University of Kent

**Children of a foreign background:
Aspirations after compulsory education in Iceland**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation, I am submitting, is an original and authentic piece of work, written by myself and the data gathered to fulfil the purposes and objectives of this study. It has not been previously submitted before to any other university. I also declare that I have followed University of Kent's rules and regulations regarding plagiarism.

Canterbury, Kent, 13.06.21

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Abstract

The foreign population in Iceland has changed rapidly over the past few decades, moving from a homogenous to a more diverse population. These changes have posed new challenges in the Icelandic educational system. Unfortunately, Icelandic studies suggest that some schools are not fully equipped to respond to these challenges. Furthermore, children of foreign background seem to fare worse in school, are more likely to discontinue with their studies after compulsory education and are less likely to graduate from upper secondary school than their Icelandic counterparts. To better understand the openness of the Icelandic school system, this thesis addresses the question: How do we explain the differential educational aspirations, if any, between children of foreign background and native background in Iceland in the last 3 years of compulsory school in Iceland?

This is a mixed methods study, based on a survey distributed in 17 schools in Iceland among students of Icelandic and foreign background, and interviews with 32 students of foreign background. The data was specifically gathered for the purpose of this study. This thesis sets out to understand how educational aspirations are formed, in order to recognise the barriers that may hinder students of foreign background in Iceland in reaching their educational goals and dreams. The study has established that although students of foreign background may be less certain about going to upper secondary school, this difference disappeared once other factors were controlled for. Rather, the main hindrances are revealed by the qualitative data. Finally, this research calls for a shift in focus from the schools and extend the conversation to societal factors and how the *system* as a whole can support a truly equitable educational system.

Keywords: education, aspirations, immigration, Iceland

Acknowledgements

It was a cold day in February. I had asked my father to join me on a road trip around Iceland to interview teenagers of foreign background. It was a cold day in February, and I was sat in the passenger seat looking at the icy road ahead. We had shortened our trip by one day as the weather forecast wasn't looking too promising. We were on our way back from a successful trip where I had conducted 15 interviews in less than a week. I was tired, happy, content, emotional, sad. I went through the whole range of emotions, all at once. It was a cold day in February and most and foremost I was thankful.

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Mamma þarf ekki lengur að fara að læra.

[...] if you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside?

(Probyn, 1996, p. 8)

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1 Introduction

Over the past 20-30 years, the foreign population in Iceland has rapidly changed from a homogeneous population to a more diverse society (Statistics Iceland, 2020c, 2020d). In 1994, Iceland celebrated its 50th year as an independent nation and in that same year became a part of the European Economic Area; this move marked the first step in the increased influx of people from other countries. At the turn of the century, most immigrants came to Iceland to work, but over the last few years, the numbers of minors began to grow (Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015; Vinnumálastofnun, 2013). In 2020, minors who were either first- or second-generation immigrants or of mixed background were 22.4% of the total population under the age of eighteen (Statistics Iceland, 2020d).

Thus, rapid changes have affected the social composition of Icelandic schools, posing new challenges if schools are to comply with the inclusive school policy they are legally bound to. According to official data, a higher percentage of students of foreign background do not continue with their studies after compulsory education; they fare worse in school in comparison to their native counterparts and there is a clear demographic divide between students who choose vocational studies and those who choose subject-based upper secondary schools. An even more pressing issue is that students of foreign background are far less likely to graduate from upper secondary school (Blöndal, Jónasson, Tannhäuser, 2011; Menntamálastofnun, 2019; OECD, 2019; Statistics Iceland, 2020a, 2020h, 2020-l).

Some of the issues, mentioned here above, are not unique to students of foreign background. A larger proportion of students attending schools in the capital area graduate from upper secondary schools, as well as those whose parents have a university degree. A relatively high drop-out rate from Icelandic upper secondary schools has been a cause of concern for years. In their White Paper on education reform in 2014, the Ministry of Culture and Education (I. Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið) stated that one of their objectives was ensuring that, by 2018, 60% of upper secondary school students would graduate *on time,* referring to a four-year timeframe; this goal was reached in 2019 – only for students of Icelandic background. Among students of foreign background, the percentage of on-time graduates was only 32% for students who were first generation immigrants (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2014; Statistics Iceland, 2020a, 2020-l).

By the same token, there have been concerns regarding how students fare overall in the Icelandic educational system. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA

hereafter), a triannual cross-national assessment that measures 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science across the OECD countries, have revealed that, Icelandic students seem to fare worse than before. Since 2012, Icelandic students scored below the OECD average, except for mathematics in 2018. Every three years the results of these studies have been a cause of concern that sparks a public discussion. What may cause even greater concern, however, is that students of foreign background seem to fare much worse than their Icelandic counterparts (Menntamálastofnun, 2017, 2019; OECD 2019). The PISA studies are not an assessment of individuals, but a tool to assess the educational systems in each of the participating countries, thus identifying its strengths and revealing where there is room for improvement.

What these findings suggest is that although outcomes may appear the *same* on the surface, they may stem from different reasons. Being a student of foreign background may certainly entail some disadvantages, or simply be one variable of many characteristics that intersect. A 2017 study reported the reasons given by students for discontinuing with their upper secondary education; it revealed different push and pull factors for native Icelandic students and those who had another native language than Icelandic. Those research results further emphasised the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the unique experience of having a foreign background and *how* that may affect their chosen educational pathways (Menntamálastofnun, 2018a).

Such studies suggest that some schools are not fully equipped to respond to the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of changing school compositions (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). Studies suggest that a school's implementation of a learning community for a diverse student body is often driven by an enthusiastic leader. Therefore, the primary burden is carried by a few staff members within the school (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008, 2016, 2020; Jónsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir, 2020).

This evokes questions about how open the school systems are. Are we systematically seeing foreign teenagers and young adults leaving the school system without a baseline level of knowledge and skills? Moreover, is the educational system becoming stratified? The educational system is a primary institution in children's lives and can cultivate cultural, social and even political values as well as promote a desirable attitude that can influence their socio-psychological development (Chiu, Pong, Moni, Chow, 2012). Such is the message from critical educational theorists, who challenge us to constantly examine how power structures may be

imposed on students through pedagogical means that maintain the status quo by reproducing existing inequality (Freire, 1970/2017; Illich, 1970/2018).

Worries about social stratification or educational inequality, go against the very blueprint of the Icelandic identity, idealised as a classless society. The fundamental principle underpinning the Icelandic educational system is equal access for everyone, regardless of their mental or physical attributes (Lög um leikskóla no 90/2008; Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008; Lög um framhaldsskóla no 92/2008). Such an egalitarian ethos is not only the foundation of the Constitution of the Icelandic republic (no. 33/1944), but it is also prevalent in the ways in which Icelanders see themselves – at least on the surface.

As this study is conducted in Iceland there are few issues that need to be taken into consideration. Iceland has a very recent history of immigration, as already explained. By studying Iceland, we explore the ways in which students of foreign background fare in an educational system in a nascent multicultural society. Strictly speaking, we are looking at a new reality rather than the reproduction of a status quo. Nevertheless, we must constantly ask ourselves what message students receive. Does the educational system limit students' ability to truly flourish? If so, how does that limit the aspirations, hopes and dreams of students of foreign background have for the future? Moreover, how does this manifest itself in a society, such as Iceland, with a very recent immigration history?

Educational aspirations

To better understand the inequalities of the Icelandic educational system, I look at children's aspirations, including both longings and future plans. What motivates them to move forward, and do they feel restrained by the system or society?

Hart (2016) offers a dynamic definition of aspirations, suggesting that it is both multi-dimensional and "future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations" (p. 326). To truly understand the nature of aspirations, we must think about the freedom people have to pursue their chosen dream (Hart, 2012a, p. 79). Therefore, aspirations are the disjuncture between dreams and opportunities, moderated by internal and external motivators and barriers, or a tug of war between how the individual envisions their future self against the perceived agency of the self.

The final years of compulsory education take place at a delicate time of transition. The adolescent stands at a crossroad where they must make decisions about their future. They are at a point when they must decide whether to go into further education, what they want to study, and how to evaluate their options to make plans accordingly. It is not only status attainment

that becomes relevant, but they are also at a time in their life when they are forming their own identity, and the teenager becomes more reliant on their friends and other social bonds (Erikson, 1968/1994).

This study focuses on students who are in their last three years of compulsory education in Iceland. These are the years where the state is bound by law to provide their education and accommodate them according to their needs (Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008). They are making decisions regarding their next steps after compulsory education. Legally, they are not bound to attend school, but they are still minors, whereby these steps must be taken together with their guardians. Teenagers are finding their own footing towards their future as an independent member of the society, yet still rely heavily upon their '*significant others*'. In the case of students of foreign background, some are navigating uncharted terrain. Even though their parents may have trodden the educational path before them, they do not necessarily know or understand the Icelandic educational system.

Where do you come from? For whom is the educational system?

Björnsson, Edelstein, and Kreppner (1977) demonstrated how Icelanders repudiated the existence of class on the basis of everyone speaking the same language. Such ideas are rooted in the idea of a racially and culturally homogeneous society – a society without discrimination. There are plenty of examples where the usage of non-standard Icelandic is associated with class and status, either to distinguish the upper class or to look down on the lower class (Halldórsson, 1978; Pálsson and Durrenberger, 1992; Pálsson, 1995; Spolsky, 2004; Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson, 2010). Moreover, scholars have pointed out how language plays a large role in Icelanders' national identity. The social impact of language is not simply measured by who speaks the language or who doesn't, but who speaks it *properly*. There is an emphasis on keeping the language free from outside influence. With such limited acceptance for how the language can be spoken, language takes on the role of an additional frontier on how to fully enter the society.

Another salient element of the Icelandic identity is the idea of the purity of the nation from external effect. This idea is best portrayed by the existence of a common genealogical database. Immigration matters in Iceland are unique in ways that have relevance for global contexts. An isolated island, the country has a short and recent history of immigration that changed in the early 21st century when this changed. The population of second-generation immigrants is still very small and there is not really a third generation to speak of. Foreign nationals were mainly from the other Nordic countries, given shared historical and

geographical roots. This means that although there were some who migrated to the country in the 20th century, most shared similar traits in terms of language and appearance (Hagstofa Íslands, 2009). Recent media coverage in the most recent years has elevated the voices of people of foreign backgrounds, in particular those who deviate from the stereotypical appearance of an Icelander, by calling for a new understanding of "*how Icelanders look*". In her first podcast episode, Chanel Björk Sturludóttir, a young woman of mixed background, interviews other Icelanders of mixed background. They discuss the frequently asked question "where do you come from, where do you *really* come from?". They attribute the questioning to their appearance. With such questions, they are reminded that they are not *entirely* Icelandic, based up on a dominant idea of Icelandic appearance (Íslenska mannflóran, 4th of January 2020). Such questions are not directed exclusively towards those of mixed background but also those of other foreign background. This limiting understanding of who is allowed to identify with Icelandic identity is thus shaped by the ways one looks, and how someone speaks.

Being attributed a non-Icelandic identity then begs the question of belonging. Icelandic culture, language, Christian heritage, and the Icelandic *distinctive features*, central to the Act on Compulsory Schools, collectively allude to a narrow, one-way street of assimilation that is guided by what it means to be Icelandic. During the writing of this introduction, the Educational Policy for 2021-2030 was passed through the Icelandic parliament with the intention to set the tone for the next decade. During the parliamentary discussion, the policy was criticised for its lack of a clear plan regarding students of foreign background. In response, the policy was referred to as "a certain anacrusis to a lot of work that has yet to be done, when implementing particular projects relating to certain groups, such as, for example, people of foreign background" (Gunnarsdóttir, 23rd of March 2021, 00:13-02:26).

This proposal for the new policy framework states that Iceland is a multicultural society (I. fjölmenningarsamfélag) that utilises the resources required in a multicultural educational system, celebrates the diversity of students, and uses them to strengthen the society. Clearly, there is a vision for an open educational system and changes are being made at the policy level, but they are laborious, and they lack clear action points.

Educational aspirations among students of foreign background

Statistics Iceland offers an extensive and detailed database where people in Iceland are categorised by their nationality. According to official numbers, almost 60% of individuals living in Iceland, with a citizenship other than Icelandic, are born in an Eastern-European country, where Poles are by far the largest group (42%). However, this information is not available on those who are second generation immigrants or of mixed background, nor is there information on what ethnic minority people may identify with. In fact, no database where people are categorised by their ethnicity was found[1].

Due to how heavily the Icelandic translations are based on *nationality* and the country's little tradition to categorise people based on their ethnic background, I used a translation for this study that was translucent and simple for teens to understand. For that reason, I chose to use the Icelandic word for *origin* (i. uppruni) in both components of the study, but further explained that this could refer to a "*country or community of origin, native language and culture*". This was done to ensure a shared or similar understanding in the quantitative component of the study but still offered the chance to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the complexities of identity in the qualitative interviews. Simultaneously, this meant that there was a need for a simple way to define the background of the participants of this study. For this thesis, I have used a similar criterion as Statistics Iceland to define students of foreign background:

> *An immigrant is an individual who is foreign born and whose parents were born outside of Iceland, as well as both sets of grandparents. Second generation immigrants are individuals who are born in Iceland but whose parents are both immigrants. People are considered to have a foreign background if either parent is foreign born.*
>
> *(Hagstofa Íslands, 2019, translated by author)*

The terms I have decided to use, are thus Icelandic background and foreign background. Children of Icelandic background are students whose parents were both born in Iceland and

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[1] The words ethnicity and ethnic offer some challenges in the Icelandic language. Originally translated as *þjóðerni* (e. nationality), the Translation centre of the Ministry for foreign Affairs (I. Þýðingarmiðstöð Utanríkisráðuneytisins) now translates *ethnic origin* as *þjóðernislegur uppruni* (Hugtakasafn Þýðingarmiðstöðvar Utanríkisráðuneytisins, n.d.), but the Icelandic translation would best be translated as *national* origin. A similar translation is to be found in a school dictionary, where ethnic and ethnical is translated as *þjóðlegur, þjóðernislegur, þjóðfræðilegur*, all words referring to a nation and national[1] (Skaptason, 1998). The Icelandic Term bank (i. Málfarsbankinn) perhaps offers the best translation, where ethnicity is translated as *þjóðerniseinkenni*, or *national* characteristic (Málfarsbankinn: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, n.d.).

thereby, children of foreign background are those who have at least one parent that was born in another country.

To understand the students' educational aspirations, using a survey, I asked the students about their immediate plans after compulsory education, the highest level of education they wanted to achieve, and the highest level of education they believed they *could realistically* achieve. In interviews, I led a conversation regarding their post-compulsory plans, asking them about their feelings about upper secondary school, what they wanted to do, how they hoped to get there, and what potential barriers they perceived in reaching these goals.

1.1 Research questions

The changes Iceland has gone through are not only recent; they have also occurred at a rapid rate. As Iceland has been thrust into modernity the nation has had to find its footing as a multicultural society and have a conversation on how they are to welcome these newcomers. Many questions follow such change. What terminology should we use to describe people who have newly arrived? How do we define or categorise people in order to understand the composition and the demography of those living in the country? For which jobs or roles are we willing to hire people who recently arrived? Are they only allowed to do the work Icelanders don't want to do, or are we willing to see them in managerial positions, as law makers, or in positions of power? And perhaps the most pressing question is "how can we create a society that accommodates them and their needs?"

A key objective of this study is to find answers to this last question. Before we can accommodate the needs of students of foreign background in Iceland, we must understand what these needs are. If we are to unwind a process that may be leading to a stratified educational system, we must understand and recognise the barriers students of foreign background encounter. What are the mechanisms by which these students set goals? What do they dream of doing once compulsory education is over? Are there limits to their aspirations?

Research on people of foreign backgrounds living in Iceland has flourished over the past few years, when the strengths and weakness of an emerging multicultural society have been highlighted. Furthermore, there is an abundance of information available that is systematically gathered as part of official statistics in Iceland. However, there is no Icelandic study on the educational aspirations of students of foreign background that focuses on understanding their ambitions, goals, hopes, and dreams.

With the aforementioned in mind, I ask:

How do we explain the differential educational aspirations, if any, between children of foreign background and native background in Iceland in the last three years of compulsory school in Iceland?

a. How does the level and nature of school engagement influence academic aspiration?

b. What are the roles family background, language, and ethnic identity have in shaping educational aspirations?

In this thesis, I will focus on the aspirations of children of foreign background. This is a mixed methods study focusing on students in their last three years of compulsory education (13 to 15 years old). Questionnaires were distributed to students, regardless of their background, during class in 17 schools; additionally, I conducted interviews with 32 students of foreign background across six of the 17 schools originally surveyed.

This dual approach provides the opportunity to first explore whether there is a difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background in terms of their educational aspirations. The qualitative interviews with the students of foreign background then provide an opportunity to explore the ways in which students think about and negotiate their educational aspirations. In their own words, they explain how, despite significant barriers, they attempt to achieve these aspirations. This study emphasises the importance of understanding how aspirations are formed, in order to recognise the barriers that may hinder students in reaching their educational goals and dreams.

1.1.1 Objectives of this study

We all know the feeling of not knowing *quite* how to navigate the social space we inhabit. For some, these experiences are innocuous, whilst others may feel like a fish out of water. Small incidents may include dress code (how fancy does *fancy* dress mean?), a code of conduct in a new workplace, unclear seating arrangements at a dinner party with people you don't know, or knowing when or how to reply to pleasantries regarding your welfare (does one respond to questions such as "how are you?"). Then, there are other incidents that may be more difficult to navigate. How does the educational system work? How does one apply for upper secondary school? What does upper secondary school entail, how is it different from compulsory education, and what opportunities does it provide?

As mentioned earlier, there is a high drop-out rate among students of foreign background in Iceland from upper secondary schools. Becoming disengaged and eventually dropping out of the school system should be viewed as the result of a process, rather than a single event (Finn, 1989). With this study I wanted to take a step back, before students enter the secondary school system, to see if we can understand potential mechanisms or indicators of this process. To do so I focus on the students' aspirations whilst they are still part of the compulsory school system. By understanding where students of foreign background want to go, and what options they believe they have available to them, I aim to identify the barriers

these students may encounter. I want to understand the logistical maze these students must navigate when they encounter the Icelandic educational system.

Moreover, this study aims to explore how we can shift our focus from *raising* aspirations, and rather focus on how we can *nurture* different aspirations. Whilst the former places emphasis on the student themselves, counts on individualism, meritocratic ideas of the benefits of education and how they need to do better at aiming *higher* or aspiring *more*, we mustn't disregard the societal factors that may impede students from attaining their aspired goals or actualise their dreams. With this research I propose that we place the emphasis on the ways in which we can create a *nurturing* ground for all aspirations to flourish, regardless of background or personal attributes. This is my contribution to bringing the voices of teenagers of foreign background into a conversation about how we can, *together,* create a truly equitable society and educational system.

1.1.2 Outline of the study

As already stated, this thesis aims to understand the Icelandic educational system and how it meets the needs of students of foreign background. If indeed, students of foreign background, encounter barriers that impede them from reaching their full potential, they are competing in a rigged game in a system that perpetuates societal power incongruency.

Following the introduction, **chapter 2** explores the literature around educational aspirations and key variables in understanding the different educational aspirations of students in Iceland. Answers to questions regarding one's future can simultaneously be interpreted as hopes, dreams or goals. These aspirations mainly differ in terms of time and how clearly laid out the preferred outcome is (Lent, et al. 1994; Rojewski, 2005). Hart (2016) defines aspirations as "future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations" (p. 326). Regardless, aspirations cannot be understood in a vacuum, but we must understand them in conjunction with the freedom people believe they have in order to pursue a future they want and value. Aspirations are thereby the amalgamation of dreams and opportunities available to the individual, modified by both internal and external motivators and barriers. The question is thus not only "how do you see yourself in the future?" but also "do you have a reason to believe you can reach these goals?".

This chapter begins with a discussion regarding the role of education through the eyes of critical educational theorists. This discussion offers a framework to explore potential barriers

students of foreign background may encounter and how the structure of the educational system may perpetuate these barriers. Moving on I will offer a discussion regarding ethnic identity and language proficiency and explain its relevance to the Icelandic context. Exploring their ethnic identities and perceived language ability thus allows us to understand potential barriers to belonging and how that may shape student's educational aspirations.

This chapter further examines the understanding of school engagement, which is generally believed to be an important aspect of academic performance, disaffection and school drop-out. Following Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris' (2004) three-dimensional definition of school engagement, the chapter explores how these dimensions may appear in students and its role for school success.

Chapter 3 situates the discussion in Iceland, where this study was conducted. As Iceland has been thrust into modernity, the face of the Icelandic population has gradually changed. Albeit still rather homogeneous, Icelandic society has experienced major changes in the past two to three decades. Many challenges have followed such demographic changes, some of which bring into question the openness of the society in general and how that translates for students of foreign background.

The Icelandic national identity revolves largely around independence from external effect and thus purity of the language and of the nation. Despite the fact that Iceland had been under the ruling of other countries for centuries, the nation was able to maintain its history and language, relatively *untainted* from outside influence. It was through strict language policy and thick descriptions of the Sagas depicting the forefathers of *Icelanders*, as well as through which the conservative form of the Icelandic language was maintained. As a country who fought for their independence, Iceland is depicted as *innocent* in relation to the history of neighbouring countries, such as of colonialism, making it challenging to address racism or other form of discrimination (Loftsdóttir, 2017). However, this acclaimed innocence is scarcely tenable if we look at laws, policies or even secret agreements set in place throughout the 20th century, where the objective was both to keep a close eye on foreigners, but also make sure neither the Icelandic nation nor language was *tainted* from outside influence.

Such an outlook must be taken into account when we explore the options non-Icelanders have in order to access spaces formerly occupied by a nation on an isolated island, or the openness of society as well as key institutions such as schools. Chapter three explores how students of foreign background fare in the Icelandic educational system. Unfortunately, it sheds a light on a prevalent attainment gap, differences in school choices and high drop-out rate

among students of foreign background, begging the question whether we are systematically seeing students of certain background leaving the educational system without a baseline level of knowledge and skills? And what does that tell us about the inclusivity of these school systems?

Moving on from there, in **chapter 4,** we turn our focus to this current study, firstly by understanding the methodological approach underpinning this thesis. The current study strives to enter a new terrain in understanding the aspirations of children of foreign background in Iceland. Due to the nature of this study, a dynamic research approach was needed, where I wanted to explain trends and differences, yet have the leeway to explore. For this reason, I chose mixed methods research as it offers the flexibility of multiple perspectives. There was no one point of integration between the two components, but the multiple, where both elements interacted with each other and fed into the next one.

When doing research with young people, there is an inherent power difference between the adult and teenager. Regardless of how much the researcher tries to mitigate this, they must take into consideration that this power balance may never be eradicated. The student has entered the researcher's world, where they are asked to open up and divulge their personal life (Gallagher, 2009a; O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017). For this reason, there are many ethnic considerations that must be taken into consideration when doing research with young people.

This chapter furthermore offers a detailed background on this study, the sampling methods employed, how the data was analysed, concepts are explained and the background of participants is given before moving on to the first analytical chapter. Throughout the analytical chapters I will rely on both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Chapter 5 is the first of three findings chapters where I focus on language and ethnic identity. This chapter takes off from chapter three where Iceland's former isolation and homogeneity was described, as well as its recent immigration history, and long tradition of guarding the language from foreign influence. In this chapter we will discuss student's experience in the Icelandic school system. We will ask questions such as: what are the restricitons to students' identity? What does it mean to have a community? Lastly, we will address how Icelandic language proficiency is often referred to as the key to society and how it may both serve as a facilitator or as a barrier that students feel they must overcome.

This chapter also illustrates a narrow idea of what can be deemed as Icelandic or accepted as *Icelandic enough*, both as with regards to appearance as well as language

proficiency. Such narrow ideas limit the students in their sense of belonging, as it was often undermined by stereotypical ideas about the *correct* Icelandic appearance, language or other cultural attributes.

The notion of an ethnic community is complicated in the Icelandic context as the whole *ethnic minority community* of a village may consist of one student and their family. In this chapter we also explore the role of social capital. Does it make a difference to have an extended family in other towns, or to know of others *like them*? These findings are considered together with Ray's (2003) aspiration window, which sets to explain the scope through which individuals form their aspirations. Lastly, chapter 5 offers a discussion of how the society must promote an open society and begin to push the boundaries for inclusion.

Moving on from our exploration of belonging, ethnic identity and fluency in the Icelandic language, **chapter 6** turns the focus to school engagement and its importance in relation to students' aspirations. School is central in the everyday lives of children and teenagers. This is where they acquire new knowledge and skills and get to understand who they are and want to be. Through the interaction of others, their peers and school staff, as well as through the learning process, they formulate their aspirations as well as an understanding of how and through which avenues education can lead them to their aspired future (Linnakylä, 1996; Linnakylä and Malin, 2008; Finn, 1989, 2006; Finn and Rock, 1997; Tarabini, 2019).

This chapter describes the three dimensions of school engagement, how they appear in both the qualitative and quantitative data, and how each dimension may differ for students of foreign background compared with their peers of Icelandic background. We will be able to understand the ways in which students vary by background, where students of foreign background encounter limits and barriers, that may be invisible to natives.

This chapter also shows us how engagement is a dynamic concept and is a combination of the interaction between students, their counterparts, the curriculum, the institution and its members (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez, 1989; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004).

The role of language is a reoccurring theme throughout this chapter, and we will understand how the language barrier impedes many of the students from fully engaging across all three dimensions. We will further explore the gendered difference of school engagement and delve into how this appears for boys of foreign background. Overall, this chapter highlights how the school system must promote an open society, actively build bridges between the school and home and recognize the barriers students and their families may encounter.

Chapter 7: in this last findings chapter I will weave together what I have learned thus far and delve deeper into the topic of educational aspirations. In this chapter, four cases studies will be introduced to help understand the complexity of aspirations. Each case relates to a topic discussion, giving a deeper understanding of how engagement, identity and language is interwoven with the students hopes and dreams for the future.

This chapter's findings emphasise the importance of understanding aspiration in terms of perceived agency of those who aspire, in addition to their *hopes* and *dreams* (Hart, 2016). Here we will explore how the trajectories through which aspirations are formed differ between students by background. Moreover, the difference in aspiration between boys and girls will be further explored, findings supported by both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Finally, this chapter sheds a light on the fragility of educational opportunities expressed by the students of foreign background. These findings thus highlight the perceived positionality of the migrant family in Icelandic society, and the complexities of the push and pull factors off the educational path (Kerckhoff, 1979; Appadurai, 2004). What we learn in this chapter is how we must look at students' situation as a whole, understand their family's background, their support system in addition to interpersonal skills and characteristics when we want to understand potential barriers they may encounter on their educational path.

The last and final chapter summarises the findings and limitations. Moreover, chapter 8 offers policy recommendations as well as suggestions for further research.

This thesis strives to understand the ways in which students of foreign background build their educational aspirations and how these aspirations may be negotiated.

2 Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used for this study.

This study focuses on the educational aspirations of students of foreign background in Iceland, how we can understand their aspirations, whether they differ from their counterparts who are of Icelandic background, and the barriers they encounter that might impede them from fulfilling their dreams.

In the first section, I cover the literature regarding equitable school systems and the role of schools. This section provides the framework for a conversation regarding potential barriers students of foreign background encounter and how the structure of the educational system may perpetuate rather than alleviate these barriers.

The second section provides a literature review of the background variables that are of importance for this study: ethnic identity and language proficiency. There, we will explore the literature regarding the role of ethnic identity and language proficiency in order to understand its role in shaping students' educational aspirations. I draw on examples from Icelandic studies, as well as international research, including from other Nordic countries.

The third section covers the literature regarding school engagement. School engagement is generally believed to be an important aspect of academic performance, disaffection, and school drop-out. In this section, I will explore the different dimensions of school engagement, how they may manifest in a student, and their importance for school success.

Finally, in the fourth and last section, I explain educational aspirations. I will first define the term aspiration, narrowing my particular scope to cover educational aspirations. In this section, I will cover literature that describes the different aspects of educational aspirations and what factors may be of importance when forming future goals and dreams.

2.1 Equal access ≠ equitable educational system

> *We hear it everywhere – the endless babble that we can all be anything we wish with enough hard work, ambition and effort. [...] Apart from a tiny and diminishing number of Bourdieu's 'miracles' (those of us working classes who got very lucky), merit in unequal societies is never merit but accumulated privilege.*
>
> *(Reay, 2018, pp. 325-326)*

A well-functioning school system combines equity and quality, so that all children are given equal opportunity. School systems should strive for inclusivity and fairness. Marginalised children should receive the opportunity to reach a baseline level of skills and schools should remove barriers that are beyond the child's control. Therefore, schools should expand economic opportunities, create mechanisms for social mobility, and prepare young people to become skilled members of the labour market and civil society (Murnane and Willet, 2011).

This characterisation of the role of education is the fundamental principle of the Icelandic educational system, in which everyone, regardless of their mental or physical attributes, should have equal access (Lög um leikskóla no 90/2008; Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008; Lög um framhaldsskóla no 92/2008). However, merely securing equal access to schools does not mean that it is a neutral field. Children spend significant amounts of time in school. This is where they learn how to read and write, compute fractions and algebra. This is also where children interact with their peers and where friendships can be formed. In addition to the formal school curriculum, many educational theorists have specified the tacit learning that takes place in the classroom is the hidden curriculum. In his book, *Life in classrooms*, Jackson (1968) emphasises the importance of viewing education as a socialization process. Students are tested in the classroom and thereby learn to understand their strengths and weaknesses, but such evaluation also takes place at home and in the playground. Focused on the learning that takes place in the classroom, Jackson maintains the existence of two curriculums: what is tested according to the school's 'official' curriculum and compliance with institutional expectations, namely the hidden curriculum. The main question should thus be what the relationship is between the two curriculums and whether strength, as measured by the *official* curriculum, also means success in conforming to the hidden curriculum.

The idea of a hidden curriculum provides a helpful framework to understand the role of education and how it may potentially work against the role of education as a tool for social mobility and equity. The Act on Compulsory Schools in Iceland states that the role of compulsory schools is to "*strengthen **their proficiency in Icelandic language and their** [the*

*students'] **understanding of Icelandic society, its history and specificities,** people's living conditions and of the individual's duties to the community, the environment and the world.*" (Lög um grunnskóla, nr 91/2008; article 2 and 3, highlighted for emphasis). However, issues regarding multilingualism and heritage language have not been sufficiently addressed in Icelandic laws and policies, so they do not accurately represent the now-diverse student body. Moreover, the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools has been criticised for being centred around Icelandic "specificities," as well as nationalistic ideological undertones, which have little space for the contribution of other cultures, nationalities, or religions (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Jónsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Kristjánsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir and Lefever, 2018). Brantefors (2015) argues that curriculums that are dominated by the narrative of 'cultural heritage' emphasise an unarticulated *us* in opposition to a well-defined *them*. Such curriculums, Brantefors maintains, *are curriculums of othering.* We are thereby left with the question: in a multicultural classroom, what message are the students being given and what does that message signal?

The hidden curriculum has been at the forefront for many critical educational theorists, albeit addressed in different ways. Perhaps the most radical of all was Illich (1970/2018), who called for the de-institutionalisation of schools as it monopolises the distribution of equal opportunities through a restraining curriculum. Illich introduced the notion of 'de-schooling,' as, according to him, schools assign a social rank as they teach a curriculum that does not promote quality or competence. Instead, they merely assign roles based on conditions that students must meet. According to Illich, much of what goes on in formal schooling is simply a form of *passive consumption*. In this way, students are *schooled* to accept service rather than value. Comparable parallels would be mistaking police protection for actual safety, the military presence for national security, or a rat race for productivity. These covert lessons and their passive consumption are what Illich called the *hidden curriculum.* Conforming to the pre-existing social structure, students unconsciously learn discipline, obedience, and conformity, as well as the methodology and practice of discrimination and prejudice prevalent in a society.

Freire's theory on the pedagogy of the oppressed starts off in the same realm as Illich's ideas, although Freire takes a less radical stance on the optimal outcome (1970/2017). Freire likens schooling and the educational system to a *banking system*, where those who are knowledgeable *bestow* their knowledge upon those who do not have it. The teacher *deposits*, rather than communicates, knowledge that the student receives, memorises, and repeats (p. 45). Education becomes a one-way transaction – an act of depositing. Freire's optimal outcome is to discard the banking system and create an environment for a *dialogue*, whereby everyone

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involved learns from each other. Albeit not necessarily his intention at the time, Freire paints a beautiful picture of an equitable educational system for a multicultural society, in which everyone, regardless of their background, can offer their unique experience to the classroom. In such an educational system, everyone's contribution is appreciated and thus requires humility. "*Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world*" (1970/2017, p. 63), Freire wrote, and further emphasised the contributions of those he referred to as the *oppressed*.

From this perspective, Freire and Bourdieu start on a similar path. Where Freire refers to the *internal oppression* of the dominant group, the internalization of the oppressor into the innermost self, Bourdieu refers to how the social structure is being introjected into the habitus (Burawoy, 2019). According to Burawoy, Bourdieu and Freire diverge on whether the *oppressed* or the *dominated* can ever be liberated by education. Freire describes the optimum outcome of the educational system as a dialogue, between teacher and student, where they learn from one another. This would be a fantasy through the lens of Bourdieu, who argues that such a scenario would require the dominants (or the intellectuals) to overcome their habitus.

This leads us to the concept of reproduction in education; Bourdieu offers a lens to understand how education perpetuates the reproduction of the social world.

> *It contributes irreplaceably towards perpetuating the structure of class relations and, simultaneously, legitimating it, by concealing the fact that the scholastic hierarchies it produces reproduce social hierarchies.*
>
> *(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/2000, p. 205)*

The educational system, along with other social institutions, plays a key role in maintaining social and economic inequalities. Similarly, to what Illich referred to as the *hidden curriculum*, schools can define *what* knowledge *is,* and thereby "*provides one of the most efficacious tools for the enterprise of inculcating the dominant culture and the value of that culture*" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/2000 p. 142). Through pedagogic means, teachers reward those who possess the cultural capital of the majority or dominant group, and they penalise those who don't. The covert curriculum contributes to learning the values, attitudes, and culture of the dominant group. That way, children who do not possess the cultural capital of the dominant group will be disadvantaged and encounter barriers that members of the dominant group do not. This dynamic can de-motivate students and impede their successful academic performance (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 2016).

According to Bourdieu, inequalities in social class are reflected through forms of capital that are not simply economic. Together with Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus, these

concepts provide a helpful framework in understanding the various educational trajectories across groups (Sullivan; 2001; Khattab, 2003; Doob, 2013; Chen and Starobin, 2019). I will now provide a short explanation of these concepts and give examples of its relevance when conducting educational research with children of foreign background. Later, in sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3, I will further apply these concepts in relation to educational aspirations.

Capital and education

Capital can take different forms, such as economic, cultural, and social capital. Capital is what Bourdieu describes as a representation of the "*immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices*" (Bourdieu, 2016, p. 83). He goes beyond the form of capital understood in economics and explains how economic capital can present itself as a form of cultural or social capital. These forms of capital, therefore, represent assets that are elevated and leveraged to signal social advantage (Reay, 2004: Moore, 2004).

Cultural capital comes in three forms: *the embodied state,* the form of capital the actor acquires through pedagogical action, such as time with parents, other family members, or hired professionals; *the objectified state,* or cultural goods such as books, dictionaries, or symbolically through other means of embodied capital that manifest as being well-versed in appreciating these cultural goods; *the institutionalised state,* which refers to institutionalised recognition in the form of academic qualification (Bourdieu, 2016; Reay, 2004). Thus, cultural capital refers to the possession of both tangible and intangible means given meaning within a field (Mahar, Harker, Wilkes, 1990). Bourdieu argues that the educational system assumes the possession of these cultural means and is thus inefficient in *pedagogic transmission*. Thereby, students who are not in possession of these valued means are left behind; the subject goes over their head and the student masks, rather than reveals, their ignorance (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/1990; Sullivan, 2001). On a similar note, when discussing the role of cultural capital in education, Reay (2004) argues for a broad understanding that captures the role of confidence (or lack thereof) in communication between home and school. Such feelings, like confidence or assertiveness, or conversely, a sense of inadequacy in providing sufficient support on behalf of the parents towards the school and its teaching staff is a critical dimension of cultural capital (Reay, 1998b, 2004, 2017).

In addition, pedagogic communication and linguistic capital are described as forms of cultural capital that is inherited and/or acquired over time. To describe this form of capital Bourdieu wrote:

> *[...] language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/2000 p. 73).*

This form of capital is both affected by and affects social agents. It distinguishes the haves from the have nots of power – and is ruled by whether the language they possess is deemed *legitimate* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977/2000; Bourdieu, 1991). It could equally be understood as the different language usage of the upper and lower classes, or perhaps of more relevance, refers to the language barriers between native and non-native speakers within a given society (Ream, 2005).

Alongside cultural capital, Bourdieu refers to social capital as another important form of capital. Social capital is "*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition*" (Bourdieu, 2016, p. 88). This form of capital is a product of constantly producing and reproducing bonds, both individual and collective. Therefore, it serves as a link in an invisible chain that allows children from dominant social classes to maintain an advantage in the educational system. It occurs through networks, both family as well as the wider community, and is essentially membership in a group bound by various forms of socially instituted connections (such as family, class or school) or through practical bonds that are maintained through material and/or symbolic exchange (Bourdieu, 1973, 2016). Through forming and maintaining such connections, social capital reinforces boundaries (Fuller, 2014). For example, Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau, (2003) demonstrated how family background plays a large role in students' academic achievement. Some parents mobilise or activate their exclusive networks in school to benefit their children. Studies further suggest that alternative social networks benefit students during their formative years and their aspirations and that they are not simply passive recipients of parental social capital (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007). Social capital can come in the form of bonds made with peers, teachers, and other members of the educational system. Chester and Smith (2015) argue that participation in extra-curricular activities outside the school ground has a mediating effect on the association between class background and educational aspirations. Their study further supports earlier findings that young people have agency in generating and activating their own social capital

(Billet, 2014; Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007). Similarly, studies also highlight the importance of a positive bond between students and their educators and other institutional agents in promoting degree aspirations, as well as when they are forming their professional identity for the future (Jensen and Jetten, 2015; Chen and Starobin, 2019).

Bourdieu argues that to understand the role of capital in perpetuating the power imbalance in society we must understand the role of the field and the habitus. Habitus is, according to Bourdieu, "*a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class*" (1977/2003, p. 86). It sheds light on the way we act, think, feel and is the core of our very being. Habitus is constantly changing in its formation and, thus, never reaches final form. It is our past, it is our present, and it influences our future (Maton, 2014). To understand habitus, we must understand the social structure that produces or changes it (Costa and Murphy, 2015). Bourdieu refers to these social structures as *fields* and are to be thought of *relationally*, as *"a network [..] of objective relations between positions"* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Field is thereby not something that is simply located in time or space. Although it objectively exists, it is also a dynamic social space with a structure of position and distribution of power or capital, possession of which gives access to gains that are of importance in that field (ibid).

On the role of field and habitus, it is key to understand the extent to which field and habitus align or how well the habitus fits with the conditions of the field in question. Therefore, a student who shows dispositions and competencies that go well with school standards and has a sense that they fulfil expectations, is more likely to have a sense of academic success which then in return reinforces a positive habitus, in relation to school and their quest for further education (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014; Maton, 2014). They are like a "fish in water," according to Bourdieu (ibid, p. 127). By comparison, a student whose habitus is less in harmony with school expectations, will, without additional help or changes made, have a less positive experience leading to increasing negative attitude and educational attainment. If a student has a positive school experience early on, they may realise the importance of education in the accumulation of cultural capital as an avenue for social mobility (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014; Maton, 2014). In the case of a successful student, the field presents them with options and categories of thought that they are prepared for, they know, understand and find self-evident. In the counter-case of a student who does not hold the practical knowledge, their habitus has

not prepared them for the field in question and their options do not appear self-evident (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu, Illich, and Freire all contribute to the understanding of power relations in society and the role of education to maintain this incongruence. Bourdieu's account of the reproductive nature of education provides an invaluable framework to explore a socially stratified system. Through this lens, we not only get a sense of how the game feels *rigged*, but also how we are constantly being moulded by the external: our ideas of what is within reach and what isn't, whether something is for *"people like me"* or not, whether we allow ourselves to aspire, and to what we allow ourselves to aspire. In the next sections we will further explore literature regarding identity, second language usage, school engagement, and aspirations.

2.2 Foreign background

Until recently, in the Icelandic context, "ethnic" or having a native language other than Icelandic, could serve as a proxy for immigration status. As will be discussed in the chapter 3, Iceland has a very recent history of independence; it was under Danish rule until 1944. Moreover, it has an even shorter history of immigration. Its language is spoken by very few people in the world. For this reason, studies from countries with a longer history of migration or even colonialism or slave trade research from parts of the world where movement of people (free or not) is entwined with the country's history, may, have a limited applicability to the Icelandic context. Still, this research can help shape an understanding of contemporary processes that are happening on a smaller scale.

The welfare of students of foreign origin in school should be taken seriously, as it is a testimony of how well they are adjusting to a primary institution in their receiving country (Chiu et al., 2012). The next two sections briefly explore the literature regarding ethnic identity and language proficiency.

2.2.1 Ethnic identity

> Being raised, around this, where all my family is uneducated and their occupation is in cleaning and a fish factory, mainly, it sort of lays the foundation for you and what you can envision for yourself. And I always thought that I would have a similar job and couldn't do anything else. And I once found a book, task book, from when I was in compulsory school and I was going through it [...] and the question "what are you going to be when you grow up, what do you want to be?" and I was in complete shock because what I wrote was that I would probably be cleaning toilets or mopping floors and that I was way too stupid and too ugly to do anything else. (Dýrfinna Benita Basalan, Íslenska mannflóran, 5th of December 2020, 35:13-36:23)

In an interview for the podcast *Íslenska mannflóran* (e. Icelandic diversity), Dýrfinna Benita Basalan, a young Icelandic musician of Southeast Asian and Icelandic mixed background, describes how her perceived future prospects were rooted in the opportunities she saw in her family, where foreign background and class intersected. Earlier in the interview, Dýrfinna explained how she had internalised the racism she had encountered in school and how her ideas about her alleged '*ugliness*' were based upon not looking White. In the podcast, she further raised the issue of feeling like your existence and your experience is not considered, and she explores the problems that arise when you can't see yourself in the larger society around you.

What Dýrfinna is describing is how her scope was limited to low paid, low skilled jobs, due to her family's own experience.

When we discuss ethnic identity in the Icelandic context, we must consider the small population size of the nation and how relatively few people of non-Icelandic background share the same national or ethnic origins. Emerging non-native communities may differ in what resources are available to them, and in terms of needs. To understand how ethnic identity converges with perceived prospects or aspirations, we must understand the context within which immigrants arrived in the country and the roles they occupy in Icelandic society.

In chapter 3, we will review a detailed explanation of the demographic changes Iceland has gone through in the past few years, and thus the backdrop of this study. Iceland's immigration history of *who* and *under what conditions* foreigners are *allowed* in, reflects a view of immigrants as a source of labour – when needed. Such an outlook, where foreign labour is seen as a *cheap* disposable work force, begs the question of the role models available to young people of foreign background who are about to venture outside the compulsory educational system (Loftsdóttir, 2017). Dýrfinna, cited here above, described herself as an Icelander; yet, she explained how she did not see herself in other Icelanders, due to her appearance. The scope of future opportunities available to her were, in a way, limited by her appearance and a sense of not belonging to the group with which she most associated. Dýrfinna's case clearly shows that in order to understand identity in the Icelandic context, we must take into consideration the barriers to claim an Icelandic identity, and what that means to young people of non-Icelandic or mixed background. This study does not provide a comprehensive discussion of ethnicity, but it does discuss the role of identity and in-group belonging in Iceland as it pertains to the perception of available opportunities.

Forming an identity

Teenagers are at a time in their lives when peers take on a central role. They spend more time with friends and form their own identity outside their parents' realm, where they learn to trust the bonds they create with friends and other social groups (Erikson, 1968/1994). Erikson (1964) described the formation of identity amongst teenagers as dependent upon "the support that the young receive from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to [them]" (p. 93). Moreover, having friends and a social network with peers of the same or similar background has been shown to be a salient feature in how children see themselves (Bellmore et al., 2007; Way and Chen, 2000).

Ethnic identity "[…] derives from a sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture, and a particular setting" (Phinney and Ong, 2007, p. 271). Ethnic identity captures the interconnectedness between an individual and members of an in-group, as well as with an out-group (ibid). Therefore, ethnic identities are formed in relation to ethnic boundaries that determine membership (Nagel, 1994).

Identity formation takes place both on an individual and collective level. It is constructed and reconstructed through interaction with others (Jenkins, 2008). The notion of identity in the social context is rooted in Tajfel's Social identity Theory (1981):

> *[...]for a minority to become a distinguishable social entity, there must be amongst some, many, most or all of its members an awareness that they possess in common some socially relevant characteristics, and that these characteristics distinguish them from other social entities in the midst of which they live" (p. 312)*

Tajfel refers to a collective understanding of a commonality amongst in-group members that distinguishes them from others. Ethnic identity is usually described as dynamic and multidimensional, and varies across time and place (Phinney, 1990, 1996; Phinney and Ong, 2007; Waters, 1990). For this reason, we must also study the context within which it forms. Therefore, ethnic identity is neither merely an objective constant, nor can it be defined as a solely subjective state of mind.

Due to the interactional nature of identity, there are various dimensions: either an *internal definition*, referring to a self-definition of their identity signalled to either their fellow group members or others; or an *external definition*, where the individual is ascribed a category based on how others perceive them (Jenkins, 2008).

Self-categorisation or ascribed categorisation

> It is easy to agree on the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what.
>
> (Castells, 2010, p. 7)

A basic element of ethnic identity is self-categorisation, that is, that a person identifies as a part of a certain group (Phinney and Ong, 2007). For Weber (1968), the basis of ethnicity was the subjective *belief* in common descent. This does not mean the ethnic identity forms in a vacuum disconnected to the wider society. Even internally defined, these processes are equally rooted in interaction with others and an expected audience. However, self-categorisation occurs through the agency of the individual (Jenkins, 2008).

Such categorisation may stem from a shared nationality, a similar ethnic background, or a sense of belonging to another social group, or groups, that the individual feels connectedness with at a given time (Berman and Makarova, 2018). That way a student of South Korean origin may feel they belong with other immigrants, or others who are from East Asia, or simply among people who enjoy K-pop (a social group that nowadays would attract far more than those of Korean descent).

As opposed to self-identification, being ascribed a cultural or ethnic identity by others has also been shown to be a consequential basis of collective identity. Ascribed categorisation may be consensual, validating the internal definition of the individual, or it may involve an imposition of an identity that groups reject (Jenkins, 2008). Being defined or categorised as a member of a social group, by others, can involve labelling, stereotypes, and prejudice, culminating in potential discrimination or abuse (Berman and Makarova, 2018; Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Those who are members of visible minorities are more susceptible to being ethnically labelled by others (Liebkind, 2006). While 'race' and racial categories are more associated with imposed identities, ethnicity has generally been understood in terms of self-conscious assertions of identity and belonging (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Nagel, 1994; Song, 2003). To some extent, an important aspect of identity formation is power, including the authority to ascribe an identity upon others (Jenkins, 2008).

Studying ethnic or racial identity and the role of whiteness is interesting in the Nordic, and particularly the Icelandic context, where claims of *innocence* of colonialism and *irrelevance* in a post-racist era makes any discussion on *othering, prejudice, racism,* or *discrimination* difficult to acknowledge (Rasta, 2005; Loftsdóttir, 2010, 2011, 2017).

In her research, Loftsdóttir (2017) demonstrates how different groups of migrants in Iceland are divided into different, yet ambiguous, groups of so-called *foreigners*. These groups are hierarchically structured, depending on time and societal context; some groups are deemed 'exotic' at a given time and are more highly socially ranked. Such structures, Loftsdóttir argues, are fluid and thus likely to change over time.

Ethnic identification may manifest differently among students who are of European descent than those of non-European descent. A Norwegian study found that self-identifying as Norwegian was more salient in second generation immigrants than in first-generation immigrants, and those who were of mixed background identified more strongly with a Norwegian identity than both groups, regardless of whether they were of European or non-European descent. However, this identity was not always recognised by others, and less often if they were of non-European background (Friberg, 2021). Numerous studies of 'race' and

minority status point to the ways in which even second or third generation 'migrants' may be *othered,* and excluded from the nation on the basis of their putative foreignness and non-White appearance (see example in Tuan 1998; Gilroy, 2002).

However, Loftsdóttir (2017) argues that racialisation is an interaction between perceived *others* and perceived *natives,* as well as the historical and situational context through which that interaction takes place. As an example, she refers to Eastern Europeans, who have been racialised through a very specific historical context in Iceland. As discussed further in Chapter 3, a period of rapid change, in terms of cross-national border agreements and an economic boom, facilitated the arrival of foreign nationals (particularly from Eastern European countries) who came to work. This created a notion of the "faceless foreigner" (ibid, p. 72), a portrayal of a dehumanised labour force who were attributed personal traits and distinct physical features through stereotyping. Stereotyping and racialisation, of any kind, are perpetuated through labelling and name-calling, either where nationality, continent of origin, or simply being a *foreigner* is referred to in a derogatory manner, or through the usage of racial slurs, such as the n-word (Rasta, 2005; Loftsdóttir, 2017).

When people have to negotiate their identity based on limited options available to them, such as negative labels, characteristics of racism in a society are revealed. Moreover, such labels, albeit sometimes perceived as teasing or harmless*,* accentuate the feeling of being *othered* or different, which contribute to loneliness, isolation, and or lack of sense of belonging (Rasta, 2005; Tran and Lefever, 2018). Such negatively loaded feelings are not only associated with those who are first- or second-generation immigrants. In an Icelandic study, Rúnarsdóttir and Vilhjálmsson (2015) found that non-native and mixed youth showed less life-satisfaction than their native comrades. Also, those who were of mixed parentage reported less life-satisfaction and more stress than non-mixed non-natives. Such findings further emphasise the importance of further exploring the role of identity of non-natives, with the inclusion of those who are of mixed background.

Importance of ethnic identity

Various studies have reported the benefits of a strong ethnic identity (Romero and Roberts, 1998; Fuligni, Witkow and Garcia, 2005; Smith and Silva, 2011). It is suggested that the importance and salience of ethnic identity may vary across ethnic groups and be of more relevance to minority groups, rather than majority groups (Waters, 1990; Phinney and Alipura, 1990; Yoon, 2011). Ethnic identity is considered to be correlated with a sense of school belonging (Gummadam, Pittman and Ioffe, 2005; Velasquez, 1999), academic achievement, as

well as a general positive attitude about education and towards the school (Fuligni, Witkow and Garcia, 2005).

The interplay between school environment, ethnic identity, and belonging has also been highlighted in various studies. A study portrayed how a school's implicit values on multiculturalism negatively correlated of ethnic identity, meaning that a student who goes to a school that upholds the values of multiculturalism perceives their ethnic identity as of less importance than a student in a school that fails to uphold such values (Brown, 2017) The school composition and social characteristics shape the student's sense of belonging in the school environment. The perception of a school environment that is hostile towards diversity is believed to undermine a student's sense of belonging and attachment towards the school; students may find it difficult to find their place academically, socially, or emotionally (Hurtado, Carter and Spuler, 1996; Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Hurtado and Ponjuan, 2005; Holm and Dovemark, 2020). By the same token, studies have identified that pride in one's own ethnicity and origin can protect them from prejudice and a hostile school environment (Romero and Roberts, 1998; Gibson, 2000; Phinney et al., 2001), but may make them more aware of perceived career barriers (Mejia-Smith and Gushue, 2017).

It is not possible to generalise about the experiences of the children of migrants across European societies, or about children who grow up in ethnically or racially mixed households, given the heterogeneity of the experiences. As discussed above, children in some mixed families, especially if they were seen as racially ambiguous, could also have to navigate a sense of belonging in relation to their peers and within the wider society. In the context of schooling, however, the specific ethnic composition of schools, the economic and cultural resources of each family, and the way in which children of a foreign background are regarded, all shape the specific set of social experiences and educational opportunities that students will adopt. In the following section, we will look at the role of language and how it may bridge the various worlds of a teenager of foreign background (the sending and the receiving country), but also, how language may serve as an additional barrier to belonging.

2.2.2 Language

In 2007, the first holistic policy on the integration of immigrants and immigrant issues was approved. The policy particularly addresses educational matters, emphasises equality, and conveys the importance of speaking Icelandic: "Language proficiency is one of the most important keys to a new society and the fundamental prerequisite for a full participation and

peoples' adaptation to Icelandic society" (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 13, translated by author). In 2016, in a parliamentary plan of action on immigration matters, the focus was more on how Iceland, as a society, should value the opportunities a diverse society provides and take advantage of the knowledge immigrants bring (Þingskjal 1692, 2015-2016). On the agenda for educational matters, among other tasks, was active bilingualism/multilingualism, by offering lessons in the most common languages spoken in Iceland and increasing opportunities for students to learn the heritage languages. In addition, to make an equitable educational system, the plan states how it will improve the teaching of Icelandic as a second language. Such governmental plans may allude to a language policy that acknowledges multilingualism. Yet, an Icelandic study suggests that such formal lessons in the heritage lessons are scant, except for in English or Scandinavian languages (ibid; Tran and Lefever, 2018).

The benefits of language proficiency in the host country's language are generally considered an important part of education and positive acculturation (Elmeroth, 2003; Morrison et al., 2003; Halle et al., 2012; Han, 2012). Learning a new language is an investment and may be an indicator of an intent to stay or envisioning a future in the country (Geurts and Lubbers, 2017). However, such choices are more relevant for the parents than the children. For children the majority language represents the academic language as well as the language they use with friends and for other social interaction in the host country (Frese, Röder and Ward, 2015).

Parents and family play a large role in children's journey of acquiring a new language and maintaining their heritage language. For example, do the parent and child converse in the parent's native language or the host country's language? What language do the children use when communicating with siblings? What language(s) do the parents use? Studies document the importance and overall benefit of children knowing their parents' heritage language (Lee, 2002; Duff and Li, 2014; Slavkov, 2016). For example, the choice of language parents used at home may affect the student's learning, where speaking their native language has a positive impact on the child as a multilingual. This may stem from the benefits of more exposure to the native language, complex language usage by the parents, or simply from a family socialisation perspective (Slavkov, 2016). The parents' native language is also the language through which culture and traditions are transmitted. Language, therefore, encourages positive self-realisation and ethnic identity (Lee, 2002; Frese, Röder and Ward, 2015). There is further evidence to suggest that when exposed to both languages, bilingual children are better equipped to develop an active language repertoire (Hammer et al., 2014; Seals and Peyton, 2016).

Understanding the importance of exposure of both languages is pertinent in the Icelandic context. A study on family language policy among immigrants in Iceland suggests that non-native parents generally have a positive view on the importance of their children learning Icelandic, but not all saw the importance of them learning their own minority language. Moreover, some parents found it difficult to help their children to become proficient in both languages (Jónsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2018). Another study demonstrates that students of foreign background in Iceland are bi- or multilingual; most speak their parent's language in addition to Icelandic. Additionally, the study shows a complex language identity among the students that sometimes corresponds with their ethnic background. Students with one Icelandic parent often ranked Icelandic as their strongest language. Yet, despite speaking the heritage language at home, some of those who had two immigrant parents ranked Icelandic higher (Tran and Lefever, 2018).

Fluency in the language of the host country is certainly important. Children can share their thoughts and feelings, participate in group activities, are able to tell stories and socialise. Socialising and interacting with native speakers is generally suggested as a beneficial way to increase language proficiency (Akresh, Massey and Frank, 2014) where they share their hopes and dreams, feelings, needs and longings. However, a vicious cycle emerges whereby when children feel or are excluded from social groups due to their lack of fluency, they have less opportunities to practice and use the language. Studies suggest that the use of English seems to be increasing among young people, among both those of Icelandic and foreign background. Students are highly motivated to learn the language in school, but they also use it outside of school in social settings (Lefever, 2009; Tran and Lefever, 2018). This may indicate an alternative socially important language in the Icelandic context that should not be overlooked.

Languages serve a particular role in the country's national identity, as well as in creating social identities. It not only enables communication between its members, but also hold certain sociocultural values, traditions, and norms (Shankar, 2008; Kroskrity, 2010). For example, an inflexible notion of a good standard language proficiency may be a language ideology in which there is a normative understanding that defines how to speak the language properly, as well as the characteristics of those who don't adhere to those norms (Kroskrity, 2010). Such ideologies that portray a homogeneous language practice may signal a common national identity or successful integration on behalf of a minority group, but it may simultaneously disregard the very existence of a heterogeneous society and disparage multilingual practises (Birman and Trickett, 2001; Phinney et al., 2006; Behtoui et al., 2019; Gogolin, McMonagle and Salem, 2019).

This is what Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) demonstrate in their study on immigrants in Iceland. Despite promises of acquiring the *key* to Icelandic society once they have acquired the proficiency in the language, the study rather demonstrates the importance of an open society where non-native speakers have access to the language and language community. Instead, many complained how they were only given access to low-skilled, minority dominated fields, where they had little opportunities for practice. Thus, although learning the language may have given them a chance to participate in a society, it gave them neither a sense of belonging nor real access to upward mobility and assimilation into Icelandic society. On the contrary, such segregation may lead to *othering* and *exclusion*, whereby Icelandic language proficiency is the means through which they are excluded, rather than included.

Language usage may define and distinguish people by class or residence, or separate the more-educated from the less-educated. In order to understand such a dynamic, one must also include the context within which the communication takes place. The role of language in the Icelandic context will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3.

2.3 School engagement

By the end of compulsory school, at the age of 15, students in Iceland have to make a choice regarding their future. They choose whether to attend upper secondary school and, if so, which school to attend and what they plan to learn. For children and adolescents, school is central to their everyday lives and it is where they spend a large proportion of their waking hours. During these hours, they acquire new knowledge and develop skills; they are learning who they are, who they want to be, and how they want to shape their future. It is through this experience that they form their aspirations, improve resilience, set goals, acquire work ethic, plan, and see the value of education (Linnakylä, 1996; Linnakylä and Malin, 2008; Finn, 1989, 2006; Finn and Rock, 1997; Tarabini, 2019). School engagement is an important element of a student's wellbeing and it plays a part in keeping the student on an educational path towards a positive future. According to Linnakylä and Malin (2008), the association between school engagement and aspirations varies by both the level of engagement and the interplay across the various dimensions of engagement, findings further echoed by Wang and Eccles (2012). These dimensions will be further discussed later in this section.

As it is believed to be an important aspect of academic performance and disaffection, school engagement has attracted great interest in educational research (Finn and Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Rumberger, 2011; Blöndal and Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2014). Moreover, school engagement is considered the main theoretical model to understand the dynamics of school dropout, which should be viewed as the result of a process of disengagement that can either stem from social or academic causes (Finn, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 2011).

The positive relationship between school engagement and academic achievement has been found across students of varying backgrounds and characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomics (Finn, 1993; Finn and Rock, 1997; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Demanet and van Houtte, 2012). School engagement can be seen as a tool or an objective that is the foundation of both prevention *and* intervention measures (Reschly and Christenson; 2006).

Scholars have debated whether school engagement should be viewed as a process or an outcome. Finn's extensive research on school engagement has revolved a great deal around school intervention and preventive measures (Finn, 1989, 2006; Finn and Voelkl, 1993). According to Finn, engagement (or disengagement) is a counteractive cycle of identification

and participation that begins very early, therefore being a long-term process (Finn, 1989, 2006). On the positive site of the spectrum Finn describes how the student "*[…] progresses through the grades and autonomy increases, participation and success may be experienced in an increasing variety of ways, both within and outside the classroom*" (Finn, 1989, p. 129). On the negative end, he claims that children who have not entered the aforementioned cycle, perhaps due to lack of support and encouragement from home, do not become interested in the value of participating and putting effort in school. This cycle can be hard to break. When there is a lack of participation, little experience with academic success, and few positive experiences with school, the student is unlikely to identify positively with their school. Or, as Finn (1989) explains, "*The emotional ingredient needed to maintain the student's involvement, and even to overcome the occasional adversity, is then lacking*" (p. 131). Reschly and Christenson (2012) deliberate whether school engagement should be either a process or an outcome, but rather both; they suggest that the different perspectives depend upon the time span one studies. Is the focus on a semester or school engagement over several years? If the focus is on long-term school engagement, it should both be seen as a single event (e.g., skipping classes could be an outcome of disengagement at one point in time) and a contributor to disengagement over time (e.g., the outcome could be school drop-out).

Engagement is a contextual and dynamic concept that requires investment, commitment, and concentration on behalf of the student. However, engagement is not only something that the student does, but is also an interpersonal dynamic between the student, the school, and its members. The degree of engagement is also highly dependent upon contributions to the learning process made by the institution, parents, and peers (Lamborn et al., 1992; Louis and Smith, 1992; Anderman, 2003; Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012). Wehlage et al., (1989) argue that engagement results from interaction between the student, the school, and the curriculum (p. 177). Moreover, school engagement can vary from one classroom to the other (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004).

Researchers do not agree on how to conceptualise school engagement or how it ought to be operationalised (Finn, 1989, 2006; Wehlage et al., 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Skinner et al., 2008; Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer, 2009). However, the general understanding is that school engagement is a multidimensional concept that includes a behavioural component (i.e., participation) and an emotional component (i.e., valuing school and a sense of belonging) (Finn, 1989). Other researchers have referred to a third dimension, cognitive engagement, which is the student's investment and strategies used in the learning process (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004).

In an extensive systematic review of the various definitions, measures, and contributors to school engagement and outcomes, Fredricks et al. (2004) come up with a three-component meta-construct. This model is comprised of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, three dimensions that all consist of different sub-dimensions. Each dimension addresses a separate, but overlapping, aspect of school engagement, and touches on a different side that are important for school success.

Behavioural engagement

According to the model, behavioural engagement is most often threefold: 1) positive conduct, that is abiding by rules, following certain classroom norms, and refraining from disruptive behaviour; 2) involvement in learning, focusing on tasks, persisting, demonstrating effort, asking questions and participating in a class discussion; 3) partaking in other school-related affairs, such as school governance or sports (Fredricks et al. 2004). Therefore, participation takes place within the classroom by attending class, participating in the work done in class and taking initiative in general studies, as well outside the classroom - in extracurricular activities and personal goal setting (Finn, 1989). Behavioural engagement is generally associated with a positive attitude towards school and academic and educational achievement which in turn has positive effect on future educational plans (Wang and Eccles, 2012; Finn and Zimmer, 2013; Voelkl, 2013; Putwain et al., 2018).

Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement refers to the emotional reaction a student has towards their school environment, their teachers, peers and the school in general. It refers to how they identify with their school, often referred to as school belongingness (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). A sense of belonging is considered a fundamental human behaviour (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Essentially, this dimension refers to a sense of membership, an intrapersonal sense of feeling valued and fitting in, being rooted in interpersonal ties with others, and a sense of acceptance, respect, and inclusion, where one's sense of connectedness is reciprocated (Mahar et al., 2013). A sense of membership and inclusion can be towards peers, teachers, or the organization as a whole. Students who are of minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds may feel excluded when the curriculum or activities that take place within the school do not reflect the diversity of the student body (Newmann, Wehlage, Lamborn, 1992). Emotional engagement plays an integral role in motivating students to pursue their education further. However, the

avenues through which this takes place, are contested. Whilst Voelkl (1997) argues that emotional engagement is considered to be a strong motivator of behavioural engagement and classroom behaviour, Wang and Eccles (2012) suggest that emotional connectedness does not necessarily have a direct effect on behavioural or cognitive engagement, further suggesting the need to study the various underlying factors behind emotional engagement.

Cognitive engagement

The last component is cognitive engagement, which refers to intrinsic motivation, as well as the investment in learning, learning strategies, and self-monitoring. Cognitive engagement's conceptualisation is often closely aligned with motivation literature, but this dimension focuses on the psychological element of learning such as coping skills, desire, need or longing to master a certain skill, flexibility and drive. How much effort is the student willing to exert in order to understand complex concepts, ideas, or acquire a skill (Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn, 1992; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004 ; Fredricks et al., 2005). Cognitive engagement is more internal indicator of whether the student sees the value of learning and the relevance of their schoolwork for their future (Appleton et al., 2006). Greene et al., (2004) argue that when a student perceives an exercise or task to be instrumental to their aspirations or aims, they find the task more meaningful *because* of its ties to their future goals.

Students show their engagement for a multitude of reasons. They may simply take pleasure in the learning process or hold an internalised value for studying and attaining good grades. Others may not necessarily enjoy the learning process, but they see it as an important steppingstone towards their future goal (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004). According to Boxer et al. (2011), students who aspire to obtain a degree higher than they believe is realistic to obtain had higher levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties; they report less attachment to their school. Boxer suggests that such frustration may be due to feeling difficult to actualise their dreams. Moreover, Gutman and Schoon (2018) suggest that there is significant association between the aspirations of a teenager and their emotional engagement, indicating that "*emotional self-reactions to school can support or undermine aspirations to continue in education*" (pp. 115-116).

The role of each dimension of school engagement may vary by student background (Bingham and Okagaki, 2013). Chiu et al. (2012) analysed emotional and cognitive engagement among students across 41 countries. Their study showed that students who were non-native or who spoke a foreign language at home had a greater level of cognitive

engagement than native students, but lower levels of emotional engagement. The role of teachers was found to be strongly correlated with both cognitive and emotional engagement of the student. Although the teacher-student relationship was weaker between teachers and non-native students, teachers played an important role in improving students' sense of school belonging. Gummadam, Pittman and Ioffe (2005) further demonstrated how school belonging played a larger role in the psychological adjustment among ethnic minority students than a feeling of belonging to one's ethnic group. However, in the absence of school belonging, ethnic identity was linked with higher self-worth. This, Gummadam et al. argue, may suggest how ethnic belonging may emotionally protect ethnic minority students who feel out of place in their school.

In their study on early school leavers in Iceland, Blöndal and Hafþórsson (2018) identified four different groups of varying characteristics. The first group, the *sociable* (i. félagslyndir) was the group most associated with students who did *not* discontinue their studies and who graduated. This group of students was better prepared academically, identified more with their school, and showed higher levels of ambition compared with the other groups of early school leavers. This is the group that participated most in school activities and social life. The second group is best described as *alienated* (i. fráhverfir) and was more common among boys. The alienated students showed little cognitive and emotional engagement, and lower ambition in their studies. They were disengaged from their studies, were unsure of their chosen educational path, and socially isolated. The third group were students who were *low-achievers* (i. vanmegnun í námi). What identified this group is the experience of performing poorly on The Icelandic National Examination (i. Samræmd próf).[2] The members of this group were cognitively and emotionally engaged, and they showed far greater behavioural engagement in comparison to the other three early school leaver groups. What identified this group was their parent's educational level, which was low compared with the other student groups, including those who had dropped out and those who had graduated. Many had not chosen a specific educational path, and this group was less likely to have chosen a subject-based educational route (i. bóknám). The fourth and last group, could best be described in terms of *low-spirit* students (i. vanlíðan). This group showed signs of mental health issues and very negative study behaviour. They showed a substantially higher level of cognitive and emotional engagement compared with the alienated group, but still less than the *low achieving students* and *sociable*

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[2] The National Examinatin is a series of exams that assess the student's reading and proficiency in Icelandic, English, and their capacity and skill in aritmetic operations (Menntamálastofnun, 2018b)

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group. Such a thorough account of the student's characteristics shows how school engagement is not a question of having *it* or not. It shows a complexity of the mechanisms that can contribute to a process of early school leaving.

School engagement is thus situational and contextual and may vary by dominant attitudes or support from others. Studies have suggested how stereotypical masculine ideas and norms may negatively predict lower school engagement among students (Rogers et al., 2017). Similarly, the fear of appearing *feminine,* may drive boys to reject, or pretend to reject, academic work (Jackson, 2003). However, Tarabini and Curran (2019) demonstrate how social class or marginalised position may play a part in how the embodied *type* of masculinity is perceived. In such cases the masculinity displayed does not carry the same value which then may affect their social relations and negatively affect their school engagement.

In their study, Blöndal and Hafþórsson (2018) show the importance of the role of parents when it comes to school engagement. Parents are salient facilitators in promoting school engagement; school structure plays a key role in supporting parents as facilitators. Size of the school, ethnic composition, or even the teacher's attitude may all affect parental involvement (Raftery, Grolnick and Flamm, 2012). Moreover, Fan and Williams (2010) found that parent's educational aspirations for their teenagers had a strong, positive association with the student's engagement as well as self-efficacy and intrinsic motivations.

Fredricks et al. (2004) argue for the benefits of viewing school engagement as a *meta* construct, by uniting the three components in a meaningful way. School engagement is not merely an intrapersonal feeling, but all schools should aim to create an environment where all students can flourish, reach their full potential, and feel a sense of belonging. An environment where all students feels that they have a sense of purpose and a community around them ought to be the benchmark all schools strive for.

2.4 Aspirations

The concept of aspirations is often treated as a self-explanatory term, but the ways in which it is conceptualised and interpreted can vary considerably (Haller, 1968; Sewell, Haller and Portes, 1969; Hauser and Anderson, 1991; Lent et al., 1994; Quaglia and Cobb, 1996; Ray, 2006; Appadurai, 2004; Rojewsky, 2005; Hart, 2012a, 2016). Simple questions, such as "*what do you want to be when you grow up*?"; "*what do you plan to do after you graduate?*"; or "*where do you see yourself in 10 years?*" can simultaneously provoke a description of preferred future endeavours, explanations of a well laid out plan, or the responders' wildest dreams.

Responses to such questions can thus be interpreted as goals, plans, preferences, or dreams that mainly differ in terms of proximity in time and explicitness of desired outcomes (Lent et al., 1994; Rojewski, 2005). Lent et al. (1994) refers to aspirations as a "goal mechanism" (p. 85) that plays a role when goals are being assessed far ahead in time without any consideration for reality or anticipated commitments. When goals have a specific intention and are assessed in proximity to a time of change or transition, they are either expressed as choices or laid out plans. Rojewski (2005) positions aspirations against interests, where the former represents individual goals when all conditions are met whereas interests display the individual's hopes towards a particular outcome. Hart (2016) offers more dynamic definitions; she suggests that aspirations are both multi-dimensional and "future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations" (p. 326) and to truly understand the nature of aspirations we must think about "the freedom an individual has to develop capabilities and to choose to pursue a future they have reason to value" (Hart, 2012a, p. 79). Aspiration is thus a battle between dreams and opportunities, modified by internal and external motivators and barriers: the envisioned future of the self as well as the perceived agency of the self.

Despite varied terminology and nuanced differences, there is a level of agreement: aspirations can be expressed in terms of idealistic hopes and realistic expectations and the potential incongruence between the two could reveal the mechanisms of aspirations.

2.4.1 Educational aspirations

Destination-driven aspirations are focused on a particular future at a natural end point, such as finishing school, or for an indefinite timeframe. Educational aspirations are an equally blurry concept that offers a broad scope for interpretation and definitions in the realm of education.

Quaglia and Cobb (1996) identify three important eras in the conceptual formation of educational aspiration. Early research defined *the level of aspirations* as the "totality of goal settings" (Frank, 1941, p. 218), a task-based concept where success and failure are subjective experiences of a task in relation to future performances (ibid, Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). Around the 1940s, *achievement motivation* appeared on the horizon. It posed the question whether motivation for success was a human behaviour that varied in intensity or an acquired personality trait (ibid). Towards the latter half of the 20th century the focus became more heavily on the role socialization has on the formation of motivation and attainment (Duncan and Hodge, 1963; Kolb, 1965; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Haller, 1968; Haller and Portes, 1973; Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller and Portes, 1969). The third set of ideas worth mentioning is the social comparison theory that orbits around the idea that abilities are manifested either through feedback based on an objective reality (praises for a skill, for example) or through comparison with others (Festinger, 1954). It is in these historical roots that Quaglia and Cobb (1996) offer the definition of educational aspirations as the "*student's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward these goals*" (p. 130). Their definition entails two important aspects: inspiration and ambition. The former refers to the feeling that an activity excites and enriches the student's life. The latter refers to the sense that the activity has a meaning for future goals and, therefore, it is both within their reach and to their advantage to plan for the future. Quaglia and Cobb's definition offer a level of hope for the future and signs of what motivates the present.

What these historical roots further manifest is the importance of considering both school engagement, as well as the social aspect of education, to understand the innate motivators of a student and the role of others, including peers, teachers, and family. Educational aspirations are generally considered the avenue through which scholastic and occupational outcomes are formed[3] (Duncan and Hodge, 1963; Sewell et al., 1969; Campbell, 1983; Jencks, Crouse and Mueser, 1983; Carter, 2001; Ray, 2006; Hart 2012a; 2016). However, more recent studies have pointed out that aspiring for a future does not guarantee an outcome culminating in a body of literature on the mismatch between aspirations and outcomes for some groups more than others (Mickelson, 1990, 2008; Marjoribanks, 1998; Ray, 2006; Dewitt et al., 2010; Boxer et al., 2011; Paat, 2015; Khattab, 2015; Hart 2012a, 2016; D'hondt et al., 2016). This will be covered in further detail in section *2.4.4. Mis-matched aspirations.*

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[3] See for example the Social Psychological Model of Status Attainment, often called the socialization model or the Wisconsin Model (Haller and Portes, 1973; Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller and Portes, 1969)

2.4.2 *The formation of aspirations*

There has been long-standing interest in explaining educational aspirations in relation to the self, aptitude, and the effect of significant others in the formation of educational expectations.

Sewell et al. (1969) proposed a socialisation model, often referred to as the Wisconsin model, suggesting that young people's academic performance was determined by socially structured and psychological factors. This includes socio-economic status, mental ability, self-concept, and the influence of significant others. In addition to the student's mental ability, the influence of others, through interaction with peers, parents, and teachers, is central to the model; it takes on a larger role than more ascriptive factors, such as socioeconomic status (Carter, 2011). The fundamental idea was that children's expectations and personal aspirations were the product of the influences of others (i.e., role-models or directly expressed expectations). This would affect the students' educational and occupational aspirations, and subsequently their educational and occupational attainment. The core element in the status attainment process is therefore educational aspiration. Students may, however, respond differently to the people with whom they interact. For example, while parents may influence the student in "future-oriented" decision making, the input of peers and close friends may have a more significant role in decisions taken regarding the present (Wilks, 1986). Students may also respond to some people they interact with but find other's input irrelevant. Moreover, students may derive inspiration from some groups that they do not interact with. For this reason, Haller and Portes (1973), suggest the term *reference group*.

This is what Ray (2006) refers to as the *aspirations window*, the scope through which individuals form their aspirations from the attainment of others they perceive to be *similar*. The aspirations window is a multidimensional concept, in which people accumulate aspirations from more than one window. The social world is neither linear nor bidimensional. Thus people can take aspirations through various avenues, narrowed down by the notion of similarity, where the individual gives it substance. Similarity can be embedded in biological similarity or simply proximity, such as peers. The aspirations window and perceived similarity is contextual; it is dependent upon how much mobility the individual perceives there is in a society. The perceived mobility enlarges the aspirations window, leaving room for a greater variety of avenues in which to find *similarities.*

Significant others, the reference group, and the aspiration window all refer to individuals or groups that inspire students. The model of status attainment mainly referred to

peers, parents, family members, and teachers; the latter two account for a more abstract influence on an individual. The role of peers and friends is considered key in the socialisation process of students. Schools not only play a role in educational achievement or status attainment, but also provide a context within which young people socialise with peers at a time in their lives when they are forming their own identity. During this time, teenagers become more reliant on their friends and other social bonds (Erikson, 1968/1994). The peer effect, defined as the impact peers have on the student, varies depending on the school's social composition. It also may affect the student's scholastic outcomes, behaviours, aspirations, or expectations. As students internalise a way of behaving or learning through the normalised behaviour of the collective, they are constantly forming and reforming their own identity as students, their feelings towards school, and definitions of appropriate behaviour (Tarabini, 2019).

Parental involvement in education, particularly academic expectation and aspiration for their children, is found to be strongly correlated with children's achievement (Fan and Chen, 2001). Garg et al.'s (2002) study on the predictors of educational aspirations suggests that interpersonal factors (e.g., academic achievement, attitudes towards school and homework, perception of courses, and the educational expectations of parents) were a major influencer on what they refer to as 'educational self-schema'. The term means that the student who holds a positive 'internal representation' (p. 103) of education and is confident in their ability, values education and sees it as a positive and rewarding experience. The parental influence thus influences the individual's self-schema, as it is mediated through personal factors. Otani (2019) further suggests that educational aspirations mediate the relationship between parental involvement and the students' academic outcome, but further emphasizes the importance of having a discussion in the household on school related topics.

The importance of parental involvement on a child's academic success holds true across different racial and ethnic groups (Taylor and Lopez, 2005; Murray, 2009; Areepattamannil and Lee, 2014). Studies even suggest that parents in migrant families have higher aspirations for their children's future educational endeavours, than non-migrant parents. These aspirations may exceed the youth's own aspirations for the future and even be transmitted to them, at least partly (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007; Trebbels, 2014). A plausible explanation for such high aspirations on behalf of the parents, then transposed to the child, may stem from a pre-migration status in the sending country, despite downward mobility in the receiving country (Engzell, 2019). Conversely, Modood (2004) suggests focusing on the term *ethnic capital,* rather than cultural capital, when studying minority ethnic students. He argues that this form of capital is

prevalent in minority ethnic families that see great value in education and aspire to social mobility through education (ibid; Basit and Modood, 2016).

> *People act (or try to act or fail to act) the way they do because it seems to them to be living an identity which they believe they have or aspire to have; certain behaviours make sense or do not make sense, become possible or 'impossible', easy or difficult, worth making sacrifices for and so on if certain identities – like ethnic or minority identities – are strongly held.*
>
> *(Modood, 2004, pp. 100).*

Thus, aspirations are tightly interwoven with the perceived opportunities and/or barriers that the individual perceives is within reach for *someone like* them. Therefore, perceived prejudice and discrimination in the labour market are major factors that moderate their educational goals and personal aspirations (Basit and Modood, 2016).

Parents are believed to be a major influencer on the formation of their children's aspirations. Children may refer to their future plans in terms of an *absence of decision*, meaning that they refer to their next steps as the obvious, automatic, or assumed choice. An Icelandic study suggests that parenting style better predicts school dropout rather than parental involvement. For example, 14-year-olds who depicted their parents as authoritative were more likely to have completed upper secondary education in eight years later, compared with those who characterised their parents as non-authoritative, even when holding gender, socioeconomic status, temperament, and parental involvement constant (Blöndal and Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2009).

Moreover, parents may transmit their own aspirations onto their children. Such transmission may be passed through what Ball et al. (2002) refer to as a *transgenerational family script*, and what Bok (2010) refers to as the *inter-generational nature of aspiration formation,* whereby the student makes a choice rooted in wanting to fulfil a dream originally established by the parent. This role of the family is what Reay (1998a) refers to as *familial habitus*, the expectation of what is expected of the student or others like them. Such concerns could refer to an acceptable educational path or the choice of school. Considerations may include choosing a school with students believed to share a similar mindset, background, or characteristics.

In the same realm, Reay (ibid; Reay, David, Ball, 2001; Ball et al., 2002) suggests another form of *habitus*, the institutional, which is of importance in the decision-making process of young people. As with individual habitus, institutional habitus[4] is established over

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[4] Also referred to as the organizational habitus (McDonough, 1996).

time and is a complex mix of individual agency and the institutional structure. Thereby, it could be defined as the mediating effect that one's background (e.g., cultural group or social class) has on the way they behave within an institution. These collective habitus, the familial and institutional, are thereby interrelated habitus that comprise the field (Reay, David and Ball, 2001; McDonough, 1996). Such an approach both considers the individuals in relation to each other and it marks the field they are within. In a school context, the institutional habitus goes beyond the individuals that make up the institution or the organizational practices of the school *per se*. Instead, it is rather an elevated account of the social composition of the schools and an understanding of the ways that they operate (Burke, Emmerich and Ingram, 2013).

An important aspect of the *institutional habitus* is the level and quality of career advice students receive. Are the students actively guided or is career advice treated as a checklist task that simply reiterates the information the student already knows? If the latter, is it to the extent that the student finds it difficult to recall *what* information had been given? Schools may vary in terms of assumed knowledge and information students have access to, or how the institutional habitus may be mobilised differently across the student body. McDonough (1996) explains that some schools work on the assumption that students can rely on their family or personal resources to supplement the information provided at school regarding the next steps of their educational journey. This approach leaves some students in uncharted waters. In contrast, other schools assume no prior knowledge and tailor their resources with the aim to fill in the gaps for everyone. In the case of the latter, institutional habitus may be mobilised differently from one student to the other on behalf of individual teachers or the school system, where some students receive greater help in formulating their next steps or plans. Such differentiation between the students may be due to chance, but it may also be attributable to prejudice or cultural bias (Reay, 1998a).

As a response to both, assumed access to school related knowledge and the different mobilization across the student body, Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila (2016), emphasise the importance of constant educational reform, training for the school staff, and innovative practices to promote a self-awareness amongst its members. They assert that educators should identify their own implicit bias towards students of different social backgrounds and understand how the school itself plays a role in the students' success. According to their argument, there are more opportunities for school engagement when teacher expectations are not weighted by stereotypes, the role of structural factors in the student's educational pursuit is taken into account, and *deficiencies* or *lack of effort* on behalf of the student is not regarded as the main contributor to their academic failure.

A collective habitus, such as the familial or institutional, are abstract terms that may be difficult to identity within schools but make up what in everyday might be referred to as *school culture* or an atmosphere within the school. Looking beyond the institutional level, there is the impact of educational policy and its effect on students' outlook on their future opportunities. In his study on the impact of tracking placement, Karlson (2015) argues that school signalling of educational aptitude plays a crucial role in the student's formation of educational expectations; his finding was further echoed by Nygård (2017). According to Karlson (2015), students actively revise their educational expectations as a response to their perceived chances for future success, as signalled by the school. From what has been covered so far, in Bourdieusian terms, educational aspirations and expectations are developed in and through the interaction with different fields. Understanding what aspirations consist of requires unpacking the capital the individual has access to, the intersectionality of fields that affect the individual, and the barriers the individual encounters. This topic is further explored in the next section.

2.4.3 Restricted aspirations

> *The danger of writing off an aspiration prematurely is that it can then be lost. Once a line is drawn in the sand and something is regarded as impossible, it is unlikely that the aspiration will be revisited.*
>
> *(Hart, 2012a, p. 196)*

The roles of aptitude, personality traits, and significant others are generally accepted as vital to aspirations. However, the focus of the avenues through which aspirations culminate in attainment has been extended to the factors restricting aspirations (Kerckhoff, 1989; Ray, 2006; Appadurai, 2004; Hart, 2012a, 2016).

Nevertheless, when taking a snapshot of aspirations at a given time, we cannot predict what will happen, but we can strive to understand the formation of such aspirations, the *idealistic* vis-á-vis *realistic* aspirations. Hauser and Anderson (1991) defined idealistic aspirations as the "*desired outcomes that are not limited by constraints on resources*" (p. 270), whereas Wicht (2016) maintains that realistic aspirations "*best express what youths are actually striving for*". The desired and the realistic may go hand-in-hand or they can express different paths. In the case of the latter, the student's evaluation stems from other sources than simply their longings. Such an incongruence can be an indication of a perceived force pushing them in a different direction or barriers hindering them from achieving their dreams (Haller, 1968; Rojewski, 2005). We must ask ourselves whether aspirations portray "*optimism about*

the future or pessimism about the present" (Hart, 2016, p. 325), as lower occupational expectations among adolescents may lead to premature compromises with regards to education or occupation (Gottfredson, 1981; Rojewski, 2005).

Kerckhoff (1979) criticised the socialisation model on the basis of the assumption that people could move freely through society, compelled by choice and skill. He emphasised that people are ascribed to layers of society due to externally imposed criteria. Therefore, the individual's attainment is relatively constrained by the social bonds or structure to which they are assigned. Adolescents understand their possibilities and what kind of an outcome they might expect and for that reason and, according to Kerckhoff, there is a strong link between expectations and attainment. So, even though people might want the same thing, people from different layers of society have different expectations based on the restraints the stratified system poses and their observation of what other people, similar to them, have already attained (ibid).

From an economic perspective, Appadurai's (2004) *capacity to aspire*, refers to a culture of aspiration, a map of norms that lead to success. However, in a stratified society, not everyone has the same opportunity to achieve their aspirations, which are essentially socially determined and, thus, only accessible to those who are more affluent. If pathways exist between aspirations and reality for subordinate groups, they are, according to Appadurai, more likely to be rigid. Ray, (2006) remains within a similar realm, and argues that what affects a person's future-oriented behaviour is the gap between their current situation and their aspired living standard. Thereby, a person is not only incentivised by an aspiration that is beyond their current living standard, it also must feel within reach. That way, someone whose dreams are closely aligned with their living standard is not incentivised to reach their goals. Similarly, if the bar is set too high – according to the current living standard – the journey is assumed to be too long or arduous. Such ideas are similar to the way Jencks, Crouse and Mueser's (1983) hypothesised the formation of high school plans, claiming that they were a simple representation of "*an individual's assessment of the costs and benefits of various courses of action*" (p. 17); plans were predictive merely because people's ideas of the cost-and-benefits remained stable over time.

However, Ray looks beyond the individual and suggests that, in order to understand this gap further (especially in the cases where the gap is small and situations where there is lack of investment on behalf of the individual), we must take a step back and understand the society within which these aspirations are formed. On one hand, a society can be *connected*, where there is heterogeneity in each reference group or *cognitive window*. In that diversity,

every individual has a sense of potential and observable steps to act upon their aspirations. On the other hand, there is a *polarized* society, where the lines are clearer between the poor and the rich. This is an issue for two reasons: the poor neither include the rich in their cognitive window nor do they aspire to be like the rich, as the gap is simply too wide.

Appadurai's (2004) and Ray's (2006) theories on socially determined aspirations are both rooted in understanding the aspirations of the poor in a stratified society. Essentially, they have centred aspirations to understand poverty as a differentiator of the haves and the have-nots of economic capital. These ideas marry well with Hart's theory on the capability to aspire (2012a, 2014, 2016). Underpinned by Sen's capability approach, she further applies Bourdieu's theories on *habitus, capital,* and *field* to the ways in which we understand the capacity to aspire and its formation. Hart suggests that "*an individual's self, identity, aspirations and ultimately capabilities are developed in and through interaction with different fields*" (2012a, p. 59). Often, these aspirations rise from the discrepancy in power dynamics that constrains the individual to conform to the expectations they perceive as acceptable or *normal*. This may result in either revealed or concealed aspirations thus those that are expressed and may only give the persons' partial aspirations. These varying forms of aspirations can stem from different levels of perceived agency, whereby the individual may form or adapt their aspirations through interaction with others, perceived opportunities, or barriers related to their understanding of how goals can be achieved (ibid). However, Hart (2016) argues that we cannot simply look at the aspirations an individual values and believes they are able to achieve to understand individual agency and freedom. Instead, we must also understand the degrees of freedom that individual has, as well as their chances of transforming these aspirations into *capabilities* (ibid, p. 329) and the real opportunities within their reach to lead a life they value (Sen, 1985).

Hart suggests that an individual's choice of aspirations, or what they find meaningful, may be, to some extent, influenced by their *habitus, "the cultural and familial roots from which a person grows*" (2012a, pp. 330). It is through these roots that a child internalises the '*proper*' ways of behaving and attains their worldview. Together, various forms of capital, interactions, and power dynamics in different fields impact the aspirations an individual finds meaningful. Moreover, Hart argues that the formation of aspirations is an interactive process; this assertion is closely tied to Bourdieu's ideas of how capital is accumulated, converted into other forms of capital, and transferred across generations, as well as Sen's point on the interactive nature of value formation.

In her work, Hart (2016) goes beyond the individual and an outcome-based understanding of aspirations. Essentially, the question should not be *how far* a student can go,

or *what* they can attain, but rather how can we create an environment where children are at the centre: How can we ensure that children can flourish and that schools offer them the opportunities to realise their aspirations and become what they value? This is not solely an issue that schools must resolve on their own, but it is a project that must be undertaken at the societal level. Even if schools and other educational establishments offer a more equitable environment and opportunities for all, barriers in the wider society will remain unresolved (Hart, 2019). Essentially, the theory on the capability to aspire calls for a shift in policy makers' approach to aspirations. Instead of finding ways to *raise aspirations,* they should find ways to *nurture aspirations*. This means that rather than placing the emphasis on the student themselves, we ought to meet the needs of the student and help them find ways to actualise their dreams and aspired future. By the same token, where there was need to *widen participation*, focusing on *widening capability* is a better step forward (Hart, 2012b; Hart and Brando, 2018; Bowers-Brown, Ingram and Burke, 2019).

2.4.4 *Mis-matched aspirations*

As has been covered in the earlier sections, focusing solely on the desired outcome that a student expresses assumes that the student is making an individual choice, free from external factors or context. This perspective is perhaps best expressed by Haller and Portes (1973), who wrote "*Aspirations are formed as the consequence of two related sets of influences: those brought to bear on the individual by his significant others and those brought to bear by the person himself as he assesses his potentialities on the basis of past performances*" (p. 87). There is an abundance of evidence that suggests otherwise.

Whilst some studies suggest that students whose aspirations take them further than their expected achievement are more likely to be of an economically disadvantaged background (Boxer et al., 2011), other studies have highlighted how this group of students has to renegotiate their aspirations over time, settling for a *reasonable* choice rather than their preference (Baker, 2019). Howard et al. (2011) suggest that the relationship between socio-economic background and aspirations may vary across ethnic groups. However, the role of socio-economic background may be of less significance for early -to mid-adolescent youth.

Other studies have centred on the difference in aspirations among students of varying ethnic background (Portes and Wilson, 1976; Hauser and Anderson, 1991; Dewitt et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2011; Wong, 2016; D'Hondt et al., 2016). Studies suggest that, when compared with their native counterparts, immigrants hold higher educational aspirations (Marjoribanks,

1998; Dewitt et al., 2010; D'Hondt et al., 2016; Friberg, 2019) and assign higher value to education (Hadjar and Scharf, 2019). This is often attributed to a desire for upward mobility that is perceived to be attainable through education (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Heath and Brinbaum, 2007; Trebbels, 2015).

Nevertheless, scholars have pointed to a paradox between aspirations and achievement. Most notably, Mickelson (1990) demonstrated the multi-dimensionality of African-American students' attitudes towards education. In this study, participants may have had an abstract idea of the importance of education but formed a more concrete attitude about the importance of schooling for their own futures through lived experience or by observing the opportunities their significant others had (Mickelson, 1990, 2008). As another potential explanation, Kao and Tienda (1998) maintain that social segregation in school, where students of certain backgrounds only socialise with others like them, may partially explain this gap.

Gendered academic achievement and aspirations

Here above we have discussed the complexities of aspirations and how they are established and negotiated through perception of opportunities: what is attainable and within reach. As we have covered, aspirations are interactive and contextual, produced through social interactions. Studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the role of gender in education and how it interacts with other identities such as class or national, ethnic, and racial identification (Reay, et al. 2002; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Burke, 2006; Tarabini and Curran, 2018).

In recent years, there has been an increasing attention paid to how boys fare in the educational system. Studies and cross-country comparison have shown how boys are underachieving compared with girls and underrepresented in higher education (OECD, 2015, 2018; Menntamálastofnun 2019). This has sparked debates about gender inequalities in education, with explanations varying from the *feminisation* of the classroom to the difference in how boys and girls are socialised (Sax, 2009; Hoff Sommers, 2013; Hadjar et al., 2014). Verniers, Martinot and Dompnier (2016), argue that not only is the explanation of an overly feminised school system oversimplified, it does not account for complex school dynamics and how some attributes that are valued within schools are stereotypically considered masculine. In fact, there is an abundance of literature in support of that explanation for the under-achievement of boys: how traditional ideas of masculinity may impede boys' educational success (Van Houtte, 2004; Orr, 2011; Vantieghem and Van Houtte, 2015). By the same token, some behaviour and attitude may be deemed as feminine and in order to uphold an image or due to fear of being labelled feminine boys may refuse to conform to such conduct (Orr, 2011).

Ideas about conforming to stereotypical masculine role may promote help avoidance in the classroom, a behaviour that is also more likely among boys than girls in general (Kessels and Steinmayr, 2013; Leaper, Farkas and Starr, 2019). Asking for help can thereby be perceived as sign of vulnerability or weakness and studies suggest that boys may thus be more reluctant to ask for help in the classroom (Czopp, et al., 1998; Kessels and Steinmayr, 2013).

This gendered difference in the educational system evokes questions on how it may affect aspirations and whether stereotypical ideas of masculinity play a part in students' educational aspirations. Burke (2006) argues how men's aspirations are not only negotiated and renegotiation in the context of others but also through their masculine identifications. These masculine identities are not only complex but may also be contradictory as they intersect with other aspects of their lives. Such aspects may include family values, ethnic, racial, religious, and national sense of self, where each may come with various ideas of manhood and masculinity.

On the general gender difference, studies suggest a dissimilarity in the ways that boys and girls express their aspirations. Such a difference may manifest itself in terms of the role of peers (i.e., speaking about their plans, hopes, and wishes with their peers), gendered preferences for occupation, and who they are inspired by. Regarding, level of educational aspirations, girls tend to aspire for careers that require more education than boys and girls are more prone to speak about their future dreams (Reay, 1998a; Wall, Covell and MacIntyre, 1999; Howard et al., 2011). The role of academic success in achievement of future aspirations may vary across subjects. Widlund et al. (2020) describe how mathematic performance plays a similar role in shaping student aspirations for both boys and girls whereas reading performance had a small effect on the girls' aspirations but had none for the boys'.

Together with what we learned about the role of masculinity and school engagement earlier we begin to see how *gender* as a standalone variable is not enough to understand difference in academic achievement or aspirations. In fact, we must understand how hegemonic ideas of masculinity intercepts with other situational and contextual factors and emphasises the importance of understanding the society within which gendered attitudes are being studied.

2.5 Summary

As explained in the introductory chapter, this study is a mixed method study and thus based on a theoretical and conceptual framework rooted in different ontological and epistemological directions. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4. To help us navigate, this study is placed under the arch of critical educational theorists such as Bourdieu, Illich and Freire, who all contribute to the understanding of power relations in society and the role of education in maintaining class structures. This, I will argue, gives us a useful tool to understand how we are moulded by the interaction with others and through different fields: what feels within reach and what feels impossible, whether we allow ourselves to aspire and whether there is a limit to that. In this chapter we have examined the role of language as well as how ethnic identity, school engagement and educational aspirations have been conceptualised to help us further understand this dynamic.

In the section on ethnic identity and language proficiency, we have not only covered the literature, but also learned how it may appear in an Icelandic context. To understand both concepts in an Icelandic context we must consider how recently, and rapidly, the population composition has changed, as well as the small population size of the nation. The society has had to adapt to a new reality, where the appearance of the Icelander and the sound of the language has begun to change. With this in mind, we can expect to see a friction between the two worlds: the traditional ideas of the face and voice of an Icelander and the new reality. This friction may cause students to feel as outsiders or that there are barriers for them to fulfil their aspired future (Rasta, 2005; Loftsdóttir, 2017; Skaptadóttir and Innes, 2017)

We further delved into the literature on school engagement and its varying dimension. Here we saw how school engagement is not quantifiable, but rather how its mechanisms are complex and may vary by students' characteristics such as background (Bingham and Okagaki, 2013; Blöndal and Hafþórsson, 2018). As Chiu et al. (2012) point at, non-native students may show greater level of cognitive engagement than native students yet score lower in emotional engagement. For this reason, we may anticipate seeing a difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background, particularly where the latter group shows lower level of emotional engagement, whereas the difference may be less pronounced on other dimensions. However, the dynamic between each dimension may differ between each group and as we unpack each aspect of school engagement, and we may find hindrances that students of foreign background are faced with, concealed to their Icelandic counterparts.

Finally, the literature on educational aspirations has shown us how we cannot simply focus on what students perceive as the *desired* outcome but take into account the various hurdles they may encounter along the way. Various studies have shown how the student's ethnic background, economic status or gender may influence their aspirations (Portes and Wilson, 1976; Hauser and Anderson, 1991; Reay, 1998a; Wall, Covell and MacIntyre, 1999; Dewitt et al., 2010; Boxer et al., 2011; Howard et al., 2011; Wong, 2016; D'Hondt et al., 2016; Baker, 2019). Appadurai (2004) describes this idea as the *capacity to aspire*, which refers to a culture of aspiration. Moreover he suggests that in a stratified society, not everyone has the same opportunity to achieve their aspirations. Regardless, many studies have suggested how non-native students, when compared with their native counterparts, hold higher educational aspirations (Marjoribanks, 1998; Dewitt et al., 2010; D'Hondt et al., 2016; Friberg, 2019). This attitude has been attributed to a longing for an upward mobility, believed to be achievable through education (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Heath and Brinbaum, 2007; Trebbels, 2015).

Given the literature at hand, one may suspect that there will be a difference in educational aspirations between students of Icelandic and foreign background. Whilst the literature suggests this difference may be in favour of the latter group, where they hold higher aspirations, there is a reason to suspect that these aspirations may be dampened by the reality of how students of foreign background fare in the school system in Iceland. This will be covered in detail in Chapter 3. This suggests that findings may be ambivalent and relational to other factors such as cultural and social capital and the perceived *capacity to aspire.*

In the next chapter, I turn to an examination of the backdrop of this study: Iceland. This chapter aims to give the reader an understanding of the importance of this study for Iceland. This chapter provides historical and demographic context and explains cultural aspects of Iceland that may not be clear to a non-native Icelander.

3 Iceland

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the changes Iceland has undergone over the past few years, as well as explain the importance of my study for Iceland. I will cover the current law and policy regarding immigration, demographic changes, and explain the Icelandic educational system. The second and last section is on the Icelandic school system. This section will offer a basic explanation of the Icelandic educational system. It will explore school policy, its main criticisms, and how students of foreign background fare in comparison to those of Icelandic background in an international context.

3.1 National identity – scepticism towards the foreign

In this section I offer a detailed backdrop of this study. The study is set in Iceland, a country often considered homogeneous, both linguistically as well as in terms of the country's ethnic composition. To understand the Icelandic social landscape, some clarification and explanations are needed. To a native Icelander, the tacit characteristics of a cultural system and unspoken undertone of communal rules or habits may be clear. Yet, for an *outsider* peeking in, this section serves as a roadmap to understand social negotiations that may only be visible to an *insider.*

Situated midway between Greenland and Norway, Iceland is a small island in the middle of the Atlantic. An isolated country, Iceland has the smallest population of the Nordic countries and least densely populated (Eurostat, 2020a, 2020b)[5,6]. The settlement of Iceland began in the mid-800s, with settlers mainly arriving from Norway, during a period of expansion of Scandinavians, with a with a stopover in Britain, Ireland, and the islands north and west of Scotland (Tomasson, 1980). For several centuries, it was under the Danish crown. In 1918, Iceland gained sovereignty and by 1944 it obtained independence. The language, culture, and history of Iceland are, therefore, closely aligned with its neighbouring countries (Vikør, 2000). Thus, Icelanders mainly originate from Northern Europe, with the population overwhelmingly identifying as White. The country's isolated geographical position is perhaps best portrayed by its common genealogy database, through which Icelanders can trace their lineage back to the original settlers of the country (Islendingabok.is, n.d.).

Icelandic laws and policies regarding foreigners portray scepticism towards an external threat that may taint the *pureness* of what is Icelandic. The first holistic legislation on immigration matters, the *Act on the Surveillance of Foreigners* (I. Lög um eftirlit með útlendingum), was enacted in 1920. It replaced a few paragraphs that already existed on the matter and was later revised in 1936 and 1965 (Stjórnartíðindi fyrir Ísland árið 1920; Þingskjal 698, 2001-2002). Emphasis was placed on surveillance, and *The Surveillance of Foreigners* (I. Útlendingaeftirlitið), what later became The Directorate of Immigration (I. Útlendingastofnun), was founded as a department within police (Lög um útlendinga 96/2002; Jónsson, 1938;

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[5] This refers to the five independent Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.
[6] For context, the population of Iceland was 364,134 in 2020, which is slightly more than the population of London borough of Newham (353.245, according to London datastore (https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/land-area-and-population-density-ward-and-borough)). With regards to population density, this would equal to the population of Newham living across Scotland and Wales, or approximately 3.5 per square kilometer.

Þingskjal 783, 1995-1996) [7]. It was only in 2002 that plenary changes were made, and The Act on the Surveillance of Foreigners was replaced by the Act on Foreigners (Lög um útlendinga 96/2002; Lög um útlendinga nr 80/2016).

When Iceland gained sovereignty, it formed its own foreign policy based upon the general rule of neutrality towards any international conflict (Hálfdanarson, 2011). This neutrality was put to the test in the lead up to and during the Second World War, when the government was "*in principle against giving Jews a residence permit*" (Bergsson, 2017, p. 237). In fact, despite boasting about their generosity towards refugees the numbers of Jewish refugees who had been allowed to stay could be counted on two hands (ibid; Baldvinsson, 2015). The alleged incompatibility of Jewish people with Icelanders was framed as a national threat, such that the nation had the "*holy duty to protect the Icelandic race, the Nordic and Celtic blood, so a strong foreign race, that can eradicate the Nordic ancestry after few generations, thereto is not blended*" (Vísir, 11 December 1938, p. 2). The obstinance against Jewish people was not unique, but rather it was against foreigners generally, both with regards to work and their alleged incompatibility with Icelanders; similar disapproval was to be found towards the British, and US soldiers who occupied Iceland from 1940 (Whitehead, 1999; Hálfdanarson, 2011). Similar issues arose in the mid-20th century when the Icelandic government made a secret treaty with the US for a military base. In it, the US agreed to an unofficial ban on stationing Black military personnel in Iceland; this agreement lasted well into the mid-1960s (Ingimundarson, 2004; MacGregor, 1981).

Laws and policies are not created and passed in a vacuum. They can either be interpreted as a social phenomenon, a common consensus on traditions and norms at a given time, or as an authoritative command on how to behave. Regardless of which we believe to be a truer representation of laws, the legislation will tell a story. Laws set the scene and are indicative of a Zeitgeist at a particular time.

One could argue that Icelandic identity is an outcome of the nation's history, complete with a battle of independence and hardship alongside formidable forces of nature. However, claims of innocence are important to the Icelandic perception of itself in relation to the rest of the world; it sees itself not as a coloniser, but rather as a country that had to fight off continued

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[7] The *Act on the Surveillance of Foreigners* (Lög um eftirlit með útlendingum), was mainly on who could come and stay in the country, the governmental authority to deport those who did not comply to the Act, and how the police, on behalf of the government, could surveillance foreign nationals in the country (Stjórnartíðindi fyrir Ísland árið 1920; Þingskjal 698, 2001-2002).

external influence. Such rhetoric can make it difficult to address racism or other discrimination (Loftsdóttir, 2017).

In the following sections, I will first explain the demographic changes that have taken place over the last few decades that resulted in Iceland's transition from a homogeneous society to a multicultural one; I will also explain the reasons behind these changes. Then, I explore the role of language and how, through the country's geographical isolation and long-rooted tradition of story-telling and written documents, the language becomes an entity or an unquestionable part of Iceland, just like the mountains or the rivers, that require protection from being tainted. Last, I will briefly touch on the issue of equality and the deep-rooted idea of a classless society. The bonds between perceived purity from external threat and egalitarianism are closely linked to Icelandic identity. These dynamics will be further discussed in the next sections.

3.1.1 A country under revision: demographic changes in Iceland

The population of Iceland has grown steadily in the past few years, reaching 364,134 in 2020, the largest it has ever been (Statistics Iceland, 2020e). Parallel to this increase, the foreign population has grown significantly, moving from a homogeneous population to a more diverse society. As of 1st of January 2020, there were 49,393 foreign nationals (13.5% of the total population). However, that only tells half the story. Foreign nationals are those who have a nationality other than Icelandic and thus changeable. Therefore, it is also important to look at foreign background, as it is a fixed background variable. First generation immigrants, those born in another country and whose parents are also foreign born, numbered 55,354 in 2020. Second generation immigrants, born in Iceland to parents who were born elsewhere, numbered 5,684. That means that first- and second-generation immigrants were 16.8% of the Icelandic population in 2020. If we further include the 18,843 people who are of mixed background, that is one Icelandic parent and another who is foreign born, people of foreign background count for 21.9% of the total population, as depicted in figure 1 below (Statistics Iceland, 2020d). To understand the composition of the foreign population, age, gender, and nationalities, we must go back and examine how immigration in Iceland has evolved over time.

When the first comprehensive Act in foreign matters was passed, one major contributing factor shaped the legislation: they had to be self-sufficient. This is best portrayed by the fact that foreigners coming to Iceland, to temporarily or permanently, had to prove that they were able to financially support themselves, without accepting any *poverty allowance* (I.

fátækrastyrkur) during the first two years of arrival. Yet, in 1927, laws were passed to heavily regulate the influx of foreigners and to preserve jobs for Icelanders. With few and strict exemptions, foreigners were prohibited from work. Exemption were applied for "people of skill/knowledge" (I. kunnáttumenn) or if there was a shortage of local workers (Lög um rjett erlendra manna til að stunda atvinnu á Íslandi, 1927). The approach to allowing foreign labour in cases of shortage reflects an outlook that foreigners are merely a source of labour, when needed.

Until the mid-nineties, the proportion of people with a citizenship other than Icelandic remained around 2% of the total population, but after signing the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement of 1994 (94/1/EC, ECSC), the foreign population began to increase (Statistics Iceland, 2020c; Þórðardóttir, 2011). Following the EEA agreement, the numbers of immigrants rose steadily. Between 1996 and 2005, the proportion of immigrants living in the country went from 2% of the population to 4.4.%. From 2005 to 2009, the number of immigrants had increased by 220%, mostly due to an expanding employment market and a rise in labour demand, which exceeded supply (Statistics Iceland, 2020d; Þórðardóttir, 2011). As figure 1 depicts, the increase of second-generation immigrants and those of mixed parentage was a much more gradual process, yet both groups are slowly becoming a larger proportion of the total population.
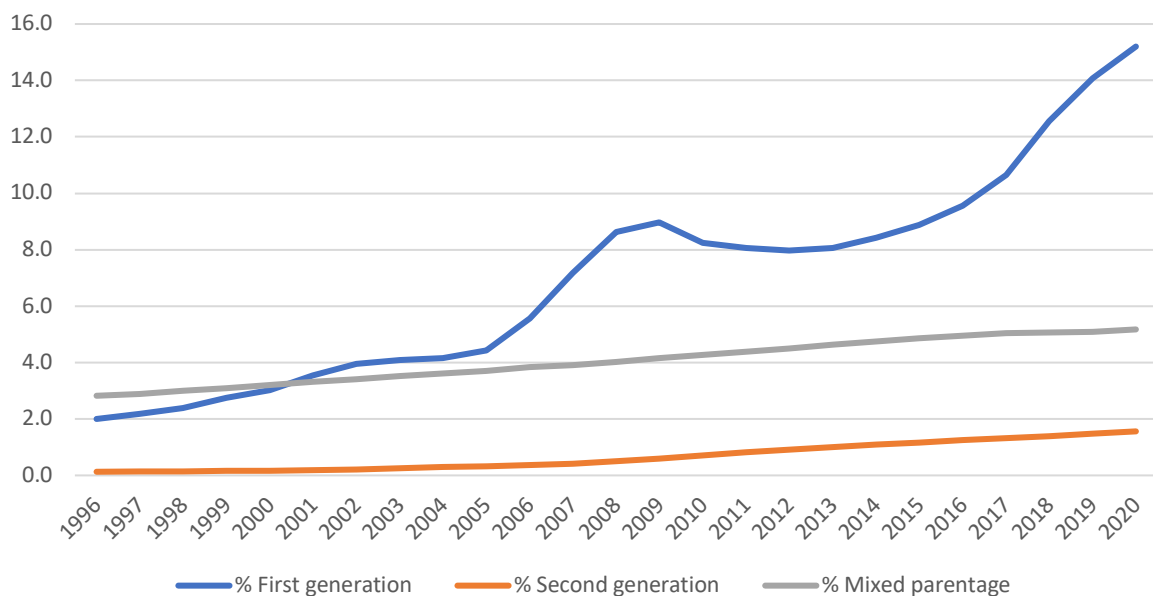
Figure 1:The percentage of first- and second-generation immigrants and people of mixed background, in relation to the total Icelandic population (Statistics Iceland, 2020d, calculations by author)[8]

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[8] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.12

Figure 2 shows that there has been a steady increase of women with foreign citizenship, whereas men have followed a different course. At the turn of the century, those with a foreign citizenship were predominantly women, but changed following the increased demand for labour in the leading up to the collapse of the banks in 2008. In the following years, the number of men with a foreign citizenship decreased for a short while, but it increased again after 2013. As of 1st of January 2020, men were in the majority (1.43 men for every woman), a short cry from the 1.6:1 gender ratio in 2007 (Statistics Iceland, 2020d).[9]
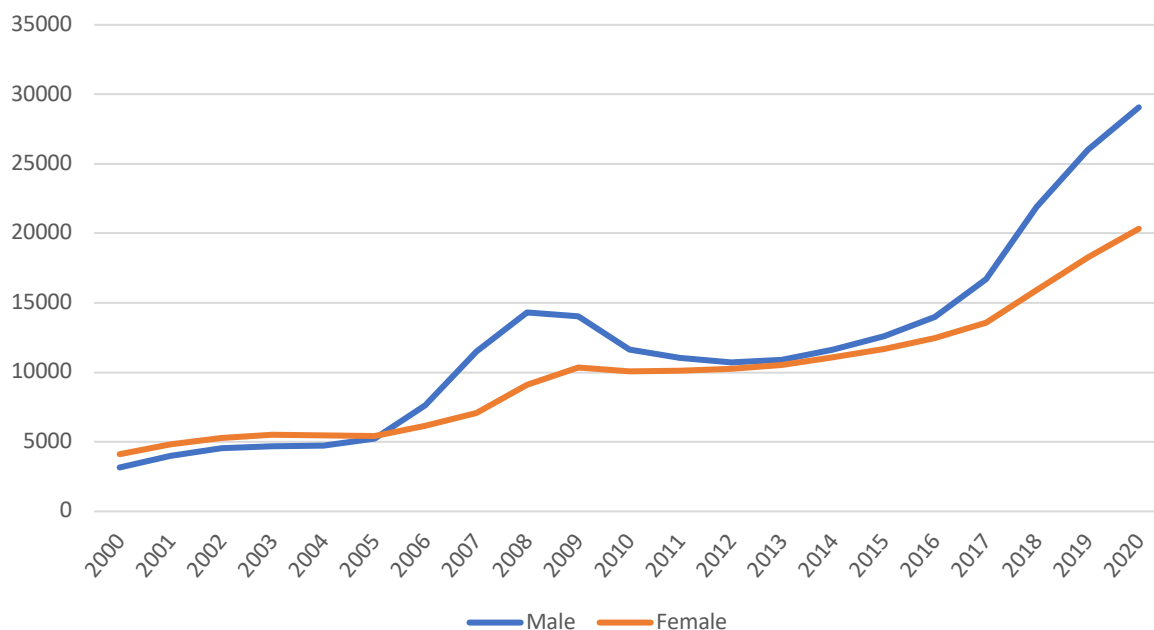
Figure 2: Individuals with foreign citizenship living in Iceland, by gender (Statistics Iceland, 2020d, calculations by author).

During the first decade of the 21st century, most immigrants came for work and as evidence to that, the unemployment rate for immigrants during that period was even lower than for Icelanders. This group was, however, more affected by the Icelandic financial crisis. For example, the unemployment rate for Polish citizens went up to a staggering 20.1% in 2010 and 2011 (Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015; Vinnumálastofnun, 2013). Unfortunately, since March 2020, unemployment rates have increased again and in the autumn of 2020, 40% of all people registered as unemployed were foreign nationals (Vinnumálastofnun, n.d.).[10]

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[9] The number of foreign citizens and the gender divide may have changed following the COVID-19 pandemic.

[10] The Directorate of Labour updates their numbers monthly. The numbers here are from September 2020.

With regards to an ever-growing foreign population, we have seen a similar trend among children. Since 1996, there has been a steady increase in the number of children of foreign background (i.e., a person under the age of 18 who is first- or second-generation immigrant or of mixed parentage). In 2020, first- and second-generation immigrant children under the age of 17 were 10.4% of all minors; if we include those of mixed parentage, the percentage of minors with a foreign background is 22.4% (Statistics Iceland, 2020d). Among children of mixed parentage there has been a year-on-year increase by 1.2-5.9% and has been on a steady incline for the past 20 years. As the figure below depicts, the number of first-generation immigrants grew extensively in the years leading up to the financial crisis in 2008, going up by 31% between 2006 and 2007. There was a slight decrease during the Icelandic financial crisis, but the figure has slowly begun to grow again. Despite the slight decrease at the end of the 2000s, the number of first-generation immigrant children is still five times greater than just 20 years ago (Statistics Iceland, 2020d).
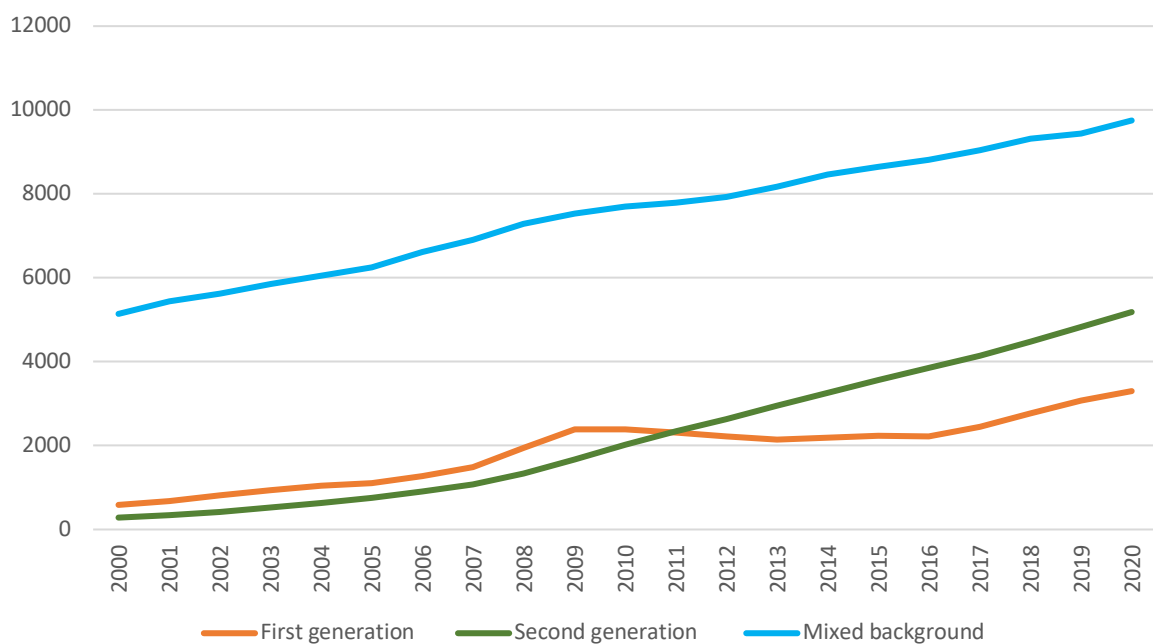
Figure 3: Number of children of foreign background from 2000 to 2020, by background (Statistics Iceland, 2020d, calculations by author).

The population of second-generation immigrants followed a similar pattern as immigrant children, but it remained slightly smaller. However, despite the financial crisis, the second-generation population grew steadily until 2011, when it surpassed immigrant children and has remained since. Second generation children, aged 0-18, are now over 18 times more numerous than they were in 2000 (Statistics Iceland, 2020d).

Today, the largest foreign population is Polish. According to Statistics Iceland, there are 20,649 individuals with Polish citizenship living in Iceland, or roughly 42% of all foreign nationals. The second largest group comes from Lithuania (9.4%), followed by Latvians and Romanian nationals (4.2%) (Statistics Iceland, 2020f)[11]. In the next three sections, we will review historical changes in Icelandic society over the past decades. Doing so may shed light on the present.

3.1.2 *'Icelandic is your tongue, pure as gold'[12]*

The Icelandic language plays a large role in the Icelandic national identity. The language simultaneously represents the pure that must be guarded from the external and is solely in possession of Icelanders; and it is also the means through which *heroic* stories of the forefathers have lived throughout centuries. To better understand this role, this section will provide a brief historical overview, taking us all the way to the 12th century. The Icelandic Sagas, a written documentation of the early settlers, can be traced to as early as the 12th and 13th century. They were written in Icelandic, despite being under the Danish Rule for centuries, and still today remains accessible to a modern speakers of Icelandic (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2001; Spolsky, 2004; Vikør, 2010). The Sagas are a testament to the historical roots of the Icelandic nation. Thus, they symbolise the purest form of the Icelandic language and serve as a common ground for national pride and unity (Pálsson, 1995, p. 127).

As early as the late 17th century, systematic measures were put in place to *purify* and *safeguard* the language from being tainted by foreign influence (Pálsson, 1995; Spolsky, 2004; Vikør, 2010). In one of the earliest documentations thereof, Crymogæa, Icelanders were encouraged to preserve the purity of the language as "*purely it is spoken by Icelanders alone, and thus we call it Icelandic*" (Jónsson, 1609/1985, p. 96)[13]. Whilst under the Danish rule, the main concern was with Danish influence, as it was the competing language of the upper-class, business, and higher education. With the Second World War and the concurrent independence of Iceland, another threat to the purity of the language presented itself through the occupation of the British and American armies: the English language (Spolsky, 2004).

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[11] Please refer to appendix 10.1 for a more comprehensive breakdown of the background of foreign nationals in Iceland.

[12] "*Íslensk er tunga þín, skír eins og gull*" This is a line from the poem "Ísland er land þitt" (e. Iceland is your land) by Margrét Jónsdóttir (1893-1971)

[13] Crymogæa: þættir úr sögu Íslands, by Arngrímur Jónsson, was originally published in Latin, Crymogaea sive rerum Islandicarvm libri III, in 1609. In 1985, the book was translated to Icelandic by Dr. Jakob Benediktsson and published, upon which this English translation is based.

In 2000, Vikør described Iceland as *"practically the only example in Europe (and possibly in the world) of a linguistically homogeneous nation-state"* (p.125). He asserted that the language, largely without regional dialects, serves as a common denominator for Icelandic nationhood, in addition to national heritage and literature that has remained without outside influence due to its geographical isolation. One could argue that being constantly under siege from foreign influence has motivated a purist outlook on the preservation of the language and national identity. During the 19th century, the Icelandic language was used politically. It played a large role in the nationalist agenda of the movement seeking independence during the first half of the 20th century, and thereupon becoming a mean of social identification (Pálsson, 1995; Hálfdanarson, 2005). Surely, similar examples can be found in other corners of the world, but the extremity of the purist agenda poses the question of whether it borders on xenophobia, in which the limit of being an Icelander and identifying as *Icelandic* is defined by the purity of the language (Pálsson and Durrenberger, 1992; Pálsson, 1995; Albury, 2016).

In their research on class, Björnsson, Edelstein, and Kreppner (1977) describe how Icelanders repudiate the existence of class by justifying that "we all speak the same language," (p. 17) signalling the idea of a ethnically and culturally homogeneous society. Such ideas are in line with the policy of maintaining an untainted language under the shared ownership of the entire nation. This is truthful to the extent that differences in dialect are minuscule, yet there still are plenty of cases where non-standard Icelandic is associated with class and status[14].

By maintaining the ideology of an *unspoiled language*, the language is given the characteristics of a fixed entity rather than a dynamic means of communication that changes with time and context. A changing society surely challenges the ideas of what it is to be Icelandic and the language's role in the nation's identity. Such *linguistic purism* clearly poses a barrier for any outsider wanting to become part of the society and it poses the question of whether the language is open enough for foreigners to integrate (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). Studies suggest that the Icelandic language is a major barrier for non-native workers in Iceland (Kristjánsdóttir and Christiansen, 2019; Skaptadóttir and Innes, 2017), inasmuch that workers reported that simply *being* a non-native speaker was enough for them to be disregarded (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016), undermining their status in the labour market, and

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[14] Danish was the language of business and, thus, the upper-class. Later, the class bias of language usage became apparent towards to lower class (Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson, 2010; Pálsson, 1995; Spolsky, 2004). Other examples are the "dative disease" (I. þágufallssýki) and a pronunciation variation that could be referred to as "bevelled pronunciation" (I. flámæli), were both equated with limited intelligence or the lower class (Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson, 2010; Halldórsson, 1978; Pálsson, 1995; Pálsson and Durrenberger, 1992).

leaving them with a sense of being a second-class citizen (Kristjánsdóttir and Christiansen, 2017). One thing is clear though; the country and the Icelandic language are not as isolated and homogenous today as originally imagined. In this next section, I will discuss the idea of Iceland as an egalitarian society, its image as classless, and opportunities and resources available to non-Icelanders.

3.1.3 Equality

In one of his most acclaimed books, *Icelandic Culture*, Sigurður Nordal tells the story of an agent who was sent to meet with the Vikings, who were at shore in the south with their large fleet. He asked to meet their leader, but the answer he received was, "We are all equals" (Nordal, 1942). The story's moral of Icelandic egalitarian heritage and its classless society has persisted (Oddsson, 2011, 2012; Bjarnason, 1974, 1976) and such rhetoric is still upheld through public discourse (see for example Oddsson, 1999-2000; Gunnlaugsson, 2013). Essentially these class ideas are rooted in an ideology of egalitarianism and homogeneity (Durrenberger, 1996). In comparison to neighbouring countries, the Icelandic society up until the 20th century can scarcely be referred to as a *class society.* Nevertheless, there are indicators of a vague everyday stigmatization based on class, such as networking of families who held noble status as well as by the fact that landowners or those who had access to land, held clear privileges such as being sanctioned to marry, unlike *paupers,* those cared by the parishes, who were at the clear bottom of the hierarchy (Hreinsson, 2005; Rúnarsdóttir, 2007).

In 1974, Bjarnason concluded that despite admitting economic differences and status, Icelanders were reluctant to acknowledge class (Björnson et al., 1977, Broddason and Webb, 1975; Tomasson, 1980). One suggested reason suggested for this reluctance is the importance of a kinship system, where social networks, to great extent in the form of relatives, are a common resource Icelanders share (Björnson et al., 1977, Broddason and Webb, 1975; Ólafsson, 2011). This kinship system still remains important (Auðardóttir and Magnúsdóttir, 2020). This "*social fabric of a family society*" (Ólafsson, 2011, p. 26) may thus enshroud other forms of inequality, allowing the country to appear as an economically classless society.

Icelandic society has gone through tremendous change in the past couple of decades and, as society changes, one can assume that social conditions have followed. The majority of Icelanders view themselves as middle-class, or roughly 80% claim a lower or upper middle-class label, whereas only 16% viewed themselves as working class (Oddsson, 2010). On the contrary, ethnic minority groups in Iceland tend to view themselves as members of a lower

class or status in comparison to native Icelanders (Oddsson, 2020; Einarsdóttir, Heijstra, Rafnsdóttir, 2018). There are signs of stratification and difficult working conditions in the Icelandic labour market. Non-natives report racism, micro-aggressions, and negative attitudes in the workplace (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Kristjánsdóttir and Christiansen, 2019; Loftsdóttir, 2019; Pétursdóttir, 2013; Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska, 2019). Minority groups are at a disadvantage, since employers are more reluctant to hire them (Wojtyńska and Skaptadóttir, 2019; Kristinsson, and Sigurðardóttir, 2019), they are overly represented in low-skilled and migrant dominated sectors, and they experience little mobility across different sectors (Napierała and Wojtyńska, 2017). Neither their education nor their overall contribution to the labour market is recognised; and they receive lower income (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Magnússon, et al., 2018; Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska, 2019). Economic factors aside, studies further suggest that migrants experience restricted access to networks and social capital (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Skaptadóttir and Innes, 2017; Kristjánsdóttir and Christiansen, 2017).

In this section, we discussed the idea of an egalitarian society that formerly prided itself of classlessness. Similarly, as with language, a changing demographic poses questions and presents new challenges to the general ideas of a society. Leaving such challenges unrecognised is fundamental to the reproduction of inequality (Sauder, 2005; Oddsson, 2012). It matters who upholds views of alleged equality of opportunities and classlessness, and who benefits when "*class has more salience to those who experience its constraints than to those who enjoy its privileges*" (Jackman and Jackman, 1983, pp. 51). It is a matter of differentiating the haves from the have-nots, those who hold power and those who do not. What this section has showed us are difficult working conditions, in which non-native workers experience an unequal labour market and do not have the same economic opportunities. Their cultural capital is not valued and omitted from social spaces, thus denied social capital. Such disadvantage can affect the next generation, yet the extent remains unclear. Next, we will learn about the Icelandic educational system and how students of Icelandic and foreign background fare.

3.2 The Icelandic school system

The fundamental principle underlying the Icelandic educational system is equal access for everyone, irrespective of mental or physical attributes. This is also an ethos underpinning the Constitution of the Icelandic Republic (no 33/1944; Lög um leikskóla no 90/2008; Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008; Lög um framhaldsskóla no 92/2008). This philosophy is further defined in the National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools, where inclusive education (I. skóli án aðgreiningar) is defined by having a nearby school where children's educational and social needs are met, guided by personal qualities, democracy, and social justice (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneyti, 2013a, p. 43).

The Icelandic educational can be divided into four tiers (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). The first level in the Icelandic educational system is **preschool** or **pre-primary school** (I. leikskóli). Albeit not compulsory, preschool is officially defined as the first educational level and "*the beginning of formal education of the individual*" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 32) for all children below compulsory school age (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008). Preschools shall all comply to a National Curriculum Guide for preschools from 2011 and the guide gives them a framework to work within (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Municipalities shall ensure a place at a preschool and are responsible for their operation (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008).

The second level is **compulsory education** (I. grunnskóli), which normally lasts 10 years and is for children ages six to sixteen. If certain criteria are met, a student may either enter or complete compulsory school early, but according to the Act on Compulsory education compulsory education should not exceed 10 years (Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008). This level of education consists of the equivalent to primary and lower secondary schools, taught within the same institution, or sometimes run as two separate schools. Municipalities are responsible for running and funding general compulsory schools. They shall provide children with a permanent residency, a place at a school, as stated in the Act on Compulsory Education but municipalities may arrange for other municipalities to take on a student. In that case, the receiving municipality assumes the same responsibilities for the child in their own municipality.

There are three forms of compulsory schools in Iceland: public schools, private schools, and schools for children with special needs. In certain cases, parents may apply for home schooling, yet, as stated in the Act on the Education and Recruitment of Preschool Teachers, Compulsory School Teachers, Upper Secondary School Teachers and Principals, whoever the

educator must be an authorised compulsory schoolteacher (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnendur við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla nr 87/2008; Reglugerð um heimakennslu á grunnskólastigi nr 531/2009). The vast majority of compulsory schools are public schools, but in 2019 less than one percent was privately run (Statistics Iceland, 2020j). Compulsory schools are legally bound to comply with the 2011 National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools (Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneytið, 2011, 2013).

The third level of the Icelandic educational system is **upper secondary school** (I. framhaldsskóli), for students who have completed compulsory education. Unlike compulsory schools, municipalities are not responsible for upper secondary schools, which are in the hands of the government and adhere to the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture (I. Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið). Length of study is dependent upon how many credits the student finishes in a year and what kind of a certificate they work towards, but normally completion takes three to four years. Students can graduate with a matriculation certificate, journeyman certificate, or other equivalent examination (Lög um framhaldsskóla nr. 92/2008).

At the fourth and top tier are **universities** (I. háskóli). Currently there are seven universities in total; four are run by the state and comply with the Act on Government Universities and three are privately run with state support (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, n.d.; Lög um háskóla nr 63/2006; Lög um opinbera háskóla nr 85/2008).
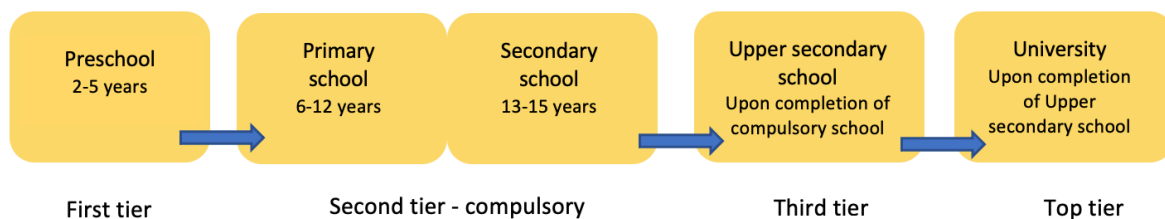
Figure 4: Explanatory diagram of the Icelandic educational system.

The figure above represents the Icelandic educational system. First is the pre-primary school level, similar to what is referred to as nursery and reception in the UK. This is a non-compulsory level and fits with level 0 of UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The second tier is compulsory education, which both entails Primary school (ISCED level 1) and Secondary school (ISCED level 2). The third tier is Upper Secondary education, which is non-compulsory (ISCED level 3). Finally, there is the top tier,

which is Tertiary education (ISCED level 5 and beyond) (United Nations, Educational scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012).

3.2.1 Changing needs

Hand in hand with the changing demographic of Icelandic society, the composition in Icelandic compulsory schools has changed over the past decade. In 2006, there were 980 students (2.2% of all students) who were of a nationality other than Icelandic in Year 1 to 10 of compulsory education. There were slightly more students (1,613) who had a native language other than Icelandic. By 2019, there were 2,900 compulsory students of non-Icelandic nationality, or 6.3% of all students, and there were 5,342 students with another native language (Statistics Iceland, 2020d, 2020k). Thus, it is safe to say that the landscape has changed drastically in schools. The demographic shift poses new challenges to school compliance with the inclusive school policy to which they are legally bound.

The first policy on the integration of immigrants was approved in 2007, with the primary goal to "*ensure that all residents of Iceland enjoy equal opportunities and are active participants in society in as many fields as possible*" (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 2). In his introduction to the policy, the former Minster of Social Affairs, Magnús Stefánsson maintained:

> *Special emphasis is put on the preservation of the Icelandic language. It is important to make this clear. The Icelandic language is shared by the whole nation and preserves its history, culture and sense of self. It is also an instrument for social communication. Knowledge of Icelandic is the key to Icelandic society and can be the decisive factor regarding immigrants' integration into society. (Stefánsson, 2007)*

The policy particularly addresses educational matters and emphasises equality, but also the importance of speaking Icelandic. The language is claimed to be "*one of the most important keys to a new society and the fundamental prerequisite for a full participation and peoples' adaptation to Icelandic society*" (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 13, translated by author), implying that integration is a one way street, where Icelandic society is a static entity to which immigrants must adapt. In the Act on Compulsory Schools, the role of compulsory schools is "*to cooperate with homes in promoting the all-round development of all pupils*". Good practise in compulsory schools is further defined as being "*characterised by tolerance and charity, **the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture**, equality, democratic cooperation, responsibility,*

consideration, forgiveness and respect for human worth"; it's role is to further "*strengthen **their proficiency in Icelandic language and their understanding of Icelandic society, its history and specificities,** people's living conditions and of the individual's duties to the community, the environment and the world.*" (Lög um grunnskóla, nr 91/2008; Compulsory School Act no 91/2008, article 2 and 3, highlighted by author for emphasis). Icelandic culture, heritage, Christian faith, and Icelandic *specificities* are central to the Act. Much like the 2007 policy, integration of immigrants and immigrant issues are represented as a one-way street of assimilation, rather than a dual path of integration.

The National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools has been criticised for its similar nationalistic ideology (Jónsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Kristjánsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010), which does not "allow for or presume contributions from other cultures and religions" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008, p. 131). Earlier National Curricula were published prior to the Policy on the Integration of Immigrants; so in 2011 and 2013, when the National Curriculum underwent fundamental changes, students of foreign background understandably gained a larger role (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2006; Mennta- og Menningamálaráðuneytið, 2011, 2013a). Regardless, there are still indicators that the educational system does not promote equality and equity to the extent intended.

Although laws and policies seem clear on the objective of an inclusive educational system and there is a general consensus about the ideology of equitable education, there appears to be a gap between intent and implementation; this is mainly due to funding, as well as lack of clarity as to what *inclusive education* means in practice. Research in Iceland on inclusive education has largely been around ability/disability, rather than on inclusion on the basis of ethnicity, race, culture, or language diversity (Wolff et al., 2021). Moreover, the operationalisation of said policy varies across schools, leaving teachers ill-equipped to deal with the specific demands of their diverse study body (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). Many schools have successfully implemented learning communities for everyone, regardless of their background, but they are often driven by an enthusiastic leader within the school community. The downside is that the burden and stress of a complex field is carried by few staff members within the school, instead of being equally spread across the school (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008, 2016, 2020; Jónsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir, 2020).

The main issue remains that where schools do not use the opportunity to build on the strengths of diversity, students' background, culture, and language represent missed

opportunities to educate and contribute to the evolution of an open society that values the strengths of each of its members (Emilsson Peskova and Ragnarsdóttir, 2018).

3.2.2 Same opportunity for everyone: The proof is in the pudding

Icelandic studies suggest that some schools are not fully equipped to respond to challenges that follow a more diverse student body. Whilst teachers may feel unsupported and out of their depth, families feel as if their children are not getting enough, or worse, that their culture is not understood. This may lead to a cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding between schools and the homes of the foreign-born families where the latter is trying to navigate an unfamiliar educational and social system, whilst combatting it all in a new language (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008, 2020; Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé and Meckl, 2018).

Moreover, students and teachers alike complain about inflexible pedagogical practices that allow little variety (Bjarnadóttir and Geirsdóttir, 2018; Ólafsdóttir and Magnúsdóttir, 2017). Ólafsdóttir and Magnúsdóttir (2017) suggest that the openness and opportunities of inclusive teaching practises diminishes in the upper classes of compulsory education. This manifests in little flexibility, immutable educational material and teaching techniques. According to the study, the main focus is on academic subjects that are seen as entry tickets for the next educational level: Icelandic and Maths. Such a rigid framework, they maintain, further separates the students, at the expense of marginalised groups.

The ideology of an inclusive educational system calls for inventive pedagogical approaches, but the ideology as such is also a testament to a societal contract on *what* education should entail and for *who* education is provided. And it goes beyond the schools. A comprehensive study on the distribution of economic and educational capital (having a postgraduate degree) between school districts in the capital area of Iceland, Magnúsdóttir, Auðardóttir, and Stefánsson (2020) concluded that although most areas are rather diverse, albeit in a different manner across space and time, there are also indicators of areas where economic and educational capital is more concentrated. Moreover, there was a moderate to strong positive (Pearson's) correlation between the proportion of Icelandic born families and educational capital and economic capital, both in the form of income and assets. This study suggests a clear differentiation of wealth distribution across school districts.

These findings are important to further understand the role of *capital* and *class*, in a Bourdieusian sense, and residency. Jónsson (2019) suggests that, when controlling for class, there is no significant difference between how students fare in the capital area and in the rural

areas. Such findings refute former ideas of the ways in which the rural schools were lacking in comparisons to schools in the capital area, how they deviate from the norm, disregarding the composition of residents in rural areas.

In addition, there is a gap in educational attainment between students of Icelandic and foreign background. In general, students who are first generation immigrants tend to perform worse academically than natives (OECD, 2016, 2019). Time in the country matters, but immigrants who have spent more time in a country tend to perform better than those who have more recently arrived. Thus, children who are older at the time of arrival and have limited language proficiency are the most vulnerable group at the end of compulsory school. Second generation immigrant students (here defined as those born in the country and whose parents are both born in another country) tend to perform better than first-generation students, but there are indications that they still perform worse than natives. Although this is the general tendency, cross-country comparisons have shown the opposite in some countries. The variation in the performance of immigrant students, after controlling for socio-economic status, suggests that other external factors, such as policy, have a role in mitigating this performance gap (OECD, 2016).

In the latest PISA study, conducted in 2018, non-immigrant students in Icelandic schools outperformed their immigrant peers (first- or second-generation immigrants); this is as one might expect. The difference, however, remains stark even when controlling for the students' and schools' socio-economic profile. Unexplained variance in literacy for first generation immigrants and native Icelandic students was equivalent to over two school years,[15] yielding a particularly wide gap compared with other OECD countries. A similarly wide gap was seen between natives and non-natives in mathematics (equivalent to 1.5-2 school years) and science (equivalent to two school years) (Menntamálastofnun, 2019; OECD, 2019).

The latest study further measured academic resilience among immigrant students. This was defined as the percentage of students who are able to attain the top quarter of reading performance, compared with others in their country. In this comparison, immigrant students in Iceland were at the bottom of the barrel, where only 7% were deemed *academically resilient[16]*. Contextual factors that are associated with academic resilience are suggested to promote a

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[15] The difference between native Icelandic students and first generation immigrants was 79 points, and 69 points were the non-native students second generation immigrants in literacy, 55 points and 51 point in mathematics and 58-62 points in science, respectively. 30 PISA points equate to roughly one school year.

[16] Academic resilience among students is, as conceptualised by OECD is when they, despite socio-economic disadvantage, can still sustain high academic performance, against all odds. Academic performance, as well as socio-economic disadvantage is a relative measure, thus defined within each country. The average across the comparing OECD countries was 17% (OECD, 2019).

positive disciplinary climate, co-operation in school, greater parental support, the perception of teacher enthusiasm, as well as for students to have a mindset where they believe they can grow, rather than that their ability and intelligence is a fixed asset (Yeager and Dweck, 2012; OECD, 2019).

In terms of educational attainment, these findings suggest a major gulf between native and non-native students in Iceland. School systems play an important role in children reaching their full potential and nurturing their talent regardless of their background. How well students fare can be seen as an example of the inclusiveness of these systems. Furthermore, inclusive education can be seen as a social justice matter that ought to be the democratic right of all (Reay, 2012). In the next sections, we will look further into the difference between native and non-native students in the Icelandic educational system.

School choice

Dianne Reay (2006) argues that despite initiatives and policy changes towards *equity, freedom and choice* in the UK, it has added little to a more equal or fair educational system where the less affluent are left with the dregs left by the middle classes. Unfortunately, the next three sections may leave a similarly bitter taste in mouth.

As seen in figure 5, between 80-90% of students of Icelandic and mixed background choose a school where they can work towards a subject-based qualification (I. bóknám)[17], as opposed to vocational study (I. starfsnám) (Statistics Iceland 2020h).

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[17] Subject-based qualification (I. bóknám), leads to Matriculation Examination, which gives access to further education at University level. This is equivalent to Advanced Level (A-Level) in the UK. The other option is vocational studies (I. starfsnám) which prepares students for a particular trade or professional vocation. Both lines of study are at upper secondary level.

% of students who enrol in schools offering subject-based qualification
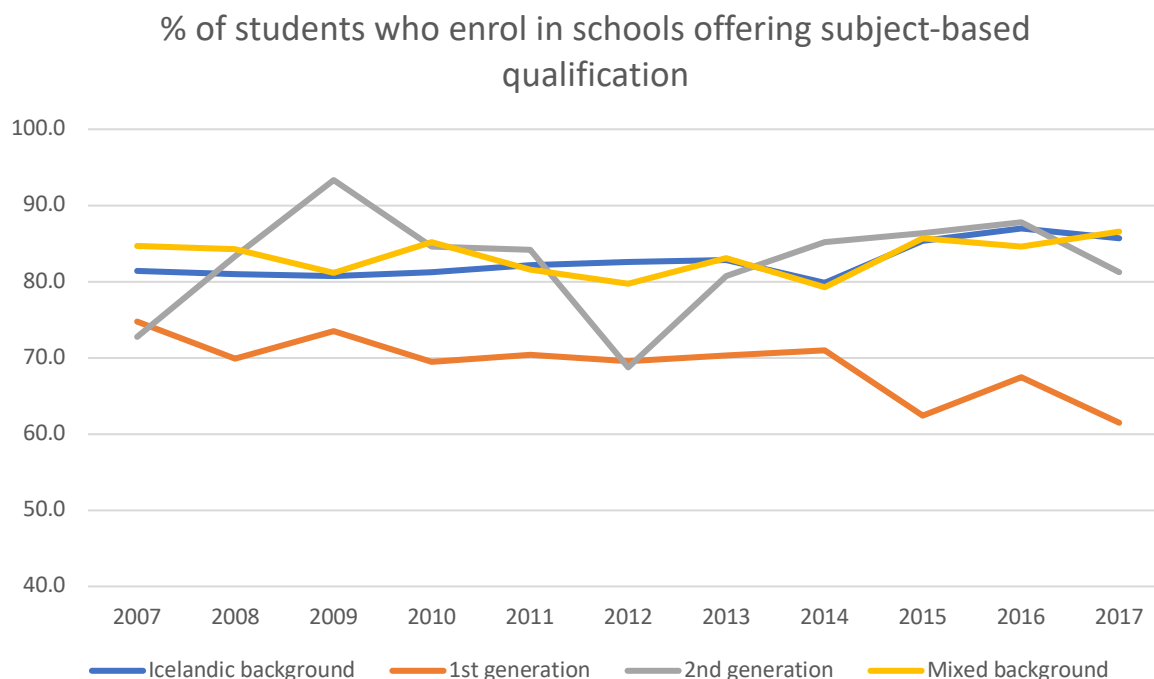
Figure 5: Percentage of students who attend a school that offers subject-based qualification, by background (Statistics Iceland, 2020h, calculations by author). Second generation immigrants (the grey line) are included in the graph, with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers[18].

The proportion of students who choose a school where they can work towards subject-based qualification is much lower for those who are first generation immigrants. In fact, what stands out is what appears to be a steady decline of students who opt for a subject-based qualification. The numbers for students who are second generation immigrants are included in the graph, but with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers, particularly the older numbers.

Schools that offer subject-based qualifications seem to appeal more to girls than boys, but a larger proportion of girls attends such schools. This trend can be seen across all backgrounds. If we focus on students who are first generation immigrants, we can see that between 62-74% of girls choose a school that offers subject-based qualification. This varies from year to year, but the percentage has remained similar in the past decade. However, what is striking in figure 6 is that for boys, who are first generation immigrants, there is a downward trend, where the proportion of those who attend subject-based upper secondary school has declined over the past decade (ibid).

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[18] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.12
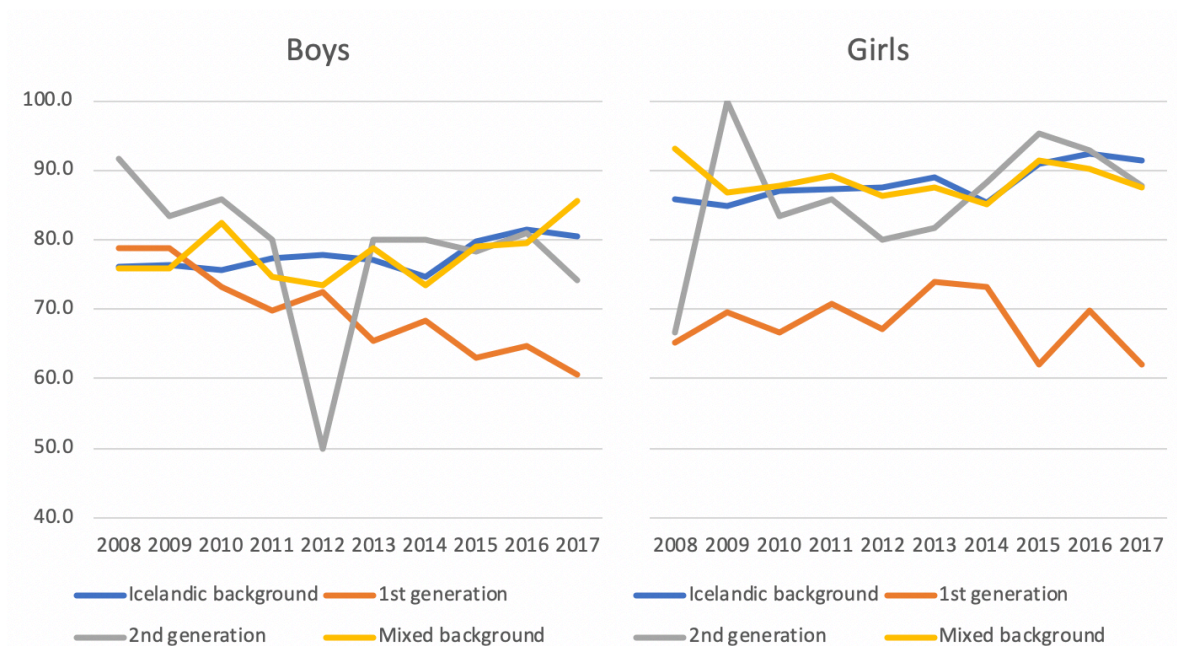
Figure 6: Percentage of students who attend a school that offers subject-based qualification, by background and gender (Statistics Iceland 2020h, calculations by author). Second generation immigrants (the grey line) are included in the graph, with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers[19].

These findings raise two serious questions on the openness of the educational system. First, this raises the question of whether a larger proportion of first-generation immigrant students are simply more interested in attaining a vocational degree or whether they do not see subject-based studies as an option for them. Second, why has there been a decline of boys who are first generation immigrants in subject-based education? This is a trend that is not present for boys of other background. These questions surely need to be addressed and they bring into question whether there is a limit to the inclusiveness of education.

Dropout rates

When they turn 16 years of age, students finish their compulsory education, with the majority of students, albeit not compulsory, advancing to upper secondary school or 90% amongst students of Icelandic background and 80-86% for those of foreign background (Blöndal, Jónasson, Tannhäuser, 2011; Statistics Iceland, 2020d, 2020h)[20]. A more pressing issue is the

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[19] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.12
[20] Second generation immigrants are not included as the numbers on Statistics Iceland do not add up. In 2017, 16 year old second generation immigrants were 50 in total, whereas according to Statistics Iceland, 62 enrolled in upper secondary school that same year, with no explanation available.

extent of dropouts from the upper secondary level. Despite high public expenditure in the educational system, this issue is suggested to be at the structural level in the ways in which student's needs are addressed and met. Another potential explanation is the lack of *attractiveness* of vocational education as an acceptable alternative to a subject-based qualification (OECD, 2012b). Furthermore, there appears to be a gap between students by background and where they reside but a larger proportion of students attending schools in the capital area graduate, in comparison to those attending schools outside the capital area; a larger percentage of students whose parents have a university degree enrol at an upper secondary school and are more likely to graduate and like in most OECD countries, students of foreign background are more likely to drop out of school than native students (Statistics Iceland 2018, 2020i; OECD, 2012a, 2016).

Drop out from upper secondary education after four years
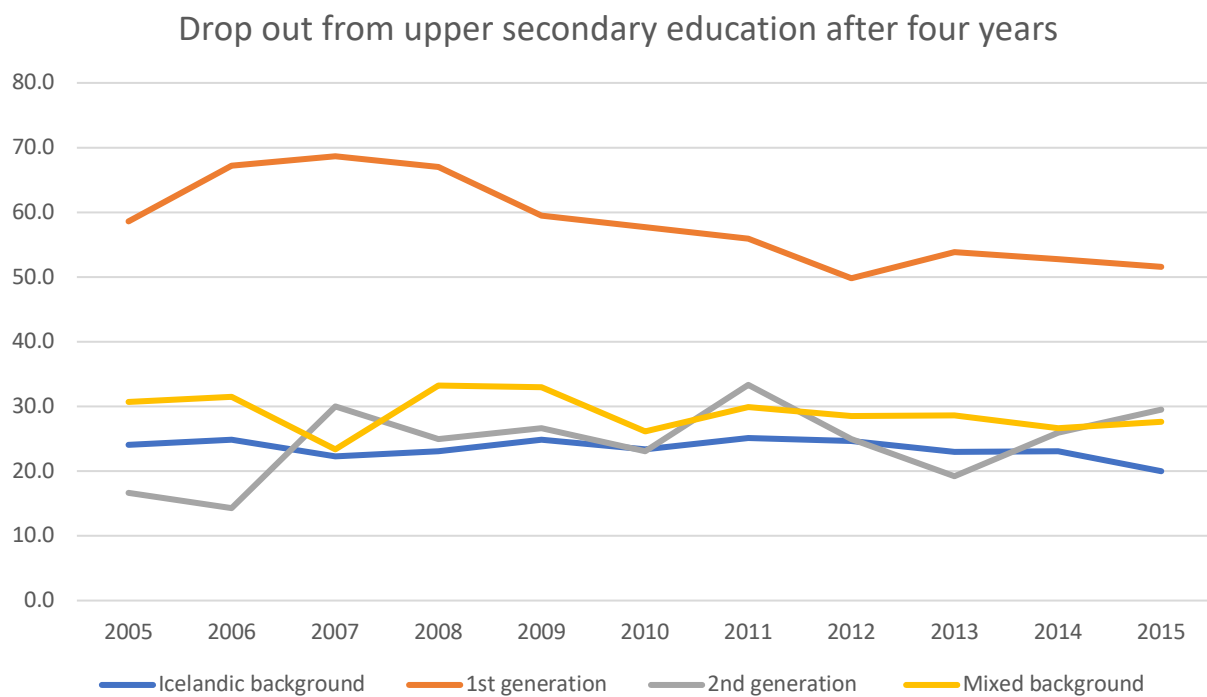
Figure 7: Percentage of students who had dropped out from upper secondary education within four years of enrolling, by background (Statistics Iceland, 2020b, calculations by author). Second generation immigrants (the grey line) are included in the graph, with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers[21].

Figure 7 shows the percentage of students who have dropped out after four years of education. The x-axis indicates *the year of enrolment*, and the y-axis indicates the percentage of students who had dropped out four years later. For example, we can see that roughly two out of three

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[21] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.12

first generation immigrant students who enrolled in 2006-2008 had dropped out of upper secondary school four years later. Furthermore, we can see that in 2019 (marked as the 2015 cohort in the graph), over half of the students who were first generation immigrants and who had enrolled in 2015 had already dropped out. The proportion of first generation immigrants who have dropped out of upper secondary school after four years of education, appears to be on the decline. Yet, the drop-out rate is very different for students of other backgrounds. Between 20-25% of students of Icelandic background had dropped out within four years of upper secondary education in the past 20 years; that figure was 25-30% for students of mixed background. Again, the numbers for second generation immigrants are included in the graph, but with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers, particularly the earlier years (Statistics Iceland, 2020b).
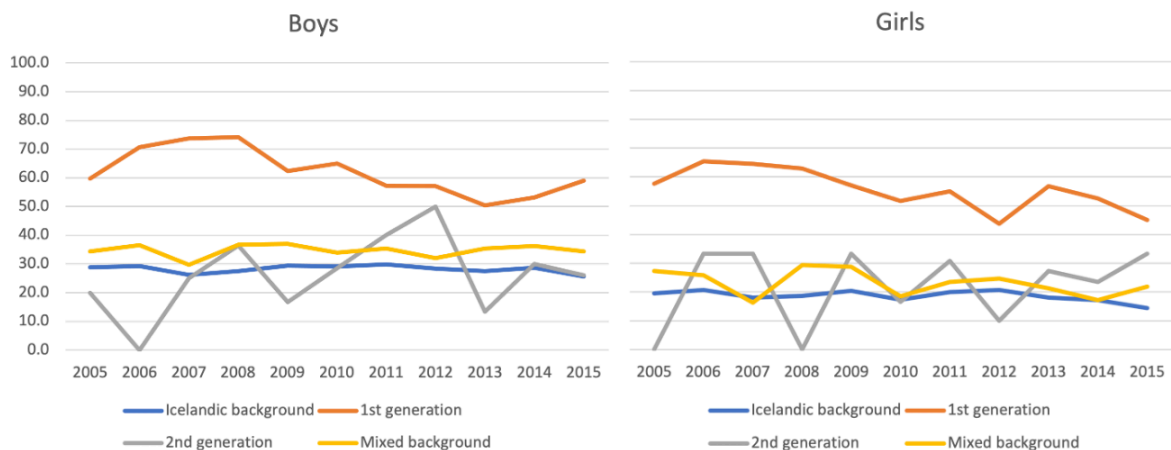
Figure 8: Percentage of students who had dropped out from upper secondary education within four years of enrolling, by background and gender (Statistics Iceland, 2020b, calculations by author). Second generation immigrants (the grey line) are included in the graph, with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers[22].

What can be clearly seen in figure 8 is the high drop-out rate amongst male and female students who are first generation immigrants, albeit relatively higher for boys. If we look at the boys, we can see that for the cohort that enrolled in 2007 and 2008, three out of four had dropped out four years later. The drop-out rate for boys has declined over the past 20 years. However, by 2019, 60% of the 2015 cohort had dropped out. A slightly smaller proportion of first-generation girls drops out, but two out of three of the 2006 and 2007 cohort had already dropped out four years later. The drop-out rate amongst girls has been on the decline, but in 2019, 45% of the

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[22] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.12

2015 cohort had dropped out. This does not mean, however, that the remainder has already graduated. During the past five years, 20-30% of boys who were first generation immigrants had graduated within four years of study, and 28-44% of girls (with the remaining students still in school). This is considerably low in comparison to students of Icelandic background, where 45-55% of boys and 60-70% of girls graduate within four years. As before, second generation immigrants are included in the graph, with the disclaimer that there are very few students behind these numbers (as few as one, in some cases). Thus, it is misleading to read anything into them (Statistics Iceland, 2020b).

The issue of high dropout rate seems to vary greatly based on the age of arrival to the country. This means that the drop out and graduation rate for students who arrived before the age of 7 is similar to students who are of a non-immigrant background. The drop-out rate for students who moved to the country aged 7 or older, is thus even greater in comparison with their native comrades, but in 2019 56.4% of the 2015 cohort had already dropped out (Statistics Iceland, 2020a, 2020-l). Such findings emphasise how *time in the country* plays a role in student's academic performance, where those who are older at the time of arrival are the most vulnerable group at the end of compulsory schools (OECD, 2016).

In 2012, The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), an independent human rights monitoring institution, released a report that addressed various issues on immigration matters in Iceland. The gap in drop out between children of foreign background and of Icelandic background was amongst other concerns the ECRI pointed out. The institution encouraged the authorities to address this problem and put effort in reducing the dropout rate. This would be done by encouraging the children to pursue further education, either subject-based or vocational studies. They were also advised to develop a monitoring scheme and support research to identify the student challenges and assess the success of these measures.

In 2014, the Ministry of Culture and Education (I. Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið) published a White Paper on education reform, in which one of the objectives was to ensure that by 2018, 60% of students would graduate *on time*, defined as a four-year time frame to finish upper secondary school. This was reached in 2019 for students of a non-immigrant background, but that percentage was only 32% for first-generation immigrant students (Statistics Iceland, 2020a, 2020-l). In 2016, the Icelandic Parliament agreed to a plan of action in immigration matters, such that they would "*work systematically against the dropout rate amongst immigrants from upper secondary schools by offering support through all educational levels: by further emphasising the teaching of their native language*

for those who have a different mother tongue than Icelandic" (Þingskjal 1692, 2015- 2016, translation by author).

Further strategies to systematically mitigate the gap in the dropout rate and to monitor and assess these strategies are not entirely clear from the plan of action. In 2012, the systematic gathering of data on students who had discontinued their upper secondary education began. However, in 2017 a variable regarding the native language, native Icelandic or other, of the student was also included. This addition made it possible to understand whether students gave different reasons for discontinuing with their studies, by background (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2013b; Menntamálastofnun, 2018a). The report on the data gathered on dropouts in 2017 indicates a total of 752 students discontinuing their studies in the autumn semester: 704 were native Icelandic speakers and 48 had a native language other than Icelandic. Reasons for dropping out were very different by background. Roughly 12% of the former group stated interest in working, and a further 1.7% mentioned economic reasons or poverty. For the latter group, almost 21% expressed interest in entering the labour market and another two students (4.2%), mentioned economic reasons or poverty. Only one student with a non-Icelandic native language mentioned lack of interest, and another two students said they found it too difficult. These findings show how we must not cluster all students, regardless of background, because the unique experiences and barriers for students of foreign background get lost.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter describes the backdrop of this study. An isolated island north in the Atlantic, Iceland was thrust into modernity in the late 20th century. Until then, Iceland had been under the rule of Denmark, yet was able to maintain its history and language relatively *untainted* from foreign influence. This was mainly due to a strict language policy and rich descriptions of the Sagas, through which portrayal of *Icelanders* and conservative spelling were maintained.

When studying Iceland, we must recognise both its relations with other countries as well as its own history and national identity. A depiction of innocence as a non-participant in colonialism, but rather as a country that had to fight for their independence themselves makes it difficult to address racism or other forms of discrimination (Loftsdóttir, 2017). Claimed innocence barely holds water if we look at laws, policies, and secret agreements that all allude to scepticism towards anything *foreign*. Collectively, these rules had the objective of keeping a close eye on the non-Icelanders and ensuring they neither took jobs from Icelanders nor put their mark on the *purity* of the Icelandic nation or language.

The Icelandic population has changed rapidly over the past two to three decades, with an influx of immigrants. In 2007, the first and only holistic policy on the integration of immigrants was approved. Its main focus was on language proficiency, and how language was the key to Icelandic society. This policy alludes to a one-way path towards integration, within which the newly arrived shoulder primary responsibility (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). Such a simplistic view on the integration of immigrants disregards societal factors that may enable or impede immigrants from truly having access to spaces mainly occupied by Icelanders.

The educational system is a primary institution in children's lives that should cultivate cultural, social, and political values, as well as attitudes that positively influence socio-psychological development (Chiu et al., 2012). However, what has been covered in chapter 3 casts doubt on whether the system is truly for all. An attainment gap, difference in school choice, and high drop-out rate should be a major concern. We should ask ourselves: are we systematically seeing teenagers and young adults of foreign background leave the school system without a baseline level of knowledge and skills? What does that tell us about the inclusivity of these school systems? In the next chapter, I will explain the methodological approach used for this study, as well as the ethical considerations that were taken into account when doing research with adolescents and people of foreign background.

4 Methodological approach

This chapter underlines the epistemological and methodological approach employed in this thesis. The first subsection discusses mixed methods as a research approach and covers the literature on its current applications. Underpinning the second section of this chapter are the main ethical issues of conducting research with children. Here we dive into the literature on issues such as informed consent, gatekeepers, confidentiality, and anonymity and how they were dealt with throughout all stages of the study. The third section gives an account of what research methods were used and, in the spirit of transparency, illustrate practical issues encountered when using these methods. I further discuss the main concepts used in this study. The fourth section gives a short overview of the participating schools and participants; I explain my choice of schools given the Icelandic context. Finally, there is a concluding discussion section, where the chapter is tied together before moving on to the first analytical chapter.

4.1 Mixing research methods

> *It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map – the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes – but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think (Geertz, 1980, p. 166)*

The excerpt above refers to "*an alteration of the principles of mapping*" (ibid, p. 166), such that there is something happening to the very way knowledge is created and how formerly established disciplines are challenged. Such a sentiment surely is applicable to the debate that has been around the research methodology referred to as mixed method.

Mixed methods is, in its simplest sense, research that includes both qualitative and quantitative features (Creswell, 2015; Ritchie, 2003). Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) offer a more refined definition of mixed methods as the "*research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry*" (p. 4).

Although mixed methods have gained popularity in the recent years, the ever-evolving field has had its difficulties for its perceived lack of philosophical paradigm (Johnson and Gray, 2010) and with its usage and standards of quality much debated (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). Bryman (2012) identifies two main debates surrounding mixed methods. The former, Bryman refers to as the *epistemological version,* focuses on the ontological and epistemological differences of qualitative and quantitative research. According to this lens, as the qualitative researcher seeks to describe a changing nature of reality, interpreted through the participants' experience when the quantitative researcher describes an objective reality, the two paradigms are mutually exclusive and cannot study the same phenomena (Sale, Lohfeld and Brazil, 2002). The second version of the debate, according to Bryman (2012) are those who lean towards the *technical version* of conducting research. Those who conform to this side of the debate recognize that although there are different epistemological and ontological assumptions, they are not constants, and identify compatibility of the research methods.

What is not as clear is the role of paradigms in mixed methods (Mertens, 2012). Thomas Kuhn (2012/1962) uses the word *paradigm* to describe the way in which scientists view the world and how those who hold different worldviews or belief systems are able to communicate to one another. The term thereby does not simply refer to a research method but refers to philosophical assumptions about what is being studied, how it can be understood, the purpose of a study and the outcome (Hammersley, 2012).

By overly focusing on the incommensurability of qualitative and quantitative research one could argue that we centre the method employed or take the paradigms at face value. This discounts the different types of research inquiry, their different histories and positioning in terms of how they capture the social world. Quantitative and qualitative research methods is simply a framework to identify trends and capture the/a *truth* but can at the same time vary drastically. Despite both relying on standardized testing, surveys and experimental research differ to great extend in terms of what is thought to be their strengths, weaknesses, and what kind of a *truth* they are considered to be able to produce (Greene and Hall, 2010). Furthermore, if we overlook how quantitative and qualitative research methods are often used as blanket terms for paradigms, considering paradigms as strictly binary is problematic as they may have more similarities than often recognized (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Both qualitative and quantitative research methods base and address their research questions on observations and both methodologies use methods to describe their data, create an explanation that is rooted in their data and then speculate on their findings. Furthermore, do most researchers, regardless of their background, include some safeguards to minimize confirmation bias or other issues that could potentially invalidate the study.

This then evokes questions on whether the meaning researchers take from their data, and thereby research, is a function of the *type of data* that was collected or whether the meaning is a result of how the data was interpreted (Dzurec and Abraham, 1993; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Thus, by strictly dichotomizing the two method approaches, the researcher is limited by the process of chosen approach (Dzurec and Abraham, 1993).

The idea of mixing methods is not a new one. However, it wasn't until the late 70's when Denzin took a firm step towards mixed methods, confidently moving away from the need for shared philosophical roots and claiming that by using multiple across-methods "*the bias inherent in any particular data source, investigators, and particular method will be cancelled out when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigators, and methods*" (Denzin, 1978, p. 14). In his opinion, there was limited value in using within-method triangulation that relied on only one paradigm, because regardless of the research design used, the weakness of said paradigm would always prevail.

Bryman (2007b) detects two differing views on the methodological approach of mixed methods: a particularistic discourse and universalistic discourse. According to the particularistic discourse, mixed methods research is only appropriate, if necessary, to answer the research question, whereas according to the universalistic discourse mixed methods is a superior research approach. This can be problematic, as the researcher may not necessarily

adhere to one discourse over the other (ibid). It could also be seen as a way to *bolster* the weakness of both methods (Sale, Lohfeld and Brazil, 2002). Furthermore, the two paradigms need to work together, and the researcher must come to a conclusion. The two methodologies need to be integrated in such a way that they complement each other in the search of a better understanding of the research topic, not just to serve as two ways of study that asynchronously answer the research question (Bryman, 2007a).

But is the difference between the philosophical positions fundamental? And are research methods inherently linked to a philosophical position? Instead of dwelling on whether and from what paradigm mixed methods stem, we can view mixed methods as an inquiry of certain paradigmatic foundations[23] that arise from different philosophical roots. Methodological pragmatists claim that methods can be employed on the basis of utility and that a research approach should be driven by the question that the researcher wants to answer (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Biesta, 2010; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010).

In addition to the researcher's perspective or philosophical stance, there are various design options the researcher has to take. Which route they choose depends on the ordering of the application of research methods, as well as at what point the mixing occurs (Mertens, 2015). Creswell (2015) identifies three basic mixed methods designs as a convergent design[24], an explanatory sequential design and an exploratory sequential design. These three designs refer to the order in which the research is conducted. Thus, whether the quantitative and qualitative is gathered independently and results compared, the qualitative research method is used to explain the quantitative data *or* the qualitative method is used in an exploratory way to then guide the quantitative component.

Mixed methods research offers an array of design options, which may potentially be a strength or a weakness of a growing and evolving field. In this debate on the different paradigms and its alleged incompatibility, we might have to transcend older debates regarding philosophical roots and turn the whole discussion upside down. Instead of approaching it as two pillars, we should begin to see it as a continuum where on each end of the continuum, we have quantitative and qualitative research methods and in the middle lie mixed methods. The researcher might belong primarily to a certain research tradition, but still be sensitive to the need for other traditions if the research calls for it. Additionally, studies can lean more towards

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[23] Instead of talking about paradigms as such, mixed methods research rather refers to perspectives, foundations, stances, or methods (Johnson and
gbuzie, 2004; Biesta, 2010; Greene and Hall, 2010; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010; Mertens, 2012).
[24] This design is also known as the concurrent or parallel form (Mertens, 2015; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

either end of the continuum, where they would either be qualitative or quantitative dominant or deadpanned in the middle with both rexfsearch traditions holding equal value (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007).

4.1.1 Current study – flexibility when doing research with children

This research is a mixed method, rooted in a pragmatic reasoning, where the researcher relies on "*the best of a set of explanations for understanding one's results*" (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17), as it was deemed the best approach to answer my research questions (ibid; Creswell, 2015). For the data collection I chose a sequential design, a QUANT –> QUAL design, where both components had an equal status. However, due to the nature of the research subject, a dynamic approach was needed. I wanted to explain trends found in the quantitative data, yet have leeway to explore, given the gaps in what we know about students of foreign background in Iceland. In line with explanatory sequential design, there was not a singular point of integration, but many, in which both elements of the study interacted with each other, and each element fed into the next one. Once the data had been collected, there was not a linear research design of two different components but one characterised by flexibility. Maxwell and Loomis (2003) refer to this as an integrated design, where "*the elements occur concurrently and in constant interaction with one another rather than as conceptually separate enterprises that are later linked together*" (p. 257). This means that the data collection was sequential, whilst later stages of the study were characterised by a more flexible approach.

The flexibility used in this research, I believe, is very much in the spirit of a new era that will be further discussed later. It is emblematic of doing research *with* children, as opposed to *on* children: to give the children a voice. When researching groups where there is an inherent incongruous power difference, the researcher needs to be honest about their role in the research and their effect on the final outcome. Themes do not lie around in our data; the researcher is the tool that identifies, chooses, and interprets themes, and the voice of the child is only heard through the interpretation of the researcher. This can easily be a problem and further emphasises the importance of flexibility and transparency. On this issue, Bourdieu (2000/1972) says:

> *If it has no other instruments of recognition at its disposal than, according to a term of Husserl, the "intentional empathy into the other", even the most*

*"comprehensive" interpretation risks becoming not much more than a very perfect
form of ethnocentrism (p. 242 translated by Bohnsack, 2014, p. 219)*[25]

If the researcher does not fully understand the world of their research participants, how can they interpret their story in a meaningful way? Surely, all adult researchers were once children and adolescents, but that only reaches so far. The researcher needs to show reflexivity throughout the whole research process and when analysing the data. We can never fully enter the youths' world and the researcher needs to be sensitive to the fact that they may not fully understand their codes and/or the systems in which they live. Thus, the key is transparency, detailed explanation of the analysing process, and acknowledge and recognise the fact that the researcher is making decisions when analysing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms *quantitative component* and *qualitative component*, only referring to the different phases in which the data was gathered. The study was conducted with more flexibility than the use of words may suggest. This will be further explored in the following sections. This study focuses on adolescents in year 8, 9, and 10 in Icelandic compulsory schools. This next section provides a short overview of what needs to be kept in mind when researching adolescents, followed by a section that explains the sampling methods and data collection employed in this study.

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[25] The quote is translated by Ralf Bohnsack as the chapter where said quote appears is not included in the English translation of Bourdieu's book, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972).

4.2 Ethical considerations

There is a myriad of issues that need to be considered when conducting research. That is even more true when conducting research with children, particularly among a small, easily identifiable group across two countries. There are even further ethical considerations. In the following sections, I will cover the main ethical issues, primarily legal aspects that need to be taken into consideration.

4.2.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

Anonymity and confidentiality are two important, yet different, concepts in research. Often they are mistaken as interchangeable (King and Horrokcs, 2010) or are simply addressed together due to how closely the two concepts are related (Wiles et al., 2006). In research, confidentiality is generally considered to be related to the principle of privacy. For the researcher to fulfil promises on protecting the privacy of participants, they need to handle all data, throughout all steps of the research, in such a way that it cannot be linked to the participant at all. This is not a clear-cut process (de Vaus, 2002; Wiles et al., 2008, King and Horrocks, 2010; Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014; Mertens, 2015).

Anonymity is the tool by which the privacy and confidentiality of the participant is protected. By anonymizing the data, the researcher makes sure, throughout the whole research process, to protect the identity of the participant by ensuring that there is not any personally identifiable information linked to tapes or transcripts. The researcher also makes sure that sampling documents are kept separate from the data, all names of individuals and/or places have been anonymised in all outputs of the study, and that anyone with access to the data maintains confidentiality (Lewis, 2003; Mertens, 2015; Wiles et al., 2006).

The legality of confidentiality and anonymity

Securing confidentiality and anonymity go beyond what are considered moral and ethical research practises. Researchers are under certain legal obligations to protect and secure personal data. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect on the 25th of May 2018, replacing the former Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). It applies to any processing of personal data in the EU. Furthermore, with the GDPR, the EU Directive 95/46/EC was repealed, thereby, extending its applications to the additional EEA states that stand outside of

the EU[26]. With the GDPR, a new and wider definition of what is regarded as *personal data* was introduced, and clearly states the process a researcher or organisation must follow to secure the identity of a subject.

For this study, the appropriate supervisory authority that acts according to the Icelandic Data Protection Act on Processing of Personal Data no. 90/2018 (originally no. 77/2000) was notified and received the case number S8578/2018. The data collected is electronic, but was transferred from Iceland to the United Kingdom, first following the 29th paragraph of the Data Protection Act no. 77/2000 and EU Data Protection Directive (95/46/EC), and later the Regulation (EU) 2016/679, to which both countries were signatories at the time of the study. In addition, it was subject to the approval of the research ethics committee of the University of Kent. Midway during my data collection there was a change in laws across the European Union as well as the European Economic Area that I had to consider.

Protecting anonymity

The strength of quantitative research, in terms of confidentiality and anonymity, lies in numbers (of participants) and may prove easier to mask the identity of participants when dealing with groups rather than individuals. This can vary, particularly if the groups have certain characteristics or are small subgroups, defined groups, organisations, or communities that are easily identifiable (Wiles et al., 2008). Participants might fear that the researcher merely secures *external confidentiality* (Tolich, 2010). This can be particularly true where key gatekeepers have given access to the research participants (Lewis, 2003). Research participants might worry about being easily recognisable to an *insider* and, in such cases, anonymity of the individuals would be impossible to secure without heavily distorting the data (particularly, if findings from individual schools were read by school members, such as headmasters, teachers, or other students) (Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014).

Consequently, researchers are faced with the issue of how far they ought to take the anonymity of an individual. If a research participant, in either qualitative or quantitative research, has characteristics that make them distinguishable from others, they need to be omitted. Omission could have an important impact on the analysis and, consequently, the research findings and outcome. This calls for the researcher to comprehensively think about

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[26] The European Economic Area (EEA) includes, in addition to the EU countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. All data was gathered long before UK's departure from the EU.

the impact of including or excluding such information (de Veus, 2002; King and Horrocks, 2010).

The process of anonymising data takes many forms. Albeit an important part of the research process, there are few guidance notes or rules on the implementation of anonymity, beyond giving each research participant a pseudonym (Wiles, et. al., 2008). The British Educational Research Association (2018) provides very general guidance on anonymisation. They say that *"[r]esearchers should recognise the entitlement of both institutions and individual participants to privacy, and should accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. This could involve employing 'fictionalising' approaches when reporting [...]"* (p. 21). Generally, in qualitative research, this is done by either omitting the participant's name or using a pseudonym; this is the responsibility of the researcher (Creswell, 2007), while the individual's anonymity in quantitative research is maintained by separating any ID numbers that could identify the individual from the dataset (de Veus, 2002).

Conducting research in a small community sets certain limits to the type of information I, as a researcher, could acquire. The data for the quantitative part of my study was collected in the spring of 2018. Having consulted with the Data Protection Authority in Iceland, I realised I could not ask the children about their country of origin, the language they spoke at home nor how old they had been when they moved to Iceland, as in some cases, that could be personally identifiable information due to the small population in Iceland. For the qualitative part of my study, I had to obtain written approval from a parent of each student in the study. The children were also given an information sheet to read and they had to sign a consent form before the interviews commenced. The form read:

> *I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I also understand that anonymised direct quotes may be used in published articles and thesis, if needed. (Consent form for participants, see appendix 10.2.)*

Before I began recording, I asked the children a few background questions. This was done to limit the amount of personal information on the recording. In some cases, names or country of origin came up during the interview but they were changed during transcription.

Making sure there were no personally identifiable information that could be linked to either the children or the schools, I mainly used two different methods of concealing student identity. In the quantitative component of my study, all schools were given a participation number that students had to key in. This was both to make sure that no one outside the

participating schools would answer the survey, but also so that I would not be able to link answers to particular schools or children without limiting my analysis. For the qualitative interviews, I chose the students' pseudonyms. These were chosen in a way that reflected their background or the personal characteristics they portrayed in the interviews. Moreover, if a student had an Icelandic name, I chose a pseudonym that could also be considered an *Icelandic* name (potentially with slightly different spelling).

Pseudonyms are not enough to secure anonymity for this study, as all my interviewees were a small subgroup of students with an identifiable characteristic: being of foreign background. That, in addition to information of what continent they or their parents come from, in what municipality they live, and information about their school, could compromise their anonymity, or simply the awareness of a researcher present in a village or school. In a small society such as Iceland, people within a certain profession often know each other, villagers in one village know the members of another village, and a researcher is noticed. This was taken into consideration, as only key people were informed of my presence in advance. Schools were not informed of where I had been before or was expected to go. Within the schools, I never mentioned the names of the students, except with the contact person within each school, and I did not engage in conversation about the students. This was complicated in some schools, particularly the smaller ones. For this reason, I will neither mention the name of the municipality, nor the school and limit the information available on each school. This has been challenging as I have had to find a way to balance between guarding my participants' anonymity and providing descriptions thick enough not to limit my output and findings. Moreover, anonymity of individuals would be impossible to secure, if the findings were read by members of the school (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). Therefore, all requests for reports about individual schools were denied.

4.2.2 Gaining access and consent

Gatekeepers

An inherent part of the research process is to gain access to a research site. In educational research, the researcher often needs to rely upon multiple gatekeepers who control access to the institution and, consequently, the prospective research participants (Alderson and Morrow, 2004).

Gatekeeping may be at an institutional level, such as schools, where a governing body, guards a group of potential participants, particularly if they are considered vulnerable. If the

schools governing body decides to give access to the site, the school's professionals become instrumental in facilitating communication between the researcher and potential research participants. Thus, a school's governing body controls access to a professional within the school, who then controls access to children. This arrangement is not without its issues. School professionals might tread carefully when they choose a student to represent their institution. Selection may have a great bearing on the outcome of the study and inadvertently contribute to the data (Brooks, te Riele, Maguire, 2014; Gallagher, 2009a).

The role of the parents as gatekeepers varies between countries or societies. It can even be different on paper than in practise. Researchers are expected to assess the competence of the child to fully understand information. Despite this general notion of children's competence, schools and researchers have opted for using age as an indicator of a child's developmental stage and to estimate their capacity to consent (Brooks, te Riele, Maguire, 2014; Griffith, 2016). Thereby, a researcher is met with an additional layer of gatekeepers, the parents, who decide whether the children may participate. This common practise has been criticised for taking away the agency of the child and placing the adult at the centre of the research. Therefore, a piece of research becomes a study *on* children and youth more so than *with* them. Also, by stripping the agency of the child, there is the added risk of a power imbalance, where the child feels that they should do what they are told by someone in a senior role. In fact, Pole, Mizen, and Bolton (1999) suggest that the very structure through which research access is obtained denies, or at least tempers, the agency of children. The researcher must understand how multi-layered gatekeepers may be burdensome on the child and find ways to mitigate that burden.

Gaining access and informed consent from youth in Iceland

Research participants should not be considered mere subjects from whom the researcher extracts information, regardless of the researcher's objective. The importance of gaining *informed* consent from participants is pivotal to ethical social science research. In their ethical guidelines for educational research, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) defines informed consent as *"[...] the condition by which participants understand and agree to their participation, and the terms and practicalities of it, without any duress, prior to the research getting underway"* (British Educational Research Association, 2018, p. 9).

Before I contacted schools to gain access, I had to be clear what kind of consent I needed and from whom. There are no central, cross-country guidelines or regulations on school's autonomy to participate in studies, so I decided to follow the strictest Icelandic guidelines I found. I sought approval from the local educational authority in each municipality. Once I had

written approval from the municipality for both components of the study, the same was sought from schools. Schools are not allowed to give personal information on students or their families, thereby became instrumental in gaining access: by informing the parents of the study.

I sought twofold parental consent: for the quantitative questionnaires, I gave the parents an opportunity to opt out on behalf of the minors; and there was a written approval for the qualitative interviews. The reason for this was that the quantitative questionnaire did not ask personally identifiable questions, or any questions that could be interpreted as legally sensitive (Lög um persónuvernd og vinnslu persónuupplýsinga nr 90/2018).[27] However, due to the nature of qualitative interviews, I deemed it necessary to seek written parental approval.

Having gotten through a multi-layered ring of gatekeepers, there, at the centre, is the participant whose right to give an un-coerced, informed consent is guarded by Icelandic law (ibid). Icelandic laws do not overtly state when or whether a child can consent to participate in a study, without consent from their parents or legal guardian (Kristinsdóttir, 2017). However, it is considered to be common practise to seek parental consent if the child is still a minor.[28]

A school-based research project, such as this one, relies on multiple gatekeepers, and it is during the final stage when the student, the subject themselves, first become active agents in the process. Once the researcher passes the last gatekeeper, the researcher does not know how much the student has been informed of the study. At that point, the researcher needs to ensure that the participants themselves understand to what they are consenting. The researcher must be vigilant and critical on how the institutional context or the use of gatekeepers as middlemen may be appear oppressive to the child. Gatekeepers have been assigned with the initial introduction of the research, but they may not necessarily share the researcher's idea of ethical conduct towards the youngsters (Gallagher, 2009b). Consequently, despite the researcher's best intentions, the research process may dilute the idea of informed consent or even border on being coerced. Therefore, the researcher must tailor the information to the young people's needs, bearing in mind their age, background, ability, and aptitude.

The quantitative questionnaire was online and before the students could fill out the study, they were given information about me, why they had been chosen to take part, what was expected of them (answering questions, filling out an online survey), how long it would take and, how they could contact me. Ultimately, I emphasised that all information was non-

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[27] Midway through my data collection, there was a change in law on data protection; Act number 90/2018 replaced former Act number 77/2000 with slight changes.
[28] In Iceland, children under the age of 18 are considered minors, according to the Age of Majority Act (Lögræðislög nr 71/1997).

personally identifiable, I informed them who would have access to the data and stressed that answering was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participating at any time. The students needed to check a box where they stated that they had read the aforementioned, and that they understood and were willing to take part.

Minors may act as agents in an untraditional way, and dissent from participation without explicitly stating it. Instead, they might refuse to answer questions, give minimal answers, or simply ask to leave (Gallagher et al., 2010; Morrow, 2005). A number of students showed their agency as active research participant by dropping out, or not filling out the study, despite having given their consent on the front page. These answers were deleted. Moreover, some students only answered a handful of question, thereby exercising their right to omit information where they wanted. These answers were kept.

When adults interview a minor, there is an apparent hierarchy of power, where the researcher has had to seek access to the child from top-down, and it is only at the final stage where youth themselves have a say in the matter. In preparation, I produced a leaflet for the students. In this leaflet, I addressed the youngster directly with information such as my research topic and why they had been chosen. Furthermore, I emphasised that participation was voluntary and that they could quit or stop the recording at any time.

I met with the students during school hours, and all interviews took place at schools. The meeting places varied from the school library to the school nurse's office but were all private. I greeted the students, introduced myself and conversed with them informally to make them feel at ease. This proved to be useful, particularly in cases where the students seemed shy or nervous. Additionally, I was building rapport with the students, partly an attempt to ease the pressure they might feel towards taking part, but also to produce better quality data in the interviews.

It became clear quite early on, that many of the youngsters had not been informed in advance about the purpose of the study, despite both headmasters and parents having been given a leaflet with appropriate information. In some cases, it was apparent that the students had been *told*, not asked, that they were to be a part of a study. This discovery affirmed the necessity to give the students plenty of time to familiarise themselves with the aims and objectives of the study, ask questions, and give them a chance, off record, to consent or decline participation in the study.

There is a fine line between being informative and producing a *sales pitch*, where the ulterior motive is to gain participants. In case the student might have felt in the slightest way that they were either being coerced on behalf of the school, or an adult gatekeeper, I decided

that I would never try to convince the students, but rather increase the number of schools. Given that the interviews were not held in the student's native language, but in Icelandic or English, the leaflet sometimes proved to be too verbose. In that case, I broke the letter down verbally, explaining each paragraph and asked them to confirm that they understood before I moved on to the next paragraph.

A multilevel hierarchical gatekeeper system also means that there are multiple layers to deal with throughout all stages of the study. In this case, as the interviews took place at school, during school hours, the teachers were the facilitators between me and the teens. In one of the cases, I overheard the teacher trying to convince the student to participate. I was usually passive at that stage of the study, as I did not know the students personally, but I felt it necessary to step in and emphasise that participation was voluntary. I spoke directly to the student, made clear that they were not obliged to speak with me and informed them that if they changed their mind, I would be at the school for the day. That student was not interviewed. Another student attended the interview, signed the consent papers, but immediately disengaged. A few minutes into the interview, I reiterated that they were allowed to leave at any time, or I could stop the recording whenever they wanted. The student asked if they were allowed to attend a class that was about to start. By being vigilant to cues from the student, I offered the student a way out that the child happily accepted. As the child did not finish their interview, I deemed that the child exerted their agency to dissent from participation and deleted the recording.

4.3 Conducting research with adolescents – the case of Iceland

The concept of *adolescence* may have a long past, but a relatively short history.[29] Lerner and Steinberg (2004) suggest that scientific study of adolescence has reached a new phase where researchers have entered a dialog with policy makers and practitioners for the betterment of society and the positive development of adolescents (Lerner and Steinberg, 2004). Whether we have entered a phase where researchers and policymakers are in conversation on how to create positive conditions for adolescents to develop, or not, there has certainly been an inclination towards a more child-centred approach, both in practise and in research (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017).

There has been a rapid change in the volume and approach when doing research with children and adolescent where advances have been made to let their voices be heard (ibid, Furstenberg, 2004). Around the 1990's there was an increased demand for young people's perspectives and opinions in matters that affected them and slowly their role in research began to change. Although children and adolescents had been researched for a century, studies were carried out *on* them, rather than with them. At the turn of the twentieth century this slowly changed, and they were given the role of informants who had something to say about their own life and experience (Morrow, 2005). A new era has emerged. Children and adolescents should be included in studies regarding them, as they are the experts in their own lives.

4.3.1 Sampling method

Before any data collection can commence, the researcher needs to carefully consider and decide on an appropriate sampling strategy, who should be in the sample, and the sample size. Sampling is a pivotal step in any research and needs careful consideration and planning. It is reliant upon the research design and subsequently affects the outcome and conclusions.

Sampling strategies in mixed methods research requires an understanding of both sampling strategies used in qualitative and quantitative research methods, and as Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) suggest, oftentimes more than one sampling method is employed. Samples can vary in terms of their nature (probability and non-probability sampling), size, and scope. In general, if the purpose is to conduct quantitative research, where one can make some inferential statistical interpretation, the sample should be randomly chosen and considerably

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[29] In his textbook in psychology, Herman Ebbinghouse, famously wrote: "psychology has a long past, yet its real history is short" (1908, p. 3), a quote that could just as well be used to describe the concept *adolescence* and the ever-growing field of research on the topic.

large. On the contrary, qualitative research methods, for the purpose of gaining in-depth inside, relies on a smaller sample chosen with a non-probability method (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017; Bryman, 2012).

The mixed methods sampling design can be classified based on the time each component of the study is conducted, either concurrent or sequential (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). In sequential mixed methods sampling, the method used for this study, one stage of the study follows the other, that is where the latter stage is, to some extent, dependent upon the former stage. Comprehensive findings then base conclusions on the findings of both components (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Graff, 2016). This means that an interview might highlight some topics that would be interesting to explore quantitatively; similarly, numerical data could give insight into issues that interviews could help uncover (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). In this study, I followed the latter method. This is where the quantitative data indicates how the researcher should sample for the qualitative component. The researcher could, for example, discover a certain characteristic or trait that is of interest. In such a case, criterion sampling would be an ideal method, where cases are chosen as the typify that certain trait (Bryman, 2012).

Quantitative sampling method

As schools in Iceland are not required to keep a register of their students' nationality or background, a sampling frame was not available for this study. When deciding on the number of children I wanted to include in the study, I had to keep in mind the size of the Icelandic population. Even more importantly, I had to consider that despite there being a relatively large proportion of people of foreign background, they are very few in numbers. Moreover, I had to consider how scattered the population is, apart from the capital and its surrounding cities, with only 36% of the total population living outside the capital area (Hagstofa Íslands, 2020).

Therefore, in order to obtain as many replies as possible from many schools, and then subsequently from children of foreign background, it was not feasible to draw a random sample at the municipality level. The sampling method for the quantitative part of this study was three-layered. The children's participation was contingent upon the approval of the municipality, the school, and then parents. I created the sampling frame myself, where I made a list of all municipalities in Iceland, based on information from the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (Samband Íslenskra sveitarfélaga, n.d.), as well as a list of all schools within these municipalities, based on the municipalities' websites and extensive research where lists of schools were compared with the registration on an online telephone directory.

I attempted to do a census, in which every municipality in Iceland was given the chance to participate. At the time of the study, there were 74 municipalities in Iceland, nine of which had no schools or only schools for children under the age of 13. I contacted the remaining 65 municipalities and asked for permission to contact their schools; 43 said yes, 5 said no, 17 did not reply. At the next layer, I sent an email to all compulsory schools in the participating municipalities, 87 in total. In the end, 23 schools agreed to participate but six schools dropped out, so 17 schools were in the final sample. Most schools that replied and declined participation, saying it was due to time constraints and an exceptional number of censuses that students had had to fill out in the last few months. As the sampling method was highly dependent on the municipalities and schools' willingness to participate, a sampling bias was inevitable (Bryman, 2012). For that reason, I cannot be sure if the participating municipalities or schools differ in any way from those that declined participation.

I sent an email to all municipalities in February 2018 and as soon as approval was given, I contacted the headmasters of the schools. From February to May 2018, I contacted them first by email, followed by a second email if I had not received a reply, and later a phone call. If headmasters were willing to participate, letters written in Icelandic, English, and Polish were sent to parents from mid-March to mid-May and parents given time to opt out on behalf of their children.

Qualitative sampling method

The following school year, I contacted a subgroup of the schools that had participated in the quantitative component of the study, six in total. The overarching sampling method chosen for the qualitative component of this study was a purposive sampling method, with the final number of students chosen using a criterion sampling (Mertens, 2015). At the school level, schools were chosen based on four criteria: I wanted 1) to talk to children who lived in rural and urban areas in Iceland, 2) schools that varied in size, 3) schools where there was both an upper secondary school in the municipality, as well as schools, where children would have to move to attend upper secondary school, 4) schools where there were either few children of foreign background, or where there were many children of foreign background. Information on the first three criteria were available online. I used the information at hand from the quantitative part of this study to determine the fourth criteria.

In the end, I visited all six of the schools I contacted. I asked the headmasters, or whoever they appointed within the school, to choose interviewees. I stressed the importance of talking to children who varied in characteristics: both those who spoke Icelandic fluently, as

well as those who did not. I both wanted to talk to children who were determined to pursue further education, as well as those who were not. In most schools, I interviewed all children who fulfilled said criteria and were in school on the day of the interview.

As the schools varied in size and number of foreign students and in order to get a good comparison between students living in an area where there was a post-secondary school in town and those who had to move by the age of 16, I needed to interview more students from the rural area. This meant that the number of schools chosen did not mirror the population distribution in Iceland. In the end, one third of my interviews came from the capital area, representing a school that was central, in a close vicinity to multiple post-secondary schools. One third of my interviewees came from one rural school that is in an area densely populated by people of foreign background. The final third of my interviewees came from various schools that were either very small, or in an area that had a low percentage of people of foreign background.

For the qualitative part of this study, I provided the contact at each school with an information sheet, as well as a form for the parents to complete to grant me permission to interview the children. In one case, I declined to speak with a child who had only been in the country and said school for a couple of months and neither spoke Icelandic nor English. Although I could have arranged for an interpreter, I contemplated whether it would be worthwhile, and how much I would get out of this interview. In the end, I decided against it, given the short time the child had been in the country.

4.3.2 Data collection

There is an array of ways to conduct research with children and adolescents, and various methods to collect data. There are, nonetheless, certain methods that may work better than others and are dependent upon the age of the participants, the setting of where the study should take place, the topic of the research along with other contextual factors. Whilst in some cases there is a need for creative approaches to data collection, there might be topics where more formal ways, such as questionnaires and interviews, would be better suited. Furthermore, formal means of data collection do not rule out creative approaches within that framework.

Quantitative data collection[30]

The questionnaire is a wildly popular form of data collection, with the obvious advantage that it enables the researcher to gather a large amount of data in a standardised form for easy comparison. When designing a questionnaire aimed at adolescents the researcher should try making it engaging so the youngster feels motivated to finish it (Tinson, 2009). For example, a long list of questions might feel repetitive and monotonous, whereas various answering options would break it up. Online surveys give more flexibility in this sense that the researcher could mix traditional Likert-scales in with options such as rankings or slider scales. The researcher should tread lightly between sounding too technical or patronising. Keep the questionnaire simple, but sway away from using words that could appear sarcastic when coming from an adult (ibid), or a vocabulary that would be better suited to children.

The benefit of questionnaires is that they are easily anonymous and may put the participant at more ease rather than answering an in-person interview. In the case of youth research, it mitigates the inherent power difference between the participant and the researcher and gives those who are not confident with strangers or in a group, a chance to participate. Moreover, in educational research, questionnaires are in a format that adolescents are familiar with, as they often resemble a multiple-choice exam. Although, this may serve as a double-edged sword where the participants could perceive the questionnaire as yet another school exercise or exam. If the questionnaires are dependent upon the adolescents completing them on their own, it may be particularly difficult for certain groups. If a student struggles with literacy, language, attention deficiency, or other deviations, they may not want to complete a questionnaire (Gallagher, 2009a).

For this study, teachers provided a reusable hyperlink and a QR code to the online questionnaire to students who had attended school on the day of distribution. Students were offered an option to answer the questionnaire in either Icelandic or English. They could fill it out on a computer, an electronic tablet, or a smartphone. The questionnaire was a self-completion questionnaire and was completed under the supervision of their teacher. The questionnaire was designed to only take about 20 minutes to complete. This was done by both limiting the number of questions, but also by offering accessible answer possibilities, such as a slide bar where applicable, and few questions on a page. The online survey closed mid-June, which generally marks the end of the nine-month compulsory academic year in Iceland (Lög

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[30] Please refer to appendix 10.3 for a full overview of the questionnaire and interview guide.

um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008). The data was securely stored on a laptop that only I had access to, and was password protected.

Qualitative data collection

Conducting interviews with children and adolescents is a useful method to collect research data and gives an insight into the participant's perception and ideas. There are many advantages of conducting interviews such as flexibility, rich, in-depth and insightful data, the chance to probe the research participant, and thereby explore new avenues the researcher may not have realised. The researcher needs to decide how they want to conduct their interviews, whether they should be semi-structured, free flowing, face-to-face, via the internet, and individually or in groups (King and Horrocks, 2018). This flexibility gives the interviewer a chance to engage directly with the adolescent, create rapport, and explore topics that might not be feasible through different avenues (Gallagher, 2009a; O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017).

Face-to-face interviews offer the opportunity to focus solely on the needs of the adolescent, pick up non-verbal cues, or try different techniques (Gallagher, 2009a). When researching a sensitive issue, the researcher can opt for different techniques, such as vignettes where the interviewee is presented with a scenario that they might identify with and then questioned what they think the main character in that scenario *should* do. That way the interviewer has opened a gate to a sensitive field, yet de-personalised the issue (Bryman, 2012).

There are various disadvantages with conducting interviews with youngsters. First, there is the inherent power difference between an adult and a teen, and they might feel uncomfortable to be alone in such a setting (Gallagher, 2009a). The location of the interviews should be carefully chosen, although the choice might be limited if conducted within an institution. The location should be welcoming, comfortable, private and a neutral ground for the child. However, despite best efforts, the whole interview context could still be a foreign situation for the child (ibid, O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017). The youngster has stepped into the world of the researcher, a *grown-up* situation and the researcher should do their best to break down these barriers.

The semi-structured interviews for this study took place from November 2018 to May 2019. Before the interviews, students were asked to sign a consent form, stating that they understood that their participation was voluntary. I interviewed 32 students in total. The interviews consisted of themes detected in the quantitative component of the study. First, they were asked questions about themselves, their family, school, and friendships. Next, they were given a vignette followed by questions on their perception of the story. The interviewees were

then asked about identity and being Icelandic. Last, they were asked about their aspirations and future plans following year 10. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once all interviews had been transcribed, the recordings were deleted.

4.3.3 Analysing the data

Amid the debate on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods, is the idea of whether the researcher takes an inductive or deductive approach. That is, either a bottom-up approach, where the coding and analysis is driven by what can be found in the data, or a top-down approach, where preconceived concepts, ideas, or topics are used to interpret the data. This, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. The researcher, despite their best efforts to be open-minded, will always bring something to analysing the data in an inductive way, and it would be difficult to ignore all semantic content when analysing the data deductively (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

As already stated, this is a sequential study, with a quantitative phase, followed by a qualitative component that aims to develop a deeper understanding of a current situation, and thus understand where changes might be needed for a marginalised group (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This research has an interactive study design where the data analysis process was not linear but recursive, where I went back and forth between the quantitative and qualitative data at hand to initiate a conversation between the two components.

I created a questionnaire where I could compare students of Icelandic and foreign background, but also get a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind the concepts. Once the quantitative data had been gathered, I looked at the basic descriptive statistics to get a feel for the data at hand. Using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25-27 (as the software was regularly upgraded) scales were created, their reliability was tested, and a comparison was made between students using Chi-square test and a T-test. These initial findings were then used as the basis for the interview guide used in the qualitative component of this study.[31]

As the quantitative findings were the main driver for many of the topics explored in the interviews, both datasets were closely aligned. For this reason, the initial analysis of the qualitative interviews was heavily influenced from the quantitative component of the study. This means that predetermined topics found in the initial quantitative data analysis led the qualitative data analysis. During this initial stage analysing the qualitative data, I also used

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[31] Please refer to appendix 10.4. for a list of formulas.

demographic group variables to inform aspects of the data analysis. These group variables included, but not limited to gender; whether the student was first- or second-generation immigrant or of mixed parentage; or for how long the student had lived in the country prior to the interview. These two data analysis methods are in line with Creswell's and Plano Clark's (2018) description of the data analysis process of explanatory sequential design.

I used thematic analysis to analyse the interviews. Thematic analysis, often used in research with children, is a flexible method and relatively simple to gain an overview, to organise data, to identify and analyse patterns, and to provide detailed and rich insight into said data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017; King and Horrocks, 2010). It is flexible in terms of its epistemological roots, thus suitable across many theoretical standpoints in qualitative research and offers both an inductive and deductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). Themes detected when using thematic analysis should capture something that is of relevance with regards to the research question. However, the ultimate themes do not simply lie around in the data, waiting to be found like in a scavenger hunt. The researcher's role is to make decisions on what to include, what is of value, and how to interpret the information. In the words of Finn (1992), it "*involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit and deploy to border our arguments*" (p. 218).

Throughout the analysis of the qualitative data, I went back to the quantitative data for further exploration, eventually formulating a final model for educational aspirations, where the response variable is binary. This variable measures the plans of a student attending upper secondary school right after compulsory school or not. To estimate the probability of one having immediate plans of furthering their education after compulsory school, given multiple explanatory variables, I use multiple logistic regression. The logistic regression is a statistical model to test the probability of an event over another using a logistic function. Logistic regression can be interpreted by interpreting the value of the odds ratio, which is the exponential of B ($\exp(B)$), thereby indicates the change in odds when there is a unit change in the predictor (Field, 2013).

Lastly, I used principal component analysis (PCA)[32], a method used to identify a cluster of interrelated variables to reduce a set of variables into dimensions or components. This method attempts to account for the total variance in the observed variables, essentially converting them into linear components, believed to represent a latent construct that is not easily measurable directly (Field, 2013) A component consists of loadings, which is the relative

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[32] For a full list of component loadings, please refer to appendix 10.5.

contribution a variable adds to a component (ibid, p. 672). I have used PCA to decipher a number of variables with the hope to uncover potential underlying concepts. Some of the scales used I created myself, based on existing scales; whereas other scales I followed in their strictest form.

In all cases, having first tested the orthogonal rotation, I used an Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalisation, as the underlying components in the scales used were assumed to be correlated to some extent with each other. When deciding on a number of components to retain, I followed three methods: scree plots, number of components with eigenvalue over one, often referred to as the Kaiser-Guttman rule, and parallel analysis (Kaiser, 1960, 1991; Cattell, 1966; O'Connor, 2000) relying on O'Connor's (2000) syntax to simulate the extraction of eigenvalues from random data sets, paralleling the actual data set at hand. Finally, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of each component before deciding on the final number of components. The outcome variable, immediate plans of going to upper secondary school, will be further explained in the next section, along with the scales and main variables that form the basis of this study.

4.3.4 Measurements

In this section, I will define the main concepts underpinning this thesis. Excluding the first concept, *aspirations,* concepts will be introduced in the same order as they appear in the three findings chapters, beginning with ethnic identity, followed by perceived language proficiency, and school engagement.

<u>Aspirations</u>

This study strives to understand the mechanisms of educational aspirations of young students at the end of their compulsory education and identify potential barriers that students of foreign background may encounter. To understand educational aspirations, I first look into the student's immediate plans after compulsory education. By asking the student about the likelihood of them going to upper secondary school at the end of compulsory education, they are being asked to assess their specific intention near a time of change or transition. Such aspirations are thus expressed as *choices* or *plans*, or a lack thereof (Lent et al., 1994).

Secondly, I will look into what the students dreams versus what they believe is within their reach, thereby both measuring the student's idealistic aspirations as well as their realistic aspirations. In the spirit of Hauser and Anderson's definition of (idealistic) aspirations as

"desired outcomes that are not limited by constraints on resources" (pp. 270), I asked the students about the highest academic degree they would like to obtain. Furthermore, I asked what the students realistically thought their highest academic degree obtained would be, thereby capturing the student's realistic expectations (Haller, 1968). These two questions offered the same options, ranging through compulsory education, upper secondary education (where they can graduate with a matriculation certificate, journeyman certificate, or other equivalent examination), undergraduate degree, postgraduate degree, and the added option of "other". Replies to the last option were then coded accordingly, whenever possible.

The first variable, immediate plans, is the main outcome variable. This is a variable where students were asked to estimate how likely they believed they were to undertake further study right after compulsory education, on a 10-item Likert scale, where 1 was very unlikely, and 10 was very likely. The majority of students believed they would undertake further study right away after compulsory education and thus gave a number above 8[33]. Given how skewed the variable was, a bivariate variable was created to further analyse and understand what could possibly contribute to a student's decision-making of attending further education. With the mean for both students of Icelandic and foreign background above 8 (8.4 and 8.0 respectively) it was deemed acceptable to use eight as the highest cut-off point, to represent those who were unsure whether the students believed they were to undertake further education immediately after compulsory education, and 9 and 10 to indicate those who were more certain. The new variable is thereby a bivariate variable, measured on a 0-1 scale, where 0 represents those who are not certain about their immediate plans and 1 represents those who are certain about going to upper secondary school straight after compulsory school.

<u>Ethnic identity</u>

The literature on educational aspirations states the importance of having a *reference group,* or a *window of aspirations*, either an individual or group of individuals people can take inspiration from (Sewell, et al., 1969; Haller and Portes, 1973; Ray, 2006). At the core of the question of who you take inspiration from is the question of how and with whom you identify. How we think of and approach ethnic categories, varies across time, individuals, communities, and context (Phinney, 1996). In the quantitative part of the study, ethnic identity was measured using this existing and revised scale, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM-R), to measure one's sense of membership to an ethnic group (Phinney, 1992; Phinney

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[33] For further information please refer to appendix 10.5

and Ong, 2007). This scale consists of six statements: *I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs*; *I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group; I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me; I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better; I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group; I feel strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.* Based on these six statements, the scale measures two elements of ethnic identity, *exploration* and *commitment*, on a 5-item Likert scale, where a higher score represents greater commitment and exploration on behalf of the respondent.

The scale has shown acceptable to excellent internal consistency (Phinney and Ong, 2007; Yoon, 2011; Brown et al., 2013; Chakawa, Butler and Shapiro, 2016; Herrington et al., 2016; Musso, Moscardino and Inguglia, 2017). Because of the nature of this study, and the characteristics of the immigrant population in Iceland, it was important that this scale showed good reliability across different ethnic groups, as the measure intends to capture both those who were similar visually as well as those who were not; this scale fulfilled that role (Phinney and Ong, 2007; Yoon, 2011; Brown et al., 2013).

Using PCA, all six questions yielded two components with eigenvalue over 1 (3.158; 1.122), explaining 71.3% of the variance, that I will refer to as exploration and commitment, as suggested by the literature (Phinney and Ong, 2007)[34]. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.786, and the significance level for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was $p<0.001$, indicating that using PCA may be useful. For the two scales, *exploration* and *commitment*, Chronbach's Alpha was 0.802 and 0.755, respectively. The Chronbach's alpha for the *exploration* scale increased by deleting one item "*I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs*" (0.803). This was a marginal change, so I decided to keep all three items. In this thesis I will use the components in my analysis, not individual items.

Exploration: refers to the act of seeking information and experiences that are related to their ethnicity and is an important aspect of the development of ethnic identity. Rooted in Erik Eriksons's psychosocial identity development model (1994), where key stages of identity formation are believed to take place during the adolescent years and young adulthood where they are forming their own identity, leading to either a resolution or a role confusion.

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[34] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.5.

Commitment: the second component is commitment or attachment on behalf of the student. Commitment refers to a sense of belonging to and being personally invested in a group (Phinney and Ong, 2007). This dimension of commitment and attachment to a certain *reference group* is identified as a major element of collective identity, or what Ashmore et al. (2004) refer to as the "*extension of the self to the social group*" (p. 90). This goes beyond a simple self-categorisation due to perceived similarity to this group, and also entails interdependence or the feeling of a mutual fate with other group members (ibid).

The interviews revealed a much more complicated and dynamic identity formation where the question of boundaries to an Icelandic identity appeared to be of greater importance, an element that was also measured in the quantitative part. This element consists of three questions: '*I consider myself to be an Icelander*', '*Overall, other people consider me to be an Icelander*,' and '*I would like to be perceived as an Icelander*', measured on a 100-point scale were 0 meant not at all and 100 meant completely.

However, the interviews emphasised the importance of accounting for the flexible nature of identity, the constant realisation and re-evaluation of who you are, both as an independent, ever evolving individual, but also how it may change in relation to others. Such journey of self-realisation and understanding is not captured in a systematic manner, nor should we see a description of a current understanding of the self as an *ultimate thruth*. Therefore, although we may try to capture an image of the *now*, we must simultaneously account for personal growth and evolvement when trying to paint a picture of the ethnic identity of youngsters. This must be kept in mind, both with regards to the qualitative and quantitative data.

Self-perceived communication competency

Conceptualised by its authors as the "adequate ability to pass along or give information; the ability to make known by talking or writing" (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988, p. 109), the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC) is a measure of people's self-perceived communication competence across four different settings, towards three types of audiences.[35] The four circumstances of communication include public speaking, talking in large meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in pairs. The three types of recipients or audiences are strangers, acquaintances, and friends (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988, 2013).

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[35] For a full list, please refer to appendix 10.9.

The measure has shown good internal consistency (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988; McCroskey et al., 1990; Croucher, 2013; Samvati and Golaghaei, 2017).

The scale contains 12 items where the student is asked to evaluate their own ability to communicate in Icelandic, thus students were given the following instructions:

> I would like to ask you to evaluate your own ability to communicate in Icelandic in different situations. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in each of the situations described below where 0 is completely incompetent (I can't do it at all) and 100 is completely competent (I feel very confident that I can do it).

The SPCC subscales, public, meeting, group, dyad, stranger, acquaintance and friend, were both tested for students of Icelandic and foreign background separately and all showed a good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.740 to a score of 0.911. For this reason, all seven scales were created and used as intended according to the literature, measured on the same scale as before (0-100) (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988)[36]. In this thesis I will use the components in my analysis, not individual items.

School engagement

This study follows Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's approach to defining school engagement as a three-dimensional meta-construct (2004). According to Fredricks et al., the school engagement encompasses three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The scales measuring these three facets were created for the purpose of this study, heavily relying on existing scales. The reason for taking this route was mainly the exploratory nature of this study. As the main objective was to understand areas where students of foreign background might differ from their counterparts of Icelandic foreign background, I decided to employ larger scales. This gave me a chance to unpack latent components that these three dimensions might consist of.[37] In this thesis I will use the components in my analysis, not individual items.

Behavioural engagement: This dimension is often defined by three means. First there is the presence of positive actions or absence of negative actions that encompass the student's behaviour during school hours, whether they adhere to the school rules, and do not participate in negative behaviour such as skipping school. Secondly, there is the student's involvement in

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[36] For further details, please refer to appendix 10.9.
[37] For a full list, please refer to appendix 10.5.

learning and their behaviour during class, such as whether they contribute to class discussions and are able to concentrate during class. The third definition is direct participation in other school related activities, such as extracurricular activities, or taking an active role in school such as being a class representative or in the student council (ibid).

To measure behavioural engagement in the quantitative part of this study, I asked students 13 questions, based on existing scales (Voelkl, 1996; Hazel et al, 2013; Skinner et al, 2008), all measuring an element of behavioural engagement, encompassing the aforementioned three definitions. All questions were measured on a five-item Likert scale, ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Some questions were negatively phrased, but were reversed before analysed, meaning that a higher score would mean a more positive feeling across all questions. Three components were detected with eigenvalue over 1 (4.709; 1.412; 1.200), explaining 56.3% of the variance. Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.892 and the significance level for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was below p<0.001, both indicating that PCA may be useful, given the data at hand. However, the Cronbach's alpha was very low for two of the components (0.356 and 0.472), thus I will only use one component for my analysis. That component, consisting of six items, had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.868, and will be referred to as *behavioural engagement*. It measures whether the student adheres to school rules and norms and applies themselves in school with questions such as "*I follow school rules", "I always finish my homework"* as well as *"I try my best to do well in school"*.

Emotional engagement: this dimension is the emotional reaction a student has towards their school environment, their teachers, and the school in general; how well they identify with their school, or a sense of school belonging (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). In the quantitative part of this study, I asked the students 16 questions that covered different aspects of emotional engagement such as where you would feel at home or could mirror yourself; how they identify with their school and felt socially connected; and with statements to measure emotional connectedness and trust towards their school as an institution and its adult members. This scale is based on existing scales (Goodenow, 1993; Appleton et al., 2006; Hart et al., 2011; Hazel et al., 2013; Voelkl, 1996). All questions were measured on a five-item Likert scale, ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Some questions were negatively phrased, but were reversed before being analysed, where a higher score means a more positive feeling across all questions.

Using PCA, three components had an eigenvalue over 1 (5.713; 1.847; 1.045), explaining 53.8% of the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling

adequacy was 0.906 and the significance level for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was below p<0.001, again indicating that PCA may be useful, given the data at hand. For each scale, Mirroring; Belongingness, and Reciprocity, Cronbach's Alpha was 0.850; 0.770 and 0.760, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha for the belongingness scale increased by deleting one item (0.859). However, after having analysed that fourth question and seeing that it was those of foreign background had systematically answered differently, and given the fact that the change was marginal, I decided to keep all four items. The mirroring scale included questions such as *"I feel like I can be myself at my school"* and *"Other students in my school are there for me when I need them"* where each question represented social connectedness towards the school and a sense of *home,* that is, where the student feels as others are there for them. The second scale, belongingness included questions such as *"Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here at my school"* and *"I feel left out of activities that take place in my school"*. Each question on the belongingness scale represented an element of inclusion or exclusion such as having friends or being left out. The last scale that represents emotional engagement is, reciprocity, included questions such as *"My teachers support me so I can be successful at school"* and *"I feel like I could talk to at least one adult in my school if I would have a problem"*. The questions this scale consists of refer to an element of trust on behalf of the student towards their school environment and its staff.

Cognitive Engagement: this third dimension refers to the student's investment in the learning process and the ways in which they self-regulate their learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Cognitive engagement was measured in the quantitative part of this study by asking the students 12 questions, based on existing scales (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990; Hazel et al., 2013 and Appleton et al., 2006). These questions were intended to cover all aspects of cognitive engagement: how the student invested in their learning, their perseverance when studying was difficult, and whether they enjoyed challenges. All questions were, as before, measured on a five-item Likert scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. One question was originally negatively phrased but was reversed before being analysed.

Using all questions, two components had eigenvalue over 1 (5.449; 1.258) explaining 55.9% of the variance, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.917 and the significance level for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was below p<0.001, indicating that PCA may be useful, given the data at hand, as before. For each scale *strategy* and *value* Cronbach's Alpha was 0.859 and 0.785. The strategy scale included questions such as "I use various methods to learn so I better understand the material" as well as "after finishing my schoolwork, I check to see if it's correct". These questions represent an element of the strategies

the student uses to understand and gain depth in the material they learn at school, such as checking, making sure they have fulfilled what was expected of them and done correctly, as well as whether they employ various learning techniques to they gain a deeper understanding. Example of questions that the value scale consists of are such as "most of what is important you learn in school" as well as "the grades in my classes do a good job measuring what I'm able to do". The questions measuring value represent seeing the value in the work they put in now, and how it can help them at a given time, as well as for the future.

Domestic barriers

In the quantitative part of the study, there was a measure of subjective barriers in the home, preventing the student to reach their academic goals. This measure consists of seven questions, encompassing a variety of barriers to fully reaching one's goals, from having a sufficiently quiet place to study, attaining help and support from parents or guardians as well as having to provide economic and emotional support at home[38]. These questions are all measured on a 5-item Likert scale, *very untrue, mostly untrue, somewhat true, mostly true* and *very true.* PCA revealed one component, thus consequently orthogonal, with eigenvalue over 1 (4.226) that I will onwards refer to as domestic barriers. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.886, the significance level for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was $p<0.001$, and Chronbach's Alpha was 0.888 and did not increase by deleting an item. On the new component, a higher value means that the student perceives greater barriers to reach their goals in school. In this thesis I will use the sole component in my analysis, not individual items.

Success

To measure the students' perception of opportunities of success in Iceland I asked them to respond to the statement "*In Iceland, people like me can succeed*", on a 5-item Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Percentage of foreign nationals above or under the national average

I created a scale, that was based on the population of people with foreign nationality in each municipality. To create this scale, I used official statistics that report the number of people by

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[38] For a full list, please refer to appendix 10.11.

municipality and nationality. Based on the average of the past five years,[39] I created a bivariate variable where I have used the national average as a midpoint.

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[39] Due to the small population in many of the towns and villages the percentage was sensitive to any changes in population, which is why I based the measure on a 5-year average.

4.4 Understanding the participants

In the preparation of this study, I worked on the basis of former county lines, creating with five areas representing the North, East, South, West and the Capital Area[40]. In the quantitative part of this study there were 17 participating schools in total, and they came from all five parts. Out of the seventeen schools, two were from urban areas, with the rest from semi-urban and rural areas. School sizes varied a lot, and thus the number of participants from each school. The smallest number of participants from a single school was one, and the highest number was 333 participants. Similarly, the percentage of students of foreign background in each school varied greatly. Overall, 12.9% of all participating students were of foreign background, but the composition across all schools ranged from none at all up to two thirds of participants.
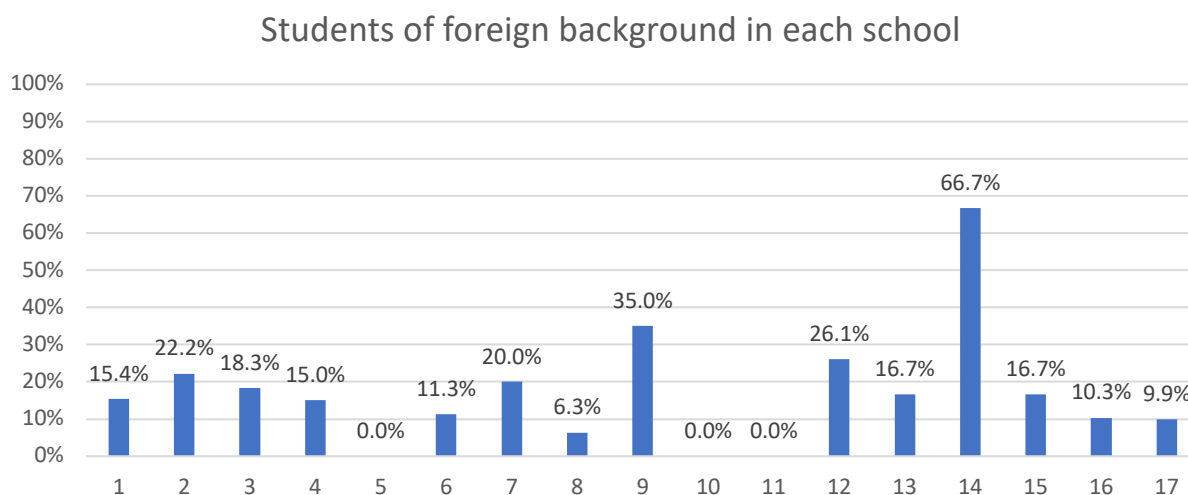
Figure 9: Percentage of students of foreign background in each participating school[41]

As we can see from the figure above, the composition of the participating schools varied across all schools, with students of foreign background accounting for 10-25% of students in over half of them.

When it came to the qualitative part of the study, I managed to get participating schools from all parts of Iceland, apart from the Northern Region. In the qualitative part of the study, there were six participating schools, all of which had been part of the quantitative component.

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[40] For further details, please refer to Appendix 10.6.
[41] For a full list of number of students, please refer to Appendix 10.12.

4.4.1 Foreign background, what is that?

> *An immigrant is an individual who is foreign born and has parents who also are born outside of Iceland as well as both grandparents. Second generation immigrants are individuals who are born in Iceland but whose parents are both immigrants. People are considered to have a foreign background if either parent is foreign born. (Hagstofa Íslands, 2019, translated by author)*

Working with both quantitative and qualitative data calls for different opportunities, challenges, and varying level of breadth and depth. In the quantitative part of this study, students were asked whether they were born in Iceland or elsewhere, and whether their parents were born in Iceland or elsewhere. For ethical reasons I could not ask the students where they were born but gave them an option from a list of regions to choose from, were they born in another country than Iceland. During the interviews in the qualitative phase of the study, where I only interviewed students who were first or second generation or of mixed parentage, I was able to ask the students questions about *where* they were born and where their parents were born. This gave an interesting layer to my quantitative data, where I would see that a simple question, such as one regarding parentage, may only give a glimpse of a complicated picture.

Throughout this study, I mainly refer to students of Icelandic or foreign background. As we can see in table 1, a student of **Icelandic background** is a student whose *parents were both born in Iceland*, regardless of where the student was born. If a research participant was born elsewhere, but both parents are Icelandic born, they will be referred to as a student of Icelandic background.

Table 1: Definition of a student of Icelandic, foreign, and mixed background

Participant born in Iceland

	Father born in Iceland	**Father born elsewhere**
Mother born in Iceland	Icelandic background	Mixed background
Mother born elsewhere	Mixed background	Foreign background

Participant born elsewhere

	Father born in Iceland	**Father born elsewhere**
Mother born in Iceland	Icelandic background	Mixed background
Mother born elsewhere	Mixed background	Foreign background

A student whose parents were born in another country are defined as **students of foreign background**. As shown in table 1, there was a third group: those who were of **mixed parentage**. Given how small the sample size was, it was deemed impossible to do any analysis separately for that group. The solution was to look at two additional factors: *how did the students identify themselves* and *what language did they speak at home*? The first factor was measured by looking at how these students answered on three separate questions, regarding whether they considered themselves to be Icelandic, others considered themselves to be Icelandic, and whether they wanted to be Icelandic. Considering how the students of mixed group answered on the identity questions I decided to divide the group into two groups depending on the language they spoke at home and their perceived identity as Icelander.

Table 2: Final definition of a student who was of mixed background, based on the definition portrayed in table 1.

Language spoken at home

	Solely Icelandic and identified as Icelandic	**Icelandic and another language or solely another language and did not identify as Icelandic**
Mixed background	Icelandic background	Foreign background

Thereby, if a student solely spoke Icelandic at home and fully identified as Icelandic, they were considered of Icelandic background[42].

In the qualitative part of the study, students were asked to write on a blank piece of paper where their parents were born, and where they had been born, to further understand their background. Interestingly enough, quite a few of the students who originally had told me that they were of mixed background, were referring to an Icelandic stepparent rather than a foreign-born biological parent. When referring to the qualitative data, particularly in chapter 5 on ethnic identity, I will make a distinction between students who are of mixed parentage and those who are not. Furthermore, we will look into how the students considered themselves, how others perceived the students, and the difference between the two.

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[42] Students of mixed parentage who were defined as Icelandic, rather than foreign background, were 10 in total.

4.4.2 Understanding the students

Quantitative data - descriptive statistics

In this study, I focused on students in their last three years of compulsory education, which means year 8, 9, and 10. The division between year groups was similar, 36% in year 8; 34% in year 9 and 30% in year 10. Overall, there were 860 students who had given information about their background in the quantitative part of this study. There were 749 students in total who were defined as students of Icelandic background or 87.1%, and the remaining 12.9% were defined as students of foreign background, 111 students in total. The gender division was similar for both groups, with marginally fewer participating boys in both groups[43].

Table 3: Gender by background

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	%	N	%
Boys	341	47.2	47	44.3
Girls	382	52.8	59	55.7
Total	723	100	106	100

Students who were born in another country, regardless of where their parents were born, were asked to choose from a list of countries, where they had been born. Due to how small the Icelandic nation is, and the foreign population being even smaller, privacy and anonymity was an issue. For that reason, I clustered together countries based on proximity, cultural ties, or historic migration patterns to Iceland (Northern Europe/Scandinavia, South or Mid Europe, and Eastern Europe) on one hand and on the other I had to consider how few students I would have from other countries. Because of this, Asia, Africa, and Latin America were a separate group, and finally the Core Anglosphere[44] was grouped together. The reason why such a diverse group, apart from its shared language, were put together was for precisely that reason: English is a language that is commonly spoken by Icelanders and it is part of the Icelandic national Curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). The majority of students of foreign background who had been born in another country, were born in an Eastern European

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[43] 26 students who were of Icelandic background and 5 who were of foreign background (3.5% and 4.5% of the total respectively) identified as outside the binary gender division.

[44] Core Anglosphere refers to five countries that share a common cultural and historical ties. These are the United Kingdom, The United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

country (52.6%). This is in line with official statistics, where the two largest foreign populations are Poles and Lithuanians (Statistics Iceland, 2020g)[45].

The majority of students who had been born in another country had moved to Iceland before their tenth birthday, 94.1% of those of Icelandic background and 65.7% of those of foreign background. Unfortunately, due to how small these subsamples are, further statistical analysis based on the time of arrival is not possible.

Qualitative data – description of participating schools and interviewees

As already stated, 32 students in year 8, 9, and 10 were interviewed across six compulsory schools. All in all, 18 boys were interviewed and 14 girls. The majority of interviewees were in year 10 or 15 in total, 11 interviewees were in year 9 and the remaining six interviewees were in year 8.

Table 4: The background of all interviewees.

	N	%
Mixed background	11	34.4
1st generation immigrants	12	37.5
2nd generation immigrants	9	28.1
Total	32	100

The interviewees were fairly evenly split in terms of background. Most students were first generation immigrants, closely followed by students of mixed background.

Participating schools and interviewees

School 1 is situated in a moderately sized town (~2500). The town is not diverse, with the proportion of immigrants under the national average. There is no upper secondary school in town, yet it is within easy reach of a variety of schools. Every student who fit the criteria, being of foreign background in year 8, 9, and 10, was interviewed.

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[45] For a full list of country division and where all foreign-born students were born, please refer to appendix 10.7.

School 1	Year	Background
Sam	10	Mixed parentage. Mother from Eastern Europe, father from Iceland.
Gabriel	8	1st generation immigrant from a Southeast country. Moved to Iceland 2 years prior to the interview.
Ali	8	1st generation immigrant. Moved to Iceland approximately 2 years prior to the interview from a Middle Eastern country.

School 2 is a large school, in the capital area with a variety of upper secondary schools nearby. The school is situated in a less diverse area of the capital, which also marks the demography of the school. Due to the size of the school, interviews were limited to students in year 9 and 10. The majority of students of foreign background in year 9 and 10 were interviewed, with two students declining to be interviewed. Interviews took place at the end of the school year, meaning that students in year 10 had already applied for upper secondary school.

School 2	Year	Background
Adam	9	2nd generation immigrant. Both parents from an Eastern European country
Greta	9	Mixed parentage. Mother Icelandic, father from Africa.
Emilis	8	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern Europe when at preschool age. Lives with mother and Icelandic stepfather.
Karim	10	2nd generation immigrant. Parents from Africa.
Pippa	10	Mixed parentage. Mother Icelandic, father from Western Europe.
George	10	Mixed parentage. Mother Icelandic, father from Western Europe.
Sarah	10	Mixed parentage. Mother from Western Europe, father Icelandic.
Rosa	10	Mixed parentage. Mother of Southeast Asian descent, but born in Western Europe, father Icelandic.

School 3 is situated in a moderately sized, yet rural fishing town (~2500). The town is diverse, which is also reflected by the school's demography. Due to this, the school's contact person was asked to prioritise students who were first and second generation over those of mixed background and year 10 students over those in year 8 and 9. Despite this, interviews went better

than expected and the overwhelming majority of students of foreign background were interviewed. There is one small upper secondary school in town, and the driving distance to the next one is two to three hours.

School 3	Year	Background
Erin	8	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Latin America 7 years prior to the interview.
Miroslav	9	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern Europe 2 years prior to the interview.
Sebastian	9	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern Europe when was at preschool age.
Ivan	10	2nd generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern Europe 3 years prior to the interview.
Andrea	9	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Southeast Asia when she was a toddler.
Lena	9	2nd generation immigrant. Parents both from Eastern Europe.
Finn	10	Mixed parentage. Mother from Western Europe, father from Iceland.
Maria	10	Mixed parentage. Mother from Southeast Asia, father from Iceland.
Hannah	8	Mixed parentage. Mother from Southeast Asia, father from Iceland.

School 4 is situated in a large town (~8000). The town is not very diverse, with the proportion of immigrants under the national average. There is an upper secondary school in town and it is within easy reach from a variety of other upper secondary schools (30-45 minute drive). Every student who fit the criteria of foreign background in year 8, 9, or 10 was interviewed.

School 4	Year	Background
Agatha	9	2nd generation immigrant. Mother from an Eastern European country, father from a Western European country.
Pavel	10	1st generation immigrant. Born in Eastern European country and moved when was at preschool age.
Marek	10	2nd generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern European country when he was at preschool age.
Sofia	10	2nd generation immigrant. Came first when was at preschool age but went back to the Eastern European country where she was born. Moved again to Iceland when was in primary school.
Dávid	10	1st generation immigrant. Moved from an Eastern European Country when was at preschool age.
Gigi	9	1st generation immigrant. Born in a Middle Eastern country and moved when was at preschool age.

School 5 is situated in a small fishing village (~500). The village is fairly diverse, with the proportion of immigrants slightly over the national average. There is no upper secondary school in the village, and the nearest school is at a one to two hour driving distance. Three students in this school fulfilled the criteria of being of foreign background in year 8 and 9, one of whom had moved to the country weeks earlier and was therefore not interviewed.

School 5	Year	Background
Marcus	8	Mixed parentage. Mother born in Latin America, father Icelandic.
Daniel	9	2nd generation immigrant. Both parents born in South East Asia.

School 6 is situated in a small fishing village (~1000). The village is fairly diverse, with the proportion of immigrants over the national average. There is no upper secondary school in the village, with the nearest school being at a 30 to 45 minute[46] driving distance. Every student of foreign background was invited to be interviewed, and only one declined to participate.

School 6	Year	Background
Greg	9	1st generation immigrant. Moved from Eastern Europe when he was at preschool age
Sap	9	1st generation immigrant. Moved when he was at preschool age. Parents from Southeast Asia, Icelandic stepfather.
Mali	10	2nd generation immigrant. Father from Southeast Asia, father from Iceland.
Rita	10	Mixed parentage. Mother from Southeast Asia, father from Iceland.

Parents' educational level and relative financial situation

In the quantitative part of this study, students were asked about their parent's highest level of education attained. For obvious reasons, this is not a concrete measure of the parent's educational level, since it is based on the student's assessment. Between 5-6% of students believed their parents' highest level of education to be compulsory education or lower. For simplicity, if parents had finished compulsory education, or had A-levels equivalence, matriculation examination or finished vocational studies, they will be referred to as having a *non-university degree*. If the parent had an undergraduate degree or finished further studies at a university level, their degree will be referred to as a *university degree*. If we were to only look at the pure division of how students reported their parental university degree, there was a clear division with a larger portion of the parents of students of Icelandic background having a university degree: 73% of mothers and 62% of fathers. This was more or less split in half for the students of foreign background, with 54% of mothers and 48% of fathers having a university degree.

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[46] The time estimated varies by varying speed limits depending on weather, seasonal mountain roads, and gravel roads.

Table 5: Students were asked about the highest level of education their parents had. Non-university degree refers to compulsory education, A-levels equivalence, matriculation examination or vocational studies.

Educational level mother

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Non-university degree	165	22.1	36	34.3
University degree	439	58.9	43	41.0
Do not know	142	19	26	24.7
Total	746	100	105	100

Educational level father

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Non-university degree	226	30.3	33	30.8
University degree	361	48.5	31	29.0
Do not know	158	21.2	43	40.2
Total	745	100	107	100

Roughly one-fifth to a quarter of students did not know their parent's educational level, except when the students of foreign background were asked about their father's educational level; little over 40% of the students were not able to answer. Overall, the findings here were very similar to the interviewees in the qualitative part of the study. What was interesting, and proved to be of importance in the interviews, was the portion of students who did not know their parents' educational level. This and its potential implications will also be discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

In both components of the study, students were asked with whom they lived. In the qualitative part, the majority of students said they lived with both parents. However, early on it became apparent that the ways in which student define *parents* can vary considerably. This shed light on the flexibility of a seemingly straight forward background variable, such as parentage and immigration status.

In the quantitative part of the study, the majority of students of Icelandic and foreign background lived with both parents, or 75.4% and 67.3% respectively. The second largest group was students living with a single parent. This could be referred to as a single mother or

a father, living with or without a stepparent. Similarly, around 8.5% students said they lived about equal amount of time with each of their parents.

Table 6: Living arrangements of students. Single parent refers to a child living with either their mother or father, with or without a stepparent.

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Both parents	563	75.4	72	67.3
Equally with each parent	65	8.7	9	8.5
Single parent	98	13.1	22	20.5
Other	21	2.8	4	3.7
Total	747	100	107	100

With whom the student lived did not differ considerably by the student's background. Where the students did diverge, however, was in regard to relative income.

Students were asked to estimate how they fared economically with the question:

> *Compared with most people you know personally, in your community, friends, family, neighbours, and peers, would you say that your family's household income is…*

This question is not an indicator of actual income, but a subjective estimate of how well the students believe their family fares compared with people in their surroundings. The students were then given the option to situate themselves on a 5-item Likert scale ranging from *far below average* to *far above average*, with the midpoint of *average*. For simplicity, the table below shows the number and percentages of students who believed their family was below average, average, or above average.

Table 7: Student's estimate of their family's household relative income, by background.

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Lower than average	26	4.3	8	10.3
Average	310	50.9	48	61.5
Higher than average	273	44.8	22	28.2
Total	609	100	78	100

For both groups, over half of the participants estimated their family's income to be on par with others around them. A small percentage of the students of Icelandic background considered their family's income to be below income, but a little over 10% were of foreign background. Furthermore, what is interesting is the amount of people who did not want to answer the question or were not sure how to answer, 157 in total. Another 16 participants skipped the question. Considering each subgroup by background, those who did not know how or did not want to answer the question amounted to 17.5% of the students of Icelandic background and 23.4% of the students of foreign background.

The majority of those who did not know or did not want to respond to the question of relative income lived in the rural part of Iceland (65%). This may suggest a sense of egalitarianism – where placing oneself on a hierarchical income scale feels *unnatural* to them. If we focus on students of foreign background, however, 8 out of 22 who did not know or want to respond to the question of relative income also said they *never* or *sometimes* had access to the internet to do their homework. Three said they did not have access to a computer to do their assignments, suggesting a lack of tools to meet their academic requirements or to perform well at school. This same group of students was also of interest in another aspect: roughly half of them did not know their mother's or father's educational level (11 out of 26, and 17 out of 26, respectively). This may suggest a *culture* or *norm* within the household where the students had no sense of how they could rank their family's economic situation relative to others.

The qualitative interviews further emphasised the fluidity of *relative economic ranking*, and issues that may follow the ways in which an adult or a researcher may perceive affluence. Yet, a teenager or a non-adult of foreign background may approach the issue in a completely different way. Two things stood out in relation to income or economic class: *who* are the students comparing themselves to and is there an *absence* of talking about their family's class position.

As to the issues of *who* the students compared themselves to, many interviewees thought about their immediate surroundings: how their home, house, and family compared to their friends' homes, houses, and families. However, there was a group of students who perceived their family to be relatively wealthy, comparing themselves to people in other less affluent countries. Sometimes they referred to the sending country but other times just to an indistinct *foreign country*. Daniel, a second generation student from Southeast Asia told me how his house was similar to others in his village, but if that house were in the sending country "*we would have a very rich house, and there it's just.. you know.. just third-class houses, somehow*". The students pertaining to this group all realised their privileged position, by the

mere fact that they lived in Iceland. These students evaluated their family economic situation across borders, as part of *one world*.

For other students, the *absence* of talking about their family's class position did not become apparent until I interviewed students in an affluent school. There, affluency or being *well off* became a topic of discussion. At this school, some students told me about the size of their houses, their parents' profession, how they could afford what they wanted, and how they were saving up for the future – all descriptions that were a far cry from descriptions of homes like others had, working class professions, and working to pay for their hobbies, or saving for something to be bought in the immediate future.

These findings, mentioned above, further emphasise how we must be careful when we ask students about their relative income. How do they understand the question and who are they comparing themselves to? School, neighbourhood, or urban/rural variation may be important variables at play.

The current study is entering a new terrain in understanding the aspirations of children of foreign background in Iceland. In this chapter, I have discussed the main reasoning behind my choice of using mixed methods, methodologies employed, and the main ethical issues regarding doing research with minors. In these next three chapters, we will delve into the findings of this study. First, we will look at the role of ethnic identity and language. Next, we will look into school engagement and how it may play a part in the student's educational aspirations. Lastly, we will draw all our findings together and focus on educational aspirations.

5   The role of ethnic identity and language

This chapter is the first of three findings chapters. Language and ethnic identity will now take the lead role in detailing student experiences in the Icelandic school system. The quantitative findings are based on data collected from students of Icelandic and foreign background, but only those of foreign background were interviewed for the qualitative component of the study.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the geographical isolation of Iceland and its recent immigration history mean that the nation is a tight knit society of kinship and family. There is also a long history of guarding the language from foreign influence, on the grounds of preserving ethnic purity and national identity. One could argue how these factors, along with its short history of independence, further deepens a sense of scepticism towards foreign influence.

In this chapter, I will explore the role of ethnic identity and perceived language proficiency. Do students perceive barriers to belonging in relation to the majority population, and what is the interplay between language and perceived opportunities? In the first section, I will discuss ethnic identity in detail by asking questions such as: What are the constraints to how students may identify? What does it mean to have a community? and Who do students consider to be in their community?

In the second section I will cover how the Icelandic language, often referred to as the key to society in Icelandic policy, may both serve as a facilitator and a barrier to inclusion. In the quantitative part of this study, I will introduce a measure of perceived proficiency in speaking Icelandic used and I will investigate how students of foreign background described this barrier in their interviews.

5.1 Ethnic identity

> "It is easy to agree on the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what." (Castells, 2010, p. 7)

Castells' statement indicates the idea that identity is a phenomenon rooted in interaction with others rather than an innate trait of human beings. In that sense, identity is shaped and reshaped through interactions with others (Jenkins, 2008). Erikson (1964) describes the formation of identity amongst teenagers as dependent upon "the support which the young individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to [them]" (p. 93).

To understand the role of ethnic identity for students of foreign background and the part it plays in their educational aspirations in the Icelandic educational system, we first need to unpack the meaning of being of foreign background in the Icelandic context. As already established, the population of people of foreign background has grown rapidly in the last two to three decades and is now 21.9% of the population but 22.4% for those under the age of 18, where children of mixed parentage outnumber both first- and second-generation children by a margin (Statistics Iceland 2020d). Regardless, those of foreign background are few in numbers. This is best described by the fact that in 2019, children of 17 nationalities did not share a nationality with any other child in compulsory school in the whole country, and a further 95 children of 30 nationalities only shared a national background with one to four other students in the country (Statistics Iceland, 2020k).

Moreover, given Iceland's recent history with immigration, there is neither a history of established ethnic communities nor is there a tradition for non-Icelandic representation in the wider community, such as in the media, high-end employment, or even in the classroom, that mirrors the modern less-homogeneous Icelandic population. Phinney and Ong describe ethnic identity as a *"sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture and a particular setting"* (Phinney and Ong, 2007, p. 271), but it is also a multifaceted and dynamic construct. It is more than simply knowing and understanding who you are, but it is also the experience of being part of a group. For this reason, it is not only important to study the sense of identity itself, but also the context within which it forms. Therefore, it can neither be described as an objective constant, nor as a purely subjective state of mind. Ethnic identity is fluid; a lived experience that is constructed over time and captures the interconnection between an individual and an inner group on one hand and an outer group on the other (Phinney and Ong, 2007; Nagel, 1994).

Understanding the demographic in Iceland is important when we discuss ethnic identity. Children and adolescents may face different challenges, rooted in their status as a first- or second-generation immigrant or of mixed parentage background. In the next subsection we strive to understand the role of ethnic identity for students who are at the cusp of deciding on their next educational steps: After whom do the students of foreign background mirror themselves and what role does that play in navigating the educational system and exploring their opportunities?

5.1.1 Back to basics: who are you?

The basis of ethnic identity has been subject of debate among many scholars (Nagel, 1994; Barth, 1998; Cornell and Hartmann, 2007) and can involve various elements: self-categorisation, questions about where you come from, one's ethnic or national background, how others racially assign you – in other words, a complex dynamic that is negotiated by individuals and groups vis-á-vis the wider society. The issue of ethnic identity is especially pertinent in the case of pupils of a foreign background who are assumed to be different on the basis of their appearance, their language use, or other distinctive characteristics.

To lay the foundation for further analysis, this section explains the ways in which interviewees, who were all of foreign background, saw their identities. I asked the students to imagine that we were in a foreign country and I would ask them *'where do you come from?'*, to hear their response. I then asked if their response would be different if I had met them in Iceland and if they were often asked this question. This provided an opportunity to explore the fluency of their self-proclaimed identity in relation to spatial awareness and laid the groundwork to discuss their experiences. Later, I asked them the question *'what is it to be an Icelander?'*, with the follow-up question *'are you an Icelander?'*. The latter question was direct or even blunt, and often came as a surprise to them.

With regards to the questions of *where* they came from and *what* their ethnic background was, there were two overarching groups: those who had a clear identity and those who were uncertain (and who often wondered what they *could* or were *allowed* to identify as). Before we explore the dynamic between identity and navigating one's future aspirations, we must begin by exploring the identities the students claimed and, in some cases, the limits of their self-perceived identity.

Knowing who you are

As covered in Chapter 4, one third of the interviewees were of mixed background, 37,5% were first-generation immigrants and 28.1% were second-generation immigrants. In understanding the students' identities, the first overarching group included those who had a clear idea of who they were, either as an Icelander or not. What most of these students shared was being foreign born and having lived in Iceland for a short period of time. In the way they responded to the question it was apparent that they all had a clear idea of who they were and where they came from, and had close ties to the sending country, whether it was a strong connection with family and friends or a longing to go back as soon as possible.

> **Researcher:** Are you an Icelander?
>
> **Erin:** Erm.. uhh… this is a very strange question! Ok.. No.
>
> **Ivan:** No! [said with an emphasise, almost surprised by the question].
>
> **Miroslav:** No… I know that. I'll just... I'll embrace where, from where I'm from and yeah...

Having a strong single *foreign* identity was more prevalent amongst students who were first-generation immigrants, and particularly those who had only lived in the country for only a few years. Greg was a first-generation immigrant who had lived in Iceland since he was a toddler. Both of his parents were from an Eastern European country, and judging from his response, he found the question almost absurd. Greg was, however, among the few who had lived most of his life in Iceland, but who still had a strong single identity as a *foreigner*.

> **Researcher:** If I were to meet you somewhere abroad and we would start talking and I would ask you where you were from, what would you say?
>
> **Greg:** The truth
>
> **Researcher:** And what is the truth?
>
> **Greg:** I would just say I am from [Eastern European country], you see. […] why would I lie about that?
>
> **Researcher:** No [laughs], there is no reason to lie about that.

Sebastian, also a first-generation immigrant from an Eastern European country, had very strong ties to his native country, visited it every year and had a close relationship with his family who still lived in the native country. However, unlike Greg, he saw himself as an Icelander. When asked where he was from Sebastian replied:

> **Sebastian:** Just say "I am from [Eastern European country]". You know, it's more, I would just say "I was born in [Eastern European country] but I live in Iceland", I always say that.
>
> […]
>
> **Researcher:** How do you feel when you are asked?
>
> **Sebastian:** Just normal. Just answer what I want. Then I feel like I would be more of an Icelander than [Eastern European native].
>
> **Researcher:** What is it about, or you know, why do you feel that way?
>
> **Sebastian:** Erm just because everyone around me are Icelanders apart from at home and just, I live here for much longer than in [eastern European country].
>
> **Researcher:** You may perhaps have answered this, I'm not sure, but are you an Icelander?
>
> **Sebastian:** Yes, I just see myself as an Icelander.

Sebastian had a very strong grasp of where he stood. Despite seeing himself as an Icelander, Sebastian did not disregard his roots. Sebastian's identity was supple, where he had the freedom to affiliate himself in a variety of ways. Similarly, Pavel, a first-generation immigrant, who had lived in Iceland since he was at pre-school age, told me that he predominantly considered himself as Icelandic:

> I would say Iceland and [Eastern European country], you know. You see, I feel like I am more of an Icelander but still I am from [Eastern European country] but I most often just say both, you see. […] My life is pretty much all [in] Iceland, you know, like I just talk [Eastern European language] with my parents, that's all.
>
> (Pavel)

Both boys told me that they were *from* their native country, their family as a unit were foreign, yet they, themselves were Icelanders. In addition to those who had a clear single identity there was a group of interviewees of mixed parentage who firmly described themselves with a *dual* identity, as opposed to being *half-and-half*. These students would reply to the question "*are you an Icelander?*" and the following questions "*are you [other nationality]*" with a firm yes.

> **Researcher:** Are you an Icelander?
>
> **George:** I would say so, yes.
>
> **Researcher:** Are you [other nationality]?
>
> **George:** Yeps
>
> **Researcher:** Yeah? So, you are both?
>
> **George**: Hundred percent.

George's response was very typical for those who had a clear dual identity. What these students had in common was that they were all White and all passed as a stereotypical Icelander in terms of their appearance.

Uncertain identity

The second overarching group, when it came to self-categorisation, were the students who weren't sure how they should categorise themselves or if they were *allowed* to call themselves Icelandic. Lena, a White, second-generation immigrant, had lived in Iceland her whole life, mainly in the same municipality. Both of her parents were from an Eastern European country. She spoke Icelandic fluently, as well as her parent's native language, and said she used both languages at home – the Eastern European language with her parents and Icelandic with her sibling – and considered both languages her native language. When asked where she was from, Lena replied, "*sometimes I say [I am from] Iceland, but I don't quite know if I am from Iceland because my parents aren't Icelanders*". Moreover, not knowing how to answer where she is from, things become more complicated when asked about her ethnic background:

> **Researcher:** Are you an Icelander?
>
> **Lena:** I don't know.
>
> **Researcher:** No? Do you ever think about it?
>
> **Lena:** I think about it sometimes.
>
> **Researcher:** Mhm. And like, how… how do you feel most often? Do you then lean towards being…?
>
> **Lena:** Yes sometimes.
>
> **Researcher:** Yes? Would you say you were [Eastern European nationality]?
>
> **Lena:** No.

Judging from Lena's response, she wanted to identify as an Icelander. She did not consider herself to be of the same ethnicity as her parents, yet she wasn't sure if she could truly call herself an Icelander, thus not entirely sure who she really was. And Lena was not the only one.

> **Researcher:** Are you an Icelander?
>
> **Hannah:** Half. Æ[47], I'm like... Yes a bit. Yes… I… Yet, my look isn't like... being an Icelander.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you feel like you are an Icelander?
>
> **Hannah:** Mm-hmm
>
> **Researcher:** Yes? Are you [Southeast Asian nationality]?
>
> **Hannah:** No…. I feel like I'm more an Icelander. Because I've been... lived here all… Yes.

Hannah was of mixed parentage, born in Iceland and lived in a small village. Her mother was from a Southeast Asian country and her father was from Iceland, Hannah herself having

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[47] Æ is a sound, similar to „you see" or „well", but often said in distress, or as a way to portray a difficult feeling or even minimising what comes next.

distinctive Asian features. The feeling Hannah describes here, is the same as Lena's: she knows who she *isn't*, but she's not entirely sure who she is 'allowed' to be. Both Lena and Hannah were clear about *where* they came from: Iceland. But, the questions *where do you come from* and *their ethnic background*, were two distinct and often conflicting questions.

Mali was born in Iceland but of mixed parentage. Her mother was from a Southeast Asian country and her father from Iceland; she was ethnically ambiguous in appearance. She reported that she considered herself to be from Iceland, but when asked if she was *Icelandic*, she was not so sure.

> **Researcher:** What is it, to be an Icelander?
>
> **Mali:** It's just... I don't know [chuckles]. It's just.. [pause], <u>I obviously don't know at all how it is to be a complete Icelander</u> because you know, because in my home there's also the [southeast Asian] religion, you know, not just the Icelandic. I don't know completely how it is to be completely an Icelander or you know... yes. [pause] don't know [pause] it's like [pause], alright it is very fun to be an Icelander.
>
> <div align="right">(underlined for emphasis)</div>

When Mali is asked what it means to be Icelandic, she immediately begins to question her own identity. Once she has established that she doesn't know what it is to be a <u>*complete*</u> Icelander, she seems to come to the conclusion that it is *fun* to be an Icelander. Mali uses the word *gaman* to describe what it is to be an Icelander, which translates as *fun*. From the context, she appears to rather mean *nice* or even *safe*, as she then further explains how Iceland is a safe country where not much is going on. Later in the interview she established that she considered herself to be an Icelander, but only to a certain extent.

Similar to Lena and Hannah, Mali was *reluctant* to fully say that she is Icelandic. Hanna and Mali, who both were of mixed parentage, described a half-and-half identity, whereas Lena, who was a second-generation immigrant, described her identity as *not quite* Icelandic. In the section earlier, we explored the identities of students who confidently claimed their Icelandic identity. What they had in common was *whiteness*. Hannah and Mali, both of mixed parentage and Southeast Asian descent, did not have that same freedom. They were non-White, and although they did not identify with their non-Icelandic side, and *felt* Icelandic, they were reluctant to fully claim an Icelandic identity.

Lena's case, however, is somewhat different. Against what we saw in the earlier section, despite her whiteness and the fact that she is a second-generation immigrant, Lena does not feel like she can fully claim an Icelandic identity, nor does she claim her parent's Eastern European identity. Before we delve into the complications of identity in terms of perceived

educational opportunities, Lena's case will be further explored in the next section, as well as the topic of negotiated identity and how it relates to a feeling of belonging.

Negotiated identity – belonging or being othered

In the earlier sections, we learned how there were two overarching themes as to how students categorised their identity: a securely established identity, either single or dual; and an uncertain sense of Icelandic identity, where students described perceived limits to claiming an Icelandic identity.

The latter was more prevalent amongst students who were second generation immigrants or of mixed parentage. Both Mali and Hannah, cited in the section earlier, referred to parts of their identities that they considered incompatible with a truly *Icelandic* identity. We saw how Mali referred to religion in her response, whilst Hannah's concern was more about her appearance *"because I think many Icelanders [have] blond hair, but if they would see, like someone with slightly darker skin and…. Black hair and brown eyes then [they] would sort of think 'No this isn't completely Icelandic'" (Hannah).* The dominant Icelandic appearance was on many of my interviewees' minds, particularly those who didn't have *it.* Some interviewees spoke of how their appearance diverged from this 'typical' look.

> **Researcher:** Do you ever feel bad at school?
>
> **Daniels**: Erm... I feel… not bad, I do not feel at all bad. But I do feel very different from the other kids who are from Iceland. And I, when I look in the mirror then is, then I think to myself that... I am... from another country. I am not Icelandic.

Daniel was a second-generation immigrant whose parents were both from a Southeast Asian country. He lived in a small village where he had grown up, yet he really struggled with the Icelandic language. His appearance bore witness to his background, with his complexion being darker than the other students, a fact Daniel was very much aware of. When asked, Daniel did not believe that he was being *othered* and even told me how the people in his village told him that he was Icelandic, with him adding, "*but I think that's a no*" (Daniel). In his mind, he couldn't be Icelandic *because of* his appearance. When I asked how he felt different, he retorted, "*Do you see me [scoffs]??? Erm I've got black hair, I've got very dark skin..*". Even though Daniel did not believe he was being *othered* on a personal level by others, he was still acutely aware of what a typical Icelander looks like and how he diverged from that look; the result was his feeling different from everyone else. For others, feeling different was due to

messages they received from their environment. Here, Rosa describes how she is constantly told that she is different:

> Like in [Nordic country where she had formally lived] , you know, everyone was blonde and there was me. If you look at my class photo then, you know, I'm just like the only brunette in the picture and then, I still didn't feel different because people didn't let me know I was different but then in <u>Iceland I felt very different because people was always saying it.</u>

<div align="right">(Rosa)</div>

Rosa was of mixed parentage. Her mother was of Southeast Asian descent and had lived in Iceland since she was a child. Her father was Icelandic. Rosa was ethnically ambiguous in appearance but had brown hair, which was enough for others to point out how she was different. In Rosa's case, her identity being invalidated seemed to be, at least partly, rooted in her mother's appearance.

> **Rosa:** Erm... like the other day then, you know, people were like 'yes you look like this one girl' and I was like 'oh?', 'yes… yes she's brown like you'. I was just like… [uncomfortable laughter]. I was just like... 'what?'
>
> **Researcher:** And what did you think about that?
>
> **Rosa:** I thought it was very strange, you know, because, you know, I think I just look like a <u>normal Icelander,</u> you know. I haven't felt like I am, you know, more Asian than others. I just think like, you know, just… typical Icelander like... and like when my mom came to school to pick me up, then, then people started to like call me a 'negri'[48] and something.

<div align="right">(Underlined for emphasis)</div>

Rosa's example is one of the more extreme, as her identity as an Icelander wasn't validated due to her slightly darker shade of skin and her mother's heritage. The message that she perceived in her environment was that she was different and not a *normal* Icelander. What these students, Rosa, Daniel, Hannah, and Mali are essentially describing is the narrow and racialised understanding of *normality* if you are to be accepted as an Icelander (Gilroy, 2002). Having to negotiate one's identity, based on limited options that are available to them, and the way they express these identities, may shine a light on some characteristics of racism in a given society (Rastas, 2005). Thus, the identity itself is merely the by-product of a much broader issue: a feeling of acceptance and validation for who you are. We have already heard from Rosa, who told me how a derogatory word was used to describe her *foreignness,* when she herself felt

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[48] The word "negri" is the Icelandic equivalent of the "n-word". Albeit not as straightforwardly considered an ethnic slur in Icelandic (Loftsdottir, 2013), it is still considered a negatively value loaded (Kristinsson, 2019) and outdated (Auglýsing um setningu íslenskra ritreglna, 2016; 2018) term. I argue that in a modern Icelandic society, it is used as a contemptuous word for a black or dark-skinned person and it encapsulate the derogatory meaning of the n-word.

Icelandic. Unfortunately, she was not the only one. Some students explained how peers contributed any wrongdoing or silliness to their foreigner background:

> No, you know, sometimes, oh god, it's always called out like, you know if I do something stupid, like an insult, is 'you [George's (western) nationality]'. Like as a joke, 100% you know? It's like, it doesn't make any sense what is being said, then just call it 'the [western nationality]'
>
> (George)

> I am just often called 'the [Pavel's (eastern European) nationality]' and like that, you know. If I do something stupid or something, you know, these '[eastern European nationality]' and something like that you know.
>
> (Pavel)

Both George and Pavel told me how this was said as a joke, yet the message is that their negative attributes were a clear sign of their foreignness and such statements accentuate a sense of *otherness* (Tran and Lefever, 2018). By the same token, Agatha, who was of Eastern-European and Western-European background, explained how she, and others at her school, were being teased about their Eastern-European background.

> Because I'm half [Eastern-European], then I feel like, just on me, you know, and also some [who is] [Eastern-European] in year 10 and something and I feel like it just offends me and, they know full well that I am also half [Western-European nationality] but they always say that I am just [Eastern-European]. But they don't talk about [Western European nationality] people or anything.
>
> (Agatha)

In her 2017 study, Loftsdóttir maintains that through a very specific historical context, Eastern Europeans have been racialised in Icelandic society. Their otherness is acclaimed through the stereotyping of personal traits, portrayal of a dehumanised labour force, or attributed to distinct physical features. Therefore, being *White* is not necessarily a guarantee the freedom of self-proclaiming an identity.

Earlier we saw an excerpt from Lena who was not sure if she was allowed to call herself an Icelander because her parents were immigrants from an Eastern European country. Lena was White, spoke Icelandic well, and felt Icelandic – but was uncertain about her whether she could claim to be Icelandic. The best way to understand Lena's position is to draw parallels with the three boys I have already introduced: Greg, Sebastian, and Pavel. All three boys were White, born in an Eastern European country but moved to Iceland when they were all of pre-school age. When Greg was asked where he was from, he found the question preposterous: he

was a foreigner. Sebastian and Pavel, on the other hand, had clearly compartmentalised their various identities, where they were foreign born, and agreed that their family unit was foreign; yet both said that *they* were Icelandic. Pavel and Sebastian formed identities and a sense of belonging distinct from their parents'. They had begun to reflect on themselves more in relation to their friends and peers. Pavel explained how, despite having a trusting and loving relationship with his parents, he wanted to spend time with his friends, whom he trusted: *"I still trust…, I talk much more often to my friends than mom and dad but, you know, it is completely different"* (Pavel). This clear distinction between a *family-identity* and *self-identity* was not as clear cut for Greg and Lena. Neither reported having a close, trusting relationship with a friend. Lena replied, "*I just hold it in and don't tell anyone*" when I asked her who she could talk to if something were to come up. Not having friends who could validate their sense of belonging, students don't get the same opportunity to try on an identity independent of their parents. This is not to say that having friends equates to feeling Icelandic, but it offers a platform to try to mirror one's self after peers rather than parents.

This discussion has shown that the process of identification is interactional. How we see ourselves is shaped by how others see us, although the ways in which it does may not always be predictable (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). We have also seen that individual students vary considerably in how they may respond to other peoples' framing and categorising of them. We now move on to a discussion of a well know measure of ethnic identity, developed by the social psychologists Phinney and Ong.

5.1.2 *Exploring who you are and confirmation*

In addition to the depth provided by the interviews, I wanted to employ an established measure of ethnic identity that would enhance our understanding of people's ties to an ethnic group they consider themselves part of. It was necessary to choose a tool that would measure the sense of membership in any group, as this study is focused on students of various ethnic and immigration backgrounds. For that reason, I have chosen an existing scale, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM-R) (Phinney and Ong, 2007) as described in chapter 4. This measures two elements of ethnic identity, exploration and commitment, on the scale of one to five where a higher score represents greater commitment and exploration on behalf of the respondent.

Exploration is the act of seeking information and experiences, relating to one's ethnicity such as investing time and effort in learning about one's ethnic group. This could be

through participating in cultural activities, reading books, or learning through conversation with others of the same background (Phinney and Ong, 2007).

Commitment refers to a sense of belonging as well as being personally invested in a group. It is a form of an attachment to a certain group with whom a person shares a collective identity, a feeling of interdependence or a feeling of a mutual fate with other group members (Ashmore, 2004; Phinney and Ong, 2007).

In the table below, I have included both students of foreign and Icelandic background and give an overview of the two scales before moving to a focus on students of foreign background.

Table 8: Difference in mean on the ethnic identity scales, exploration and commitment, by background.

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	**Mean**	**Std dev**	**N**	**Mean**	**Std dev**
Exploration***	578	2.6	1.00	85	3.0	0.79
Commitment	82	3.2	0.90	85	3.2	0.77

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

The MEIM-R scale has values between 1 and 5, where a higher number stands for a positive value: they have explored more or feel more commitment towards their ethnic group. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, what table 8 shows us is that students of Icelandic background scored lower on average on the exploration scale, measuring the degree to which students say they had sought information and experiences about their ethnicity. This difference was statistically significant. These findings may not necessarily be surprising, since students of a foreign background recognised that they would have to make more of a concerted effort to learn about their foreign ethnic background, in a way that Icelandic students did not need to. On the commitment scale, there was essentially no difference, on average, between the two groups. These findings are interesting, and it is unclear why there is no difference in terms of the attachment that students have towards a certain group with whom they share a collective identity. What we have seen in the earlier sections, however, is that many of the non-native students were unclear about their ethnic identity. Moreover, we know that some students share their ethnic background with few others. In some cases, it might be their parents' or they could be thinking of others who also share a non-Icelandic identity. What we may have captured is a varied understanding of commitment, towards others that the student perceives as like them, further suggesting the importance of attaining a qualitative understanding of the students' ethnic identities as we have

done here in this study. In the next sections, we will explore how feeling of attachment to a group and commitment plays out in relation to aspirations and perceived educational options and opportunities.

Knowing who you are

The Act on Compulsory Schools states that the role of compulsory schools is to promote '*the all-round development of all pupils*', suggesting that regardless of their background, schools ought to provide a secure environment where students can come to a self-realisation of who they are as an individual in a democratic society (Lög um grunnskóla, nr 91/2008, article 2). In earlier sections we saw how the students' identity was shaped and negotiated through experience, heritage, stereotyping, and interactions with others.

Some of the students interviewed had adopted an Icelandic identity, either solely or in duality with another national label, whilst others felt as if they had to negotiate that label. In the quantitative part of this study, I asked the students three questions regarding being Icelandic. The questions, measured on a 100-point scale (0 meant *not at all* and 100 meant *completely*), were '*I consider myself to be an Icelander*', '*Overall, other people consider me to be an Icelander*' and '*I would like to be perceived as an Icelander*'. The first question yielded a mean of 53 with a standard deviation of 30, meaning that there was a great variability amongst participants. On the other two questions, '*Overall, other people consider me to be an Icelander*' and '*I would like to be perceived as an Icelander*', the mean was 60 and 56, respectively. Both had the same standard deviation of 30.

I also asked them about perceived opportunities in Iceland, measured on a 5-item Likert scale, where 1 was completely disagree and 5 was completely agree. What the next table shows is the correlation between feeling *Icelandic*, and (1) how others looked at the student and (2) the students' perceived opportunities for success in Iceland.

Table 9: Pearson's correlations between whether the students of foreign background felt Icelandic, and if others considered them to be Icelandic on one hand and students' perceived opportunities for success, on the other

	I consider myself to be an Icelander (N=82)	Overall, other people consider me to be an Icelander (N=82)
In Iceland, people like me can succeed	0.345**	0.395***

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

What this table shows is a weak to moderate positive correlation between *feeling* Icelandic and believing in success for *people like them*. This holds true if the student believes others think of them as Icelandic and their perceived opportunities of success in Iceland. What this means is that there is a relationship between perceived Icelandic identity and believing you can succeed.

Now, as we have established, feeling Icelandic for students of foreign background is multi-layered, and can be partial. Students who were first-generation immigrants and had lived in Iceland for relatively few years had a clear-cut *foreign* identity, whilst it varied amongst those who had lived in Iceland for longer, including those of mixed parentage or second-generation immigrants. Some had a clear single identity as Icelandic, a clear dual identity, but many of the students reported how they weren't sure if they were allowed to be *completely* Icelandic. These hesitations were in the spirit of a perceived *pureness* of Icelanders, either in terms of lineage, looks, cultural attributes, or religion. We have now learned that the more students feel they are Icelandic, the greater perception of success they'll have. The next question we ought to ask ourselves is the importance of feeling mis-identified - meaning what happens if a student wants to be considered Icelandic, but isn't.

With my qualitative findings in mind, I created a new variable, measuring the discrepancy between whether students perceived themselves as Icelandic and what others considered them to be. This was a bivariate variable where the student had either reported that they felt their Icelandic identity was validated by others, or that their assertion of being Icelandic was denied and not validated by others. Overall, there were 30 students who reported feeling *more Icelandic*, than what they felt others acknowledged, here below called *Icelandic identity denied*. As we can see from the table below, students who felt as if their Icelandic identity was being denied, also reported, on average, a higher score on the exploration scale, meaning that they reported spending time and effort in seeking information and experiences relevant to their ethnicity. This difference was statistically significant. This group of students also scored higher, on average, on the commitment scale, referring to an enhanced sense of belonging and attachment, than those whose Icelandic identity was reciprocated; yet this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 10: Students of foreign background: The difference in mean between those who felt the identity they wanted was validated or not on the two dimensions of ethnic identity, exploration, and commitment.

	Icelandic identity validated			Icelandic identity denied		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Exploration[*]	53	2.87	0.758	30	3.31	0.802
Commitment	53	3.09	0.741	30	3.36	0.811

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p < 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

These findings provoke a difficult, yet important question: are these students, who feel as if they are being denied their Icelandic identity, exploring their Icelandic or foreign identity?

Based on my interviews, parents played a key role in students' understandings of their roots and where they came from. This was mostly done by encouraging them to read books, an emphasis on learning the native language, and visits to the sending country. Students who travelled regularly to the sending country reported contentment, and described the adventures they had experienced, as well as enjoyment with visiting their family. However, there was a handful of students who felt unsure of who they were. What these students had in common was little contact with the sending country and the way they envisioned the country either as all-good or all-bad. To further explain this, we will refer to two interviewees, Greta and Daniel.

Greta was of mixed parentage, her mom from Iceland and father from an African country. She was the only interviewee of Sub-Saharan African descent. Her hair was brown, and her complexion was somewhat fair. According to her, she passed as White. She told me how she had visited her father's native country a few times (the last time when she was six years old), but did not have many relatives there that she knew. Greta felt she was missing out on knowing her African descent and regretted passing as White, as she believed it effaced her African background. "*You see, this is a bit weird to say but because my dad is black and I really want to be black, then maybe [others] would think that I am half, because I am half*". When she spoke about her African descent, she described them as *"cool"*, "*so much fun*", and "*nice*", whereas Icelanders were "*rude*", the country was "*boring*", and she said that it would be "*dreadful if people knew I was from there [Iceland]*".

On the other end of the spectrum there was Daniel. Daniel was a second-generation immigrant and both his parents were from Southeast Asia. Daniel had once been to the sending country, when he was five years old. Daniel's ideas about the people from the sending country were all-bad stereotypes, whilst Icelanders represented what was good. When describing

Icelanders, he said "*Very strong, very… resourceful, I don't know what that word is in Icelandic. Erm... Very.. they are very nice to each other. They are very cool and everyone is so beautiful [..]*" but when he described the sending country he said "*Everything is in such a mess. It is just like.. just.. everyone is against each other. [..] It's just what I'm trying, what I am trying to say is that… everyone is just very bad over there.*" Right from the beginning of the interview, Daniel identified himself and his family as foreigners and "*very different than the people from Iceland*". Yet, despite his clear idea of being from another country, rooted in his particular appearance, he described how he did not feel like anyone. "*I feel like I could be… not any of this... kind of*", he said. Therefore, he did not feel the same as his other family members or parents. We have already learned that the message he received from others in his village was that he *was* an Icelander, but perhaps it was the very fact that his background was being disregarded that resulted in such a feeling of *otherness* (Brown, 2017). The struggle Greta and Daniel had was internal; two worlds collided leaving them feeling that either a part of their identity was lost or stuck in-between the two (Greta) or feeling uncertain about their identity and sense of belonging (Daniel).

Not a single interviewee seemed to take formal classes in their native language, as suggested in the parliamentary plan of action on immigration matters for 2016-2019 (Þingskjal 1692, 2015-2016) and there appeared to be very limited access to material from their native language, such as books. These findings highlight the importance of a conversation that needs to be had at an institutional level as well as a society. Do the students feel as if their backgrounds are represented in the curriculum? What messages are they being given through their interactions with others at school? Illustrating this point, Hannah, of mixed Icelandic and Southeast Asian background, complained about the Eurocentric history lessons she took, saying:

> We have to learn about stories and such... then it's just about Iceland or Europe, I find it crazy boring. But to be just learning about that, about Iceland […], because we've read it many times. […]. But not about Asia and so on, I find that, that's what I find very fun. To learn about it.

How are we going to promote an "*all-round development of all students*" as it is written in the Act on Compulsory schools (Lög um grunnskóla no 91/2008)*,* if students of foreign background neither feel validated as Icelandic (if that's their identity inclination) nor as valid *foreign* members of society? Does the curriculum and learning materials reflect the diversity of the classroom and Icelandic society?

In the next section we will explore the role of community and how it may affect students' perceived opportunities for the future.

Who is in your window of aspirations?

The literature on educational aspirations emphasises the importance of *reference groups,* referring to individuals or group of individuals that students can take inspiration from (Sewell et al., 1969; Haller and Portes, 1973; Ray, 2006). In Chapter 2, we read an excerpt from Dýrfinna Benita Basalan where she explains how her scope of future opportunities was limited by the few opportunities she saw in relation to her family. Central to the question of who you take inspiration from is the very question of how you see yourself. As already established, ethnic identity is formed through a diverse array of interactions that occur in specific places and times. In this section, we will explore the avenues through which future aspirations may be formed. We will look into the role of community, whether that is a community of shared national or ethnic identity or a shared foreign background.

Community

When we think about the role of community, we are interested in the identity options and experiences of minority individuals within a larger society. We raise the question: what is the significance of place and its demographics for ethnic minority experiences? How much does living in an area where there is a high percentage of immigrants, or an area that is ethnically diverse, matter for their sense of belonging or perceived opportunities?

This is a particularly pertinent question given the Icelandic context, where you may live in an area that has a large proportion of people of foreign background, but very few may share the same ethnic identity. Or you may live in an area with hardly any people of foreign background. Furthermore, as we discussed earlier, the way you self-identify in terms of ethnicity or nationality may change, or you might simply identify as Icelandic. To explore this further, I created a bivariate variable representing the percentage of people of foreign nationals in their area, using the national average as a midpoint. What we can see in the table below is the mean for exploration and commitment amongst students of foreign population, by whether they live in an area that is sparsely populated by foreign nationals and then those who live in a densely populated area with other foreign nationals.

Table 11: The difference in mean on the two ethnic identity dimensions between students of foreign background who either live in an area where the percentage of foreign nationals is under or above the national average.

	Exploration			Commitment		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
% under country's average	49	2.92	0.68	49	3.10	0.72
% above country's average	36	3.17	0.91	36	3.31	0.82

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Students who lived in areas where the foreign national population was under the country's average did, on average, score lower on both exploration and commitment than the students who lived in areas that were more densely populated by foreign nationals. This difference was not statistically significant, and could thus be due to pure chance, but it is still of interest, and worth investigating further with a larger representative sample.

The topic of community or having friends *like them* came up in several of the interviews. Talking about a *community* in the Icelandic context, often just meant other family members, rather than a community of unrelated others who came from the same country. These family members had often served as a mediator for them to come to Iceland and others talked about how they had been there first and helped their extended family move to the country. For most, having family members around them was a source of strength. Family members could provide someone they identified with, on the basis of being from the same family: "*Erm.. perhaps my cousin, the other one that [you] will talk to because we are in the same family*", Mali replied when I asked if she identified with anyone from school. In some cases, the students had a foreign-born family member who lived in other municipalities, resulting in what appeared to be greater post-compulsory options. For example, Mali and Sap both told me how they aimed to move across the country for their dream education and they were not worried about moving so far away because they had other family members there. On the contrary, there were also students who referred to a *lack* of family as a reason for their limited post-compulsory options. Hannah aspired to move to the same town as Mali and Sap, but she stated a lack of family or social net as a reason why she could not. Sebastian, who aspired for the same profession as Mali, told me how his family was having to negotiate between his mother's current employment and his dream education, as he would otherwise have to move and be on his own at the age of 16, which his parents did not want. Thereby, having extended family in Iceland

appeared to offer the students role models and peers, and it also expanded their educational options in the form of social capital.

There was one example where the presence of family members further emphasised the foreignness the interviewee already felt in school. Daniel, a second-generation immigrant of southeast Asian origin, lives in a small fishing village. His family moved to Iceland a few years before he was born. His parents were not the first ones from their family to move to their village but, as Daniel told me, many more relatives had arrived in the past few years. As has already been stated, Daniel had a strong sense of being a *foreigner*. Daniel went to a small school and there were two other students of foreign background, in the three senior year groups. The feeling of *otherness* appeared particularly prevalent at school, where he was around other children. He was very lonely, to a point where he felt that no one could understand him: "*you know when they are talking or we are talking, then I try to understand them, and it's like, I have their personality but they don't have mine*". There was a clear distinction between *us* (foreigners) and *them* (Icelanders), yet he did not feel like he was the same as his relatives. Despite the fact that his extended family accounted for roughly 2-4% of the total population in said municipality (Statistics Iceland, 2019), he did not feel as if he fit in in with his family, nor at school. In terms of post-compulsory options, Daniel told me how he would have to make compromises about his preferred upper secondary school, as it was too far away from his family. Many of his family members, both those living in the sending country, as well in Iceland, had an advanced university degree. Daniel told me that those who lived in the sending country had made use of their degree, whereas those living in Iceland did manual labour. Regardless of his family's experience with higher education, Daniel felt as if no one in his family could help him make choices regarding his educational aspirations. There was a gap between his family's lived experiences and the choices Daniel was facing. The chasm exacerbated his feelings of being on his own and unsupported.

Apart from referring to family members, community could both refer to other people originating from the same sending country, or it could also mean a community of others who were also *foreign*. There were few examples where the students talked about others from the same country, without them being related. The composition in each school that I visited varied significantly, with some students being predominantly from one particular country, whilst other schools were more diverse. Overall, students did not seem to have a great need for a community, at school, with others from the *same* country. Some acknowledged that they had someone they identified with or could understand how it was to be like them, but they were not necessarily friends with them.

For a very small subgroup, students referred to a community outside of school, either a religious community or communities of people with shared heritage that they *knew* of in other parts of the country or other schools. Miroslav was one of the interviewees who wanted to finish his upper secondary education in Iceland and then move back to his native country. He told me how he worried a little bit about how he would be seen, when people knew his nationality.

> **Miroslav:** I just say, look, I come from [Eastern European country 1]. Yeah, I'm from [Eastern European country 2], but I say that because of my, like legacy, nationality and that, I just say that.
>
> **Researcher:** Yeah, that you are from [Eastern European Country 1]
>
> **Miroslav:** Yeah, I just say it like that
>
> **Researcher:** Do you ever get that question?
>
> **Miroslav:** When I came here I got a lot, but now, not really.
>
> **Researcher:** How does that make you feel, when you get that question?
>
> **Miroslav:** Like, little bit worry that I will get judged where I'm from.

Miroslav's parents were originally from a country that eventually split into two, so each of his parents could claim nationality from a separate country. He told me how he had heard from others, both who came from the same countries, as well as other Eastern European countries, that people had been judged by where they came from. He thought it was more of an issue in bigger cities. Yet, it was in those larger cities where he knew of communities of people with the same background as him. When I asked him about upper secondary school, he told me how a lot of the boys from school were going to schools in the capital area, but he wanted to attend a school that was in a town close by.

> I like the city [referring to a town] more than Reykjavík, for some reason. And I heard there's more like [Eastern European country 1] there and… like more, so...
>
> (Miroslav)

To Miroslav, the prospect of attending a school where he could be part of a community outweighed the benefits of being with friends from school. He was proud of who he was and where he came from but was wary of negative stories he had heard. Perhaps it was the longing to go back to his native country that pulled him to move closer to a community of others from that same country. Or perhaps he believed there would be strength in numbers. Miroslav wasn't sure *why* he wanted to be part of a community - he just did.

Moreover, Emilis, a second-generation immigrant whose parents were both from Eastern Europe, told me how he wanted to get into the same school his friend was already attending. His friend, who was *"also like me, like [Eastern European nationality]... [Eastern European nationality] and Icelandic"* (Emilis), had attended a compulsory school in a neighbouring town and was already attending upper secondary school. To Emilis, this was a great advantage, as his friend would be able to guide him and answer any questions he might have before applying for the school. Both Miroslav and Emilis based their post-compulsory choices on having a community of other students *like them*, either by shared national, ethnic, or foreign background. These findings further stress the importance of understanding how choices made, through family bonds or a sense of connectedness, offers freedom in the decision-making process. This means that having a community isn't necessarily about *going* to upper secondary school or not but *where* to go and feeling content with that choice.

These findings are further emphasised by the quantitative data. Surveyed students were asked about their views regarding the importance of education, such as 'My education will create many future opportunities' and 'I plan to continue my education after compulsory education'. Students who lived in an area where there was a higher percentage of foreign nationals were more positive towards the importance of education, but there was not a statistically significant difference[49]. This was not the case when asked about perceived opportunities for success. Table 12 shows a difference between students who live in areas with a low and high percentage of foreign population in terms of whether they believe success in Iceland is possible for people like them.

Table 12: The difference in mean for students of foreign background regarding whether they believed people like me could succeed in Iceland, by whether they live in an area where the % of foreign nationals is under or above the national average.

	In Iceland, people like me can succeed*		
	N	Mean	Std dev
% under country's average	46	3.33	0.99
% above country's average	38	3.79	0.88

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

What the table above shows is how students who lived in areas where the foreign population was over the national average, also scored higher, on average, when evaluating their perceived

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[49] See appendix 10.8. for tables.

opportunities of success; the difference is statistically significant. As Ray (2006) suggests, the aspiration window offers a scope into how individuals form aspirations embedded within the attainment of others they perceive as *similar* to them. Such perceived similarity could be due to physical similarity or simple proximity. Moreover, what this section has emphasised is the practical importance of community. Surely, a community of others that the students perceive as similar to them may offer a window of aspirations, as well as closeness to others who can be mirrored and who can answer your questions. Extended family in other areas can offer the students an important safety net and thereby expand their perceived opportunities. In the next section, we will shift focus from ethnic identity to language, to understand the role of language for the students of foreign background.

5.2 Language

As already stated, there is a strong language policy in Iceland. For example, this is reflected in the Act on Compulsory Schools, which states that schools shall "*strengthen their proficiency in Icelandic language and their understanding of Icelandic society, its history and specificities*" (Lög um grunnskóla, no 91/2008; Compulsory School Act no 91/2008). Also fluency in the Icelandic language is often considered the key to Icelandic society in national governmental policy but clear plans regarding multilingualism is less prevalent (Ragnarsdóttir and Lefever, 2018). By focusing on a single *key* factor, policies focus on a destination instead of the journey, and further disregard the complexity of the journey.

In the last section, we learned about the role of ethnic identity: how the assertion of one's identity is more available to some of the students than others, and the role of community of others *like them*. In the following sections, we will further explore the importance of language to understand which door the key of language ability may open. my

5.2.1 The home language

The vast majority of interviewees spoke both Icelandic and their parents' native language, whether they were first-, second generation immigrants, or of mixed parentage. Most of the interviewees who were first-generation immigrants considered the language of the sending country their native language and spoke it at home, consistent with an earlier finding (Tran and Lefever, 2018). None of the interviewees reported studying their native language formally but, as already mentioned, some said their parents tried to maintain their language proficiency by reading books, listening to music, or asking them to teach younger siblings. Most found that helpful, as they could communicate with their friends and family in the sending country. Others saw bilingualism as paramount to keeping their options open, were they to return to their native country. Four of the first-generation students differed in this respect. All four had lived in Iceland since they were pre-school aged and, to varying degrees, leaned towards Icelandic being their native language. However, their circumstances were different. For example, two had an Icelandic stepparent and, therefore, spoke Icelandic and the other parent's native language at home; the other two lived with both of their biological parents. Two interviewees explained how they combined both Icelandic and their parent's native language, where the former was the dominant language. In both cases, their parents were from a Southeast Asian country.

> **Researcher:** When you are at home, what language do you speak?
>
> **Andrea:** [Southeast Asian language]. You see, I combine Icelandic and [Southeast Asian language]. I just mix.. because I don't manage to.. or you know.. I understand but I don't manage completely to say it [referring to Southeast Asian language].
>
> **Researcher:** I get it. What language would you say was your first language?
>
> **Andrea**: Erm… I think [whispers] Icelandic.
>
> (Andrea)
>
> **Sap:** I talk, I talk Icelandic with my mom, but if she is annoyed then I speak [Southeast Asian language].
>
> […]
>
> **Researcher:** When she is annoyed [laughter], why?
>
> **Sap:** She doesn't understand at all what I am saying.
>
> (Sap)

Both Andrea and Sap had lived in Iceland since they were pre-school aged but preferred to speak Icelandic over their parent's native language. Interestingly, both lived in villages with others from their native country, yet reported speaking mainly Icelandic with those neighbours; Sap told me that he sometimes mixed the two languages.

What Andrea and Sap describe was quite common amongst students of Southeast Asian origin. Regardless of whether they were second generation or of mixed parentage, the majority of these students reported that they did not speak their parent's language. These students agreed that their foreign parent(s)' native language was difficult and, therefore, they did not want to learn it. Many of these students were of mixed parentage, with a Southeast Asian mother and an Icelandic father. These students spoke Icelandic, but not their mother's language. Moreover, in one case, a student, whose parents were both from a Southeast Asian country, did not speak his parent's language, but communicated with his parents in broken English and Icelandic. This resulted in very poor language skills, where he did not have strength in any of these languages. Whether perceived difficulty with the parent(s)' native language is the real reason for this disassociation is unclear. However, what the students described was how not knowing your parent's native language comes with a range of difficulties. These include not being able to communicate with their family in the sending country and thereby depending on an English-speaking relative to communicate and in some cases, not even communicating properly with their parents (Lee, 2002; Duff and Li, 2014; Slavkov, 2016).

Not sharing the same language with one's parents seemed to be more prevalent among the students of Southeast Asian descent. However, there were examples among the other students of how the distinction between *home* language and *social* language had become blurry, especially for students who were second-generation immigrants or of mixed parentage.

Researcher: What language would you say was your first language?

Icelandic… Erm... No I would say it was [North African language]

(Karim)

I don't know. I most often just talk, at home, [with] my parents in [Eastern European language], but otherwise with my brother I sometimes talk in Icelandic so... I don't know completely.

(Lena)

Erm mother tongue? Erm... It obviously matters what country you are in. If I were in [western European country] then you would say Icelandic. If in Iceland, you would say [western European language]. Yes, because, you know, then you learn, surrounded by Icelandic, then it's just the language, not the mother tongue, that's just, the language that [you] learn here and in [western European country] then it is Icelandic, then it is the language that [you] don't learn.

(George)

They all spoke both of their parent's languages but were not sure what language they felt they knew better and considered their *first* language. George's ideas about having a native language seemed to be rooted in the language by which he was *not* surrounded. This could suggest that he never feels adequate speaking the language around him, and that this feeling of not being able to communicate effectively was central to his existence.

Having said that, the overwhelming majority of the students interviewed, regardless of whether they were first-, second-generation, or of mixed parentage, reported speaking multiple languages. In addition to Icelandic and their native language(s), all of them had to learn an additional language (or languages) for the school curriculum. All students reported studying English; some of the first-generation immigrants had learned it before, whereas others were learning it simultaneously with Icelandic. Thus, two new languages at the same time. In addition, some of my interviewees reported learning Danish, but only if they had lived in Iceland for multiple years or were born in Iceland. Regardless, many interviewees told me that they found all these languages very confusing and difficult. For some, it made their studies difficult; others reported general confusion and said it, sometimes, hampered their everyday life.

> **Researcher:** What about [your] weaknesses?
>
> **Mali:** Yes... erm... hmm... [pause] probably just, because, it's probably just like understanding other people because I have two languages. [...] when it comes to talking to adults then, like my grandmother, she speaks like old Icelandic so I sometimes don't entirely understand but then I ask her what she means. Ahh and then it's just learning Icelandic [explanation: as a subject], that's sometimes not easy.
>
> (Mali)

> I am learning Icelandic and I speak English and [official language of a southeast Asian country], I speak a little bit of [same language] and I speak a little [reginal language spoken in same Southeast Asian country], I think is the name and I speak at home.
>
> (Gabriel)

> **Researcher:** And do you just fare well in all subjects then?
>
> **Ali:** Yes, but not English. It's a bit difficult learning two languages together.
>
> (Ali)

Having to speak multiple languages on a daily basis is definitely something that should be taken into consideration when we address *keys* to society or how we can help students acquire a level of proficiency in the Icelandic language so that they don't consider it a barrier to their

aspirations, goals, or fulfilling their full potential. Despite policies or implementation plans, there appears to be a lack of formal support for students to acquire language skills in their family's native language. Although most of the students speak their family's native language at home, the only support they had was from their family. This lack of support to the students and families becomes particularly pertinent in the case of many of the students of Southeast Asian descent, who have difficulty maintaining relationships with their family in the sending country. These findings pose questions regarding the language support available to students and their families, so that children could become proficient in both languages (Jónsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2018). Moreover, what message does society send to those of foreign background regarding speaking their minority language? Is the focus on *solely* speaking Icelandic, and do they feel that their supplementary language proficiency is validated? We will further explore perceived language ability in the following section.

5.2.2 *Icelandic, the interpersonal language*

Educational research stresses the importance and benefits of fluency in the host country's language and is considered to be an important part in the education and integration for those of foreign background (Elmeroth, 2003; Morrison, Cosden, O'Farrell and Campos, 2003).
What I wanted to do with this study is to move beyond the narrow idea of solely focusing on proficiency and treat language as a concrete measure of a benchmarked level of being *good enough*. I decided to focus on the student's perceived ability and comfort level with speaking. For that reason, in neither the quantitative nor qualitative part of this study did I ask students to self-report their grades, nor to conduct a language proficiency test; instead, I focused on how they felt they fared in school in relation to others and how they felt about speaking the language.

In the quantitative part of this study, I chose a scale that measures the individuals' perception of their communication competence in Icelandic, the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale, or SPCC (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988). This measure offers seven subscales that capture a person's self-perceived communication competence across different areas of communication as well as towards different types of audiences. The areas of communication vary in size and gradually move to more intimate settings, from public speaking, talking in large meetings, in small groups, and finally in pairs. Built on a similar idea, moving from a more intimidating to intimate audience, the types of recipients are three: strangers, acquaintances, and friends (McCroskey and McCroskey, 1988, 2013).

The scale contains 12 items where the student is asked to evaluate their own ability to communicate in Icelandic on a scale of 0 to 100 where a higher score represents *feeling more competent at speaking the language* and each subscale offers a range of what is considered a low and a high score[50]. Unsurprisingly, the students of Icelandic background scored higher on average on every measure with a difference of roughly 10 points on average; this difference was statistically significant.

Table 13: The difference in mean on each measure of SPCC between students of Icelandic and foreign background where a higher score represents feeling more competent at speaking the language

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public***	564	71.6	25.5	82	60.6	25.8
Meeting***	567	69.7	24.6	82	57.7	24.7
Group**	566	73.2	23.6	82	63.9	24.9
Dyad***	569	74.4	22.6	80	65.3	24.2
Stranger***	565	64.6	27.4	81	52.7	26.2
Acquaintance***	565	71.4	24.4	82	61.7	25.8
Friend***	559	81.1	21.4	81	71.7	24.0
SPCC total***	550	72.5	22.4	79	61.9	23.7

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

Although the mean score may appear relatively high, at face value, a *high score* varies across all subscales, according to McCroskey and McCroskey (2013). This means that a high score on a scale that measures perceived competency to speak a language on a more intimate level, such as talking to a friend, yields a higher score than when speaking with a stranger. This is important, as those of Icelandic background averaged neatly between what is to be considered a high score and a low score; those of foreign background averaged closer to the lower mark, and sometimes below. Figure 10 shows how far students were, on average, from a benchmarked *low score* that has been standardised for comparison, on each of the scales.

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[50] For a full breakdown of what is considered a high and a low score for each subscale, please refer to appendix 10.9.
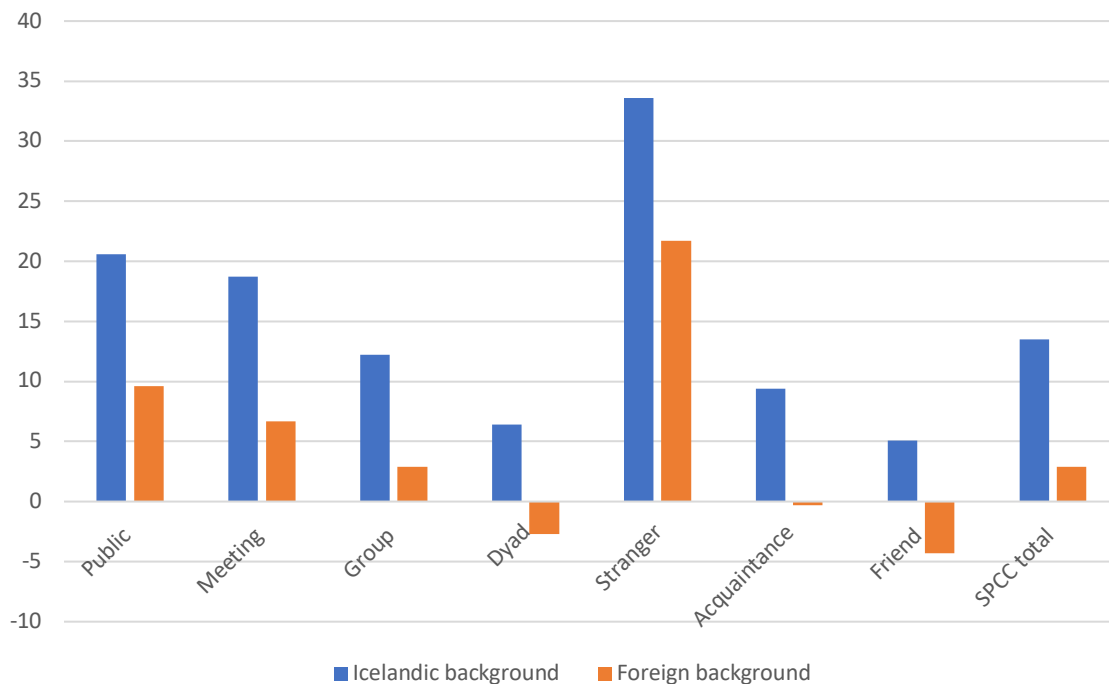
Figure 10: Average distance from a standardised low score on each scale, by background[51].

If we look closely, we can see that the mean score for students of foreign background is below a low score according to the measure, on the dyad, acquaintance and friend scales - all scales that measure intimate conversations or interpersonal communication. We must remember that ideas of perceived language competence may not stem from the same roots for those who are of Icelandic or foreign background. For an Icelandic native speaker, speaking in front of a crowd may be intimidating, even distressing, but for a non-native speaker there is an added level of speaking a language that you may not be fully comfortable speaking. Less intimidating is speaking in small groups, or with people you are familiar and trust. For that reason, the low score on the interpersonal scales for students of foreign background should be a cause of concern. It raises the question: what are the implications of feeling uncomfortable when speaking in small settings? This will be the subject of my next section, where students described their feelings about having intimate conversations.

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[51] Please refer to Appendix 10.12. for information on how many responded on each dimension of the scale, by background.

5.2.3 *The one-on-one and intimate conversations*

The struggle with speaking in dyads is something that I learned myself during the qualitative research process. In the interviews, I offered students the option of being interviewed in Icelandic or English. This did not prove to be an issue, and most students chose to speak in Icelandic; few interviews took place in both Icelandic and English and two interviews were entirely in English. What I, however, could not as easily control, was the messages students were given before the interview. There were times where students came in with the preconception that they must speak Icelandic, and the interview process came as part of the *school's learning process*. The few interviews that took place in Icelandic and English all began in Icelandic. Right from the start it was, however, noticeable, that the interviewees seemed somewhat timid and unsure of themselves. When I reiterated my offer to speak in English, they gladly took it, seemed relieved, and subsequently described their feelings and experiences beautifully. They just needed time to feel as if they were being met with understanding and validation that Icelandic can be a difficult language. This struggle is depicted by Gigi, who describes how she feels when she is having a conversation in Icelandic:

> **Gigi:** I am not good at, like, erm... when I am talking with people then like people ask, I answer. Just… a bit... erm… or if someone else then he would just like reply and just laugh, or… you know? Like, and when people are talking it is just like a ball just…
>
> **Researcher:** That goes back and forth?
>
> **Gigi:** Forward… yes. Yes, with me it just stops, and so on.
>
> (Gigi)

Gigi, a first-generation immigrant of Middle Eastern background, had lived in Iceland since she was in pre-school. She spoke her native language at home, Icelandic in school, and studied English and Danish in school. In the interview, Gigi spoke Icelandic beautifully. She spoke with an accent and at times made grammatical errors, but she corrected herself when she noticed. What Gigi describes above isn't the problem of not being able to speak the language but much rather the struggle of maintaining a natural conversation. She refers to a ball that goes back and forth, but the ball often gets stuck in her court. She later told me how she sometimes struggled with fully grasping what was being said to her and how she then relied on her friend to explain, "*Erm, I don't mean like everyone else doesn't understand me. But it is just that, ...erm... maybe if I don't understand something, [she] just explains it very well*". Gigi's friend was also of foreign background, a second-generation immigrant with Eastern European

background, who took the time to explain things to Gigi. The friend only rephrased in Icelandic, as they did not speak the same native language.

The majority of students of foreign background who participated in the quantitative part of this study reported speaking either solely Icelandic or Icelandic and another language with their friends. In fact, only four said they spoke solely another language with their friends.

Table 14: Difference in mean: Students of foreign background and how they scored on SPCC scale by whether they spoke Icelandic, Icelandic and another language or solely another language among their friends and acquaintances.

	Solely Icelandic			Icelandic and another language			Solely another language		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public	43	61.1	25.23	35	63.4	25.31	4	30.9	22.25
Meeting	42	59.7	25.19	36	59.4	21.59	4	21.9	23.44
Group	43	64.6	25.70	35	66.8	21.40	4	30.8	27.31
Dyad	42	67.0	24.85	34	67.8	20.87	4	26.3	10.30
Stranger	42	56.0	27.17	35	52.5	23.38	4	19.9	21.06
Acquaintance	43	62.6	25.44	35	64.3	24.63	4	28.1	22.18
Friend	43	70.8	24.34	34	77.2	20.23	4	34.5	18.78
SPCC total score	42	63.4	24.27	33	64.4	20.50	4	27.5	20.51

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

If we look at table 14, we can see how these four students, on average, deemed their Icelandic proficiency poorly. These results are perhaps self-evident. All four were students who had recently emigrated to Iceland, both explaining why they solely spoke another language as well as their SPCC score. What is more interesting is the difference, *or lack thereof,* between the students who spoke solely Icelandic and Icelandic in conjunction with another language. The latter group averaged marginally higher in most cases, with similar variability and the marginal difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. This is something the qualitative data can clarify.

English, the social language: "This is what teenagers do, nowadays"

The vast majority of my interviewees said they spoke Icelandic with their friends. A few told me that they, on occasion, resorted to another language, most often English, but not necessarily because they had to, but much rather as a language to make jokes in. They, thereby, compartmentalised their language usage, speaking their parent's native language at home,

sometimes together with Icelandic; Icelandic was spoken in school; and with friends they spoke both Icelandic and English. Pavel told me how all his friends were Icelandic, therefore, he mostly spoke Icelandic with them "*Yes, or you know, also English sometimes, just making jokes, you know",* a sentiment further expressed by Agatha who said, "*But just as a joke as well, then we just talk in English or something*". Sam also explained "*If we are just joking, it's got to be English. If we are just messing around [...] It kind of makes it funnier. Like a single word won't be as funny if you are speaking Icelandic, it sounds a lot weirder than in English*". To these students, English is the language you use for fun and in social settings. Pavel further told me how this also applied if they were *dissing*[52], "*like you know, always when we are dissing each other, then [you], perhaps he starts dissing you in English you see. [...] This is what teenagers do, nowadays".* The usage of English clearly played a large role in bridging friendships and in relaxed social settings. The increasing usage of English in social settings has been recorded in Icelandic studies, among students of Icelandic and foreign background alike (Lefever, 2009; Tran and Lefever, 2018).

Some interviewees talked about being comfortable with spoken English, as it was the language they used online, on social media, or online gaming. Sam further explains, *"because I have been speaking English my whole life and I've kind of learned it throughout playing video games or watching movies talking to people on the internet so that's yeah...".* This reasoning is further echoed by George who describe to me how English serves as a constant in his life.

> It's just, that's the language I have been learning always, consistently. It's just... I have been on the Icelandic [sic] for three years, have lost it, gap in the grammar and then I was coming back and had to catch up and same with the [father's native language]. Erm.. I have just learned English together with.. and I have just... consumption of media is also just more in English, I just learned it, just passively, just for many years.
>
> (George)

Given the table here in the earlier section and what we have just learned, we know that having a supplementary language can help to bond with others through jokes or banter. It can also serve as a constant in the students' lives. They are navigating in a new environment and may not fully grasp the new language. Therefore, speaking and understanding Icelandic was clearly a key for students to access social spaces. Yet, at the same time it isn't the only key.

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[52] "Að dissa" is a slang adopted from English, either used in the context of *to diss someone* or as a word to describe *banter.*

Ivan, a first-generation immigrant, who had lived in Iceland for about three years at the time of the interview, told me about his friends back in his native country in Eastern Europe and how he was still in contact with them. When I asked him about the language he used with his mates in Iceland, he told me they mostly spoke English, but Icelandic as well - to some extent.

> **Researcher:** Which language do you think you speak more?
>
> **Ivan:** English
>
> **Researcher:** And how do you feel when you speak Icelandic?
>
> **Ivan:** Erm... just... I just don't want them to laugh, like…
>
> **Researcher:** Does that ever happen?
>
> **Ivan:** No.
>
> […]
>
> **Researcher:** Do you ever feel that way when you speak English?
>
> **Ivan:** Erm... no.

It takes a lot of trust to speak with native speakers in a foreign language with which you are not entirely comfortable. Ivan did not have strong social bonds or close friends and felt very vulnerable when speaking the language. At least, when he speaks English, they are all speaking a foreign language. They are on a level playing field. The relationship between perceived language proficiency and feeling at ease speaking it amongst friends will be further explored in this next section.

Belonging to a group

Ali and Gabriel were both year 8 students and went to the same school. At the time of the interview, they had both lived in Iceland for about a year and a half. Gabriel was from southeast Asia, and Ali from the Middle East. The main difference between the boys in terms of a social support system was that Ali's family appeared to have other people from the same country living in the neighbouring towns, as well as an Icelandic social support system. From what Gabriel described, his family appeared to be more on their own.

Both boys described how they had initially been very lonely in school because of the language barrier. For Ali, there had been a major change over his first summer in Iceland. He was very active and described how playing sports and being included by others had helped him step over that initial threshold to learn the language. Also learning Icelandic gave him the freedom to travel, to go on trips to compete, and to become more socially active. When he

compared his experience to a friend from the same country of origin who lived in another town, Ali said he considered himself freer and more independent.

Gabriel, on the other hand, really struggled with Icelandic. For him, the lack of language fluency was his main barrier, both to doing well in school and making friends. Gabriel sometimes participated in sports on the school ground, but not much more than that. Both Ali and Gabriel spoke their native language fluently and were comfortable speaking English. Ali, who was already comfortable speaking Icelandic, told me how he used English to supplement his Icelandic. Gabriel, on the other hand, despite speaking English, felt as if he did not have any language to converse with others.

> **Researcher**: And what language to you use when you speak with your friends?
>
> **Ali**: I speak a bit English.
>
> **Researcher**: A bit of English? But do you then mostly speak Icelandic with them?
>
> **Ali**: Yes, yes that's right.
>
> (Ali)

> **Researcher:** So why, what do you find hard… to make friends here... What makes it difficult?
>
> **Gabriel:** When I think of that I have to say first that language.
>
> **Researcher:** Yeah exactly. So, you feel like you can't talk to them, is it then because you don't speak Icelandic or?
>
> **Gabriel:** I can't speak Icelandic.
>
> **Researcher:** What about English because you speak English. Do the kids speak English?
>
> **Gabriel:** Ah yeah, but some kids don't, so…
>
> **Researcher:** Yeah so it makes it maybe difficult. Do you think you could speak to them in English maybe?
>
> **Gabriel:** Maybe but…
>
> (Gabriel)

My contact at the boys' school was a teacher who was very enthusiastic about the welfare of students of foreign background. The facilitator made an effort to engage the students, as well as the parents. When introducing me to my prospective interviewees, they told me how they *could* speak Icelandic. When Gabriel came to me for the interview, he had been given the instructions that he *must* speak Icelandic. This clearly made him nervous, so when I offered to interview in English, he gladly took it. I learned that, not only was English a language he spoke effortlessly, he also spoke two other languages at home, both of which were official languages of his native country. Icelandic was his fourth language.

Unfortunately, as Gabriel had not overcome that initial hurdle of learning Icelandic, or at least gain the confidence to speak Icelandic, he felt out of place. Whether he felt he was not allowed to, or others wouldn't understand, he did not see English as an option, despite it being a language he felt comfortable speaking. This impeded him in all aspects of his life. Gabriel told me how he sometimes physically hid himself under the hood of his sweatshirt during class when he did not understand his teachers and this affected his social life. He did not see the ways in which he might be good or capable, despite the fact that he spoke two languages at home, in addition to English and was learning Icelandic. Icelandic had become this insurmountable obstacle and he saw no other way around it.

Ali described a sense of pride about learning Icelandic and, when compared with Gabriel, Ali appeared to have established stronger social ties with his peers. The way Ali described it, his participation in extra-curricular activities over the summer had helped him to overcome the main hurdle of learning Icelandic. Although he was not fluent, English served as a supplementary tool when he felt out of his depth in Icelandic.

This link between extracurricular activities and language is something that was also found in the quantitative part of this study. In fact, there was a statistically significant, positive relationship between participation in school-based extracurricular activities and all aspects of the SPCC measure, apart from public speaking, with Pearson's correlation coefficient ranging from 0.229 (acquaintances) to 0.400 (dyad)[53]. These are important findings, given the prevalence of youth centres, run by local governments and sometimes even on school grounds. Other extracurricular activities proved to be important in the qualitative interviews as well. Some students solidified friendships with their school mates at the sports clubs. Others told me how it gave them a chance to form friendships with others outside their school. By participating in extracurricular activities, the student is given an opportunity to take part in something larger and be part of a team. From what we have just learned about the relationship between interpersonal communication and perceived language ability, we must ask ourselves whether there is a relationship between feeling emotionally attached to one's school environment and perceived language ability. In Chapter 6, we will further explore the role of language, peers, and emotional attachment towards the school environment.

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[53] For further information please refer to appendix 10.9.

Speaking Icelandic, "trying to fit in"

In earlier sections we saw how the student identities were shaped and negotiated through experience, heritage, stereotyping, and interactions with others. Moreover, we learned of how the interviewees actually identified. This negotiated identity was often more prevalent among the non-White students, but also among a handful of Eastern European students who also felt excluded and did not have many friends.

We already met Miroslav, a student from an Eastern European country, who took great pride in where he was from and nationality. Nevertheless, he expressed concerns about being judged by where he came from. These worries were rooted in stories he had heard from others from the same and neighbouring countries of origin. When I asked him whether there was anything he did to protect himself from being judged, he replied:

> **Miroslav:** Yah just trying to, just be like <u>normal</u> and, like… just trying to fit in.
> **Researcher:** What do you do to try to fit in?
> **Miroslav:** Try to talk more Icelandic, that's the first thing.
> **Researcher**: Do you feel like that's important?
> **Miroslav**: yeah.
>
> (Underlined for emphasis)

The message Miroslav gets from his surroundings is that he must learn Icelandic in order to be *normal* and fit in, or at least that is how he perceives it. A few of my interviewees acknowledged that they *passed*, mainly attributing this to their language proficiency (but also because they were White). They had achieved a sense of *normality* that Miroslav refers to. Sarah was of mixed parentage, her mother was White from a central European country, her father was Icelandic, and she was born in Iceland. Sarah described herself as someone with a very fair complexion. That, along with speaking very good Icelandic, she believed was the main reason why she passes as an Icelander.

> **Researcher:** Do you get this question [where she's from] both when you are in Iceland as abroad?
>
> **Sarah:** No, I almost never get any [questions] in Iceland because I just talk very clear Icelandic, but my mom has been asked because she has rather dark hair and very like, compared to how Icelanders are, like a large nose

Sarah believed that she passed as an Icelander due to her language skills, but even then, she acknowledged that it was not enough. She refers to her mother, who she says has a darker complexion relative to a stereotypical Icelander and a facial feature that she believes is not typically Icelandic. In Sarah's mind, to pass as an Icelander, one must both speak the language

and also look the part – fair and 'Icelandic' features. Sofia, cited below, told me that she was never asked where she was from and that when people found out where she was from, they were surprised.

> **Researcher:** Why do you think that is?
>
> **Sofia**: Because I talk well, good Icelandic…
>
> **Researcher:** I see, and how do you feel when people are maybe surprised?
>
> **Sofia**: I'm just like.. I don't know, just a bit happy or like, then obviously know that I am doing well[54] at like speaking and… so…

Sofia was a White, first generation immigrant of Eastern European origin. Sofia acknowledges that she seems to *pass* as an Icelander, and in her mind, this is due to her ability to speak the language. However, there is more to it, an underlying feeling satisfied with how well she has done at acquiring the Icelandic language. In the excerpt above, translated as *doing* well, Sofia uses the Icelandic term „standa sig", which implies that she feels as if she is meeting certain expectations. Here, Sofia is not only saying that she is doing well for the sake of doing well, but that she feels like she meets some implicit expectations with how well she speaks. This way, Sofia feels as if she has done her job to assimilate and feels good when that is being acknowledged.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are the students who described being *othered* on the bases of a noticeable accent or not being fluent in Icelandic. Gigi, a first-generation immigrant from the Middle East, who had lived in Iceland since pre-school age, described how she had to move due to bullying about her *foreignness*, *"Then in year 8, I changed [forms] because the girls in the form I was in, they were all like friends, like together, and they wanted to, they didn't want someone else came [sic]… joined"*. She further explained that this had not been an issue in the beginning and, at first, she had tried to ignore it, but it had become too much.

> **Researcher:** I see. Were they then saying something to you or something like that?
>
> **Gigi:** Like ignoring, erm…: "what? I don't understand you" something like that. Were maybe just like looking funny [at me]. […] They were always doing, they just couldn't be bothered talking with me [shows signs of distress] .

---

[54] Doing well is used here instead of *standa sig*, which implies doing well by meeting expectations.

In the section on ethnic identity, Rosa, Daniel, Hannah, and Mali, described the narrow and racialised understanding of *normality* that must be adhere to if they are to be accepted as 'real' Icelanders. What the students described is essentially the same, but now it is rooted within the context of language. Whilst some have attained a level of sufficient language proficiency, others aspire for that level that blocks an acceptable *normality*. Gigi, for example, essentially describes prejudice and exclusion because of her non-Icelandic origin, where her *otherness* is signalled through alleged lack of language ability.

Earlier, we learned how Gigi was nervous about speaking in Icelandic and compared her conversation skills to a ball game, where the ball stopped in her court. Her perceived lack of conversational skills did not stop her from conducting a highly sophisticated hour-long interview with me. Gigi further explained how she relied on her friend who was also of foreign background. Here, Gigi describes a hostile class environment, where her Icelandic competency was ridiculed. She felt like she couldn't speak the language to other Icelanders but confided in a student that shared a non-Icelandic background with her. In the next chapter, on school engagement, we will further explore how this experience marked her feeling of belonging in school.

What all of these excerpts illustrate is the importance of feeling validated, as someone who belongs in the school community. Sarah and Sofia proudly explain how they *pass* as Icelanders, whilst Gigi's Icelandic is ridiculed. We have learned that students equate speaking Icelandic with normality and speaking difficulties are stigmatised by an*other* status. Furthermore, the cases above show that speaking a foreign language can make pupils feel vulnerable; to speak a new and difficult language, especially in culturally and socially homogeneous schools, can involve trust. In this last section on language let's take a look at perceived language ability and aspirations.

Language ability and aspirations

It was clear from the interviews that the vast majority of students wanted to learn Icelandic and do well in school. In the quantitative part of the study, students were asked about the highest academic degree they ***would like to*** obtain. Comparing the students of foreign background who aspired to a university degree and those who wanted to obtain a non-university degree, there

was not a statistically significant difference in terms of their perceived language ability[55]. They were then asked to estimate their real opportunities, asking *"Realistically, what is the highest academic degree you think you will obtain?"*. This is where the story changes and students who realistically believed they could obtain a university degree, scored 14.7 to 21.2 points higher on the SPCC scale, and the difference was statistically significant[56]. This means that students who realistically believed they could obtain a university degree were also students who felt more comfortable speaking Icelandic, across all situations measured by the SPCC scale. Given what we already know, these findings may not come as a surprise. A student that feels more competent speaking Icelandic may also feel more competent academically, as one interviewee phrased it, being very good at *"speaking the teachers' language"* (Sarah).

To fully understand the students who aspire for more than they perceive is within their reach, a new variable was created. This variable is for students whose hopes are the same as they realistically believe is within their reach on one hand and those whose perceived reality falls short of the student's aspirations. What is being measured here is the discrepancy between hopes and perceived reality, regardless of whether the student aspired to finish upper secondary level but believed they could only finish compulsory school, or those who aspired for a university degree that they believed was out of their reach.

Table 15: Students of foreign background: difference in mean on the SPCC scale between students whose aspirations comport with their realistic self-estimate and those who aspire for a higher level of education than they believe is realistic

	Hopes and perceived reality the same			Hopes and perceived reality are different		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public*	63	64.2	26.1	12	44.9	22.55
Meeting*	63	60.9	25.36	12	44.0	21.31
Group	63	66.6	25.18	12	53.5	23.23
Dyad*	61	69.2	24.11	12	51.2	21.42
Stranger*	62	56.3	27.07	12	37.0	21.89
Acquaintance	63	64.8	26.6	12	49.7	21.40
Friend*	62	75.0	23.1	12	58.5	25.16
Total score*	60	65.4	23.95	12	48.4	21.17

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

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[55] There was no difference between students who just wanted to finish compulsory education or those who wanted to finish upper secondary degree (either matriculation examination or vocational studies).
[56] For further information, please refer to appendix 10.9.

As we can see from the table above, there was a small group of students of foreign background whose aspirations did not match what they believed was within their reach[57]. Regardless, they scored, on average, lower than their counterparts, whose aspirations went hand in hand with their perceived reality. These are important findings, as they help us understand the students who have preconceived ideas of their opportunities. What is it that dampens the student's expectations? Are we seeing how a lack of confidence in speaking Icelandic dampens the students' hopes and dreams for the future, when they are realistically estimating future opportunities? If so, language acts as a barrier rather than a key, to their learning and educational aspirations.

So far, we have examined the intrapersonal and interpersonal implications of feeling confident communicating with others, whether that is in Icelandic or English. We have learned how speaking a foreign language is a performance of trust, adding to our understanding of how we can create an open school environment. Last, but not least, we learned how a lack of language proficiency (and self-consciousness about being less than completely fluent) may impede the student from fully committing in the classroom, where it can feed into their insecurities or their belief that their dreams are out of their reach. For those who have mastered the Icelandic language, the student can gain a valuable sense of belonging, pride, and independence, as well as a feeling of having done what is expected of you from the wider society.

---

[57] Students of foreign background who believed they would realistically attain a lower level of education than they aspired were 16% of the sample of foreign background who answered both questions. The same group of Icelandic background was 14% of the total sample of students of Icelandic background who responded to both questions.

5.3 Conclusion

In this first findings chapter, we have focused on ethnic identity and language. The overall running theme throughout this chapter is the limit to what can be deemed as Icelandic or accepted as *Icelandic enough*, both as with regards to appearance as well as language proficiency.

This chapter shows how defining and talking about one's ethnic identity often proved to be a difficult task for students of foreign background. Some maintained the ethnic identity of the sending country; most of whom were first-generation immigrants who had recently emigrated to Iceland. Some of the interviewees had a single Icelandic identity. Then there were students who either upheld a dual identity of both the sending and the receiving country; others still expressed uncertainty about their identities and their various ethnic affiliations. Such hesitation often stemmed from a narrow idea of how Icelanders are or can be, a prerequisite they felt that they did not fulfil. The quantitative findings suggest that students who did not feel as if their identity was reciprocated, had more need to explore and seek information and experiences about their ethnicity. What these findings don't tell us, however, is whether they feel a greater need to explore their Icelandic or non-Icelandic identity. Some students spoke of how their sense of belonging in Iceland was circumscribed and/or undermined by stereotypical ideas about Icelandic appearance or other cultural attributes. Others described how they were actively *othered* and excluded, through discriminating remarks or racial slurs. Although some of the students referred to negative labelling as '*teasing',* they still evoked a sense of isolation, stigma, and lack of belongingness (Rastas, 2005; Tran and Lefever, 2018).

This same narrative can be extended to language. Some students talked about how they *passed* as Icelandic, by fulfilling stereotypical ideas of appearance and speaking without an accent. Then, on the other hand, students who had not yet acquired fluency in the language, often felt like outsiders. These findings suggest that we must avoid an overly narrow focus on what is an acceptable language level for non-native Icelandic speaking adolescents.

We further also learned how language also plays a key role in shaping students' sense of belonging, although the findings highlight the necessity of viewing immigration inclusion as a two-way street that also applies to language learning. Many of the students reported how they found the one-on-one conversations difficult and even stressful. One interviewee compared this experience to passing a ball, with the ball constantly getting stuck in her court. The quantitative data told us how there was essentially no difference between perceived proficiency in Icelandic between students who solely spoke Icelandic with their friends and

those who spoke Icelandic and another language with their friends. This was further supported by the interviews in which students described how English was a supplementary language for socialising, banter, or jokes (Lefever, 2009; Tran and Lefever, 2018). Having a neutral third language levelled the playing field, where no one spoke in their native language. Students who did not have a strong command of Icelandic, but who felt that they must speak Icelandic at all times, were thereby without *a language* in which to communicate.

We have also learned the implications of feeling *not enough.* In the language section we saw that students, whose innermost hopes fell short of what they realistically estimate their options to be, are those who are not comfortable speaking the language. To those students, language is certainly not a key for future endeavours but a barrier to reach their dreams. These findings are eerily reminiscent of Skaptadóttir and Innes' (2017) findings from their study on adult immigrants on the labour market; participants in that study often experienced language as a tool of exclusion, rather than one of inclusion.

In this chapter, we learned about the importance of social capital, in the forms of community and friendship. Social capital occurs through networking, with family as well as the larger community (Bourdieu, 1973, 2016). What we saw in this chapter is that while family plays a large role, teenagers are not merely passive recipients of their family's social capital, but are actively forming bonds themselves (Holland et al., 2007) with others they considered to be *like them.*

Community is complicated in the Icelandic context, as the whole *ethnic minority community* of a village may entirely consist of one student and their family. We saw how important family was for some of the students thinking about the future. Having an extended family in other towns served as a safety net and, thus, increased the perceived opportunities available to students. For others, it was important to know of others *like them*, either from the same country or simply someone who had a similar immigration status.

There are some indicators of the benefits of living in areas that are more densely populated with foreign nationals. Students who lived in areas where the foreign population was over the national average, also had a higher score on average when asked whether they thought people *like them* could succeed. These findings are interesting in light of the importance of *significant others*, or Ray's (2003) aspiration window, that offers a scope through which individuals form aspirations that are rooted in the attainment of others who they perceive as *similar* to them.

Overall, we can see how the feeling of validation and being accepted as you are is a theme throughout this chapter. We have seen many students' awareness that they are not quite

Icelandic enough, and of the strict criterion concerning what is *properly Icelandic*. Students questioned whether they were truly Icelandic if they couldn't trace their Icelandic lineage and they questioned whether their Icelandic language skills were good enough. Essentially, we can boil this chapter down to the notion that the barriers to being Icelandic and speaking Icelandic are defined by those who fit a mould of preconceived ideas of what is Icelandic. What does an Icelander look like? How does an Icelander sound like? Who *is* an Icelander? We must find ways to redefine those moulds and give those of foreign background leeway to define or redefine who they are, so it may fit who they feel they truly are. The issues raised in this chapter are not at the individual level nor are they at the school level. This is a discussion that we must have at a societal level if we truly want to promote an open society. We must begin to push the boundaries for inclusion.

6 School engagement

After our exploration of belonging, identity and fluency in Icelandic language, we now turn our focus to school engagement and its importance when looking at student aspirations. In the earlier chapter, we learned how some students experienced constraints to their chosen identities, which were often negotiated in relation to a stereotypical image of how an Icelandic person looks or speaks. These perceived limits were particularly true in terms of language, where to some students, language was certainly not a key to social spaces or for future endeavours but a barrier.

In the everyday lives of children and teenagers, school is central. In school, they both acquire new knowledge and skills. They learn who they are and who they want to be. Through this learning process, as well as the interaction with their peers and school staff, they formulate their aspirations alongside important intrapersonal skills, such as resilience, work ethic, and also goal setting. They form an understanding of how education can lead to their aspired future (Linnakylä, 1996; Linnakylä and Malin, 2008; Finn, 1989, 2006; Finn and Rock, 1997; Tarabini, 2019).

My findings, presented in this chapter, are based on both the questionnaire given to all students (both of Icelandic and foreign backgrounds) in year 8-10 in 17 Icelandic compulsory schools; as well as 32 qualitative interviews with students whose parent(s) were born in a country other than Iceland. For that reason, some students I interviewed are first-, second-generation immigrants, or are of mixed parentage.

School engagement is an important concept in the field of student achievement, originally on how to strengthen student learning (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). Engagement, at least according to many current definitions, goes beyond the simplest form of time spent on a school activity or a task (ibid). It is an important theoretical model to understand school dropout (Finn, 1989); it is also a multifaceted concept that encompasses the feeling of belonging, participation, and motivational goals (Fredricks et al., 2004). The conceptualisation underpinning this chapter is based around the three-dimensional meta-construct introduced by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004). These three dimensions constitute the student's **emotion**, **behaviour,** and **cognition**, all considered to be important aspects for a student to reach their goals in school.

The following sections will explain the three dimensions of school engagement. The first section is on **behavioural engagement**, how it appears and how it might affect students

of foreign background differently. This is how the student abides by rules, follows classroom norms, contributes in class, and whether they partake in other school-related affairs.

In the second section I describe **emotional engagement** and its three subdimensions, mirroring, belongingness, and reciprocity. This is the dimension that refers to how the student feels or identifies with the school and its members in addition to their feelings towards schooling, such as boredom and interest. In the third chapter and last section, I will introduce **cognitive engagement**, its two sub-dimensions, strategies, and value in education. This is the dimension that focuses on the psychological element of learning. What drives the student forward? How are their coping skills, desire, and flexibility?

The quantitative part of this study is an opportunity to compare students of Icelandic and foreign background. All three dimensions were measured separately to gain an in-depth understanding of school engagement and its relationship with aspirations. Being *engaged* on one dimension does not ensure *engagement* on another dimension. Measuring the three elements separately provides the opportunity to disentangle potential links between each dimension of school engagement with educational aspirations, as well as to make a comparison of those links by the students' background. This chapter also draws on the qualitative interviews conducted with the students of foreign background, giving us a chance to get a deeper understanding of what each element consists of for students of foreign background.

6.1 Behavioural engagement

The first dimension of Fredricks et al.'s (2004) meta-construct is behavioural engagement. As mentioned before, this dimension is often defined by three means: (1) as the presence of positive actions or absence of negative actions, such as the student's behaviour during school hours, adhering to school rules, and the absence of negative behaviour (i.e., skipping school); (2) the student's involvement in learning and behaviour during class (e.g., whether they contribute in class discussions and are able to concentrate during class); and (3) participation in other school related activities or extracurricular activities that take place in school (i.e., school dances, school choirs, class representation, or student council) (ibid). The quantitative part of this study is based on one aspect of behavioural engagement: whether the student adheres to school rules and norms (i.e., whether they finish their homework, participate in class, try their best to do well, and respect the teachers). This factor consists of questions measured on a five-item Likert scale, where a higher score means a more positive feeling. To further understand this dimension of school engagement, we will now look at the quantitative data and how they are reflected in the interviews.

6.1.1 *"It's just like, I'm screaming HELP and no one helps me."*

In this study, I visited six different schools. Between interviews, I talked to the headmasters, ate lunch with the teachers, and talked to the administrative staff. These were always informal chats about the school in general and I never asked about the students I was about to interview. Nevertheless, school staff often offered information about the upcoming interviewee. Gabriel was one of them. Before my interview, I was warned that I would probably not get anything out of him because he would not be very cooperative and might even place the hood of his sweatshirt over his head to hide. I was not told, however, why Gabriel hid in class. Perhaps they did not know. Gabriel, who we got to know earlier, was a first-generation immigrant. He had lived in Iceland for a year and a half at the time of the interview. The interview was positive and productive. He was honest and open, but very lonely and shy. In the following excerpt, Gabriel explains why he sometimes hides in class.

> **Researcher:** So, when you are at home or you have like a Christmas holiday or summer holiday or something and you are thinking about going to school, how do you feel?
>
> **Gabriel:** Sometimes I don't like to go because I'm shy.
>
> **Researcher:** OK, are you normally shy in class?

Gabriel: Erm... yeah.

Researcher: Yeah? What do you do when you are feeling shy?

Gabriel: I like, I put the hood over my eyes and look down. [...] Because I don't... sometimes… yeah…

Researcher: Mhm. Is there any time in particular when you are feeling shy? Is there something... you feel uncomfortable and then you are shy or….?

Gabriel: When I don't know what to do. [...] When teachers ask me or they like announce something in Icelandic I don't understand so... and my classmates do something I don't understand so yeah...

Researcher: I see, but when you feel like that do you ever ask anyone what's going on what's happening?

Gabriel: I want to. But I just…

[...]

Researcher: Do you ever do that at home?

Gabriel: No

Researcher: So it's just in school?

Gabriel: Ahh yeah.

He described situations in school where he was unable to follow the Icelandic conversations or announcements. His response was to literally hide. To him, pulling his hoodie over his head and looking down, was a defence mechanism and that meant he did not have to participate. Gabriel's response was an extreme version of low behavioural engagement. Students like Gabriel would find it difficult to participate in class discussions or activities. Most described how they were quiet during class and would not ask questions or offer comments or observations. A teacher might perceive Gabriel's behaviour as a sign of bad manners, or lack of effort or interest, when in fact it was his way of dealing with an overwhelming situation. In the earlier chapter, we learned how Icelandic was not his second language, nor his third. We also learned that although he spoke English fluently, he did not want to use it with others. This Icelandic language barrier was thus impeding him from having friends. Here we can see how it also held him back from participating in class. In his case, it was the Icelandic language that had become this insurmountable wall, and there was no way around it.

The majority of interviewees described themselves as fairly or rather engaged students. They would ask for help if they needed, would do their homework, and described how they participated in class. This is in line with the quantitative findings. Compared with students of Icelandic background, there was not a statistically significant difference in terms of their *behavioural engagement*. Both groups scored relatively high on average, around 4 on a 5-item Likert scale. The difference was between boys and girls, with a mean difference of roughly 0.4

point on the five-item scale, where the girls score higher, showing more positive behavioural engagement.

Table 16: Behavioural engagement, difference in mean between boys and girls by background.

| | Icelandic[***] | | | Foreign[*] | | |
	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev
Boys	299	3.74	0.85	42	3.78	0.76
Girls	363	4.18	0.65	52	4.14	0.63

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

This difference between boys and girls holds true for both the students of foreign and Icelandic background, a trend that was partially true judging from the interviews. Measuring behavioural engagement with a quantitative measure we have asked students to estimate their classroom behaviour in a standardised manner, but we lose the context and nuances that surround behavioural engagement. What hinders a student to partake in a classroom activity or do their homework? Why do some students find it difficult to ask their teacher for help? Some aspects of the student's behavioural engagement was noticeable in the interviews (like gender), whilst other aspects were not.

Students who leaned more towards *behavioural disengagement*, described various situations or reasons, with the same theme Gabriel had described in his interview; the Icelandic language was their main hindrance. For many interviewees, this barrier would manifest as the feeling of taking up too much space. As with Gabriel, this would be internal, with the student not wanting to ask questions, or where the students were reluctant to ask for the help they needed. This was a trend more prevalent among the boys, but it was not limited to first generation students.

> "I have a lot of questions, couldn't ask, you know, otherwise I would always be asking. There was a time [….], I always had my hand raised, that's how I was in class."

(George)

George was of mixed parentage and had moved back and forth quite a bit, between Iceland and the central-European country where he was born. It was not that George did not want help from his teachers. As a matter of fact, he reminisced about the times when he lived in the sending country and got one-on-one tutoring at school and felt he had the chance to ask as many questions as he needed. To George, asking too many questions was a sign of weakness and he did not want to be *that* guy or the reason why others would not get help. He didn't want to be

different from others, treated differently, or stand out in any way. Yet when offered a chance to turn in an assignment in English in a social science subject, he took it gladly and was very thankful for having been given the chance to prove himself, without the language difficulties weighing him down. His self-consciousness about not asking for more help was typical.

> **Daniel:** When I'm always raising my hand or something… they are always busy. So I'm always on my own. I need, I always get help after school but not during class. [….] I find it [….] very annoying that… I, you know, I just, it's like I'm just screaming "HELP" and no one helps me. [….] Because they are so... erm… busy helping the others. They get all the help but not me.
>
> **Researcher:** Why do you think that is?
>
> **Daniel:** Because just... erm.. I rarely raise my hand and you know, [teachers] just forget that I'm there.

Daniel was a second-generation student but, he spoke poor Icelandic; yet he still considered Icelandic to be his native language. The students who described this feeling, not wanting to take up too much time and space, were not of a certain background, but they all shared the belief that their language proficiency was not good enough. The boys mentioned above were aware that they needed a lot of help, more help than they felt was on offer. Instead, they would withdraw, not ask questions, and make sure not to take up too much space. Studies have shown that help avoidance in the classroom is more likely among boys and girls and are linked with stereotypical ideas of masculinity where asking for help may be perceived as a sign of vulnerability or weakness (Czopp, et al., 1998; Kessels and Steinmayr, 2013; Leaper, Farkas and Starr, 2019).

As one might imagine, this feeling would sometimes vary across teachers or subjects. The feeling of being the classes' surplus was not at the school level, but more about individual teachers:

> **Researcher:** If you need assistance in school, like in your classroom, who do you speak with?
>
> **Ali:** I don't know... I just…. Don't know.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you ask the teacher… ask the teacher for help?
>
> **Ali:** No
>
> **Researcher:** No? Why not?
>
> **Ali:** Because I can't be bothered…I don't think it is fun. I only feel like some want to talk to me, then just, welcome. Some don't want to, then ok.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, and do you then find it difficult to ask for help in class?
>
> **Ali:** Yes

> **Researcher:** Yes. Is there anyone else you feel like you could talk to if you need help with anything in school?
>
> **Ali:** No

In such cases, students would count on particular teachers, even with subjects they did not teach, essentially described emotional engagement and trust towards school staff. This topic will be covered in further detail in this chapter. But for these students, the support of friends was even more important. Some schools emphasised the importance of peer-to-peer mentoring. *"As they always say in the school: ask two and then the teacher",* Sarah shared with me, an advice favoured by many of the interviewees. But what about those who felt as if they could not ask their teachers or their classmates?

> **Miroslav:** I usually don't get a lot explained. When I ask, they say it in Icelandic and I'm just like... looking like I don't know it and some… because there are some words that I don't really know.
>
> **Researcher:** And when that happens, what do you do?
>
> **Miroslav:** I just ask a friend or if he doesn't know either I'm just sitting there listening to the teacher
>
> **Researcher:** I see, do you ever ask the teacher?
>
> **Miroslav:** Yeah but she's..., says it in Icelandic so I sometimes don't really understand Icelandic that well. Yeah, I'm here for two years, but still…

Miroslav's comment intersects all of the issues covered thus far. His difficulties are rooted in not understanding Icelandic but he tells me *"I'm here for two years, but still…."*[58] Suggesting that not being more fluent in Icelandic is his own fault. Although he found studying hard, he would not ask for the additional help he knew he needed. Miroslav had to count on his friends and classmates to follow along in school, and when they could not help, he felt as if there was little he could do. The boys cited, Miroslav, Gabriel, George, Ali, and Daniel, all had different backgrounds: some were first generation immigrants, others were second generation or of mixed background. All of them knew they needed more support and all of them felt as if they were playing catch up. When students sense that they were an inconvenience or had completely missed the meaning of a day of classwork, they found it difficult to re-engage, show interest and participate.

These findings show how engagement involves a dynamic interaction. It is not only the responsibility of the student, but also dependent upon the institution as well (Lamborn, Bron,

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[58] The interview with Miroslav took place in English. What he means to say is "I have been here for two years".

Mounts, Steinberg, 1992; Louis and Smith, 1992; Anderman, 2003; Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012). This varied across classrooms and thus shows how engagement is a product of the interaction between the student, the institution, and staff members (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004).

6.1.2 Behavioural engagement and homework

This feeling of having to play catch up was interwoven into other aspects of learning. The behavioural engagement scale measures whether students adhere to class rules, but also finish their tasks, such as *homework, participating in class activities,* or just *trying your best in school*.

In the earlier section, we learned that some students felt as if they could not ask for help during class, mainly due to a language barrier. What about their homework? The overwhelming majority of the students of foreign background said during the interviews that they did not get help from their parents with schoolwork. If they had older siblings living in Iceland, most asked their siblings for help. However, things were a lot more complicated for those who were the oldest, those who had older siblings in the original country, or who did not have any siblings. Some said they sought help from friends, others used the internet, or waited until they could ask their teacher for help. Some said that they could not get help from anyone.

> There is no way my parents know anything [….] that's the hard part.
>
> (Karim)

If students specifically mentioned that they could not get help from their parents, the reasons were twofold: their parents had forgotten the material the student needed help with, or the parent did not understand the assignment due to a language barrier.

Interestingly enough, mathematics was the subject most referred to throughout the interviews. If students said their parents had forgotten the material students needed help with, they would specifically mention mathematics as an example: it was such a long time since the parents had learned it or they had learned it differently. For students in the latter category, asking for help was more of a hassle than it was worth.

> **Researcher**: Like regarding homework, do you have a lot of homework?
>
> **Sofia**: Erm only if I have to finish something for this day and still have a bit left to do, then I do it at home. And then, like, mom and dad could help me except this is of course all in Icelandic so I would have to translate it and something like that so I always try to do it on my own but if I'm just not understanding then they try to help me.
>
> **Researcher**: And so, do you then have to translate it too.

Sofia: Yes, cause you know, maybe it says what you should do in Icelandic and they, of course, don't understand anything, or you know, they understand you see, but maybe not... They would understand if it was in [native language]

Sofia, a first-generation immigrant, preferred to do her homework on her own, and as a last resort she sought help from her parents. It was not for the lack of trying or willingness on behalf of her parents, having to translate her schoolwork and explain it to her parents, simply meant more work for Sofia. In fact, lack of willingness or trying was contrary to what many of the students described. When asked to describe their family, some would describe their parents as being *stricter* than Icelandic parents, both regarding homework and overall. For example, Sebastian described "*Like, I feel like Icelandic families don't take that much care of their kids, just let them be in his room all day, […] just [Eastern European nationality] families make kids do more*", yet he was one of the students who had told me how his parents struggled with helping him with his homework and he would have to get help from his teachers.

This rang true for many of the students who couldn't get help from home. Most of the students whose parents could not help with their homework would get the help they needed at school, the next day. From the school's perspective, that might be interpreted as low behavioural engagement. Some students described how the schools or teachers had shown innovative initiatives to facilitate learning outside the classroom, either by getting the parents more involved or by supporting student-led homework clubs. That way students at one particular school described how the school had actively encouraged the students to do their homework together on the school property after school, an initiative students found very helpful. Other students described how individual teachers had come up with creative ways to promote learning on their own terms. This included homework in science done in the student's native language, so the parents could help the student and then the student was further asked to translate that assignment to Icelandic. That way the learning was an well-rounded experience for the student where the parents were given the chance to be involved and the student was encouraged to build a bridge between the two languages his world consisted of.

This is a barrier that needs to be further explored. Moreover, the question these few examples pose is this: is this a barrier the student should have to overcome, or is it in fact a wall set in place by a system that is not inclusive enough? The examples these handful of students gave me were in fact examples of how teachers or a school policy tried their best to facilitate student engagement, on their own terms at their own pace. We cannot simply tell students to do their homework, if they can't get any help with their homework. Students of

foreign background have more limited resources to fulfil their school related duties, and if they do not have an older sibling, they become reliant on external resources (i.e., friends or the internet) – or they simply cannot finish their tasks. It sets the student up for constant failure, if they have to come back with their unfinished homework, and not for the lack of trying. It also adds additional pressure on the teachers, who are giving their students one-to-one teaching outside the classroom. A homework club, as mentioned in few of the interviews could be a solution for those students who have fewer resources. The school offers a place where students can work on their homework and receive help from peers or other adults.

What we have covered in this section is how behaviour in class may appear as disengagement or lack of willingness to participate in class, to do one's homework, or lack of parental help. What we have uncovered, though, is how apparent disengagement may, in fact, be a symptom of a language barrier, both on behalf of the student as well as the parents. In the next chapter, we will explore another dimension of school engagement: emotional engagement.

6.2 Emotional engagement

In the simplest sense, emotional engagement is the feeling a student has towards their classroom, school, and teachers. It can be measured as an emotional reaction towards their school environment, their teachers, and the school - generally; or how well they identify with their school or how much they belong (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004).

As already explained, three factors were created to describe the full range of emotional engagement. These were called *mirroring*, the sense of feeling at home or being able to show one's true self, *belongingness,* which refers to either the feeling of belonging or on the contrary, feeling as an outsider on the other, and *reciprocity,* which refers to the feeling of community at the institutional level and trust towards its members. All questions were measured on a five-item Likert scale where a higher score would mean a more positive feeling across all three scales.

Comparing the mean score of students of Icelandic and foreign background does not reveal a significant difference across two of the emotional engagement scales.

Table 17: Difference in mean between students of Icelandic and foreign background across all three scales of emotional engagement.

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Mirroring	707	3.72	0.90	97	3.55	0.94
Belongingness**	703	3.83	0.73	98	3.58	0.83
Reciprocity	706	3.44	0.80	100	3.42	0.79

[*]Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); [**]Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); [***]Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

As the table above shows, the mean for both groups, regardless of their background, was above three, representing a more positive emotional engagement. The mean was always lower for students who were of foreign background, meaning that on average, they scored lower on emotional engagement. This difference, across the mirroring and reciprocity scales, was not statistically significant ($p>0.05$). However, on the belongingness scale, students of foreign background scored significantly lower on average. This will be furthered examined in the next section.

In the process of weaving in the qualitative data, it became apparent that there was a need to understand each element of emotional engagement separately. Being of *foreign*

background is a very broad term. By looking at each element and its characteristics together with the qualitative data we can get a fuller understanding of which students struggle across each facet, and who flourishes. During the interviews with the children of foreign background, I came across these aspects of emotional engagement. Below I refer to the qualitative data to shed more light on how one might detect students who have low emotional engagement.

6.2.1 Understanding emotional engagement, the role of peers

In the last chapter on ethnic identity and language, we learned that some students were *othered* on the basis of their ethnic background, look or accent; they were labelled as *different* by teasing or the use of derogatory words or slurs. Such labels further deepen the sense of feeling different and contribute to loneliness, isolation, and limited belongingness (Rastas, 2005; Tran and Lefever, 2018). Having friends, a trusting or a meaningful relationship with others, is very important and becomes of particular importance during adolescence (Erikson, 1968/1994; Wilks, 1986).

Mirroring is a side of emotional engagement that measures whether students feel as if they are part of their school, if the other students are there for them, and whether they can truly be themselves; or in Goffman terms: engage in a backstage performance, at least with some of their peers. For them to do so, they would need to feel as if they can trust their environment and that they will not get a negative response when they show their true selves. The belongingness variable measures how students identify with their school and how socially connected they feel. What both of these variables have in common is that they measure an aspect of how the students reflect on themselves in relation to their peers.

If we first look at the quantitative data, including students of all backgrounds, we can see that students who socialise with their classmates and others from school outside of school score higher on both the mirroring and belongingness. There the difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), regardless of background.

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Table 18: Difference in mean on the emotional engagement dimension, mirroring, by whether the student socialises with their classmates or other friends from school, outside of school[59], both show for students of Icelandic and foreign background

| | Icelandic background[***] | | | Foreign background[**] | | |
| | Mirroring | | | Mirroring | | |
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Yes	393	3.89	0.81	49	3.82	0.95
No	195	3.34	1.01	33	3.21	0.88

[*]Statistically significant (p < 0.05); [**]Statistically significant (p < 0.01); [***]Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

Table 19: Difference in mean on the emotional engagement dimension, belongingness, by whether the student socialises with their classmates or other friends from school, outside of school, both shown for students of Icelandic and foreign background

| | Icelandic background[***] | | | Foreign background[**] | | |
| | Belongingness | | | Belongingness | | |
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Yes	393	3.95	0.67	49	3.82	0.80
No	194	**3.57**	0.79	34	**3.25**	0.82

[*]Statistically significant (p < 0.05); [**]Statistically significant (p < 0.01); [***]Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

What is even more interesting is that students who socialised with their school mates outside of school scored quite high on both the mirroring and belongingness scale, on average. Moreover, if we look at students who did not socialise with others outside of school, the average score was very similar on the mirroring scale for students of both backgrounds. What this means is that students who did not socialise with their peers outside of the school ground felt less like they could show their true selves in school. These are similar findings as in the former chapter, where a common language (Icelandic and/or other) played a key role.

On the belongingness scale, students of foreign background who did not socialise with their peers scored significantly lower (p < 0.05) than students of Icelandic background who did not socialise with their peers (highlighted in bold in table 19). What this means is that students of foreign background suffered even more than their Icelandic counterparts from not being able to extend their friendships outside the school grounds (in terms of school belongingness).

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[59] Students were asked to answer the following statement: I socialise with my classmates or other friends from school, outside of school.

To further understand this element, the next step was to understand whether there was a difference between boys and girls. In terms of mirroring, the mean difference is marginal and there was not a statistical difference, neither for the students of Icelandic nor those of foreign background. On the other hand, there is a significant difference between boys and girls when it comes to belongingness, but this is only true for those of Icelandic background. In fact, with only a marginal difference between the two, both the boys and girls of foreign background scored lower, on average, than the Icelandic boys.

Table 20: Emotional engagement: belongingness, difference in mean between boys and girls, for both students of Icelandic and foreign background.

Belongingness	Icelandic*			Foreign		
	N	Mean	Std. Dev	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Boys	310	3.77	0.73	44	3.58	0.83
Girls	369	3.90	0.73	51	3.65	0.80

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

To better understand this dimension of emotional engagement, the interviewees, who were all of foreign background, were asked about friendships, inside and outside of school. This was to understand whether they had established friendship with someone within the school, someone they could spend their breaktime and lunches with, whether they knew their classmates, felt included, and were being valued. Most of the teenagers said they had a friend, either in their school, in their old school, or even back in the native country. This obviously varied, depending on how long they had been in the current school, for how long they had lived in the country, and how comfortable they felt speaking Icelandic.

Circumstances varied but, looking over the students who felt like outsiders, there was one profile that stood out: first generation boys. Unfortunately, as this is such a small subgroup there is no meaningful comparison that can be done with the quantitative data, but the qualitative data speaks volumes: about half of the boys I spoke to described having few or no friends in their current school. Most of these boys were originally from an Eastern European country; however, that is more a testament to the demographic of the foreign population in Iceland, and thus the demographic of my interviewees.

In terms of friendships, these boys fell into one of two categories: they had not formed any meaningful friendships with other students in their school; or they had already formed a

meaningful friendship with a student, but that student had left the school, and they were now on their own.

When asked about their best friend, these boys either referred to a friend, either who attended their school at some point, or a friend back in their native country; or they would describe their school friendships in blanket terms: meaning that they were friends with *everybody* during school, but not outside of school. This is an important distinction, as the first group of boys is easy to identify in the classroom. They seem more disconnected at school, even reclusive. They describe themselves as being lonely, someone who would spend their recess or breaks on their own sleeping, reading a book, or playing games on their phones. The second group, those who said they were friends with everyone, but not close to anyone, is more difficult to spot. They would participate during school hours but spend most of their time alone outside of school. Judging from the interviews, being friends with *everyone* could just as well mean that they would be friends with or spend time with *anyone.* On the subject of friends, friendship, and having a trusted best friend, the students who were in the second category equated human interaction with friendship. Thereby, *everyone* would fall in the group of best friends. When asked who their friends were, these students would typically respond as follows:

> Everyone in my class and also in Year one[60] and even everyone at school. No just a lot of people and then also in [town where he wants to study]
>
> (Sap)

> Erm… kind of everyone here in [village where he lives]. Everyone knows me. Or I... they know my name because my parents know them but I don't know them but I say hi, like "Hi Daniel" and I just say hi, and… they ask... some asks, ask me like "do you know my name?" and I s.. I just "yeeeeah…" but I kno.., even though I don't know it.
>
> (Daniel)

> I just feel like everything... everyone that are in my school are my friends […] I always talk to all the boys. Those who are big or small.
>
> (Ali)

> I am with, like, yes I am with… [hesitates] just all the kids.
>
> (Ivan)

Regardless, it was apparent that they were not referring to close friendships or trusted friends.

---

[60] Sap is referring to year 1 in upper secondary school, or in this case the students who were in year 10 in his school the year before.

Researcher: Do you have many friends?

Ali: yaaa… but.. boys who are my friends are not always with me. They just find... Icelandic friends who are with them better than me.

<div align="right">(Ali)</div>

Researcher: What is the best thing about having friends?

Ivan: Erm… it's not like... what is it called? Depressing, that I don't have such… when I am like, just alone, that's not good.

<div align="right">(Ivan)</div>

All of the boys above talked about how they would spend breaktimes and be friends with *everyone* but this relationship never extended past the school boundaries. Ivan later told me, despite spending recess with most kids in the sports hall, he sometimes felt as if he was not invited to spend time with others after school. What both Ali and Ivan are describing, is not having access to tight social circles among the other kids - at least not outside the school ground. What makes this situation difficult is the fact that they appear to participate during school hours, but do not seem to manage to extend these friendships outside of the school, meaning that their loneliness is not necessarily apparent to their teachers. This will, from the outside, seem as if they are being included, but that inclusion is quite limited.

Furthermore, it may explain why there was virtually no difference between the boys and girls in the quantitative data. Potentially, what the quantitative data does not capture, is how boys and girls might evaluate their friendships differently or how the boys might mask their loneliness. Many of the boys talked about how they sometimes played sports with their schoolmates during breaktime and recess, but their friendship did not go beyond that. A student might recognise that he is being included in school-based activities, but when they are not included outside of school – will they then feel as if they are truly being included? This further emphasises the importance of understanding how these friendships are extended. In short, we need to find ways to make a connection between the school and the home. Given that we know how boys might feel included during school activities, yet lonely outside of school, one way could be to strengthen the ties between schools and extra-curricular activities and to encourage such boys to join an activity outside of school. It was interesting though, how more of the first-generation boys would reminisce about a childhood friends in their native country, than girls. Unfortunately, there is very little that can be concluded from that, but this is an area that should be studied further.

6.2.2 Understanding emotional engagement at the institutional level

Engagement requires intention, concentration, even commitment by students, but it is not generated by students alone. As with school membership, degree of engagement is highly dependent on the institutions contribution to the equation that produces learning.

(Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 177)

The third variable, reciprocity, appeared in the interview as trust towards their teachers or the school, as an institution. By *reciprocity*, I mean the feeling of support and trust in their school as an institution and its members.

According to Icelandic laws, each student should be provided with a supervising teacher who closely oversees the students' education and overall welfare. They ought to guide their students when it comes to school, but also "*help and guide them on personal issues and promote a way to strengthen a cooperation between school and home*" (Lög um Grunnskóla 91/2008, p. 13, para 2). Teachers, and supervising teachers in particular, thereby have an important role within the schools, of unquestionable significance judging from the interviews. This relationship is especially important if a student did not seem to identify with their peers or their school community.

Looking at the trust towards the members of the school, this came through in two ways: trust towards the adults was conditioned with a positive experience where they had felt safeguarded from their peers, but a lack of trust towards the members or even the whole school system was when they did not feel as though they were being safeguarded from their peers.

Overall, students seemed to have at least one teacher within the school, who they felt they could contact and count on. Most often, these were teachers who were either their present or former supervising teacher. Some had already had an experience where they sought help from a staff member, and most thought they had been successfully resolved. This trust was then juxtaposed against a lack of trust in the students:

> **Researcher:** If you feel bad about something in school, is there someone you feel like you could talk to?
>
> **Gigi:** Maybe the teachers
>
> **Researchers:** yes, have you ever done that?
>
> **Gigi:** mhm [Affirmative]
>
> **Researchers:** And has that been something that they were able to resolve?
>
> **Gigi:** Erm, in year 8, or I used to be in another form. Then, in year 8, I changed [forms] because the girls in the form that I was in, they were all like friends, like together and they wanted to, they didn't want anyone else came [sic], joined.

180

Researcher: Did you then go to the teachers and talk to them or?

Gigi: mhm [Affirmative]

Researcher: Yes, and could they then fix that for you or change?

Gigi: Yes

As we learned in the last chapter, Gigi had been bullied and excluded on the basis of her non-Icelandic origin and her Icelandic proficiency was ridiculed. When seeking help, she felt that she had been listened to. Thus, dealing with the school administration was a positive experience. However, even though Gigi felt that she had been successfully helped, this trust did not go beyond individual staff members. She was still quite timid and only asked two teachers for help, regardless of whether they taught that particular subject or not. She only trusted a few teachers and would only seek help from them. The trust was at the individual level, but not towards the whole school in general. This distinction is important to understand. Furthermore, what happens if that trust is broken? Maria is of mixed parentage. Her mother comes from a Southeast Asian country and her father is from Iceland. She is a top student, but she describes how her trust towards the school staff was broken due to an incident with one member of staff:

> **Maria:** [...] I don't trust anyone here that I want to talk to. Not the teachers because... yes... I don't find them like... trusting [sic]
>
> **Researcher:** Have you ever talked to the nurse?[61]
>
> **Maria**: No I don't trust her. Because, this one time... I had a teacher and I was very sentimental in Year 1 and Year 3 and then [the teacher] said to my parents that I would never… good student… and would never be good student and after that, I don't trust the teachers to talk to someone and be... sensitive...

Maria was very isolated, had very few friends, except one whom she trusted, a girl who had attended her school but was now in upper secondary school and was *"also from abroad".* In Maria's case, there was a complete lack of trust towards all members of the school, including students, teachers, and a visiting school nurse, because of an incident where she had shown vulnerability. Sure, it simply tells a tale as old as time, trust needs to be earned. Yet, her story also raises an important question: how can the school, as an institution, gain that trust? What happens when students do not trust their environment?

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[61] In Maria's school, there was no guidance councellor, but there was a school nurse who came regularly for consulations with students.

The interviews showed how one school stuck out in terms of trust (or lack thereof) towards the adult members of the whole school as an institution. The school was urban and rather large compared with the others. A few students explained how there was a gang of very disruptive boys who seemed to run the show at the school. Sarah, a year 10 student, described how she felt that the school authorities seemed to have given up. When asked whether they had done anything to control the group, she said: *"I think they tried in the beginning but it's like the teachers have just given up. You know, they try to keep them calm but during breaks then there's not really anything done. It's just like, the hall monitors stand by and watch"* (Sarah)

Rosa, also a year 10 student in the same school, had lived in another Nordic country and compared her school experiences a lot. She maintained that she did not feel as safe as she had felt in her former school. In fact, she superimposed that distrust onto the Icelandic educational system as a whole, saying *"There's less sense of security, you know, like in Icelandic schools, because in the other there was a much stricter overview, so I probably think there is more security in the other school"* (Rosa). Furthering this thought she even described her school as a jungle. In her mind, there was very little that the school authorities would do:

> **Rosa**: [...] they had a fight the other day and not one of them was sent to the headmaster. And then, once I came in late for reading and I was sent to the head master. [...] So it's like, there is a very, there's a discrimination. [...] Because, you know, it's kind of like, you know, in the jungle, just you know, the lions and...
>
> **Researcher**: I see, is that how you feel like it is?
>
> **Rosa**: Mhmm [affirmative]
>
> **Researcher**: Why do you think that happens?
>
> **Rosa**: I just think, you know… they are all a dunce and you know, they get like D in everything, I think this is the only thing they are good at really, you know, to maintain the power.

In Rosa's mind, talking to adults within her school was pointless. What seemed to hold her back was a fear of her peers (as she said, "snitches get stitches"), as well as a complete lack of trust towards the school authorities, as they were not the ones holding the power. What Sarah and Rosa described is an example of a complete breakdown of trust, but that trust was not only towards the school, the members of the school authorities, but also towards the educational system as a whole. For schools to fulfil their legal role (and mission), they must promote an environment of trust. Trust, or lack thereof, may be an indication of an individual act or of a relationship with an individual employee, who may represent *all* teachers or the entire school. Similarly, perceived inactivity on behalf of the school to protect the students from their peers

may justify characterising the school as an uncaring and unsafe institution; the same came be said of the educational *system* as a whole.

In this section, we covered the three facets of emotional engagement (*mirroring, belongingness,* and *reciprocity),* and how they may appear in and outside of school. We have illustrated how some students struggle with extending friendships outside of the schoolground and accessing social circles. In the next section, we will explore cognitive engagement, the third and last dimensions of school engagement.

6.3 Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to the student's investment in the learning process and how they self-regulate their learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). As mentioned earlier, cognitive engagement's conceptualisation is often closely aligned with motivation literature, focusing on the individual's psychological need or longing to master a certain skill where they want to learn for the sake of learning. (ibid, Newmann et al., 1992). Other definitions of the term are more focused on the learning aspect of cognitive engagement, looking at the student's strategies for learning. These would be strategies such as repeating a task, going over one's homework, and techniques to memorise a subject (Fredricks, Blumenefeld and Paris, 2004).

Two scales were created to describe the cognitive dimension of school engagement: *strategy*, referring to the students learning strategies and effort they put in the learning process; and *value,* a dimension that measured the value of working hard in school as well as whether and how much they saw value in their education. All questions were, as before, measured on a five-item Likert scale where a higher score represents greater cognitive engagement.

If we begin our investigation by looking at the quantitative data, we can see that there is not a significant difference between the students of Icelandic and foreign background, in terms of their cognitive engagement, a similar trend found across most of the other facets of school engagement. The main difference was between boys and girls on the strategies dimension. If we look at the table below, we can see that both the Icelandic boys and the boys of foreign background scored lower than the girls. This was statistically significant for those of Icelandic background (p < 0.001), but not for those of foreign background (p =0.056), by a margin.

The value scale measures whether the student sees the value in formal schooling. On this scale, boys of Icelandic background scored significantly lower than the girls, but this was not the case for those of foreign background; those boys scored marginally higher than the girls. This difference was not statistically significant, meaning that there was not a difference between boys and girls in whether they saw value in schooling.

Table 21: The two dimensions of Cognitive engagement, difference in mean between boys and girls by background.

Icelandic background

	Strategies[***]			Value[***]		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Boys	295	3.16	0.79	298	3.36	0.93
Girls	356	3.44	0.75	355	3.70	0.81

Foreign background

	Strategies			Value		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Boys	41	3.27	0.75	43	3.51	0.81
Girls	50	3.56	0.68	49	3.49	0.81

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

In the next subsections, we will look more closely into these dimensions and how they appeared in the interviews with the students of foreign background.

6.3.1 Strategies and effort put in class

Strategies is the dimension of cognitive engagement that measures how the student acquires a new skill or learning method. This includes whether the student tries to link the material with something that they have already learned, if they like to be challenged in school, or if they go over their homework to ensure it is correct. This dimension also measures the effort students put in, such as the student's perseverance, even when they find the work difficult.

As one might expect, this measure is positively correlated with behavioural engagement, the side of school engagement that measures whether the student complies to school rules, norms, and tasks they have been given in school.

Table 22: Pearson's correlation between behavioural engagement and strategies, a dimension of cognitive engagement, by background.

	Icelandic background	**Foreign background**
Strategies	0. 649[***]	0.632[***]

 * Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

For both student groups, the strategies used to understand subjects and the effort they were willing to invest in their learning were moderately to strongly correlated with behavioural engagement. This relationship was very apparent in the interviews and appeared in two ways: how they fared in school was either due to an internal effort or external to them. The main difference between these two groups was whether they considered their success or lack thereof to be within or beyond their own control, and whether was it something *they did* or something that happened *to them.*

Most students were characterised by the former group, believing that how they fared in school was due to their own efforts. To them, in order to do well and reach one's goals, you would have to study hard. These students were then situated across a spectrum varied by the level of effort they were willing to invest. On one end, very studious students believed that to succeed they had to apply themselves. These were students whose effort level had been reinforced with good marks or steady improvements. On the other hand, there were students who also believed that to succeed one must work hard, but they did not see the value in doing well in school. These students talked about how they could not *be bothered*, or how they believed that doing well was an event that only had to take place by the end of compulsory school, not along the journey towards completion.

> **Researcher:** Are there any hindrances or something that could impede you from getting there [attending a school in the capital]?
>
> **Greg:** My grades
>
> **Researcher:** Oh ok. And is that something you worry about?
>
> **Greg:** No
>
> **Researcher:** And is there anything that you could do to get past these hindrances?
>
> **Greg:** Aha, study more.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, and do you do that?
>
> **Greg:** No, in year 10, maybe.

The interview took place in the last term of school, so he was in his final months of year 9. His attitude was in line with his counterparts, who could not see *why* they ought to bother. They felt the future was not something one has to plan for. Later in this chapter I will discuss this attitude, a characterising attribute of those who saw education as a plan B to an unclear plan A.

There were not many students who were in the second group, those who believed their perceived options for the future were due to an external force. Interestingly, these students saw these perceived external forces only as potential hindrances, something that might impede them

to fully engage and reach their goals. What these students described was how the main barrier to reaching their goal was if they would all of a sudden lose all interest, or suddenly lose their ambition, as if it was something that could happen to them, beyond their control.

However, there is an additional third group, a group in-between the two. These students believed their perceived options for the future were completely within their control. They were in control of their destiny and overall, their success was a testament of their hard work – except they did not get the sense that it was enough, due to external factors. These were students who studied hard, did their homework, but felt as if their educational outcome did not accurately demonstrate their own efforts. They had tried to do well but felt as if it would not amount to anything.

> Sometimes I feel like a complete idiot, you know. Because, you know, what on earth is going on and when I was, I did well in [native country] but here it's just [loud thud as he drops his hand on the table] It's sort of just a pain in the ass. I just look at it like this, why couldn't you just god damn waited there?[62] It's, it's just awful to think about it that way, but I don't do it anymore.

(George)

Later in the interview, George talked about how he has had to manage his expectations about the school and the area of study he aspires to, because of his grades. When asked what he could do better when he would get into upper secondary school he replied:

> **George:** Just, you know, this time around.. don't [slams the table] be [slams the table] lazy [slams the table]. This time just, do it, just for the love of god.
>
> **Researcher:** Ok, and do you feel like you have been getting bad grades because you've been lazy?
>
> **George:** Or you know, I say that, yes. I am lazy. Still, I studied a lot for... you know... Yes I don't feel like I have done my best. I don't know.
>
> **Researcher:** Did you feel that way before you got your grades?
>
> **George**: erm... you know.. no not in the finals, not at all, I studied my ass off for that so when I got my grades, it became apparent… I just.. no! […] I have never slept that little in my life […] whilst I was studying, before the grades and after I got the grades, it was terrible. It became apparent that it was for nothing. Nothing.

The *strategy* scale used in the quantitative part of the study, not only measures the students learning methods, but also the effort they put in class and their sense of agency. These elements of the strategy dimensions were apparent in George's interview. Not only did George feel as if all the studying had not resulted in anything, but it was affecting his sense of self: *"I studied as much as I physically could. […] Maybe I'm not smart enough"*. In chapter 5 we got to know

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[62] Judging from the interview, George appears to be referring to himself rhetorically.

George. He told me how he considered his native language to be the language that he was not able to use in his daily life, suggesting that he never feels adequate speaking – except in English, which had been a constant in his life, regardless of where he lived. Moreover, we learned that he was somewhat behaviourally disengaged. Although he did his homework, he never asked for help in class as he did not want to be *that guy* who took up all the attention from the other students. As such, he didn't get any help. It was there, by the end of year 10, when George realised that all his effort to study, on his own, was for nothing. He believed that since he did not do well in his exams, it must be because he was not smart enough.

The effect this had on other students, like George, varied. Some students had already given up as they thought their efforts were pointless, but it was causing them a lot of stress. This would cause some of them to err on thinking that not participating was better than failing, rather than to seeing it as a chance to work harder.

> **Researcher:** Do you ever feel bad at school?
>
> **Ivan:** I am just like stressed
>
> **Researcher**: Why are you stressed?
>
> **Ivan**: Because just, aa if I got like C because.. or like D in Icelandic and Maths or English then I have to repeat in upper secondary school and it's just... not good.
>
> […]
>
> **Researcher**: Is there anything you can do now [to reach your goals]?
>
> **Ivan**: Study!
>
> **Researcher:** I see. And do you do that?
>
> **Ivan:** No.
>
> **Researcher:** No ok, and when are you going to do that?
>
> **Ivan**: Tomorrow! [laughs]
>
> […]
>
> **Researcher:** Is there anything that, anything that you do to reduce this feeling of stress?
>
> **Ivan:** Yes. […] I don't think about it.

Ivan was ambitious and aspired for a university degree. Just like George, he wanted to do well in school, but constantly felt like it wasn't good enough. So, he would rather ignore it; by doing nothing, the issue didn't exist.

As previously stated, these students did not lack ambition. They believed it was within their control to succeed but, due to external factors, they did not believe it was worthwhile. What these students had in common was twofold: they felt as if the Icelandic language was

their main hindrance to fully succeed and they would talk about lack of support from their school.

If we look at the quantitative data, we can see the correlation between perceived strategies, effort on behalf of the students, and how the students felt they fared in school, and how this varied between students of Icelandic and foreign background.

Table 23: Students of Icelandic and foreign background and (Pearson's r) correlation between their perception of how they have fared in school and the strategies and effort dimension of cognitive engagement.

	Icelandic background	Foreign background
Fare at school overall	0.349***	0.411***
Fare compared with others	0.394***	0.183
Fare in English	0.128*	0.186
Fare in Icelandic	0.332***	0.168
Fare in maths	0.238***	0.281**

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

The first question asked how the student felt they fared overall in school, but the latter four asked them to compare themselves with others: overall, in English, Icelandic, and mathematics. What is interesting that were they of Icelandic background there was a positive, low to moderate correlation between strategies and perception of how the student fared. This correlation was only prevalent among students of foreign background when they were a) asked how they fared overall, without comparing themselves with others, b) asked how they compared with others in mathematics. What this shows is how employing various learning methods to acquire a skill, put in effort to link the material to what they have already learned, perseverance and believing one does well in school because they work hard (measures of the *strategy* dimension), does not result in an impression of faring well in comparison with others – if the student is of foreign background.

George and Pippa were both students who would fall into this in-between group on effort. In their interviews, they both touched upon the issue of Icelandic and the inability of school to overcome this external issue. As mentioned earlier, George was very much affected by his educational attainment and believed that that must be a testament to static attributes, regardless of any effort he might put into his work. This issue was, in his mind, rooted in his lack of Icelandic. When asked about the subjects he struggled with and why, he said:

Icelandic, just for the obvious reasons, I never managed to catch up again. I was... I had caught up on [native language] because I went there so early[63], I was still, you know, when my brain was still taking in languages […] and then all of a sudden we've moved back to Iceland and it just destroyed my studies. It just… exploded. […] My Icelandic was hindering me in Math and Icelandic was hindering me in natural science.

(George)

In George's mind, there was something external, the *Icelandic language*, that **destroyed** his studies. Pippa was of mixed parentage; her mother was native Icelandic and her father Western European. She was not as extreme in her descriptions, but when asked about what could potentially hinder her from reaching her goals, she said:

> **Pippa:** Erm… I don't know. Maybe if I don't do well in Icelandic or something but I don't know if that has an effect. […] You know I could, I understand it completely and can write it and so on but it's like, just the grammar, I... it's just that.
>
> **Researcher**: I see. Is there anything else you could do now to get passed these?
>
> **Pippa**: Erm... just study more… and… maybe get more like extra hours[64] and so on.
>
> **Researcher**: Is that something that you do?
>
> **Pippa**: I asked for it now and then there was something... there was a lot going on and then there was not much time left of school so there wasn't really time.

Both Pippa and George were students with a clear vision for their future. Both saw Icelandic as a potential threat to their future aspirations and both did not feel as if they had received enough help from their school. Pippa was more forthcoming and would seek the help she needed, whereas George saw it as a sign of weakness. He did not want to be treated differently or stand out in any way. It doesn't mean that he didn't *want* the help, as he reminisced about the help he had gotten in his native country.

On the other hand, Pippa's behavioural engagement was high. She asked for additional work in subjects she did well. She did her homework and even asked for extra help in the subjects that challenged her. When asked if there was anything that could hinder her from reaching her goals the only thing that she could think of was Icelandic. During the interview, she spoke perfect Icelandic. Speaking Icelandic or not speaking Icelandic was not the issue here, but the perception of it not being good enough, regardless of how good they really were. In any case, it was clear that the language was a stressor to both of them. The upside is that as these students would, at the core, believe that success was in general due to their effort. For

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[63] George moved back and forth from his father's native country to Iceland few times but spent most of his primary school years in his father's native country.
[64] I. „fá meiri svona aukatíma"

that reason, they saw upper secondary school as a new opportunity; both mentioned how they hoped they would get the help they needed there.

6.3.2 Value in education

> **Researcher**: When I say upper secondary school, what do you think of?
>
> **Agatha:** Just focus really hard because you are approaching your future when you are becoming twenty and so on, and just never... and then you are, you know, working and you just have got a job and have to take responsibility of what you are doing and then you have to concentrate more, you see? Because you are studying so you can get good grades so you can go further and then you might get a really good job and a lot of money, you know?
>
> (Agatha)

Roughly half of the interviewees considered further education as a ticket for their future. In the excerpt above, we can see how Agatha considered her grades to be a direct indicator of her effort and she equated that with her future options. Early in the interviews, it became apparent how all three dimensions of school engagement were closely related. In fact, a student who appeared well-engaged, emotionally and behaviourally, applied themselves in school and showed perseverance would also see the value in education – that school was a steppingstone towards their desired future. Surely, this shouldn't be a surprise. If we look at the quantitative data, we can see that there was a moderate, positive relationship between these dimensions and *value in education.* If we look at table 24 below, we can see all three facets of the emotional engagement dimensions were interrelated with seeing the value in education. This relationship was marginally stronger for students of foreign background, between *value* and all three dimensions of emotional engagement. This was not the case when it came to behavioural engagement and the other subgroup of cognitive engagement, strategies, where the relationship was stronger for the students of Icelandic background.

These findings may suggest that different aspects of school engagement matter for students of foreign background, than they do for students of Icelandic background. For students of foreign background the three dimensions of emotional engagement appeared to be of importance. That is, there was a moderate, positive relationship between valuing education and being part of the school community, feeling as if you are able to be your true self, and trust in the community at the institutional level. For students of Icelandic background, seeing the value in schooling was more strongly correlated with the strategies employed. Seeing the value in education and the effort they put into their schoolwork, adhering to school norms and rules (behavioural engagement) was moderately correlated for students of both backgrounds.

Table 24: Pearson's correlation between seeing the value in education and other dimensions of school engagement, by background.

	Icelandic background	Foreign background
Emotional engagement		
Mirroring	0.398***	0.419***
Belongingness	0.271***	0.347**
Reciprocity	0.511***	0.536***
Behavioural engagement		
Behaviour	0.641***	0.540***
Cognitive engagement		
Strategies	0.611***	0.475***
Value	-	-

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

These findings evoke the following questions: what is it that makes the student see further education as worthwhile? How can we identify students who do not see the value in education?

Based on the interviews, parents play a large role in whether and how the student sees value in education. Before we look at the themes that emerged from the interviews, let's take a look at how this appeared in the quantitative data. The table below shows how the students valued education in terms of their parents' educational level.

Table 25: Comparison of the means of value in education, using an ANOVA test, by the parents' educational level

Mother's education

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Non-University degree	149	3.50	0.84	33	3.55	0.74
University degree	396	3.58	0.88	38	3.46	0.92
I do not know	131	3.36	0.92	23	3.43	0.71

Father's education

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Non-University degree	204	3.57	0.84	31	3.59	0.73
University degree	321	3.57	0.89	27	3.50	1.03
I do not know	151	3.35	0.93	37	3.39	0.67

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

If we first look at the students of Icelandic background, we can see that there is very little difference in how the students value education in terms of the educational level of their parents. Students whose mother have a university degree score marginally higher, meaning that they

are somewhat more positive about the importance and value of education for their future. On the other hand, if we look at the students of foreign background, we can see that there's a different story. Students whose parents have a university degree score lower than the students whose parents do not have a university degree. Students who did not know their parents' educational level had the lowest score, on average. There was not a statistically significant difference between the groups. However, these findings raise a question that was worth looking into in the interviews: do the students not see the merits of further education, and if so, is it despite their parents' educational level or *because* of it? Which then brings into question whether their parents utilise their degree in Iceland and reap the benefits of their education or is it an undervalued or even unvalued skill (Portes and Zhou, 1993)? Or could it perhaps be that children whose parents had not finished a degree felt like they needed to prove something?

There were mainly three themes that emerged from the interviews when it came to understanding how the students valued education: upper secondary school was a mere steppingstone for their future aspirations, upper secondary school was the logical way forward, and upper secondary school was plan b.

Clear aspirations: Almost half of the interviewees would fall into the first category. This was the only group that clearly saw education as something that was valuable for their future. These students would both identify as boys and girls, their parents would differ in terms of educational degree, but what most had in common was that education was a subject discussed at home. Students were aware of their parents' educational level and discussed further education and the future with them. This is what Reay (1998a) refers to as a familial habitus, which refers to the knowledge of what is expected of them. This group could be subdivided into two groups. Some would have clear aspirations for their future, they were goal oriented, and saw upper secondary school as one step forward towards that goal. Others were not sure of what they wanted to do when they grew up but still saw the value in education, in general. Many could see themselves going to university but were not sure what they wanted to study; but to them upper secondary school was the bare minimum. Students whose parents had a university degree also aimed for university, whereas other students aimed for at least the same education as their parents. These findings are interesting if we compare them to the table above, on how students value their education by their parents' educational level.

> **Maria:** You see, mom didn't go, and... yes like… do this because she didn't go to upper secondary school and stuff. That is my strength to just finish this, finish upper secondary school and University.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you feel like it motivates you to do…, to get further education because your mom didn't go?
>
> **Maria:** Æ[65], you know she's seen differently because she married an old man, and... because then they call her just, you know, a whore and something like that, and it's just, you know, I want to show people that, you know, she raised me well and she... æ.. and we are good. You know we, we are maybe better… than she. But still… yes.

Neither of Maria's parents had finished upper secondary school. For her, attaining a degree was a way to prove her family's worth. Maria was very aware of the sacrifice her mother had made for the greater good of the family. She said it hurt to hear what her mother had to go through, "*you know, she is doing this for her family, for us to have a better life, because she didn't want.., she doesn't want us to experience the same as she did, you know?"* (Maria). Her mother had clear aspirations for her daughter and encouraged her to attain a degree from a reputable upper secondary school. Such transmission of their own aspirations is what Ball et al. (2002) refer to as a "*transgenerational family script"*, where a clear vision has been instilled from early on.

For the students in this group, those who saw clear value in education, the role of parents is an important one. They were the student's role model or motivators, they would support their endeavours, be active participants in the child's school life, could facilitate a positive outlook on the value of education, and – in some cases – rescind issues of low emotional or behavioural engagement.

The next logical step: This leads us to the second theme, which is students who saw upper secondary school as the only logical way forward. What these students had in common is that they saw school as the next logical step forward, but not necessarily as a key to their future. It was just something expected. What these students had in common was a clear push from their parents to attain further education. They would not have a clear goal in mind or aspire for a certain career but were very aware of the fact that they would not get away with not attaining further education *because* of their parents.

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[65] Æ is a sound, similar to „you see" or „well", but often said in distress, or as a way to portray a difficult feeling or even minimising what comes next.

Researcher: When I say high school, what comes to mind? …Or upper secondary school?[66]

Greta: My mom and dad choosing... or you know, being angry because I couldn't get into any upper secondary school.

[later in interview]

Researcher: Do you think you'll go to university?

Greta: Yes

Researcher: Is that something that you want to do?

Greta: Yes, I find it very likely that my parents would not let me not to go to university.

(Greta)

The parents varied in terms of their educational level and had high aspirations for their children. This would have two outcomes: the student would acknowledge their parents' aspirations for them but feel as if they still had a leeway to write their own story and the students who felt as if the story was being written for them, as in Greta's case.

Further education is plan B: The third theme that emerged from the interviews were students who saw education as worthwhile, until something better came along. Education was merely a plan B, often to an unclear plan A. What these interviewees had in common was that they were all boys. Moreover, half of all the boys who were interviewed fell into this category. These boys all showed signs of low emotional and behavioural engagement, albeit manifested in different ways. A common repertoire throughout these nine interviews was an escape (or at least a way to seek something new), whether that was new people, new environment or simply just a change from their current situation. Most of the boys did not know what education their parents had achieved. Overall, education or the future was rarely discussed in their homes. They saw themselves as outsiders, had few or no friends in their school, struggled with getting help in school or at home, and, in their mind, high school was not something that one has to prepare for.

Researcher: When I say high school, what comes to mind?

I haven't started thinking about the future. […] I don't have time for that.

(Dávid)

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[66] Throughout the interviews I would use the Icelandic words *menntaskóli, fjölbrautarskóli* or *framhaldsskóli,* all referring to a slightly different type of upper secondary schools. The word used each time would echo how the student had referred to upper secondary school earlier in the interview.

No idea.

<div align="right">(Marek)</div>

I just don't think about high school

<div align="right">(Greg)</div>

The three boys here above were in their last or penultimate year of compulsory school. To them, further education is not something one has to plan for and is a decision one makes right around the time they absolutely must. This profile fits the description that Blöndal and Hafþórsson's (2018) refer to as *alienated* in their study on early school leavers. This group mainly consists of boys, and is characterised by behavioural, emotional, and cognitive disengagement, social isolation, and uncertainty about their chosen educational path.

In the quantitative part of this study, students were given the statement in the quantitative part of the study: "In Iceland, people like me <u>can</u> succeed", and options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This statement had a weak, positive correlation with the student's value in education, regardless of whether they were of Icelandic or foreign background (r=0.223[***] and r=0.380[***] respectively)[67].

Table 26: The difference in mean measuring the student's value in education by whether they believe people like them can succeed, shown for both Icelandic and foreign background.

	Icelandic background[***]			Foreign background[**]		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Agree	327	3.53	0.97	41	3.60	0.90
Disagree/neither nor	247	3.14	0.93	42	3.11	0.86

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p < 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

With the two measures being positively correlated, students who believed that people like them could succeed in Iceland scored higher on the scale that measured how they valued education. This applies to students, regardless of their background, and is statistically significant. What this measure encapsulates is perceived ideas of one's identity and being able to mirror that in people who are successful in Iceland. The difference was statistically significant between students of Icelandic, as well as foreign background, but the mean difference was even greater for the latter group. In this simple measure we cannot know for sure who exactly each student

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[67] * Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p < 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

perceives as *people like them*. A student might think about *people like them* in terms of their gender, their native background, or even their socio-economic status. Based on the quantitative data, the most prominent variable was gender.

Table 27: Chi-square test: Students thoughts on whether they believe people like them can succeed by gender. Here shown for students of both Icelandic and foreign background.

	Icelandic background*		Foreign background	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Agree	52.4%	62.8%	39.4%	56.2%
Disagree/neither nor	47.6%	37.2%	60.6%	43.8%
Total	250	309	33	48

* Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

We can see from the table above that over half of the students believed that most people like them could succeed. But there was one group that stood out: boys of foreign background. Only 39% of the boys of foreign background agreed to the statement that people like them could succeed in Iceland. Although the boys would not be explicit about the potential of succeeding or not succeeding in the interviews, this rings true in terms of the clear gender difference already mentioned.

If we go back to the interview, there was more to it than just being able to imagine a success in their future. The boys would also describe how they not only had an unclear idea about their future, but also how they were to get there. This touches upon a very important aspect and goes beyond the three themes we have covered thus far: the informative role of schools. If parents don't seem educationally oriented, do not completely understand the educational system, and do not have a point of reference, the school's informative role becomes even more profound.

> How I see high school, through movies and stuff like that, is way different from here in Iceland, it's a complete mess-up on my brain because I don't really understand the school system yet and how it works here.

> (Sam)

In fact, some of the students weren't even familiar with the Icelandic **word** for high school or upper secondary school, *menntaskóli, fjölbrautaskóli* or *framhaldsskóli*. Surely, they would all have in common that Icelandic was not their first language, and most had lived in the country for less than five years, but even still – if students aren't even familiar with the word for upper secondary education, how are they to actively engage in a conversation about it?

If we go back to the quantitative data, we can see that students who feel as if they have had enough information about their upper secondary options from their school, see more value in their education than those who haven't, with the results being very similar for the students of Icelandic and foreign background.

Table 28: Cognitive engagement: Difference in mean in value in education for the student's future, by whether they felt as if they had had enough information from their school to make up their mind regarding further education. Here shown for both students of Icelandic and foreign background.

	Icelandic background***			Foreign background**		
	N	Mean	Std dev.	N	Mean	Std dev.
Not enough information	325	3.04	0.92	47	3.08	0.94
Enough information	299	3.70	0.91	42	3.67	0.85

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

This doesn't necessarily mean that schools do not give their students information. What this measures is *relative* knowledge: how much the students *feel* as if they know and do not mean how much they actually know about their options. In fact, during the interviews with the students of foreign background, it was apparent that students from the same school could have very different knowledge of the resources available to them. Resources, such as school guidance counsellor, were an obvious source of information to some students when others did not seem to be aware of them. Other resources would be in-class interest inventory tests, school projects on upper secondary school options or introductions from upper secondary schools. These two excerpts are from two students who live in a village where there is no upper secondary school. They both attend the same school where there is no on-site guidance counsellor. They were asked if there was someone they could speak to if they needed to help them choose a school, their major or get information about what grades they needed:

> **Rita:** Erm… yes it comes, comes erm some woman who was helping us. Yes, like interests and what schools you can, you know... what's best for you.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, and did you take some tests or?
>
> **Rita:** yes, and then we got an interview.

<div align="right">(Rita)</div>

Sap: I could talk to my form teacher, I could try to talk to my friends in [town where he wants to study] and they can talk to the teachers.

Researcher: Mmm I see. Yes, do you get any sort of introduction or something from the school?

Sap: No.

<div align="right">(Sap)</div>

Rita's answer was in line with the answers from most other students in her school, who either had already received some information and help make up their minds or thought they would later meet with someone who could give them more information. Sap, on the other hand, was not aware of any introductions or source of help available to him. Schools do therefore have to make sure that all students are aware of the help available to them. For example, whether there is access to school councillors or offers of personalised help, perhaps through school projects or in-school assignments. In addition, what is no less important is the specific time they are introduced of their post-compulsory options. Based on the interviews, if students had gotten an introduction in schools, or knew they would receive one soon, this would most often take place in year 10, and in some cases, in the very last months of year 10. This does not give students much leeway to explore their options.

Researcher: Did you get any help from your school?

George: [laughs] No! Or you know... not really, no.

Researcher: No?

George: No, not really.

Researcher: would you have wanted any help from the school?

George: Yes. Yeah, kind of. Because, you know, I hate it so much, the system in Iceland, they don't let you know anything. And [you have to] find out yourself. Because in [native country], Ok, these are your grades, pick one of these schools and you'll get in. Here it's: ok, you have to choose before you receive your final grades, see if you can get in to the school, [if you] can't get in, ok, we'll choose for you. You know?

George's explanation of how he feels as if he is having to blindly choose his future is a theme that came up over and over again in the interviews. In George's case, it was whether his grades were good enough for the school he wanted to get into, and as mentioned before, he had settled for a *'lesser'* school and line of study, than he had aspired to because he was certain he would not have the grades for it. For others, choosing their options blindly, would take the form of not knowing whether the upper secondary school they are interested in offered a dormitory or other form of accommodation or whether there were particular schools that teach the subject

they were interested in or how they could study for a profession they aspired for. The latter was in fact a particularly recurrent theme; students even asked me if I knew the answer.

Furthermore, interviewees described how they would be or had been introduced to their post-compulsory options in their final year of compulsory school. With such an arrangement, post-compulsory options are not treated as a major life event that one has to plan for. This is the case, in particular, if students do not live close to an upper secondary school. This becomes even more salient in cases where students do not have older siblings who have an experience of the Icelandic school system or parents who fully understand it.

Schools are meant to play a role in guiding students towards their next steps, in part via the dissemination of information about students' options. If schools assume that students have prior access to knowledge and information, they will leave some students behind in uncharted waters rather than tailoring their resources to individual students' needs (McDonough, 1996; Reay, 1998a).

What we have covered in this chapter is how seeing the value in education is closely linked to the student's engagement across other dimensions as well as their future ambition. Furthermore, having parents who are vocal and supportive of the student's future aspirations fosters a more positive outlook on the value of education. But not all students are so lucky to have parents who are vocal about education, for whatever reason. This does not mean that parents are to blame when students who do not see the value in further education. It rather places an emphasis on the role of the schools or society as a whole in such cases. If one chain in the link is broken or weak, other links should be reinforced for the student to truly blossom and reach their potential.

6.4 Conclusion

Before we move on to the last findings chapter about educational aspirations, this chapter helps us understand the level and nature of school engagement and how it may differ between students of Icelandic and foreign backgrounds. The quantitative data of my study has given us a chance to compare students who are of Icelandic and foreign background, whilst the qualitative data gives us a chance to further delve into how school engagement may appear to those who are of foreign background. What we have seen here is that engagement is a combination of the interaction between the student, their surroundings, as well as the curriculum (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez, 1989).

The main findings from the quantitative part of this study are that the difference between the two groups, those of Icelandic and foreign background, do not appear to be that significant on the surface. There was not a statistically significant difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background in terms of behavioural or cognitive engagement, and on the emotional dimension students only differed in terms of their belongingness; students of Icelandic background reported greater belongingness.

The tension between the quantitative and qualitative data emphasises the importance of unpacking each dimension of engagement so it includes varied experiences. When we take each dimension apart, we are able to understand the ways that students vary by background, where students of foreign background encounter limits and barriers that are perhaps invisible to natives, sometimes resulting in them feeling excluded or becoming recluse, a lived experience that may not be easy to capture in a standardised manner

First of all, the findings show how engagement is a dynamic concept, and is the product of the interaction and contribution made by the student, their peers, the institution, and its members (Lamborn, Bron, Mounts, Steinberg, 1992; Louis and Smith, 1992; Anderman, 2003; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012). In some cases, there was a clear difference between schools, or across classrooms and staff members.

When we looked into behavioural engagement, the dimension of school engagement that measures whether the student follows school norms and rules, the majority considered themselves to be engaged, regardless of whether they were of Icelandic or foreign background. The difference was mainly between boys and girls, a trend that was very similar for students of either background. It isn't until we begin to look closely into the ways that students of foreign background describe their level of engagement that the picture becomes clearer. When we

unpacked behavioural engagement, we saw two main issues arise: the limitations for the students to engage and fully participate in the classroom on one hand and problems regarding homework on the other. Both of which share the same running theme, where a language barrier was impeding them from fully participating in school. Although both boys and girls describe how they would sometimes be reluctant to ask for help in the classroom, it was the boys who seemed to struggle the most. We learned that some of the boys refrained from asking for help, as they felt as if the help they needed was far greater than they could get. They described how they did not want to be *that guy,* who took up all the time; yet they showed signs of relief when offered additional help. Otherwise, they felt as if they were screaming into a void and no one would help; as a result, they exhibited learned helplessness and decided not to ask for help to being with. Even when they did, some of the students described how they didn't find help useful, as the explanation would all be in Icelandic, the very source of their confusion. What the boys were essentially describing is how they felt that the help provided from their school was limited, non-accessible, or simply not for them.

Problems regarding homework was, by the same token, essentially a language barrier, even on behalf of their parents. Students who did not have an Icelandic parent (were of mixed parentage), older siblings, or could not get help from friends, described how they could not get help from their parents because it would require more work to translate the assignment into their parents' native language. This was not a gendered issue, as both boys and girls described how they had to face the same hurdles.

A similar trend was to be found with emotional engagement. This second dimension of school engagement measures three aspects: mirroring, the sense of being able to show one's true self; belongingness, the feeling of belonging to one's environment; and reciprocity, the feeling of community at the institutional level, both towards the school as well as its members. There was not a significant difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background, except when measuring belongingness. Overall, most students, regardless of background, felt as if they belonged to their school environment, although those of foreign background less so, on average. In the earlier chapter on ethnic identity and language, we also saw the importance of friendships and being able to extend relationships outside the school grounds. Again, we saw the importance of socialising with school mates outside the school grounds. Students who managed to extend school-based friendships outside the school grounds showed, on average, higher level of belongingness towards their school, regardless of background. Furthermore, students of foreign background who did not socialise with their school mates outside of school showed lower level of belongingness than their Icelandic peers in the same situation.

Based on the quantitative data, there was not a gendered difference amongst the students of foreign background. This was not the case in the interviews. Half of the boys of foreign background told me that they had few or no friends in their current school. Some of the boys described their loneliness in school whilst others masked their loneliness by describing how they were friends with *everyone*, yet close to no one in school. It is that latter group that is worrisome, as they may come across as relatively engaged during school hours, mostly participating in sports during breaktime and recess. However, they describe closed social circles among the other children that they do not have access to, making it impossible to extend these school-based friendships beyond the school ground.

What both the quantitative and qualitative data tell us is the importance of friendships, if they are to feel as if they belong in their school. Interestingly, this does not only refer to friendships within the school, but also stresses the importance of extending these friendships outside the school ground. We must find ways to help these teens who are of foreign background, the boys in particular, to extend the friendships they make in school outside the school grounds, to connect the school and home. This could be done through means of extra-curricular activities that the boys find easy to partake in within the school ground.

Finally, we looked at the cognitive aspect of school engagement, the dimension that refers to the students learning *strategies and effort,* and whether the student sees *value* in their education. On the interplay between strategies and success, we encountered two main groups of students with some falling in-between. To most of my interviewees, they considered success to be within their control and the fruit of their labour and hard work. The other group would consider their future or events to be something that happened to them due to an ambiguous external force. They described how they worried about *losing interest* or how they could all of a sudden *not be bothered* anymore. The third group, the in-betweeners, is the group that requires attention. This is the group that believed their future options was a testament of their hard work yet, at the same time, they felt as if (no matter how hard they worked) it was not reflected in their educational outcome. This message was purported through a lack of academic Icelandic. The result was that they believed they must be lazy, stupid, or simply the hard work was not worth the effort.

We have further learned the impact of parental involvement when it comes to seeing the value in upper secondary education. For most of my interviewees, going to upper secondary school was a steppingstone for their future, an important step towards success. Students aimed to reach for at least the same educational level as their parent; some aimed higher. Some of the students had clear future aspirations, whilst others had a vague idea of what they wanted to do.

Regardless, they all believed that, in order to succeed, they had few additional years of schooling ahead of them. The second group considered upper secondary school as the next logical step, but not necessarily key for their future. What these students had in common was having parents who were vocal about the students' next steps and who gave them a clear push towards upper secondary school. The parents' educational level varied, but the aspirations they had for their children would often exceed their own education. The third group was a group of boys who all considered upper secondary education as a plan B, often to a vague plan A. Education was rarely on the agenda in their house, and they would often not know their parents' educational level. This was a group of boys who considered them as outsiders and struggled with schoolwork, both in school and at home.

What the cognitive engagement chapter taught us is the importance that the students to receive help to navigate the educational system (McDonough, 1996). Some students were not even familiar with the Icelandic *words* for upper secondary school making it even more difficult to seek information about their options. Schools would, in most cases, offer some help and give the students information. But this would often take place very late in the semester or, in some cases, students were not aware of the resources available to them.

When it comes to seeing the value in education, these findings suggest, that there are different aspects of school engagement that are interrelated for students of Icelandic and foreign background. For students of foreign background, all three facets of emotional engagement proved to be more strongly correlated with seeing the value in education, than the other dimensions. This means that feeling of being able to show one's true self (mirroring), that you belonged (belongingness) and a feeling of community at the institutional level; and trust towards its members (reciprocity) is of particular importance for students of foreign background. For students of Icelandic background, however, behavioural engagement, learning strategies, and effort put in the learning process played a greater role.

These findings further emphasise why we must think about schooling in a wider sense. Rather than focusing on whether the students have finished a task on time or acquired the knowledge and skills they ought to, we should rather ask: What sort of messages are signalled to students in terms of inclusion or exclusion? This chapter has shown us the importance of the school systems and how they must promote an open society, build bridges between the school and home, and recognise the fact that there may be students and parents who do not understand the very basics of the Icelandic educational system. In the next and final findings chapter, we will look at educational aspirations.

7 Aspirations

In the two prior chapters, we examined ethnic identity and perceived ability to speak the Icelandic language, and various measures and experiences of school engagement. In this chapter we will join together everything we have learned thus far and delve more deeply into the topic of educational aspirations. We will examine both immediate educational aspirations as well as the students' goals for the future.

To aid our understanding of educational aspirations, how it may vary between students of Icelandic and foreign background, and how it appeared in my conversations with students of foreign background, I will continue relying on both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered for the purpose of this study. The quantitative findings are, as before, based on data collected from students of Icelandic and foreign background, whereas students of foreign background were the sole focal point of the qualitative interviews.

In this chapter, I will introduce four case studies to help us understand the complexity of aspirations. Each case embodies a topic already discussed but gives us a chance for a deeper understanding and how engagement, identity, and language are interwoven with the students hopes and dreams for the future. We have already met these four students through excerpts and descriptions of the prior chapters. Now we get to understand their aspirations through their own voice. I will still refer to other participants we have met thus far, but they will take a smaller role than before.

The first section will briefly discuss educational aspirations in general and how they may vary depending on the student's background, their age as well as the difference between boys and girls. The second section will discuss the relationship between educational aspirations and school engagement, as well as alternative ways to understand students who may not aspire for further education after compulsory school. The third section looks at the role of parents, as well as where the student resides. The fourth and last section provides a statistical model where we delve into the potential differences in educational aspirations between students of Icelandic and foreign backgrounds.

7.1 Educational aspirations

Educational aspirations can be hopes and dreams, wishes, ambitions, and goals. Aspirations can be one or all of the above (Lent et al., 1994; Rojewski, 2005). In this study, we encompass all of these forms of aspirations, short-term educational aspirations and long-term vision for the distant future.

As explained in Chapter 4, the main dependent variable is the students' immediate plans after compulsory education. This variable was originally measured on a scale of 1-10 but has been dichotomised for the purpose of this study. This new variable thus measures either certainty about progressing to upper secondary school or uncertainty about the next educational steps.

Table 29: This table shows the make-up of the new bivariate variable that indicates students' certainty of whether they are planning on further education right after compulsory education.

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	%	N	%
Not sure whether I will undertake more education	245	35.8	48	49.5
Certain I will undertake more education	440	64.2	49	50.5

What stands out in table 29 is how two thirds of students of Icelandic background are certain that their next step after compulsory school will be any form of upper secondary school. This is not the case for students of foreign background, where half of students weren't so sure whether they wanted to go to upper secondary school right after compulsory school. This association between background and certainty of going to upper secondary school was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 6.83$, p< 0.01).

When comparing students by their reported gender identity, there was also a difference, for both groups respectively. For students of Icelandic background, the difference was somewhat less distinct, yet significant; over half of the boys were certain about undertaking more studies after compulsory school ($\chi^2(1) = 21.99$, p< 0.001). This difference is sharper for the students of foreign background. In fact, less than half, 39%, of the boys of foreign background were certain about wanting to undertake further studies after compulsory school, compared with 62.7% of the girls ($\chi^2(1) = 5.13$, p< 0.05).

Table 30: Chi-square: How likely students are to undertake further studies by gender. Here shown for both students of Icelandic and foreign background.

| | Icelandic background[***] | | Foreign background[*] | |
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Not sure	44.2%	26.7%	61.0%	37.3%
Certain	55.8%	73.3%	39.0%	62.7%
Total	301	359	41	51

* Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

As previously stated, gender differences were evident in the interviews with the students of foreign background. Overall, the girls seemed to have given their future a lot more thought than the boys. We've already seen how boys showed signs of less school engagement on many of the dimensions and a smaller percentage of boys believed that people like *them* could succeed. We've furthermore learned how a group of students, all of whom boys, did not see the value in foresight or planning for further education, and education was a plan B to an indistinct plan A. It is this gendered aspect, among other issues that came up throughout the course of this research, that will be unravelled in the following sections. We will be introduced to four students who each represent an element of what we have covered thus far. Two of the students, a boy and a girl, presented clear aspirations but faced different obstacles in their quest. The other two students, also a boy and a girl, were less clear about their future intentions, yet for very different reasons.

7.2 School engagement and aspirations

This study strives to understand the aspirations of students at a given moment in time. This means that we strive to understand their direction, but their destination remains unknown. Focusing on students in their last years of compulsory school, we get to understand what tools they have to create the road map towards their aspired future, and which ones they may be lacking. What is the student's idealistic aspiration (Hauser and Anderson, 1991), where does their realistic aspirations take them (Wicht, 2016), and is there a difference between the two (Haller, 1968; Rojewski, 2005)? In the earlier chapters we learned, both through the quantitative data as well as the qualitative data, the internal dialogue that often took place: Who am I? What am I good at? What methods do I employ to understand a given topic at school? Am I part of my wider surroundings? In this section, we strive to understand that dialogue further and how that inner monologue may affect their aspirations.

In this section, with the help of the two boys, George and Greg, we will look closely at the interplay between school engagement and educational aspirations. George had clear aspirations for the future, whereas Greg did not see the value in thinking about the future. In some respects, the boys' stories are atypical but in other respect they described a feeling echoed by other interviewees. I will begin by introducing the two boys, giving an overview of how they feel and how they envision their future. We will then get snippets from their story throughout this section, as well as further explanation and examples from other interviewees.

7.2.1 *"Sometimes I just feel like a complete idiot, you know?"*

In both prior chapters we met George, a year 10 student in a large school in the capital area. He was of mixed parentage, his mother from Iceland and his father from a Western European country. He had a clear dual identity, yet he also explained how he was sometimes teased on his ethnic background, where any negative attributes were contributed to his *foreignness*. When asked about his native language, he referred to the one he was not surrounded by, suggesting a feeling of inadequacy of speaking the language around him and thus ineffectively communicating with others. His response was quite telling of his main struggles and how it tainted his learning experience and future outlook. Simply put, language is the root of his problem, and not for a lack of trying. He told me that he wanted a summer job at a nursing home, because it would force him to speak professionally at all times, i.e. speaking Icelandic without resorting to English. He tried to think of ways to improve his Icelandic on his own.

The language barrier was also evident in the way he described his school engagement. George ticked most boxes on the school engagement scale. He tried different strategies to understand the material at hand. For example, when he could not read the textbooks in Icelandic, he researched the topics in English; he clearly saw the value in education; he had a group of friends with whom he described clear attachment. He was lacking in terms of behavioural engagement. As an example, George did not ask his teachers for help, despite having a lot of questions, "*otherwise I would always be asking*", he explained. He wanted help, but George did not want to stand out or be considered different. He was already being teased about his background, given the message of being different, and he was very aware of his own perceived lack of language proficiency. Therefore, self-identifying the areas where he was lacking was too much for him. As a result, he did not fare well in school academically and began to believe that he wasn't '*smart enough*', that he was *'lazy'*, or that he was a '*complete idiot'*.

This feeling was not limited to the classroom, but he also described feeling like this at home. George lived with his father and a sibling; his mother passed away a few years prior to the interview. At home, George told me he spoke his father's native language as well as with his sibling. George's father is well educated and seems to do well in his profession but does not appear to be very active in his son's learning. His older sibling is, according to George, "*crazy smart*", and as a consequence he sees himself as less academically able:

> "They are[68]… I'm like… erm… [laughs] I wouldn't say the stupid one in the family but like they are like higher [sic] than me, you see. And, and I acknowledge that."

George explained how he found it difficult to finish his homework and did not feel like he could ask his father for help because he didn't want to disappoint him, a feeling derived from his perceived intellectual inferiority.

George described an insurmountable wall he felt he had to climb, only to be knocked down every time he received his grades. The only logical explanation was his 'intellectual disadvantage' or 'laziness'. Being close to graduating compulsory school with such baggage only caused him to worry and stress about the future. When asked about the future, George replies:

> It's so.., it's so…, there is just so much that can happen in these 10 years. Erm and if all goes well then hopefully [I am] in a good place but there is so much that can go wrong. There's so, it can go so incredibly wrong and I just have to.. you know.. life is just obstacles and then [you have to] get through it and I just have to study

---

[68] Given how many distinctive features George has, to preserve his anonymity the gender of his sibling will remain undisclosed.

myself [sic] through it and hopefully I get to a good place. […] It's just, I know there is so much that can happen that I get stressed when I think about it.

<div align="right">(George)</div>

Surely, George's loss of his mother influenced him and his outlook for the future. He worried about his father and sibling – but he also feared that he would lose his motivation *"just boom, done, can't anymore, burn out"*. The truth was, fear, stress, and worry about the future were feelings often expressed by the interviewees, mainly the boys. They most often worried that their grades were not good enough and that their school performance would affect their future.

Researcher: How do you feel when you think about the future?

Gabriel: Worry.

Researcher: Why do you worry?

Gabriel: Maybe because I can't do to things I want to do. For example, I can't go to college.

Marcus: Stressful

Researcher: What is it mostly that you find stressful?

Marcus: Just that I will get older and… responsibility and much more, like buying a house and something.

Researcher: When you look at the grown-ups around you, do you think it is hard?

Marcus: Yes.

Karim: [hesitates] erm... sometimes afraid. [If] anything goes wrong.

Researcher: What... like what could go wrong?

Karim: I don't know...

Standardised methods of evaluation in school, signalled that their best wasn't good enough; the student isn't being met where they are. George described how he felt like his hard work went unrewarded, overlooking the fact that *attending school* in a second language is already hard work. Many of the boys were in fact working with three languages at the same time: Icelandic, their native language, and English (as a bridge between the two).

Riddled with anxiety about their current performance, students get the sense that they are being left behind. They must work with the same tools as their Icelandic counterparts, but these tools are not yielding the same results. And in their mind, it must be their fault. The language barrier is a symptom of deeper rooted issues, which beg the question: how can we truly meet the student where they are?

Some of the boys dealt with stress by avoiding it. Ivan, cited earlier, told me how he worried about his grades. The way he dealt with it was to simply try not to think about it. In fact, this was a tactic used by some of the boys:

Marek: I'm not thinking about the future now. […] It's too difficult.
Researcher: Yeah? Do you know why you find it difficult?
Marek: [I] Feel like I don't know what to do next year.

This avoidance behaviour is a way for the student to escape difficult thoughts and feelings. When you escape the issue, you don't have to deal with, in the hopes the problem dissipates, goes away or never existed at all. This brings us to Greg. We have already gotten to know Greg through excerpts in previous chapters but will now further look into his story.

Greg, a year 9 in a small village in the rural part of Iceland, is a first-generation immigrant from an Eastern European country. He had lived most of his life in the capital area but moved to the village few years earlier. He was not happy with having to move from the capital. He lived with both of his parents and two younger siblings with whom he speaks his native language. Greg is White and he speaks Icelandic fluently. Greg wasn't sure what form of education his parents had finished but thought they had at least finished high school. His parents were factory workers, like most of the other villagers.

Greg came across as very disengaged in school. He did not see the value in education. He maintained that all subjects except for sociology were boring; sociology was "a*t least not as boring*" as the other subjects. He was closed off and struggled in terms of maintaining friendships. However, interestingly enough, if we use the school engagement framework to understand Greg's attitude towards school, he showed signs of behavioural engagement. He told me how he asked his teacher for help when he needed it and got help with his homework from his parents. He, however, did not want me to think that he was interested at all in schoolwork and mentioned on a few occasions how he slept during school hours and hated being woken up by the teacher. Even more so, Greg was reluctant to name any of his strengths, in school or outside, and simply admitted to being good at basic human functions, such as "*sleep a lot*" and "*eat a lot*".

His life revolved around computer games; he spent a lot of time playing online. This caused a tension between Greg and his parents, who seemed to worry about school, his computer games, and his ideas about the future. Greg said he wanted to move back to the capital. He understood that getting a job and renting on his own would be difficult. Thus, he

told me that the only way he could live in the capital was to go to school and live in a dormitory. His parents were not too keen on this idea, as they worried that he might fall in with wrong crowd, a group of boys he had known when he was younger. He told me how some of them were getting into trouble and that he felt as if he was missing out on something.

Greg, whose descriptions bordered on an aspiration for a delinquent future, was setting up a front of someone who wasn't preoccupied by whether he did well or not at school, so I couldn't see the real Greg. In fact, Greg's interview was interesting for all that he did not allow himself to admit and what was left unsaid. Greg played the role of someone cool and collected, but at the same time he appeared reserved and lonely. It wasn't until the interview was over when what went unsaid was revealed in an interview with his classmate. There, another student, without being prompted, revealed how Greg had been bullied by another classmate.

Unlike George, Greg did not describe difficulties with schoolwork or the Icelandic language. He was, however, very isolated and lonely. He maintained some relationship with his former classmates in the capital but had not managed to make a connection with anyone in the village where he lived; he clearly did not feel like he belonged. Earlier we talked about how George was faced with an unsurmountable wall, where the language was holding him back. In Greg's case, he had built that wall himself, between him and the uncertainty of the future. Allowing yourself to hope and aspire of a future is an act of vulnerability where you are exposing your innermost dreams. If you never dream, you never fail, a sentiment palpable in Greg's interview, where his dreams would never take him further than the *present*. These hopes evolved mostly around computer games, which almost seemed to be Greg's world of safety. When I asked him about what motivated him in life he replied: *"Just win more and if you have ten kills, then win the next game with fifteen and then you have 17 and... you always work your way up".* Greg refers to a computer game and essentially described how he was motivated by becoming a better player by gaining *"kills"*. This is where he could tangibly see the fruit of his labour: if he had more *kills*, he must be improving his skills. He could see the *now* and he didn't envision what was beyond; he applied that philosophy to the importance of education:

> If I knew everything that I have to be able to, I would quit school. So, if I had to learn something, then I would just go [to school]. […] Yes, I'm halfway through year 10. Just see what I have to be able to do at the end [of the school year] and finish that quickly and then quit

We have already discussed, how many of the boys described their worries about the future, some to the extent that they didn't want to think about it. Greg was perhaps the most extreme

case. The digital world was where he got an immediate positive response for the work he put in, where he was able to finish tasks that he found manageable. That was his comfort zone. When I asked him about how he felt when he thought about the future, he replied:

> **Greg**: Depends on whether I do well in the computer or not. If I do well in the computer, then I feel good and think I will succeed
>
> **Researcher:** I see, like succeed in life?
>
> **Greg**: Yes
>
> **Researcher**: Yeah ok, and when it doesn't go well?
>
> **Greg:** Then I get frustrated that I am bad at the games.
>
> **Researcher:** Yes, and is that in relation to the future?
>
> **Greg:** Yes.

To Greg, the video games represented his potential for accomplishments, but he could not see a future past the present. Greg described limited assistance from his school regarding his next academic steps; this is similar to George, who in an earlier chapter described a confusing educational system where he had been left alone to navigate his options. George had a fairly clear idea of what he wanted to do in the future, either to become a psychologist or a psychiatrist. However, coming to that conclusion was not simple. Since he had received limited help from his school, he relied quite heavily on his friends in terms of what he should study at upper secondary level, in addition to having done research on it himself. George told me how there was a school, and a line of education taught in English, that he dreamed of, but attending that school wasn't *realistic*, he perceived, due to his grades. Desperately trying to navigate a system he did not quite understand, he had come to the conclusion that the school of his dreams was out of his reach, so he chose a school he thought he could realistically get in with his grades. This was not, however, a decision made with the help of his teachers or parents, but the choice made by a student who was constantly getting the message from his environment that he was not doing well enough. As he did not reap the benefits of his hard work, he believed himself to be stupid.

George and Greg each represent the opposite end of a spectrum with regards to thinking and planning for the future. Whilst George tried to plan every single step, Greg did not think beyond the present, with most of the boys somewhere in between. Just like Greg, many of the boys thought about their future as an extension of their current hobbies, yet without committing to it to the fullest. It was more like their wildest dream rather than their clear goal for the future. Most of them thought they were quite good, and enjoyed participating in their respective hobby,

but very few had a clear path in mind as to how they could make that into a career. Others let themselves dream but did not want to close any doors, to keep alternatives available:

> **Pavel:** I also think it is good to work, you know, I think I will profit more from being a mechanical engineer later some time.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, are you more thinking about the future?
>
> **Pavel:** Erm yes. But I want the most to be a professional football player you know. That is my _main goal,_ you see.

<div align="right">(Pavel, underlined for emphasis)</div>

Ali, who also wanted to become an athlete but was planning on becoming a lawyer, described the same idea with the analogy "_one hand cannot clap",_ and by that he meant that he needs to have a wholistic plan for his future if he is to succeed.

Now, regardless of whether the boys I talked to have a plan or not, it is important to know what one's options are to be able to envision the future. Using Greg and George as an example, they were both at crossroads where they were not sure about the next steps. They showed different level of school engagement across the three dimensions. However, school engagement is not merely an intrapersonal trait, but also depends on the contribution of the institution, as well as the role of parents and peers (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, Steinberg, 1992; Louis and Smith, 1992; Anderman, 2003; Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012). Neither of Greg or George felt as if they had received enough information about the schools and other post compulsory options from their school, with Greg saying that he thought they might get a presentation "_in the future"._ The main difference between the two was perhaps that George had a strong group of friends who supported him when he needed help and when he felt as if there was no one to turn to. He didn't get help from his school nor his family, so his friends stepped in and helped him with figuring out a direction: what to study, where to study and more importantly, they were going there with him. Greg did not have any friends to support him, nor were his parents able to sufficiently help him as they were trying to navigate an educational system they were not familiar with. This was clear by the fact that Greg talked about how he had discussed the option of living at a dormitory in the capital area, where there are no dormitories. He was trying to navigate a world in the dark.

7.2.2 _Understanding the perceived value of education: does education pave the way for work or is it in the way of work?_

In Chapter 3, the four-tier educational system in Iceland was explained, where the second tier consists of compulsory education for students aged six to sixteen. This means that by the age

of sixteen, students stand at crossroads deciding on whether they want to take on further education, what they want to study, and then they must make plans accordingly. The last years of compulsory education not only take place at a delicate time of transition, but also these years are the last chance for policy makers to have access to every single youngster in the country, as the state is bound by law to provide their education and accommodate them according to their needs (Lög um grunnskóla nr 91/2008).

The choice these adolescents are faced with by the age of 16 is essentially whether they want to attain further education or enter the labour market. Earlier in this chapter we learned that 64.2% of students of Icelandic background were certain about wanting to attend upper secondary school right after graduating from compulsory school, compared with 50.5% of those of foreign background. We also learned that this was gendered, but only 39% of the boys of foreign background were certain about their plans, compared with 62.7% of girls. In the quantitative part of the study, the students were further asked about the appeal of a prospective job opportunity, rather than attaining an upper secondary diploma. Students were asked to respond to the statement *"I want to leave school as soon as I can find a job"*. This question does not tell us *why* the student might want to quit school, as the reason could stem from a push from the educational path: becoming disengaged or a perceived need to work.

There was not a statistically significant difference between students of foreign background and Icelandic background, where roughly 30% of students of either background agreed to the sentiment (χ^2 (1) = 0.093, p= 0.760). However, as table 31 reveals, there was a statistically significant difference between boys and girls, regardless of their background (Icelandic background, χ^2 (1) = 41.167, p< 0.001; foreign background (χ^2 (1) = 5.152, p< 0.05).

Table 31: Chi-square test: students were asked whether they wanted to leave school as soon as they found a job, by gender. Here shown for both students of Icelandic and foreign background.

I want to leave school as soon as I can find a job

| | Icelandic background[***] | | | | Foreign background[*] | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Agree	112	41.9	61	18.2	15	40.5	9	18.4
Disagree	155	58.1	275	81.6	22	59.5	40	81.6

*Statistically significant (χ^2< 0.05); **Statistically significant (χ^2< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (χ^2< 0.001)

In fact, the difference between boys and girls was very similar for those of Icelandic and foreign background; just over 40% of the boys agreed to the statement, compared with 18% of the girls.

As we can see, from aforementioned numbers, quite a large percentage of the students agreed to wanting to quit school as soon as they could find a job, most of them boys. In the earlier chapters we have already covered the gendered disparity in engagement and valuing education. To further delve into the issue and understand the characteristics of those who wanted to quit school, and those who did not, let's look at both groups' school engagement.

Table 32: Difference in mean in school engagement between those who want to quit school as soon as they can find a job and those who don't, students of Icelandic background

I want to leave school as soon as I can find a job

		Icelandic background				
		Agree			Disagree	
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Emotional engagement						
Mirroring[***]	180	3.42	1.00	434	3.82	0.86
Belongingness[***]	180	3.48	0.83	431	3.95	0.66
Reciprocity[***]	179	3.12	0.83	434	3.57	0.78
Behavioural engagement						
Behavioural[***]	181	3.45	0.85	432	4.15	0.69
Cognitive engagement						
Strategies[***]	184	2.95	0.72	431	3.46	0.75
Value[***]	183	3.11	0.84	435	3.67	0.86

[*]Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); [**]Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); [***]Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Table 33: Difference in mean in school engagement between those who want to quit school as soon as they can find a job and those who don't, students of foreign background

		Foreign background				
		Agree			Disagree	
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Emotional engagement						
Mirroring	23	3.47	1.01	62	3.60	0.98
Belongingness	25	3.41	0.83	61	3.65	0.85
Reciprocity	24	3.18	0.81	64	3.51	0.76
Behavioural engagement						
Behavioural	22	3.78	0.72	64	4.04	0.69
Cognitive engagement						
Strategies	23	3.27	0.84	64	3.44	0.71
Value	25	3.38	0.69	63	3.55	0.86

[*]Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); [**]Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); [***]Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Tables 32 and 33 give us a breakdown of all three dimensions of school engagement by background. If we begin with the students of Icelandic background (table 32), we can see that on every single dimension, students who agreed to wanting to quit school and get a job, scored statistically significantly lower than those who disagreed with the statement, across all three dimensions of engagement. Therefore, the students who reported that they wanted to leave school as soon as they could find a job were less emotionally engaged, meaning that they did not feel as they could see themselves in others in school (mirroring), belonged to their school (belongingness), and reported less trust towards their institution and its members (reciprocity). Perhaps unsurprisingly they also reported less behavioural engagement, the dimension measuring whether the student complies to school rules and norms, they score lower on their learning strategies and whether they see the value in education. What is striking, is when we move on to the second table, we can see that this does not apply to students of foreign background.

For students of foreign background (table 33) there is not a statistically significant difference between those who want to quit school to work and those who want to stay on the educational path. One reason could be the small sample size, however, if we compare the mean difference, we can see it only ranges from 0.13-0.34 point, whereas for students of Icelandic background the mean difference between the two groups ranges from 0.40-0.77 points. This indicates that, for students of foreign background, the two groups are very similar in terms of school engagement. Even more importantly, if we focus on the students who answered that they wanted to quit school and start working, the students of foreign background scored, on average, higher on the dimensions of school engagement compared with their Icelandic counterparts on all accounts except belongingness. This further emphasises the importance to specifically understand the push and pull factors from the educational path for those who are of foreign background, as well as the perceived opportunities they might have. We got this depth of understanding from the interviews.

Is it enough to value education and aspire?

Hart (2016) defines aspirations as "future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations" (p.326), yet we must also strive to understand the freedom the individual perceives they have. To understand how interviewees perceived their opportunities and priorities regarding the future, they were provided with a short vignette followed by questions. The vignette tells the story of Alex, a fictional character, and financial hardships Alex and their family have been going through due to their father's recent unemployment. Alex is a Year 10

compulsory school student who aims to go to university at some point in the future. Given their parents' situation they are contemplating whether they should delay going to upper secondary school for a year or two to work to help their parents financially. First, the interviewees were asked questions about the hypothetical *Alex*, gradually moving the conversation closer to home[69]. This technique was a useful way to get the student to talk freely about a potentially sensitive topic but also to understand the student's thoughts on working versus going to school, understand their determination and value in education but above all, whether there a limit to their plans for education extended beyond compulsory school?

When analysing the responses to the vignette, three themes emerged, as to how they evaluated the importance and role of education for their future:

a) Education creates future opportunities, and one must first think about themselves before they can help others;

b) Opportunistic ideas about the next steps, with no clear goal to work towards;

c) Family is of most importance; therefore, financial issues of the *present* should be dealt with *now*.

What distinguishes the first group is how they saw education as the *key* for their future. All talked about the importance of education and how they would be much better fit to help their family once they had finished their education and gotten a better job. George explained the importance of the *correct* order, in his opinion:

> I would go to school. It's better for the future, in every possible way. Erm.. I would then just try to diminish the damage as much as I could and then I have gotten, erm.. older and hopefully I get a good job and then, then the damage has possibly become as small as it could be and then I just fix that damage. Just... with money. […]
>
> (George)

He then explains what would happen if his priorities were the other way around, where he would work for a year or two and then get education:

> Erm and if I would try to help them as much as I could, you know, not up to the point where I would have a job, real job, not like summer job where you would like 1600 kronas[70] per hour, that's nothing for grown-ups of course.
>
> (George)

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[69] Please refer to appendix 10.10. to read the vignette.
[70] 1600 kronas is, when this is written, equivalent to £8.90, slightly above mininum hourly rate for a 15 year old (see for example https://www.vr.is/media/6105/launataxtar-januar-2020.pdf and https://efling.is/lagmarkstekjur-fyrir-fullt-starf/?lang=en)

What George has explained here is seeing the value in education as well as setting a target for the future and aiming towards that target, not just the next couple of years. Overall, many of my interviewees could relate to the main character's (Alex) struggles, for different reasons. Some could relate to being at crossroads, not knowing what to do next. Others assumed that Alex was an immigrant, which further emphasised the importance for them to attain a good education, reflecting on the same importance for themselves. Yet, another group of students told me how they believed they could be at the cusp of being in the same position as Alex: *"Because if I think of it I think like if, that it maybe.. it could happen to my family too"* (Gabriel). However, these students did not see financial struggles as a reason to quit school and find a job. Many of them tried to find solutions to the problem, such as working alongside school or seeing if they could help the hypothetical unemployed father find a job. They showed resourcefulness, but also revealed how much they valued the importance of education. Studying, in their mind, should not be delayed.

We also saw the second group in Chapter six. These were mostly boys, who thought education was plan B to an unclear plan A or were simply too unsure about what they wanted to do next. These were students like Greg who had unclear ideas about the future and did not aspire for a particular profession. When I asked Greg what first came to mind when he read the story about Alex he replied:

> **Greg:** Why the kid is going to high school?
>
> **Researcher:** Yes ok, do you find it strange that..…
>
> **Greg:** Yes. If he is fifteen, he doesn't have to think about it before he's turned sixteen, you know.
>
> **Researcher:** Yes, yes, yes but... if he is in Year 10? At the beginning of year 10 do you find it strange to have begun thinking about high school?
>
> **Greg:** Yes, I would only do it towards the end, you see.

Essentially this is about seeing the value in planning for the future and the value in education. Greg did not see any value in planning for his future, and as referred to earlier, his ideas about education is to reach a destination of knowledge. When Greg says *"If I knew everything that I have to be able to, I would quit school"* he reveals an attitude where knowledge is an entity one acquires, rather than a lifelong journey. A similar attitude was found among a few of the boys I interviewed, all of whom shared the same uncertainty about their next steps after compulsory school. This gendered outlook on the role of education is in line with the quantitative findings, where we learned that boys rather than girls expressed a longing to quit school if they were to find a job.

The third group requires particular attention. This group, roughly one third of the interviewees, consisted predominantly of students who were aiming for further education as well as others who were more ambivalent; but when the topic of potential financial issues came up, they told me how they would help their family. Family comes first. On the surface, this group of students seemed to have very little in common: these were boys and girls, of Eastern-European, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian background, and all were either first- or second-generation students, with the exception of one student of mixed parentage.

But these students' priorities were clear: *"because first then [sic] have to help the parents, then help him in college and so on"* (Ali). Sam took this even further and explained:

> **Sam:** Yeah, I think he should do that and help his parents out a bit because they are your family and family matters more than anything. And that is also kind of my plan if my family falls into financial troubles. To kind of break up school and just take extra shifts.
>
> **Researcher:** And help them?
>
> **Sam:** Yeah. Because they've give you so much throughout your life and you should, you know, really give back, that much, because... can't because you are a teenager, and you don't have money floating out of your ears so you really just have to get a job and just help them out if they are in trouble because they have helped you out through many various life troubles, so I really do think parents do need a little payback.

In addition to a sense of payback, or being ethically obliged to help your family out, what all of these students had in common was their perception of the commonality of hardship in Iceland. Every single student who told me that they would postpone upper secondary school if the family was going through financial hardship, also believed that Alex's hypothetical situation was common in Iceland.

What makes this group of students so difficult to identify is how most of them envisioned going to upper secondary school, and even had decided on where they wanted to go and what they wanted to study. It sheds a light on the fragility of educational opportunities, where aspiring and envisioning is not enough, but it highly depends on the financial security of the family. Even though upper secondary schools may be affordable, it is worth little if the student worries about having a roof over their head or food on the table. And the students are aware of how sensitive their dreams and future plans can be. These findings suggest the existence of an intangible *map of norms,* where the pathway between aspirations and reality may feel less accessible for those of less affluent background (Appadurai, 2004). Moreover, such findings must be understood within the context within which this study takes place. Despite high labour force participation among those of foreign background, jobs tend to be

highly concentrated in low-skilled, low paid employment that is sensitive to sudden changes in a fragile labour market (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015; Magnússon, Minelgaite, Kristjánsdóttir, Christiansen, 2018; Napierała and Wojtyńska, 2017; Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska, 2019; Vinnumálastofnun, n.d., 2013).

Limits of engagement, limits to reaching goals - domestic responsibilities

As already established, one third of the interviewees had a deep sense of obligation to help their family out, leaving their educational aspirations vulnerable in times of potential hardship. To further understand the student's roles within the household I asked them about their household chores or responsibilities. The vast majority of my interviewees did not think they had any responsibilities that were different from their Icelandic counterparts. Most said they helped with small chores around the house. They set the dishwasher or walked the dog. However, there was a small subset of students who described how they had added responsibilities. Most were girls who had caregiving responsibilities. These responsibilities varied from having to take care of younger sibling from time to time to a more extreme end where they had to take on the role of an adult.

> **Researcher**: Are there any tasks or are you responsible for something in your home that is different than other kids have to do?
>
> **Sarah**: I quite often have to watch my little brother who is 14 years old, to make sure he goes to bed because my mom needs to go to bed very early because my little siblings are only two and a half and 6 years old so she goes to sleep around 11 o'clock. My brother goes to bed around 12 so I have to be, you know, always checking if he is going to bed, whether he is on the computer and all that.

Sarah said that she normally went to bed herself at midnight or as late as 2 am. She said that she did not mind having to watch her brother in this way, and claimed that she was such a *"mom type"*. However, it is clear that due to Sarah's role of watching her barely younger, 14-year-old brother, she was not getting much sleep, considering most schools start around 8 o'clock in the morning.

Working and going to school simultaneously was not as gendered as the household chores. Despite the fact that most of my interviewees were in year 8, 9 and 10, roughly a third, both boys and girls, worked alongside school in some shape or form. Some babysat every now and then whilst others worked in supermarkets or bakeries. The main catapult for working was somewhat of a financial independence, to be able to afford a lifestyle they wanted, whether that was in the form of clothes or to finance a hobby. Some said they had quit working, or had decided to work less hours, as it was affecting their school.

Few of the interviewees, who were currently working, thought their work did not affect school in any way, and some talked about how they made sure it would not, either by making sure they only worked during quieter months in school and not during exam periods, or only in the evenings when they had already done their homework. However, there were exceptions of students whose work was clearly getting in the way of school:

> **Rosa:** There is sometimes quite a lot of pressure[71], like sometimes I only get like a few hours of sleep, so.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you feel it affects…, right, sleep and… ?
>
> **Rosa:** Yes.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you feel like it affects your studies?
>
> **Rosa:** Erm… kind of like... the studies are really, like, the reason why I don't get enough sleep. Because, this is like, because [once] I've finished with, you know, practice and all the exercises[72], and you know, with all the other and then, you know, time is 10 [pm] and then I have to do all my homework and study for exams.

Rosa told me that her parents encouraged her to work, but in her case, it wasn't to contribute to the household, but to save up for an apartment. In fact, Rosa described her family as quite affluent, more so than most in her surroundings. Overall, to most of my working interviewees, working was to maintain some level of financial independence rather than out of perceived necessity. Out of the thirty interviewees, a handful described how they felt like they needed to work to help out or making sure their "*parents aren't spending the money on me*" (Karim). Sam had just applied for a job in the local grocery store:

> **Researcher**: So, what motivated you to apply for this job at the store?
>
> **Sam**: Erm.. sometimes my.., my mom finds something she wants and then she asks dad for some money and he's like "I don't have any money at the moment" and like, I kind of just want her to be happy because she already has like few things she is worried about in life so.. I kind of just wanna get a job, and like, give her a little bit of that cash.

These students, like Sam, described how they wanted to help out and take the pressure off of their parents. They did not want to ask their parents for money, so they worked to pay for additional costs, like extracurricular activities, travel costs, or competition fees in their extra-curricular activities.

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[71] Rosa uses the noun „*álag*" which referes to being under pressure or strain.
[72] Rosa refers to both extra-curricular activities as well as practising for her music studies she does outside of school.

If we remind ourselves of the findings from the vignettes, almost one third of the students said that if their family went through financial hardship, they would quit school and try to find a job. Here, we learned that a small portion of the students already work alongside school as to help out, or at least so their parents didn't have to spend as much money on them. While some maintained that they made sure their work was not getting in the way of their schoolwork, some students clearly had too much on their plate, leaving them tired for school.

As these findings are drawn from the interviews, we don't know if these are barriers limited to students of foreign background or if these issues can also be found amongst students of Icelandic background. In the quantitative part of the study, there was a similar measure of subjective barriers in the home, preventing the student to reach their academic goals. This measure consists of seven questions all beginning with "*I find it hard to reach my goals in school because...*", followed by a range of statements relating to the student's perception of potential barriers that may hinder them from reaching their goals in school. Examples include, "*...of my parents'/guardians' lack of knowledge to help me*"; "*...of my parent's/guardians' lack of time to help me*"; "*...I have to work to help with family expenses*" and "*...I have to look after my parents/guardians or other relatives*"[73]. This measure, hereafter called domestic barriers, is measured on a 5-item Likert scale, ranging from *very untrue (1)* to *very true* (5); a higher scored signifies greater perceived barriers.

Table 34: Difference in mean between students of Icelandic and foreign background on the variable measuring perceived domestic barriers to reach goals in school - a higher value indicates greater perceived barriers.

	Perceived domestic barriers**		
	N	Mean	Std deviation
Icelandic background	644	1.8	0.83
Foreign background	89	2.1	0.86

[*]Statistically significant (p < 0.05); [**]Statistically significant (p < 0.01); [***]Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

As we can see from the table above, students of foreign background said they encountered greater domestic barriers that hindered them from reaching their goals in school than students of Icelandic background; the difference was statistically significant (p< 0.01).

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[73] For a full list, please refer to appendix 10.11.

Table 35: Difference in mean in perceived domestic barriers to reach goals in school by gender, here shown for students of Icelandic and foreign background.

| | **Icelandic***** | | | **Foreign** | | |
	N	Mean	Std deviation	N	Mean	Std deviation
Male	272	1.95	0.93	38	2.28	0.96
Female	348	1.71	0.72	48	1.93	0.75

*Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Moreover, we can see a difference between boys and girls. For both groups, boys reported greater barriers impeding them from reaching their goals in school. The difference between boys and girls was statistically significant for students of Icelandic background ($p< 0.001$), but not for those of foreign background ($p=0.072$).

We learned from the interviews how some students felt that they needed to work, although most reported that it was not necessarily because they needed to contribute to the household as such, but so they could be more independent and pay additional costs, such as travel cost or competition fees. We have also learned that some of the students understood how fragile educational opportunities can be and how anyone, including them, could potentially have to step off the educational path they had chosen for themselves to help their family.

Table 36: Difference in mean on the perceived domestic barriers scale between those who want to quit school as soon as they can find a job and those who don't, shown for both students of Icelandic and foreign background.

I want to leave school as soon as I can find a job

| | Icelandic background*** | | | Foreign background** | | |
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Agree	177	2.45	0.98	24	2.57	0.86
Disagree	436	1.57	0.61	63	1.96	0.80

*Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Table 36 reveals that students who want to leave school as soon as they can find a job, also reported a higher mean on the perceived domestic barrier scale, thus reporting greater barriers. This trend was found for students of Icelandic and foreign background and was statistically significant for both groups. These findings, in conjunction with tables 32 and 33 where we looked at the relationship with leaving school for work and school engagement, even further highlights the importance of taking a holistic view on the student's situation. We cannot simply

look narrowly at the student in the *now*: how they behave in school, are they doing their homework, are they participating in class discussions, or can they speak Icelandic? We need to take a step back and take a wider view to understand what may impede them from fully engaging in school, moving from compulsory school to upper secondary school, or managing to graduate from the latter. This is what we will be doing in the next section where we will move on to the role of the parents and the role of the student's place of residence.

7.3 The role of significant others and external barriers

In the first section we got to know George and Greg and learned about their aspirations for the future. We learned that Greg's parents, who were both from an Eastern European country, were worried about him and what was ahead once he'd go to upper secondary school. Furthermore, we learned how his parents were trying to navigate an educational system that they did not fully understand. George, on the other hand, lived with his father who was from a Western European country. His dad was educated and successful in his profession but absent in his son's learning.

George feels that there is a tremendous expectation on performing well, both because of his father's, as well as his sibling's success. Earlier we learned that George felt that his grades did not bear witness to his hard work. He struggled with the language and reminisced about when he lived in the sending country and was offered additional help from his school and teachers. George told me that he hides his grades from his father and makes sure he doesn't know what happens at school. When I asked him what was the worst thing that could happen, he replied:

> Worst that could happen? Nothing really. He is just so, he just allows me to do what I want. What I would find worst is if he would be disappointed in me or something. That he would, you know... yes, that is this [sic] worst. […] There is just so much pressure on me from my [sibling] and from him to perform but I just completely can't all the time. That's just that.

> (George)

Although George did not explicitly explain what it was in his father's demeanour that made him feel a lot of pressure to perform well, it is clear that all that George wanted was to do well in school and make his father proud. However, when the student is always trying to perform at a level that is not within their reach, they are being set up to fail. Let's remind ourselves that George was a preteen when he moved to Iceland and lives with a non-native parent. Having to perform at school to the same standards as his Icelandic counterparts, without having his needs met, is simply not realistic. He is playing at a rigged game but, without acknowledging his disadvantage, he keeps losing. He has internalised the message that *he* must be a loser. In the next section, we look into the relationship between parental aspirations and the fine line between supporting and forcing aspirations on children.

7.3.1 Parental aspirations within the parameters of a migrant background

Rosa is a year 10 student and attends a large, yet not ethnically diverse, school in the capital area. Rosa has one older sibling and is of mixed parentage. On her mother's side, Rosa had grandparents from a southeast Asian country and Europe, and her mother had moved to Iceland as a child herself from another western country. Rosa's father was from Iceland. Rosa is ethnically ambiguous in appearance, has brown hair with light skin with a warm skin undertone. In Chapter 5, we learned how Rosa constantly received the message from her surrounding that she looked different; this messaging resulted in her feeling different from others. Rosa described her family as affluent, her parents both have a university degree in high-earning professions.

Rosa did very well in school and was among the top in her class. Alongside school, she worked two-to-three days a week, competed in STEM competitions, and took private lessons in an extra-curricular activity. Rosa told me that she often felt anxious, down, and out of place in school. When asked for possible reasons, she talked about how she felt like she always had to carry herself perfectly. She was worried about losing control of her temper or not behaving properly. She felt as if she was being judged by how she behaved. When asked about that she replied:

> Ermm... I feel like... because... my mom she is this... this... it's... people make fun of it that she is this typical Asian parent, like... you know, If I get a B+ then she's like "Why didn't you get an A". So this is the stereotype... is, like, correct in this case.
>
> (Rosa)

Asked where these stereotypes came from, she replied that the kids at school had begun telling her how her mom was a typical Asian mom. Rosa tells me that she had not realised how her mother was in line with a stereotype of the Asian parent with an intense parenting style, before the other students' remarks, but now agreed to it. Rosa's mother is being racialised through stereotyping, despite the fact that her mother had lived in Iceland throughout most of her life. When asked about her future plans, Rosa, whose parents were university graduates, only wanted to finish the bare minimum, which in her mind was upper secondary school. When asked about her 10-year plans, and whether she thought she might have gone to university by then, she answered:

> Erm… like... like honestly, I hope not [laughs]. Because, you know, I hope I can get away with not going to University. Because, like, I find school... I don't find it very fun. But I think it is ok.
>
> (Rosa)

The immediate question that comes up is how come a straight-A student, who has won prizes at national competitions, shows great potential in her extra-curricular activities, whose parents are both educated, and comes from an affluent family, does not aspire for a university degree herself.

Blöndal and Aðalbjarnardóttir (2009) maintain that students who describe their parents as authoritative were more likely to complete upper secondary education, compared with the students who described their parents as non-authoritative. These findings are in line with the findings in this study. In Chapter six, we learned that there were three main ways to understand how students valued education: those who had clear aspirations, school was a plan B to an unclear plan A, or it was simply the next logical step, often because they knew their parents would not allow them to get away with not attaining further education. We've also discovered that most students aspired for at least the same level of education as their parents and learned about the important role of parents as role models or motivators who could facilitate a positive outlook on the value of education. Rosa, on the other hand, appears worn out, exhausted. When she describes her options for the next steps on the educational path, instead of getting a gentle push to fly from her parents, she feels as if she is being dragged.

If we focus on the educational level of Rosa's parents, she appears to be somewhat anomalous, although not completely atypical, if we look at the quantitative data. Here below, we can see the results from the quantitative part of this study, where students were asked about their parents' educational level, with the results cross-tabulated with the student's certainty about going to upper secondary school after finishing compulsory education.

37: Chi- square test: association between the parents' educational level and certainty about upper secondary plans, Icelandic background

Icelandic background

| | Mother's education*** | | | | | |
| | Non-university degree | | University degree | | Don't know | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sure	61	40.7	105	26.3	77	57.9
Certain	89	59.3	294	73.7	56	42.1

*Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

| | Father's education*** | | | | | |
| | Non-university degree | | University degree | | Don't know | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sure	66	31.7	91	28	84	56.8
Certain	142	68.3	234	72	64	43.2

*Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

What we can gather from the upper table here above is for students of Icelandic background and with a parent with a university degree, over 70% of students were certain about their upper secondary plans. If the mother had a non-university degree, roughly 41% of the students were not sure whether they would go to upper secondary school after compulsory education but 32% if it was the father. However, if the student didn't know their parental educational level, only 42-43% had definitive upper secondary plans. The association between parental educational level, i.e. non-university degree, university degree or not knowing, was statistically significant on both accounts (Mother's educational level: χ^2 (2) = 45.498, p< 0.001; father's educational level: χ^2 (2) = 38.531, p< 0.001). This may not come as a surprise. A larger percentage of students whose parents have a university degree were certain about going to upper secondary school themselves. Now let's take a look at the students of foreign background; the story differs.

Table 38: Chi-square test: association between the parents' educational level and certainty about upper secondary plans, foreign background

Foreign background

| | Mother's background | | | | | |
| | Non-university degree | | University degree | | Don't know | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sure	12	37.5	17	47.2	15	60.0
Certain	20	62.5	19	52.8	10	40.0

*Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

| | Father's background | | | | | |
| | Non-university degree | | University degree | | Don't know | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sure	11	36.7	11	40.7	24	63.2
Certain	19	63.3	16	59.3	14	36.8

*Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

What we can see from the table above is how two thirds of students, whose parents had a non-university degree, were certain about going to post-compulsory school. Moving on to the students whose parents had a university degree, the story changes drastically. Still, the majority of students are certain about going to upper secondary school, but just barely. In fact, a smaller proportion of students who had parents with a university degree were certain themselves about going to upper secondary school, compared with those whose parents had a non-university degree. And this was regardless of whether it was the mother or the father.

As before, if students didn't know their parent's educational level, a smaller proportion was certain about their upper secondary plans. The association between parent's educational level and upper secondary plans was not statistically significant (mother's education: $\chi^2 (2) = 2.851$, p= 0.240; father's education: $\chi^2 (2) = 5.602$, p= 0.061) but could be explained by a small sample size. These findings marry well with the findings from chapter six where we learned that students of foreign background, whose parents had a non-university degree, valued education more on the cognitive dimension of school engagement than if their parents had a university degree.

To further explore the importance of *knowing* your parent's educational level, over their actual degree, a variable was created that measures whether the student knows n*either* of their parent's educational and were thereby categorised as *Don't know parent's education*.

Table 39: Chi-square test: association between knowing the parent's educational level and certainty about upper secondary plans, here shown for both students of Icelandic and foreign background

| | Icelandic background*** | | | | Foreign background* | | | |
| | Know parent's education | | Don't know parent's education | | Know parent's education | | Don't know parent's education | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sure	175	30.5	68	62.4	29	42.0	17	65.4
Certain	399	69.5	41	37.6	40	58.0	9	27.4

*Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($\chi^2 < 0.001$)

What table 39 shows is the percentage of students who are certain about going to upper secondary school if they know their parent's educational level compared with if they don't know their educational level. This association between knowing parents' educational level and upper secondary plans is statistically significant for both groups (Icelandic background: $\chi^2(1)$ = 40.664, p< 0.001); Foreign background: $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.125, p< 0.05). These findings correspond with the qualitative findings from chapter 6, where we looked into the influence of parents on the students' value on the importance of education. There, we saw that students who saw upper secondary school as a plan B to an unclear plan A often did not know their parents' educational level and education was rarely discussed in the household. These findings, together with table 39 here above (where we learned that the relationship between the parental educational level and upper secondary plans) do not follow the same path as for students of Icelandic background. This certainly raises the question of whether the actual educational level is more important or simply the discussion of education in the household. One might expect that in a household where students are familiar with their parent's education, the topic of education is more on the table than when the student does not know their parent's educational level. Or, perhaps what we have captured is the lack of interest in education on behalf of the student. We don't know if the topic of education has been brought up in the home, but we do know that the student isn't familiar with their parent's educational level. Moving forward, we will be looking at the importance of where the student resides and goes to compulsory school, in terms of their post compulsory opportunities.

Show your worth through education

In the last section, we learned how Rosa, who came from a well-educated family, wanted to finish her studies as soon as possible. She referred to an intense parenting style, however, we must look at Rosa's case in conjunction with what we have already learned about her. In chapter 5, Rosa described how she felt "*like a normal Icelander*", but was constantly reminded that she had darker features than a '*real*' Icelander. In addition to being othered through a denied Icelandic identity, she described vile racism, where her peers had begun calling her the n-word when they saw her Asian mother. She further described how she, as an extension of her mother, was being *othered* through the stereotypical *Asian parenting style*, a label she had herself not seen before it was pointed out to her by her peers. The pressure of constantly doing well thereby comes not only from her parents, but also as a consequence of living up to a racialised stereotype that is being thrust upon her. As a consequence, she constantly worried that she

would not carry herself properly in front of people, causing a lot of stress and anxiety insofar as she had nightmares where she got very angry. This resulted in her becoming apathetic to the idea of further schooling. Rosa's experience was not the sole example of how racism and prejudice coloured student outlooks on schooling. To further understand this, we will look at the example of Maria.

Maria, a year 10 student, lives in a small village in the rural part of Iceland. She is of mixed parentage, her mother was born in a Southeast Asian country and her estranged biological father is Icelandic. Maria's stepfather, who she calls dad, is Icelandic. She has three sisters, one of whom older. Maria speaks fluent Icelandic and has a tanned complexion; thus she is not White-passing. Maria described herself as a good student and very active in extra-curricular activities. She described her as sporty, which is a large part of her identity, and she described how she felt like she belonged to her sports team.

There is an upper secondary school in Maria's town, but the school has limited options. Maria's older sister studies in the town's upper secondary school. Maria looks up to her sister, but doesn't want to follow her footsteps. Maria aspired to attend a school in the capital city and had a very clear idea of what she wanted to study and which school to attend.

Maria tells me that her mother moved to Iceland for a better life, so they wouldn't have to "*experience the same [things] she had*". Maria had a strong sense that she was getting an opportunity that her mother hadn't had and was grateful for that. According to Maria, her mother had experienced a lot of racism for being a woman of Southeast Asian descent, married to an "old" Icelandic man, as Maria described it. Maria told me that her mother is called derogatory names, alluding that she is either a "*mail-order bride*" or a prostitute. Maria describes how she herself feels judged in her school for her family situation. This experience fuels her drive to be a good student, to show them all that "*she [her mother] raised me well [...], and we are 'good', we are maybe better than her*". She aspired to study human rights.

Both Maria and Rosa described how othering, racism and prejudice was interwoven in their migrant experience and dissipated throughout their choices of education. In chapter 5 we learned that quite a few students reported how they were othered on the basis of not fulfilling stereotypical ideas of an Icelandic identity, either in terms of looks or language proficiency/pronunciation. In fact, all four of the interviewees whose stories we have delved into in the earlier sections, Greg, George, Rosa and Maria, all showed signs of feeling different,

a lack of school belonging or how they were outside the border of what is consider '*properly*' Icelandic, and this affected their outlook for further education, to a varying degree. Rosa and Greg wanted to quit school as soon as possible, George negotiated his future opportunities and the adversity fuelled Maria to *teach* others, both her and her family's worth, as well as the effect of prejudice.

The following section further explores these migrant experiences in terms of students' educational aspirations.

Negotiated aspirations

In chapter 5 we learned about the practicality of having a community. A community of others that the students perceive as similar to them offers them a window of aspirations. We learned that closeness to others who you believe is similar to you, or having extended family in other areas, allows the students to expand their perceived post compulsory opportunities.

When students are deciding on what they want to do after compulsory education, these decisions are dependent on a variety of external factors. One such factor can be where in the country they reside, and whether there is an upper secondary school in proximity. The distance from each participating school to the nearest upper secondary school varied a lot, ranging from 0 km if there was a school in town, to almost 190 km. Most students (74.2%) lived in a town or a village with an upper secondary school, whereas the rest lived in a town with no upper secondary school; the latter towns were populated disproportionately by students of foreign background ($\chi^2(1) = 14.43$, p< 0.001).

In terms of whether they were certain about their post compulsory plans, I compared students who lived within a 30-kilometre distance from the next upper secondary school to those who lived further away. A higher percentage of students who lived in a closer vicinity of the nearest upper secondary school were certain about their post compulsory plans; and this holds true for both students of Icelandic and foreign background. However, this difference was marginal and not statistically significant for either group ($\chi^2(1) = 0.39$, p= 0.532 and ($\chi^2(1) =$ 0.25, p= 0.618 respectively) [74].

What the quantitative data doesn't show, however, are the ways in which we define *aspirations*. Is it simply to attend an upper secondary school or is it to attain education from the school of choice? Is it to finish the degree that best supports and takes you on your path towards your dreams for the future? More importantly, they do not show us how *where you*

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[74] For further breakdown, see appendix 10.11.

live and *to what you aspire* intersects with social capital. The students I interviewed could roughly be divided into three categories: 1) students who lived in, or in a driving distance to a major city[75], 2) students who had to move away to attend upper secondary school, and 3) students who lived close to a small upper secondary school with limited options. The first group of students, undeniably, had more options and opportunities to study what they desired. That didn't necessarily mean they would purposely choose a school that fit best for their future aspirations. Many chose a school where most of their friends and classmates were attending, or a school in close proximity to their home. Nevertheless, the main difference between this group and the other two was that they had a choice. The second group were students who knew that if they were to attend upper secondary school, they would have to move away from their family. These students' choice was often limited by accommodation options: meaning that their choice would not necessarily reflect their future aspirations but what was convenient. The third group were students who also lived in the rural parts of the country but lived in a town or a village where there was a small upper secondary school a mere bus ride away, a school with a limited choice of pathways for the student to choose from, again restricting the student's options. And it is through this absence of choice where the student's status as an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, and the lack of social capital became apparent.

Surely, living in a rural part of Iceland where there is a small or no upper secondary school will always limit the student, no matter their background. However, the reality for many of my interviewees was how their immediate family was an island, a single unit, without a social net. Thus, they had to make decisions as a unit. The choice these families are faced with is to a) send a 16-year-old to live on their own away from the support system (family or friends), b) move with the teenager, so they could fulfil their dreams and attend the school of choice, c) ask the teenager to settle, in terms of their choice of school, perhaps by negotiating a transfer once they turn 18 and thus reached the age of majority. And these were the *choices* expressed by interviewees.

The students who would always have to move, seemed to find it easier to talk about their upper secondary plans. According to them, most of their peers were heading to the nearest large schools that offered a dormitory and, in most cases, they saw themselves also choosing the same school. It was an imagery normalised through a forced choice of *either or*. Either you

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[75] A major city in this case is a relatively short distance from the capital area or Akureyri, albeit not technically a city but capital of the North. What these two locations have to offer, beyond others, is a choice of more than one school where they could both work towards a matriculation certificate (equivalent to A levels) or a Journeyman certificate.

can get an education, or not. It was the third group who seemed to struggle the most, at least the ones who aspired for a particular line of study or school. These students felt as if they were having to settle for an education and thereby give up on their dreams.

As has already been mentioned, Maria lived in a town with an upper secondary school, she aspired to attend a school in the capital area, and so did her parents (although they did not agree on what school was best for her). She did not believe the school in her village offered what she wanted for her future but she was aware of the fact that she might have to study there for a year or two - due to distance to the capital area and the fact that she had no extended family in Iceland.

> You see, my mom and dad[76] wanted me to go to [School X (in Capital Area)] because he, he went to [School X], dad, but never graduated and I think just because, he [the father] didn't graduate that I want to graduate for him or something, I don't know [sniffles]. But I just want to take a different route, just for me, because this is for me, not for them. [chuckles and sniffles]

Maria gets the message that she is supposed to finish what her father had begun, indicating a similar expectation as Rosa had explained earlier, albeit to a lesser extent. This is what Ball et al. (2002) refer to as the transgenerational script, and Bok (2010) calls the inter-generational nature of aspiration formation; the student feels they must make choices rooted in a dream originally established by the parent. The school, Maria's parents[77] wanted her to attend, is a prestigious school in the capital area indicating the high aspirations they had for their daughter. The school Maria's mind was set on is also a school of certain prestige, however it was not prestigiousness she was after. Maria explained to me how the school she had chosen was the best school for her future dream of studying about human rights and attend a school in a form-based system rather than module-based system, meaning that she would be part of a set form, rather than attend classes with different students in each module. She had done her research on what the school had to offer, and, in her heart, she knew it was the right school for her. Despite the fact that she did not agree with her parents on which school was the best fit for her, they did agree that studying in the capital gave her the best opportunities. And that is as far as that dream could reach. Maria had no one she could stay with and, when asked how she could sort out the living situation in the capital area, she replied: "*we just need to go… We need to talk to*

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[76] The man Maria refers to as her dad is her stepfather. He is born in Iceland.
[77] Maria's biological father lives in the capital, with whom, for reasons unknown, she has very little contact. Thereby, despite having an Icelandic family, she tells me how it is not an option living with her family on her father's side. Maria was not ready to divulge these reasons to me.

the government in Reykjavik and just get an accommodation". However, despite clear aspirations, hopes, dreams and wishful thinking on how to overcome any barriers, deep down inside, Maria knew that she wasn't going. Further into the interview she told me how she was going to finish her upper secondary education in two-and-a-half years in the local school. She didn't know if the school offered anything that she wanted to study, but she knew it was all she could get.

Maria was certainly not the only example of a student whose dreams were out of reach. Let's take a look at Erin, a student in year 8. She is first-generation immigrant from South America, living in a small village, not too far from a small upper secondary school. She described herself as someone who was very engaged in school and more importantly Erin, despite her young age, was very keen on further education. She had a good idea of what she wanted to do in the future and was already working on improving the skills needed to reach her goals. Erin aspired to study in the capital area and thought it would give her better options, both in terms of what she could study and also a better chance to enter a university of her choice. Therefore, both the study options available in the school closest to her and the perceived prestige of the school, did not appeal to her. But Erin did not see it as an option available for her, due to a lack of extended family in Iceland.

> Because also, you know, I will be maybe 16 years old, or like 15 and there is no one in my family that lives in Reykjavik, so it is a bit difficult, because then an apartment needs to be rented and... yes… it is a bit...

> (Erin)

The feeling of this forced choice clearly dampened the students' aspirations, as they experienced their choice to be limited by where they resided. She told me how the only way for her to reach her goals was if there were other students from her year group moving to the capital that she could live with, thereby, adding a support system of others.

Erin's only chance to attend a school of her choice was if others from her school would also decide to move to the capital. Others described how they were hoping for an older sibling to move with them to the capital, as that meant they could move together. These barriers stem from two reasons, as has already been mentioned: lack of network and lack of accommodation. If we overlook the issue of a support system, there is still the issue of having to rent on the open market, from the age of 16. Considering this, we are faced with the deafening lack of inclusivity in the educational infrastructure. Most of these students, who lived far from the school they aspired to attend, had no idea of how they could live there. Some thought the school might

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offer a dormitory, and that is where they would live. This is true, in some cases. Most rural schools offer a dormitory, contrary to the capital area[78] (where 16 out of 38 upper secondary schools are located).

Yet, what I learned through interviewing the students was the general lack of knowledge in terms of what is available to them. Greg, who we met in the first section, also was from a small village and aspired to live in the capital area. He saw upper secondary school as an opportunity to move back to the capital area, where he had lived as a child, but not necessarily because he wanted to study. Having discussed what it was that he wanted to do after compulsory education, I asked where he would like to live:

> **Greg:** At school, dormitory.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, yes ok, are there schools with a dormitory in the capital?
>
> **Greg:** Yes, that's how it always is, at least.

Coming from a small village where most of his classmates were going to a dormitory, he just assumed that would also be the case in the capital. And perhaps Greg isn't wrong in thinking that. He expected equal opportunities for all, regardless of where they lived.

Moreover there was one topic that stood up during my long conversations with the students – or, in fact, the absence of an issue. Together with my interviewees, we delved into their aspirations, hopes, and dreams, as well as the ways that they could possibly make their wildest dreams come true. We talked about barriers as well as what could *help them* reach their goals. Not a single interviewee mentioned an Equality Grant, for driving or accommodation, although this was something that many of the students were eligible for[79]. It remains unclear if they were not aware of the grant or if they did not see it as a useful support to help them follow their educational dreams. However, when I searched, there was no information available on the Equality Grant in any other language other than Icelandic (attavitinn.is, nd.; Menntasjóður námsmanna, n.d.)[80]. That means that for parents who are not very comfortable with Icelandic,

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[78] In February 2020, the Reykjavík city council agreed to pave the way for a dormitory to be built in Reykjavík. This is merely a mission statement, given that upper secondary schools are state-funded. For further information see https://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/ymis_skjol/fundargerdir_pdf/borgarstjorn_1802_0.pdf

[79] Students who have to move at least 30 kilometers or more from their home and family, are eligible for an equality grant, that they need to apply for and receive by the end of a semester, once schools have confirmed their learning outcome. This grant is twofold: for students who have to drive over 30 kilometres but live at home, or either live in a dormitory or pay rent for another accommodation (Menntasjóður námsmanna, n.d.a; Reglugerð um námsstyrki Nr. 692/2003). This was equivalent to roughly £500 and £868 (by the exchange in October 8th 2020) per semester.

[80] This was confirmed verbally over the phone by a call centre representative at the Student Loan Fund (28th of January 2020).

they become, and consequently the students, reliant upon help and information from an external source, teachers, guidance councillors, or the schools in general.

All things considered, we have learned that where the students lived was not necessarily a barrier to *studying* at the upper secondary level, but it *could* be a barrier for the student to attain the degree of their choice and thus to acquire the education they desired.

7.4 Taking a holistic approach

What we have looked into thus far is the difference between students by background in terms of their educational aspirations. At face value, there does not seem to be a lot of difference, but once we have unpacked our concepts, we begin to understand the nuances in which students may differ and potential barriers those of foreign background face.

Below is a hierarchical multiple logistic regression, testing the overall research question of this thesis:

How do we explain the differential educational aspirations, if any, between students of foreign background and native background in compulsory school in Iceland?

Throughout this thesis we have learned there is consistently a difference between boys and girls, findings both supported by the qualitative and quantitative data. Boys often described loneliness, they showed less behavioural engagement, and – although they reported similar emotional engagement as the girls in the quantitative part of the study – the qualitative component revealed how they appeared to put very different meaning into having friends and being emotionally connected with others. The same holds true for how the students valued education. Although cognitive engagement appeared to be similar for boys and girls, the interviewees revealed an attitude where further education was only a plan B to an unclear plan A, only prevalent among the boys. For this reason, it was imperative to include a gender dimension in the model.

Throughout Chapter 5-7 we have seen an abundance of examples that show that the perceived lack of language skills limits students' entire school experience and that students negotiate their aspirations on the grounds of perceived lack of skills in Icelandic. I have thusly included a variable measuring how well the students felt they had fared in Icelandic as a school subject, compared with others.

On the surface, there did not appear to be a great difference in terms of engagement between students of Icelandic and foreign background. However, the qualitative data emphasised the role of family as well as the important role institutions play in helping the students navigate the educational system and how the institutional habitus may be mobilised differently across the student body (McDonough, 1996). To capture these elements of school engagement and the role of significant others, I have included a variable that measures whether students know their parent's educational level and whether the student feels as if they have received enough information from their school regarding their next steps.

Earlier in this chapter, we learned about the fragility of educational opportunities. For example, a third of interviewees said that if their family went through financial hardship, they would quit school and try to find a job, leaving their educational aspirations vulnerable. For this reason, I have included the variable *domestic barrier,* a measure that strives to capture the student's limitations to reaching their goal.

In Chapter 5, we learned about the complicated avenues through which ethnic identity is formed. The interviews highlighted how many of the students of foreign background had to negotiate their identity, a narrative that was not easily understood from the quantitative measures of ethnic identity. The model here below thus includes a variable measuring perceived opportunities for success in Iceland. We learned that there was a moderate association between considering yourself to be an Icelander, as well as being considered an Icelander by others, and believing that people *like them* could succeed.

I used the Hosmer-Lemeshow test to statistically test the goodness of fit of the four models. All except the first one were $p > 0.05$ and thus indicative of good fit. Due to limitations presented in Chapter 8, the number of participants in the final model is 616, or 71.5% of the total sample (71.8% students of Icelandic background, 70.3% students of foreign background).

Table 40: Logistic regression, model one and two. Outcome variable is certainty about going to upper secondary school.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	β	Exp (β)	S.E.	β	Exp (β)	S.E.
Background						
Icelandic (ref)						
Foreign	-0.515	0.597*	0.246	-0.560	0.571*	0.251
Gender						
Boys (ref)						
Girls				0.864	2.372***	0.174
Enough information in school						
No (ref)						
Yes						
Know parents' education						
No (ref)						
Yes						
Domestic barriers						
Success for people like me						
Disagree (ref)						
Agree						
Background*Success						
Constant	0.721			0.264		
Cox and Snell	0.007			0.047		
Nagelkerke R^2	0.010			0.064		
χ^2	4.324*			25.018***		
-2LL	787.484			762.466		

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

Table 41: Logistic regression, model three and four. Outcome variable is certainty about going to upper secondary school.

	Model 3			Model 4		
	β	Exp (β)	S.E.	β	Exp (β)	S.E.
Background						
Icelandic (ref)						
Foreign	-0.446	0.640	0.268	-0.086	0.918	0.290
Gender						
Boys (ref)						
Girls	0.770	2.161***	0.184	0.566	1.761**	0.199
Enough information in school						
No (ref)						
Yes	1.013	2.755***	0.187	0.689	1.992**	0.207
Know parents' education						
No (ref)						
Yes	1.172	3.227***	0.239	0.760	2.139**	0.258
Domestic barriers				-0.796	0.451***	0.120
Success for people like me						
Disagree (ref)						
Agree				0.463	1.589*	0.204
Background*Success				-	-	-
Fare in school - Icelandic				0.227	1.254***	0.054
Constant	-1.112			-0.816		
Cox and Snell	0.135			0.242		
Nagelkerke R^2	0.187			0.334		
χ^2	60.162***			81.026***		
-2LL	702.304			621.278		

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

Our outcome variable in all four models is certainty of going to upper secondary school, where 0 means that the student isn't sure whether they are going, and 1 means that the student is certain. If we begin by looking at **model one** there is nothing that comes as a surprise. We have already established that although the majority of participants were certain about going to upper secondary school, regardless of background, there appears to be some difference between the students of Icelandic and foreign background. In fact, model one shows us that there is a 40% decrease in the odds of being certain about going to upper secondary school if the student is of foreign background.

In **model two** we have controlled for gender. When controlling for gender, students of foreign background are still less likely to be certain about their post compulsory plans, with the odds remaining very similar as in model one. We can also see that there is a statistically significant difference between boys and girls, controlling for background. In fact, in this second model, we can see that the odds of being certain about going to upper secondary school is almost 2.4 times higher for girls compared to boys. This should not come as a surprise as these are findings that we have seen repeatedly throughout chapter five, six, and seven in both the quantitative and qualitative data.

In **model three** we have added two variables that asked (1) whether the students felt as if they had been given enough information about their next steps and school options from their schools or teachers, as well as (2) if they knew their parents' education. Both of these variables were bivariate measures, comparing yeses (1) to no's (0): *I think I have had enough information from my school to make up my mind regarding further education* and *No I don't know my parent's educational level.*

As we have already discussed, many of the students did not know whether their parents had finished upper secondary school or had a university degree. This could stem from various reasons, such as incompatibility between the educational system in the sending country and the Icelandic educational system, the parent has finished an advanced degree or their education is a sensitive topic, or perhaps it is a proxy for whether education is generally discussed in the household. In any case, discussing education in the household and the support from parents were shown to be of importance in the interviews and is thus used in this model.

Holding all other variables constant, the odds of students being certain about going to upper secondary school were two times greater if they reported that they had received enough information from their school. Moreover, students who knew their parents' educational level were at 3.2 times greater odds of being certain about their post compulsory plans, compared with those who did not know the parental educational level. Girls are still more likely to be certain about attending upper secondary school right after compulsory education, whereas the background variable is not statistically significant. This means that where we first found a difference between students of foreign background and Icelandic background in terms of their educational aspiration, once we hold static the effect of knowing their parental educational level and receiving enough information from their school, this difference disappears. By holding these two variables static, together with gender, we have taken the effect of these variables out of the equation, leaving us with no difference in educational aspirations. This may suggest that the initial difference found between students of Icelandic and foreign background

is driven by factors that are part of our cultural capital, both passed through our parents but also mobilised through the schools.

This leads us to the **fourth model**, where we have further included *domestic barriers*, *believing that success was achievable for people like them* and *how students fared in Icelandic in school*. As in model 3, the background is not statistically significant. Controlling for all other variables, the odds of girls being certain about their school plans are greater than for boys or at roughly 1.8 times greater odds. Students who feel as if they have received enough information about their post compulsory options are more likely to be certain about going to upper secondary school, as well as the students who knew their parent's educational level.

When taking other variables into consideration, we can see that domestic barriers are statistically significant. What this means is that for a one-unit increase in domestic barriers (reporting greater barriers), there is about 55% decrease in the odds of being certain about going to upper secondary school.

Finally, we tested for a variable that measures the students perceived prospects of success. This is a binary variable where students who believed that people like *them* could succeed in Iceland were coded as 1 and those who did not agree to the statement were coded as 0. Looking at **model 4,** we can see that the odds of being certain about going to upper secondary school were 1.6 times greater if the student believed that people like them could succeed in Iceland, compared with those who didn't.

In Chapter 5, we visited the question *In Iceland, people like me can succeed*, and saw that there is an association between *feeling Icelandic* and perceived opportunities of success. For this reason, I have added an interaction effect in this fifth and last model to look at whether the relationship between *perceived success* and certainty of going to secondary school is somehow different for students of Icelandic and foreign background. Looking at **model 5**, we can see that in fact there is a difference and our story has changed significantly.

Table 42: Logistic regression, model five with an interaction effect. Outcome variable is certainty about going to upper secondary school.

	Model 5		
	β	Exp (β)	S.E.
Background			
Icelandic (ref)			
Foreign	0.843	2.324*	0.406
Gender			
Boys (ref)			
Girls	0.595	1.812**	0.202
Enough information in school			
No (ref)			
Yes	0.671	1.956**	0.209
Know parents' education			
No (ref)			
Yes	0.742	2.100**	0.259
Domestic barriers	0.782	0.457***	0.121
Success for people like me			
Disagree (ref)			
Agree	0.740	2.095**	0.221
Background*Success	-1.921	0.146**	0.574
Fare in Icelandic	0.243	1.275***	0.055
Constant	-1.089		
Cox and Snell	0.256		
Nagelkerke R^2	0.353		
χ^2	11.360**		
-2LL	609.918		

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

We have already seen that that if students believed that people like them could be successful in Iceland there were increased in odds of them being determined to go to upper secondary school once they finished compulsory school. What the interaction effect tells us is that this increase in odds of certainty about future plans is lower for students of foreign background compared with those who are of Icelandic background. This means that believing that you and

others like you can succeed in Icelandic society increases the likelihood of certainty of next educational steps, but less so if the student is of foreign background.

Moreover, we can see that, holding gender constant, having received enough information from school, knowing the parental educational level, domestic barriers, perceived opportunities for success, and the interaction between success and background, students of foreign background are at increased odds of being certain about their post compulsory plans. These findings are supported by our qualitative data, where most of the interviewees described their aspirations and had no reason to believe they were any different from their Icelandic counterparts. This highlights the importance of understanding the complexities of aspirations, the negotiated aspirations, and the perceived barriers students encounter when formulating these aspirations.

7.5 Conclusion

Educational aspirations are multi-faceted, where a simple question regarding future plans can be multi-layered. Responses to future-oriented questions can be interpreted as goals, plans, dreams, or preferences where the difference lies in proximity of time and how well-formulated those responses are (Lent, et al. 1994; Rojewski, 2005). In this chapter, we have discussed educational aspirations and how they may appear.

This chapter's findings emphasise the importance of understanding aspiration both in terms of *hopes* and *dreams,* but also in terms of the perceived agency of those who aspire (Hart, 2016). At face value, there is a difference in educational aspirations between students of Icelandic background and foreign background. However, as we unpack this difference, we better understand the trajectories through which aspirations are formed and how it may be different for both groups.

Throughout this thesis, we have seen the difference between boys and girls, and this chapter further adds to that story. Here, we can see the difference in aspirations between boys and girls; this holds true for students of either background. Boys are not as certain about their post-compulsory plans as their female counterparts. These findings were supported by the qualitative interviews with the students of foreign background; many of the boys expressed stress and anxiety for the future, often rooted in fear and shame that they weren't doing well enough in school. Despite applying themselves, they felt as if the message they received was that their best wasn't good enough, resulting in some cases in negotiated aspirations, where the student felt as if he needed to dampen his aspirations and settle for a school that wasn't his first choice. The same went for the students living in the rural parts of Iceland, regardless of gender, some of whom had dreams to attend a particular school or a particular field of study but due to distance, lack of extended family or a support net, and lack of infrastructure in the educational system, the student had to negotiate their dreams. These findings are in line with the importance of social capital as we encountered in Chapter 5. Having an extended family or knowing of others *like them* in other towns in Iceland opened up their window of perceived opportunities and thus increased their post-compulsory options (Haller and Portes, 1973; Ray, 2006)

In this chapter, we also saw negotiated aspirations when we looked at the fragility of educational opportunities. We learned that, unlike their Icelandic counterparts, students who wanted to quit school as soon as they could find a job did not differ much in terms of school engagement from those who wanted to remain in school. Students of foreign background, however, reported greater domestic barriers. In fact, this chapter highlights the importance of

understanding the perceived financial security or fragility of opportunities for those of foreign background. The interviews revealed a group of students who most envisioned going to upper secondary school, yet who were also very aware of the fragility of educational opportunities due to a perceived commonality of hardship in Iceland. These findings shed light on the perceived positionality of the migrant family in Icelandic society, and the complex push and pull factors involved in the educational path (Kerckhoff, 1979; Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Jencks, Crouse and Mueser, 1983).

It may not necessarily be the case that a student who is more susceptible to drop out for employment is a student who doesn't want to study, doesn't value education, or put effort in school. We must look at their situation as a whole, understand their family's background, their support system in addition to interpersonal skills and characteristics. Our findings raise a whole range of questions about the value of education and how we can erase these barriers for students of foreign background. We must ask ourselves: what do these findings tell us about the openness of the society? Do students of foreign background have enough positive role models, who they can mirror themselves after and who they can look up to? How can we ensure that they do? Simultaneously we cannot guarantee that by going down the *right educational path* will lead to the same destination for all students, regardless of their background. We should be wary of approaching students' needs or aspirations as a check list, and once all boxes have been ticked, we can bask in the happiness of having found the key to a truly meritocratic educational system. Reay (2017) describes the road towards social mobility as "full of doublings-back, loops and curves, culs-de-sac and diversions", which shows well the complexities of the idea of an egalitarian educational system. As the educational system does not exist in a vacuum, we need to address a system that perpetuates the status quo as a societal matter. What is the societal position of people of foreign background, what message does that send to our students and what opportunities does that offer them?

According to Illich (1970/2018) schools assign a social rank that conform to the pre-existing social structure, roles where students learn to conform to the practices of discrimination and prejudice that prevails in a society. On this ground he called for "de-schooling". However, we can also turn this around and call for a societal change. Thereby, student aspirations are not an *issue* that has to be dealt solely within the educational system, but rather calls for a societal dialogue of merit, role models and opportunities, how to welcome newcomers and what roles we are willing to pass on to them in that society, alongside addressing barriers within the educational system. Such ideas are perhaps closer to Freire's (1970/2017) ideas who envisioned an environment for a dialogue whereby everyone involved

can learn from each other. Although his objectives were to change the classroom, his ideas are equally appropriate outside the classroom. While the first step towards that reparation may be to identify barriers that impede students from flourishing, similarly, there is a need to take a hard look within and find a place of agreement as to what kind of future we want to head towards as a society.

8 Discussion and conclusion

8.1 Answering the research question

As we have seen in this thesis, Iceland has gone through immense changes in a very short period of time. Since being a signatory to the EEA agreement in 1994, the former-homogeneous population has moved to become a more diverse society (Statistics Iceland, 2020c, 2020d). Such rapid changes have not only shifted the composition of the Icelandic population but also the schools, thereby posing new challenges, if schools are to comply with the inclusive school policy they are legally bound to.

Challenges have risen with regards to how students of foreign background fare in the Icelandic educational system: more likely to drop out before graduating from upper secondary school, more likely to choose vocational studies than subject-based education and there is a clear divide in their educational attainment during compulsory education.

Knowing this, we must ask ourselves how this may affect the students and their outlook for the future. Focusing on students of foreign background, where do their aspirations take them? Who do they look up to when they form their aspirations? What do the students believe is available and possible to them and can we detect any barriers to these aspirations?

In this thesis we set out to answer the following question:

How do we explain the differential educational aspirations, if any, between children of foreign background and native background in Iceland in the last three years of compulsory school in Iceland?

Moreover, we strive to explain how these aspirations are formed with two further sub-questions:

    a. **How does the level and nature of school engagement influence academic aspirations?**

    b. **What are the roles family background, language and ethnic identity, have in shaping educational aspirations?**

Before we can answer the research question, we first need to establish whether there is a difference in educational aspirations between students of foreign and native background in Iceland.

We have established that there is some difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background in terms of their aspirations. This is supported by the quantitative data, where 64.2% of students of Icelandic background were certain about undertaking more education after they finished post-compulsory education, compared with 50.5% of students of foreign background; this difference was statistically significant. However, we learned that once we control for *gender, having received enough information in school* and *knowing their parents' educational level,* this difference disappears. Such findings emphasise the importance of understanding external factors such as the cultural capital of the student, rather than simply the background of the student. Moreover, when we further included *domestic barriers, believing success in Iceland was achievable for people like them, and how they fared in school in Icelandic*, students of foreign background were more likely than those of Icelandic background to be certain about going to upper secondary school right after they finished compulsory school.

These findings are supported by the qualitative data, as delving into the wider contexts and family backgrounds enabled us to understand the barriers students of foreign background encounter, and the avenues through which these aspirations are formed.

In order to explain the difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background, and the aspirations of the latter group, there are three main themes that run through all three chapters that we have already covered on ethnic identity, language proficiency, and school engagement. These themes are: ***borders to belonging***, ***navigating the educational system,*** and ***negotiated aspirations***.

8.1.1 Borders to belonging

In terms of ethnic identity, we learned that many of the students of foreign background described constraints to what can be deemed as *Icelandic* or accepted as *Icelandic enough*, both as with regards to appearance as well as language proficiency. Descriptions of *not feeling authentically Icelandic enough* to claim an identity resulted in students' ambivalence or uncertainty as to who they were. This both applied to appearance as well as language. While

some students expressed how their sense of belonging in Iceland was circumscribed by stereotypical ideas about Icelandic appearance or language proficiency, others explained how they were actively *othered* and excluded through racial slurs or other discriminating remarks. Although they often referred to this as *teasing*, such exclusionary remarks evoked a sense of stigma, isolation, or reduced belongingness (Rastas, 2005; Tran and Lefever, 2018).

Throughout chapter five to seven we encountered the same students describing the border to belonging, through which they could not pass. This was not limited to their self-image but extended to how they felt in school. It is important to feel as if you are part of the school environment, where there are others *like you* in your surroundings, and feeling as if you can trust the other members of your school community. However, difference is not merely voiced by peers, but also by what is unsaid in the *hidden* messages of the classroom and the wider society. For example, in some of the schools I visited there was a significant emphasis on speaking Icelandic at all times, and in some cases I realised that this was the message given to my interviewees before they arrived. In a handful of cases this created a wall between me and the interviewee until I reiterated my offer to continue with the interview in English. Whilst it is positive to place emphasis on the native language in Iceland, there must be a time and a place. Inflexible ideas about good language practices may be considered as a marker of successful integration on behalf of the migrant; however, it disregards the variants of a heterogeneous society and dismisses multilingual practices (Birman and Trickett, 2001; Phinney, Berry, Vedder and Liebkind, 2006; Behtoui, Hertzberg, Jonsson, Rosales and Neergaard, 2019; Gogolin, McMonagle and Salem, 2019).

In fact, this study accentuates the importance of making a distinction between *academic* language and *social* language. Icelandic studies have maintained the increasing use of English among children in Iceland, regardless of their background. It is a language that they are motivated to learn in school, but it is also used outside school in social settings (Lefever, 2009; Tran and Lefever, 2018). These findings are echoed loudly in this research, where English served an important role in creating and maintaining social bonds, or even served as a fixed entity they could rely on. What the quantitative data revealed is that there was no difference in the students' perceived proficiency in Icelandic between those who spoke with their friends solely Icelandic or together with another language (these findings were further supported by the interviews). Moreover, the students who felt as if they could not, or were not allowed to, speak English to supplement their Icelandic, felt more like outsiders who lacked the tools to access social spaces.

Being able to access social spaces is of great importance, both inside and outside of school. This study has shown how students, of both Icelandic and foreign background, who socialise with classmates and friends from school, outside the school grounds, also report a greater sense of emotional engagement. Of even greater importance, students of foreign background who did not socialise with their peers, scored significantly lower than students of Icelandic background who did not socialise with their peers, thus suffering more from not being able to extend their friendships outside the school ground. Such findings highlight how we must pave the way for students of foreign background to help them to create bonds outside of school.

Finally, this thesis shows the importance of belonging and feeling included, and more so for students of foreign background than Icelandic background. We saw how different aspects of school engagement were interrelated for the two groups, where emotional engagement proved to be more strongly correlated with seeing the value in education than the other dimensions, whilst behavioural engagement and strategies were of more importance for students of Icelandic background. We saw the same throughout the interviewees, where some of the students I interviewed described how they tried to find common links with others on the grounds of being from the same ethnic background or a shared *foreign status*. These were people who they could mirror themselves in, could ask questions or offered them an image of their perceived post compulsory options. Thereby, having such a bond could translate into a common aspiration. They created or aspired to create their own community and thus aspired to attend the same school or live in the same town. This is what I have referred to as a window of aspirations (Ray, 2006), where students envision what they have seen or can see together with others they perceive as similar to them.

What these findings show is how we must think about schooling in a wider sense, in terms of what message the students receive about inclusion or exclusion. The Act on Compulsory Schools states that compulsory schools should be shaped by the Christian heritage of the Icelandic culture and further states how the role of schools is to strengthen understanding in Icelandic society, its history, and *specificities (I. sérkenni)*. This alludes to both a common and narrow understanding of what it means to be part of the majority (Lög um grunnskóla, nr 91/2008, article 2). However, we should critically ask ourselves: how do schools in Iceland address diversity? How does the school material represent the diversity of the Icelandic population? How does it challenge the negative rhetoric and stereotyping that students may encounter in wider society? What do the schools have to offer in order to provide all students with positive role models? How can we, as a society, ensure that all students, regardless of their

background, believe that success is achievable for them? These are all questions that must be answered, and they must be addressed quickly. We can no longer afford to let students of certain backgrounds disappear from the educational system.

8.1.2 Navigating the educational system

In this research we have demonstrated the important role schools and parents play as informants for students who are taking their first steps towards adulthood. As students lead up to the transition of leaving the compulsory educational system and deciding on what they want to do, it is fundamental that they understand their options and opportunities. This role of parents and the school may be even more important for students of foreign background than for those of Icelandic background. In chapter 7 we saw how the difference in educational aspirations between the two groups disappeared once we controlled for *knowing their parental educational level* and the sense of *receiving enough education* from their school.

The position schools and parents are in, however, is very different. Parents play a crucial part in the formation of students' aspirations. This can be either through the *transgenerational family script* (Ball et al., 2002) (i.e., the choices the student makes that are rooted in a dream originally established by the parent) or the *familial habitus* (Reay, 1998a) (i.e., the acceptable educational path, given their background). What this study has shed a light on, is the importance of conversations regarding education within the household. When we have established that simply *knowing* their parents' educational level increased the odds of students being certain about their post compulsory plans, it is of great concern that as many as 40% of the students of foreign background did not know either of their parents' educational levels. These findings evoke many questions, but the most pressing one of all is this: are these findings a proxy of the family's cultural capital, where they are reluctant to discuss education either due to their lack of experience of further education or due to their lack of experience within the *Icelandic* educational system – or both?

What these findings show is the importance of building bridges between the home and the school, where parents are actively included in the post compulsory choices of their children. School should not assume prior knowledge in the ways they explain the opportunities available to students (McDonough, 1996). This leads us to the second point: schools as informants. If the parents don't seem educationally oriented, don't understand the educational system, and do not have a point of reference, the school's informative role becomes even more important. This study shows that students who believe they have received enough information from their

schools regarding their post compulsory options, were at greater odds of being certain about going to upper secondary schools, as opposed to those who did not feel that they had received enough information. Moreover, we learned that many of the students felt confused about the school system, up to the extent that some were not even familiar with the Icelandic *word* for high school or upper secondary school. Not knowing the very basics regarding their future options, how are they to actively engage in conversations about it or seek information?

The schools thus play a key role in mobilising the *institutional habitus* across the student body. Are the students actively guided, where the aim is to fill in gaps or create a foundation of understanding when needed? Or does the school treat career advice and future oriented guidance as a check list, assuming the student already has access to knowledge and information? Schools have an important role in advising students towards their next steps, partly through the dissemination of information about their options and should thus not rely on the capital students have access to at home. If schools assume prior access to knowledge and information, they will inherently leave some students behind, swimming in uncharted waters, when their resources should be tailored to individual students (ibid; Reay, 1998a).

However, this informant role cannot only be placed on the schools' shoulders. This study further shows how governmental agencies, municipalities, the upper secondary system, among others, may show better initiatives in providing accessible information regarding the options available to students. In a system that you are unfamiliar with, it is very difficult to gain an understanding and to overcome the absence of information. Bridges must be built between the school and home that recognise the fact that there may be students and parents who do not understand the fundamentals of the Icelandic educational system. This should be the case in any equitable educational system.

8.1.3 Negotiated aspirations

The students participating in this study often described how their aspirations were negotiated, albeit rooted in various reasons. The problem with negotiating aspirations is that your innermost dreams may then become lost, or as Hart (2012a) describes it:

> *The danger of writing off an aspiration prematurely is that it can then be lost. Once a line is drawn in the sand and something is regarded as impossible, it is unlikely that the aspiration will be revisited. (p. 196)*

This study has shown how students negotiated their future aspirations on the grounds of perceived lack of language skills, where they resided in the country and domestic barriers, and there were also indicators of negotiated aspirations due to vulnerable financial situation.

Such findings fall well within Appadurai's (2004) ideas of the *capacity to desire*, but according to him, not everyone will have the same opportunities to achieve their aspirations in a stratified society. If pathways exist between aspirations and reality for those who are at disadvantage, they are more likely to be rigid. Appadurai spoke from an economic perspective and his ideas are in line with prior knowledge; studies suggest that students of economically disadvantage background are more like to aspire for greater achievements than they believe is realistic (Boxer et al., 2011). Other research shows how these students have had to re-negotiate their aspirations over time and to settle on a more *reasonable* aspiration than what they may have otherwise aimed for (Baker, 2019). Our findings support this to a certain extent, although I would like to extend Appadurai's perspective to any *means, asset*, or *capital* that is worthwhile to exploring one's opportunities for the future.

The role of language comes through in this study like a red thread. We have learned that students who aspired for a higher educational level than they deemed as realistic for them, were also students who, on average, struggled with their language proficiency. We saw how perceived lack of language skills held the students back in class. They described that they were reluctant to ask for help, struggled with the textbooks or doing their homework. Moreover, we saw how this perceived lack of language capital (proficiency) affected the students in terms of their aspired future, resulting in them downgrading or limiting their post compulsory opportunities. This study suggests a gender element to this barrier, where boys seemed more reluctant to ask for help than the girls. That is in concurrence with other studies, where conforming to stereotypical masculine roles is associated with avoidance to ask for help in the classroom, as it is seen as a sign of weakness (Czopp, et al., 1998; Kessels and Steinmayr, 2013; Leaper, Farkas and Starr, 2019).

Whilst some of the interviewees lived in areas that offered plenty of upper secondary schools, others lived in more remote areas, where there was a choice of one small school with limited educational choices or where they had to travel or move. Living in an area did not seem to affect the students of foreign background in terms of *whether* they aimed for further education. But, in certain cases it meant that these aspirations had to be negotiated. This study shows how having an extended family in other parts of Iceland expanded the students' educational options. This form of *asset* is essentially social capital, a net that offers the student some form of security and opportunity as they are deciding which educational path to take.

Those who did not have extended family in other parts of Iceland had to either negotiate their choice of school or line of education, otherwise their entire family had to negotiate the teens' aspirations against the family finances and employment.

Finally, this study shows how domestic barriers may affect these students' aspirations. Perhaps not surprisingly, students of foreign background reported greater domestic barriers than students of Icelandic background. We also learned that students who wanted to leave school as soon as possible to find a job, also reported greater domestic barriers and this held true for students of both backgrounds. Moreover, students who reported greater domestic barriers were also less likely to be certain about going to upper secondary school. Through the means of vignettes, we learned how a group of students, most of whom aimed for further education, explained how they would leave school to work if their family went through financial hardship. They all agreed on the commonality of hardship, suggesting an outlook where they experienced a lack of financial security. These findings highlight the fragility of educational opportunities, where the aspirations are highly dependent upon the perceived financial security of the family. Similarly, it may shed a light on the perceived *risk* these students are taking by pursuing further education. This risk can both be emotional as well as financial. Whilst pursuing further education may seem like an opportunity towards upwards mobility, it may also feel like an abandonment of what you know, where you belong or where you come from. It is in that friction between belonging and striving for *more*, that may cause a conflict for the student in their decision making (Reay, 2017). Appadurai's (2004) approach is economical, where he explains how there are different opportunities to achieve one's aspirations in a stratified society. Therefore, the *risk* of potentially wasting time, energy or financial resources in a society that already feels rigged against you, becomes greater. Jencks, Crouse and Mueser (1983) explain this decision-making process regarding high school as a representation of a costs-and-benefits assessment, made by the individual. Decisions are not made in a vacuum, nor do they simply represent the will of the individual. We can see this from the quantitative findings, which demonstrated that unlike their Icelandic peers, foreign origin students who wanted to quit school as soon as they could find a job, did not differ significantly from those who wanted to remain in school - in terms of school engagement. Yet, as mentioned, they reported greater domestic barriers. Such findings make it difficult to argue that the key to success is through education, or that there are other factors that come into play than sheer merit.

These negotiated aspirations suggest the existence of an invisible *map of norms,* where the pathway between aspirations and reality may feel rigid, and not as available for those of less affluent backgrounds (Appadurai, 2004). Additionally, these findings force us to look at

the societal factors that may contribute to such findings. It is sad to think that students may feel forced out of the educational system due to a society that does not provide them with enough stability and security. We must understand this within the context within which these students live. Despite high labour force participation among those of foreign background in Iceland, they tend to be highly concentrated in low paid and low-skilled jobs, which are more sensitive to sudden changes on a fragile labour market (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Haraldsson and Ásgeirsdóttir, 2015; Magnússon, Minelgaite, Kristjánsdóttir, Christiansen, 2018; Napierała and Wojtyńska, 2017; Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska, 2019; Vinnumálastofnun, n.d., 2013). This leaves us with the question: what effect does that have on one's aspirations, knowing the positionality of *others like them* in a society? Or even more importantly, is the educational system equipped with counteracting such message or does it simply perpetuate it?

I have addressed the research questions this thesis set out to explore and described the difference in educational aspirations between students of Icelandic and foreign background.

In addition to the three areas that have thus been covered, there was one group of students that stood out in particular; they must be studied further. Throughout the study, boys of foreign background seem to be a particularly vulnerable group in all areas studied. They were much less likely to be certain about their post compulsory plans than any other group (only 39%). These findings further supported the qualitative interviews where boys often described their future plans of further education as a plan B to an unclear plan A. Moreover, they often reported anxiety and stress when thinking about the future, a feeling that was often rooted in fear and shame that they were not doing well in school.

Such findings should not come as a surprise. In Chapter 3 we saw how there has been a downwards trend among first-generation boys in choosing a school that offers subject-based qualifications (figure 6). They are more likely than any other group to have dropped out from upper secondary school without qualification and very few graduates within four years of study (figure 8). In order to understand these situational factors better, attention must to be drawn to hegemonic masculine ideas in the Icelandic context and how it intersects other aspects of the lives of those of foreign background (Burke, 2006). We must take into consideration what is being expected of them in the household, how masculinity in the Icelandic context may fit within their own family values or sense of self. Moreover, as Tarabini and Curran (2019) argue how social class or marginalised position within a given society may have a role in how the embodied masculinity is perceived by others whereby masculine display on behalf of an

immigrant may not carry the same value as if they were native. These findings point to areas of research that must be further explored.

8.2 Limitations

As with any piece of research, this study has some limitations. In Chapter 4, I discussed the importance of reflexivity and being sensitive to verbal as well as non-verbal cues, when conducting research with young people. I further discussed how I, as an adult, will never be able to fully understand the reality of young people today. Moreover, I have always held a position of privilege in Iceland, as White and native. Thus, I will not have the same insight as the interviewees, or fully understand the experiences of those of foreign background.

In addition to this, the main limitations of this study stem from three reasons: issues regarding the small population of Iceland, and thereby an even smaller foreign population; issues rooted in choices made by an overly ambitious first year PhD student; and issues due to pure chance.

The population of people of foreign background has grown rapidly in Iceland in the past decades. This is particularly true for minors but 22.4% of youth in Iceland is of foreign background. However, as has been stated throughout this thesis, the Icelandic population is very small in numbers, meaning that there are not many children of foreign background. This did not prove to be an issue with the qualitative component of this research as interviewees were purposely chosen. However, in quantitative research, larger numbers render better estimates, meaning that in order to reach to a small subgroup nested within the main student body, I had to reach as many schools as possible to reach as many students of foreign background as possible.

Due to the small number of participating students of foreign background in the quantitative part of this study it was not possible to look into differences between students who were of mixed parentage or who were first- or second-generation immigrants. As all these students were grouped together, differences across migrant background were lumped together into an *average experience* of those of foreign background.

Originally the plan was to look at the role of schools and school differences, using multilevel modelling. As there were only 17 participating schools, three that had no students of foreign background, this was not deemed feasible. Nevertheless, the interviews further emphasised the importance of looking into differences across schools, a research idea that would be worth exploring further in the future.

As I embarked on this journey, I was eager to learn as much as I could. I spent the first year understanding the literature around aspirations and the main concepts used for this study. I went through every single scale and questionnaire I could get my hands on and decided to, not only assemble my own questionnaire, but some of the scales as well. Scales and survey questions had to be simple to understand; they had to be relevant to teenagers and they had to be succinct. Moreover, I wanted to understand the *mechanisms of difference*. This means that I did not only want to know *if* there was a difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background, but also *what* that difference consisted of. For this reason, I included more questions than what I, in retrospect, should have included, resulting in response fatigue. Unfortunately, there was as 25% non-response rate on some of the questions and in my final model in Chapter 7 only 71.5% of my total sample were included. There was not a difference in the non-responses between students of Icelandic and foreign background, but this still creates some grave methodological errors. If I were to repeat this study, I would ensure that not only the *questions*, but also the scales and the questionnaire were succinct.

During the autumn and spring term of 2017 and 2018, I contacted all municipalities in Iceland that had a school for students in year 8, 9, and 10. I received a response from most municipalities within a relatively short time frame, which gave me time to contact schools and arrange for the questionnaire to be distributed.

Overall, I was met with positivity and enthusiasm from the schools. Many of the headmasters expressed their interest in the topic and talked about how important it was. Most schools that replied and declined participation, said it was due to time and an exceptional number of censuses and studies the students had had to fill out in the last few months. These included the triennial PISA study, a biannual Icelandic school census in addition to smaller scale studies, and some also referred to a grave technical error in the Icelandic National Examination, given to all students in year 9 in Iceland.

Many of those that declined, said that they were happy to participate in the following autumn if that was possible. This was not deemed feasible, as I had over 30 interviews to conduct, based on the findings from the quantitative data.

As the sampling method was highly dependent on the municipality's and school's willingness or opportunity to participate, a sampling bias was inevitable (Bryman, 2012) and strictly speaking, I cannot be sure if the non-participating municipalities or schools differ in any way from those who participated. Regardless, there was nothing at face value that suggest that the non-participating schools were systematically different from the participating schools. This is based on how their characteristics such as school composition and geographical location

did not differ in an important way from the participating schools. Furthermore, this is also based on the conversations (in written and/or over the phone) I had with headmasters of the non-participating school, where the overwhelming majority expressed an interest in participating, but passed due to an inconvenient timing.

At last, it is worth addressing how the quantitative and qualitative data did not always seem to portray entirely the same story. This has been alluded to throughout the study but is worth addressing in a cohesive manner. In Chapter 5, we covered ethnic identity and perceived language proficiency, measures that were both tested in a quantitative and qualitative manner. Right from the beginning, we can see how there are limits to measure a concept such as ethnic identity in a country with such a short history of immigration, like Iceland, where we can scarcely refer to *communities* or an established subculture within the dominant culture. Here, the qualitative data provided an invaluable insight into the complexities of identity formation in such a society, where the questions revolve equally around the background of the student as well as how that fits into the wider societal context. The same can be said about the difference we could see at times with engagement in Chapter 6. Whilst there sometimes appeared to be little or no difference between students of Icelandic and foreign background on the surface, the interviews with the latter group painted a picture of nuances and barriers only visible to them. In fact, this tension between the quantitative and qualitative data emphasises the importance of unpacking each dimension of engagement in such a way that it includes varied experiences. For example, a student may show their behavioural engagement by following school rules, participating in class and finishing their homework. However, it is through the means of interviews where we understood how students of foreign background, despite their best efforts, where often faced with additional hurdles due to language proficiency, sometimes resulting in them feeling excluded or becoming recluse.

Whilst it may appear as a limitation, when the data does not portray entirely the same story, I would argue that this is a strength of the thesis. It highlights the necessity of ensuring that we include the lived experience of students of foreign background that may be concealed to the majority.

8.3 Policy recommendations

Throughout this study, we have both covered areas that schools have to be mindful of to ensure they appeal to all students, regardless of background, as well as described successful initiatives schools and teachers offer their students. In addition, this study has revealed areas where the very way we approach the transition from compulsory education to upper secondary education is fragmented due to a reliance on prior understanding of the educational system that some students do not have.

Some students described inventive initiatives that facilitated their learning experience (e.g., student-led homework clubs and parental involvement in the learning process). Many of the students described how they had few to turn to when they needed help with homework, this resulted in some students not doing their homework. Rather, they asked the teacher for help the next day. Such an arrangement not only creates extra work for teachers but signals low school engagement or an attitude of dismissiveness on behalf of the student and parents.

Schools and teachers must have tools to include parents in the learning process. For example, one student described how they had been asked to write a paper in the student's native language with help from their parents, which then the student translated to Icelandic. That way the learning became a well-rounded experience, by both including the parents as well as teacher encouragement to connect the two languages his world consisted of. However, such initiatives should not lie solely on the shoulders of teachers who are eager and enthusiastic about immigration matters. As with any other challenges they are faced with in the classroom, teachers and schools should have a toolbox they can go through to find ideas about how to engage students and their families. Such toolboxes should be provided through a clear policy tailored to students of foreign background.

In this study we have seen how the gap between compulsory education and the upper secondary school system remains unbridged for some students of foreign background. This study has unequivocally emphasised the important informative role schools have, as part of an equitable educational system. Even more so, this study has shown how many of the students of foreign background had limited understandings of the Icelandic educational system and what next steps were available to them. In some cases, this uncertainty put a damper on their future aspirations, whilst others looked towards the sending country when they envisioned the future. The level and quality of career advice students are given in school is an important feature of the institutional habitus and varies from one school to another. Does the school assume prior knowledge and information that the student may have access to at home or do they ensure every

individual is given advice that best suits them (McDonough, 1996)? The findings of this study reveal some school difference; however, there was an apparent difference across the student body within each school. Whilst some students reported that they had attained guidance and help with their post-compulsory decision, others disclosed that they had not had any such guidance. Even more importantly, this study shows a gap in knowledge among certain groups of students, most of whom were first-generation immigrants who seriously lacked an understanding of the basics needed to make an informed decision about their future. It is unacceptable that students in the last years of compulsory education don't even know the *words* for upper secondary school. In such cases, the student is stripped of their agency to seek information on their own and to make an informed choice.

In the same realm, many students described how post compulsory plans were a topic visited in the very last year, or even months, of schooling. Many students revealed that they had received visits at school or done exercises aimed to help them make an informed decision about their future. But in most cases, these took place during the last year (year 10) of compulsory school. Such an arrangement assumes that upper secondary decisions are a relatively straightforward process and it disregards the complications some students are faced with due to potential lack of cultural or social capital. For some of the students interviewed in this study, going to upper secondary school was a major decision with many layers of complications. That, together with potential lack of understanding about the educational system, sets these students back and thinking about the future may be daunting.

Lastly, we have seen how the educational system, as a whole, must find ways to include parents to ensure a smooth transition from compulsory education to upper secondary education. This thesis has shed a light on the important role parents have in the student's decision making. Open conversation about educational options should be encouraged in the household. However, if parents feel out of their depth or they don't have an understanding of the educational system, such conversations may be of little help. The educational system must not assume prior knowledge or understanding of the parents, and not rely on parents asking the necessary questions they need. It is difficult to formulate questions with regards to what you don't know. Thus, the system, as a whole, should ensure information is available, including the basic information. Additionally, governmental agencies have to make sure that information like the equality grant is available in more languages than purely Icelandic. Moreover, there is a need for an accessible and multilingual overview of where dormitories are available and what they consist of.

This research speaks to societal factors such as what it is to be an Icelander, who can succeed, the job security of people of foreign background, as well as opportunities to progress in their respective field or make use of their education. We must think about the message it signals to children of foreign background when they see people *like them,* concentrated in certain fields, whilst invisible in others. Furthermore, it is imperative that students have the freedom to define their own identity, even if they do not fulfil stereotypical ideas of what an Icelander looks like. Educational aspirations are not formed in a vacuum in schools. They are formed gradually together with the perceived options they believe are available to them. Therefore, students, regardless of background or ethnic identity should be able to find role models in all layers of society and be given the strong message that all roads are available to them.

8.4 Final words

The objectives of this study were to identify the barriers students of foreign background encounter and to bring the voices of teenagers of foreign background into a conversation about how we can accommodate all students in a truly equitable educational system.

In this thesis, I have strived to understand the educational aspirations of students of foreign background and compared it with students of Icelandic background. I have spoken with teenagers of foreign background who generously allowed me into their lives and given me an insight into their aspired future. It is through the journey towards these aspired futures where we encountered and explored potential barriers that restrict them on their educational path.

Although we have offered an extensive analysis of the barriers students of foreign background encounter in the Icelandic educational system, there is no reason to believe that this is an exhaustive account of all possible barriers. When addressing education for all, we cannot simply focus on schools and teachers, but rather extend our viewpoint to societal factors them may impede full participation. This study emphasises the importance of further exploration of societal changes and policy shifts that can provide an equitable educational system for all students, regardless of background.

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10 Appendices

10.1 Further details for chapter 3

A comprehensive list of the 20 largest groups of foreign nationals in Iceland, by population size and percentage of the total number of foreign nationals.

	N	%
Poland	20649	41.8
Lithuania	4628	9.4
Latvia	2076	4.2
Romania	2061	4.2
Portugal	1405	2.8
Germany	1388	2.8
United Kingdom	1159	2.3
Spain	1136	2.3
Philippines	988	2.0
Denmark	898	1.8
Croatia	887	1.8
United States of America	802	1.6
Czech Republic	798	1.6
France	742	1.5
Italy	576	1.2
Thailand	558	1.1
Hungary	540	1.1
Slovakia	505	1.0
Bulgaria	497	1.0
Vietnam	397	0.8

(Statistics Iceland, 2020f)

10.2 Letters to parents and consent form for participants

Dear parent/guardian

I, Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir, am a PhD researcher in Sociology at the University of Kent in England. For the past 18 months, I have been working on my research on children in secondary school (last years of Grunnskóli), their future aspirations after compulsory education, different levels of belonging towards their school environment, and what factors could contribute to that difference. I will be comparing children of Icelandic background on one hand, and foreign background on the other, to see if we can see similar or different trends depending on children's background.

I will approach all children in their last three years in compulsory school (year 8, 9 and 10 in grunnskóli). The questionnaires will be web based and given to children during school hours by their teacher.

All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential. I have already notified the Data Protection Authority (S8578/2018) and will comply to rules and regulations to make sure no information can be traced to neither an individual nor a school. The ethics committee in University of Kent has also been notified. I am the guarantor of this research.

Only I, along with my supervisors, Dr Miri Song, professor at the University of Kent and Dr Tina Haux a lecturer at the University of Kent will have access to the data.

For further information regarding this research you are welcome to contact me by email E.D.Sigurdardottir@kent.ac.uk

I hereby ask for a permission if your child could participate in my research.

The research data will be gathered in few days, however, if you do not want your child to participate I ask you to notify the child's school.

Best regards,

Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir
kt. 210586-2459

E.D.Sigurdardottir@kent.ac.uk

Dear parent/guardian

I, Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir, am a PhD researcher in the department of Social Policy, Sociology and Social research at the University of Kent in England. For the past 18 months I have been working on my research on children in secondary school (last 3 years of Grunnskóli), their future aspirations after compulsory education, different levels of belonging towards their school environment, and what factors could contribute to that difference.

The working title for this research is "Children of foreign background in Iceland – aspirations after compulsory education" and is funded by the Development Fund of Immigrant Affairs, as can be seen both on as well as .

Last spring I administered a questionnaire to students in year 8, 9, and 10, and it is now time for the second part of my study, which is an interview with children of foreign background, that is children who are either first or second generation immigrants, or with either parent born in another country than Iceland.

I will be asking questions about aspirations and future plans after compulsory education and feelings towards school. The interview will take about an hour, conducted by me and I will have to audio record it. All audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed.

All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential and anonymised. I have already notified the Data Protection Authority (S8578/2018) and will comply to rules and regulations to make sure no information can be traced to neither an individual nor a school. The ethics committee in University of Kent has also been notified.

I will be the only person who will have access to all data but I will also hire a transcriber who will have had signed a non-disclosure agreement, to transcribe some of the interviews. The product of these interviews will be used for my doctorate thesis, and presentations of my study, as well as for a report that will be written for the Minister of Social Affairs and Equality in Iceland.
At no point, during the process or presentation of this study, will I use names, names of schools or municipalities or any other identifiable information.

I want to, hereby, ask for a permission to interview your child. If you are willing to give that permission I want to ask you to reply to this email and the school will get me in contact with you. I will then contact you for a formal consent and find a good time for the interview to take place.

For further information regarding this research you are welcome to contact me by email
E.D.Sigurdardottir@kent.ac.uk

All the best,

Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir

Dear participant

This research is a part of my doctoral research in sociology at the University of Kent and you are invited to participate because you are a student in either grade 8, 9 or 10 in an Icelandic secondary school.

All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential. I have already notified the Data Protection Authority (S8578/2018) and will comply to rules and regulations to make sure no information can be traced to neither an individual nor a school. The ethics committee in University of Kent has also been notified. I am the guarantor of this research and only me and my supervisors, Dr Miri Song a professor at the University of Kent and Dr Tina Haux a lecturer in University of Kent, will have access to the data.
I will not be gathering any identifying information such as name, email address or IP address.

Answering this survey is voluntary and you may withdraw from participating at any time. However, your participation is highly appreciated.

The procedure involves filling an online survey and will take approximately 20 minutes.

If you have any questions, please contact me at E.D.Sigurdardottir@kent.ac.uk

Sincerely

Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir

Dear participant

I, Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir, am a PhD researcher in the department of Social Policy, Sociology and Social research at the University of Kent in England. For the past 18 months I have been working on my research on children in secondary school (last years of Grunnskóli), their future aspirations after compulsory education, different levels of belonging towards their school environment, and what factors could contribute to that difference.

The working title for this research is "Children of foreign background in Iceland – aspirations after compulsory education.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research because you and/or your parent(s) is/are born in another country than Iceland and you are a student in year 8-10 in an Icelandic compulsory school (Grunnskóli).

I will be asking questions about your aspirations and future plans after compulsory education and feelings towards your school. The interview will take about an hour, it will be conducted by me and I will have to audio record it. All audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed.

All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential and anonymised. I have already notified the Data Protection Authority (S8578/2018) and will comply to rules and regulations to make sure no information can be traced to neither an individual nor a school. The ethics committee in University of Kent has also been notified. I am the guarantor of this research.

I will be the only person who will have access to all data but I will also hire a transcriber who will have had signed a non-disclosure agreement, to transcribe some of the interviews. The product of these interviews will be used for my doctorate thesis, and presentations of my study, as well as for a report that will be written for the Minister of Social Affairs and Equality in Iceland.
At no point, during the process or presentation of this study, will I use names, names of schools or municipalities or any other identifiable information.

For further information or comments regarding this research you are welcome to contact me by email E.D.Sigurdardottir@kent.ac.uk

Your participation is highly appreciated. However, I want to stress that participation is voluntary and you may quit at any time. Also, I can stop the recording at any time, if you wish for.

All the best,

Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir

Title of project:
Children of foreign background in Iceland – aspirations after compulsory education.

Name of investigator:
Eva Dögg Sigurðardóttir

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet I have been handed for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I also understand that anonymised direct quotes may be used in published articles and thesis, if needed.

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of parent/guardian   Date   Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____
Lead researcher   Date   Signature

10.3 Questionnaire and interview guide

Questionnaire:

School's number _____ *

1. What grade are you in?
   a. 8th
   b. 9th
   c. 10th

2. To which gender identity do you most identify?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Other
   d. Prefer not to answer

3. Where were you born?
   a. In Iceland
   b. Elsewhere

3i. If answered 3b:
   I was born in

   - Northern Europe/Scandinavian country
     By Northern Europe/Scandinavian country I mean any of the following
       country: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and regions that belong to
       them such as Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland Islands.
   - South and central Europe,
     By South and central Europe I mean any of the following country: Germany,
       Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, France, Spain,
       Portugal and Italy
   - Eastern European country
     By Eastern European country I mean any of the following countries: Albania,
       Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria,
       Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo,
       Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland,
       Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine
   - Asia, Africa, South-America, Central-America
   - Britain, Ireland, United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

3ii. If answered 3b:
I moved to Iceland

- Before my 10th birthday
- After my 10th birthday

4. Where was your mother born?
    a. In Iceland
    b. Elsewhere

5. Where was your father born?
    a. In Iceland
    b. Elsewhere

6. What is your mother's highest level of education?
    a. Compulsory education or less (Grunnskóli)
    b. Finished high school or vocational studies
    c. University degree
    d. Don't know/not applicable

7. What is your father's highest level of education?
    a. Compulsory education or less (Grunnskóli)
    b. Finished high school or vocational studies
    c. University degree
    d. Don't know/not applicable

8. Who of the following live in your home?
    a. Both parents
    b. I live roughly half the time with my father and half the time with my mother
    c. I mostly live with my mother, not my father OR I mostly live with my father, not my mother
    d. I live with my mother and her partner OR I live with my father and his partner
    e. Other

9. Compared with most people you know personally, in your community, friends, family, neighbours, and peers, would you say that your family's household income is…….
    a. Far below average?
    b. Below average?
    c. Average?
    d. Above average?
    e. Far above average?

10. Is Icelandic spoken in your home?

    a. Yes, solely Icelandic
    b. Yes, Icelandic and another language
    c. No, solely another language

11. If you think about people around you, how many do you consider a **<u>close</u>** friend

       a. None
       b. One
       c. Two
       d. Three
       e. Four or more

12. If you think about most of your **<u>close</u>** friends, are they born in Iceland or elsewhere?
       a. Iceland
       b. Elsewhere
       c. Not applicable

13. Do you speak Icelandic to your friends and acquaintances?
       a. Yes, solely Icelandic
       b. Yes, Icelandic and another language
       c. No, solely another language

14. These questions are regarding your friendship with your **<u>close</u>** friends. Please choose an answer that best fits you where 1 is ***Strongly disagree*** and 5 is ***Strongly agree***

	1	2	3	4	5	Not applicable
a. My friends really try to help me						
b. I can count on my friends if anything goes wrong						
c. I have friends who I can share my joys and sorrows with						
d. I can talk to my friends about my problems						

15. I would like to ask you few questions about how you feel in school. Please choose an answer that best fits you where 1 is *Strongly disagree* and 5 is *Strongly agree*

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
a. I feel like a part of my school					
b. Other students at my school like me the way I am					
c. I feel like I can be myself at my school					
d. I am not happy to be at my school					
e. I don't have any friends in my school					
f. I feel like most teachers in my school are interested in me					
g. I am proud to be a student in my school					
h. Other students do not respect what I have to say					
i. My teachers support me so I can be successful at school					
j. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here at my school					
k. Most mornings, I look forward to going to school					
l. I feel left out of activities that take place in my school					
m. Other students in my school are there for me when I need them					
n. I feel very different from most other students in my school					
o. I feel like I could talk to at least one adult in my school if I would have a problem					
p. There is no one in my school like me who I can confide in					

16. Please choose an answer that best fits you where 1 is *Strongly disagree* and 5 is *Strongly agree*

	1	2	3	4	5
a. I participate in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class evenings, school dances, school choir)					
b. I follow school rules					
c. I always finish my homework					
d. When I am in class I **<u>do not</u>** participate in class discussions					
e. When I am in class I participate in class activities					
f. I try my best to do well in school					
g. When I am in class, I just pretend like I'm working					
h. I respect my teachers					
i. When I am in class, my mind wanders					
j. If I have a problem understanding something, I go over it again until I understand it					
k. I take an active role in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class representative, student council)					
l. I never skip school					
m. Sometimes I get into trouble in school					

17. Please choose an answer that best fits you where 1 is ***Strongly disagree*** and 5 is ***Strongly agree***

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
a. When I do well in school it's because I work hard					
b. I give up when assignments are hard					
c. After finishing my schoolwork, I check to see if it's correct					
d. When I study, I try to understand the material better by relating it to things I already know					
e. I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things					
f. I use various methods to learn so I better understand the material					
g. I work hard to get a good grade even when I don't like a class					
h. I try to see the similarities and differences between things I am learning for school and things I know already					
i. Learning is fun because I get better at something					
j. I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school					
k. Most of what is important you learn in school					
l. What I'm learning in my classes will be important in my future					
m. The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I'm able to do					

18. How well do you feel you have done in school this year
    a. Very well
    b. Quite well
    c. Quite bad
    d. Very bad
    e. Not sure/I don't know

19. In general, how well do you believe you fare in school compared to your peers? Please situate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is *Bad, I am probably one of the weakest* and 10 is *Excellent, I am probably one of the best*

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9--------10

20. How well do you believe you fare in the following subjects, compared to your peers? Please situate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is *Badly, I am probably one of the weakest* and 10 is *Excellent, I am probably one of the best.*

English

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8-------9--------10

Icelandic

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9-------10

Maths

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8-------9-------10

21. If you were to say how likely it is, in your opinion, that you will undertake further study **right away** after your compulsory education (i.e. high school, technical college) how would you rate it? Please choose an answer on the scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is *very unlikely* and 10 is *very likely**

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9--------10

22. What is the highest academic degree you ***would like to*** obtain?*
 a. Compulsory education
 b. Matriculation examination (graduate from high school)
 c. Vocational studies (including journeyman certification and art degrees that don't lead to matriculation examination)
 d. Bachelor degree
 e. Postgraduate degree (Master's degree/doctorate degree)
 f. Other

23. Realistically, what is the highest academic degree you ***think you will*** obtain?*
 a. Compulsory education
 b. Matriculation examination (graduate from high school)
 c. Vocational studies (including journeyman certification and art degrees that don't lead to matriculation examination)
 d. Bachelor degree
 e. Postgraduate degree (Master's degree/doctorate degree)
 f. Other

24. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is ***Does not describe my family at all*** and 5 is ***Describes my family very well.***

	1	2	3	4	5
a. Most people in my family go to high school when they have finished compulsory school					
b. My family's opinion is important to me when deciding on what I want to do after compulsory school					
c. My family wouldn't mind if I left school after I finish compulsory education					

25. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is Never and 5 is *Always*
Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always

	1	2	3	4	5
a. When I'm not in school, I often feel lonely					
b. I have access to the internet to work on my homework if I need to					
c. I don't have access to a computer to work on my homework if I need to					

26. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is *Very untrue* and 5 is *Very true.*

I find it hard to reach my goals in school because……

	1	2	3	4	5
a. There is a lack of a quiet place to study at home.					
b. Of my parents'/guardians' lack of knowledge to help me					
c. Of my parent's/guardians' lack of time to help me.					
d. Of lack of support from my parents/guardians					
e. I have to look after my younger siblings					
f. I have to work to help with family expenses					
g. I have to look after my parents/guardians or other relatives					

27. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is *Strongly disagree* and 5 is *Strongly agree*

	1	2	3	4	5	Not applicable
a. My friends think doing well at school is important						
b. Most of my friends intend to continue their education after compulsory education						
c. My friends' opinion is important to me when deciding on what I want to do after compulsory school						
d. I socialize with my classmates or other friends from school, outside of school						

28. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is *Strongly disagree* and 5 is *Strongly agree*

a. It is important to me to do well in school					
b. I am hopeful about my future					

29. Please choose an answer that best describes you where 1 is *Strongly disagree* and 5 is *Strongly agree.*

	1	2	3	4	5
a. I think I have had enough information from my school to make up my mind regarding further education					
b. Teachers in my school say negative things about people of my origin					
c. Teachers in my school have lower academic expectations for me, than other students					
d. School will give me the necessary foundation to reach my future goals					
e. My education will create many future opportunities					
f. I don't think it will make much difference to my life how well I do at school					
g. Going to school after compulsory education is important					
h. I want to leave school as soon as I can find a job					
i. I plan to continue my education after compulsory education					
j. I feel lonely in my school					

30. The following questions ask you questions about your Ethnic Identity. Remember there are no right or wrong answers, just answer as accurately as possible. Use the scale below to answer the questions. Find the number between 1 and 5 that best describes you.

1 Strongly disagree to **5 Strongly agree**

	1	2	3	4	5
a. I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.					
b. I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.					
c. I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.					
d. I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.					
e. I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group.					
f. I feel strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.					

31. In general, how well does the following statements apply to you? Please situate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is *Does not describe me at all* and 10 is *Describes me perfectly.*

I consider myself to be an Icelander

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9--------10

In general, other people consider me to be an Icelander

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9--------10

Overall, I would like to be perceived as an Icelander

1 ---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8--------9--------10

32. I would like to ask you to evaluate your own ability to communicate <u>in Icelandic</u> in different situations. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in each of the situations described below where 0 is *completely incompetent (I can't do it at all)* and 100 is *completely competent (I feel very confident that I can do it)*

1) Present a talk to a group of strangers
2) Talk with an acquaintance (a person you know slightly but is not your friend).
3) Talk in a large meeting of friends.
4) Talk in a small group of strangers.
5) Talk with a friend.
6) Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances (people you know slightly but are not your friends)
7) Talk with a stranger.
8) Present a talk to a group of friends.
9) Talk in a small group of acquaintances (people you know slightly but are not your friends)
10) Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
11) Talk in a small group of friends.
12) Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

33. Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements, where 1 is *strongly disagree* and 5 is *strongly agree.*

		1	2	3	4	5
a.	In order to succeed in Icelandic society, <u>one must</u> speak Icelandic.					
b.	In order to succeed in Icelandic society <u>one must</u> have an Icelandic family					
c.	In order to succeed in Icelandic society, <u>one must</u> know the right people					
d.	In order to succeed in Icelandic society, <u>one must</u> do well in school					
e.	I expect to be better off than my parents, when I am their age.					
f.	In Iceland, people like me <u>can</u> succeed					

*This question must be answered in order to proceed.

Interview guide:

Background:

For how long had your mother/father/parents lived in Iceland before you were born?/ For how long have you lived in Iceland?

Do you have any siblings?

      Do they live here? Older or younger?

      If older: did they ever attend this school?

      How would you describe your relationship with them?

How would you describe your family?

      Would you say that your family differs in any way from other Icelandic families?

      What about your home?

      Do you have a large family?

            Do they all live in Iceland?

What language do you usually speak at home?

Have you always lived in this town?/When you moved to Iceland, did you move straight to this town?

      Always attended this school?

How would you describe yourself?

      What would you say is your greatest strength?

      What about your weaknesses?

So how would you describe in general how you feel in school?

      How do you feel when you go back to school after the weekend/after a school holiday?

What about in the classroom?

      Do you know many of your classmates?

      Do you feel like you are a part of the group?

      Do you have friends at school?

Do you talk to them outside of school?

What do you normally do during break time?

What sort of a student are you?

Would you say you are a good student?

Are there any subjects that you find easier/more fun than others/enjoy?

Are there any subjects that you find difficult/that you don't like/not as good at?

What is it about xx that you enjoy/don't like?

If you need help in class, what do you do?

Do you feel like that's helpful?

What about when you have homework? Do you have a lot of homework?

If you ever need help with your homework, who do you talk to?

Do you find that helpful?

Do you ever feel bad/lonely at school?

If that would happen, is there anyone you could talk to?

Have you ever felt lonely, at school?

What did you then do?

When I say the word "friends" what's the first thing that comes to mind?

What's the best thing about having friends?

Is there anyone that fulfils that for you

Is there anyone who you see as your best friend?

What is it about your friendship that makes you feel that way?

When you talk to your friends, what language do you speak?

Is there anyone in your family who you feel similar towards?

Is there anyone at school who you can identify with?

Is there anyone you feel like is similar to?

Anyone who could understand you or your situation or how you feel?

Is there anyone who is very different from you?

If I would meet you somewhere abroad, we would start chatting, and I would ask: "where do you come from?" what would you say?

      What about if I met you in Iceland?

      Do you ever get this question?

What is it to be an Icelander?

      Are you an Icelander?

          Are you xx?

vignette I have a short story that I would like you to read, or I could read it for you. I both have it in Icelandic and in English so you can take which ever version you want and I'm just gonna give you some time

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you read Alex's story?

      What do you think Alex should do?

      Do you think this is common?

      What would you do?

Do you work at all? During winters/summers?

      What do you do?/Would you like to work?

      Do you feel as if it affects your studies?

When I say *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli* (upper secondary school/high school) what do you think about?

      Do you want to go to *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli?*

          Why?/Why not?/have you given it any thought?

      What strengths do you have that would help you in *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli*?

      Are there any issues that could come up when you have to choose a school?

      Do you know what you want to study?

          Do you know where you can study that?

          Is that something you are working towards?

      What matters the most to you, when you choose the school?

          Do you anyone who goes there?

          What are your friends going to do?

Have you ever spoken about *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli* to your parents?

     What do they think?

     How do you know?/Have they told you that?

     What is your parents' educational level?

          Do you think they completed *upper secondary school/university*?

If you had any questions about the school/line of study/regarding *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli*, is there anyone you could talk to?

     Have you already had any help?

          Who helped you?

          Would you like any help?

          Did you find that helpful?

Do you ever talk about *menntaskóli/framhaldsskóli*?

     To others? To your friends?

          What do they think?

What do you want to be good at in 5 years?

     Is there anything that you could do now to help you get there?

What about 10 years, where do you see yourself in 10 years?

     Do you think you will live in Iceland?

What motivates you to reach your goals and dreams?

Who would you say is your role model?

How do you feel when you think about the future?

     Do you often think about the future?

If you could send yourself a message, that you would receive in 10 years, what would it say?

Anything that you would like to add?

10.4 Formulas

Chi square

To test whether there was a significant association between two test variables variables

$$(\chi^2 \ (obtained) = \Sigma \frac{(f_o - f_e)2}{f_e})$$

T-test

If there was a need to test the difference in mean between groups, testing a null hypothesis (H_0: $\mu_1 = \mu2$ or H1: $\mu1 \neq \mu2$). This is tested, either based on the assumption of equal variance or where equal variance is not assumed (Field, 2013; Healey, 2012).

Equal variance is assumed:

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{S_p^2}{n_1} + \frac{S_p^2}{n_2}}}$$

Where S_p, the pooled standard deviation, is defined as:

$$S_p^2 = \frac{(n_1 - 1)s_1^2 + (n_2 - 1)s_2^2}{n_1 + n_2 - 2}$$

Or if equal variance is not assumed:

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

Multiple Logistic Regression

To estimate the probability of one having immediate plans of furthering their education after compulsory school, given multiple explanatory variables. The model for $\pi(x)$=P(Y=1) when values x=(x$_1$, ..., x$_p$) of p predicting variables are:

$$logit[\pi(x)] = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \cdots + \beta_p x_p$$

Or, alternatively if directly defining $\pi(x)$:

$$\pi(x) = \frac{\exp{(\alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \cdots + \beta_p x_p)}}{1 + \exp{(\alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \cdots + \beta_p x_p)}}$$

Principal Component Analysis

This is a method used to identify a cluster of interrelated variables and thereby reducing a set of variables into dimensions or components. A component consists of loadings and is denoted by the following formula:

$$Y_i = b_1 X_{1i} + b_2 X_{2i} + \cdots + b_n X_{ni}$$

10.5 Measurements

10.5.1 Educational aspirations – main outcome variable

The main outcome variable is immediate plans after compulsory education. Students were asked to estimate how likely they believed they were to undertake further study right after compulsory education, on a 10-item Likert scale, where 1 was very unlikely, and 10 was very likely.

Percentages: How likely the student believes they will undertake further study right after compulsory education
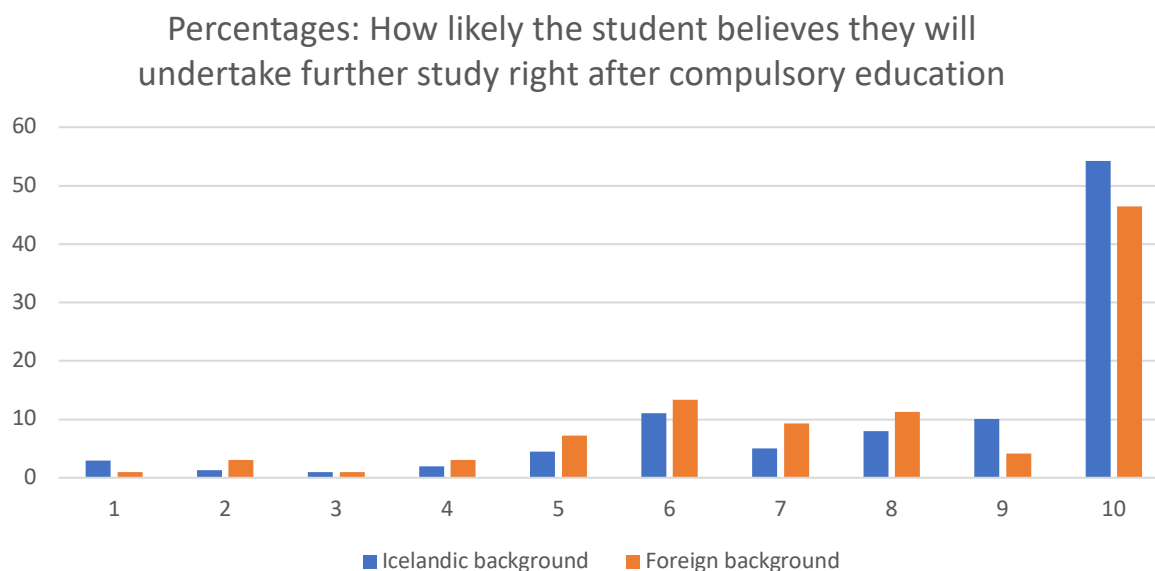
The students were asked to estimate how likely they believed they were to undertake further study right after compulsory education, where 1 was very unlikely, and 10 was very likely. Numbers on y-axis indicate the percentages, and x-axis indicates the students' rating. (N= 685 for Icelandic background and N=97 for those of foreign background).

Overall, the majority of students believed they would undertake further study right away after compulsory education. Divided by background, both groups answered in a similar manner, as can be seen in the graph above. There was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Proportionally, most students of either background, believed they were to undertake further education.

To further analyse and understand what could possibly contribute to a student's decision-making of attending further education, a bivariate variable was created, given how skewed the original variable is.

This table shows the mean and standard deviation for the variable where students were asked how likely they believed they were to undertake further study right after compulsory education with a higher score indicating more likelihood.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
Icelandic background	685	1	10	8.4	2.35
Foreign background	97	1	10	8.0	2.40

With the mean for both groups above 8 (8.4 and 8.0 respectively), a similar standard deviation of 2.3-2.4, it was deemed as acceptable to use eight as the highest cut-off point, to represent those who were unsure whether the students believed they were to undertake further education immediately after compulsory education, and 9 and 10 to indicate those who were more certain. The new variable is thereby a bivariate variable, measured on a 0-1 scale, where 0 represents those who are not certain about their immediate plans and 1 represents those who are certain about going to upper secondary school straight after compulsory school.

10.5.2 Principal component analysis – factor loadings

Below are the scales used in this study, the components retained and their loadings. I have included the pattern matrix that shows the loading of items on a given component, as well as the structure matrix table that shows the correlation between variables and components.

School engagement

Behavioural engagement – pattern matrix

Items	Components		
	1	**2**	**3**
n. I participate in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class evenings, school dances, school choir)			0.650
o. I follow school rules[B]	**0.821**		
p. I always finish my homework[B]	**0.733**		
q. When I am in class I **<u>do not</u>** participate in class discussions		0.678	0.481
r. When I am in class I participate in class activities[B]	**0.646**		
s. I try my best to do well in school[B]	**0.816**		
t. When I am in class, I just pretend like I'm working	0.436	0.603	
u. I respect my teachers[B]	**0.776**		
v. When I am in class, my mind wanders		0.700	
w. If I have a problem understanding something, I go over it again until I understand it[B]	**0.670**		
x. I take an active role in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class representative, student council)			0.769
y. I never skip school	0.618		
z. Sometimes I get into trouble in school	0.483		

Behavioural engagement – structure matrix

Items	Components		
	1	**2**	**3**
aa. I participate in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class evenings, school dances, school choir)			0.692
bb. I follow school rules[B]	**0.812**		
cc. I always finish my homework[B]	**0.759**		
dd. When I am in class I **do not** participate in class discussions		0.666	0.400
ee. When I am in class I participate in class activities[B]	**0.727**		0.414
ff. I try my best to do well in school[B]	**0.823**		
gg. When I am in class, I just pretend like I'm working	0.533	0.688	
hh. I respect my teachers[B]	**0.757**		
ii. When I am in class, my mind wanders		0.668	
jj. If I have a problem understanding something, I go over it again until I understand it[B]	**0.671**		
kk. I take an active role in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class representative, student council)			0.761
ll. I never skip school	0.587		
mm. Sometimes I get into trouble in school	0.509		

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Emotional engagement – pattern matrix

Items	Component		
	1	**2**	**3**
q. I feel like a part of my school[M]	**0.664**		
r. Other students at my school like me the way I am[M]	**0.811**		
s. I feel like I can be myself at my school[M]	**0.793**		
t. I am not happy to be at my school[B]		**0.577**	
u. I don't have any friends in my school[B]		**0.571**	
v. I feel like most teachers in my school are interested in me[R]			**0.753**
w. I am proud to be a student in my school[R]			**0.624**
x. Other students do not respect what I have to say[B]		**0.605**	
y. My teachers support me so I can be successful at school[R]			**0.771**
z. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here at my school[B]		**0.682**	
aa. Most mornings, I look forward to going to school[R]			**0.568**
bb. I feel left out of activities that take place in my school[B]		**0.691**	
cc. Other students in my school are there for me when I need them[M]	**0.487**		
dd. I feel very different from most other students in my school[B]		**0.624**	
ee. I feel like I could talk to at least one adult in my school if I would have a problem[R]			**0.656**
ff. There is no one in my school like me who I can confide in[B]		**0.679**	

Emotional engagement – structure matrix

Items	Component		
	1	**2**	**3**
gg. I feel like a part of my school[M]	**0.793**	0.435	0.504
hh. Other students at my school like me the way I am[M]	**0.874**		0.430
ii. I feel like I can be myself at my school[M]	**0.854**		0.421
jj. I am not happy to be at my school[B]		**0.584**	
kk. I don't have any friends in my school[B]		**0.621**	
ll. I feel like most teachers in my school are interested in me[R]			**0.752**
mm. I am proud to be a student in my school[R]	0.482		**0.734**
nn. Other students do not respect what I have to say[B]		**0.637**	
oo. My teachers support me so I can be successful at school[R]			**0.788**
pp. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here at my school[B]	0.441	**0.753**	
qq. Most mornings, I look forward to going to school[R]			**0.621**
rr. I feel left out of activities that take place in my school[B]	0.425	**0.743**	
ss. Other students in my school are there for me when I need them[M]	**0.639**	0.419	0.478
tt. I feel very different from most other students in my school[B]		**0.616**	
uu. I feel like I could talk to at least one adult in my school if I would have a problem[R]			**0.641**
vv. There is no one in my school like me who I can confide in[B]		**0.623**	

Cognitive engagement – pattern matrix

Items	Component 1	Component 2
n. When I do well in school it's because I work hard[v]		0.426
o. After finishing my schoolwork, I check to see if it's correct[S]	0.588	
p. When I study, I try to understand the material better by relating it to things I already know[S]	0.802	
q. I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things[S]	0.676	
r. I use various methods to learn so I better understand the material[S]	0.844	
s. I work hard to get a good grade even when I don't like a class[s]	0.516	
t. I try to see the similarities and differences between things I am learning for school and things I know already[S]	0.829	
u. Learning is fun because I get better at something[S]	0.474	
v. I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school[S]	0.493	
w. Most of what is important you learn in school[V]		0.824
x. What I'm learning in my classes will be important in my future[V]		0.862
y. The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I'm able to do[V]		0.755

Cognitive engagement – structure matrix

Items	Component 1	Component 2
a. When I do well in school it's because I work hard[v]	**0.580**	**0.611**
b. After finishing my schoolwork, I check to see if it's correct[S]	**0.629**	
c. When I study, I try to understand the material better by relating it to things I already know[S]	**0.748**	
d. I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things[S]	**0.748**	0.484
e. I use various methods to learn so I better understand the material[S]	**0.768**	
f. I work hard to get a good grade even when I don't like a class[s]	**0.694**	0.612
g. I try to see the similarities and differences between things I am learning for school and things I know already[S]	**0.797**	
h. Learning is fun because I get better at something[S]	**0.676**	0.640
i. I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school[S]	**0.557**	
j. Most of what is important you learn in school[V]		**0.787**
k. What I'm learning in my classes will be important in my future[V]	0.429	**0.858**
l. The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I'm able to do[V]		**0.785**

Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity -pattern matrix

Items	Components	
	1	**2**
I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs	**0.865**	
I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group		**0.906**
I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.		**0.847**
I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.	**0.795**	
I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group.	**0.837**	
I feel strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.		**0.552**

Ethnic identity – structure matrix

Items	Components	
	1	**2**
I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs	**0.808**	
I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group		**0.873**
I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.		**0.852**
I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.	**0.854**	0.464
I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group.	**0.861**	
I feel strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	0.605*	**0.704**

Domestic barriers

Domestic barriers - component loading

Items	Components
I find it hard to reach my goals in school because…	**1**
…. there is a lack of quiet place to study at home	0.659
…of my parents'/guardians' lack of knowledge to help me	0.787
…of my parent's/guardians' lack of time to help me	0.783
…of lack of support from my parents/guardians	0.855
…I have to look after my younger siblings	0.734
…I have to work to help with family expenses	0.806
…I have to look after my parents/guardians or other relatives	0.800

10.6 Choosing schools along the ring road

Iceland is a sparsely populated country, the sparsest in Europe, with population density per square kilometre at roughly 3.6 (Eurostat, 2020a). As if not enough, two thirds of the population live in what is most often referred to as the *Greater Capital Area* (I. Höfuðborgarsvæðið), which comprises of Reykjavik, the capital city, and its surrounding towns (Statistics Iceland, 2021). Furthermore, due to agricultural, geographical reasons as well as access to waters, for Iceland's main vocation from its settlement, the towns and villages are mainly close to the coast, leaving the middle mostly vacant. With aforementioned in mind, there are certainly urban areas, with few semi-urban towns as an exception, but the majority of the country would be characterised as rural or remote, and in some cases even in relatively isolated parts of the country.
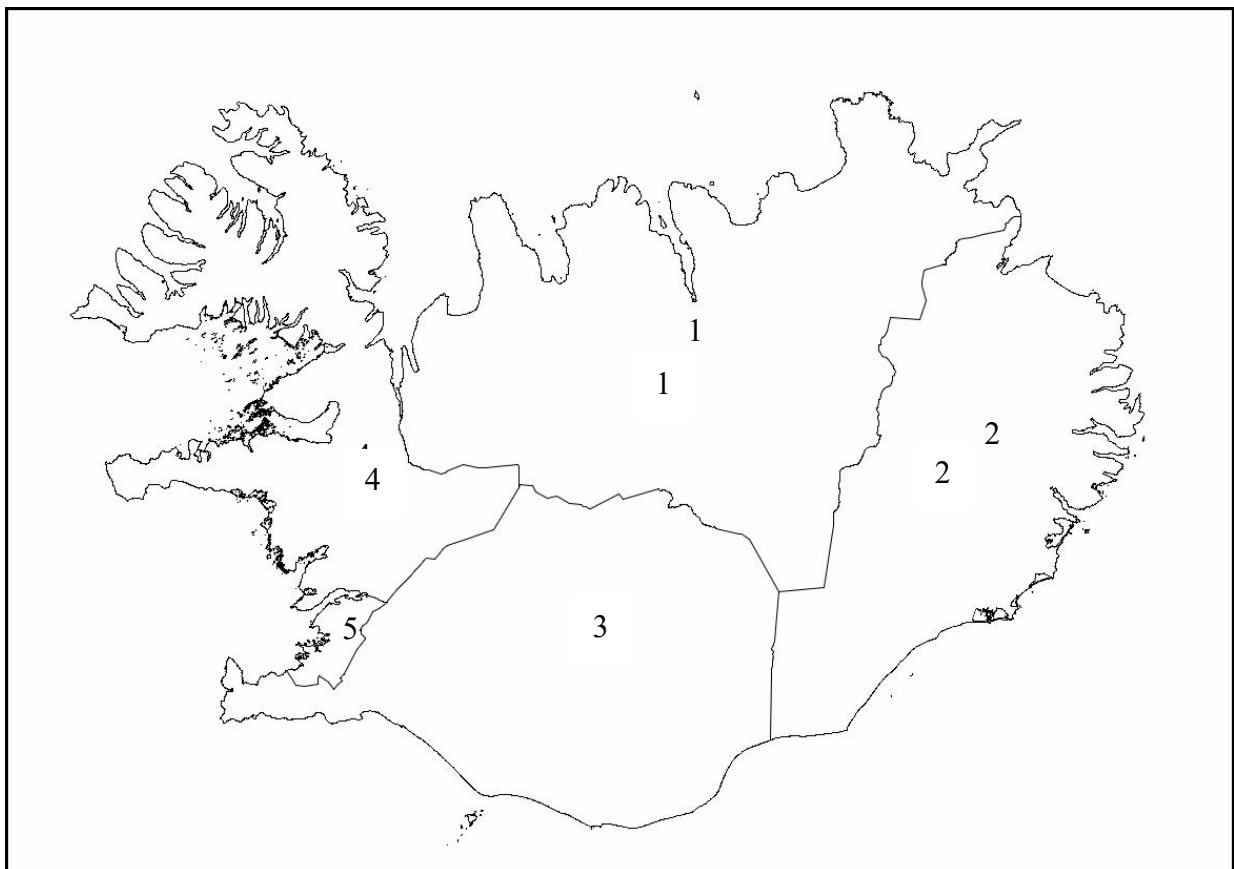
Figure A: A map of Iceland, divided by former county lines. Map drawn by Kristinn Hallur Sveinsson (2021), Geographer B.Sc, for the purpose of this thesis.

From the beginning, my aim was to get as many participating schools as possible, from every part of Iceland. Each territory in Iceland will be referred to by the cardinal directions;

Norðurland, Austurland, Suðurland and Vesturland, in addition to the Capital area. This division may appear straight forward but is not as clear cut as one might think. In the preparation of this study, I worked on the basis of former county lines. That way the 1. Northern Region (I. Norðurland) represents former North and South Thingeyjarsysla in addition to West Hunavatnssysla; 2. East region (I. Austurland) includes South and North Mulasysla as well as East Skaftafellssysla; 3. the South Coast (I. Suðurland) represents West-Skaftafellssysla, Rangarvallarsysla, Arnessysla and Sudurnes, and 4. the western part of Iceland (I. Vesturland) includes Borgarfjardarsysla and Westfjords; leaving the Capital Area (I. Höfuðborgarsvæðið) and Kjos as the fifth area.

Map:

Sveinsson, K.H. (2019) Map of Iceland divided by former county lines (unpublished)

10.7 Full list of country division and where all foreign-born students were born.

Full list of country division

"I was born in…."

- Northern Europe/Scandinavian country
  By Northern Europe/Scandinavian country I mean any of the following countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and regions that belong to them such as Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland Islands.
- South and central Europe,
  By South and central Europe, I mean any of the following countries: Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy
- Eastern European country
  By Eastern European country I mean any of the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine
- Asia, Africa, South-America, Central-America
- Britain, Ireland, United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

Where foreign born students were born

The table here below both refers to students of Icelandic background who were born in a foreign country but both parents were born in Iceland, and foreign background, meaning that they were either first generation immigrants or of mixed parentage but born in a foreign country. As we can see from the table, most students, whose both parents were born in Iceland, had been born in Northern Europe or Scandinavia, or almost 53%. This was not the case for students who were of foreign background and born in another country where a similar percentage, 52.6% was born in an Eastern European country.

All students who were born in another country were asked to choose from a list, where they had been born.

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	%	N	%
Northern Europe/Scandinavia	19	52.8	4	10.5
South or Mid-Europe	8	22.2	5	13.2
Eastern Europe	0	0	20	52.6
Asia, Africa, South America, Central America	5	13.9	3	7.9
Core Anglosphere	4	11.1	6	15.8
Total	36	100	38	100

10.8 Ethnic identity- additional table

Students of foreign background who lived in area where the population of foreign nationals was under or above the country's average

	My education will create many future opportunities			I plan to continue my education after compulsory education		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
% under country's average	54	3.72	1.02	54	4.11	0.98
% above country's average	36	4.08	0.99	35	4.23	0.91

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

10.9 Perceived language proficiency - additional tables

Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC)

*I would like to ask you to evaluate your own ability to communicate <u>in Icelandic</u> in different situations. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in each of the situations described below where 0 is **completely incompetent (I can't do it at all)** and 100 is **completely competent (I feel very confident that I can do it)***

13) Present a talk to a group of strangers
14) Talk with an acquaintance (a person you know slightly but is not your friend).
15) Talk in a large meeting of friends.
16) Talk in a small group of strangers.
17) Talk with a friend.
18) Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances (people you know slightly but are not your friends)
19) Talk with a stranger.
20) Present a talk to a group of friends.
21) Talk in a small group of acquaintances (people you know slightly but are not your friends)
22) Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
23) Talk in a small group of friends.
24) Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

Each scale consists of:

Public = (1+8+12)/3
Meeting = (3+6+10)/3
Group = (4+9+11)/3
Dyad = (2+5+7)/3
Stranger = (1+4+7+10)/4
Acquaintance = (2+6+9+12)/4
Friend = (3+5+8+11)/4
Total = (stranger sub score + acquaintance sub score + friend sub score)

Mean and standard deviation on each measure of SPCC for students of Icelandic and foreign background.

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public	564	71.6	25.5	82	60.6	25.8
Meeting	567	69.7	24.6	82	57.7	24.7
Group	566	73.2	23.6	82	63.9	24.9
Dyad	569	74.4	22.6	80	65.3	24.2
Stranger	565	64.6	27.4	81	52.7	26.2
Acquaintance	565	71.4	24.4	82	61.7	25.8
Friend	559	81.1	21.4	81	71.7	24.0
SPCC total	550	72.5	22.4	79	61.9	23.7

Mean and standard deviation on each measure of SPCC for all students regardless of background

	Total		
	N	Mean	Std dev
Public	646	70.2	25.8
Meeting	649	68.2	24.9
Group	648	72.0	23.9
Dyad	649	73.3	23.0
Stranger	646	63.1	27.6
Acquaintance	647	70.2	24.8
Friend	640	79.9	22.0
SPCC total	629	71.2	22.8

Chronbach's alpha (α) – internal consistency

	Icelandic	Foreign	Total
	α	α	α
Public	0.863	0.867	0.866
Meeting	0.798	0.821	0.805
Group	0.814	0.836	0.820
Dyad	0.731	0.767	0.740
Stranger	0.910	0.898	0.911
Acquaintance	0.894	0.931	0.901
Friend	0.856	0.865	0.860
SPCC total	0.902	0.923	0.907

Higher score and a low score according to McCroskey and McCroskey (2013).

	High score	Low score
Public	> 86	< 51
Meeting	> 85	< 51
Group	> 90	< 61
Dyad	> 93	< 68
Stranger	> 79	< 31
Acquaintance	> 92	< 62
Friend	> 99	< 76
SPCC total	> 87	< 59

Students of foreign background. Pearson's r correlation between participating in extra-curricular activities and the SPCC scale

	I participate in extracurricular activities that take place in my school (e.g. class evenings, school dances, school choir)
Public	0.212
Meeting	0.265[*]
Group	0.299[**]
Dyad	0.400[***]
Stranger	0.352[**]
Acquaintance	0.229[*]
Friend	0.295[**]
SPCC total score	0.325[**]

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

Students of foreign background: Comparison in mean between students who aspire for a university degree or not, on the SPCC scale.

	Non-university degree			University degree		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public	33	55.6	24.74	44	64.5	26.92
Meeting	33	54.0	23.37	44	60.4	26.62
Group	32	59.5	24.35	45	66.1	26.35
Dyad	33	62.1	24.32	42	68.1	24.97
Stranger	33	48.2	24.85	43	56.5	28.03
Acquaintance	33	56.2	25.3	44	65.5	26.87
Friend	32	68.9	23.95	44	73.2	25.00
SPCC total score	32	57.0	22.58	42	65.6	25.26

significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

Students of foreign background: Comparison in mean between students who realistically think they can obtain a university degree or not, on the SPCC scale.

	Non-university degree			University degree		
	N	Mean	Std dev	N	Mean	Std dev
Public***	41	51.9	24.62	35	72.5	24.17
Meeting**	41	50.3	22.91	35	68	25.03
Group**	41	57.7	24.48	35	72.9	23.61
Dyad**	41	58.2	23.96	33	76.6	21.03
Stranger***	41	43.7	24.48	34	64.9	25.61
Acquaintance**	41	53.8	24.58	35	72.9	24.5
Friend**	41	66	24.59	34	80.7	21.19
SPCC total score**	41	54.5	22.72	32	73.6	21.93

* Statistically significant (p < 0.05); **Statistically significant (p< 0.01); ***Statistically significant (p < 0.001)

10.10   Vignette

Alex is 15 years old and a student in year 10 in Grunnskóli. Alex has been doing quite well in school, and wants, at some point in the future, go to university. Alongside school, every other weekend, Alex has been working in a grocery store and has set part of it aside as savings, and uses part of it as pocket money.

Lately, Alex's parents have been struggling financially as Alex's dad lost his job. Alex's mom works full time but has now begun to work evenings, cleaning in various companies in town, to earn a bit more. Alex's parents have tried to hide the situation, but they are obviously worried.

Alex has asked, at the grocery store, if it is possible to take some extra shifts, and thereby not have to ask their parents for money, like for packed lunch or clothes. Alex is also wondering whether it might be best to delay going to high school for a little while, and rather go in a year or two, and help their parents with the finances.

10.11   Educational aspirations – additional tables

I find it hard to reach my goals in school because…

	Icelandic background			Foreign background		
	N	Mean	Std. Dev	N	Mean	Std. Dev
...there is a lack of quiet place to study at home	655	1.96	1.08	91	2.16	1.19
…of my parents'/guardians' lack of knowledge to help me***	655	1.96	1.11	91	2.49	1.25
...of my parent's/guardians' lack of time to help me*	654	2.17	1.17	90	2.47	1.25
...of lack of support from my parents/guardians**	654	1.75	1.07	91	2.08	1.20
...I have to look after my younger siblings	652	1.80	1.07	91	1.79	1.08
…I have to work to help with family expenses*	654	1.58	0.98	90	1.84	1.15
…I have to look after my parents/guardians or other relatives*	648	1.58	0.97	91	1.85	1.10

* Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); **Statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); ***Statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)

The percentage of students living in a town or a village where there is an upper secondary school

The following table shows the percentage of students living in a town or a village where there is an upper secondary school. Most students lived in a town or a village with a upper secondary school, or 74.2%, whereas the rest lived in a town with no upper secondary school, with the latter towns populated disproportionately by students of foreign background (χ^2 (1) = 14.43, p< 0.001).

Percentage of student living in town/village where there is an upper secondary school, by background.

	Icelandic background		Foreign background	
	N	%	N	%
Upper secondary school in town	177	23.6	45	40.5
Not an upper secondary school in town	572	76.4	66	59.5

Using 30 kilometres as a benchmark, participating schools, and thereby students, were divided by their proximity of the nearest upper secondary school. The 30-kilometre benchmark was chosen as an indicator of a distance that students could comfortably rely on public transport or drive, either by themselves or with others from the same municipality. Although some students living somewhat further away from the nearest school yet still drive on a daily basis, this was considered to be an acceptable distance for students who are still one year shy of a driver's licence, thus more likely to have to live in a dormitory[81].

Furthermore, students who have to move at least 30 kilometres or more from their home and family, are eligible for a grant, an equality grant, that they need to apply for and receive by the end of a semester, once schools have confirmed their learning outcome. This grant is twofold: for students who have to drive over 30 kilometres but live at home, or either live in a dormitory or pay rent for another accommodation (Menntasjóður námsmanna, n.d.a; Reglugerð um námsstyrki Nr. 692/2003). The grant is, as of now, 90.000 Icelandic Kronas per semester for those who drive and 156.000 Icelandic Kronas for those who rent[82] (Menntasjóður

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[81] Where possible, the shortest way from a participating school to the nearest upper secondary school was chosen. If the shortest distance was through seasonal mountain roads, Route 1 (the Ring Road) was chosen to measure the distance, or other non-seasonal roads.

[82] This is equivalent to roughly £500 and £868 (October 8th 2020) per semester.

námsmanna, n.d.b). Using 30 kilometre as a point of reference was therefore considered to be valid benchmark.

This divide didn't change a lot in terms of numbers of students in each group: 658 students (76.5%) of students lived in a town where there were 30 kilometres or less to the next upper secondary school and the rest, 202 students (23.5%) lived further away.

In terms of whether there was an association between distance to the next upper secondary school and of how certain they were about going to further education after compulsory education, the difference is marginal and not statistically significant

Certainty about going to upper secondary school

| | Icelandic background | | Foreign background | |
	30 km or less	More than 30 km	30 km or less	More than 30 km
Not certain	35.1%	37.8%	47.5%	52.8%
Certain	64.9%	62.2%	52.5%	47.2%
Total (N)	521	164	61	36

10.12　　　Additional information for figures

Figure 1:

The total number of people in Iceland at a given year.

	Total number of people in Iceland
1996	267,809
1997	269,735
1998	272,381
1999	275,712
2000	279,049
2001	283,361
2002	286,575
2003	288,471
2004	290,570
2005	293,577
2006	299,891
2007	307,672
2008	315,459
2009	319,368
2010	317,630
2011	318,452
2012	319,575
2013	321,857
2014	325,671
2015	329,100
2016	332,529
2017	338,349
2018	348,450
2019	356,991
2020	364,134
2021	368,792

Figure 5:

This table shows how many children in total are behind the percentages in figure 5. (Statistics Iceland, 2020h, calculations by author).

	Total	Icelandic background	1st generation immigrant	Second generation immigrant	Mixed background
2007	4173	3657	231	8	277
2008	4277	3754	225	15	283
2009	4299	3705	278	14	302
2010	3968	3455	221	11	281
2011	3919	3396	233	16	274
2012	3955	3432	210	11	302
2013	3811	3246	230	21	314
2014	3648	3098	225	23	302
2015	3724	3158	216	38	312
2016	3925	3306	224	43	352
2017	3753	3112	241	52	348

Figure 6:

This table shows how many boys and girls are behind the percentages in figure 5. (Statistics Iceland, 2020h, calculations by author).

Boys

	Icelandic background	1st generation immigrant	Second generation immigrant	Mixed background
2007	1720	107	3	141
2008	1754	86	11	132
2009	1717	130	5	144
2010	1634	101	6	132
2011	1639	100	4	133
2012	1654	95	3	143
2013	1543	89	12	152
2014	1469	102	8	141
2015	1461	95	18	132
2016	1559	97	17	175
2017	1508	108	23	171

Girls

	Icelandic background	1st generation immigrant	Second generation immigrant	Mixed background
2007	1937	124	5	136
2008	2000	139	4	151
2009	1988	148	9	158
2010	1821	120	5	149
2011	1757	133	12	141
2012	1778	115	8	159
2013	1703	141	9	162
2014	1629	123	15	161
2015	1697	121	20	180
2016	1747	127	26	177
2017	1604	133	29	177

Figure 7 and 8:

Number of students who had dropped out from upper secondary education within four years of enrolling, by background

	Icelandic background		1st generation		2nd generation		Mixed background	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2005	604	427	46	60	1	0	45	38
2006	641	477	58	106	0	1	64	41
2007	567	374	93	102	1	2	50	25
2008	611	398	75	110	4	0	62	45
2009	638	449	98	102	1	3	68	50
2010	612	345	78	76	2	1	54	30
2011	622	389	75	89	2	4	62	36
2012	586	409	68	62	3	1	61	44
2013	540	339	64	89	2	3	68	38
2014	554	318	76	75	3	4	67	32
2015	463	264	88	77	6	7	57	42

Further details for Figure 9

Number of students in the quantitative part, of Icelandic and foreign background in each participating school.

School number	Icelandic background	Foreign background
1	11	2
2	21	6
3	49	11
4	34	6
5	3	0
6	47	6
7	40	10
8	89	6
9	13	7
10	6	0
11	1	0
12	17	6
13	25	5
14	1	2
15	5	1
16	87	10
17	300	33
Total	749	111

Figure 10:

Average distance from a standardised low score on each scale, by background

Higher score and a low score according to McCroskey and McCroskey (2013).

	High score	Low score
Public	> 86	< 51
Meeting	> 85	< 51
Group	> 90	< 61
Dyad	> 93	< 68
Stranger	> 79	< 31
Acquaintance	> 92	< 62
Friend	> 99	< 76
SPCC total	> 87	< 59

How many responded on each dimension

	Icelandic background N	Foreign background N
Public	564	82
Meeting	567	82
Group	566	82
Dyad	569	80
Stranger	565	81
Acquaintance	565	82
Friend	559	81
SPCC total	550	79