



Háskólinn  
á Akureyri

## **Syrian Students in Icelandic Schools – Akureyri**

Voices of students, parents and teachers

Kheirie El Hariri

**Félagsvísindadeild  
Hug- og félagsvísindasvið  
Háskólinn á Akureyri  
2018**



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*Magister Artium-prófi í félagsvísindum*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of the Syrian students and their respective parents at the compulsory school level in Akureyri, Iceland, as well as the experiences of their teachers when dealing with them. Three Syrian families, constituting of three fathers, three mothers and six children, in addition to five teachers participated in this research. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, and thematic analysis was followed as a data analysis method. The findings revealed that there is a clash in cultural values regarding the process of education and a gap in home-school communication, which resulted in the parents' lack of trust towards the Icelandic schools. Furthermore, teachers lacked the appropriate support and training to deal with this specific group of students. In spite of that, students expressed their contentment with the education system, and had good relationship with their teachers.



*I dedicate this master's thesis project to my parents, Maha El Hariri and Muhieddine El Hariri, who raised me to value education more than anything else, and to my loving husband, Malek Kaderi, who always supports me to achieve my dreams.*



## **Preface**

This 90-credit master's thesis project marks the completion of the Masters of Arts by Research program in Social Sciences, School of Humanities, at the University of Akureyri. The research was conducted under the supervision of Markus Meckl, professor at the faculty of Social Sciences, Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir, associate professor at the faculty of Education and Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir, associate professor at the faculty of Social Sciences.

I am very grateful to all the participants who accepted to be part of this thesis project. This project would not have been possible without their contribution. My sincerest thanks to professor Markus Meckl, associate professor Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir, associate professor Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir and instructor Stéphanie Barillé who guided me through writing this thesis paper, and provided me with valuable advice while conducting my field work and analyzing the collected data. Their constant support and assistance was the key to successfully completing this project.

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# **Introduction**

## **Study Aim, Objectives and Benefits**

At the end of 2016, The Syrian civil war resulted in 5.5 million refugees, with almost half of them under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2017). Most of the refugees sought asylum in neighboring countries, while others risked their lives to reach Europe in search for a more stable and peaceful life. Iceland, an island located in the North Atlantic between Greenland and Norway, is a difficult destination to reach. Refugees resettling in Iceland usually arrive through specific organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the beginning of 2016, Iceland welcomed the first Syrian family under the title of quota refugees (UNHCR, 2016). Most of the Syrian refugee families arriving in Iceland had never heard about the country before. They enter Iceland not knowing what to expect, bringing with them their past experiences, which are partly traumatic due to displacement and war, and hold different cultural values from those found in Iceland. As a result, their integration process into the Icelandic society is a difficult and delicate procedure.

Education is a crucial factor in the refugees' integration process, because it is a key site in which both the host and incoming population learn about one another (Hannah, 2007). With almost half of the Syrian refugees being children, schools bear a responsibility to face the challenges in serving these children and their families (Rah et al., 2009). The sense of belonging that foreign pupils feel within their surrounding at school plays a large role in community integration (OECD, 2015a). The resettlement process of refugee children and youth is complex, since they struggle to acquire a new language and adapt into a new culture, while, simultaneously, trying to preserve their sense of social and psychological stability (Anderson et al., 2003). Therefore, in order to ameliorate the educational policies and practices targeting this group, it is important to study the educational experiences of the students in

addition to the individuals involved in their educational process, such as the parents and the teachers.

Scarce research has been done on solely Syrian refugee education in Iceland. This can be related to the fact that Syrian refugees have been in Iceland for only two to three years. This research aims to study the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their respective parents regarding the Icelandic education system at the compulsory level. In addition, it explores the experiences of the teachers when dealing with this specific group. The main objectives of this research are:

- To assess the experiences of the Syrian students and their respective parents and teachers at the compulsory level, by focusing on their personal perspectives, aspirations and challenges.
- To compare the experiences between the three groups, and to present solutions for possible discovered barriers.

The study was conducted with families residing in Akureyri, Iceland. Located in the North of Iceland, Akureyri is the largest town in Iceland outside the capital area (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018). The population of Akureyri is 18,488 (Statistics Iceland, 2017a), and, at the beginning of 2017, it was recorded that there are 24 Syrian individuals officially residing in Akureyri (Statistics Iceland, 2017b). The small number of Syrian individuals in Akureyri makes this group more unique, as they are not only refugees, who were forced out of their country due to war, but also an ethnic minority.

The purpose of this research is to improve refugees' education-related policies and practices by highlighting refugee students' voices, as well as that of their parents and teachers. It will assist teachers and the school system in general to identify and understand the needs of the refugee students and parents. Understanding the Syrian families' needs will enhance the teachers' cultural sensitivity inside as well as outside the classroom, and encourage them to be more culturally responsive in their teaching practices. By giving school administrations a closer look on how the refugee students and parents view the schooling system, it will help them to support a collaboration and engage in a mutual dialogue in home-school matters. Additionally, teachers' voices will assist in advancing the teachers' support system when dealing with refugee families. Besides schools, this study can serve as a base to future studies related to education and refugees, where researchers can refer to the results of this study and expand accordingly. This research will be presented in English,

which will make its audience both local and international; hence, providing the chance for international researchers and educators to understand the education system in Iceland regarding refugees, and compare it with other countries.

## **My Motivation for the Study**

My interest in conducting this research roots back to my two and a half years of experience in Lebanon with a non-governmental organization (NGO) called Teach for Lebanon. Teach for Lebanon is part of a 46-nation global network, Teach for All. It aims to provide quality education in under-resourced schools in impoverished areas, by placing trained fellows for a minimum of two years in full-time teaching positions (Teach for Lebanon, n.d.). These children benefiting from this program in Lebanon were not only Lebanese, they were also Syrian and Palestinian.

Almost one million Syrian refugees were registered by UNHCR in Lebanon by the end of 2016 (UNHCR, 2017); yet, local NGOs and the Lebanese government estimate that almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees live in the country, which is a high number for a country whose population does not exceed 4.4 million inhabitants (Union of Relief & Development Association, 2017). Most refugees depend on the Lebanese public schools to educate their children, which only 30 percent of Lebanese students attended, and which suffered from high numbers of dropouts and grade repetition (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

After my two years teaching experience with Teach for Lebanon and six months mentoring experience, I was able to locate several educational and schooling problems in Lebanon, especially when dealing with refugees, despite the undeniable efforts of several individuals and organizations to improve the children's experiences. One of the main challenges for the Syrian students' inclusion was the language, since in Syria all subjects are taught in Arabic, while in Lebanon classes are taught in English or French, and Arabic is given as a separate subject (UNHCR, 2014). Segregation was also evident in schools, with teachers separating Syrian and Lebanese students in classrooms, and, in some cases, Lebanese parents demanding their children not to be seated next to Syrians (UNHCR, 2013). In addition, the afternoon "second shift" provided in public schools by the Lebanese government to increase education accessibility to the Syrian refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2016), heightened

the risk of exclusion, since it was only dedicated to Syrian students. Besides segregation and exclusion, students suffered from verbal and physical bullying and mistreatment by both staff and other students (UNHCR, 2014). It is important to point out that the students mentioned here exclude students with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities, since including these children in mainstream education is a complicated issue in Lebanon, even with the several policies made to promote inclusion (UNHCR, 2013).

In January 2017, I was one of the very few Lebanese who were lucky to come and live in Iceland. Even though my motivation for living here was not primarily education, my high curiosity led me to do this research. Since my arrival in Iceland, every immigrant I discussed education with, mentioned how happy their children were in Icelandic schools and how much they loved going to school. This intrigued me to know more about the education and schooling system in Iceland; especially since there is a strong emphasis on an all inclusive system, where everyone is offered equal opportunities to have an education regardless of sex, economic status, religion, possible handicap, residential location and cultural or social background (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, 2012a, 2012b). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016), there is very low segregation regarding immigrants in Iceland, and high equality in education, which, until now, Lebanon has been struggling to achieve.

I knew that Syrian families had recently arrived in Iceland, and was aware that they encountered difficulties with the educational system in their first-asylum country, Lebanon; I was very curious to understand their new educational experience in Iceland, with the hope that one day I could take what I have learned here to improve the quality of education in Lebanon, particularly regarding refugee students and pupils.

## **Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This thesis paper is constituted of four chapters. The first chapter presents the background information in addition to the literature review and theoretical framework, which the research is based on. The second chapter explains the methodology and methods followed to gather and analyze data. The third chapter includes the findings of the study, and the fourth chapter is a

discussion, where the findings are analyzed and discussed in the light of the literature and theories presented in the second chapter.



# 1. Background Information, Literature Review and Theories

This chapter serves as a guideline to the research. It helps broaden the understanding of the studied group and of the data gathered. The chapter is divided into six sections, which are:

- (1) 'Background Information' presents the legal and constitutional definitions of refugees, how they are distinguished from other groups, such as immigrants and asylum seekers, and gives a general overview on how Syrian refugees are dispersed around the world. It also presents a brief description about the educational system in Iceland with a particular focus on the compulsory level.
- (2) 'Trauma in Refugee Children' discusses how war and displacement can affect refugee children's psychological state.
- (3) 'Acculturation and Refugee Resettlement' explores Berry's acculturation strategies in addition to the pre-migration and post-migration factors, which affect the acculturation process. This section helps to understand the educational resettlement of refugee children, and to answer questions regarding learning the host language, sense of attachment to the host country and social life.
- (4) 'Multicultural Education' defines and explores multicultural education and the extent to which it is applied in Iceland with a focus on the compulsory level, since it is the level targeted in the study.
- (5) 'Hofstede National Dimensions' serves as a tool to increase cultural understanding, and explains how cultures affect the educational process.
- (6) 'Home-School Communication' sheds light on the importance of having clear communication channels between the students' families and the school. It presents some strategies which the teachers and the school as a whole can follow to increase the parents' (or caregivers') involvement in school.

# 1.1 Background Information

## Who are Refugees?

Refugees are a group of people who are legally and constitutionally well-defined (Anderson et al., 2003). The United Nations Refugees Convention, which was approved on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1951, states that refugees are individuals who leave the country of which they hold the nationality because of fear and persecution, and are unwilling or unable to return to it due to that fear (UNHCR, n.d.-a). It specifies basic rights to refugees, such as the right to primary education by stating, in its 22<sup>nd</sup> Article, that refugees are entitled to equal rights as nationals with respect to elementary education (UNHCR, n.d.-a). The convention has undergone only one amendment in the form of the 1967 protocol, to respond to the temporal and geographical limitations of the original document, as its scope was only limited to people fleeing events which occurred before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1951 and within Europe (UNHCR, n.d.-a). In Iceland there is no comprehensive legislative act targeting refugees, yet the act on foreigners dedicates a section for refugees under the name of ‘Refugees and Protection Against Prosecution’. Article 44 of this act indicates that Iceland follows the refugee definition presented in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (Act of Foreigners No. 96/2002). Article 44 of the Icelandic act on foreigners defines a refugee as a foreign national who may not fall under the definition given by the Convention or the Protocol, but faces “danger of capital punishment, torture, or other in humane or degrading treatment or punishment if he/she were sent back to his/her state” (Act of Foreigners No. 96/2002, Article 44).

The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) is the main organization responsible for the physical, social and political protection of refugees and is responsible for providing humanitarian assistance, such as education, food, water and shelter (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). UNHCR resettles refugees in a third country, when they cannot return to their home country and when the first country of refuge cannot provide for their specific needs or cannot address their perilous situations (UNHCR, n.d.-b). These refugees are called resettled refugees or quota refugees. Resettlement is the process during which a refugee moves from an asylum country to another which agrees to provide him with permanent resettlement (UNHCR, n.d.-b). Iceland has

received refugee groups for resettlement as of 1956 (UNHCR, 2016). Since 2007, the policy in Iceland is to welcome between 25 and 30 quota refugees every year (Ministry of Welfare, n.d.). Decisions regarding the admittance of quota refugees in Iceland is done in collaboration with UNHCR (Ministry of Welfare, n.d.). The Icelandic refugee committee, which is constituted of members from the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Icelandic Red Cross, is the consultative body on quota refugees (UNHCR, 2016). For refugees to be resettled in Iceland they should be recognized as refugees in accordance to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 2016).

The term ‘refugee’ is different from the term ‘asylum-seeker’. Although both are on the move usually due to conflict or violence, an asylum-seeker is a person whose request to refuge is still under process (UNHCR, n.d.-c), and who does not fully fit the criteria given by the 1951 Convention (UNESCO, n.d.). Refugee is a person who has already been granted protection, whereas an asylum-seeker will become a refugee if the local immigration or refugee authority consider that he fits into the international definition of a refugee and accepts his claim (UNESCO, n.d.).

The conditions that bring refugees to a new country create specific needs and challenges that are not common among voluntary migrants (McBrien, 2005). Refugees have experienced trauma and displacement, and, in contrast to migrants who move voluntarily, they are forced to seek asylum in another country while their return is not an option (Hannah, 2007).

## **Syrian Refugees: Brief Statistics**

The global population of forcibly displaced people has increased significantly within the last two decades from 33.9 million in 1997 to 65.6 million in 2016; 22.5 million are refugees and 51% of them are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2017). This substantial growth occurred between 2012 and 2015 as a result of conflicts in Yemen and Iraq, in sub-Saharan Africa including Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Sudan; the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, played the main role in this rise (UNHCR, 2017). At the end of 2016, Syrians were the largest forcibly displaced population in the world, comprising of 12

million people including 5.5 million refugees, 6.3 million internally displaced people, and almost 185, 000 asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2017).

Most of the registered Syrian refugees are found in neighboring countries of which 47% are under 18 years old (UNHCR, n.d.-d). Around two million Syrians registered by UNHCR are found in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, and almost 3.5 million Syrians registered by the government of Turkey and UNHCR are found in Turkey (UNHCR, n.d.-d). Between January and December 2017, Syrian refugees were among the main nationalities to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, mainly in an attempt to reach Greece (UNHCR, n.d.-e). Between 2011 and 2018, the total number of Syrian asylum applications sent to Europe reached one million, of which 64 were sent to Iceland (UNHCR, n.d.-f). In 2016, Syrians were among the five main citizenships of non-EU asylum applications submitted to Iceland (Eurostat, 2017). Due to the considerable expansion of refugees' number around the world, the Icelandic government agreed, during 2015 and 2016, to resettle 90 Syrians (UNHCR, 2016). On January 19<sup>th</sup> 2016, the first group arrived, and the second group reached Iceland on April 6<sup>th</sup> that same year (UNHCR, 2016).

## **The Icelandic Education System**

The Icelandic education system is divided into four stages which are: (1) Pre-primary school education (leikskóli), (2) compulsory education (grunnskóli), (3) upper secondary education (framhálsskóli), and (4) higher education (háskóli). In this section, I briefly describe the education system at the compulsory level by referring to the compulsory school act No. 91/2008 and the Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools.

Education in Iceland is compulsory for pupils between the ages of 6 and 16 (The Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 3). All public compulsory schools are free of charge (The Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 31). The educational policy is based on six fundamental pillars, which are derived from laws on preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). These fundamental pillars are:

1. Literacy, which deals with empowering students to create meaning of their own world through reading and writing, as well as technology and media;
2. sustainability, which concentrates on creating active citizens who are interested in local and global issues related to the environment, society and economy;
3. democracy, which aims to nurture a democratic environment within the school and to create critical citizens who have a vision for the future;
4. equality, which aims to create an inclusive school, to increase students' understandings of various languages, cultures, religions, nationalities, and disabilities, as well as prepare both genders to participate equally in society;
5. health and welfare, which targets to create a safe and positive environment that nurtures the students' welfare and wellbeing; and,
6. creativity, which aims to increase the students' critical thinking, innate curiosity and entrepreneurial skills (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014).

The fundamental pillars must appear in all school's activities, and should be reflected in all subjects and subject areas (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Article 25 of the Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, specifies the subject areas at the compulsory stage, which are explained in details in the national curriculum guide. Table 1.1 presents the required subjects and subjects areas, their duration per week and their weekly proportion.

*Table 1.1 Subjects and Subject Areas Reference Timetable (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014)*

Subjects – Subject areas	Grades 1 - 4	Grades 5 – 7	Grades 8 – 10	Weekly classes	Weekly classes
	Total time in Grades 1 - 4 Minutes per week	Total time in Grades 5 - 7 Minutes per week	Total time in Grades 8 - 10 Minutes per week	Total time in Grades 1 - 10 Minutes per week	Proportion
Icelandic, Icelandic as second language or Icelandic sign language	1.120	680	630	2.430	18,08%
Foreign languages: English, Danish or other Nordic language	80	460	840	1.380	10,27%
Arts and crafts	900	840	340	2.080	15,48%
Natural sciences	420	340	360	1.120	8,33%
Physical education	480	360	360	1.200	8,93%
Social sciences, religious studies, life skills, equal rights affairs, ethics	580	600	360	1.540	11,46%
Mathematics	800	600	600	2.000	14,88%
Information and communication technology	120	160	80	360	2,68%
School electives	300	160	870	1.330	9,90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.800</b>	<b>4.200</b>	<b>4.440</b>	<b>13.440</b>	<b>100%</b>

The education procedure at the compulsory level is based on the concepts of equality and inclusivity; all students have an equal right to gain the appropriate education in accordance with their specific needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). The teaching and assessment procedures are individual oriented (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Teachers allocate, with their respective students, a set of objectives specific to each student’s case, strengths and weaknesses. Students are given materials according to their level, and evaluation is done throughout the year to assess if the students achieved their specific set of objectives. Furthermore, four standardized evaluation criteria (A, B, C and D) are used to evaluate the competence of the students in each subject area (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014).

Local municipalities are responsible for the operation and evaluation of regular compulsory schools (The Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article

5). In 2000, Iceland became part of OECD<sup>1</sup> PISA<sup>2</sup> studies (EURYDICE, n.d.). According to PISA (2015), the students' life satisfaction and sense of belonging to the school in Iceland is above OECD's average, and the students' school work related anxieties are below the average. In 2012, it was recorded that the difference in the percentage of students who reported to be happy in school between first generation immigrants and non-immigrants in Iceland is low (OECD, 2015b). Several studies also showed that students at the compulsory level are happy. The main findings of a study realized with immigrant students in four Nordic countries revealed that students at Icelandic compulsory schools, aged between eight and fifteen, have positive experiences in schools, especially when dealing with their teachers, and specified that they always felt welcomed (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). These students described their teachers as "caring", "helpful" and "good" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). Similarly, the results of Sveinbjörnsdóttir (2017) master's study on refugee children in Icelandic primary school system showed that students are happy at schools and feel that they are receiving the support they need. That said, some students struggled with language acquisition and attaining friendship bonds (Sveinbjörnsdóttir, 2017; Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). This may explain the 2015 results of PISA (OECD, 2018), where non-immigrant students showed higher sense of belonging and better academic performance than first generation immigrants (OECD, 2018).

## 1.2 Trauma in Refugee Children

Refugee children go through traumatic incidents which plays a role in their complex social, psychological and emotional resettlement process (Anderson et al., 2003). Although not all children develop clinical symptoms, they will pass through a degree of stress with respect to their experience of war, loss, family disruptions and resettlement challenges (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). The

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<sup>1</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It aims to promote policies that will ameliorate the economic and social well-being of humans around the world. It is constituted of 36 member countries.

<sup>2</sup> Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey, which aims to assess education systems worldwide by examining the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. See: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

effect of these traumatic experiences may extend throughout their lifetime, with symptoms appearing during specific stages of development or during important events of the individual's life (Frater-Mathieson, 2003).

The Syrian conflict has caused a lot of psychological and physical suffering for children of different ages (UNHCR, 2013). These children have undergone horrific experiences that they struggle to forget, in which their homes, schools and communities were destroyed, and some of their family members and friends were killed (UNHCR, 2013). Sirin and Rogers-Sirin (2015) recorded that almost 79 percent of Syrian refugee children have experienced death within their own family, and 60 percent have passed through stressful life events in which someone they know was in extreme danger. 45 percent of Syrian refugee children showed symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and 44 percent displayed symptoms of depression (Sirin & Sirin-Rogers, 2015).

In the school context, the psychological state of refugee children causes various challenges to teachers (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Schools should support staff to understand the refugees' trauma and loss, help teachers to overcome their personal frustrations and fears when dealing with refugee students, and provide appropriate training and in-service activities related to refugee education (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Additionally, signs of trauma may differ among various cultures, thus assessment and therapeutic interventions need to match and be viewed through the wider social and cultural context (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Implementing culturally sensitive activities and integrating the child's past, present and future while teaching may help in restoring a sense of identity, belonging and meaning of continuity (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Furthermore, it is important to avoid labelling refugee children as 'traumatized'. Even though the term 'refugee' has a universal definition and is linked to individuals who have passed through trauma, refugee children are not a homogenous group and labelling all of them as traumatized may impede their progress in schools (Rutter, 2006). Educationalist and researchers need to take into consideration that refugee children pass through very different pre-migration and post-migration experiences (Rutter, 2006).

## 1.3 Acculturation and Refugee Resettlement

Acculturation affects the integration of refugees, and may facilitate or impede their educational progress (Rutter, 2006). In order to successfully study the approaches to refugees' educational resettlement and the possible improvements to the current practices and policies, it is beneficial to understand the processes of acculturation (Lerner, 2012). Furthermore, understanding acculturation processes will clarify the responses of the participants of this study in aspects such as learning the host language, sense of attachment to the host country and social life.

Acculturation refers to the cultural changes that occur when two or more cultures come in contact (Anderson, 2003), and it occurs on both group and individual level (Berry, 2005). Group acculturation occurs when the change influences the group's social structures, economic factors and political activity (McBrien, 2005). Whereas, individual acculturation happens with the change of one's own sense of identity, beliefs and values; in this case, people may undergo acculturative stress, such as anxiety or depression, while adapting to the new culture (McBrien, 2005).

When refugees arrive in a host country, they normally do so in groups, which makes them a minority group with significant characteristics (Anderson, 2003). In most culture contact situations, one group is the dominant one, the 'donor' culture, and the other is the acculturating group, the 'receptor' (Anderson, 2003). In the case of refugees, usually the 'donor' culture is the host country, and the 'receptor' is the refugee group (Anderson, 2003). The extent of voluntariness to move to a new culture largely affects the attitudes of acculturation (Anderson, 2003). Refugees, whose move is involuntary and who are considered a minority group, are at risk of developing an oppositional reference to the mainstream culture and negative attitudes towards the host country and their own culture (Anderson, 2003). This will impede members of this group to cross the cultural boundaries and to learn the host cultures values, attitudes and language, thus threatening their cultural identity (Anderson, 2003).

Berry's acculturation model is one of the most widely used and well-known models. He identified four acculturation strategies related to two main issues, which are (1) the extent of preference to maintain one's heritage and cultural identity, and (2) the extent of preference to engage into the larger community

along with other ethno-cultural groups (Berry, 2005). Figure 1.1 represents the four acculturation strategies based on these two issues. The strategies carry different names depending on whether it involves the dominant or non-dominant group. In the case of the refugees (the non-dominant group), assimilation occurs when individuals do not want to maintain their own cultural identity, but rather seek daily interaction with the host culture; whereas, separation occurs when individuals hold onto their own heritage and avoid interacting with the other culture (Berry, 2005). In this case the language, values and beliefs of the host country are not acquired, but the heritage culture is preserved (Anderson, 2003). When there is an interest to maintain one's own culture and engage daily with other groups, integration occurs (Berry, 2005). Integration is considered the most adaptive option accompanied with the most positive outcomes (Anderson, 2003). Lastly, marginalization, which is the least adaptive option (Anderson, 2003), happens when there is little interest in both maintaining one's heritage (for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and interacting with other groups (for reasons such as exclusion and discrimination) (Berry, 2005). Marginalization is associated with lack of competence for both the heritage and the host language, and with negative attitudes towards both cultures (Anderson, 2003). It is important to note that the non-dominant group is not always free to choose from the four strategies (Berry, 2005), as it depends on the constraints and the acculturation strategy that the dominant group enforces (Berry, 2005). For example, the non-dominant group can only freely choose integration, if the dominant group is open and inclusive towards diverse cultures and thus enforces 'multiculturalism' (Berry, 2005). In this situation, the national institutions, such as schools and labor institutes, have to adapt to the needs of all groups (Berry, 2005).



themselves in countries with little cultural similarity to their own, as they have no choice in choosing the country of resettlement (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018).

Although pre-migration factors cannot be controlled, as they have already occurred, post-migration factors can be managed in order to facilitate positive outcomes of acculturation. Supporting refugees on arrival (e.g.: employment, health care, language training etc.), involving all parties in designing and delivering programs and services (e.g.: representing and consulting refugee populations in school committees), preserving heritage language and offering bilingual teachers, teacher trainings in issues related to diversity and multiculturalism are all considered effective recommendations to provide positive acculturation outcomes (Anderson, 2003).

## **1.4 Multicultural Education**

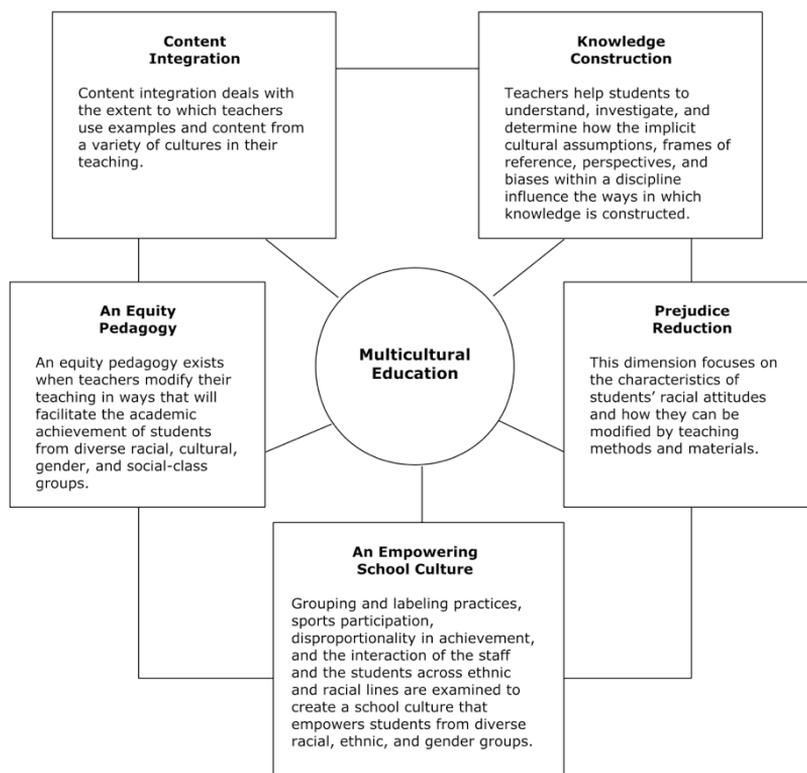
As mentioned in the ‘Acculturation and Refugee Resettlement’ section, choosing the ‘multiculturalism’ strategy will facilitate the successful integration of refugees in the host country without threatening their identity and cultural heritage. Multiculturalism is an idea that values equality, encourages cultural identity to thrive, and ensures that no specific group dominates the other (Castles, 2009). Schools can be viewed as a micro-culture constituting of a dominant culture and sub-cultures, and having a set of norms, values and goals (Banks, 2009); the process of acculturation also occurs within schools, and the values of multiculturalism can be applied in schools under the title of ‘multicultural education’.

### **Defining Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education is a response to the limitations of assimilation and segregation forms of schooling for students from various migrant backgrounds (Castles, 2009). It seeks to fully develop their potentials and acknowledges their differences by combining both the principals of recognizing cultural differences and working towards equality (Castles, 2009). Multicultural education emerged with the rise of the 1960s civil rights movement, when African Americans demanded their rights in the United States (Banks, 2010). One of this movement’s major goals was to eliminate discrimination in education systems by employing more black and brown teachers and

administrators, revising textbooks to reflect diversity and reforming the curricula to reflect their experiences (Banks, 2010). Successive similar movements (e.g.: women’s rights, gay’s and lesbian’s rights, people with disabilities rights etc.) were developed in several nations such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (Banks, 2010; Banks, 2009). As a result, multicultural education targets all individuals regardless of their nationality, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and disability.

James Banks is one of the recognized scholars in the field of multicultural education. Banks (2010) defines multicultural education as “a total school reform effort designed to increase educational equity for a range of cultural, ethnic, and economic groups.” (p. 7). In order to achieve a total school reform, Banks (2009) presents five dimensions to multicultural education which encompass the entire school and not only the content of the subjects. Figure 1.2 summarizes these five dimensions.



*Figure 1.2 The Dimension of Multicultural Education (Banks, 2009)*

Other advocates of multicultural education such as Nieto and Bode (2010) and Grant and Sleeter (2010) also presented various approaches to multicultural education. Although the approaches differ throughout literature, they all focus on concepts of equity, inclusion and tolerance, where all students are perceived as having a set of strengths and talents, the home language and culture are preserved, diverse cultures are studied and everyone has an equal right to educational success regardless of his/her background or status (Banks, 2009; Grant & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2010).

When following multicultural education and discussing cultures, it is important not to homogenize groups and assign them to constant cultural features (May, 2009). Teachers need to surpass the idea that multicultural education is merely about creating superficial multicultural units or commemorating culturally diverse idols and histories (Hopkins-Gillispie, 2011). It is advised to follow critical multiculturalism, which calls for questioning the mainstream system, examining the structural inequalities, understanding the unequal power relations, practicing self-reflexivity (May, 2009) and making notable connections between knowledge and power (Hopkins-Gillispie, 2011). Also, as Castles (2009) emphasized, it is important to focus on racist exclusion rather than cultural dissonance, to find equilibrium between the goals of working for equality and cultural recognition, to teach new concepts of citizenship and belonging as a response to globalization, and to include children whose parents lack legal residence and are in irregular situations.

## **Multicultural Education in Iceland**

The Icelandic education policy follows the concept of inclusion (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). According to international comparison, Iceland is considered highly inclusive in its education system with very limited segregated resources for students with special needs (Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Article 2 of the Icelandic compulsory act places emphasis on the general development of all pupils, and Article 17 mentions that pupils with special needs are permitted to have their educational needs met in a regular inclusive school (The Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). Inclusion is an integral part of multicultural education, as it aims to celebrate diversity and ensure the participation and success of all students who

face any kind of learning and/or behavioral challenges, with regards to socio-economic situations, cultural background, ethnic origin, sexual preference, religion, gender etc. (Topping & Maloney, 2005). Initially, inclusive education was about incorporating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms; yet, recently, it has been responding to the increasing diversity, such as cultural and linguistic, within schools' communities (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). It is worth mentioning that the meaning of the term 'inclusive education' is complex, broad and can have various meanings for different people (Armstrong et al., 2010). The Icelandic compulsory national curriculum defines inclusive schools as those who consider all students having equal opportunities for education, and who work towards meeting these students' specific educational and social needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Following this definition of 'inclusive education', the equity pedagogy dimension of multicultural education, defined in figure 1.2, plays an important role. In Iceland, equity is achieved by individual-oriented teaching methods, and by taking into account the values of equality and the needs and experiences of individual pupils (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Similarly, the study assessments at the compulsory level are individual-oriented, and the "teachers should assist their pupils towards realistic self-evaluation, explain to them the objectives of education and how they are progressing towards these objectives" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p.56). Even though the curriculum emphasizes individualization, studies have found that the dominated mode of thinking among teachers is based on segregation; individual needs are seen as a problem, and teachers tend to construct exclusive student groups (Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Additionally, teachers consider inclusive education as an additional work load and have only a vague understanding of what inclusive ideology entails (Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). This can be solved by supporting teachers to systematically self-reflect and critically learn about the complexities of the inclusive ideology, its policies and practices (Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014).

Despite the efforts to incorporate the ideology of inclusion and equality within its core, the Icelandic national curriculum guides are mainstream oriented with an emphasis on Icelandic heritage and Christianity (Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010). They do not address multicultural or intercultural

education and the implementation of equity is not clear (Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010). In the compulsory national curriculum, the term ‘multiculturalism’ is rarely discussed, and if mentioned, it is in a broad way with limited connection to multicultural education. Furthermore, although the guide recognizes the maintenance of one’s mother tongue, it does not provide a specific plan, and mother tongue tuition is optional (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). There is high prominence on the Icelandic language and a belief that the lack of proficiency in Icelandic will inhibit foreign students from becoming active participants in Icelandic society (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). However, forcing students to learn in a language they do not understand will cause an educational impediment and obstruct their potential to be productive society members (UNESCO, 2007). Finally, in a recent study done by Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2018) in Akureyri, Iceland, it was revealed that teachers lack the appropriate support to understand and manage multicultural education, and there is a communication gap between foreign parents and the teachers. This result might be different when discussing another group of people, in the case of this research the Syrian refugees. Yet, according to my research, there is no English literature and studies targeting solely this group in Iceland. There are in progress studies related to Syrian refugees and education that are still not finalized. This might be related to the fact that the Syrian refugees have been in Iceland for only two to three years.

## **1.5 Hofstede’s National Culture Dimensions**

One of the explanations for the failure of students at schools is the cultural mismatch between the school and home (Nieto, 2009). A cultural mismatch may result in a cultural clash (Nieto, 2009), which can consequently cause a disruption in the exchange of information between teachers, students, parents and national institutions (Hamilton, 2003). Refugees, who have no choice in the resettlement process, may acquire different or oppositional cultural frames to that of the host country (Hamilton, 2003). Since the educational ideology followed by a specific society depends on its cultural values and beliefs (Marshall, 2014), oppositional or different cultural frames may result in dissonant expectations towards how the educational process and the education system have to be. Therefore, the various experiences, values, expectations,

lifestyles and skills which the students bring with them to the school need to be considered (Nieto, 2009) as well as the expectations, views and knowledge of the teachers regarding the refugees' culture (Hamilton & Moore, 2003).

One way to enhance cultural understanding is following Hofstede's work on national culture dimensions (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede national culture dimensions describes the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values appear in behavior. Caution should be taken when following Hofstede's national culture dimensions, for nations are not homogeneous; they consist of multicultural and multi-ethnic groups of people in addition to different demographic groups, such as low income families, the elderly, male/female etc. (Marshall, 2014). Individuals should avoid essentialism and stereotyping, and be critical of the information they obtain. Having these precautions in mind, in this study, Hofstede's national culture dimensions is a useful tool to understand and compare the participants' responses regarding the education system and the learning environment with relation to culture.

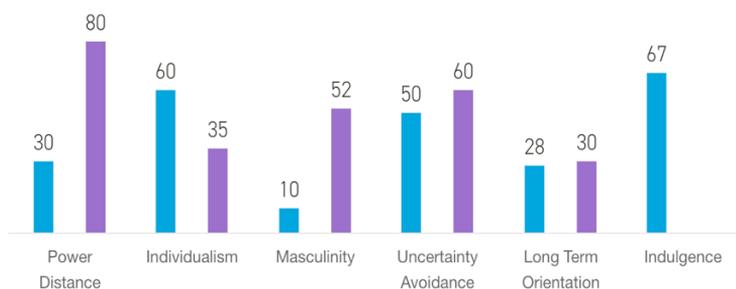
Hofstede identified six dimensions in order to understand the cultural values of people belonging to different countries (Hofstede, 2011), which are:

1. Power distance, which is the degree individuals accept and expect unequal distribution of power;
2. indulgence/restraint, where indulgence represents societies that allow the freedom to enjoy basic and natural human desire, and restraint represents societies that control these needs through social norms;
3. masculinity/femininity, which represents the distribution of values between genders in a society;
4. collectivism/individualism, that is the extent individual in a society is integrated into groups;
5. long/short term orientation, which is the degree to which a society accepts change and prepares for the future; and,
6. uncertainty avoidance, that is the extent to which a society tolerates uncertainties (Hofstede, 2011).

Good examples to understand how Hofstede's national culture dimensions can be implemented in education are the power distance and masculinity/femininity dimensions. In countries of large power distance, education is teacher-centered, the relationship between teachers and students is formal, and teachers are treated with respect or fear (Hofstede et al., 2010). Whereas, in countries of small power distance, education is student-centered,

teachers and students are considered as equals, and learning is a two-way communication process (Hofstede et al., 2010). In masculine societies, there is high competition between students, high achievers are rewarded, winning is important and failure is not accepted (Hofstede et al., 2010). In contrast, in feminine societies, competition is not widely approved, failure is fine and there is praising for the weak (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Figure 1.3, which is taken from Hofstede Insights website<sup>3</sup>, compares Iceland and Syria with respect to Hofstede’s national culture dimensions. This figure will be referred to in the discussion chapter in order to understand the findings gathered.



*Figure 1.3 Comparison of Iceland (blue) and Syria (purple) with respect to Hofstede’s National Culture Dimensions (Hofstede Insights, n.d.)*

## 1.6 Home-School Communication

The development of clear communication channels between home and school can ease the clash of the cultural values and expectations when refugees start school (Hamilton, 2003). Establishing clear communication channels is directly proportional to increasing parents’ involvement in schools (Hamilton, 2003). Various literature and studies emphasize the important role that home-school collaboration and parental involvement play in the success of refugee children (Block et al., 2014; Ficarra, 2017; McBrien, 2005; Szente et al., 2006; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Thomas, 2016). Additionally, one of the significant factors in achieving school reform and multicultural education is the involvement of the closest people to the students in the teaching and learning

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>

process (McGee Banks, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2010). In this research, I will be referring to ‘closest people’ as ‘parents’, since the children are with their parents, yet they can be caregivers or any other family member (McGee Banks, 2010). The more the parents are involved in the education of their child, the more the child will be successful at school (Hamilton & Moore, 2003). Teachers need to establish a two-way communication with parents and be ready to reach out to them instead of waiting for them to get involved (McGee Banks, 2010). Table 1.2 lists some of the strategies that teachers can follow in order to increase parental involvement.

*Table 1.2 Strategies for Teachers to Increase Parental Involvement (Hamilton, 2003; McGee Banks, 2010; Szente et al., 2006)*

<b>Strategies for Teachers to Involve Parents</b>
• Welcome parents to the classroom and make sure they have something to do when they visit
• Send home written information and encourage parents to write too
• Home visits
• Conduct periodic phone calls
• Locate translators or mediators who have in depth understanding of the schools’ culture and that of the parents and student
• Report students’ progress and problems to parents, and let parents know what improvement is expected and how they can help
• Get to know the students’ community
• Gather information about parents’ view of education (e.g. educational goals and concerns about school)

For teachers to be successful in their quest to involve parents, principals’ and administrative staff’s support is necessary (McGee Banks, 2010). This may be achieved by providing teachers with flexible hours in order to spend time with parents, setting up a parent room, organizing parent nights to learn more about the school environment and curriculum, organizing after-school activities for parents to learn the host language, involving parents in volunteer programs and first language tutoring programs, asking parents for help in

identifying multilingual resources, and actively involving them in the students' learning process (Hamilton, 2003; McGee Banks, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2010).

## 2. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and the methods used to collect and analyze the data for this research. It provides a detailed description of the participants and how I gained access to them, in addition to the settings. Additionally, it discusses the ethical considerations that I followed throughout my project. While discussing the methods and ethical considerations, several limitations, which I faced during the project, are also presented.

This research aims to study the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their respective parents regarding the Icelandic education system at the compulsory level in Akureyri, Iceland. In addition, it explores the experiences of the teachers when dealing with this specific group. Therefore, qualitative research was deemed as appropriate (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

Qualitative research aims to understand the social world of the participants by studying their experiences, perspectives, histories, and their social and material conditions (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Researchers conducting qualitative research are interested in understanding behavior from the participants' perspectives, while the data collected is abundant in description of conversations, people and places, and cannot be tackled by statistics easily (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research questions are designed to investigate issues, and are not defined by variables (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It is naturalistic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which means that data is usually collected in settings where the participants experience the issue studied (Creswell, 2014), and it is concerned with the process rather than merely outputs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative researchers design their themes, categories and patterns inductively (Creswell, 2014), which means that instead of searching for data to prove or disapprove a certain hypothesis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), they follow a bottom up approach by progressively arranging the data into more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2014). After identifying a comprehensive set of themes, the researcher, deductively, looks again at his data and his themes to check if more evidence is needed to support the themes or if more data collection is required (Creswell, 2014).

Ritchie (2003) identified four broad functions of social investigation in qualitative research, which are: (1) Contextual research, which focuses on exploring and describing the participants' comprehension and interpretations of social phenomena; (2) Explanatory research, in which the purpose is to

identify causes and generate explanatory hypothesis; (3) Evaluative research, which concentrates on questions of effectiveness, and is mainly used in policy-related investigation; (4) Generative research, which aims to generate new ideas either as an addition or an improvement to social theories or to policy solutions. As the objective of this research is to describe the meaning that participants attach to their experiences, contextual research is followed (Ritchie, 2003).

## **2.1 Data Gathering**

### **Participants and Setting**

Participants in this research belonged to three groups of people: students, their respective parents and teachers.

#### **Parents and Students**

Three Syrian families, constituting of three fathers, three mothers and six children, were recruited voluntarily based on the following criteria: (1) identify as a refugee per quota, (2) reside in Akureyri and (3) have at least one child registered in elementary school in Iceland. All of the fathers had reached upper level education in their home country, whereas mothers had limited education to either informal or elementary level education. All of the fathers and two of the mothers were employed. The children, one girl and five boys, were between eight and fifteen years old. The parents were first approached informally, either face-to-face or via a phone call, through which I discussed with them the research objectives and gained their oral approval to take part in the study. This was easily achieved, since I was in a friendly contact with the families before the initiation of the project. After their oral approval, the parents were formally presented with an Arabic version of a letter of intent and an informed consent document (Appendix 1). The children were only interviewed after giving their own personal consent and receiving their parents' consent. Interviews were conducted in the families' houses in a room separate from other family members. Parents were interviewed separately, whereas siblings were interviewed together.

## Teachers

School principals were asked to nominate teachers who are responsible for Syrian students at the compulsory level. Five teachers, four females and one male, were interviewed. Only one teacher had previous experience with refugee teaching in a non-formal context – i.e. teaching students who are not registered in formal schools. Prior to contacting school principals, a consent from the director of school authorities in Akureyri was obtained. I contacted the director via email explaining the objectives of the study. Similarly, I approached the principals and teachers through an email. The teachers were provided with an English version of the letter of intent and informed consent (Appendix 2). The location of the interview was conducted according to the preference of the teachers, which was either in the school classrooms or in a café.

## Data Gathering Method

In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted, since they serve the objective of examining the experiences of the participants by allowing them to express their opinions and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). Semi-structured interviews, as opposed to structured interviews, allow for open-ended questions, which gives the interviewees the chance to shape their responses or change the direction of the interview all together (Fife, 2005). They are mainly used in the collection of qualitative social data, when the researcher is interested in the experiences, understandings and behaviors of people, and the ways and reasons they understand and experience the social world as they do (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Although, in semi-structured interviews, the same aspects of research are discussed with all participants, participants are allowed to reply in their own words and are encouraged to express their own opinions and feelings, and the researcher has to be adaptable with each participant and explore certain issues within the interview process (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the teachers and parents, whereas group interviews were conducted with the students, since children tend to get shy and overwhelmed with one-on-one interviews (Fife, 2005). Siblings of the same family were grouped together, and groups ranged from two to three individuals. A one-on-one interview was conducted with one

student since he was the only child in his family to fit the required age range to be participant of this study. Parents' and students' interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the teachers' interviews were conducted in English.

Interviews were first taken with the families. Parents were mainly asked general open-ended questions, such as: "*What would you like to improve in the school?*" and "*Describe the ideal school for your child?*". Children were asked similar questions, yet in a simpler form, and drawings and scales were used in order to facilitate their answering process. For example, students were asked to choose from a variety of faces (e.g.: happy face or sad face) as an indicator to their level of happiness in school, and they were also asked to draw how they would like their classrooms to be (e.g.: seat arrangement).

The teachers' interview questions were set according to the results of the parents' and the students' interviews results; Therefore, the questions were more specific, such as: "*What do you think about the concept of homework?*" and "*How do you motivate the students?*". Yet, they were also asked general questions, some of which were: "*What were your expectations before teaching the student(s) and after teaching them?*" and "*What are the challenges, if any, that you encountered while teaching the student(s)?*".

All interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and they were audio-recorded after gaining the approval of the participants. Following each interview, the audio-recording was copied to my laptop and transcribed in English. The parents' and students' interviews, which were in Arabic, were directly translated and transcribed in English. Some limitations occurred when trying to preserve certain meanings, for example Arabic proverbs. I handled this limitation by writing notes to clarify the meaning. Utterances (e.g. 'um', 'uh') and repeated words were frequently removed, and aspects as jokes, laughter, long pauses and external interruptions were noted. I used signs, such as '-', '--' and '. . .', to indicate interrupted statements, missing words and change of topic.

## **2.2 Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis as it permits the reflection of participants' realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and treats data in a descriptive manner (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), thus serving the objective of my research. Thematic analysis systematically identifies and describes themes (patterns)

across data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Themes represent a specific pattern found in the data which serve the research question(s) (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

Thematic analysis is a frequently used method, yet there is no specific distinction on its definition and process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is usually not identified as a method of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and it is commonly confused with content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) classify thematic analysis as a separate method, and consider it as a foundation for qualitative analysis that the researcher should initially learn, as it provides basic useful skills for conducting other forms of qualitative analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If examined closely, thematic and content analysis are two distinct approaches (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Content analysis is considered as a partially quantitative method, as it involves establishing categories and determining the frequency of their reoccurrence in a certain text or images (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). On the contrary, thematic analysis concentrates more on the qualitative aspect of the analyzed material, where the researcher combines the analysis of frequencies of codes with their meaning in context (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Thematic analysis usually involves both manifest themes, i.e. content of data that is directly observable, and latent themes, i.e. content of data that is implicitly referred to (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Even if the focus is on manifest themes, interpretation is needed to understand the latent meaning of the manifest themes within the data (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

In this study, I followed the detailed steps of thematic analysis explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), which are: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. (p. 87)

Thematic analysis of the parents' and students' interviews was data driven, where the process of coding was not based on any existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After establishing an initial thematic map related to the analyzed interview results of the parents and the students, interviews were conducted with the teachers, and part of the questions assigned were related to the established initial themes following a more deductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Although teachers' interviews were based on predetermined initial themes, new themes emerged, which resulted in the final thematic map.

## **2.3 Ethical Considerations**

### **Administration of Data Collection**

One of the first initial actions I took to initiate my research is to send an application to the data protection authority (persónuvernd) explaining my research project. I started contacting participants and conducting interviews after the application was sent.

As mentioned in the ‘Participants and Setting’ section, I contacted the parents either via a phone call or in face-to-face communication. As I was in direct contact with the families before the initiation of the project, this gave me the opportunity to discuss with them the research aims and interview procedures informally before starting the research, and gain their oral acceptance. The parents were then formally provided with an Arabic version of the letter of intent and informed consent (Appendix 1). The interviews did not start until all ambiguities were clarified, and a signature was obtained. The children were not interviewed unless their parents approved. Both the parents’ and the children’s signatures (or in this case a written name) were needed to start the interview. The children as well were informed about the research objectives and interview procedures beforehand.

School principals were not contacted until an approval from the director of school authorities in Akureyri was obtained. Similarly, teachers were contacted after attaining the approval of their school principals, who provided me with their contact information. As in the case of the parents and the children, interviews with the teachers were conducted after all of their questions regarding the research were truthfully answered, and after they signed the informed consent (Appendix 2).

All participants were informed that their participation is voluntary, and that they were allowed to terminate it at any time. They were also notified about the audio-recording. A hard copy of the informed consent and letter of intent was left with the parents, and a soft copy was left with me. In the teachers’ case, it was the opposite; the informed consent was scanned and sent to them via email. Prior the interviews, the teachers were also provided, via email, with the letter of intent.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative validity indicates that the researcher uses specific procedures to check the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Validity of qualitative data or findings is usually associated with the terms ‘correctness’ or ‘precision’ of the research reading (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003), and it can be referred to as ‘credibility’ (Tracy, 2010; Matthews & Ross, 2010).

Qualitative reliability indicates that a certain approach is consistent across other studies and researchers (Creswell, 2014). Although in social sciences no two studies result in the exact same outcomes, it does not mean that similar groups cannot have similar results (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Reliable research is not researcher specific, meaning that it is possible for another researcher to use the same method and achieve similar outcomes (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Reliability is very similar to the concept of dependability, which is ensuring consistency within the research practice by, for example, making sure that all data is included and that no data is lost in the transcription process (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The reliability and dependability of the research is achieved by the researcher being transparent (Matthews & Ross, 2010), which is being honest about the research process (Tracy, 2010). In this section I will explain certain techniques I followed to ensure validity and reliability.

In order to achieve transparency, I documented and explained in details the steps of my research process. I kept track of all my work, including interview notes, audio-recordings, transcriptions and progress notes on my personal laptop, which is protected by a password. I have also kept a copy of all my work on an external flash memory whose content I updated regularly. Transcriptions were proof read by listening to the audio-recordings several times to avoid missing words. At the end of this section I presented a self-reflection about myself, which will clarify the bias that I, the researcher, brought to the study (Creswell, 2014). Reflexivity is one of the main elements in qualitative research, as it clarifies how the background of the researcher may affect the results of the study (Creswell, 2014).

I have also used rich and thick description to present my findings (Creswell, 2014). I presented the readers with evidence from several information sources to every claim I made. Immersion and concrete detail to establish tacit knowledge, i.e. knowledge that surpasses surfaces of speeches or texts (Tracy, 2010) was achieved with the Syrian students and parents without complications, since I speak Arabic fluently and I have knowledge about their

culture. This step was sometimes complicated with the teachers, as their mother tongue is Icelandic, which I have limited proficiency in, and some of them had difficulty expressing themselves freely in English.

I used triangulation to ensure validity (Creswell 2014; Tracy, 2010). I triangulated different sources of information, the students, the parents, both mothers and fathers, and the teachers. Observations in the schools would have been an additional tool to ensure accuracy, as it is the natural settings in which the subjects, in this case the teachers and students, do what they normally do (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007); yet, due to various of factors I did not have the opportunity to conduct the observations.

It is also important to note that, as a master's student, my study was regularly peer debriefed (Creswell, 2014) by my supervisors, who frequently revised and asked questions about the study.

### Self-Reflexivity

As mentioned previously, in 'My Motivation for the Study' section of the introduction, this study stems from my previous experience with Syrian refugee students in my country, Lebanon. As a result, before starting this research, I had preconceived assumptions that the education in Iceland is better than the education in Lebanon or in Syria. I also assumed that the students and their parents were happy in the school, as other immigrants whom I previously had met mentioned.

I was in contact with four out of the five Syrian families living Akureyri prior the commencement of the interviews. My initial motive to meet the families was homesickness, and the desire to be in contact with people who spoke my language, Arabic. Upon their request, I taught two of the families English at the language center in Akureyri, SIMEY. My connection with the families made it easy for me to discuss with them my research project and its objectives; yet, I had uncertainties concerning their response, due to their undesirable experience in Lebanon. This was the case with only one Syrian family whose decision not to contribute in the research was fully respected and accepted. Also, as a young woman researcher, I was worried that the Syrian men would undermine my position; this was not the case. All of the men participants were open to the interview, and did not show any prejudice due to my gender.

Even though the analysis of the students' and parents' interviews were approached in a data-driven manner, in which the themes emerging have little connection with the questions asked (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it should be noted that no theme is entirely data driven, due to the researchers' preconceptions and knowledge (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). This was my case with the Syrian families, as I knew them before the interviews, and some of them often discussed with me specific issues they faced regarding schooling in Iceland.

Matthews and Ross (2010) mentioned that some of the interviewees may find it difficult to talk about specific subjects while being audio recorded. This was the situation with several Syrian participants, who sometimes tended to discuss issues in more details off the record, either before or after the audio-recording.

Being an Arabic speaker made it easy for me to communicate with the Syrian students and parents, which allowed them to express themselves freely. The case was different with the teachers. I have limited proficiency in Icelandic, and although all of the teachers spoke English, which I have expert proficiency in, some of them found it challenging to express themselves freely while addressing certain subjects.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

There are only five Syrian families in Akureyri, which makes the concept of anonymity and confidentiality very fragile. In order to tackle this issue, I did not associate detailed demographics with specific participants, such as age, profession, sex and grade level. In the findings, I was very careful not to include any data that will identify the participants, and pseudonyms were used. I also avoided mentioning details such as school names, period lived in Lebanon and the city of birth. The procedures I took concerning this aspect will help in preventing identification of the exact person, even though, due to the very few number of Syrians in Akureyri, the group who contributed is easily identifiable.



## 3. Findings

This chapter presents the research findings, which are divided into four main themes: (1) Icelandic School System, (2) Parent-School Relationship, (3) Supporting Teachers and Staff, and (4) Is Iceland in the Future? The first theme is made up of four sub-themes, which are: ‘Individualized Teaching and Students’ Academic Achievements’, ‘Subject Area: The Value of Arts and Crafts’, ‘Discipline’ and ‘Homework’. A potential main theme, which can be added upon further research, is the ‘Friendship’ theme. Only one family openly discussed this aspect and voiced their challenges to establish friendship bonds with other students. Other families did not expand on this topic; this is mainly because of the nature of the data driven interviews, where general questions were asked.

For confidentiality reasons, I have considered all students as males and all teachers as females, since gender is not a variable in this study. Parents were referred to using pseudo family names, which are: Mr. and Mrs. Zain, Mr. and Mrs. Loutfi, and Mr. and Mrs. Faraj. Both students and teachers were given pseudo names. The names given to the students are: Nadim, Wael, Adam, Bilal, Alaa and Moussa; and, the names given to the teachers are: Dina, Lisa, Kristin, Emma and Dalia.

### 3.1 Icelandic School System

#### **Individualized Teaching and Students’ Academic Achievements**

In Iceland the education system is based on inclusivity and the teaching is individual-based. Students have their unique set of objectives to achieve throughout the year and are given specific material adapted to their level. Throughout the interviews with the parents, it was obvious that they did not understand how the all-inclusive system works. For example, Mrs. Loutfi pointed out that the area of improvement in the school is the “*studying*”, and

expressed that “*there is no preparation for her child*” and that “*he is like any Icelander*”. She was also surprised how they included the Syrian students with Icelanders, by saying:

Now they put them [the Syrian students] only 15 days together, then they took these students to Icelanders class. He [her son] entered to class very lost. How will he speak?

Similarly, her husband, Mr. Loutfi, expressed that when his child goes to the class, “*it is supposed that the class teacher or the teacher responsible for the class to give him [his son] a special course.*” This contradicted with what the teacher said, who mentioned that the student actually “*gets extra support with Icelandic and Math*”.

Also, parents were confused regarding their children’s evaluation process, and were not able to exactly identify the progress of their children. Mr. Loutfi demanded that he “*needs to see results of his children*” and wondered that if “*there is something called quiz, test and exam (...) where are the results*”. Mr. Faraj doubted the teachers’ evaluation by saying:

We always ask about the children; they [the teachers] tell us all is very very good. But the truth is they [his children] are zero [have very low academic level], so only if they [the teachers] do an evaluation, not only to encourage us, a true evaluation to specify each student’s level if that is possible (...)

Furthermore, his wife, Mrs. Faraj, pointed out the lack of language proficiency as a barrier to understanding her child’s exam outcome by stating:

(...) they [her children] come and tell me, mom we did an exam today. ‘Okay, you got the grade?’ ‘Yes, almost good’, he [her son] tells me. For example, I do not understand their language [the Icelandic language], if I want to tell him give me to see what you took, I do not understand (...)

Additionally, parents argued for the need of a numeric grading system and stressed on the importance of competition to motivate students to work harder. Mrs. Faraj explained this by saying:

We [referring to the Syrian and Arab society] have the sense of competition, for example, if one student takes a grade of 10 then the other student will want to receive the same grade (...) so, the child will want to work hard and learn in home (...)

Similarly, Mr. Zain mentioned this point by comparing it to his home country:

(...) we had this in Syria, for example, reward the first ten then those who are rewarded will always improve and their friends will try and keep up with the top students (...) And this they do not have it here.

Mr. Loutfi considered that the absence of failure in the system equates to the lack of identifying “*individual differences*”. He stressed that “*it is impossible not to have differences between individuals. It is impossible that the whole class is on the same level (...)*”. He also assumed that “*there is no evaluation*” because “*the student whatever he is, he is passing [moving to a higher grade]*”.

Although the parents showed confusion regarding individual teaching, none of the children mentioned any disturbances or challenges concerning this aspect. Students considered their teachers helpful. When asked about how their relationship was with their teachers, some of the responses were:

Bilal: Good, if I want help they help me.

Moussa: Their treatment is very good (...) they come alone to me and help me, if I need anything.

Likewise, when Alaa was presented with a scale of smiley faces (Appendix 6) and asked to point to the smiley that indicates his level of content with his teachers, he chose the very happy face. His explanation for this was “[*because*] *they help me*”.

An important part of all inclusive education is to not discriminate between students. This was seen in the below exchange, where Nadim pointed out that he likes his teachers, because they do not show discrimination.

Interviewer: Why do you like [your teachers] them?

Nadim: Because they are good. They treat me in a very good way.

Interviewer: Okay, very good. How do they treat you for example?

Nadim: For example, I am not different from other students. I am like them [the other students].

Similarly, some of the parents revealed their appreciation concerning this aspect. When asked about the positive aspects of the school, some of the parents’ answers were:

Mrs. Zain: (...) they [the teachers] do not discriminate between Syrian refugees and Icelanders. They are all the same.

Mrs. Faraj: There is no like this a foreigner and this a native.

Mr. Faraj: For example, they take into consideration if he [the Syrian student] is sick, or has a psychological problem (...) they [the teachers] do not leave the student alone by himself (...) They find for him a solution.

As a result, the findings show that the parents lack the sufficient understanding concerning the function of the all-inclusive system. Even though they appreciate that the school system does not discriminate against their children, they believe that their children are not getting the enough academic support needed. They consider that the teachers do not have a tailored plan for their children, and they exhibit a lack of trust in the teachers' evaluation. These concerns are opposite to how the all-inclusive system work, and opposite to how their children described their teachers, as "helpful". This confusion indicates that there is a lack of an effective home-school communication, and a failure to clearly explain how the system works to the parents.

The main reasons for the parents' confusion were the language barrier and the teachers' lack of preparation. The teachers stated that the goals are in Icelandic, which explain why the parents might not understand them. Also, one teacher, Dalia, mentioned that they are still "*adapting*" to the system, and another teacher, Kristin, mentioned that "*the new system [setting objectives], is not complete, so it is very hard to work on*". She elaborated on this aspect, by saying:

(...) they [the teachers' department] just let it in the hands of the teachers, so the teachers were how am I supposed to do it (...) And the computer system should work as well. Nothing works together, that's why it is very hard to make them [the parents] understand, when our system is not ready yet (...)

This reveals that the teachers were not given the appropriate training and support to deal with the new system, which as a result inhibited them from properly explaining it to the parents.

Teachers also agreed that having numbers instead of goals and letters to evaluate the students is more "*accurate*". Kristin explained this by saying:

(...) they [students and parents] know the system is from one to ten, because it is only percentage. If you get an eight, you have done 80% of what you are supposed to do, and they understand that. But, when you put down some goals, it is very hard for me to say when the kids have reached the goal (...)

Nevertheless, regarding ‘competition’ and ‘failure’, the teachers showed oppositional point of views compared to the parents’. Dina mentioned that repeating the same class “*for the social [life] it is not good*”, and Emma mentioned that “*this will break the student’s confidence*”. Teachers showed empathy regarding each student’s situation. Kristin stated that “*it is not fair*” for parents to want their children to achieve as much as others. Also, when Dina was asked about her opinion of rewarding high achievers to motivate low achievers, she stated:

Maybe they will try harder, but in the school system in Iceland we have kids that we know they can’t even though they try, so it is not right for them, because we actually know that they can never do it.

Dalia advocated the new system, by saying:

(...) now the focus is on to learn the subject understand what you are doing instead of just competing together for a good grade.

However, teachers gave small rewards for individual achievement such as “*stars*” or “*smiley man*”. Also, Lisa stressed on the importance of internal motivation to encourage students to work harder, by saying:

(...) of course we also try to motivate them with what we talk about what would they like to do after school and what would they like to achieve, and what would they like to be doing in 20 years or such. And most of them would like to have studied something, so I make a point that’s why we are doing this (...)

This reflects some of the differing expectations regarding the educational process that the parents and teachers have. On one hand, the parents emphasize on external motivation to motivate the students, such as competition and rewards; on the other hand, teachers emphasize on the importance of internal motivation, such as working towards a future goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and consider students as distinct individuals with diverse abilities.

## Subject Area: The Value of Arts and Crafts

In the compulsory curriculum in Iceland, the weekly proportion of arts & crafts is 15.48%, which is more than mathematics (14.88%) and natural sciences (8.33%) (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Arts and crafts is defined as follows: *“to arts belong music and visual arts and dramatic art. To crafts belong design and handicraft, textiles and home economics.”* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p. 51).

While discussing the field of subject area with the parents, it was obvious that there is a lack of efficient communication between home and school. Although there is emphasis on arts and crafts in the curriculum, parents were not able to identify the importance of these subjects. Mrs. Loutfi indicated that, *“these subjects [arts and crafts] we do not care about”*, considered that there are *“a lot of missing subjects”* and aspired that her children would take more *“reading and writing”*. Furthermore, Mr. Loutfi assumed that these subjects are *“activities”*, which *“will not benefit anything”*, and aimed for subjects that would provide more *“knowledge”*, such as learning the English language. Similarly, Mr. Zain stated that *“(...) the scientific subjects it seems they [schools in Iceland] do not have that interest in them”*. He defended his statement by comparing the school to that in Syria, by saying:

(...) I am talking about the level in Syria - - physics and chemistry these were nice and they used to concentrate on them a lot. Now, the level of my children is less (...) they are still young. But [for example] in geography and geographic coordinates (...) put the map and tell the child where is Britain he will not know where as in Syria we used from the class - - age of my son they used to put the map and tell us this is Egypt (...) We knew how to locate them on the map. Now I am sure no one knows how to locate anything on the map.

Teachers, on the contrary, highly valued subjects belonging to the category of arts and crafts (e.g. carpentry), and stressed on their importance to increase creativity and teach self care. Kristin explained that by saying:

(...) We think it is very important to teach them that [arts and crafts]. By that we teach them to be creative, to make something, to get some ideas, not to be just like computers what the teachers tell you. Be creative. Think on your own. (...)

Additionally, teachers emphasized the value of arts and crafts in order to discover one self. Lisa elaborated on that, by saying:

(...) students are just people who have really different strengths. I have got students that are just unable to do math, they do not have the capability to do it, it is really hard, but at the same time they are excellent at sports or dancing or something. It is just that people have different strengths, and in elementary school it is important to both get to work with your mind and your hands. To just find out where your strengths are (...)

The teachers' opinions reflect what is stressed on in the compulsory national curriculum guide. Creativity is stated as one of the six pillars that the working methods, communication and schools' atmosphere are based on (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Additionally, the curriculum highlights the importance of creating independent individuals and developing the talents and abilities of each student (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). The parents failed to recognize these characteristic. The parents also failed to identify the value of these subjects for their children.

All students enjoyed subjects under the the category of arts and crafts. None of them had any negative comments towards these subjects. For example, Nadim expressed that his ideal school is *"like our school [current school]"*. When asked why, he explained:

There is sewing, carpentry, drawing and like that. Things like clay.  
There is music, sports. Whatever you want there is. There is cooking.

Similarly, Alaa pointed out that what motivates him to study is *"carpentry and sewing"*, and Wael expressed how he liked his current school by comparing it to schools in Syria: *"Not like Syria. Syria [is] all studying. There is no sewing, carpentry (...)"*. Finally, on a motivation scale from one to ten (with one being the minimum and ten the maximum), Moussa situated himself on five, midway (Appendix 7). When asked what would make him reach ten, he replied by:

Play sports in the morning (...) be active. For example (...) the first three sessions (...) I remain not awake [sleepy]. When there is a break, I go play sports (...), and then I become more motivated [and] I want to stay at school.

Although sports is an independent subject from arts and crafts, Moussa's response mirrors the teachers' voices about how students are distinct individuals with different needs and talents. For Moussa it is sports that

motivates him, whereas for other students this can be something totally different.

## **Discipline**

The Syrian parents considered that the Icelandic schools lacked discipline and order, and that the students showed little respect towards their teachers. For instance, Mrs. Faraj mentioned that they “*do not feel the order*”, and compared the school with that in Syria and in Lebanon, by saying:

(...) it is not like in Lebanon (...) there is order [in Lebanon], the child is clean and neat. He goes to school wearing the school’s uniform and his hair neat and combed, his nails cut and clothes ironed and clean. Here there is nothing of this order.

Additionally, her husband, Mr. Faraj, expressed that the school system in Iceland is “*very much free*” in comparison to Syria, where there is “*strictness*”. When asked what he meant by strictness, he explained:

For example, if the student is not prepared, he knows that he will get punished. So, he works more and he will care more. Here, for example, prepared or not prepared he knows that the result is the same.

A recurrent example which several parents gave to describe the supposed disrespect of the students towards the teachers was similar to this quote said by Mrs. Faraj:

In our country the student sits respectfully and with manners, here the student sits and puts his legs on the table in front of the teacher, and in front of his friend. This is normal to them. We do not have this. In our country, the student (...) have to sit with manners and concentrate on the teacher while she or he is explaining the lesson.

Only one student, Moussa, discussed the perceived lack of discipline in the interviews. Moussa expressed that “*the teaching*” is a point of improvement in the school. When asked to elaborate on that, he responded by, “*for example, while we are studying there is one student playing, another on the phone, and another not writing (...)*”. He also stated that he misses for “*the hitting [corporal punishment]*” in Syria, because this way “*the person will learn directly*”.

Contrary to this student’s response, all the other students indicated that they prefer the teachers in Iceland over those in Syria and in Lebanon, where there

was “*hitting*”. Nadim expressed that he “*used to hate something called school*”, because it was “*all studying and there was hitting*”. Also, Bilal explained that he really liked his current teacher because “*she does not get angry and scream*”.

Teachers were aware of the parents’ desire to have a “*traditional*” way of teaching. However, they strongly opposed it, and aimed towards building trust and creating an open communication with the students. Kristin expressed her opinion regarding this point, by saying:

(...) we are trying to (...) make them feel good. Make them trust us, and make them feel welcomed (...) for the kids of course if it does not come from themselves they will not learn it, it is very hard to make some [students] to learn something they do not want to (...)

She later added:

My opinion is that try to make a good nice person, do not make people obey by being afraid of you. Make them want to follow the rules, because it is better.

Dalia explained how she addresses misbehavior through communication rather than punishment, by saying:

I do not have any punishment really (...) when it [the problem] was communicating with the kids and he [the Syrian student] got angry and maybe hit them or they hit [him] back, then I take them both with me and explain this is forbidden. Then I use my hands to show what is forbidden and make them shake hands.

Similarly, Lisa expressed her opposition to the parents’ opinion regarding discipline, and emphasized on communication to solve conflict between students, by stating:

(...) they [the Syrian parents] think we are not strict enough when it comes to discipline, and they think that we did not address it good enough when he [the Syrian student] has been bullied or something. But, I would disagree, because my student he had the attitude if someone was messing with him, or someone was hitting, he was allowed to hit back, but we are trying to imprint on him that we try to use words and we try to talk about it to solve conflict, not by hitting back. And I think to some degree the parents were okay that he just hit back, and that was a normal way to solve a conflict.

The differing point of views between the parents and the teachers reflects the differing opinions regarding the education process. As in the sub-theme ‘individualized teaching and students’ academic achievements’, the parents lean towards using external motivation techniques to push the students to work more, such as punishments (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This was also seen in one of students responses, Moussa. Whereas, teachers lean towards intrinsic motivation, such as working because of personal interest and joy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

## **Homework**

All of the parents expressed their desire for their children to have homework. The main reasons for that are to stay up to date with the academic life of their children and to be assured that their children are learning. For example, Mrs. Faraj mentioned that homework is important to make sure that *“the idea will be planted in his [the student’s] mind”*. Mrs. Loutfi stated that it is vital in order to *“follow up”*, and compared the situation to that in her home country and first-asylum country, by saying:

They come home [with] no books (...) They do not come and write, like in Lebanon and Syria. [There] you see all children are writing.

In addition, she stated that several times she asked the school for homework, but, according to her, *“they are not giving them”*. She then added the school’s response about this concept, by saying:

They said that here in Iceland that’s it. It [the study] is enough in school, and at home they [the students] do other activities.

The teachers shared a similar philosophy, and emphasized the importance of students spending their after school hours with their families and doing other activities. Lisa explained this by comparing school to a regular job. She said:

(...) we have [the] opinion [that] this is their [the students] work, and because I do not want to take my work home, I do not send them home with their work.

Kristin acknowledged the importance of homework, by stating:

(...) when you are learning to read and do things, you have to go home and think about what you have to learn. You have to practice at home (...)

However, she mentioned that in order for this to happen she wants “*the school day to be shorter*”. She explained how having long school hours and homework will take away the family and activity time, by saying:

(...) we have a lot of school hours. Then the kids some of them are doing some sports, playing instruments (...) after school. When they have finished that it is almost dinner time. If you have to do homework everyday you can see the family life is off.

Although parents demanded that their children receive homework, teachers’ interviews revealed that teachers in fact allocate some tasks for the students to do at home. To start with, all teachers pointed out that the children have “*to read*” at home, where Dalia mentioned that they “*expect the parents to let them [the students] read aloud every day*”, and Kristin stated that “*the parents have to sign their names [to say that] they listened to them read*”. Furthermore, teachers indicated that students are expected to finish work they were not able to finish in the classroom. For example, as Lisa said:

(...) most of them [students] have to take with them a little bit of math or something home with them, because they did not get the chance to do it in class (...)

Also, Kristin explained that the teachers update the computer system so that “*the parents know what they are doing*” and “*can see what they have to finish*”. However, when asked if the Syrian parents look at the updates, she responded by “*I doubt it*”, and when asked if there is a probable miscommunication she mentioned that “*they [the Syrian parents] have been taught to use the system.*”

Teachers also mentioned that they responded to the requests of the parents and gave the Syrian students homework. Nevertheless, as shown in the following two exchanges, the homework was not always done.

Exchange 1:

Dina: I have always tried to let them have homework, but he doesn’t do it.

Interviewer: So, you give them homework, but he doesn’t do them?

Dina: Yes.

Interviewer: Why doesn't he do it?

Dina: I have been trying to talk about this with the parents with the help of the translator, and their father was complaining that the child did not have homework, and then we just show him in his bag (...) Then he says 'oh', and the parents are not actually checking.

Exchange 2:

Emma: If the parents and the student asks for it then they get it. I mean some people take homework but nothing happens.

Interviewer: They take homework but they do not do it?

Emma: No they do not do it.

Interviewer: But, they were asking for homework?

Emma: Yes. Maybe more the parents.

Interviewer: So there is a conflict with what the parents want and what the students want?

Emma: Yes. Because they see the Icelandic students are not doing any extra then why should [they].

The contradicting responses between the parents and the teachers, reveal that there is a home-school communication gap. This gap was also reflected in some of the students' responses. Some of the students expressed their desire to have homework. For example, Alaa stated that in his ideal school he *"will give them [the students] homework"*. Bilal mentioned *"to give us homework"* as a final comment regarding the school; and, Moussa replied by *"of course"*, when asked if he prefers to have homework. Nevertheless, the reason for wanting homework was not clear and responses were limited to answers such as *"not to stay on the phone"* and *"not to sit on the computer and play video games"*.

## 3.2 Parent-School Relationship

The parents' and the teachers' interviews revealed that the relationship between the parents and the school is very limited. Parents only interacted with the teachers and/or the administrative staff upon request or during the regular parent-teachers' meeting, which occurs twice a year. Two families stated that

they remain in contact with the school through emails. Whereas, one family, the Faraj family, mentioned that they are not receiving emails. In this situation, the Mrs. Faraj indicated that they stay up to date through the “*emails of their children*”; for example, “*If there is a vacation, they send [the information] to the children’s emails.*”

Although teachers updated the parents through emails, the parents did not show any responsiveness to these updates. Teachers mentioned that the parents do not reply to the emails, and doubted that they read them. For instance, Dina stated:

(...) they [the Syrian parents] do not read post [emails] from me, even though I have them in English (...)

When asked if she tried to contact a translator, she replied that she “*tried twice*”; however, she considered that the father “*actually does not know how to read the email, even if he have the computer and number [credentials] of the email (...) but he doesn’t do it*”. Also, Lisa mentioned that she “*always writes them [the Syrian parents] in English*”, and, thus, assumed that they are reading the emails even though she does not get any responses.

Emma doubted that the parents understood what is written in the emails, by saying:

(...) you send your usual email, but you do not know if they understand. You have these two meetings a year. We get the translator. But, some people are more motivated to try to just google translate do something (...) and some people just [do] nothing.

Therefore, the teachers seem to think that the lack of communication lies only with the parents.

Emma showed her desire for the parents to be more involved with the school, and related the lack of involvement to the lack of language proficiency. This was reflected in the following exchange:

Emma: (...) we think maybe they should come more to the school. Maybe they do not understand what we are writing them. I do not know.

Interviewer: Do you send them in the email to come to the schools?

Emma: Yes, if there is presentation or something. Parent meeting. They are not sure exactly what to do.

Kristin considered the difference in cultural values as a barrier to communication. She highlighted this issue when discussing about techniques to enhance parents understanding of the Icelandic system, by claiming:

(...) It is no use for me to try to make him [Syrian father] understand (...) Our translator he is very good in making him understand our rules, and it is much better for him to do it, because he is a man. That is also difference of the culture (...) the man is the boss at home. It is not how we do it in Iceland, we try to be all equals, but when a man says something to a man like that, it is better for the man to tell him. He is not going to listen to me I know it. So I just smile.

Mothers were more passive than the fathers in their interactions with the teachers. All of the mothers mentioned that the fathers are responsible for the emails. This might be related to their limited literacy, and lack of proficiency in English and Icelandic. In addition, as seen in the exchange below, teachers noticed that the mothers rarely interacted in the meetings, even with the presence of a translator.

Interviewer: I hear that you mostly say father, you do not talk about the mother. Is the mother not involved?

Dina: She always came also, but she doesn't say much.

Interviewer: Do you think it is because of the language?

Dina: Maybe, because she doesn't speak English, and the father speaks English. But the translator always speaks Arabic. So I am not quite sure.

In addition, no extra efforts, other than assigning a translator, were shown from the teachers or the schools as a whole to enhance the communication with the parents. When asked if the school took any additional steps to get the parents involved, Emma replied “no”. She then indicated that there was only one person called ‘Anna’, who “*took care of them [the Syrian families]*”, and that the refugees’ issues were “*just her responsibility*”. She explained that ‘Anna’ is responsible for all refugees and is assigned by the municipality of Akureyri. She considered ‘Anna’ as a “*communicator*”, whom they send an email when they face difficulties with the refugees, and who helps them in allocating academic material. Kristin mentioned that parents are always welcome to the school, by stating:

The parents can see what we are doing in schools, they are always welcome (...) My door is always open, and we invite the parents to come

to see what we are doing (...) and they do not always come. In the beginning they always came. But, sometimes they do not.

Nevertheless, she did not indicate any specific technique to motivate the parents to get involved, and the level of parental involvement is dependent on the parents' willingness.

Finally, all of the parents stated that they are not in contact with any of their children's classmate's parents, unless they were one of the Syrian families. Only one teacher, Emma, mentioned the importance of being in contact with other parents, by saying:

We think maybe because they are trying to get into the community that they should maybe come. And, as well as friends after school for children, you maybe have to get to know the other parents. And, that's why you have to come to school.

Similarl to previous cases in this theme, the parents' level of involvement is considered their own responsibility. The teacher expressed her desire that the parents would visit the school more oftenly and communicate with other Icelandic parents; however, she does not indicate any specific actions on how to involve them.

### **3.3 Supporting Teachers and Staff**

The interviews with the teachers indicated that they needed extra support, when dealing with the Syrian refugee students. Their aspiration for support varied between providing: (1) psychological help for students, (2) cross-cultural education for teachers, and (3) in-classroom assistance.

Two teachers mentioned the issue of providing psychological help for the refugee students. Lisa expressed her surprise that psychological assistance is not obligatory for refugees, by saying:

(...) we have put pressure on (...) the red cross and the local government that this kid [the Syrian student] needed more help than we as a school can give. And, I actually think it is really strange that children that come here from conflict area, it is not an obligation that they should get psychological help.

Dalia criticized the school regarding this aspect, by stating:

This is a school of about 500 kids, and I think they should have a children psychologist, and they have to have someone who is specialized in therapy (...) if there are moving problems. Physical and psychological. And, provide more service. More special teachers (...)

Teachers also aspired to learn more about the culture. When asked what mostly attracted her about the Syrian culture, Emma replied:

I do not know. Maybe we do not know too much about the culture. Maybe we should do more learning.

In addition to her wish to learn the culture, she aspired to “*learn a little bit about Arabic, and the language*”. Similarly, Dina shared her aspiration to learn the culture. When asked what she would do differently if she was “*the boss [principal]*”, her answer was:

I would say that not only my boss, but the head in Akureyri, should get all the teachers and tell them more about the culture.

Additionally, teachers discussed the pressure they had regarding all inclusive classrooms, and desired to have extra help in preparing academic material and in teaching the students. Lisa discussed the negative point of all inclusive classrooms, by stating:

(...) the bad thing is that now I got in this class alone four children that need a lot of extra help, and I am not getting extra help too to work with them (...)

She later gave an example of a school in Norway, and compared it to her current school, by saying:

(...) there [in Norway] were always two teachers in the classroom, because there are always some students who need extra help. And because in Icelandic I am working with four different types of material, it is hard to be teaching something up here when they are doing something completely different (...)

Kristin gave an alternative solution to reduce the weight of all inclusive classrooms, by saying:

I would rather have a smaller group. They are up to 30 in each. Around 18 or 20 in each group, that would be very good. Or having a special teacher who is taking care of some of the preparation (...)

She later explained the exhaustion that Icelandic teachers are going through by presenting a factual example of a student who have vision impairment in her classroom. She stated:

(...) he [the student] can not see very well, but he sees close to him, so I have to make his assignments in a computer so he can see it, and he has to return in a computer. Of course it takes time, but you want to make that for the students. So, I do not do many assignments. I want fewer assignments, but to do them well. And this is what is killing the Icelandic teachers nowadays. It is exhausting (...)

Furthermore, Dina and Emma pointed out that they need “*more material and structure*”, and help in the “*námsefni [syllabus]*”.

Only one student pointed out the aspect of providing support for the teacher within the classroom. He mentioned that the “*studying is weak*”, because there “*are 28 individuals [students], and she is only one teacher*”. He later gave a solution for that by stating: “*that is why she needs another teacher to help her, so that everyone understands.*”

### **3.4 Is Iceland in the Future?**

When parents were asked if they envision their children in Icelandic universities, they either showed uncertainty or answered by a direct ‘no’. The main reason for this is related to their lack of trust in the Icelandic education system. For example, Mrs. Loutfi emphasized that her children will not be in Icelandic universities by saying:

I (...) talked with a journalist (...) about this. He asked me if my children will base themselves here in universities (...), I told him no.

Her husband, Mr. Loutfi, voiced his worries about the uncertainty of the future of his children, and related it to the lack of planning found in the Icelandic schools, by arguing:

When will they [his children] reach university, we do not know, because the holder of the plan [meaning the teacher or principal] does not know (...) Now [if] I go (...) to the upper secondary school, and ask him [the teacher] when will they finish, with all honesty he tells you he does not know (...) It is supposed that when you bring a refugee (...) it is known [that in] three years he [the student] will finish this level, four years this

level then five years this level, so that he [the student] can know how to plan his life (...)

Additionally, when asked where he sees his children five to seven years from now, Mr. Faraj claimed that “*in Iceland [it is] difficult*”, and explained the reason by stating:

(...) for the schools, for the language, for everything. Here they say they are fifth worldwide for teaching [quality], but we do not see this. For example, the doctors [in Iceland] they have all learned in Canada, in America, in Britain (...).

The parents desire to have their children continue their higher education in countries other than Iceland, explains their emphasis on the importance of learning the English language. Mrs. Zain mentioned that “*they [her children] should take English*” because “*this language is the best wherever you go*”. Furthermore, Mrs. Loutfi voiced her complaints regarding the lack of focus on the English language in the school, by stating:

(...) now my son he is talking in school English; they do not want him to speak English in the school. They want Icelandic.

She later expressed that English is important because it is “*the language of the whole world*”.

The teachers were conscious of the parents’ desire to eventually leave Iceland. Nevertheless, they did not identify the lack of trust in the Icelandic schooling system as the main reason for their desire to leave. The teachers emphasized more on the effect of the language and the surrounding community for their reason to leave. For example, Lisa pointed out that the reason why the Syrian families want to leave is because “*the Arab community in Akureyri is not (...) big*”, and that they aspire to be in a country where “*they have (...) relatives*”. In addition, Emma indicated that the Syrian families might want to go to a country where “*they can speak English*”, such as “*England*”.

All of the students except one expressed their wish to move to another country. The students did not widely elaborate on the reasons why they want to move to another country. It is well known that the beliefs of the parents affect the children (McBrien, 2005), which might lead the children to attain similar aspirations as that of their parents. Only two of the students presented reasons for their desire to leave, which were related to the language and the environment. Alaa voiced his desire to move to “*Australia*” since there “*they*

*[the people] speak English*". In his drawing about his ideal school (Appendix 8), Alaa illustrated a school in "Syria", where there are "apple trees", "sun" and "no snow". Likewise, Nadim explained that he does not want to remain in Iceland because it is "cold". Both Nadim's and Alaa's responses are comprehensible, as they come from a country which environment widely varies from that found in Iceland. The other students chose locations where English is used and there is a larger Arab community, such as "London", "Turkey" and "Los Angeles".



## **4. Discussion**

This research aims to study the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their respective parents regarding the Icelandic education system at the compulsory level in Akureyri, Iceland. In addition, it explores the experiences of the teachers when dealing with this specific group. The overall results reveal that the students are happy at school and are content with the attitudes of their teachers. The students perceive their teachers as understanding and helpful, and they prefer the Icelandic schools over those in their home and first-asylum countries. This is consistent with the results of Sveinbjörnsdóttir (2017) master's study, which revealed that refugee students in Icelandic primary schools are happy, and feel that they are receiving adequate support from their teachers. However, the parents showed dissatisfaction regarding the education system. This dissatisfaction originated from the little cultural fit between Syria and Iceland, and the lack of adequate home-school communication. Teachers, on the other hand, lacked the appropriate training and support to deal with the refugee families.

This chapter discusses three major themes that emerged from the findings in the light of the theories and literature presented in this research. The three themes are: (1) The effect of cultural values on education: Iceland vs. Syria, (2) A home-school communication gap, and (3) Lack of teachers' support and training. It also presents the limitations of the study.

### **4.1 The Effect of Cultural Values on Education: Iceland vs. Syria**

In the theme 'Icelandic School System', it was apparent that the parents have expectations towards the education system which are in opposition to the practices found within the schools in Iceland. These expectations sprung from their home country's culture, which the parents usually compared to the education system in Iceland. Students also compared the schools to those in their home country; however, in contrast to their parents, the students preferred

the Icelandic schools. They favored the treatment of the Icelandic teachers, whom they considered as less strict and more caring, and enjoyed subjects such as arts and crafts, whereas the parents failed to understand and appreciate the importance of such subjects.

Parents aspired for a learning environment where there is discipline and order. They perceived the Icelandic schools as very 'free' and considered the teachers not strict enough. In addition, they wished for a system that encourages competition between students and supports the idea of failure – i.e. class repetition. Parents wanted to reward the high achievers and/or have a certain punishment system as a motivation to learn. This was also reflected in one of the student's aspirations, who demanded the presence of corporal punishment to push students to learn more. On the contrary, the teachers stressed on the importance of internal motivation, such as working towards a future goal or studying because of intrinsic enjoyment. They opposed the ideas of performance and competition, empathized with the situation of each student and considered it unfair to compare students to one another. Additionally, teachers stressed the importance of open communication to resolve problems rather than merely punishing, and strongly rejected the idea of corporal punishment.

These oppositional point of views regarding the learning environment can be explained through Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Referring to figure 2.3, Iceland has low masculinity and small power distance in comparison to Syria, which has high masculinity and large power distance (Hofstede Insight, n.d.). According to Hofstede et al. (2010), in feminine societies (i.e. countries with low masculinity) failure is accepted, competition is not openly encouraged and there is praising for the weak. Whereas, in masculine societies, competition is encouraged, failure is not accepted and the concept of rewarding high achievers is endorsed (Hofstede et al., 2010). Furthermore, in countries with small power distance the learning process is a two-way communication, students and teachers are considered equals and corporal punishment is considered child abuse (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the other hand, in countries with large power distance teachers are usually treated with respect and fear, corporal punishment is accepted and a strict order is expected to be found in classrooms (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Besides the learning environment, parents showed dissatisfaction regarding subject areas in Iceland. They considered that '*a lot of subjects [were] missing*'

and that the Icelandic academic level was weak. They also believed that subjects falling under the category of arts and crafts were just '*extra curricular activities*' and aspired that the schools would concentrate more on subjects that provide '*knowledge*'. Whereas, teachers highly valued these subjects and emphasized their importance in increasing students' creativity and independence, while assisting students in discovering their strengths. This is also emphasized in the compulsory national curriculum, where creativity is considered one of the six pillars, which the education policy is based on (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). The schools are expected to increase the students independent thinking and self-responsibility, in addition to stimulate their imagination and curiosity (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). These characteristics are found in countries with low power distance, in this case Iceland, where students are expected to be independent and discover their own intellectual paths (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Syria is a country with strong uncertainty avoidance, and, thus, individuals belonging to such societies need structure, clarity and rules, and are not comfortable with unpredictable and ambiguous situations (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede et al., 2010). This may explain the demands of the parents for homework, where their main reason for that is to '*follow up*' and make sure that their children are studying. It likewise explains the anxiety of the father, found in the theme 'Is Iceland in the future?', towards the uncertainty of his children's future, and his frustration with the lack of clear long-term planning from the side of Icelandic teachers and schools.

The findings discussed in this section reflect how a society's culture can affect the process of education and individuals' beliefs and values. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is no "good" or "bad" culture, as culture symbolizes values that are the creation of historical and social conditions and necessities (Nieto, 2009). Culture is dynamic, meaning that it is constantly evolving as result of political, social and other factors in the immediate environment (Nieto, 2009). Therefore, Hofstede's cultural dimensions are used to enhance cultural understanding (Hofstede, 2011), and one should be critical and avoid creating stereotypes while referring to them.

## **The Risk of Having Oppositional Cultural Frames**

Sheikh and Anderson (2018) pointed out that refugees tend to find themselves in countries with little cultural fit, since they do not have the choice in choosing the resettlement country. This is the case in this study, where the results discussed above show the presence of oppositional cultural frames. Having oppositional cultural frames can be considered a reason for the parents' lack of trust towards the Icelandic system. It may also lead to negative acculturation process, where the refugee families can become either separated or marginalized (Berry, 2005; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). This is reflected in some of the parents' lack of interest in the Icelandic language, especially given that they do not perceive themselves, in the long run, as living in Iceland. Additionally, refugee parental beliefs can affect the children (McBrien, 2005), which may explain the children's aspirations to move to other countries.

Schools, being one of the vital agents in facilitating the acculturation process, need to establish the appropriate actions to foster integration and decrease the negative influence of little cultural fit. According to Berry's acculturation model (figure 1.2), following the multicultural approach is the most appropriate way to achieve successful integration (Berry, 2005). Teachers need to be trained on how to deal with diversity (Anderson, 2003) and learn about the refugee's cultural background (Lerner, 2012). However, the results of this study indicate that the teachers have insufficient training about the refugee's culture, which may impede the successful educational resettlement of the refugee children (Lerner, 2012). Furthermore, establishing clear communication channels between home and school is an essential part of multicultural education (McGee Banks, 2010) and it can ease the cultural clash (Hamilton, 2003), yet, as shown in the following section, there is a home-school communication gap.

## **4.2 A Home-School Communication Gap**

One way to overcome differences of prior conceptions, values and goals between the parents and schools, is to establish a clear home-school communication (Hamilton, 2003). The findings in this study show that there is a wide home-school communication gap, especially when discussing the theme

‘Parent-school relationship’ as well as the sub-themes ‘Homework’ and ‘Individualized teaching and students’ academic achievements’.

Hamilton (2003) discussed the importance of parental involvement in building clear communication channels between home and school. He described the relationship between parental involvement and home-school communication as reciprocal, where an increased parental involvement develops a solid communication channel and, in return, a clear communication channel enhances the parental involvement (Hamilton, 2003). Richman pointed out that the more parents are involved in the school, the more they will be knowledgeable about and comfortable with the school (as cited in Hamilton, 2003). The findings presented in the ‘Parent-school relationship’ theme reveal that the parents’ involvement in the school is limited, which may be one of the reasons parents lack trust in the Icelandic school system.

Several studies and literature reviews indicate that one of the main causes for limited parental involvement is the language barrier (Ficarra, 2017; Hamilton, 2003; McBrien, 2011; Rah et al. 2009). This is reflected in the findings, where the teachers doubted that the parents understand or ‘know how to read’ the emails sent; thus, schools are advised to establish language training programs for the parents (Hamilton, 2003; McBrien 2011). In addition to language, computer skill training programs can enhance the parental involvement level (McBrien, 2011). The results indicate that the parents have limited understanding about the email and the computer system, where information about the school and students is regularly updated. One of the families pointed out that they do not have access to their email account, and that they depend on their child’s email to get information about the school. Moreover, sending e-mails is considered a one-way form of communication, and if the parents have difficulties in the language, they will miss on opportunities to learn about the school and their children’s performance (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018).

Part of parental involvement includes volunteering in children’s schools and classrooms or being part of parents’ associations and councils (Rah et al., 2009). These activities might serve as a solution to one of the teacher’s aspiration, which is for the parents to be more in contact with other parents; especially given that schools are considered an essential contact between immigrants and the host culture (Anderson, 2003). However, all of the Syrian

parents specified that they are only in contact with each other, putting them at risk of separation or marginalization (Berry, 2005).

The findings also show that the mothers' level of involvement is more limited than the fathers'. Teachers pointed out that the mothers rarely shared their opinions in the meetings, even with the presence of a translator; additionally, in all of the families, the fathers are the ones responsible for checking the emails. This might be related to the mothers' limited literacy, or to the culture in masculine societies, such as Syria, where women expect male dominance, and they are characterized by their gentleness and care; whereas, men are characterized by their sense of responsibility, decisiveness and ambitiousness (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hamilton (2003) stated that "depending on the target population, the definition of 'involvement' may differ dramatically such that it is important that schools do not adopt the same expectations for involvement for all parents within the school, irrespective of their needs" (p. 93). As a result, schools need to be culturally responsive in their efforts to involve parents, and this does not seem to be the case here. One of the teachers openly discussed her inability to communicate with Syrian parents due to a clash in cultural values. She assumed that one of the fathers would not listen to her since she is a woman, and, consequently did not increase her efforts to enhance the communication. Resorting to critical multiculturalism might help to resolve this issue, since it involves training the teachers to practice self-reflection and acknowledge their own bias (May, 2009). Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2018) pointed out that a failure in communication is related to the teachers' lack of training on how to teach immigrant students. It would be beneficial for the teachers to learn about the educational expectations of the parents towards their children, the home language, the values and norms, and how children are taught in their homes (McGee Banks, 2010). In this study, most of the teachers indicated that they did not receive enough training on how to deal with refugee students, and aspired to learn more about the culture and the language. Furthermore, McGee Banks (2010) stressed the fact that teachers ought to engage in the outreach to the parents, instead of just waiting for them to become involved (McGee Banks, 2010); even though the teachers interviewed displayed a welcoming attitude, the findings reveal that they did not encourage the parents to be involved more than it was necessary. The level of involvement is dependent on the parents' willingness and motivation.

Hamilton (2003), McBrien (2011) and Rah et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of assigning same-cultural and bilingual liaisons to enhance parental involvement. Liaisons serve as a cultural bridge between parents, students and schools, and help to develop a clear home-school communication (Hamilton, 2003; Rah et al., 2009). The schools have provided a non-Syrian Arab translator to play this role. The teachers also pointed out that the municipality assigned an Icelandic woman, ‘Anna’, who was responsible for the Syrian families. ‘Anna’ was referred to when the teachers needed any assistance regarding the refugees and she too served as a liaison. However, both the translator and ‘Anna’ were not from the same cultural background as the Syrians; even though the translator is an Arab, he is not Syrian and does not share a similar history with the Syrian refugees. Additionally, the translator and ‘Anna’ are the only available liaisons in Akureyri, as the Arab community and, more specifically, the Syrian community in Akureyri is very small. According to Statistics Iceland (2017b), there were no Syrians residing in Akureyri before 2016, and at the beginning of 2017, it was recorded that only 32 Arabs resided in the town (Statistics Iceland, 2017b). Furthermore, as the teachers pointed out in the ‘Is Iceland in the Future?’ section, the small community may affect the Syrian families sense of belonging and can be a cause for the parents’ and students’ aspirations to leave Iceland in the future. Spicer pointed out that the refugees first establish a sense of belonging within their own ethnic group, and afterwards they feel a sense of connectedness with domestic born minority groups (as cited in Ficarra, 2017).

Another way to establish an agreeable relationship between home and school is to inform the parents about their children’s assessment procedure, the teaching techniques, the learning objectives, the required materials and books, and the various ways through which they can provide support to their children’s achievement (McGee Banks, 2010). The findings indicate that these factors are missing. In the ‘Individualized teaching and students’ academic achievements’ section, it was clear that the parents did not understand how the all-inclusive system works and were not able to evaluate their children’s progress. One of the main reasons for the parents’ confusion is the language barrier. Teachers explained that the students’ learning objectives are written in Icelandic, making it difficult for the parents to understand. Additionally, the individualized assessment procedure, which is based on setting individual goals and assessing the students’ level of achievement towards these goals, is

new for the teachers. The teachers pointed out they are still '*adapting*' to this procedure. It was apparent that they did not receive sufficient support on how to use it adequately, which made it challenging for them to explain it to the parents.

Besides the confusion regarding the inclusive system and assessment procedure, a lack of communication was evident while discussing homework. All of the parents and some of the students demanded homework. Parents complained that their children did not receive enough material to work on at home. Their main reasons for wanting homework were to stay up to date with their children's school work and to be reassured that their children are studying well. On the other hand, the students' reasons to demand homework were not clear whether they were a response to their parents' demands or because it is truly what they want. Yet, both the parents' and students' requests contradicted the teachers' responses about homework. The teachers mentioned that they are giving the refugee students homework, but the students are not always doing them. In addition, they stated that reading is a daily requirement, and that the students have to complete unfinished classwork at home. According to the teachers, the parents are regularly informed about their children classwork either through an English written email or through the computer system, which they updated in English specifically for this group. As a result, there is a wide ambiguity regarding homework, and some of the issues which remained unclear are:

- Is the homework given by the teachers, different from the parents' and students' concept of homework?
- How can the parents help their children with their studies and read with them on a daily basis, if they do not have proficiency in Icelandic?
- How knowledgeable are the parents about the email and computer system?
- Only one parent has very good proficiency in English, therefore how can the other parents fully understand what is written in the emails and the updates on the computer system?
- Is what one of the teachers mentioned true, that the students actually do not want homework, but the parents do?

Most of the teachers opposed the idea of homework. Even though their opposition stemmed from a moral motive, which is to respect the free time of the students, they were not able to identify the important role homework plays in involving the parents. McGee Banks (2010) pointed out that one of the most

vital roles parents can play in their children academic process is working with them. This will “develop a positive self-concept and a positive attitude toward school as well as a better understanding of how their effort affects achievement” (McGee Banks, 2010, p. 431). Furthermore, simply telling the parents to work with their children is not enough; they need clear directions on how to support their children (McGee, 2010).

### **4.3 Lack of Teachers’ Support and Training**

As discussed in the previous two sections, teacher training plays an essential role in creating clear communication channels between home and school, and in decreasing the negative influence of little cultural fit between two places. Teacher training is an important component to deal with new refugee children (Frater-Mathieson, 2003). Trainings should be given to enhance the understanding of refugee experiences and trauma (Mathieson, 2003), and to ameliorate the teacher’s knowledge about various cultures including that of the refugees’ (Hamilton, 2003). In this study, the teachers revealed that they did not receive enough training on how to deal with refugee families, and did not gain sufficient awareness regarding the Syrian culture and language.

In addition to receiving training around refugee education and the Syrian culture, teachers expressed stress they experienced due to the nature of all inclusive classrooms. Besides the teachers, one of the students highlighted this aspect in the interview, by suggesting to provide an extra teacher in the classroom in order to improve the quality of studying. All inclusive classrooms are seen as a way to increase social cohesion (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), and enhance the development of the refugee’s host language (Hamilton, 2003). Yet, teachers, like students, need extra support, and it is normal for some teachers to feel overwhelmed with existing duties (Hamilton, 2003). Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhanesson (2013) study revealed that compulsory school teachers in Iceland perceived inclusive education as an extra workload; additionally, they complained about the lack of resources to target the whole class towards inclusive structures. These results were reflected in the findings of this research. Teachers in this study aspired to have extra support in the classroom and help in preparing material for the refugee students. This issue can be addressed by employing skilled professionals who can work within the

system to support regular teachers (Moore, 2003). Finally, teachers complained that there is a lack of psychological support for the students and a lack of specialized personnel to help students with difficulties.

## **4.4 Study Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. To start with, my lack of proficiency in Icelandic limited my access to several Icelandic studies and literature around immigrant and refugee education. I concentrated on English written papers and international studies and reviews. Additionally, not all of the teachers interviewed had strong proficiency in English, which impeded them from freely expressing themselves. Besides the language, the study sample was small in size and only limited to Akureyri. The results might differ upon interviewing more participants in different locations around Iceland. It should also be taken into consideration that the Syrian families interviewed have been in Iceland between two to three years. Upon future interviews, for example in two years from now, the participants' responses might differ, as acculturation is a procedure that occur over time (Berry et al., 2006). Furthermore, while interviewing the children, some of the parents occasionally entered the interview setting, which might have indirectly affected the children's responses. Therefore, it would have been more effective if the children were interviewed in schools. Schools are locations the children are familiar with that will allow them to be comfortable and, at the same time, to be away from the influence of other family members. Finally, prior conducting this research, my aim was to highlight the voices of the children. Yet, as seen in the discussion and findings chapters, the parents' and teachers' voices controlled this study. This might be due to the nature of the data-driven interviews conducted with the children. I believe it would be beneficial to interview the students again and ask them more precise questions targeting specific topics. One topic that will serve an important role in understanding the acculturation process of the students is 'Friendship', yet, due to lack of data, I was not able to include it as a full theme.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of 2016, Iceland welcomed the first Syrian refugee families (UNHCR, 2016). The integration of refugees into the host society is not a simple task. Refugees, unlike voluntary migrants, do not have a choice in their resettlement procedure. They come to the host country with preconceived expectations and prior experiences which affect their acculturation process. Schools play an essential role in successfully integrating the newly arrived refugees into the society. In order to implement the appropriate educational policies and practices, it is beneficial to examine the experiences of the refugee students and parents in addition to the teachers dealing with them.

This research aims to explore the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their respective parents regarding the Icelandic education system at the compulsory level in Akureyri, Iceland. In addition, it explores the experiences of the teachers when dealing with this specific group. The findings revealed that the parents lacked trust in the Icelandic education system. They were unable to understand how the all inclusive system functions, considered that the schools lacked discipline and viewed the teaching as weak. The parents' perspectives were mainly due to a home-school communication gap, as well as a clash in cultural values regarding the process of education. Both parents and students showed uncertainty about their future in Iceland. Additionally, teachers were underprepared and not supported in their quest to deal with diversity. That said, students revealed comfort and content regarding the Icelandic schools, and had good relationships with their teachers.

Multicultural ideology is considered one of the effective approaches to establish a successful integration process (Berry, 2005). In schools, this approach can be achieved through multicultural education. Multicultural education is not merely about enhancing content and reforming the curriculum; it is an entire school reform that targets everyone and everything involved in the schooling process (Banks, 2009). Icelandic schools still have a long way to successfully implement multicultural education. Educational policies and national curriculum guides need to be more clear on how to apply multicultural

education. Integral parts of multicultural education are involving the parents, establishing clear home-school communication and properly preparing teachers to deal with diversity. As seen in this study, these elements are missing. In order to enhance home-school communication and increase parental involvement, it is important for teachers and school staff to be trained about the families' culture and language, and to critically practice self-reflection. They need to be active in their approach to get parents involved, and provide them with comprehensible information about the school system and their children education. Offering language and computer training programs can contribute in ameliorating the home-school communication channels. Having skilled personnel, such as psychologist, translators and bilingual liaisons, within the school system can aid the teachers in understanding the needs and difficulties of refugee students, and in communicating with the families. Furthermore, providing teachers with suitable materials and in-classroom teaching assistance can ease their stress regarding the nature of all inclusive classrooms. Finally, in order to better comprehend the acculturation process of the refugee families, it is important to interview them again after few years from now. To understand the refugee students' acculturation in schools in details, further studies need to be done, such as studies related to their social life and language acquisition. Besides that, similar researches with refugee families residing in different locations in Iceland is essential to broaden the understanding about refugee education in Iceland as a whole.

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## Appendix 1 Parents' and Children's Letter of Intent and Informed Consent in Arabic



### خطاب نوايا وإبلاغ نموذج الموافقة

عنوان البحث: نظام التعليم الأيسلندي من وجهة نظر الطلاب وأولياء الأمور السورين

اسم الباحث: خيرية الحريري

المشرفون: بروفيوسور ماركوس ميكل - بروفيوسورة مشاركة هيرمينا غونوردوتير - بروفيوسورة مشاركة إيلين ديناغا غوناردوتير

الإجراءات: تم تصميم هذا البحث لدراسة فعالية نظام التعليم والممارس الأيسلندية عند التعامل مع الطلاب والآباء اللاجئين من خلال جمع آرائهم الشخصية. وستجرى المقابلات وجها لوجه مع الوالدين حيث سيتم مقابلة كل من الزوجين بمفرده. سيتم وضع الأطفال في مجموعة تركيز لتسهيل عليهم الإجابة على الأسئلة. وتتراوح المقابلات بين 30 و60 دقيقة. وستكون جميع المقابلات مسجلة صوتياً ثم تكتب لأهداف تحليلية.

فوائد: الفوائد المتوقعة للمشاركة هي الفرصة لمناقشة مفاهيم وشواغل نظام التعليم والمدارس في أيسلندا، مما يساهم في تحسين النظام عند التعامل مع اللاجئين الحاليين والمستقبليين.

المخاطر: لا توجد مخاطر أو حالات إزعاج متوقعة. المخاطر أو حالات الإزعاج المحتملة تشمل مشاعر حزن أو تذكر بصدمة قديمة. ولكن سيتم تجنب ذلك بعناية فائقة من خلال نوع الأسئلة المطروحة.

خصوصية: المعلومات التي سيتم جمعها خلال هذه الدراسة ستبقى سرية وسيتم حفظها في مواقع آمنة خلال هذا المشروع. فقط الباحث سوف يكون لديه الصلاحية لاستعمال والإطلاع على بيانات ومعلومات الدراسة. لن تكون هناك أي أسماء تحدد هوية الشخص في المسوحات أو نصوص المقابلة. لن يكشف عن أسماءكم أو أي تفاصيل تعريف أخرى في أي نشر للنتائج هذه الدراسة. سيتم التخليص من التسجيلات عند انتهاء الدراسة. سيتم استخدام نتائج البحث في أطروحة الماجستير، أيضاً في شكل ملخص في منشور مجلة. ستكون النتائج المكتسبة ذات قيمة كبيرة بالنسبة للمختصين ليكونوا أكثر فعالية في مجال تعليم اللاجئين.

الانسحاب دون حكم مسبق: المشاركة في هذه الدراسة طوعية؛ فإن رفض في المشاركة لا يضمن أي عقوبة. أنت حر في عدم الموافقة والانسحاب من هذا المشروع في أي وقت دون مساس أو عقوبة. أنت أيضاً حر في الإمتناع عن الإجابة على أي سؤال يطرح عليك.

المزيد من الأسئلة والمتابعة: إذا كان لديك أي استفسارات حول البحث، يمكنك الاتصال بـ:

خيرية الحريري (kheirie.elhariri@gmail.com)

بروفيسور ماركوس ميكل (8655 460 / markus@unak.is)

بروفيسورة مشاركة هيرمينا غونوردوتير (8556 460 / hermina@unak.is)

أو بروفيوسورة مشاركة إيلين ديناغا غوناردوتير (8670 460 / edg@unak.is)

قد أعطيت معلومات عن المشروع "نظام التعليم الأيسلندي من وجهة نظر الطلاب وأولياء الأمور السورين". وقد ناقشت هذا المشروع البحثي مع خيرية الحريري، طالبة ماجستير (ماجستير في الآداب من قبل البحوث) في جامعة أكوريري. هذا هو جزء من مشروع بحث أطروحة الماجستير تحت إشراف بروفيسور ماركوس ميكل، بروفيسورة مشاركة هيرمينيا غونارسدوتير وبروفيسورة مشاركة لين ديبانا غونارسدوتير.

أنا أفهم أن المخاطر ضئيلة، وقد أتيتحت لي الفرصة لطرح أي سؤال لدي حول البحث ومشاركتي لخيرية الحريري.

إنني أدرك أن مشاركتي في هذا البحث طوعي وأنني لن أتلقى أجرا مقابل ذلك. وتشمل مشاركتي إجراء مقابلة مع خيرية الحريري. ستستغرق المقابلة حوالي 30 إلى 60 دقيقة، ولدي الحق في رفض أي سؤال أو إنهاء المقابلة.

أنا حر في رفض المشاركة وأنا حر في الانسحاب من الدراسة في أي وقت. رفضي للمشاركة أو الانسحاب لن يؤثر على معاملتي بأي شكل من الأشكال مع جامعة أكوريري أو علاقتي بها.

أنا أفهم أن البحث لن يرمز لي بالاسم في أي تقرير باستخدام المعلومات التي تم الحصول عليها من هذه المقابلة، وأن سرية المشارك في هذه الدراسة سوف تبقى آمنة.

بالتوقيع أدناه، أنا أوافق على المشاركة في البحث. وأنا أفهم أن البيانات التي سيتم جمعها من مشاركتي سوف تستخدم في المقام الأول لأطروحة الماجستير، وسوف تستخدم أيضا في شكل ملخص في منشور مجلة.

توقيع المشارك .....

اسم المشارك (مطبوع) ..... تاريخ ..... /...../.....

إذا كان المشارك أقل من 18 عاما

توقيع ولي الأمر / الوصي .....

اسم ولي الأمر / الوصي (مطبوع) ..... تاريخ ..... /...../.....

إذا:

(أ) ترغب في الحصول على نسخة من محضر المقابلة عند توفرها

(ب) كنت مهتما في معلومات عن نتائج الدراسة ككل و / أو

(ج) إذا كنت ترغب في الاتصال مرة أخرى في المستقبل لإجراء مقابلة متابعة محتملة، يرجى تقديم معلومات أدناه:

تحقق من تلك التي تنطبق:

أود الحصول على نسخة من محضر المقابلة

أرغب في الحصول على معلومات حول نتائج الدراسة

سأكون على استعداد لأن يتم الاتصال بي في المستقبل لإجراء مقابلة متابعة محتملة

العنوان البريدي: ..... عنوان البريد الإلكتروني: .....

**Letter of Intent and Informed Consent Form**

**Study Title:** Syrian Refugee Students in the Icelandic Schools

**Researcher Name:** Kheirie El Hariri

**Supervisors:** Professor Markus Meckl - Associate Professor Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir - Associate Professor Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir

**Explanation of Procedure:** This research is designed to analyze the aspirations, perspectives and challenges of the Syrian refugee students and parents regarding the Icelandic education and school system by gathering their personal feedbacks. In order to have credible and reliable results, interviews with the teachers responsible for these students will also be conducted. Teachers in the same school will be interviewed together, unless preferred else wise, then they will be interviewed individually. All interviews will be face-to-face and will last between 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

**Benefits:** The interviews with the teachers serve as a backbone to the interview results of the parents and students. The participation will provide the opportunity to discuss the perceptions and concerns of the the teachers compared with those presented by the Syrian parents and students resulting in a holistic approach; thus, adding more credibility and reliability to the final results.

**Risks:** There are no risks or discomfort anticipated from the study.

**Confidentiality:** The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during this project. Only the researcher will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names of the teachers or the schools on the surveys or interview transcripts. Your names and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The recordings will be destroyed at the completion of the study. The results of the research will be used for a master's thesis, and will also be used in summary form for journal publication. The knowledge obtained from this study will be of great value in guiding professionals to be more effective in refugees' education field.

**Withdrawal without prejudice:** Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question we might ask you.

**Further questions and follow up:** If you have any enquiries about the research, you can contact Kheirie El Hariri ([kheirie.elhariri@gmail.com](mailto:kheirie.elhariri@gmail.com)), Professor Markus Meckl ([markus@unak.is](mailto:markus@unak.is) / 460 8655) , Associate Professor Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir ([hermina@unak.is](mailto:hermina@unak.is) / 460 8556) or Associate Professor Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir ([edg@unak.is](mailto:edg@unak.is) / 460 8670).

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I have been given information about “Syrian Refugee Students in the Icelandic Schools” project. I have discussed this research project with Kheirie El Hariri, a MA student (Masters of Arts by Research) at University of Akureyri. This is part of a master’s thesis research project supervised by Professor Markus Meckl from the faculty of Social Sciences at University of Akureyri.

I understand that the risks to me are minimal, and I have had an opportunity to ask Kheirie El Hariri any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I will not be paid for it. My participation involves being interviewed as teacher responsible for Syrian refugee student(s) by Kheirie El Hariri. The interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. I have the right to decline any question or to end the interview.

I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal will not affect my treatment in any way or my relationship with University of Akureyri.

I understand that the research will not identify me by name in any report using information obtained from this interview, and that the confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for a master’s thesis, and will also be used in summary form for journal publication.

Participant’s Signature .....

Participant’s Name (printed) ..... Date ...../...../.....

I confirm that I have informed the above participant about the purpose of the study and interview.

Researcher’s Signature .....

### *Appendix 3 Parents' Interview template*

#### Interview Questions

- 1) Compared to now how were your children reacting to the school when they arrived to Iceland (first month)? - Did they face any obstacles? - If yes, what were they and what were the taken regulations to overcome them? - Are they still facing obstacles? - If yes, what are the regulations taken to overcome them?
- 2) As a parent, did you face any obstacles when dealing with the school? - If yes, what were they and what were the taken regulations to overcome them? - Are you still facing obstacles? - If yes, what are the regulations taken to overcome them?
- 3) What motivates your children to go to school?
- 4) What are the advantages in the schooling system?
- 5) What would you improve in the schooling system?
- 6) How is the school environment?
- 7) Describe your relationship with the teachers and school administration. How did it evolve since your children started school?
- 8) How involved are you in your children's school activities?
- 9) How much involved do you think you should be? Why?
- 10) Describe the ideal school which you believe is appropriate for your child?

### *Appendix 4 Children's Interview Template*

#### Interview Questions

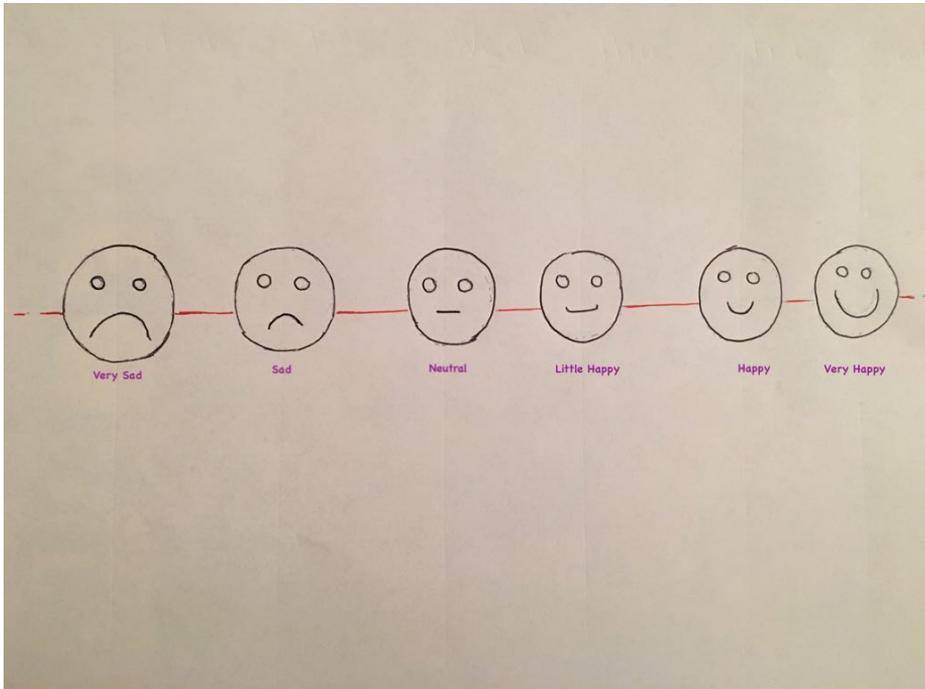
- 1) What do you like most about school?
- 2) What would you improve in school?
- 3) What motivates you to go to school?
- 4) Describe your relationship with your classmates.
- 5) Describe your relationship with your teachers.
- 6) Describe your ideal school?

## *Appendix 5 Teacher's Interview Template*

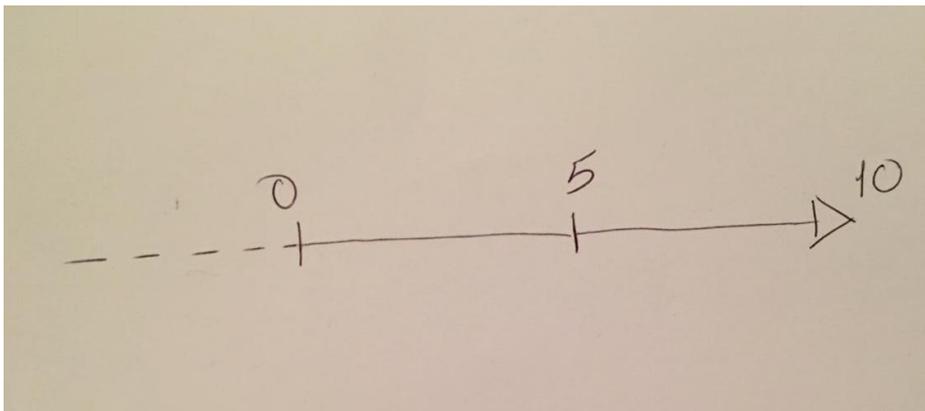
### **Interview Questions:**

- Is this the first time you teach refugee students?
- Do you find a difference between refugee students and immigrants? What are they?
- Have you previously taught students from similar cultural background as the Syrians, regardless of the refugee status?
- Can you describe the evolvement of the student(s) (academic and social development)?
- Did you encounter any challenges while teaching the student? If yes, what are they and how do you deal with them?
- In your opinion, what are some policies you may add, change or remove in cases of receiving refugee students or students from very different cultural background?
- From scale 1 to 5, how happy do you think the students are? And why?
- From scale 1 to 5, how happy do you think the parents are? And why?
- How is their relationship with their classmates?
- How is your relationship with the parents?
- Do you encounter any hindrances when communicating with the parents? If yes, what are they, and how can they be surpassed?
- Parents and some students say that they prefer to have homework, do you agree with this fact? Why yes or no?
- Parents perceive art and crafts (i.e.: Carpentry, knitting, drawing etc.) as extracurricular activities of little importance, how can you convince them otherwise?
- In your opinion, how should the student teacher relationship be?
- Do you think that English should be used as an intermediate language of explanation? Why yes or no?
- What do you think about the concept of all students passing (no failure or level repeating)?
- How do you motivate students inside the classroom?
- Do you think that you need more help or training when dealing with refugee students? If yes, what kind of help or training?
- What were your expectations before teaching the student(s) and after teaching them?

*Appendix 6 A Scale of Smiley Faces for Students to Refer to in the Interviews*



*Appendix 7 Motivation Scale from 1 to 10 for Students to Refer to in the Interviews*



*Appendix 8 Alaa's Drawing of his Ideal School in Syria*

