Students of Vietnamese Heritage: 
What are Their Academic Experiences in Icelandic Upper Secondary Schools?

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ABSTRACT

Studies of immigrant students in upper secondary school in Iceland often highlight low attendance rates and early school departure. This article interrogates this view through an exploration of the perspectives of 13 students of Vietnamese heritage in two upper secondary schools. The article mobilizes multicultural education which sees education as inclusive, insisting on valuing diversity and equal opportunity regardless of gender, religion, belief, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, disability, or other statuses. Analysis of interviews shows that students, despite their positive feelings towards their teachers and their belief that their teachers were trying to do their best, understood that they were perceived to be deficient due to their lack of Icelandic language proficiency. Teachers’ perceptions were thus limited, and they overlooked the students’ academic and heritage resources that could have provided advantages in the learning process and contributed to student motivation and attainment.

KEYWORDS
Culturally Responsive Teaching, Iceland, Multicultural Education, Upper Secondary Schools, Vietnamese Heritage

INTRODUCTION

The improved standard of living in Iceland has made Iceland an immigrant destination since the 1950s. The largest number of immigrants arrived during the economic bubble at the turn of the 21st century. As Iceland’s population becomes more culturally and ethnically diverse, so does the student body in upper secondary schools. The first 35 people of Vietnamese heritage came to Iceland in 1979 from a refugee camp in Hong Kong. In recent years this population has grown to approximately 600 (Statistics Iceland, 2016a). Studies of Vietnamese heritage students from North America, and North and Central Europe affirm the importance of knowledge, family attachment and family responsibilities in producing favourable academic outcomes (Leirvik & Fekjær, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007). In Iceland during the past decade, a series of studies have examined the educational progress of first generation immigrant youth in upper secondary education. These studies have shown that these young people have had a higher dropout rate and a lower attendance rate than their Icelandic heritage peers (Statistics Iceland, 2009; Tran, 2007). Students of Vietnamese heritage were no exception (Tran & Ragnarsdóttir, 2018).

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The authors argue that this phenomenon implies there is a need to scrutinize school pedagogical practices to determine some of the causes for these negative outcomes.

Grounded in multicultural education theories, through the experience of youth of Vietnamese heritage, this paper examines how the concept of equality in education can advantage such youth, and how well the Icelandic schools have adjusted their practices to make them equitable for this particular group of students. The research question asks, what are the academic experiences of students of Vietnamese background in the two upper secondary schools in the study? The findings presented in this paper are drawn from the first author’s doctoral dissertation (Tran, 2015).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We live in a time of accelerated globalization and many social theorists conclude that multiculturalism, driven by a globalized economic system, is now a global norm (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999; Parekh, 2006; Ragnarsdóttir, 2007). As Cope & Kalantzis (1999) articulate: “Global markets, global capital, global communications and global culture play on local diversity as much as they erase it. In every country of the world, cultural and linguistic diversity is emerging as one of the great political issues for the next century” (p. 247). As Ragnarsdóttir put it, Iceland was not “deprived of this development,” (Ragnarsdóttir, 2007, p. 109). A multicultural society calls for an educational system that is inclusive of a diverse student body.

Thus, for making sense of the data that describes the academic experiences of the immigrant students in the two upper secondary schools, the study is situated within the theoretical framework of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching. Statistics Iceland (2016b) defines individuals whose heritage is Icelandic as having “no foreign heritage.” Individuals with foreign heritage are grouped into four categories. The first category is immigrant: individuals who are born outside of Iceland and have two foreign born parents and four foreign born grandparents. The second category is second generation immigrant: individuals born in Iceland but having two foreign-born parents and four foreign-born grandparents. The third and fourth categories are individuals with one foreign-born parent and at least one foreign-born grand-parent. These individuals can be born in Iceland or abroad.

The categorisation clearly identifies what these individuals are but not who they are. Taking immigrant students as second language learners as an example, the students themselves are not a homogeneous population, they also are not monolithic in character. Their success in learning the academic language in a host country in order to have positive outcomes in school depends on different variables among individuals, such as motivation, level of proficiency in their first language, the amount and the quality of education they had in their home country, and the quality of the language programs and the amount the time they receive structured language support in the host country (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 2001; Roessingsh & Kover, 2003). In other words, in order to determine the reasons behind individual immigrant students’ educational outcomes, one must look beyond the categories and examine the individual’s particular circumstances.

Multicultural education is based on a philosophy of inclusiveness, where all students have equal opportunity for school success regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, race, colour, socioeconomic status, origin or any other status (Banks, 2007b). Multicultural theorists emphasize the importance of each individual’s experience. Education should be built on the experiences that students bring with them into the classroom, such as their knowledge of their languages and cultures. The connection between formal education and student experiences leads to deeper understanding and contributes to the expansion of the students’ knowledge and the development of their emotional, social and political skills (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Nieto & Bode (2011) note that teachers who comprehend the realities of the students’ world outside the classroom are able to make education relevant and interesting to the students, and this motivates the students to learn. There is no lack of research demonstrating discrimination experienced by minorities when their ethnicity, religion, and/or language
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