# *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 paper interrogates this view through an exploration of the perspectives of 13 students of Vietnamese heritage in two upper secondary schools. The paper mobilizes critical multiculturalism which sees education as inclusive, insisting on valuing diversity and equal opportunity regardless of gender, religion, belief, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, disability, or other status (Banks, 2007b). Analysis of interviews show 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 which could have provided advantages in the learning process and contributed to student motivation and attainment.

***Keywords:*** Iceland, Upper secondary schools, Vietnamese heritage, multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching.

# INTRODUCTION

As Iceland’s population becomes more 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, 2016). 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 favorable 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 lower attendance rate than their Icelandic heritage peers (Grétarsdóttir, 2007; Statistics Iceland, 2009a; Tran, 2007). Students of Vietnamese heritage were no exception (Daníelsdóttir, 2007). The authors argue that this implies there is a need to scrutinize the educational system to determine the cause of these negative outcomes.

Grounded in multicultural education theories, through the experience of the youth of Vietnamese heritage, this paper examines how the concept of equality in education can advantage such youth, and how well the Icelandic educational system has established itself to make it equitable for them. The research question asks, what are the academic experiences of students of Vietnamese background in the two upper secondary schools in the study, and how do they reflect the concept of equality? 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, to make sense of the data that describes the experience of immigrant students in the two upper secondary schools, the study is situated within the theoretical framework of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching.

## Multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching

Multicultural education is based on a philosophy of in­clusiveness, where all students have equal opportunity for school success regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, race, color, 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 which 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, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995).

Nieto (2000) notes 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 is “other” from the dominant group. Theorists in multicultural education, such as Gay (2000) and Nieto (2000), criticize instructional cultures where the teachers alienate diverse students or cause the breakdown of communication with such students by seeing them through the lens of their (the teachers’) own worldview. An educator’s worldview is influenced by their personal social background, which includes the language they speak and how they express themselves, their social class, culture, religion, and ethnicity with which they identify themselves (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999).

Research has repeatedly shown that bi­lingualism is an effective pedagogical route to success for immigrant students (Filhon, 2013; Gogolin, 2002; Nieto, 2002; UNESCO, 2003). Enriching the home language of immigrant children is the most effective method to help them learn the new language of the host country. Despite this body of research, it is nevertheless often the practice to emphasize the teaching of the host country’s language, the argument being that acquiring this language is the key to immigrants’ successful integration in school and in daily life (Filhon, 2013; Nieto, 2000; OECD, 2010). Thus, the language of the host country is a factor that reinforces the deficiency perception and contributes to social stratification within pluralist western societies.

An immigrant student’s command of the host country’s language is often used to determine their readiness for education, and to predict their success in school. Cummins, a researcher in language and literacy development among students whose English is a second language, says such uses demonstrate “misconceptions about the nature of language proficiency” (Cummins, 1996, p. 51). He defines language proficiency as:

…the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling” [In linguistics, a register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting] (Cummins, 2000, p. 67).

Cummins says one misconception is the assumption that if a student’s conversational language proficiency is limited, then they must not yet be able to undertake studies that require logical and critical thinking. The other misconception, he says, is if a student is considered to be fluent and can speak eloquently, then they are considered ready to tackle all academic subjects equally with their native speaking classmates (Cummins, 1996).

Many researchers, i.e. Ladson-Billings, (1995), Gay (2000), Nieto (2002), align with Cummins’ (1996) conclusion, in that all of them are critical of immigrant students’ academic abilities being measured chiefly on the basis of their proficiency in the dominant language. In addition, Cummins’ Common Underlying Proficiently (CUP) model shows there is a “significant transfer of conceptual knowledge” between the heritage language and the host language (Cummins, 1996). This work serves to underscore the fallacy of assuming that students are deficient in logical and critical thinking due to their oral limitations in the majority language when these young immigrants have a native language in which they are more developed and fluent.

The question posed by multicultural educational thinkers is whether students of minority backgrounds must conform to the majority school culture, in other words, to be assimilated, in order to have school success and to be socially accepted. Research has shown that assimilation is not necessary for school and social success. It has been shown that schools can achieve more positive academic and social integration outcomes when they dedicate themselves to encouraging students by recognizing and fostering their home languages and cultures (Freire, 1998; Gay, 1992; Nieto, 1999).

Culturally responsive teaching was conceptualized as a result of common research findings relating the failure of students’ performance in school to the pattern of communication between the students and teachers in cases where the students’ culture and language differed from teachers’ mainstream language and culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Gay defined “culturally responsive teaching” as: “…using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

Gay and other leading researchers in multicultural education affirm that this pedagogical practice is “validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, transformative, emancipatory, and empowering” (Gay, 2000, pp. 29-42). Culturally responsive teaching encompasses all these characteristics, because the theory that underpins it recognizes and accesses the students’ wealth of prior knowledge and experiences, and uses these to create the scaffolding on which they can further develop their social interactions and cognitive knowledge. Culturally responsive teaching bridges the cultures between home and school flexibly employs multiple teaching methods and incorporates teaching materials that reflect the reality the learners are living in across all subject areas in their curriculum. It lays the foundation for students to understand themselves and others, thereby bringing about respect and appreciation for each other’s ethnicity, heritage, and religion. It values every student and believes in each and everyone’s ability to learn. It is student-centered, focusing on the development of a whole individual – mentally, physically, socially, and academically (Banks, 2007a; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000).

Children learn and internalize their home languages, the methods of receiving and processing and communicating through the social cultural medium of their ethnic environment. Thus, they come to school with a culturally bounded set of tools and strategies for problem-solving and critical thinking. In addition, youth who have already spent a number of years in school in their home country also bring to their new host country schools certain defined study habits and learning styles (De Vita, 2001; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000). Culturally literate teachers who use students’ existing knowledge as a basic principle for teaching would incorporate the students’ diverse learning methods into their pedagogical strategies. The congruity between teaching and learning will then make students more effective and successful learners. Teachers who lack understanding about the students’ cultures can cause misunderstandings and discrepancies between the students and teachers by not recognizing different learning styles, expectations, or values. Teachers in the power position who fail to recognize ethnic minority students’ ability and proficiency can compromise students’ self-esteem, disempower them, and make them feel “alienated, unwelcome and out of place” (Nieto, 2000, p. 146).

Establishing congruity between teachers’ instructional strategies and students’ learning customs, bridging cultures, and affirming dialogue between students and teachers are all pedagogical practices that promote equity in education for all students and immigrant students in particular. The adoption of these conventions in teaching is not to be understood as accommodating or supplementing student deficiencies when the majority language and culture are not theirs. As a matter of fact, students’ multilingualism and multiculturalism are advantages and assets and not disadvantages and deficits (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

## Research on immigrant youth

In 2007, Grétarsdóttir conducted a study on educational progress among youth with native languages other than Icelandic. Her results showed that 65% of 119 respondents never attended or had dropped out of upper secondary education (Grétarsdóttir, 2007). The statistics from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) for Iceland for 2006, 2009, and 2012 consistently document the lagging of immigrants compared to Icelandic-heritage students at the end of compulsory education (Halldórsson, Ólafsson, & Björnsson, 2012, 2007; Halldórsson, Ólafsson, Níelsson, & Björnsson, 2010). Their performance scores were significantly poorer than their Icelandic peers in all three areas that were assessed (reading, science, and mathematics literacy). In reading comprehension for instance, the most recent tests for 2012 showed that Icelandic-heritage students dropped by 20 score points from the previous test in 2009, while immigrant students dropped by 47 score points. This translates into a whole school year, according to the OECD standard (Halldórsson et al., 2012). PISA posed the question, “How are school systems adapting to increasing numbers of immigrant students?” and drawing from its own statistics, showed that the performance gap between immigrant students and their Icelandic-heritage peers could be closed by government and schools’ intervention.

Research in Iceland identified the deficiency model into which the schools and the teachers had fallen as the source of many of the hindrances to immigrant student performance. The first such barrier was language deficiency in Icelandic (Guðmundsson, 2013; Karlsdóttir, 2013; Tran & Ragnarsdóttir, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir, 2011). The languages in which the students were proficient were not used to assist them in learning effectively. Their underperformance in the majority language in the early years of their arrival succeeded in masking other knowledge that they already possessed (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2014). The immigrant students’ culture, language, and previous academic knowledge were resources left untapped in the host country (Beach, Dovemark, Schwartz, & Öhrn, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir, 2012b; Daníelsdóttir, 2009; Nieto, 2002).

In different parts of the world the academic performance of students of Vietnamese heritage was reported to be better than, or at least not worse than, their host nationals. The favorable outcomes were explained by good study habits, self-discipline, cultural values, family support, clear ethnic identity, parental encouragement and high expectations (Lauglo, 1999; Leirvik & Fekjær, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007). The literature repeatedly documents the ambition parents have for these children to succeed in school. Parental encouragement in turn, sets the base for the children’s high expectations for themselves (Lauglo, 1999; Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim, 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Furthermore, Framtíð í nýju landi [[1]](#footnote-1) (FÍNL), a program to assist Vietnamese immigrant youth with integration and education, which the first author designed and directed between 2004 and 2007, collected data that point to a similar conclusion. In 2004, there were 83 youths in Iceland who were born in Viet-Nam, who were between 16 and 25 years old, and had both parents who were of Vietnamese origin (Statistics Iceland, 2009a). Thirty-five of these youth participated in the project and returned to school to learn Icelandic and various vocations, but 24 of them dropped out again. Only 11 of them continued and were expected to finish their studies (Daníelsdóttir, 2007). In interviews, the students cited low proficiency in the Icelandic language, inadequate academic background, low self-esteem and motivation, and social isolation in school as reasons for this poor performance.

Some of these findings are consistent with the results of another study that the first author conducted between 2002 and 2004 called *Factors Affecting Asian Students’ Academic Achievement in Iceland*. Around 71% of participants of Asian origin who were in school, and 91% of those who were no longer in school, stated that the main barrier to their studies and a key reason for dropping out was difficulty with the Icelandic language. Also, 45% of those who dropped out stated that a reason for abandoning school was a lack of social connection (Tran, 2007).

An unpublished report by Statistics Iceland looked at school attendance between 2004 and 2008 among children who were born in 1988. Of the 98 immigrant children included in the report, 75 (77%) were in school and 23 (24%) were not in school. At the same time, 94% of the Icelandic children in the report were in school, and only 6% were not in school. This cohort study extended to 2008, when these children became 20 years old. At that time, 31% of the immigrants were in school, and 69% were not in school, while among their Icelandic counterparts, 56% were in school and 44% not in school (Statistics Iceland, 2009b).

Other researchers have reported other possible causes for the struggle these young people face, such as racism, family dysfunctions due to poverty (parents who work long hours do not have time to support their children), breakdowns in cultural ties among second generation youth, intergenerational conflict, and the loss of parental authority (Ngo & Lee, 2007). In addition, in cases where their cultural and social capital is perceived by the host countries as a deficiency, the young people could feel alienated. For example, in Nguyen’s (2012) study, some Vietnamese immigrant youth felt a sense they had been reduced to being visible only once a year. Even though some of them expressed their appreciation for opportunities to introduce Vietnamese culture through cultural awareness events, they perceived that such events were acts of tokenism. Their culture was put on display once a year for a limited time with clothes and dances that they thought did not result in a deeper understanding of their culture. Their culture was invisible and non-existent for the rest of the year (Nguyen, 2012). Some research reports showed that Vietnamese youth who perceived discrimination also showed lower self-esteem, stress symptoms, depressive affect, and possible weakening of ethnic identity, as Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Solheim (2004) articulated: [perceived discrimination] “had a significant negative effect on the school adjustments of the immigrant adolescents” (Nguyen, 2012; Berry et al., 2006; Liebkind et al., 2004, p. 684; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

## Policy and **c**urriculum: Deficient ‘Foreigners’

Icelandic does not yet have an equivalent to the English word “ethnicity”, which can be used to refer to the ethnic background without indicating whether or not someone is an immigrant or native-born. In Icelandic, the word “útlendingur” (foreigner) is used in everyday speech to refer both to individuals who are not Icelanders as well as to Icelanders of immigrant background. The use of the word “útlendingur” is a powerful signifier for exclusion in Iceland, which is seen as having remained homogeneous long into the 20th Century (Koay, 2004).

Since 1996, there has been an increasing number of efforts to address student diversity through laws and guidelines*.* However, while these laws and guidelines made some attempts to take into consideration the wealth these students brought with them into the classrooms, overall, they were framed within the context of teaching Icelandic (Ministry of Education & Science and Culture, 2008). Article 35 is an article specifically addressing the situation of students for whom Icelandic is a second language

While they should be taught about Icelandic culture, society and language, there is no mention in Article 35 of how their existing cultural, religious and educational backgrounds can be integrated to work to their advantage. Even where the law explicitly states the right of these students to learn Icelandic as a second language, enrichment of their mother tongue, their first language, is not a priority (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). It is an “optional subject” (Ministry of Education & Science and Culture, 2008, p. 13) and “[an] upper secondary school is not responsible for providing such instruction” (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2009, p. 2). The discourse of the law implies that the initiative and responsibility for advancing in their mother tongues lies with the students and not with the educational system or the schools. If by law, Icelandic is the instructional language, then a question is whether this law frees disengaged principals from having to actively help students of foreign backgrounds achieve successful academic outcomes. Rather than ensuring student comprehension of subjects, the law is concerned about whether Icelandic is used for instructional purposes.

On the other hand, *the* *Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants, 2007* explicitly has the goal of equipping pupils of immigrant background to function in a “multicultural society” (Ministry of Education & Science and Culture, 2008, p. 1)*.* Multiculturalism is explicitly mentioned in the context of immigrant students, but not mentioned within the context of all students. Multiculturalism, in other words, is understood as being for others, the foreigners, the minorities who have backgrounds different from the Icelandic-heritage majority.

Academically, the acquisition of Icelandic is of great importance for the academic success of Vietnamese students (Collier, 1995; Roessingh & Kover, 2003). At the school curricula level, the laws declare that pupils whose mother tongue is other than Icelandic have the right to instruction in Icelandic as a second language. The policy documents maintain that mastering the Icelandic language is the key to integration into Icelandic society. Fostering the effective development of language acquisition during the first years the students immigrate to a host country is an important part of integration (Public and Management Institute, 2013). However, teaching Icelandic as a second language is not a field in which teachers can specialize. In other words, students at the upper secondary level do not receive qualified instruction because teachers are not given professional training in teaching the subject. In the view of critical multicultural education scholars, the lack of qualified teachers is part of the inequitable education for ethnic minority students (Banks, 2007, 2009; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

# METHOD

The methodology chosen for this research was a critical ethnography study with the aim of uncovering the power positioning within the school system that may be the cause of educational inequality between groups. Creswell (2007) identified the work of critical ethnographers as studying “marginalized groups from different classes, races, and genders, with an aim of advocating for the needs of these participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 241).

The method for data gathering was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese since this allowed the participants to use their own language to effectively tell the story of their journeys between countries, cultures and educational systems, and to recount their day-to-day school life experiences (Lichtman, 2006). A set interview guide was at hand, outlining the main categories in the research. These included the students’ academic perspectives and experiences of studying at the two upper secondary schools, their interaction with their teachers and other staff members and their future plans.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in Vietnamese. The analysis of the Vietnamese text was then coded and categorized into themes. The quotes chosen for the article were then translated into English.

In the study, a total of thirteen students of Vietnamese heritage, five girls and eight boys, were interviewed. They all arrived in Iceland during their teens. The youngest was 16, and the oldest was 25 years old. The length of time the participants had been in Iceland at the time of the interviews was two to five years. They were recommended by the schools for this study. Participants were second and third year students at the schools, except for two who were at the end of the second semester. These students were selected because they had spent enough time at the school to be able to situate themselves and express themselves about their experience in the school.

In Iceland, six of the 13 lived with single parents, and only four had families with both parents in Iceland. The remaining three had some relatives in Iceland but lived alone and supported themselves through work and school. All had jobs, working as housekeepers, in checkout lines, or as receptionists, to help with family incomes and in order to send money to Viet-Nam.

This study is one of the very few that have been conducted in upper secondary schools in Iceland. One limitation of this study is the small number of schools attended by ethnic Vietnamese students. How the concept of equality in education is transferred into the inclusive curriculum, teaching materials, pedagogy, etc., has not yet been studied.

# FINDINGS

In this section, the students’ experiences as students of ethnic minority in two Icelandic upper secondary schools are described and discussed. The students’ perceptions are detailed in order to provide a deeper understanding of the reality of their learning process in school and to bring these experiences to life. The majority of the students felt they were vulnerable with regard to Icelandic. Their experiences revealed that the schools underestimated their previous academic knowledge.

## Values and knowledge from Viet-Nam to Iceland – Untapped Resources

The participants in this study were in their teens when they came to Iceland. Thus, they all had classroom experience in Viet-Nam. Many of them were quick to say that school in Iceland was easy compared to Viet-Nam. They described their Vietnamese school days as long, intense, severely disciplined, and constrained. They started school between 7:00 am and 8:00 am and finished between 9:00 pm and 10:00 pm. A normal day included regular schooling, extra schooling and tutoring, and finally, homework at home. Although the majority of the youth described the pressure they felt in school in Viet-Nam, they also admitted that they came away with good study habits and extensive knowledge in certain subjects such as math and science. These were advantages they brought with them to Icelandic schools. ThanhLang:

Our methods of study in Viet-Nam were much more austere than in this country. Thus, I knew how to work when I came here.

In contrast to the adjectives the students used for the Vietnamese school system, they described upper secondary schooling in Iceland as “*dễ, thoải mái, nhàn*” (i.e., easy, relaxed, leisurely). These were students who were attending the first to the fourth year of upper secondary education, in different programs such as Icelandic as Second Language, Natural Science, Business, and Economics. VinhHau:

I find the schooling here much more leisurely, much more leisurely. For instance, the homework from Monday to Friday, there are assignments but there isn´t much.

The participants described how the emphasis on math and science in the Vietnamese system helped put them in an advantageous position in the Icelandic system. The majority found that they were far ahead in math in Iceland. Even though the methods of teaching math differed between the two countries and between schools in Iceland, it can be said that students who had completed 12th grade math in Viet-Nam would not learn anything new in Icelandic upper secondary school math until level 600. MyThanh described his experience in math during his four years at Mosahraun Comprehensive School:

Math is the subject that helps us the most because it is awfully easy. I had almost finished grade 12 math [when he first came to Iceland?] therefore, we could actually go directly into math level 503 here. However, we have to start with math 203, 303, 403, 503 to earn credits. Starting at 603 are concepts that we had not yet learned.

NhuTam, who needed to work long hours to support herself and a seriously ill sibling in Viet-Nam, could not afford the time to start from scratch and thus decided not to take math, even though it was required for graduation. She, therefore, unsurprisingly never completed her studies:

I had registered for math classes earlier, but then I dropped out again because I had already learned everything in Viet-Nam. I had completed math through 12th grade level in Viet-Nam. However, when the teachers asked whether I had taken any math [in Iceland], and I told them I had not, since I had finished it in Viet-Nam, I was then only allowed to start at the beginning, level 100. That’s right. The teacher registered me to study math, but it was all the same [as I had already learned].

The fact that the teacher registered NhuTam for level Math100 without even asking her how much she had previously learned suggests that the decision was based only on her knowledge of Icelandic without taking into account her knowledge of math. This one-sided decision required her to start from the beginning. The choice could have been made largely by the teachers’ assumption, or it could have also been due to a school system’s constraining qualification.

MyLinh’s account challenged the teacher’s position.

Of course, what I have learnt in Viet-Nam helped my study here. For instance, in the beginning, I didn’t have Icelandic. I didn’t understand the teachers. But when I studied math, the teacher only needed to introduce the problem, and I already knew what the following steps were because I was familiar with the method. I could just continue.

NhuTam‘s disappointment reflected that of many other students of Vietnamese background who came during their mid-teenage years. The focus was not on the level of scholarship they had already achieved, but rather on where they were deficient, which was in the Icelandic language. Language was the lens through which the Icelandic upper secondary school system saw these youth. Without the language, they were seen as a blank page, as though their lives began when they arrived in Iceland.

Math is an especially striking example, but the fact was that these students had already attained broad academic and other experience before they arrived in Iceland. In Viet-Nam, the participants had also studied natural sciences (physics and chemistry) and writing techniques (punctuation, paragraph construction, essay writing), which they could transfer into Icelandic classrooms (MyThanh, VinhHau, LanHuong, ThanhNga). In addition, they had pragmatic knowledge, such as that gained from daily living and participation in different cultures. NhuTam articulated this very obvious connection:

Things that are similar in Vietnamese and in Icelandic — I could have a full understanding of them.

Math, science, and writing skills were not the only valuable assets these students brought with them into the Icelandic classrooms. They were also armed with the Vietnamese traditions of working hard, valuing education, and having strong family ties.

In making the decision to move to Iceland, their families had sacrificed the tight everyday communication and support systems of their close extended families. For some, even their nuclear families were now separated. However, the displacement was not only to seek better education for their children and better living conditions for themselves but also to be financially stronger and thus improve life for their family members who were still in Viet-Nam. Six of these thirteen youths live with single parents, and three of them are alone in Iceland. Thus they struggle not only with a new language and culture, but also struggle to manage their isolation from the emotional and moral support provided by their missing parents and siblings. MyThanh, whose only relative in Iceland is a cousin, works a full time job at night and is a full time student during the day. He is determined to push forward for a better future. He described his presence in Iceland as an opportunity of which he needs to take full advantage:

...coming here [to Iceland] I was lucky I to get to go to school. Getting to go to school provides me with an opportunity to learn the language and to develop myself. In the beginning, I was only thinking about finishing upper secondary education. But then I found out there was no future after this much education. This is the reason I need to try to learn more. I need to learn a profession that I am passionate about.

In a new educational system and culture, these connections to family and traditional social relationships fuel their resiliency, motivation, and determination to get a good education. Education is not only for themselves but is part of their duty to return the sacrifices their parents have made for them. ThanhNga related her mother’s words:

My mother is very concerned. Every day she told me that coming into this country, we don’t know the language. Without the language, there is nothing we can do. My mother said her hope and expectation is on me...

Vietnamese parents and relatives, like ThanhNga’s mother, may not speak Icelandic enough to help their children with their studies or with navigating the system, but they gave them a lot of encouragement. Their parents remind their children to do their homework, monitor their grades, and come to meet with teachers when they are invited. LanHuong described her parents’ participation in her studies:

My parents told me to put my effort into my studies, then I could choose to study whatever I am interested in…They make sure I do my homework every night and carefully read my report card every time.

Last but not least, ThanhLiem grandparents’ words of guidance connect his education to the development of his well-being. Their words echo the language in the Icelandic curriculum:

Make every effort in your education to become a fully rounded person.

According to the students, using English to help teach Icelandic was a popular method for many teachers. The author witnessed this method being employed in classrooms during her observations in the schools. Unfortunately, English was a subject in which students of Vietnamese background were equally as vulnerable as in Icelandic. HoangOanh and ThanhNga indignantly explained:

Using English was good for students who knew English. But because I didn’t know a lot of English, it was difficult to understand.

...the group of foreign students—not the Vietnamese group—Americans or some people like that—they were already proficient in English; in class, the teacher also used English. This was the reason they understood a lot, i.e., we [Vietnamese students] understood 50%, but the others [students with English] must understand up to 80-90%.

ThanhNga’s experienced another disconnect between her background and pedagogical practice. She told me that in one of her Icelandic language classes, she was asked to describe the activities of her day. She wrote the essay the way she had learnt in Viet-Nam, beginning by describing the overall atmosphere of a rainy day, with herself walking in it, before she described what she did on that day. When she the paperback, the part where she described the environment was crossed out because the teacher considered it irrelevant to the assignment. ThanhNga’s interpretation of the teacher’s comment was that Icelanders write directly to the point without describing their surroundings, unlike the way the Vietnamese usually do. From a Multicultural Education perspective, this incident would be seen as a missed learning opportunity for both the teacher and ThanhNga. The teacher could have acknowledged ThanhNga’s existing writing habits while at the same time explaining Icelandic expectations more fully, thus boosting ThanhNga’s confidence for future assignments, instead of leaving her feeling discouraged.

## Born at Leifstöð Iceland International Airport

As the findings show, the policies and schools are not using a multicultural model. The model is instead a “deficiency model”, i. e. the primary goal of the system is to address some deficiency in the students. In the case of these immigrant students, the deficiency is in the Icelandic language, and thus their lack of proficiency becomes the sole lens through which the school system evaluates them, and it becomes a barrier to accessing further education.

The effect of this attitude towards the youth was reflected in the way they expressed a lack of self-confidence throughout many of my interviews with them. Even though she had completed three and a half years of compulsory education in Iceland before she entered Upper Secondary Education, LanHuong was already resigned when she talked about the process of applying for schools:

...because at the time I had newly started in school, also because I didn’t yet know a lot of Icelandic, my teacher advised me to apply to Mosahraun because this school is more suitable for foreign students...I also applied to two other schools, but naturally, I didn’t get in.

LanHuong took her teacher’s recommendation and applied to the school where there was more support for students of foreign background, but like other Icelandic teenagers she also wanted to go to another school that might have been more suitable for her for other reasons. When she did not get accepted by the other two schools she applied to, she was disappointed but also thought it was “*natural,*” as though she already knew these schools were out of her reach.

ThanhNga arrived 2 years ago in Iceland and had been about to complete 12th grade in Viet-Nam. She was preparing for her university entrance exam and considered herself to be “*hoc sinh khá*” (good student), and had a very clear plan for herself. She had majored in math and natural science to prepare for studying business administration. At the time of the study, she had completed her two year Icelandic program but is no longer sure which direction she is heading because she thinks of herself as a failure at learning Icelandic:

Now, especially to study at the university level, the language has to be ours. In Viet-Nam the language is already mine, because I am Vietnamese, so I comprehend everything. But here, because of the language I can’t grasp 100%—not even 90%—I find the dream is a little difficult to realize.

Students going to upper secondary school can take placement tests for their heritage language, for which they can get up to 12 credits, which can be used for elective courses. The tests are offered by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The tests are offered in several languages, including Vietnamese. When MyLinh started studying at Sjónarhóll she had taken the exam, thinking that she would ultimately be graduating. However, after two years in school, she was convinced that she would not be able to graduate because she could not take written tests in the subjects she learned in Icelandic. Thus, she did not want to put in the effort to make use of the credits:

Yes, I took that exam [in Vietnamese], but I forgot about it because I will not graduate from here. The reason is I can’t take the written tests [on the different subjects] in Icelandic. There is no way I can write long Icelandic text.

## Summary

Most students of Vietnamese background participating in this study entered Icelandic upper secondary schools without full command of Icelandic. They were equipped, however, with a habitus, social and cultural capital that are applicable and favorable for the continuation of their education in Icelandic upper secondary schools. Nevertheless, the Icelandic language deficiency frame of mind infiltrated all areas of their study. In addition to language and cultural differences, they faced an inflexible educational system that failed to recognize their strengths and the wealth of knowledge they brought with them into the classrooms. The effect of this attitude towards the youth was reflected in the way they expressed a lack of self-confidence, resignation, and doubts about their ability to further their education.

# DISCUSSION

## Deficient Students and Deficient Educational System

The Icelandic educational policy clearly stipulated that Icelandic language proficiency was the only bridge to education and integration for the youth of ethnic minority backgrounds at the upper secondary level (Ministry of Education & Science and Culture, 2008). Even if we accept the premise that Icelandic proficiency is the only bridge, we can see that teachers who were supposed to build the bridge were given an inadequate toolbox. They were mostly untrained in teaching Icelandic as a second language, and they lacked the understanding of how to educate students with different backgrounds.

In addition, by making Icelandic the key to positive outcomes and integration, the schools disrupted the students’ perceptions of their own abilities. They were convinced by their classroom experience, both at the compulsory school and at upper secondary school, that their language deficiency was the cause of their limitations (Filhon, 2013; OECD, 2010; Nieto, 2000, Cummins, 1996*).* When the students’ choices of the educational institution were limited to which school provided ÍSA, when Icelandic proficiency was the prerequisite for courses, the students’ confidence was damaged. The policy and practice needed to be scrutinized. If language was the barrier to equity and equality in the students’ educational process, then the question is whether the policy and the practice needed to be reviewed and altered (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000). Of the student participants in this study who saw themselves as potentially not completing school, half were undone by their Icelandic proficiency. But was Icelandic the only barrier?

The authors believe that teachers who might have applied a multicultural education philosophy as their pedagogical approach would have reflected more on their own worldview and been more vigilant in their teaching methods so that their methods did not privilege students of Icelandic background with whom the teachers shared a culture and language (Gay, 2000). They would have seen themselves as heterogeneous in order to understand students’ diversity. They would have made the life histories of the students in their classroom more relevant and explicit in their teaching methods and materials. They would have made their teaching more equitable and welcoming to a student body of diverse backgrounds. (Nieto, 2002, 1999; Gay, 2000). Our interpretation was that schools that adopted multicultural education as their teaching culture would have more teachers welcoming students of diverse backgrounds and, in many ways, could avoid inequitable learning experiences like NhuTam, MyLinh, ThanhNga recounted. NhuTam gave up on her math classes, MyLinh sat through classes where English (another language she did not understand) was used for explanations. ThanhNga had part of her Icelandic essay crossed out because, as she understood it, she had not written her essay the way Icelanders wrote an essay. They narrated their experiences with feelings of frustration and resignation. They felt they had been treated unfairly, but they excused their teachers because they realized that the teachers did not know any better.

## Blank Slates?

The student accounts lead the authors to conclude that the students were viewed as blank slates whose accomplishments prior to their arrival in the Icelandic school system were not evaluated or acknowledged. This model of the immigrant student as a blank slate, in combination with the emphasis on Icelandic proficiency as the gatekeeper to further education, created a system in which many students felt locked out of successful outcomes due solely to language acquisition difficulties (Banks, 2007; Nieto, 2002; Gay, 2000). Their existing educational capital, even in areas where their achievements prior to coming to Iceland were substantial, was disregarded. As was indicated in the data from student participants, studies of subjects other than Icelandic did not always challenge these students. They found studying in Iceland was more “leisurely”, because there was little homework, they had already learned some of the materials in Viet-Nam, and they had strong study skills.

These examples underline that Vietnamese immigrant youth are not blank slates: they entered Icelandic upper secondary schools with educational, cultural, and social capital (Lauglo, 1999). They were also fueled with personal resiliency acquired from moving across the globe, working to provide for themselves, and helping their families to build a new home, living and negotiating between Icelandic and Vietnamese cultures in their everyday lives (Leirvik & Fekjær, 2011; Liebkind et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

The answer to the research question for this article is that the adversities the students faced, which started at the policy level, the very foundation of the national educational system, possibly caused more than half of the youth of Vietnamese background in the study to drop out of upper secondary schools. Nevertheless, they found themselves comfortable living in Iceland. The students who successfully navigated the deficiency model of the Icelandic school system got some help from some dedicated teachers, figured out strategies, exercised the social capital which they actively built in this second home country, and used their habitus. These students managed to overcome an inhibitory school system. They succeeded in finishing school at the upper secondary level and kept on building on the dreams for which their parents had sacrificed so much to send them to Iceland.

# CONCLUSION

This paper sought to provide experiential evidence of students of Vietnamese heritage as a particular immigrant student group in upper secondary schools in Iceland. The study demonstrated that learning the Icelandic language and culture was not the only important factor that contributed to these students’ academic attainment. The policy discourse, which addressed mainly the teaching of the Icelandic language and culture as the approach for integration into academic life, followed the immigrant student deficiency model (Cummins, 1996; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000). The students’ accounts showed they had untapped academic and background resources, and that teachers had deficiencies in in pedagogical practice that contributed to the problem of students dropping out.

This extended study of the academic experiences of students of Vietnamese heritage in Icelandic upper secondary schools gives some insights into the dilemmas of immigrant students in general. However, the study was limited in its scope. A small scale study can only point to possibilities for the Icelandic school system. What the study shows is that there is a need to shift policy discourse from an assimilative tendency model for teaching Icelandic culture and language to a multicultural educational model, with a more holistic and inclusive pedagogy. The shift would encompass the transformation of the school system and of teacher education and professional development. As Iceland progresses toward a population that includes increasingly diverse language and cultural backgrounds, it is recommended that all upper secondary schools in Iceland be more appreciative and receptive to the wealth of knowledge and culture immigrant youth bring with them. Multiculturalism will benefit not only the individual students but also the society in which they live.

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