Learning as being taught: An insight into the classroom life of teenagers in 14 Icelandic compulsory schools

Rúnar Sigþórsson
University of Akureyri runar@unak.is

Þóra Björk Jónsdóttir
Educational Testing Institute thora@namsmat.is
This paper

- Built on data from 14 out of 20 schools – lower secondary level – in a larger project “Teaching and learning in Icelandic schools“
  - answers from students in years 7–10 to survey questions (1821 respondents)
  - interviews with teachers (years 7–10)
  - focus group interviews with students (years 9 and 10).
Three facets of classroom life

- Students’ position in the learning process
- Students’ conceptions, interest and attitudes
- Students’ empowerment – involvement and influence
I think the teaching at my school is ...

- Very good: 22%
- Rather good: 47%
- Average: 26%
- Rather bad: 3%
- Very bad: 2%
## Three aspects of students’ attitudes

- **I enjoy school**
  - Strongly agree: 18
  - Rather agree: 34
  - Neither agree nor disagree: 29
  - Rather disagree: 10
  - Strongly disagree: 9

- **I am interested in my studies**
  - Strongly agree: 15
  - Rather agree: 34
  - Neither agree nor disagree: 30
  - Rather disagree: 11
  - Strongly disagree: 10

- **My homework is interesting**
  - Strongly agree: 5
  - Rather agree: 14
  - Neither agree nor disagree: 29
  - Rather disagree: 22
  - Strongly disagree: 30

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School subjects: Important to learn

Very or rather important %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical education</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic science</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and woodwork</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School subjects: Important to learn

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School subjects: Important vs. enjoyable to learn

% | Very or rather important | Very or rather enjoyable
---|--------------------------|--------------------------
English | 93 | 70
Maths | 92 | 59
Icelandic | 90 | 51
Science | 77 | 54
Social studies | 76 | 50
Physical education | 74 | 52
Life skills | 78 | 58
Domestic science | 81 | 64
Danish | 47 | 33
Design and woodwork | 64 | 45
Drama | 59 | 37
Art | 55 | 36
Textiles | 48 | 36
Music | 44 | 32
Dancing | 38 | 15

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# Methods of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Daily or often every day</th>
<th>Once to four times a week</th>
<th>Once to three times a month</th>
<th>Less than once a month / never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seatwork with workbooks</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher's lectures/...</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work / cooperation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using computers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay writing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning games</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiments / hands on...</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field trips / outdoor education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Interviews and observations ...

- indicated students as receivers
  - observations of seating arrangements, teacher movements, student’s use of workbooks, and learning activities
- to learn = to work in workbooks
- to take notes = copy from the board or ppt-slides

“Take up your books, start learning, this is your homework, bye, bye“

„Yes, they just give us the books, and [say]: ‘you just get on with your work,‘ easy peacy, yes“
In interviews students called for ...

- more variations,
- more cooperation and individual responsibility
- more games
  - “You learn more quickly and you remember more when you have fun ... and you are more interested if it is a game, because you will want be a part of the game, of course“
- suitably challenging tasks
  - “When you grasp something, really manage to understand something, then learning is pleasing.“
- more choice according to interests
  - “Those are the morst enjoyable lessons, really“
Four aspects of student choice

How often or seldom can you choose ...

- activities according to your talents or abilities?
  - Always / nearly always: 16
  - Sometimes / seldom: 61
  - Almost never / never: 22

- different media for learning – books, audio books, videos or computers?
  - Always / nearly always: 15
  - Sometimes / seldom: 37
  - Almost never / never: 48

- activities according to interest?
  - Always / nearly always: 13
  - Sometimes / seldom: 61
  - Almost never / never: 26

- how you demonstrate the product of your learning, e.g. orally, in writing, on a poster?
  - Always / nearly always: 9
  - Sometimes / seldom: 40
  - Almost never / never: 51
Observations and interviews ...

- Observed choice in 49 lessons out of 147
  - When the 49 lessons were scrutinised less than half of them involved choice that empowered students
- Elective subjects mandatory in years 8–10
- Examples of choice of learning materials/or activities of different levels of difficulty of pace (e.g. slow – medium – fast)
- A few examples of students planning time and pace
- Examples from two schools of topics of interest
Students about their influence

“We don’t have much say. There is such a little we can change ... [if] we say that we don’t like something then it goes like that: ‘Well, this is something you have to do.’ There is not much we can decide in the lessons, nothing really.”

“Most of us have opinions, but it is not possible to do anything with them because they go so much against the curriculum, We know that nothing will change so we see no point in more blabbering ...”
Concluding remarks
– points for discussion

1. The majority of the respondents (70%) said that the teaching was good, but a lot fewer enjoyed school, were interested in their studies and homework, and enjoyed their main subjects.

2. Similar learning arrangements (direct transmission) have been seen in a number of other Icelandic research, but in teachers answers in the TALIS (OECD Teaching and Learning International Study) results for Iceland are contradictory.

3. Students are listened to but not empowered, have limited agency – and approve of it.