

## Chaotic first action plan in education



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September 2021 saw the publication of a document named *Education Policy 2030. First Action Plan 2021-2024* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). The plan is intended to serve as a follow-up to Parliamentary resolution on education policy for the years 2021-2030, no. 16. This is probably the most significant document on educational policy since the publication of the national curriculum guide for preschools, compulsory schools and secondary schools in 2011 and 2013 (compulsory school subject areas in the latter year). Consequently, this is an official paper which deserves careful scrutiny. Here, we, on the one hand, recount the events leading up to the publication of this action plan and, on the other, carefully examine the content and format of this first action plan relating to a new education policy.

In a nutshell, the plan is a compilation of actions and work components with little or no prioritization, nor is it placed in the context of other current policy documents. When plans for two new laws were published 17 October 2022 by the governmental consultative board a priority arrangement appeared, however, to the effect that the first two actions were of highest importance; on the one hand Planned legislation - school services and, on the other, Planned legislation - a new organization (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022a, 2022b).

# Preliminaries

The preliminaries to the parliamentary resolution and the action plan can be traced to a declaration of intent regarding a review of the implementation of a policy on the inclusive education signed by so-called key partners; that is, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Welfare, The Icelandic Teachers Union, the parent association Home and School, the Association of Icelandic Municipalities, and the Icelandic Headmasters' Association.

Subsequently the review was carried out under the auspices of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education and it exists both in Icelandic and English: *Education for All in Iceland. A Review of the implementation of the policy of the inclusive school* (European Agency for special needs and the inclusive school, 2017, [see the publication in Icelandic here](#)). Subsequently the above-mentioned key partners met and signed a new declaration of intent regarding co-operation on follow-up in March 2017.

In autumn 2018 a series of meetings were convened with representatives from all municipalities in Iceland in order to discuss the topic of the inclusive education. This made up a total of 41 meetings with two groups of stakeholders. On the one hand, there were meetings attended by leading representatives from the municipalities concerned and responsible parties from the sectors of education, social issues and health, as well as representatives from the Icelandic Teachers Union, the Icelandic Headmasters' Association, the Directorate of Education, Home and School, providers of teacher education and members of the steering group in charge of following-up the review of inclusive education. On the other hand, 23 meetings were convened with representatives from the levels of preschool, compulsory school and secondary school, leisure services, parents, school services, school office, social and health services. The meetings consisted in an informative lecture on inclusive education, after which participants were requested to complete a group assignment.

The results of this work were, *inter alia*, published in a report named *Education for all - the road ahead. A report to the Ministry of Education and Culture* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, [see the publication in Icelandic here](#)). The report was written by academic staff at the University of Akureyri and the University of Iceland, including the first author of this article. Among other things, the report contained recommendations as to how official policy regarding the inclusive education could be clarified and consolidated.

Soon after the series of meetings was initiated the ministry presented it as part of the formation of an education policy until 2030. The plans for a new education policy are clearly

spelled out in yet another report, *Education for the future. Actions and measures taken in the wake of a series of meetings on inclusive education and the formation of an education policy until 2030* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020a, [see the publication in Icelandic here](#)). In this report the main areas of emphasis in a new education policy were defined as follows:

- Outstanding teaching and school administration.
- Equal education opportunities for all.
- That the curriculum, learning environment and assessment support competences needed for the future.
- That responsibility for quality of school and education activities be clearly defined.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Education and Culture began drafting a parliamentary resolution. The issue was open for comments on the government consultation portal from 28 February until 13 March 2020. Proposals and comments were discussed and evaluated and the conclusions of the consultative process were published on 19 May in that same year. In the spring of 2020, the OECD was consulted regarding the formation and implementation of the new education policy and an OECD report on the implementation of an education policy was published (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020b). After a review by the OECD, a parliamentary resolution was presented in Althing on 12 November 2020 and passed on 24 March 2021.

In the summer of 2021 the first of three action plans for an education policy until 2030 was compiled, spanning the years 2021-2024. A seminar on official education policy until 2030, held in October 2022, revealed that the action plan had been completed under time pressure and was eventually presented on 15 September 2021.<sup>[1]</sup> A few days later there was a general election and just over two months later a new minister took over this matter in a reorganised Ministry of Education and Children.

We have now reached the latter section of the article; that regards the document *Education Policy 2030. The First Action Plan 2021-2024 (Menntastefna 2030. Fyrsta aðgerðaáætlun 2021-2024)*.

## **Education policy - action plan analysis**

When we had familiarised ourselves with the events leading up to the education policy and its structure as presented in the action plan from September 2021, we proceeded to focus on the document itself. For this purpose, we used a historical discourse analysis (Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, 2006). The main characteristic of this method is to ask *how* rather than

*why*; it is well suited to describing one or more documents and another point of emphasis is to note what is not revealed (silences) in the document concerned. Furthermore, the method requires each policy document to be regarded as an independent unit with the researcher attempting to read between the lines of the document what it fails to reveal.

We singled out seven questions which we use below as sub-headings:

### *What does the document look like?*

The document is 22 pages, including blue front and back covers. The document specifies nine separate actions, each of which is divided into several sections, thus making up a total of 41 work components. The document is somewhat unapproachable since it neither contains a table of contents, nor a separate overview of the nine actions. Neither does it offer a preface or a form of elucidation as to the context of its publication.

Nevertheless, the layout of the text is for the most part co-ordinated; that is, the elements of each action are in a coherent sequence: First there is a text, followed by aims, then the work components, responsibility is identified and finally there is a list under the heading areas of emphasis. Certain subject and appearance elements are occasionally included, for example key concepts are sometimes defined and occasional links are provided to other documents.

### *Who is the document intended for?*

The document itself does not specify who it is intended for, although a large number of stakeholders are listed; those are sometimes responsible parties or contributors, or both. First are the ministries; that is, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Transport and Local Government which have all been recently renamed as a result of a redistribution of responsibilities.

Furthermore, additional responsibilities are likely to be assumed by more than these three particular ministries as a result of new roles inherited from the former Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

This is followed by a long list of other stakeholders: Other professionals in school and leisure activities, Save the Children (Barnaheill), the Icelandic Regional Development Institute (Byggðastofnun), universities, Home and School, Municipalities' Equalization Fund (Jöfnunarsjóður sveitarfélaga), Teacher education institutions, teachers, the Icelandic Teachers Union, the Directorate of Education, independent school operators, Samfés youth organization, schools at every level, school administrators, headmasters of preschools,

compulsory schools and secondary schools, student and learner associations such as LÍS (National Union of Icelandic Students and SÍF (The Icelandic Upper Secondary Student Union), the government's steering group in matters relating to children, municipalities, Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Þroskahjálp National Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities, ÖBÍ - The Icelandic Disability Alliance.

We do not know whether the document is intended for all those different parties listed, or whether the list is mainly conceived as a working paper for the Ministry of Education and Children. We tried to establish whether the document was intended for teachers and professionals in the field by checking which groups are "directly addressed" and which parties are supposed to implement the actions concerned. We found that teachers as such are once referred to as implementing parties; that is, in the implementation of country-wide school development. But they are not specifically addressed in relation to two actions (6 and 8) which have a direct bearing on school activities; that is, relating to critical thinking and the voices of young people.

### *What is the story line in the document?*

After careful reading of the document, the only possible conclusion is that its content comprises a haphazard assortment of action plans and work components. Perhaps a clearer overall concept is to be found in some other documents, but no attempt is made to explain this to the reader, neither in a preface nor by other means. Besides, as already pointed out, the sequence of the nine action plans cannot be seen in one place; the reader has to leaf through the document, page by page in order to locate them.

The sequence of the action plans may be an indication of their importance; it would at least appear logical to begin with those of greatest consequence.

1. Consolidated school services based on support at different levels to facilitate the studies and welfare of children and youths
2. Country-wide school development
3. Focused support for students with a diverse linguistic and cultural background
4. More certified teachers
5. Skills of school professionals
6. Critical thinking, creativity and understanding
7. The formation of an Icelandic competence strategy by means of dynamic consultation
8. The voices of young people - well functioning student democracy at all school levels
9. High-quality study and teaching materials for the education system as a whole

Thus "consolidated school services" even if narrowed down to „support at different levels to

facilitate the studies and welfare of children and youths”, is a rather logical first phase of implementation. The action of “country-wide school development” appears a natural next step immediately after “consolidated school services”. And now the government consultation portal has presented plans of establishing a new institute which appears to be designed to fulfil the above-mentioned roles. The new institute is probably based on action plan 3 under the heading of work component 1: “Preparations for the establishment of a professional nation-wide knowledge centre which, *inter alia*, supports the adoption of welfare services in school activities and school services”. Most other actions in the document are considerably more specialised and there appears to be no obvious logic in the sequencing.

We asked whether the document had *a story line*. The answer is that we find no story line and there is no obvious overall policy on which the actions are based. This criticism can probably be responded to by pointing out that the document is conceived of as a sequence of *action plans*, but not an ideological paper.

### *What are the main themes of the document?*

The use of discourse analysis in the study of policy documents is a useful way of identifying the central, recurrent themes, or motifs, which sustain the main emphasis and core concepts of the text. At first, specific themes were not obvious, nevertheless, a few words stand out. Firstly, it is stated that the work has to be comprehensive, co-ordinated or integrated, for example that “access must be ensured for all children” to consolidated school services and that the services must be integrated “to ensure the children’s welfare” (in both cases n.p.). Secondly, there is a strong emphasis on the consultation and co-operation of stakeholders, key partners and responsible parties. Thirdly, operations are to be strengthened in a variety of settings, for example as regards Educational Materials Development Fund. The fourth main theme, as we choose to call it, is competence, for example the competence of teachers and other professionals is discussed and the formation of a competence policy is described as an independent undertaking.

As may be gathered, most of those themes are rather system-oriented; they refer directly to the system, but neither to the studies and education of the students themselves nor to the venue of the schools as such.

### *Does the document contain contradictions?*

The action plans do not necessarily involve a great deal of internal contradictions; but they are singularly incoherent both in nature and scope.. Some are highly specialised, for example Action 8 where there is a discussion about the establishment of an electronic

participation venue for children. Other action plans appear relatively easy to implement, for example strengthening the Educational Materials Development Fund (Action 9), which we have already used as an example.

Other plans are highly comprehensive as for example Action 7: the formation of an Icelandic competence strategy by means of dynamic consultation. The name of this action may well seem confusing to many people, but it involves establishing a consultation venue with many participants “in order to form a competence strategy where the education system and industry agree on a process of dynamic consultation focusing on developing a competence to face future challenges and simultaneously ensure welfare, value creation and competitiveness” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021, n. p.).

Other kinds of contrasts comprise contradictions between action name and content, for example Action 6: Critical thinking, creativity and comprehension - whereas the work components of this action are teaching to read, minimum teacher competence in Icelandic, revision of competence criteria in the national curriculum guidelines for Icelandic, libraries etc. The only relevant explanation we can find of the title is that sound competence in reading and writing support critical thinking, creativity and comprehension.

The first work component in this action plan contains in part unrelated sections. It begins by stating the need for focused support in reading and reading exercises in preschool, compulsory school and secondary school; and better access to assessment tools for reading comprehension, writing and Icelandic as a second language. Special emphasis is to be placed on actions relating to boys and if the plan is to focus on boys in particular, this work component is fairly well concealed. The final section in work component is to map and support the digital skills of school staff.

*Will the strategy prove effective – in what respects and relating to whom?*

In general, most of the actions aim to improve the system rather than school activities and in light of this one may wonder how the policy is supposed to affect student learning. The reader of this document will realise right away that these measures will incur significant expenses and many of the actions call for considerable manpower. It has been made clear that the Directorate of Education is to be abolished and replaced by a new service institution but some of its tasks will be transferred to the ministry. It seems reasonable to assume that, as a consequence, the ministry’s expenses will increase, possibly resulting in other projects being side-lined.

It is quite out of the question that the strengthening of various projects and adoption of new

ones can be achieved without additional cost, sometimes of significant dimensions. We counted 22 action plans and work components requiring an implementation team, a professional knowledge centre, a new school development team, an annual contribution to school development projects, the strengthening of three funds (that is the The Icelandic Innovation Fund for Schools , Study Materials Fund and The Educational Materials Development Fund), a temporary concession relating to the repayment of student loans etc. Eleven of those action plans must involve considerable cost, a professional knowledge centre, for example, is without doubt a highly expensive undertaking, the strengthening of funds is also costly; if, however, strengthening means increasing fund support from 50 million ISK to 60 million this would only represent a moderate item of expenditure. Nine action plans do not obviously involve additional expenses, although other projects might need to be side-lined as a result. For example, information on study sabbaticals is to be gathered; there will be a reallocation of working hours somewhere and other tasks will have to wait as a result. Another example of an action plan without obvious special funding is a consultation venue with a regular appraisal every six months. Transferring projects between institutions within the education system represents hidden expense items.

### *What is not included?*

In discourse analysis, considerable emphasis is usually placed on analysing silences; that is, what is left unsaid, what is not included in a document and even what is left out in such a manner that it conveys the effect of deliberate silencing. Nevertheless, the need for fairness should be emphasised when assessing what might possibly have been included in the action plan, but since the document does not include overall concepts, this is a problematic issue.

We could list our professional interests and state that those omitted from the document are indications of silencing. But silencing in discourse analysis is not necessarily the result of conscious decisions, but a signal of lack of emphasis

In this context, we consider it reasonable to investigate areas of emphasis in the national curriculum guide for preschools, compulsory schools and secondary schools from 2011 and ask how the action plans are going to affect its implementation. We select two of six fundamental pillars where we are not aware of significant activities. One of those is Equality in any shape or form. During the past few weeks, one issue after another has been shouting for our attention. One week we are faced with the circumstances of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) (youths in schools and how they have become the victims of bullying; the next week we note the response or, in particular, the lack of response to sexual violence students are subjected to, both in school and outside it.

The other fundamental pillar is Sustainability. And we ask: what are the education authorities going to do about this?

We could probably list all six fundamental pillars and we would have liked to see them dealt with in more detail in the action plan – apart from literacy which is given considerable emphasis. The general curriculum guide for preschool, compulsory school and secondary school from 2011 remains in full force and thus it would be reasonable to expect its areas of emphasis to be more visible in the action plan.

The silencing of certain areas of emphasis of the curriculum guide was probably not deliberate. Our criticism of this shortcoming as regards this document should, therefore, be regarded as an admonition not to leave them out or forget about them when the next action plan is composed – its writing will begin next year according to a ministry official at the seminar referred to earlier.

## **Final comments**

Shortly after this analysis had been completed a notification arrived from the Ministry of Education and Children to the effect that the Directorate of Education was to be abolished and replaced by a new service institution. Simultaneously new comprehensive legislation on school services was to be enacted. The consultation portal published the following comments on the school service legislation:

Accessibility for everyone has to be equalised; that is, all students, parents and school staff, to school services offering support at appropriate levels. Minimum services to all students irrespective of residence has to be ensured and their quality improved. School services must be co-ordinated on the basis of school levels to ensure that support, counselling and guidance is in accordance with the needs of all students regardless of school level. Data collection must be co-ordinated to gain an overview of key figures in school activities and strengthen evidence-based decision-making regarding school activities, support strategies and students' welfare (Ministry of Education and Children, 2022a p. 2).

As far as we can see, prospective legislation on school services and a new service institution is in fulfilment of work component 3 in action plan 1 which reads as follows: "Preparations for the establishment of a professional knowledge centre on a country-wide basis, which inter alia supports the implementation of welfare services in schools and school services." According to the text in the government consultation portal "the state is expected to play a more active part in the development of country-wide school services. For this to be achieved, an organisation is needed which can provide a stronger lead in services and

consultation regarding school development and services spanning different school levels.” (Ministry of Education and Children, 2022b, p.4).

In our opinion, this proposed legislation represents reasonably clear objectives. The action plan, however, is first and foremost a collection of activities which we regard as disjointed and it is probably a matter of coincidence what was left out and what was included. It would appear that the more actions and work components that happened to be included, without prioritising in any form, the more actions are missing which obviously need to be continued or deliberately strengthened and emphasised. Perhaps official preparations for legislation regarding school services and a new organisation for this purpose will represent a change in this context.

## **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> The University of Iceland seminar under the auspices of RannMennt - Research Centre for Education Policy, Internationalisation and Social Justice: Dialogue on State Education Policy until 2030, Friday 14 October.

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**SKÓLAÞRÆÐIR**  
TIMARIT SAMTAKA ERKUNDFOLKS OG SKÓLAÞRÆÐIR