a special school to a student with mild intellectual disability was wrong.**

The parents stated that the ruling by the City of Reykjavik to refuse their daughter entry into Klettaskóli special school was based on rules set by the Education committee that all children with an IQ of 50-70 were expected to attend a mainstream school. The charge was that this rule contravened the Education Act for compulsory school, no.91/2008; Ordinance on students with special educational needs, no. 585/2010; Law on the affairs of disabled people, no. 59/1992; the Constitution for Iceland, no.33/1944 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Children. The City Advocate claimed that the Education Act for the compulsory school clearly

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1 The Icelandic versions of the National Curriculum Guides were published in 2011.
states that the school should be inclusive and adjust its services to suit the needs of the child. This intention is then detailed in the Ordinance for students with special educational needs and the National Curriculum Guide. He further claimed that the rules of acceptance of students to the school were set on the basis of all these laws, ordinances and curriculum guides and stated quite unequivocally that the school is for students of 1st – 10th class in the compulsory school who have been assessed with medium, severe or deep intellectual disability or with mild intellectual disability with additional impairments such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Cerebral Palsy and blindness. Furthermore, the school should be able to offer the applicant education suitable for him or her and that demonstrably the local school is unable to offer the same. The Ministry ruled that the Reykjavík Education Authority was within its rights to refuse the child entry into the special school.

If a child is unequivocally disabled the parents can seek the assistance of the Guardian of the Rights of People with Disabilities who helps with redressing whatever wrong has been alleged. The next stage may be the Ombudsman of the Althingi who has an advisory role towards official instances on behalf of members of the public who appeal to his office. Nevertheless several cases related to special education or disabilities appear before the courts annually. Mostly, they are demands for financial compensation because services have not been provided, but in rare cases the right of entry into a mainstream school or a special school are sought. The following is an example of such cases.

_Supreme Court Case no.169/2007. H.Ó. vs. S-town._

A local authority was charged by parents of maltreating their 12 year old daughter by excluding her from a primary school. The parents demanded a considerable sum of money as compensation. The daughter had been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder combined with intellectual disability. For reasons of behaviour the school found it impossible to integrate her into mainstream classes and suggested to the parents that they move the child to a special school. The parents claimed that, according to compulsory school Act where inclusion was the main policy, their daughter had an undeniable right to attend a mainstream school. The verdict which fell in the municipality’s favour was supported by the argument that since the compulsory school Act had the provision that a special school was an option if the parents and professionals considered the child’s needs were not met in his or her home school then this child did not have an unequivocal right of attendance at a mainstream school.

Both these cases are instructive as the Education Act is not crystal clear on the point as to whether parents can choose a school for their child or not. It is left to ‘parents, teachers, school managers, or other experts’ to decide whether the mainstream school does or does not meet the needs of the child; then parents can apply to transfer him or her to a special school. Apparently the authority that runs the school can then wield its power to refuse the application although the law does not say so.

**Financing**

Without additional resources, it is questionable whether instruction or support for students with special needs that is provided as part of the daily work of the mainstream classroom teacher would be labelled special education, even though it may be carried out in accordance with an individual education plan and although the general education teacher may have a further degree in special needs education. One of the central characteristics of special education is that it involves financial contributions over and above the ones required for group instruction. Resources required may be ten
times greater per child than that in the mainstream. Thus, it matters a great deal how this funding is allocated and used.

Preschool is financed by the municipalities but they may determine a fee collected from the parents for their child’s attendance. There are no separate funds for special education at the preschool level. Compulsory schooling is free of charge but in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities funds are provided by central government to the municipalities via the Municipalities Equalisation Fund. The students funded must be residents of the municipality, their disabilities must have been diagnosed and it must be clear that they need considerable and extended additional support at school (Jöfnunarsjóður sveitarfélagi, 2014).

Payments to the municipalities for students with impairments depend on the levels of disability. The same amount is expected to be paid per student with the same degree of disability to each municipality irrespective of whether the special education provided varies from one municipality to another. This amount is determined on the basis of medical diagnoses and is in accordance with the amount the individual and his/her family gets from the national security system because of a given disability as described in the Act on the Affairs of the Handicapped from 1992. The State Diagnostic and Advisory Centre, that has created the rules for the Advisory Committee of the Equalisation Fund, has the final say in whether the amount suggested by other specialists is in accordance with the given degree of disability. The amount allocated for each student is meant to provide an educational opportunity for that student. This can be in the form of a special class or a special school run by the local authority itself, shared with other authorities or stationed in a different authority (European Agency, 2011). The Equalisation Fund is now in the process of adapting the Supports Intensity Scale (SIS) for the evaluation of needed funds for support for children as well as adults (Jöfnunarsjóður sveitarfélagi, 2012).

In addition to the funding provided for individual students with diagnosed impairments by the Equalisation Fund, the municipalities allocate funds for students with disabilities in collaboration with the schools and their expert services (special educators, schools advisory services, school health service etc.). This is usually done on the basis of an annual survey in the schools updated twice a year, i.e. according to need rather than a disability category. However, some local authorities take account of whether the children have been assessed to receive family support from State Social Security and at what level (Elin S. Jónsdóttir, Akureyri, personal communication). For this, the State Social Security Institute assesses the child’s level of disability (five levels), the need for care, support or treatment and finally the cost involved (Tryggingarfotnun ríkisins, 2012). Many municipalities follow the example from the City of Reykjavik that has a two tier system of allocation of funds for special education: One allocation for students with disabilities and another general allocation for the whole student body, including students with special needs such as learning disabilities, ADHD or language and speech impairment. The allocation for students with disabilities is made following an application by the school, only for students diagnosed by authorised state agencies and on the basis of a plan of intervention submitted by the school. The general allocation is a sum proportional to 0.14 - 0.25 of a weekly lesson multiplied by the number of students in the school. Some municipalities allocate this latter sum on identified students, others in a lump sum to be used by the schools as they see fit. Reykjavik adds a third tier in its allocation for schools that apply for it on the basis of a disproportional number of students with special needs compared to other schools. A separate allocation is made for students who need support for reasons that they have a mother tongue other than Icelandic. All allocations are made on the condition that the school organise its work in accordance with the policy of inclusive education (Reykjavíkurborg, 2012). The state pays
upper secondary school operating costs. Funds for educating students in need of special support are applied for to the Ministry of Education on an individual and/or group basis.

As detailed above, the funding of special education is to some extent linked to diagnostic labelling of impairments. One of the consequences is that schools try to identify students with disabilities who might fetch extra funds for the school. A system based on diagnostic labels thus has perverse incentives for over-identification of disabilities and special needs. Some municipalities are therefore transferring more of their special education resource distribution from the ‘bounty’ system to a ‘base’ funding system where schools get a general sum estimated on the basis of the totality of educational needs of its students as observed in the school context at that time (‘difficulty model’) as opposed to being based on formal diagnosis only (‘disability model’). This later approach to funding has been adopted by Finland (Jahnukainen, 2011).

**The Children: Prevalence and Incidence of Impairment**

Official information on the prevalence and incidence of disability in Iceland is hard to come by. The State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre, that has as one of its roles to keep an overview of children’s disability in the country does not have this statistics, neither does the Ministry of Welfare that has disability as one of its tasks, nor any other state institution. One wonders how it is possible to plan to meet the needs of these individuals with disabilities without having some idea of its size or composition. The larger municipalities do, however, keep data on the children with disabilities and special needs that they serve in their schools. In addition, Statistics Iceland (2013) keeps data on education and finally there are a few carefully done studies on the epidemiology of some disability groups that we can rely on (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Prevalence of impairment amongst children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>NB</th>
<th>n*</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism spectrum disorder</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>Boys 1.72%; Girls 0.64%</td>
<td>22.229</td>
<td>14 - 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual disability</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>Medium ID: No data, Mild ID: No data</td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>5 - 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Severe)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
<td>139</td>
<td>5 - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>73,459</td>
<td>0 - 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impairment</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>0 - 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatric disorders</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>317</td>
<td>4-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Statistics Iceland, 2013)

* n=size of population from which % is calculated

**Table 2.** Number of compulsory school students with formal diagnosis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of</th>
<th>Total no</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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3 Solveig Sigurðardóttir, Bórdur Pórkelsson, Margrét Halldórsdóttir, Ólafur Thorarensen, Torstein Vik, 2009.
4 Rosenberg, Flage, Hansen, Rudanko, Guðmundur Viggósson, Tornquist, 1996
5 Ingibjörg Hinriksdóttir, chief physician, National Hearing and Speech Institute. Personal communication 2014.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Preschool Boys</th>
<th>Preschool Girls</th>
<th>Preschool Total</th>
<th>Compulsory school Boys</th>
<th>Compulsory school Girls</th>
<th>Compulsory school Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Statistics Iceland, 2013)

Table 3. Proportion of preschool and compulsory school boys and girls who receive special support or special education.

The proportion of students who receive special support in compulsory schools has risen gradually over the last two decades after remaining relatively stable for two decades before that. Thus in 1974 around 15% of students received special education, in 1984 and 1994 the figure remained unchanged but, as Table 3 shows, in 2005 it had risen to 23.7% and in 2013 to 27%. One of the reasons may be the tendency to provide short term help for a variety of reasons (e.g. help at break-time and lunch-time) to a greater number of students than before for the purpose of preventing learning or social problems from becoming entrenched. This development is an indication of greater flexibility in the provision of learning support within mainstream schools (Svavarsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir & Logadóttir, 2011). Considering that only 5.25% of compulsory school students in Reykjavik are diagnosed with impairments and 1.3% of these are in special schools and special classes (Hrund Logadóttir, Reykjavikurborg, 2014, personal communication) these figures warrant observations on how the system of special education has a tendency to blow out despite the fact that the number of students per teacher (1:10) and group (1:19) is low compared to many other countries (OECD, 2013).

**Educational Provision and Teacher Education for Special Needs**

**Identification and Intervention**

Most children with severe disabilities are identified at preschool age (0–5 years of age) by medical personnel, health visitors or preschool teachers. They are then generally referred to the State Diagnostic and Advisory Centre for a medical examination, psychological assessment and evaluation by social workers as well as physical and occupational therapists. The National Institute for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Deaf Blind is a public institute governed by the Ministry of Welfare. It provides services mainly in the rehabilitation and education area and does not provide initial medical diagnosis or medical treatment. The institute is responsible for a national database regarding visually impaired and blind individuals. A corresponding facility, The National Hearing and Speech Institute of Iceland is the centre of knowledge in the field of hearing and speech impairments. The centre offers the diagnosis and treatment, sales and services of hearing aids and assistive equipment. Children and adolescents with serious emotional and psychiatric problems are referred to the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Unit of the National Hospital for diagnosis and treatment. Children with suspected disabilities at preschool can be referred by preschool teachers for diagnosis and
intervention to the expert services operated by social and educational departments of the municipalities (European Agency, 2011). The same applies to students at compulsory schools where parents and teachers play a major part in identifying and evaluating students’ need for support. For this purpose a variety of methods are used for screening in the fields of language, literacy, maths and social interaction (Svavarsdóttir et al., 2011). The next step is often a conference in the Child Welfare Committee of the school where the student’s teachers, special educators, a representative of the school health service, the school psychologist, the principal and others share their evaluation of the situation. The conclusion may be a referral to a school psychologist for formal assessment who may then recommend special educational support in or outside the classroom (Björnsson, 1991).

The law concerning compulsory education underlines the right of every child to receive appropriate education in a school nearest to his or her home. However, parents have the right to apply for a special school for their child should the mainstream school fail to provide education suited to his or her needs. This is, however, limited to students with considerable learning or behaviour problems so that those with milder level of difficulty cannot expect to gain access to a special school. This has led to conflicts between parents and the local authority (Ólafsdóttir, 2013). Decisions as to who is eligible for education at a segregated facility are, in the case of students at the compulsory level, reached in consultation between head teachers and their special educators, parents and the school advisory services or other experts. At the compulsory, level special educators and guidance counsellors located in schools provide counselling and support to their fellow teachers and parents. Students can also be referred by teachers and parents to the municipality’s school expert services for diagnosis and intervention (European Agency, 2011).

**Provision of Special Support**

According to the law on preschools children who, because of disability, emotional or social difficulties, need special support or training are provided with such support in their own preschool under the guidance of experts. Similarly, the compulsory ‘basic school’ have inclusive catering for special needs as well as other educational needs of its students. The main policy is that such instruction should take place in their local home school. Special needs education in the mainstream school is organised on a short- or long-term basis depending on the needs of the student, possibly lasting all of his or her school years. The municipalities are also obliged to offer education for children who are in hospitals or are sick for a long period (Lög um grunnskóla, 2008). Recent immigrants receive special instruction in Icelandic, both at the compulsory and upper secondary levels, in addition to some provision for instruction in their native language (European Agency, 2011).

Everyone is entitled to education at upper secondary school level. Students with disabilities (as defined in the Law on the Affairs of the Disabled) are to be provided with instruction and special support in their studies. Expert advice and suitable conditions are to be ensured. In their studies, disabled students are to follow the mainstream curriculum with other students as far as possible. The law provides for the possibility of establishing special units within upper secondary schools for students with disabilities. The law also stipulates that deaf students have the right to special instruction in the Icelandic sign language (Lög um framhaldsskóla, 2008). In addition, there is increasing emphasis on educational and vocational counselling.

The Ordinance on students with special needs in compulsory schools (Reglugerð um nemendur með sérþarfir í grunnskóla, 2010) and its counterpart for the upper secondary school (Reglugerð um nemendur með sérþarfir í framhaldsskóllum2012) state that support for individual
students and student groups involves a flexible and multifarious learning context and teaching methods and that the support shall take place within a local school. According to this special support, which is not seen as separate from other teaching, involves changes of educational aims, curricular content and teaching context and/or methods as compared with what other students of the same age are offered. It involves the writing of an education plan for an individual or a group of individuals, implementation of the plan and finally written reports and evaluation of the education plan and its implementation.

Special educational support in the compulsory school is provided by a variety of arrangements:

1. Special needs education in mainstream classes (within class or pull-out).
2. General special education classes in regular schools (for students seen to have learning and behavioural problems).
3. Specialised special classes or units for students seen to share the same problem or label such as autism.

Outside of Reykjavík, the first arrangements would be seen widely but the second, third and fourth would only apply in rare instances. Students in the special units within regular schools have a home class and spend a part of the day taking part in that programme.

According to those in charge of providing for special needs of children in Akureyri, a town on the north coast of Iceland, each mainstream school makes an education plan for an individual with special needs, a group or a special class. The plan includes teaching, materials and assistants and is reviewed two to four times a year. The teaching plan is carried out by a class teacher and in some instances a support person in the class. In many schools, teachers work in teams so that the teaching load of students with disabilities is spread within the team. A team is created around each child with disabilities, including a representative from the school, who supervise the use of funding provided for the student’s education (Elin S. Jónsdóttir, Akureyri town, personal communication, 2014).

There are three segregated special schools in the country that serve students with disabilities at compulsory school age: A school for students with intellectual- and multiple disabilities and two schools for children with socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties. In addition to the above-mentioned special schools, there are special classes in 49 compulsory schools (30%) with 1-40 students. This includes temporary classes (for students with learning and behaviour issues) as well as more long term special classes (for example for students diagnosed on the autistic spectrum disorder). All these special classes are located in mainstream schools and the students participate in regular class part of the time. Students with hearing impairment attend a “twin school” together with students with unimpaired hearing. In that school, sign language is on equal footing with the Icelandic language. Two ‘participation’ classes have just been established in Reykjavík mainstream compulsory schools, one for students with ‘mild’ intellectual disability and another for students with behaviour problems operated by the special school for those students. The idea is that the students will have easier access back into the mainstream school from these ‘participation’ classes than from the special schools. In addition to short-term home support teaching for sick children, there are facilities available for children who are hospitalised for longer periods in two national paediatric wards. Surveys by the City of Reykjavík also reveal that in all year school groups special support is more often provided in “pull-out groups” than inside the classroom, despite the policy of inclusive education, according to which as much instruction as possible should be provided within the classroom and despite the fact that all schools employ support personnel in mainstream classrooms.
No statistics exist on the learning outcomes and grades of students with special educational needs or diagnostic labels in comparison with other students.

At upper secondary level, students with disabilities and students with emotional or social difficulties are to be provided with instruction and special study support. Extra teaching hours are provided to schools wishing to give special support to individuals or groups of students so that they can either follow the mainstream curriculum or a special programme. Many upper secondary schools now provide extra support to students who have difficulties with reading and writing. There are special programmes (called ‘practical departments’) operated in all (19) upper secondary schools for students who find learning difficult in the mainstream classes because of disabilities or special educational needs. The ratio of teachers and students in the units is 1:1 to 1:4 and the students are offered instruction for four years, the same length of time as students in mainstream classes. Many of the students receive part of their instruction in mainstream classes and mingle with other students in the cafeteria. In mainstream courses, students with disabilities are assisted with their studies by, for example, sign language interpreters, co-students acting as scribes or other assistants, but in other respects they are subject to the same rules as other students. The upper secondary schools have, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, done a great deal in recent years to meet the needs of all their students at that level; this is in accordance with the law and regulations as well as official policy, which emphasises offering courses to match everyone's abilities. The new programmes are especially intended for students with poor preparation for enrolment in the more difficult programmes. The results of an evaluation of these programmes indicate that direct interaction between the students in these programmes and their non-disabled peers is minimal. The students themselves and their parents and teachers, however, all consider their enrolment in the mainstream schools beneficial (Leiknisdóttir, Jónsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2012). No special schools for students with disabilities exist at the Upper Secondary School level.

At the University of Iceland, where an official policy exists on how to meet the needs of students with dyslexia, physical disabilities, blindness and psychological problems, students can apply to the Counselling Service for special study arrangements and special examination procedures. The School of Education offers a two year diploma programme for students with intellectual disability where they can prepare for work on the open market (Stefánsdóttir, 2013).

Most preschools and compulsory schools put someone in charge of special support arrangements who maintain contact with the municipality’s expert services. For the compulsory school this service offers general curricular advice, specialist advice on the teaching of the main school subjects, guidance for students and psychological counselling. The focus shall be on support for teachers and head teachers in day-to-day school work, including how to meet special educational needs, but also on teachers' projects aimed at school improvement. The purpose is to strengthen the professional capacity of the school to solve its own problems. Specialists of the service, being teachers, psychologists and other specialists are also expected to assess students with psychological or social problems, should these difficulties impede their education. Some advice to parents is also expected (Lög um grunnskóla, 2008). The service has been criticised for being too clinically oriented and not providing enough support for leadership and development work in schools that may help with building inclusive education (Sigþórsson, 2013). No such expert service is operated for the Upper Secondary Schools on an area basis, but guidance counsellors employed by the schools deal with learning and personal problems presented by individual students. For more complicated problems they direct students to specialised evaluation and services outside the school (European Agency, 2011).
Special needs education cannot be considered without reference to its social and institutional context. For special needs education to work in practice a network both inside and outside the schools must exist between all those who serve the needs of the children in question. Ordinance no. 584 (2010) for expert services in municipalities, paragraph 5 stipulates that head teachers of preschools and primary schools shall take the initiative in entering into collaboration with the local authority’s school expert service, social service, child protection service and health service in connection with chronic illnesses or other health needs of individual student. In the City of Reykjavik for example there are several institutions run by the City involved in meeting the needs of individuals. At the compulsory school level there are additionally two special schools with limited advisory role to mainstream schools and parents. Finally, there are third level institutions serving children with disabilities and a hospital for children, all run by the state. Inside the schools, there are student counsellors whom special educators need to collaborate with. In most schools, this collaboration is managed by a special educational needs co-ordinator. Parents are usually in good collaboration with the schools on how to plan and organize special education for their child. Without collaboration there is a danger of cross-over advice to teachers and parents.

Teacher Education

Teacher education is at the university level. Since 1971, Teachers trained at the compulsory school level started in 1971 whereas teacher training at the preschool level started in 1994. A three year bachelor degree in education was required for teacher certification at the preschool and compulsory school level until 2011. Teachers in upper secondary school were required to add 60 ECTS in pedagogy to their bachelor degree to fulfil requirements for teaching their school subjects. A recent study showed that preparation for student teachers at university undergraduate level for work in an inclusive school is far too limited (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2012). In 2011 a new law on teacher education took effect requiring a master’s degree (5 year of study) for teacher certification at all school levels. Teachers wishing to specialise in special needs education complete a 120 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) programme leading to a masters in special and inclusive education at the University of Iceland, School of Education in Reykjavík (Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2011).

Working with Families

The role of parents as advocates for their children’s education has been strong in Iceland as in many other countries in the west, but the advocacy has taken the form of pressuring the Ministry of Education, local educational authorities and individual schools and preschools, through using the media, personal contacts and parent associations (Bjarnason, 2010). Thus, in Iceland the development has been impacted by parents but driven by professionals and politicians.

Hardly any services or formal support beyond the family doctor was available to disabled children living at home and their families until after the middle 20th Century. Parents of blind and deaf children formed support societies for those categories of children in the late 1930’s and 1940’s. In the 1950’s, when the post war welfare system was taking shape two benefit societies were established to aid people with disabilities. The Benefit Society for Children with Disabilities (Styrktarfélag lamaðra og fatlaðra) was established by medical doctors and other health professionals in 1952 to support and care for children and young people diagnosed with polio. The society has broadened its clientele and now supports children with a variety of physical and intellectual impairments. Its mission today is "to support people with disabilities, particularly children, in every
possible manner that contributes to their participation, competence and quality of life”. The Benefit Society manages a community based rehabilitation centre and a camp for disabled children and youth in Reykjadalur, just out of Reykjavík. In 1958 some parents of children with intellectual impairments joined together to solve their private problems. They initiated the opening up of non-governmental organization (NGO) services for children and adults with intellectual and multiple impairments. The association was called “Styrktarfélag vangefínna” which translates as The Benefit Society for the Mentally Retarded. The name was changed in 2008 to Ás Benefit society (Ás styrktarfélag). From the beginning, this organisation attempted, as did many similar organisations on both sides of the Atlantic, to fill gaps in services by building up, administering and operating segregated services for people with intellectual disabilities, from group homes, day-services to supported workshops, respite homes, summer camps and more. The organization financed these services by selling lottery tickets and from public collections and benefits. In 2002, a contract was made with the Ministry of Social Services and Municipal Service Centres (svæðisstjórnir) for financial support towards the running of the services (Hilma Gunnarsdóttir, 2009). By the late 1960s and early 1970s a more radical group of parents and a few professionals joined forces, disappointed with the focus of The Benefit Society for the Mentally Retarded, and in 1976 formed the advocacy movement proskahjálp, an umbrella association of parents and professionals pressing, not only for services but also for normalization, integration, inclusion and human rights. This group grew in strength and importance and developed into a powerful pressure group, being involved in shaping the disability policy and legislation. Proskahjálp was instrumental in shifting the focus of government and public opinion from that of disability in the family as a private problem to it also becoming a public issue based on citizenship and human rights. The focus on disability in the family being a public issue grew in strength and influence and young parents in the late 1990’s and in the new millennium expected better and more generic and/or special services for their disabled children as a right. Proskahjálp lost some of its attractions for some parents who established a number of associations for the support of children with particular labels, such as Downs Syndrome, harelip, Tourette, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder and so forth. These parental societies have gained in voice and, from the parents’ perspective, apparently been more accessible that Proskahjálp. It may be argued that parents pulled the wagon for change in policy and practice shifting the focus gradually away from disability in the family as a private problem towards framing it as a public issue (Bjarnason, 2010).

Issues and Challenges

Special Education vs. Special Support

The theoretical position of special education vis-à-vis other disciplines is now more uncertain than before. It used to be considered an expert area within education drawing on a legacy from psychology, medicine, law, philosophy, and even religion but always operating within education. Now it is seen by some as an impostor in the inclusive school, an unwelcome proponent of the medical model in the context of a social model. This is for the reason that it is based on a categorical perspective, where diagnostic tests are used for the classification of students into diagnostic categories. This is despite the fact that special education has been offered as a master’s degree study at the Iceland University of Education and later at the School of Education at the University of Iceland and not at the Faculty of Psychology; and the focus of the study has, for the last 25 years been an inclusive one.
By eliminating the term ‘special education’ from the Education Act the legislative assembly (or those who prepared the bill) was not only trying to be consistent with the policy of inclusive education, but also attempting to transfer power from the professionals to the parents and to widen parental choice. Eliminating the professional title of special educator was, for instance, designed to reduce the possibility of a student’s education being limited to instruction by such a teacher (Marinosson, 2011). Thus de-professionalization of the school was being achieved as part of a bill promoting inclusion. Other issues have also impacted the development of special education in recent years both directly and indirectly.

**Neoliberalism vs. Child Centred Views**

In the last few decades, the major change in Icelandic education policy has been away from state control of education towards local responsibility; away from curriculum guided by content towards one assuming that teaching is guided by objectives; from bureaucratic control of schools towards their self-evaluation and accountability; from a social pedagogy towards an individual, competitive one; from annual budgets to contractual management of schools; from a social to a technical conception of change and development; and from a central administration towards the devolution of responsibility for administration and finances monitored through performance indicators (Mýrdal, Jóhannesson, Geirsdóttir & Finnbogason, 1999). This development conceals a number of complexities and contradictions. There appears, for example, to be a paradox inherent in the principles of social inclusion on one hand and the policy of competition and accountability on the other. How does the decentralization of decisions coincide with national testing and the monitoring of standards? How may standardized common goals coexist with ‘providing effective and efficient education for all students’? Are strong individuals and democratic communities not best maintained through collaborative education? Is new knowledge not better produced through diverse perspectives rather than ‘more teaching’? The central question is how a small nation state, like Iceland, can sustain its success in the global market place and simultaneously maintain a just democracy where different voices are listened to?

**The Categorical vs. the Contextual Model of Special Education**

There is no legal basis for the categorization of disabilities or special needs amongst students, but nevertheless there are several systems of categorization in use for administrative purposes: One is used by the state Diagnostic and Advisory Centre, another by the Equalisation Fund for Municipalities, a third by local authorities for use in their schools and a forth is used by the state Social Security Institute.

It can reasonably be maintained that special education based on diagnostic categories builds on the categorical perspective, while inclusive education builds on the relational perspective. Persson (2003) is of the opinion that, although both models incorporate knowledge useful for students with special needs (see Table 4), they are both imperfect and that their proponents need to collaborate to produce a better one that takes us a step forward in search for a model that takes pedagogic practice better into account.

Table 4. Implications for special education support depending upon theoretical perspective
Implications for special educational support depending on theoretical perspective (Persson, 2003)

The categorical model represents an attractive choice for professional as it is based on traditional principles of scientific research methodology and focuses on delimited areas of study, be that individuals or designated categories or sub-categories of impairments. In comparison, the social or contextual model represents a complex research field involving, for example, different participants’ perspectives (e.g. that of students, parents, teachers or assistants), a variety of processes and routines (e.g. processes of social construction and institutional routines), outcomes (e.g. of instruction) and cultures (e.g. of schools). Within this model, special needs and special education are looked at in the context of mainstream education and larger service systems thus overlapping with and facilitating links with other disciplines (Persson, 2003). This chapter is written with the latter model in mind.

The Perennial Tension between Full Inclusion and a Variety of Provision

There is still disagreement as to whether to expect the mainstream school to cater for all educational needs of its students or to provide a diversity of educational offers and leave it to parents and guardians to decide what kind of schooling is most suitable for their children. Iceland’s Education Acts and the National Curriculum Guides reflect this dichotomy where the demands for a School for All are unequivocal but there still is an escape clause that provides for a special school or special class in individual cases. Some parents fight for the alleged right of their child to attend a special school although the school may not be authorized to accept him or her because the child is not disabled enough. Thus, the policy of inclusive education is enforced although parental choice (in collaboration with experts) and is given a central place in the Compulsory School Act.

Inclusive Education: Ideology vs. Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Categorical perspective</th>
<th>Relational perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology of special needs</td>
<td>Special needs refer to actual characteristics of individuals</td>
<td>Special needs are social constructs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to difference</td>
<td>Differentiating and categorizing</td>
<td>Unifying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major contribution</td>
<td>Mapping and systematizing the field</td>
<td>Problematizing and deconstructing the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary basis</td>
<td>Establishing special education as a “scientific” discipline</td>
<td>Establishing special education as a social scientific discipline</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Special provision</td>
<td>Integrated/ inclusive provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of special</td>
<td>Superior support directly related to diagnosed difficulties among students</td>
<td>Superior support for incorporating differentiation into instruction and content</td>
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<td>educational competence</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Reasons for special</td>
<td>Students with difficulties. Difficulties are either innate or otherwise bound to the</td>
<td>Students in difficulties. Difficulties arise from different</td>
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<td>educational needs</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>phenomena in educational settings and processes</td>
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It would be incorrect to assume that a change in government policy towards inclusive education has been accompanied by a general change in pedagogic practice. The shift from a general child-centred perspective of the post-war years towards a whole school approach, characterised by collaboration and democratisation combined with individualisation of instruction seems not yet to be reflected in the classroom. Teachers are still fundamentally preoccupied with getting the content of the curriculum across to their student group (Óskarsdóttir, in press). According to a survey conducted by the City of Reykjavik in 2011 around a third of compulsory school teachers found it hard to follow the policy of inclusive education. They felt that funds, knowledge and time were lacking, but another third of the group thought it easy. The remaining third were neutral on this point (Svavarsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir, & Logadóttir, 2011).

The City of Reykjavik has a policy of inclusive education that it carries out partly by making funding of ‘special support’ for students conditional on the schools demonstrating that they follow the policy. This, however, is not yet fully functional in Reykjavik or in other local authorities. Thus, the “bounty system” in combination with the “base system” as the two are used together in many municipalities for funding special support has a perverse incentive on the schools to identify a greater number of students with special educational needs and disabilities than otherwise would be the case. Furthermore, it entails escalating costs of expert diagnosis and assessment that could otherwise be used for supporting the school in its efforts towards inclusion. Icelandic authorities should consider changing over to a needs-based system where educational needs are assessed according to the learning context.

**How to Integrate Special Education in an Inclusive School?**

It seems that the term special education is disappearing in official documents concerning education in Iceland. It has perhaps outlived its usefulness and is being replaced by the term ‘special support’ which covers educational support that entails additional resources provided within the inclusive school to all those who need it irrespective of the reason. Thus, it works towards greater equality.

We need a new model instead of the special education model that also replaces the ‘pure’ inclusion model. We need an approach that is helpful, transparent and easily understood instead of standing in the way of development. This should be of an inclusive school where individual needs are catered as part of daily school work (cf. the ‘irregular’ school proposed by Slee, 2011: 151-168). There is no regular and exceptional in this school but variegated tasks to meet a diversity of interests, types of talent, culture, character and needs. For this to work all available knowledge is utilized: pedagogic, medical, sociological, psychological and managerial. Thus, expert knowledge is part of school work but geared towards the aims of education. Not surprisingly this is precisely what the 1974 Education Act stipulated among the aims of education. Perhaps we will reach the unreachable before too long?

**Conclusion**

With its roots in the age of enlightenment special education had its heyday as part of the construction of a welfare state after World War II as a measure to remediate children’s problems, particularly children who were ill equipped for formal school work or from poor families. Its role was furthermore to make sure that these children had their education and training away from the mainstream. Over the years special education has been overtaken by developments in related fields,
such as disability theory and ideas of inclusive education, equality, equity and democracy in the day-
to-day work of the school. At the same time the proportion of children who benefit from special
support within their schools has risen constantly. In Iceland it has reached 27% and is still growing.
This raises burning questions of the system’s adequacy in meeting every child’s learning needs. The
usual culprits are all under suspicion: families and their circumstances, the children and their
problems, the teachers and their teaching and the schools and their system. It may reasonably be
argued, however, that the main reason for the rise in this proportion is how all these players
understand and use the services on offer in an increasingly flexible way. This is a sign of a
progressively inclusive system. Schools have started to see parents as collaborators rather than
customers or even adversaries and this is reciprocal; the children’s school problems also need to be
seen in the context of their school work rather than independent of it; all teachers need to embrace
the principle of inclusive education and prepare their teaching in light of a diverse group of learners.
The school system has to see students’ educational needs as a general concept rather than tied
solely to individuals and to provide resources for these to be met in the mainstream.

At the classroom level, there has been a lessening of identification and labelling of
impairments or categories of impairments; however at the overall administrative level there has
been an increase in this trend. Under the influence of neoliberal policies, diagnostics and
categorization for the purpose of controlling the expenses of special education has been imported
from the health system into the education system. This has, as far as identifiable disabilities are
concerned become a routine for deciding educational resources. It has replaced the principle of
needs-based provision that is still, however, used for special needs that lie outside the disability
quota. So the dilemma of equality of access to services in the face of limited resources is still very
much present producing solutions such as the selection of individuals into predetermined
categories.

In order to find a way out of the dilemma we need to rethink our conception of special
education’s role in the school system. We need to rethink the schools and their use of special
education to solve their system-wide issues instead of focusing on the children. Special education
needs to be integrated to an even greater degree into the mainstream work of the school by
becoming part of the teachers’ teamwork. It should also function as an expert support service for
individuals and groups to participate actively in school work. This should be done in collaboration
with the schools expert service operated by the municipalities. School work in general needs to be
reoriented to a greater extent towards students’ potentials instead of their shortcomings. Special
education will then lose its identity as a separate service and become a support service for all
students.

This chapter has traced the history of special education in Iceland from its inception to the
present day. Special education research in Iceland, policy and legislation trends have been
addressed. Information on children with disabilities with respect to prevalence and types of
disabilities has been presented, along with information on the practices of educating children with
special needs. Teacher education has been addressed noting that Icelandic teacher education
programmes have followed the trend from segregated special education, through integration to
inclusive education. The perspective of families of children with disabilities has been discussed. The
chapter concludes with some of the ongoing challenges for special education in Iceland including the
dichotomy of categorical and contextual responses to the diversity of student needs, the tension
between inclusion and a cascade of provision and between the ideology and the practice of inclusive
education. The role of special education in the inclusive school is still uncertain as it is vis à vis
multicultural education but hopefully before long it will become part of the support system that serves all students.

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