Immigrant Students' Experiences of Higher Education in Iceland: Why Does Culturally Responsive Teaching Matter?

Artem Ingmar Benediktsson [1]
>   Ph.D. Candidate, University of Iceland

Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka,
>   Ph.D. Candidate, University of Iceland

Anh Dao Katrín Tran
>   Postdoctoral researcher, University of Iceland

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir
>   Professor, University of Iceland

Abstract

The paper is based on the first, extensive, qualitative study on immigrant students' experiences of university education in Iceland. The theoretical framework is based on culturally responsive teaching that derives from multicultural education theory which focuses on analysing the position of minority groups, including immigrants in societies with special attention to their access to education. According to the theory, culturally responsive teaching methods and balanced workload based on the students' language abilities, previous experiences and background have positive effects on the immigrant students' well-being and generally contribute to their sense of belonging in the universities (e.g. Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). The participants of the study are 41 immigrant university students who participated in focus group and individual interviews. The findings show that despite the fact that culturally responsive teaching as an established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon in Icelandic universities, the students' experiences are highly positive, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the students especially valued an atmosphere of care, trust and power-sharing in the classroom. The study makes a significant contribution to understanding immigrant students' experiences of the education process in Icelandic universities that currently emphasise the importance of multicultural education and pay special attention to providing equal rights to education to everyone regardless of their origin. Furthermore, the study is relevant from a comparative perspective and contributes to the general discussion about immigrant students in higher education in Europe.

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[1] Corresponding author: artem@hi.is.

Introduction

The increase in immigration around the world brings new opportunities and challenges to educational settings at all levels as they try to recognise immigrant students and address their needs in order to support them in their academic and social achievements. Educational institutions play an important role in ensuring societal equality. Playing this role ranges from noting the potentially low aspiration level and its social and educational causes, through ease of access to various programs, and to the ways the immigrants are responded to by the system. These responses need to be cognizant of various factors, such as potential language difficulties, cultural precepts and social marginalization. While this awareness has grown significantly in compulsory education, higher education institutions lag behind in their understanding of the immigrant student population (Boesch, 2014).

Different studies show that minority groups, including immigrants, are underrepresented in institutions of higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The reasons behind this underrepresentation are varied but mostly relate to a weaker position in society, which could be explained by lower income, difficulties in integrating, and language-related issues (Banks & Banks, 2010; Parekh, 2005). Furthermore, underrepresentation leads to the continued presence of prejudices within these institutions. Theorists have criticized school personnel for designing teaching techniques and developing education based on the needs of the majority groups of society while the backgrounds, experiences, cultures and languages of the minority groups, including immigrants are often ignored (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010). When it comes to the specific issues of immigrant students who are already pursuing higher education, it is important to understand that they bring a variety of knowledge, cultural values, languages, and skills in particular areas, as well as different levels of curiosity, along with them into educational institutions (Alex, Miller, Platt, Rachal, & Gammill, 2007; Boesch, 2014). Theorists of the multicultural education as well as previous research in the field argue that implementing appropriate teaching methods, such as culturally responsive teaching could motivate minority groups students, including immigrants, improve their integration into the new educational environment and have positive influence on their performance (e.g. Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

Icelandic context

In this study, the term *immigrant student* is applied to immigrants pursuing higher education in Icelandic universities. In Iceland, the term immigrant is applied to a person born abroad with both parents and grandparents also born abroad (Statistics Iceland, 2016).

According to Statistics Iceland (2016), the Icelandic society is becoming increasingly diverse because of the constantly growing immigration to Iceland. In the Icelandic universities, the percentage of students with foreign background was approximately 19% of all newly registered students in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018). The majority of the courses in Icelandic universities are taught in Icelandic (except a few courses specifically designed for international and exchange students) while the reading material is usually in English, which requires all students on the undergraduate level have good language skills in both languages.

The Icelandic higher education is constantly developing, teachers and academic personnel are looking for new ways to address diverse students' needs, including immigrant students, who besides language-related issues experience other challenges such as adapting to teaching methods applied in Icelandic universities. Despite growing interest, the Icelandic universities still lack insight into students' experiences of teaching methods, because very few studies have been conducted in the field (e.g. Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014). This makes the current research highly relevant for university teachers, policymakers, and immigrant students pursuing higher education in Iceland. Furthermore, the presented research contributes to the discussion about social inclusion, access to education and equity in higher education in Europe, that according to the report *Learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018) currently has high priority status in European-level higher education policy documents, but still has not been fully incorporated into practice.

This paper's main purpose is to explore immigrant students' experiences in the education process in Icelandic universities. The investigation of the students' experiences is carried out through analysing students' perspectives on language-related issues, workload, relations with teachers during the education process, and the teaching methods, including culturally responsive teaching and multicultural group work.

This paper derives from the qualitative research project *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland, 2016-2018*, which is the first extensive study on immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and their expectations, opportunities, and challenges, as well as formal and social support for their education in Iceland. The project is funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís).

Culturally responsive teaching

The theoretical background of the paper draws from the ideas of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) has also been conceptualised by theorist Ladson-Billings (1995) as culturally relevant pedagogy. The goal of culturally responsive teaching is cultivating an equitable education for all students regardless of language, race, abilities, cultural background, or any other status (Gay, 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching has its roots in multicultural education, that regarded as education for pluralism that was established to counteract the hegemony which caused the marginalization of certain groups of students (Parekh, 2005). Multicultural education theorists emphasise the importance of using a variety of teaching materials, theories and concepts from different cultures, as well as a need to introduce the history of thoughts and how they have been influenced by the dominant culture's education (Banks & Banks, 2015; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The position of teachers is very important in multicultural education as they have to be aware of diversity in the classroom, try to connect to every student in the classroom and motivate students (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). Power-sharing between teachers and students is regarded as a characteristic feature of multicultural education as the learning process should be transformed from the classic image where students are merely acquiring knowledge from a teacher to a new form of knowledge exchange where teachers and students share their knowledge on a specific topic (Banks & Banks, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching focuses on incorporating students' strength, previous knowledge, experiences, cultures, and languages in the educational process to create a compelling multicultural learning environment for students of diverse background. Gay (2018) described culturally responsive teaching as "…using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and beneficial for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (p. 29). One of the central concepts in culturally responsive teaching is *caring* that was theorised by Gay (2018). Caring teachers' qualities are highlighted by their patience and persistence in facilitating their students' learning. Their students' background knowledge and experiences are validated, and they are empowered to succeed (Gay, 2018, Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching methods create a link between school and the outside world. Students are no longer balancing two cultures. They incorporate one culture into another, and with inputs from other students and teachers, they create a rich, multicultural environment around themselves (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

In order to implement culturally responsive teaching methods, teachers should start with understanding both their own and the students' cultural identities. In the opinion of critical educators, teachers need to be conscious about their own worldview that is impacted by their social class, culture, language, religion and ethnicity with which they identify themselves. Teachers who fail to be critical with their own worldview risk causing a breakdown in communication and alienating students of diverse background (Gay, 2000, Nieto, 2000). Therefore, when first becoming acquainted with students, it is crucial that teachers do not project their own worldviews and opinions onto the students' cultures, but instead explore cultures through dialogue with the students (Gay, 2001, 2018; Nieto, 2010). The process of dialoguing provides opportunities for teachers to adapt their instructions to meet the needs of the students with multicultural backgrounds. The teachers

recognize the students' cultural and academic assets that are the scaffolds on which the students successfully build their new knowledge.

The next step is to provide an inclusive curriculum and ensure that its content makes the diverse background of these students relevant. Their language, culture and prior knowledge are validated, and they are empowered to exercise their agency in their learning process. Later, a learning environment is built up based on cross-cultural communication, the transmission of ideas, trust, and power-sharing in the classroom (Gay, 2001, 2018). Amongst other methods that promote cross-cultural communication, multicultural group work is considered being especially useful (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006). Group work is considered multicultural when it involves a collaboration of two or more individual students from different cultural backgrounds, such as ethnic, linguistic, national or of any other kind (De Vita, 2005; Popov et.al, 2012). Previous research has revealed that multicultural group work helps to reduce existing prejudices, promotes interaction between students in the classroom and helps students to integrate into the learning environment (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012).

Last, but not least, empowering school culture based on educational equity and accessibility plays an important role in creating an environment suitable for implementing culturally responsive teaching methods (Banks & Banks, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014).

Besides considering cultural issues, teachers must apply appropriate assessment methods and ensure that all students have equal opportunities (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010). While choosing assessment methods, teachers are required to reflect on the question how students learn and to utilize "culturally responsive ways of evaluating learning, rather than attempting to standardise outcomes" (Slee, 2010, p.258). Furthermore, earlier studies emphasised the importance of a balanced workload and teachers being open to suggestions regarding the workload coming from students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Slee, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching methods have proven to be useful, especially in adult education, as adult students learn best by participation, and they appreciate their previous knowledge and experiences being respected and valued (Karge, Phillips, Jessee, & McCabe, 2011; Rubenson, 2011). On the other hand, the challenge with diverse classrooms is that different students have different levels of knowledge and curiosity, as well as different expectation towards education. This makes it challenging for teachers to provide a curriculum that accommodates the needs of every student (Karge et al., 2011) Ladson-Billings (2014) criticises some teachers who claim to apply teaching methods which focus on cultural diversity, for being one-dimensional and not fully translating research into practice. The critique is based on the notion that the teachers are often focused on the content integration and ignore other important dimensions of cultural responsibility in the classroom, including encouraging students to think critically about policies and practices that may have an influence on their lives inside and outside of educational institutions.

Recent studies in Norway have shown the importance of understanding cultural diversity in educational institutions and emphasized the significance of creating a discussion of goals of the multicultural education as well as the need to reflect on inclusion and exclusion in concept of diversity (Burner, Nodeland, & Aamaas, 2018; Fylkesnes, Mausethagen, & Nilsen, 2018).

Several research studies (Books, Ragnarsdóttir, Jónsson, & Macdonald, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014) have been conducted at the School of Education in the University of Iceland to investigate the positive outcomes of culturally responsive teaching methods and immigrant students' experiences of the learning environment. The results of the studies show the importance of implementing culturally responsive teaching methods and indicate that this approach serves the significant goal of making education accessible to everyone.

This paper explores immigrant students' experiences of higher education in three Icelandic universities. In times when social inclusion and equity enjoy high priority in universities all over Europe (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018), it is particularly relevant to implement culturally responsive teaching methods that value every student's experiences, background and cultures as well as promote equity through power-sharing between teachers and students in multicultural classrooms (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

Methodology

The presented research is a qualitative study involving focus groups and individual interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen to elicit the views of the participants as clearly and accurately as possible and provide a deep understanding of the individual cases (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Flick, 2009). Moreover, qualitative research is considered being culturally responsive methodology as it focuses on communication with participants and values their personal experiences and perceptions (Nodelman, 2013).

The participants in the research study were immigrants living in Iceland. The main requirements were that the participants were first-generation immigrants, had studied at one of the three target universities (University of Iceland, University of Akureyri, Reykjavik University) for at least one year at the undergraduate level, and were not exchange students. Data on some immigrant students was obtained from the registrar offices in the universities. Additionally, the participants were recruited through applying a snowball sampling approach (Flick, 2009).

In order to obtain rich data, 41 immigrant students were recruited through maximal variation sampling based on characteristics such as gender, age, country of origin, socioeconomic status, number of years in Iceland and in the Icelandic school system, proficiency in their native language(s), Icelandic and English. The participants' ages varied from 20 to 52 years old. They had 21 different native languages. They came from 23

different countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America and have been living in Iceland for 2 to 18 years.

When it comes to the participants' fields of studies, the goal of recruiting diverse participants was reached successfully as the participant group consisted of immigrant students studying over 20 different subjects, including geology, languages, law, medicine, pedagogy etc. The participants experienced a variety of teaching and assessment methods in addition to making contact with different teachers and peers during their learning process.

The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed of the research and the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland gave a positive review. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law nr.77/2000 about data protection. The participants' identities were kept secret. The researchers took precautions against any possibility of disclosing the participants' identities.

The research group worked collaboratively throughout the whole research process, including preparing for the interviews, creating interview guides, conducting the interviews, coding and analysing the data.

Data collection started with seven focus group interviews with the participants. The duration of the focus group interviews ranged from 52 up to 78 minutes. The researchers applied directive approach (Lichtman, 2013) to conduct the focus group interviews and led the group discussions towards the specific topics, which included questions on the participants' experiences of the education process, teaching methods as well as their perspectives on the language-related issues. Later, the findings from the focus group interviews were used to create more advanced interview guides for individual interviews. The interview questions related to the purpose of this paper are presented below:

- What can you tell about your experiences of being an immigrant student at the university?
- What can you tell about your relations with the teachers?
- What can you tell about your experiences of communication with teachers?
- What teaching methods did the teachers apply?
- What do you think about these teaching methods?
- What challenges did you experience during the education process? And how did you deal with them?
- Could you use your previous knowledge and experiences in your study? If yes, please explain how.
- What is your experience with group work?
- Do you have anything else that you would like to share with us regarding your experiences at the university?

All interviews were conducted in Icelandic and/or English. The participants were notified that they could skip answering any question without having to explain. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 28 to 69 minutes with an average of 47 minutes.

The total amount of data collected during the research study exceeded 1500 pages of interview transcriptions. In publications in English such as the presented paper, the quotations coming from the interviews conducted in Icelandic were translated from Icelandic into English by the research team.

The analytical process took place simultaneously throughout the research period (Creswell, 2008). The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). It consisted of several stages. During the first stage, each author of this article became familiarised with the data before coding in the second stage. In the next stage, the research group came together to discuss the codes and organised them into themes. The group clearly defined the themes, stating their focus, scope and purpose. Each theme was developed in relation to the research questions and to the other themes. Together, they provided a coherent picture of the patterns in the collected data. In the analysis, the research group avoided selectiveness of the data by making sure to provide extracts from across the data, in order to show the breadth of each theme (Sandelowski, 1994). In order to analyse the vast amount of data and keep codes and themes clearly registered, the Atlas.ti analytical software was used for the management of the data.

Findings and discussion

Three main themes derived from the interviews in the final stage of the analysis. The analysis of the interviews showed that when talking about common challenges, the participants often discussed language-related issues together with the problems related to the extensive workload in some courses. It led the research group to the conclusion that these two issues should be combined in the first theme which explores the students' perspectives on the workload and language-related issues.

The second theme focuses on participants experiences of culturally responsive teaching, applied to some extent by several teachers, who mainly encouraged students to use their previous experiences and cultural background in the learning process. Furthermore, the theme includes the participants' perspectives on multicultural group work.

The third theme presents the students' perspectives on the relations with teachers through analysing the question of power-sharing and equality in the classroom, that are often highlighted as important dimensions in multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is not possible to generalize the findings and argue that all immigrant students experience the education process in the same way. The focus of the presented study is on understanding particular immigrant students' experiences and finding patterns in their answers, that may indicate some common challenges that other students with similar characteristics might experience as well.

Students' perspectives on the workload and language-related issues

Different factors may impact how university students perceive their education. These include the clarity of the goals in a certain course or programme, the quality of teaching, the level of workload, and whether assessment builds on student ability to demonstrate understanding rather than recall certain facts (Ashwin et al., 2015; Slee, 2010).

Generally, the participants were satisfied with the workload in their studies. A participant who studied geology said, "It's a lot, but it's not like it comes in waves at a very wrong time". An appropriate workload is said to be one of the crucial factors strengthening the positive outcomes of student learning (Ashwin et al., 2015). However, students pointed out that the number of ECTS granted (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) did not reflect the amount of work required for some courses, especially those that included an extensive amount of reading material in the Icelandic language. A participant who studied languages and pedagogy stated that,

> ECTS did not always represent the real situation in the course, that's for sure because I am really disappointed with that literature course. It was ten credits, but it took all the time from other courses, so it was not ten credits. It was like fifteen at least. You had to read a book in Icelandic every week and write papers on it and learn a theory on it.

The main issue was that the teacher while preparing the syllabus, did not take into consideration different levels of Icelandic skills, which could affect those who had a weaker grasp of the language. This substantially elongated some students' time spent on preparation for the course and assignment writing. The same course was also mentioned in an interview with another participant who studied languages. She said, "I don't know. I try to read something at home in Icelandic, and I don't read the books from that course. Why can't we choose and read something beautiful, Laxness for example". It was clear that the participant was interested in studying literature. Later in the interview, she revealed that she had some suggestions about reading material. The teacher, however, implemented the standardised syllabus and did not allow the students to choose some of the reading materials based on their preferences. This practice contradicts culturally responsive teaching, which encourages teachers to discuss the learning materials with students and evaluate how it could be adjusted to the students' interests, needs and existing level of knowledge (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010).

For a participant who studied languages and political science, it was important to know the goals of the course and have some flexibility. He complimented one teacher for being caring towards her students and allowing them to decide if they want to study the basics or if they would like to go beyond the syllabus.

> She [teacher] is always just great. We have one chapter pretty much every week, and we have that fixed workload to do, and she is always giving us more, and if you want to keep up, you keep up. If you just want to stick to the basics, you stick to the basics.

This is an example of how flexible teaching methods are appreciated by some students because they are allowed to alter their workload according to their backgrounds and levels

of knowledge and curiosity. Previous research stressed the importance of teachers taking time to get to know their students and learn about their abilities, expectations, goals, and levels of curiosity (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). This allows teachers to tailor a course, workload, course materials, and assessment methods to satisfy the diverse needs of the student group with whom they work.

Some participants revealed that they studied a subject only for practical purposes without intending to finish the degree. This often applied to students at the Faculty of Languages and Cultures, especially to students who studied Icelandic as a second language. During the interview, one of the participants said that it was too difficult for her to study dentistry, which was taught in Icelandic, because of the lack of language skills, so she decided to improve her Icelandic before she comes back to dentistry.

> I started learning dentistry, but it was very difficult. There was too much competition there, and I was the only foreigner in the class. So, I decided to improve my Icelandic, and I'm doing that now [...] It is several years, but I'm not going to take all years. I just want to make sure that I'm ready to start again.

The participant explained later that she did not feel like she belonged in the Icelandic language departments because her goal was different from the goals of her peers. This created a challenge for university teachers, who needed to consider the diverse backgrounds, aims and needs of their students. According to the participant, her teachers had never asked about the students' goals, that could be useful in order to provide tailored educational support which could contribute to this particular student's sense of belonging, which is considered being highly important in a multicultural classroom (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Several participants pointed out different approaches between faculties and programmes in addressing language-related issues and usage of different languages in written tasks such as essays and exam papers. The participants expressed their concerns about the lack of clear language policies within the universities. In most cases described by the participants, the usage of English in written assignments and the question of providing examination papers in English required negotiations with the individual teachers. A participant, who previously studied computer science, explained,

> I don't know if this depends on department or not, but in comparison with the science and engineering department, if you ask for an English final exam, they always provide you an English exam, so that's why I have survived the first year so far. Everything is in English for me. But my friend who is now studying in business department, she has asked for an English final and the teachers were kind of like – no you cannot get.

According to the participants, a lack of clear policies and rules regarding the usage of English and other languages in written assignments creates confusion. The majority of participants wish for better language support and standardization of language policies within the universities. This is in line with the multicultural education theory that empha-

sizes the importance of clear policies and providing appropriate educational support, including language support, which can compensate for lack of skills in the language of instructions (Banks & Banks, 2010; Boesch, 2014; Slee, 2010).

Students' experiences of culturally responsive teaching and multicultural group work

Teaching not only requires having the appropriate content knowledge but also the ability to convey this content. Teachers should be able to manage their teaching, show a willingness to get to know their students, and care about them and their learning (Gay, 2018; Hill, 2014; Nieto, 2010). The analysis of the interviews suggests that culturally responsive teaching as a fully established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon at the Icelandic universities. However, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers, the participants' experiences become increasingly positive.

Theories claim that adult learners and their perspectives should be welcomed, respected, and valued in the classroom (Rubenson, 2011; Karge et al., 2011). Many of the participants stressed the importance of being able to express their own views. Especially those from Asia and Eastern Europe where the education systems, according to the participants, were more traditional and did not always allow students to engage in discussion in the classroom and express their opinions. A student who studied the Icelandic language and pedagogy highlighted,

> You can always talk. There is always discussion in the class, always! Like, your opinion is your opinion. It's something you can say 'No I don't believe it, prove!' So, that's not in all the universities like this.

The majority of the participants combined studies with work. Some participants were studying subjects related to their current work, which gave them an opportunity to use their knowledge in practice every day. A participant, who studied to become a professional kindergarten teacher, also was working part-time in a kindergarten. "I have already applied some teaching methods in my work, and now, I am learning about them and, at the same time, trying them out with my pupils". Creating a link between formal education and life, work, and experiences outside of the university is regarded as an important feature of culturally responsive teaching, as it motivates students and promotes active learning (Gay, 2001, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

A different story, shared by a student, who studied to become a primary school teacher, showed how a supervisory teacher supported and motivated her to train acquired knowledge during the teaching practice at a primary school. The teacher encouraged the student to be open about own cultural background and to use it as an advantage,

> I really enjoyed the training in our courses. I just said to children that I am an immigrant and that is why my pronunciation is different, but I really want to read for you. And the supervisory teacher supported me, she said 'Just say it and be open, you will only get positive reactions from them!'

The above-mentioned example shows the importance of understanding immigrant students' challenges. The teacher understood that the student felt insecure about her pronunciation, but instead of criticising her and asking her to improve her language skills, the teacher encouraged her to overcome the fears and be open about her background and challenges that she experienced. Carefully chosen words of support play an important role in establishing a positive atmosphere in the learning environment and empower students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Several participants emphasised the importance of being able to use previous knowledge and experiences in the classroom. A student who studied pedagogy highlighted that the possibility of using her background was very important for her, especially during her first days at the university.

> One of my first memories of classes is coming and just discussing the research that we had done, and it was just interesting. It was really different from the teaching I had before […] It was an excellent introduction. Everybody wants to be there immediately.

A student who studied the English language and pedagogy added, "It was super cool that people could put their background into the studies. So, for me, that was super interesting". According to the participants, the teachers who were applying culturally responsive teaching methods were able to activate the students' interest and background resources and to provide an assessment that encouraged independent studying habits, sense of responsibility and usage of different sources. A student from the School of Education said the following,

> I find it a bit more like free in that sense that if you like some topic then you are free to study the topic and use the information you find, maybe not just from the books but like your own experience and different materials you know. And at first, it was very challenging to me – this kind of assessment – because I was not very used to working by myself or studying by myself in that sense. But I find it very useful, and the more I get used to it, I can see the benefits of it.

Bridging cultures through allowing students to use their background and previous experiences in classroom is a characteristic feature of culturally responsive teaching, that promotes active learning, knowledge sharing and generally has positive impact on students' performance (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Slee, 2010).

The analysis of the interviews showed that group work was amongst the most frequently applied teaching methods in Icelandic universities. During the interviews, the participants' shared their experiences of the multicultural group. The experiences varied from being positive to negative. A participant who studied biology found the multicultural group work being very useful,

> It is much better for me for sure. It makes it easier for me, because sometimes I would have misunderstandings about the task or the assignment or what to do or something in the background information. Then, if there are Icelandic people who I am working with - they definitely don't have misunderstandings, so they can correct me […] For me, it's very helpful that we have to do our assignments and reports in groups and I am a little afraid of one day getting an assignment that I have to do it on my own in Icelandic because I can't really write Icelandic properly.

Previous research argues that multicultural group work helps students to integrate into the learning environment, encourages knowledge exchange and promotes collaborative learning (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006). The aforementioned example showed that Icelandic group members provided valuable language support, which had a positive impact on this particular immigrant student's experiences of the group work.

On the other hand, some participants had negative attitudes towards group work. As a language student explained it,

> I think it is unfair to work in groups […] I don't know why group work [is assigned]. It doesn't show anything. We all got the same grade even though everybody agreed that I was the best.

While group work is generally considered to be a beneficial way of teaching, especially advantageous in a multicultural educational environment, it is important that its characteristics and aims are well explained by teachers (Hassanien, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012). Previous studies showed that some seemingly well-known teaching and assessment methods might be unclear for students of immigrant backgrounds, as they might not have experienced them before (Boesch, 2014). In the above-presented example, the participant came from a culture where group work was rarely applied. During the interview, he commented that he was not familiar with the aims of the group work and generally did not know why it was assigned. The teacher did not properly introduce the purpose of the group work, and the negative attitudes towards it were created by the student's general misconceptions.

The analysis of the interviews revealed an interesting pattern, which was clearly portrayed in this section. The majority of the participants who experienced some dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, such as an ability to express their own thoughts, being able to use their previous experiences and knowledge and create a link between formal education and life were students in the School of Education, University of Iceland. This pattern could be explained by the current emphasis on the culturally responsive teaching methods and multicultural education in the School of Education and teachers' high level of the awareness of diverse students' needs (see also Books et al., 2011; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014).

Power-sharing and equality in the classroom

During the interviewing process and thematic analysis, the research group became aware of a pattern. Several participants pointed out that they enjoyed the equality in classrooms and dialogue between teachers and students. Further, some participants expressed that this democratic way of teaching, where the majority of teachers were easily accessible, and the educational process was an exchange of knowledge between students and teachers, was totally new to them as they had not experienced it in their countries of origin. Equality and power-sharing in educational institutions in Iceland go along with democratic views and general equality that prevails in modern Icelandic society (Stjórnarskrá lýðveldisins Íslands [Constitution of the Republic of Iceland], 1944).

Various research studies showed that students valued teachers who possessed the knowledge of the subject they taught, had competences in diverse teaching methods, were well prepared for the class, and were able to manage time well (Carusetta & Cranton, 2009; Hill, 2014; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014; Vella, 2002). These are the primary factors measured in teaching evaluations. What is not less important for students is to form trusting relationships with teachers and experience an atmosphere of safety, respect, and flexibility in the learning space, the characteristic details of culturally responsive teaching (Gay; 2018; Nieto, 2010). The students want to feel supported in their learning and to be valued for what they bring into the classroom. Providing personal and relevant support can have a highly positive influence both on students' experiences of the learning process and their academic performance (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). A participant who studied computer science shared her story,

> The trick is to have a good relationship with teachers […] There was a teacher who knew that my Icelandic was not good, and he said that he was going to help me, you know to explain about the home assignments and so on. And we were skyping every day.

Developing a personal connection with immigrant students that is built on mutual respect, genuine concern for students, enjoyment of and commitment to teaching, and willingness to improve the practice are the characteristics that the participants of the study name as important in their teachers. Furthermore, multicultural education theorists emphasized the importance of power-sharing in a diverse classroom because it empowers the students, improves their sense of responsibility for their own learning and it generally contributes to their sense of belonging in the university environment (Banks & Banks, 2010). A student who studied pedagogy, and who had broad international experiences of studying in different environments, concluded,

> I've been in other countries in universities. I've seen different methods of teaching, but that [Icelandic] was like absolutely different for me, I finally feel like home […] Maybe because the group is not that big. Maybe we are not that many. Even teachers know you by name. It was kind of like personal.

On the other hand, misguided empathy resulting in holding immigrant students to lower standards and expecting less from them was considered by the participants to be the least motivating method. During the interviews, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with the low expectations that some teachers showed toward immigrant students. A participant who studied law mentioned, "The teacher didn't teach us very well. I think, she kind of approached us as if we were children". This participant's negative experiences are supported by various studies that show that teachers should have high academic expectations for all students because lowering expectations based on students' ethnic background leads to lower well-being for immigrant students, making them feel invisible (Banks & Banks, 2010; Boesch, 2014; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants' experiences were positive in those cases when they felt that teachers approached them with respect and valued their

previous backgrounds and knowledge that they brought with them and encouraged critical thinking and discussions in the classroom. This is based on the notion of power-sharing which is considered being an important dimension of culturally responsive teaching (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). Despite that the theorists of culturally responsive teaching argue that such teaching methods should be consistent and based on systematic implementation of all the dimensions, the current research findings highlight that even when single dimension such as power-sharing is applied it has a positive influence on students' experiences.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews indicated that culturally responsive teaching as a fully established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon in Icelandic universities. According to the participants' experiences, the School of Education, University of Iceland shows the strongest emphasis on culturally responsive teaching.

The findings related to the participants' experiences of the workload in Icelandic universities, revealed two clear patterns in participants' experiences. The participants appreciated when teachers paid attention to the students' needs and allowed them to alter their workload while keeping the teaching within the frames of the syllabus. This corresponds to suggestions of theorists of multicultural education, that emphasise the importance of balanced workload and appropriate assessment methods that evaluate learning progress rather than measuring students' achievement (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010). On the other hand, the participants' experiences were mainly negative in those cases when the teachers ignored suggestions coming from the students and the participants were not allowed to choose some reading materials.

Language-related issues were widely discussed during the interviews and the findings indicated that the majority of the participants wish for better language support during their studies. Additionally, the participants were concerned with the lack of clear language policies regarding usage of English and other languages in written assignments. The participants expressed wishes for the standardisation of policies and rules regarding language support and special assistance during the exams.

When it comes to the participants' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching, especially applied by the teachers at the School of Education, the analysis of the interviews showed an apparent pattern in the participants' answers. Those students who were encouraged to use their previous knowledge and experiences during the learning process felt motivated and considered these teaching methods to be relevant. Building on students' existing knowledge and encouraging them to use their cultural background, languages and previous experiences are regarded as the main feature of culturally responsive teaching, that celebrates diversity and values every student (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Previous research suggests that teachers should consider applying multicultural group work as a productive way of sharing knowledge and promoting cross-cultural interaction between the students (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012). According to the participants in the presented study, group work is frequently applied in the Icelandic universities. Those participants, who understood the purpose and the advantages of the multicultural group work, had positive experiences of it. On the other hand, those participants who were unfamiliar with the concepts of group work had mostly negative attitudes towards group work. As claimed by previous research studies, in order to eliminate misconceptions about multicultural group work, teachers should clearly introduce the main purposes and advantages of it, especially to those students, who are unacquainted with this teaching method (De Vita, 2005; Popov et.al, 2012).

Several participants in the presented study highly appreciated the democratic way of teaching, that is a characteristic feature of Icelandic education. According to their experiences, the majority of teachers were easily accessible, and they were genuinely caring for their students. An atmosphere of caring, mutual trust and respect is emphasised in the field of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010). The participants reported that this way of teaching had an empowering effect and contributed to their sense of belonging in the university.

The goal of the study was not only to provide insight into immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and education process at different universities in Iceland but also to call educational institutions to action to take steps towards equality in universities through introducing and implementing culturally responsive teaching methods in different academic disciplines. The presented study argues that culturally responsive teaching is highly relevant in universities where the diversity of student populations grows. Furthermore, the study highlights that immigrant students' experiences of learning process become positive, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers. This naturally triggers a rhetorical question of what implications culturally responsive teaching would bring if it were applied as a fully established teaching method and a mindset in higher education.

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