NJCIE Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education

ISSN: 2535-4051 Vol 10, No 5 (2026) https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.6687

Article

# Teachers' attitudes and assumptions regarding newly arrived migrant students' education: Insights from Iceland and Norway

**Lara Hoffmann**
University of Iceland
Email: laraw@hi.is

**Finn Aarsæther**
Oslo Metropolitan University

**Helene Fulland**
Oslo Metropolitan University

**Hanna Ragnarsdóttir**
University of Iceland

**Susan Rafik Hama**
University of Iceland

## Abstract

This article explores teachers' attitudes and assumptions regarding the education of newly arrived migrant students, including their linguistic, cultural, and academic needs, and how these attitudes and assumptions may position the students as learners. Our analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with teachers at lower-secondary schools in Iceland and Norway conducted between 2022 and 2024. By juxtaposing

©2026 Lara Hoffmann, Finn Aarsæther, Helene Fulland, Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Susan Rafik Hama. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

interviews with teachers educating newly arrived migrant students in mainstream classes in Iceland and in a reception class in Norway, we contribute to the literature on the education of newly arrived migrant students by exploring how different conditions and educational contexts shape teachers' experiences. Our data reveal that many teachers report feeling insufficiently prepared to meet the diverse educational needs of newly arrived students, citing limited training and a lack of support structures in their schools as key factors. Teachers at the two sites often describe newly arrived migrant students facing multiple challenges, including interrupted schooling, difficulty adapting to the instructional methods common in the Nordic countries, and limited proficiency in the language of instruction. Following this, we discuss how teachers' attitudes and assumptions can place newly arrived students in a disempowered and deficit position, highlighting the relationship between teachers' attitudes and assumptions and student agency.

**Keywords:** migrant students, attitudes, assumptions, Iceland, Norway

# Introduction

For a range of reasons, global migration has increased significantly over the past twenty years, and European countries have received large numbers of migrants and refugees in the 21st Century. Statistics reveal that in 2025, 10.4% of the EU population were foreign-born residents, an increase of 1.9 million individuals compared to 2024. In Iceland and Norway, the figures for 2025 were 21.8% and 18.7% foreign-born residents, respectively (Eurostat, 2026). In general, the proportion of individuals in the age group 15-64 is higher among the foreign-born population than among the native population in European countries (Eurostat, 2026), making education and schooling for newly arrived migrant students an important task for host countries. This is a challenging task, and comparative research is therefore considered purposeful, as it contributes to the understanding of the processes that enhance educational development among newly arrived migrant students across countries in different institutional and social contexts.

Within Europe, the Nordic countries are often said to represent a distinct group, with certain assumed shared characteristics regarding their approaches to education: values of social justice, equity, and inclusion (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2023). However, research shows both differences and similarities among the Nordic countries regarding the education of newly arrived migrant students, as documented by Emilsson Peskova and colleagues (2023), who investigated the Nordic countries' approaches to second language (L2) and mother tongue (L1) learning. While language learning is relevant to our study, we intend to describe and analyze the education of newly arrived students in a broader, pedagogical sense, including questions of students' agency and empowerment. Our research methodology follows the comparative case study approach introduced by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), which focuses on processes instead of defining cases as fixed entities. Based on data from interviews collected in two separate research projects, we

investigate the attitudes and assumptions of lower-secondary teachers in Iceland and Norway towards the education of newly arrived migrant students, with a particular focus on whether and how teachers' attitudes and assumptions position the students as learners.

The targeted teaching context in this study is the education of newly arrived migrant students who arrive at ages 12-15 and attend the lower secondary level at schools in their host countries. Statistics show that students who migrate two or three years before they are supposed to complete lower secondary school tend to experience difficulties with further education and/or entry into the labor market. European Statistics (OECD, 2024a) show that, in general, foreign-born individuals aged 15 to 29 are more likely to be NEET (not in education, employment, or training), underscoring how serious this situation is for the individual and for society.

In the Norwegian context, statistics reveal that late arrival dramatically decreases the chances of completing compulsory school with achieved school points (i.e. Grunnskolepoeng) in the diploma. Statistics from the 2022/23 school year (Kalcic & Ye, 2023) clearly show how lower secondary school point achievement rates vary with time spent in residence in the host country. 67% of the students who had migrated to Norway at ages 13, 14, or 15 left lower secondary school without a school-point based diploma. Among migrant students who had stayed in the country for four years, 28% did not achieve school-points, while among migrant students with more than four years of schooling in Norway, the rate was 9%. Similar rates for Norwegian-born students with an immigrant background were 7% and 5% for ethnic Norwegian students. In the Icelandic context, foreign-born students with migrant parents also exhibited higher dropout rates than those without migrant parents. Dropout rates are especially high among those who moved to Iceland in their mid-to-late childhood but dropout rates among students who moved to Iceland before age 7 were comparable to those of students with Icelandic parents born in Iceland (OECD, 2024b). Data from Statistics Iceland show that the dropout rate was highest among foreign-born students who arrived in Iceland after age 6: Their dropout rate was close to 50–60% four years after enrolment (OECD, 2024b). These insights from Iceland and Norway strongly indicate that schools face challenges in addressing the educational needs of the group of migrant students included in this study.

## Research questions

The overall aim of this article is to investigate the intersection between lower-secondary teachers' attitudes and beliefs about newly arrived students, their' perceived preparedness to teach these students, and their teaching strategies.

We ask the research questions:

1. How can lower secondary school teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards the education of newly arrived migrant students, such as assumptions about their linguistic, cultural, and academic needs, shape how these students are positioned as learners?

2. How can teachers' perceived preparedness for educating newly arrived migrant students affect the way they approach these students in the classrooms?

Prior research broadly documents how teachers' attitudes and assumptions shape their teaching practices and can influence students' education (Prentice, 2023; Yoon, 2008), and even more so for students from less privileged socio-economic groups or students with interrupted educational trajectories. Theoretically, this project leans on an interdisciplinary pool: Critical pedagogy's emphasis on empowerment (Freire, 1970/2000), educational research on deficit approaches to newly arrived students (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016), and research on teacher preparedness (Deng et al., 2021; Iversen et al., 2025). An Icelandic–Norwegian comparative case study approach offers a broad perspective on teachers' professional experiences and perspectives, including how differing educational contexts shape them (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

# Research Context: Iceland and Norway

## Iceland

In Iceland, the education of newly arrived migrant students is governed primarily by general education legislation and national curriculum policy (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). The Compulsory School Act (2008) guarantees all children aged 6–16 the right to inclusive education within mainstream schools, emphasizing inclusion as a guiding principle; however, the legislation does not define Icelandic as a Second Language (ÍSL) as a distinct compulsory subject with nationally prescribed teaching hours. Similarly, the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), structured around six fundamental pillars: literacy, democracy and human rights, equality, sustainability, health and welfare, and creativity, addresses multilingualism and diversity implicitly through inclusive values. The practical organization of education for newly arrived students is largely decentralized, with municipalities and individual schools exercising considerable autonomy in designing support measures, including establishing reception departments or introductory classes (móttökudeildir) (Benediktsson, 2023). Although teacher education programs formally incorporate multilingual and second-language perspectives, research shows that these components are limited in scope and unevenly integrated, resulting in reports of low preparedness, restricted pedagogical strategies, and insufficient institutional guidance among teachers, especially in subject teaching beyond language instruction (Benediktsson, 2023; Gunnþórsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2025). Moreover, participation in these courses is generally not mandatory across teacher education programs. In Iceland, professional support for teachers working with multilingual students is primarily provided through service-based structures rather than mandatory coursework. While the

importance of heritage language education is recognized in Iceland and provided ‘if needed’ according to guidelines published by the Icelandic government, it is mostly provided by community-based language schools (Emilsson Peskova et al., 2025).

### Norway

The education of newly arrived migrant students in Norway is regulated through the Education Act (2023), the legislative framework common for all Norwegian schools. However, since 2012, an exception has been made for newly arrived students by allowing schools to organize all education for these students in separate classes, or reception classes, for a maximum period of two years. Reception classes in Norway are mainly an urban phenomenon, as fewer rural sites have enough newly arrived students or the infrastructure to organize separate classes (Løddingetal., 2024). Students without proficiency in Norwegian have the right to intensive Norwegian-language instruction and, if needed, are entitled to mother tongue education or bilingual instruction to get access to the curriculum until they have acquired sufficient language skills in Norwegian. Education through students' first languages, however, depends on whether the school management deems it necessary and on the availability of competent teachers. With this as a backdrop, many Norwegian schools with newly arrived students do not offer heritage language education and/or bilingual instruction, and intensive Norwegian language instruction usually becomes the default choice.

To teach intensive language courses in Norwegian, 30 relevant ECTS are required, there is no specific requirement to have completed a course in second language learning. For teachers in subjects other than Norwegian, there are no specific requirements, despite the documented complexity of integrated content and language teaching (Kjelaas & Fagerheim, 2021). Thus, teachers' competences and sense of preparedness when teaching in reception classes are expected to vary across sites. Although there are available online learning and teaching resources in terms of digital tools, translation tools, AI-based tools, and didactic guidelines, there is expected to be a strong need for support from school management for teachers responsible for newly arrived migrant students (Løddingetal., 2024).

# Theoretical perspectives

## Teachers’ attitudes, assumptions, and preparedness

Attitudes are defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1). Research broadly documents how teachers’ attitudes and assumptions can influence students’ education (Prentice, 2023; Yoon, 2008), and even more so for students from less privileged socio-economic groups or with interrupted educational trajectories.

Previous research from a Nordic context (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016) shows that a strong focus on students' challenges tends to place newly arrived students in disempowered and deficit positions, and that, alternatively, looking at their linguistic and cultural background as resources may enhance agency among newly arrived migrant students by offering opportunities for them to voice their acquired knowledge, experiences, and feelings. As for teacher preparedness, previous research indicates that teachers in many places feel insufficiently prepared to meet the diverse educational needs of newly arrived students, citing limited training and support as key factors (Deng et al., 2021; Iversen et al., 2025). Nilsson (2023), from a Swedish context, discusses how the teachers in her study experience their didactic agency as being dependent on both competence-related issues and organizational support structures at the school level. Teacher agency is further analyzed by Priestly et al. (2015), who discuss the conflict between external demands on teachers to enhance quality and efficiency in education, on the one hand, and the absence of organizational structures to support teachers in executing these demands, on the other.

## Students' empowerment and agency

Freire (1970/2000) challenged the traditional hierarchical opposition between teacher and student by reconceptualizing their relationship as reciprocal, articulated through the notions of the teacher–student and the student–teacher, thus empowering the students. In this formulation, responsibility for learning and growth is shared, as both parties contribute to creating meaningful educational spaces. For Freire (1970/2000), education is fundamentally tasked with fostering critical consciousness, enabling learners to question and transform their social realities. Viewed through a Freirean lens, learning is inseparable from students' development as critical citizens, grounded in social responsibility and political agency (Freire, 1970/2000). One factor in reconceptualizing traditional hierarchical opposition between teachers and students is supporting children's linguistic agencies. Lanza (2007) argued that children should be viewed as active social agents who contribute to adult society, while also producing their own culture. Similarly, Palviainen and Curdt-Christiansen (2022) emphasize that children can express their views on language learning and language policy. Schwartz (2018) maintained that children can generally express their ideas on certain languages in their environment and whether these languages are worth learning, thus exerting their linguistic agency. However, when monolingual practices are implemented in multilingual settings, this can silence immigrant children's voices, as Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) has argued. Therefore, Cummins (2004; 2021) emphasized that schools need to develop ways to implement practices that welcome diverse backgrounds and identities. Such approaches include scaffolding instruction to support students' language comprehension and production, activating their existing background knowledge, and building new background knowledge as needed (Cummins, 2021). Findings from research (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014) have indicated that when provided with supportive, inclusive practices and learning spaces, children

become empowered and can become active agents in developing their multilingualism.

# Method

## A cross-Nordic comparative approach involving Iceland and Norway

Our research methodology follows the comparative case study approach introduced by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017). Our unit of analysis is teachers' assumptions about the education of newly arrived migrant students. Rather than treating Iceland and Norway as fixed entities and analyzing teachers' attitudes and assumptions as belonging to a particular educational system, we have focused on processes among individuals and across the two sites represented in the study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7). In this way, an Icelandic–Norwegian comparative case study approach explores how local variations in educational contexts, such as teacher and subject characteristics and student group characteristics, inform teachers' experiences and assumptions. The study contexts in Iceland and in Norway share some characteristics. The interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024. The teachers all work at the lower-secondary level; all interviews except one were group interviews, and all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Both studies aimed to advance knowledge about the education of foreign-born students in schools in Iceland and Norway, respectively. However, the two studies differ in some important parameters. The questions used in the interview guides in Iceland and Norway matched considerably, allowing us to compare the two studies: They contained questions about teachers experiences with newly arrived migrant students, teachers' preparedness, views on the reception process, language policy (e.g. whether they encouraged students' multilingualism), and visions for newly arrived students' futures. Two different research teams conducted the interviews, and there are differences in school, teacher, and student characteristics between the two sites, as shown in Table 1. Altogether, this study draws on data from 10 interviews conducted with 29 teachers 7 schools, one in Norway and six in Iceland.

**Table 1.** Overview of site and sample characteristics

| Country | Iceland | Norway |
|---|---|---|
| School setting | Migrant students in mainstream classes at six schools | Migrant students in a reception class at one mainstream school |
| Teachers interviewed | 21 teachers, the majority without formal training in teaching migrant students or | 8 teachers, novice to teaching in reception classes, two of them with formal training in teaching |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | teaching Icelandic as a Second language | Norwegian as a second language |
| Subjects represented | Icelandic, Icelandic as a second language, various academic subjects and practical aesthetical subjects | Norwegian, various academic subjects and practical aesthetical subjects |
| Students' backgrounds and languages | Primary focus on students with a refugee background from Iraq and Syria speaking Arabic and Arabic dialects, but interviews also included general information on how schools received students with a migrant background. | Students with varied immigration backgrounds, representing the following languages: Albanian, Somali, Twi, Nepali, Tagalog, Polish, and Ukrainian/Russian. |
| Interview approach | Semi-structured group interviews | Semi-structured group and individual interviews |

## Interviews and ethical considerations

In the research project ESRCI (A Part and Apart? Education and social inclusion of refugee children and youth in Iceland (ESRCI) (2023-2026), and funded by Rannís, the Icelandic Centre for Research, a total of 120 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with refugee children and youth from Syria and Iraq in Iceland, as well as their parents, school staff (teachers and school principals), social services, non-governmental organizations, and volunteers). Interviews were conducted by members of the research team based on an interview guide developed by the researchers. Written information about the purpose of the study in the form of an information letter was presented to participants via e-mail and in print directly before the interviews. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form provided in Icelandic, in Arabic for parents, and in child-friendly Icelandic for children. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Interviews were fully anonymized after transcription and saved on a secure repository (Microsoft Teams). For this article, we selected six focus group interviews with teachers out of a total of 120 interviews. The interviews were selected based on the criteria that included information about lower-secondary teachers' thoughts about and experiences with teaching migrant students. Table 2 shows the number of teachers participating in each interview. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic. We translated the selected excerpts using the

translation engine málstaður.is. The interviews were analyzed following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data from Norway stem from a small-scale research project on the education of newly arrived migrant students in a reception class at the lower-secondary level (grades 8–10) during the 2022/23 school year. The school is in an urban area in South-Eastern Norway. The research team participated in staff meetings, conducted classroom observations, and interviewed school management, teachers, students, and parents affiliated with the reception class. Information about the project's aim was first given orally in a meeting with the school management and teachers. Separate information letters and consent forms were then provided for school management, teachers, students, and parents. The documents were in Norwegian but translated into other languages for parents and students. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Data were research ethical standards set by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). Interviews were fully anonymized after transcription and saved in a secure repository (Microsoft Teams), and care was also taken to treat third parties anonymously in the presentation of excerpts. The project was designed to cover a range of topics regarding the education of newly arrived migrant students, like approaches to second language learning, academic progress and social inclusion, as well as teachers´ attitudes, assumptions, and preparedness. For the present article, semi-structured, individual (N= 1) and group (N= 3) interviews with the eight teachers were selected for analysis. The interviews were constructed and conducted by both researchers and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The selected quotes in this article were translated by the researchers. Table 1 shows that the students in the Norwegian case (N = 15) were 14-16 years old, had emergent L2 Norwegian skills, and represented a mixed group of language backgrounds.

Table 2 provides an overview of the interviews analyzed for this manuscript

**Table 2.** Overview of interviews

| Interview number | Country | Number of teachers |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Iceland | 3 |
| 2 | Iceland | 4 |
| 3 | Iceland | 2 |
| 4 | Iceland | 3 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | Iceland | 5 |
| 6 | Iceland | 4 |
| 7 | Norway | 3 |
| 8 | Norway | 2 |
| 9 | Norway | 2 |
| 10 | Norway | 1 |

All ten interviews were analyzed following reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) with a hybrid inductive-deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pearson et al., 2025). We did side-by-side analysis in four steps: 1) country-wise analysis of interview material, 2) online data workshop with cross-case discussions of themes, 3) case-wise analysis, and 4) online data workshop with cross-case discussions and elaboration of themes. While drafting the results section, the transcripts were reread to identify additional nuances that could highlight a theme or subtheme. Results are presented in relation to four main themes.

## Limitations

Limitations of this comparative study include that the two separate studies are based on different (but similar) interview guides and were conducted by different research teams. This made it necessary for us, as a collective research team, to make ourselves familiar with our context and data through a series of data workshops. In that way, this limitation turned out to be a strength. We discovered that we had corresponding data that, in our view, were valuable to compare. This study is a qualitative one with inherent limitations as to generalizations. In addition, the Norwegian study is a small-scale study involving teachers from only one school. Moreover, the teachers in the Norwegian study were all new to teaching newly arrived migrant students in a reception class context. If all teachers had taught newly arrived migrant students, their responses may have been different. The Icelandic study, on the other hand, is a large-scale study with its primary focus on resettled refugees from Syria and Iraq in Iceland, thus strongly emphasizing this specific group. However, the Icelandic interview guides also included questions about school management's and teachers' attitudes and approaches to receiving and teaching migrant students in general, not only those from Syria and Iraq, which to some degree makes this limitation less significant.

# Results

We identified the following themes in the interviews from Iceland and Norway analyzed for this article: “Teachers’ sense of (un)preparedness”, “Teachers’ attitudes and assumptions about migrant students’ previous education”, “Teachers’ attitudes and assumptions about students´ language and content learning”, and “Resources and support for teachers”.

## Teachers' sense of (un)preparedness

In both Iceland and Norway, many teachers reported a lack of preparedness to teach migrant students, citing structural factors and personal experiences as reasons. Some interviewees highlighted the increasing number of migrant students, such as a teacher based in a small town in Iceland:

> The number of foreign students here in [name of municipality] has increased enormously over the last two years. I think it has just doubled. [...] Almost a whole new primary school here! So, this is a big task. (Teacher 1 Iceland (I1))

Similarly, a teacher in Norway stated:

> It is hard to know how to approach teaching, when there are fifteen students with fifteen different entry points, both regarding language backgrounds and academic levels. It has been, like, trial and error […]. It has not been my most successful semester as a teacher; there have been many defeats [...]. But I think we have succeeded in caring for them as a social group and making them feel well at school. (Teacher 1 Norway (N1))

These two excerpts reflect how teachers may perceive teaching newly arrived students as an exceptional teaching assignment; ‘this is a big task’ and ‘It is hard to know how to approach teaching’. While Teacher N1 referred to teaching related to the background of the specific students in her classroom, Teacher I1 referred to the general task of teaching an increasing number of foreign students. This implies that teaching newly arrived students is expected to be, and experienced to be, a different kind of teaching, both in mainstream and reception class contexts.

Furthermore, Teacher N1 expresses a sense of not having succeeded in this ‘big task’. The trial-and-error approach may also reflect that teacher N1 did not experience that the teaching task she was assigned for was sufficiently scaffolded for her, for instance through formal knowledge, prior experience or integrated teaching methods. The lack of perceived support was confirmed by the Norwegian teacher N2, talking about how she missed a support system to help her out:

> Yes, and then there is no one who could supervise me on what to do, because none of us have done this before. And there is no place to find information either, I wish we had some textbooks or something that I could look at. (Teacher N2)

As to the latter part of N2’s comment, it should be considered that this teacher was working within the

practical-aesthetic domain, where in Norway, relevant bilingual web learning resources are scarcer for newly arrived students. Teachers in academic subjects in Norway, however, would quite easily get access to web-based learning resources relevant to their subjects. Furthermore, in the latter part of the statement from Teacher N1, we notice a contrast to her experience of defeat. She says that the school has managed to care for the students' well-being. Our data show how teachers in both Iceland and Norway highlight having supported students' well-being and social inclusion. In Iceland, a teacher spoke about a newly arrived student not yet being ready to start in the mainstream class:

> He came to us in Year 10, the poor thing, completely bewildered, and we had no preparation for it. We just tried to be good to him. (Teacher I4)

The teachers' separation of the teaching task at hand and the notion of 'trying to be good' positions the students as learners, as students' well-being at school can be assumed to be a pre-requisite for attendance and participation in classroom activities. It is a dilemma, though, that, when teachers have to spend a lot of time on caring activities, academic progress for the students can be slowed down.

While a sense of unpreparedness was common among teachers in Norway and Iceland, there was a noteworthy case of a town school in Iceland where all five teachers participating in the focus group interview felt relatively well prepared. They had gained some experience teaching students with diverse backgrounds, had been trained in relevant teaching methods, and the school management had hired an assistant with a cultural and linguistic background similar to some of the migrant students. Teacher I5 speaks on behalf of all five teachers participating in the interview:

> Teaching methods. I also think it is incredibly good how the school responds, for instance, with her [assistant name] who has come [...] to talk to the Arabic-speaking kids. [...] I have one student who is a bit difficult; he comes from a refugee camp. He's been here for 2 years. And I notice that when she comes here, he becomes completely different. She sits and helps him, comes 3 times a week. (Teacher I5)

The teacher's account suggests that access to bilingual support contributed positively to both student engagement and the teachers' ability to respond to the students' needs. More broadly, this example illustrates how teacher preparedness is strengthened through access to relevant resources, collegial collaboration, and supportive leadership. Viewed alongside the findings from both countries, the results suggest that teachers' experiences of preparedness cannot be explained solely by differences in organizational structures. Rather, preparedness appears to be closely linked to broader structural and competence-related factors, including opportunities for professional learning, access to specialized support personnel, and institutional investment in inclusive educational practices.

## Teachers' attitudes and assumptions about students' previous education

Teachers in both research contexts expressed attitudes and assumptions about different aspects of their

students' previous schooling. Interrupted schooling and illiteracy in students' heritage languages were mentioned as key challenges. In an interview from Iceland, two teachers compared two students with refugee backgrounds, discussing their different educational backgrounds:

> Teacher I1: My two boys, one of them speaks Icelandic fluently now, but the other has a more difficult background. He was not in school, and he's taking a very long time to grasp it. [...]
>
> Teacher I2: But there is a huge difference between them. Their background, whether they have had any schooling or none at all. To just start school in Year 6, that's obviously a massive challenge.
>
> Teacher I1: Of course, not literate in their own language, let alone ours, so that is a challenge.

In this conversation, the teachers showcase how they recognize the diversity within the group of migrant students and how they reflect on the challenges students with interrupted school trajectories meet. In addition, teacher I1 ascribes the lack of progress of one of the students in relation to his limited command of the heritage language. Teacher I2 adds another factor: the age of the student- 'to just start school in Year 6'. In this way, they position the students individually, and one of them is a more challenging learner than the other.

The assumption that previous education has an impact on student behavior was also evident in the Norwegian data, although all students at the Norwegian school had age-appropriate schooling and were literate in their heritage language. An observable pattern among all the Norwegian teachers was how they tended to position the newly arrived migrant students as passive learners, seemingly not being able to voice their opinions or to take initiatives of their own:

> They sit quietly at their desks, listening. Are they not going to express any opinions of their own? Can´t they talk to each other? (…) [I] try to urge them to be more active learners, but they come from a school culture where this is not appreciated. (Teacher N1)

In this example, a lack of interaction in the student-teacher and student-student relationships during classroom activities is made relevant by the teacher. The questioning tone of the statement – 'Are they not going to express any opinions of their own? Can´t they talk to each other?'- may reflect that the teacher is still a bit confused about the students´ lack of adapt to what she considers a new student role. She has tried to support the students to be more active, but in her view, this is not working because, according to her, previous schooling has not taught them how to. Firstly, this is a generalization: the migrant students, who come from eight different countries and school contexts, are described as one homogenous group, referred to as 'they'. Secondly the teacher assumes that the students´ passivity is caused by expectations to student behaviour in previous schooling.

Another of the Norwegian teachers (N3) expressed similar assumptions regarding inactive students, although with 'perhaps' as a modifier:

> Perhaps [they are] used to another kind of teaching, more teacher-led, uh, they are used to a teacher who talks while they, like, write down, that they receive the information. (Teacher N3)

These two excerpts share prevalent views regarding the positioning of students: both teachers describe situations where they had expected students to be more engaged, and in trying to understand this, they both direct their attention to deficits among the students, caused by previous schooling. On the other hand, the teachers do not point at work methods, classroom organization, or reflect around whether they could have acted differently, to unleash more activity among the students.

In one interview from Iceland, four teachers reported and agreed that they experienced limited cooperation with parents from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. According to the teachers, parental involvement in school-related matters was often perceived as low, which they considered a challenge in supporting students' learning.

> Yes, just generally with these refugee children or immigrants or parents from another country who do not speak Icelandic at home. You try to give them tools to use with the children at home, something online, for example. But they do not seem to use it. Their only hope is to get something here at school. (Teacher I6)

Again, this excerpt shows how teachers may perceive that they attempt to interact – 'you try to give them tools to use'- but position the students and the parents as not responding to these attempts, whether in the classroom or at home. On one hand, these excerpts show how teachers across contexts may make generalizations about the impact of culture or school background on how newly arrived students as a group embrace the new student role or how fast they learn a language, even though the students come from different school systems and have diverse backgrounds. However, as shown, teachers also refer to heterogeneity within the student group when they position the students as either successful or challenged learners.

## Teachers' attitudes and assumptions about students' language and content learning

In one interview, teachers in Iceland spoke about how students used technology as well as their heritage languages as resources for learning school subjects, describing this practice as inventive and innovative and encouraging the use of Arabic as a resource for subject education in class:

> Teacher I1: Based on how he learns science, it seems to me that Arabic is at the forefront of his tools [...] He uses Google Translate to translate text into Arabic in Google Translate to understand it, and then back again, so he's using Arabic on the computer in lessons just to help himself understand. […]
>
> Researcher: Do you think he just comes up with this himself? [….]
>
> Teacher I2: Yes, he is very independent. We also have a project manager for technical matters who has shown them the best resources and so on. He is very quick to pick things up. It has actually surprised me when he's doing science projects like this, his vocabulary, and that he has an understanding of what is being worked on.

As opposed to previously described positioning of the students as ‘passive’ in the classroom, the teachers in this excerpt highlight how one student takes an active role in his own learning process, by utilizing available bilingual resources. It is interesting to note that teacher I2 is surprised by the student’s skills, vocabulary, and understanding of what they work on during science projects. The ‘surprise’ may illustrate the contrast between how students can be positioned as learners when only the skills in school language are accounted for, as opposed to when their whole linguistic repertoire can be included in the learning process.

Similarly, the teachers in the Norwegian reception class all described teaching approaches where they involved students' first languages or English in their classes. One teacher said he could see how the students lit up when he referred to their competencies in other languages and when he made their background significant in his teaching, reflecting an approach where the students’ background is acknowledged.

Another aspect raised in the Norwegian interviews was the assumption that same-L1 peer interactions would be beneficial for the reception class students, for socializing and Norwegian language learning. Teacher N4 said:

> There are many students at the school who speak different languages. There are many resources. When they are to collaborate on a project, for instance, they could use the languages that they [share]. (Teacher N4)

Here, the teacher positions the newly arrived student's vis-a-vis other students in mainstream classes with similar language backgrounds, indicating that the reception class students can be provided with more equal terms for collaboration in learning activities.

In other interviews, the teachers spoke about potential deficits in the language skills of migrant students. In the following excerpt from Norway, teacher N3highlights how the students’ limited proficiency in Norwegian is a hindrance for learning and teaching in social studies:

> Well, if you are to explain democracy in the reception class, then it is much more difficult compared to explaining democracy in a mainstream class, because then you can use Norwegian words and you know that they know the words. And then, in the reception class, you do not know if they know all the Norwegian words they need to understand what democracy is. And when they talk so little themselves and not always ask, then you become, you are a bit lost, kind of in a grey area, where, where you do not quite know. (laughs). (Teacher N3)

The teacher starts by comparing his usual approach to teaching social studies in his mainstream class and how applying the same didactic approach in the reception class becomes difficult. This example confirms the previously stated notion that teaching newly arrived students is perceived as an exceptional teaching task. Here, a teacher with long experience teaching social studies to mainstream students has recognized that his didactic approach is of limited value in a context where the student's demographics have changed.

At this point, however, a new didactic approach, for example, regarding how to integrate language and content learning, or to systematically use multilingual resources, has not yet emerged or been worked out by the teacher. In the same interview, the two other teachers run a dialogue around an attempt to make students display their background knowledge about a specific topic:

> Teacher N1: Didn't you facilitate an activity where they were to write in their own language, what they knew about the topic?
>
> Teacher N5: Yes, and it was a disaster
>
> Teacher N1: Yes, but didn't you get an overview of their point of departure?
>
> Interviewer: But why was it a disaster, was it because they produced limited texts?
>
> Teacher N5: Yes!
>
> Interviewer: But was it because they could not, or was it because they were not comfortable, did you think about that, it was a touchy subject?
>
> Teacher N5: Ehh, I think it was a lovely mix of everything, and in addition, they write on iPads and have to push one letter at a time, and that is a slow process. I do not know.

This excerpt illustrates a teacher´s attempt to acknowledge the students' linguistic skills as a resource. Seen together with the example from teacher N3, above, who was frustrated by the difficulties he met, trying to explain the concept of democracy, the excerpts both describe teachers who see the need to adjust their didactic approaches in order to position the students as more active learners, but who have not yet figured out how to go about it. None of them are trained in second language learning, they are not obliged to be either, as they are regarded qualified teachers within their fields (social studies and science ). In an earlier section (research context and background), we described *integrated content and language teaching* as a complex activity (Kjelaas & Fagerheim, 2021). The statements from teacher N5 and N3 above illustrate this complexity by revealing how challenging it could be to apply a didactic approach like that in the classroom, without any training or supervision. The teachers express a sense of didactic insufficiency in these situations, and according to the teachers, the students were not having a good time, either.

## Resources and support for teachers

At the outset of the Norwegian reception class, a school assistant, who had migrated to Norway himself, was assigned to the class. Several of the teachers confirmed the value of an extra resource - one teacher referred to how it helped her focus on her teaching and supervision, and how the teachers as a group missed the assistant a lot when he went on welfare leave for three months, without being replaced. In the following example, teacher N2 talked about how the use of different first languages for social talk, not during curriculum activities, was challenging to address without the assistant in class:

> When he [the assistant] was there, that was great. Because if I were busy, and some students spoke their mother tongue amongst them, he could talk to them and encourage them to speak Norwegian […] That helped a lot. When he disappeared, it was hard to focus on teaching, supervision, and to make sure they did not speak their mother tongue. (Teacher N2)

Having access to cultural brokers familiar with students' language and culture made teachers feel more prepared and secure when teaching diverse groups of students. Teacher I3 really appreciated the presence of a fellow teacher who shared cultural and linguistic background with the students:

> Look, I think it has been a good experience. And very rewarding just to get to know another culture, but the key thing is to have someone who speaks the language. I don't know how we would have managed if you hadn't come. (Teacher I3)

When asked about the availability of support for migrant students, a teacher in Iceland mentioned that a staff member responsible for supporting migrant students had been hired in a part-time position, arguing that this percentage was not enough to provide the services needed by this student group.

> Teacher I1: Those who have come here and should absolutely be receiving this service and need it, but we're not managing it.
>
> Researcher: I'll just ask, is 20% enough?
>
> Teacher I1: No. Not if it’s to be done well

These three excerpts highlight the importance of having staff in the classroom who share language or background with the newly arrived students. In one way, the interviewed teachers seem to disclaim their own linguistic and cultural competence as insufficient. The benefit of bilingual staff seems to be two-folded. On one hand it supports the teachers in navigating the linguistic diversity that they yet don’t know how to go about: ‘When he disappeared, it was hard to focus on teaching, supervision, and to make sure they did not speak their mother tongue’ (Teacher N2), and ‘I don't know how we would have managed if you hadn't come.’ (Teacher I3). On the other hand, it benefits students by providing services they need. In terms of empowerment, bilingual staff support, although not constantly present, seems to empower both teachers and students and position both parties in a better learning environment.

# Discussion and concluding remarks

In this study, we investigate teachers’ assumptions and attitudes, as well as their preparedness, regarding newly arrived migrant students' education. We further discuss whether different didactic approaches and/or the use of multilingual resources may enhance agency among newly arrived migrant students.

Issues related to teachers’ preparedness proved salient in both the Icelandic and Norwegian data. Many teachers reported feeling insufficiently prepared to meet the diverse educational needs of newly arrived

migrant students, citing limited training and lack of organizational support as key factors. This resonates with prior research on teacher preparedness (Deng et al., 2021; Iversen et al., 2025) as well as with results from the Swedish context (Nilsson, 2023) related to the concept of didactic agency among teachers.

Data from both Iceland and Norway show that educational provision for newly arrived migrant students is somewhat unsystematic and unstructured, particularly in terms of formal training and support structures. Teachers perceived preparedness appears to be equally low across the two sites, regardless of organizational model: newly arrived students in mainstream classes, as in Iceland, or in a reception class in Norway. Interestingly, at one of the Icelandic schools, teachers reported being more prepared and better able to handle challenges compared to the other schools in the total sample. A closer look at this school revealed some significant differences: for one, it had gained some experience in educating migrant students; secondly, the school management actively supported the teachers, resulting in stronger confidence among the teachers; thirdly, the school management hired a teaching assistant who shared the students' language and was capable of supervising the students in their first language. Not surprisingly, this indicates that the presence of acquired competences and systematic support structures will enhance teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2015); furthermore, it indicates that the role of the school management is crucial to teachers' efficacy regarding the education of newly arrived migrant students.

Previous research has shown that teachers' assumptions impact students' schooling in various ways (Prentice, 2023; Yoon, 2008). A key finding in our data is that some teachers tended to position the students as disempowered and within a deficit framework (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016), generalizing about their previous schooling, describing them as passive learners. Moreover, in the Icelandic data, teachers expressed that they would expect little cooperation from the parents of newly arrived students. Through our data, we have shown how such attitudes and assumptions may prevent teachers from gaining access to the academic, cultural, and linguistic knowledge that newly arrived migrant students possess. On the other hand, we have also shown how some of the teachers reflect on how they could facilitate students' activity. One could imagine an alternative approach, in line with Freire's perspective (1970/2000), where teachers responded to student passivity by directing the lens towards their own didactic practices, discussing and reflecting on whether there were ways to make adjustments to get access to the knowledge, experiences, feelings, and opinions these students would have accumulated through their everyday lives and through previous schooling? When teachers´ attention is drawn to what students, in their opinion, lack, this constitutes a deficit approach to the education of newly arrived migrant students, as described by Nilsson and Bunar (2016). They show how a disproportionate focus on the difficulties newly arrived students face hinders the recognition and use of their pre-existing capacities. However, in the interviews, there were examples of teachers characterizing newly arrived migrant students as individual learners with linguistic

and cultural capital, emphasizing the diversity amongst them. These teachers have acquired knowledge of the students' backgrounds (for example, interrupted schooling) and have thus been able to reflect on how these backgrounds and experiences have shaped their learning trajectories.

In our interviews with teachers in both countries, it was evident that they strongly believed that learning Icelandic and Norwegian should play a prominent role in the education of newly arrived migrant students. While research strongly supports that migrant students' proficiency in the language of the receiving country plays a central role in their inclusion and academic success, research (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Lanza, 2007) also shows that an exclusive emphasis on language learning, without considering or facilitating the use of students' acquired languages, knowledge, feelings, and experiences, places students in a deficit framework and discourages them to voice their thoughts, thus limiting their agency. This offers an alternative explanation to some of the interviewed teachers´ tendencies to point to students' previous school cultures as the reason for their perceived passivity. It can be argued that taking note of and drawing on migrant children's linguistic and cultural resources is particularly relevant for the group of students in focus of this article, who came to their new countries after the age of 7 and thus face a high risk of school dropout (OECD, 2024b; Kalcic & Ye, 2023). Several teachers participating in our study drew on multilingualism as a resource, using languages such as English to explain concepts or encouraging students to translate material into their first languages. However, these activities were mostly informal rather than pedagogically systematized.

Based on this analysis, we can draw the following recommendations for policymaking: Given a situation where teachers' attitudes towards newly arrived migrant students are to some degree based on generalizations and assumptions and the majority of the teachers interviewed express that they feel unprepared for teaching them, this suggests that more targeted education for teachers within second language learning, integrated content and language teaching, and intercultural pedagogy is needed. This may improve the teachers' feelings of 'didactic sufficiency'. At the same time, it would provide teachers with a broader knowledge base for evaluating their students' learning contexts, at both the individual and group levels. Increased competencies among teachers could result in enhanced educational quality for newly arrived migrant students. The data from both Iceland and Norway, however, show that most of the interviewed teachers also report a lack of support structures at their schools, suggesting that, in addition to further education, school management must ensure that relevant organizational measures are implemented to strengthen teachers' agency.

# References


Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). Comparative case studies: An innovative approach. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.1929

Benediktsson, A. I. (2023). Reception of newly arrived immigrant schoolchildren in Iceland: Exploring challenges and dilemmas concerning teaching and assessment practices. *Education Inquiry, 16*(3, 508-526. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2023.2262204

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Chumak-Horbatsch, R. (2012). *Linguistically appropriate practice: A guide for working with young immigrant children*. University of Toronto Press.

Compulsory School Act. (2008). *Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008.* Government of Iceland. https://government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/law-and-regulations/Compulsory-School-Act-No.-91-2008.pdf

Cummins, J. (2004). *Language, power, and pedagogy. Bilingual children in the crossfire* (3rd ed.). Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. (2021). *Rethinking the education of multilingual learners*. Multilingual Matters.

Deng, Q., Sang, G., & Tondeur, J. (2021). Factors associated with novice general education teachers' preparedness to work with multilingual learners: A multilevel study. *Journal of Teacher Education, 72*(4), 489–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487120971590

Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The psychology of attitudes*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Education Act (2023). *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training* (LOV-2023-06-09-30). Lovdata. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2023-06-09-30

Emilsson Peskova, R., Lindholm, A., Ahlholm, M., Vold, E. T., Gunnþórsdóttir, H., Slotte, A., & Esmann Busch, S. (2023). Second language and mother tongue education for immigrant children in Nordic educational policies: Search for a common Nordic dimension. *Nordic Studies in Education, 43*(2), 128-144. https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v43.3982

Emilsson Peskova, R., Bade, S., & Hoffmann, L. (2025, September 10). *Information on Iceland – Nordic languages as second languages.* University of Iceland. https://nafo.oslomet.no/om-nafo/hvem-samarbeider-vi-med/nordic-languages-as-second-languages/information-on-iceland-nordic-languages-as-second-languages/

Eurostat. (2026). *EU population diversity by citizenship and country of birth.* Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/1275.pdf

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed., M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Originally published 1970)

Gunnþórsdóttir, H., & Óskarsdóttir, E. (2025). Working with multilingual students in Iceland: Exploring educational experiences of newly graduated teachers. In A. R. Warren, J. Y. Iversen, & B. Straszer (Eds.), *Teacher education for working in linguistically diverse classrooms: Nordic perspectives* (pp. 31–53). Language Science Press. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15280895

Iversen, J. Y., Haukås, Å., & Speitz, H. (2025). Norwegian pre-service teachers' orientations, knowledge and skills regarding multilingualism. In Å. Haukås, C. Bjørke, & M. P. Dypedahl (Eds.), *Teacher education for working in linguistically diverse classrooms* (pp. 127–149). Language Science Press.

Kalcic, M. & Ye, J. (2023). *Utdanningsløp blant innvandrerne og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre*. SSB Statistisk sentralbyrå. https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/utdanningsniva/artikler/utdanningslop-blant-innvandrerne-i-norge

Lanza, E. (2007). Multilingualism and the family. In L. Wei & P. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of multilingualism and multilingual communication* (pp. 45–67). Mouton de Gruyter.

Lødding, B., Kindt, M. T., Vennerød-Diesen, F. F., Randen, G. T., Grøgaard, J. B., Tahir, H., & Samuelsen, Ø. A. (2024). *Vilkår for inkluderende opplæring. Sluttrapport fra prosjektet Forskning på opplæringstilbud til nyankomne elever* (NIFU-rapport 2024:4). NIFU Nordisk institutt for studier av innovasjon, forskning og utdanning. https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3132566

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. (2012). *The Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools: General section.* Government of Iceland. https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-of-Education/Curriculum/adskr_grsk_ens_2012.pdf

Nilsson, J. (2023). "Vi ser om dom flyter typ": Att utveckla en språk- och kunskapsutvecklande ämnesundervisning för nyanlända elever - möjligheter och begränsningar ur lärarperspektiv [Doktorsavhandling]. Stockholms Universitet.

Nilsson, J., & Bunar, N. (2016). Educational responses to newly arrived students in Sweden: Understanding the structure and influence of post-migration ecology. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 60*(4), 499–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2015.1024160

OECD. (2024a). *Students from migrant backgrounds*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development . https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/students-from-migrant-backgrounds.html

OECD. (2024b). *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Iceland*. Working Together for Integration, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/96adc300-en

Óskarsdóttir, E., Gísladóttir, K. R., & Guðjónsdóttir, H. (2019). Policies for inclusion in Iceland: Possibilities and challenges. In *Inclusive education in Europe*. Opin vísindi. https://opinvisindi.is/server/api/core/bitstreams/199c45bd-eb6d-4a38-a8a8-43b2fb4e87cb/content

Palviainen, Å., & Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2022). Language education policies and early childhood education. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Handbook of early language education* (pp. 166–192). Springer International Handbooks of Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91662-6_7

Pearson, H., Myall, M., Darlington, A.-S., & Gibson, F. (2025). The approach and application of analysing inductive and deductive datasets: A worked example using reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 22*(4), 842–886. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2025.2499265

Prentice, C. M. (2023). Educators' attitudes towards refugee pupils: Intergroup contact and virtuous circles. *Intercultural Education, 34*(6), 590–611. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2023.2265305

Priestly, M., Biesta, G. J. J., & Robinson, S. (2015). Teacher Agency: What Is It and Why Does It Matter? In:Kneyber, R. & Evers, J. (Eds.), *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up* (pp. 134–148). Routledge.

Ragnarsdóttir, H., & Schmidt, C. (Eds.) (2014). Earning spaces for social justice: International perspectives on exemplary practices from preschool to secondary school. A Trentham Book, Institute of Education Press.

Schwartz, M. (2018). Preschool bilingual education: Agency in interactions between children, teachers, and parents. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Preschool bilingual education: Agency in interactions between children, teachers, and parents* (pp. 1–24). Multilingual Education, vol 25. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77228-8_1

Yoon, B. (2008). Uninvited guests: The influence of teachers' roles and pedagogies on the positioning of English language learners in the regular classroom. *American Educational Research Journal, 45*(2), 495–522. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316200