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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses early childhood education in Iceland and its in relation to the country's cultural heritage, the family welfare system, and legislation and influences from abroad. Because Iceland has been isolated for centuries from the rest of the world, the country has developed its own culture and maintained its native language. The need for early childhood care did not arise until the late arrival of the industrial revolution. The first early childhood program was established in 1924 as a shelter for poor children orphaned by influenza. The curriculum has gradually been transformed into preschool as the first level of schooling, according to a 1994 law. The Icelandic welfare system resembles that of other Scandinavian countries; therefore, most preschool facilities are established by the local authorities. The Ministry of Culture and Education supervision the operation of the preschools and establishes the curriculum. Icelandic early childhood education is built on a Scandinavian family welfare model, the natural environment of the country, and the Icelandic cultural heritage. The paper discusses the influences of these factors, as well as external factors, on early education in Iceland. Contains 26 references. (Author)

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ICELAND.

A response to the welfare system, the natural environment, the cultural heritage and foreign influences.

by

Jóhanna Einarsdóttir

A paper presented at the Symposium on Early Childhood Education,
honoring Dr. Bernard Spodek
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Abstract

Early childhood education in Iceland is introduced and discussed in relation to the country's cultural heritage, the welfare system and legislation as well as influences from abroad. Iceland is a Scandinavian country, although isolated from the other part of Scandinavia. It is an island situated far in the north Atlantic, midway between Europe and North America. The country was very isolated from the rest of the world for centuries and as a result has developed its own culture and maintained its native tongue. The industrial revolution arrived late in Iceland, therefore the country was still predominantly rural in the beginning of the 20th century; hence the need for early childhood care did not arise until later.

The first early childhood program was established in 1924 as a shelter for poor children. The early childhood curriculum has gradually been transformed into preschool as the first level of schooling, according to a 1994 law. The Icelandic welfare system resembles that of other Scandinavian countries; therefore most preschool facilities are established by the local authorities. The Ministry of Culture and Education supervises the operation of the preschools and establishes the curriculum.

Icelandic early childhood education is built on a Scandinavian family welfare model, the natural environment of the country, and the Icelandic cultural heritage. The paper discusses the influences of these factors, as well as external factors, on early education in Iceland.

Education as a Part of the Welfare System

Iceland is a Scandinavian country, although isolated from the other Scandinavian countries. It is an island situated in the North Atlantic, midway between Europe and North America. The population is approximately only 270,000. Icelanders enjoy a living standard comparable to that of their European neighbors, and the welfare system resembles that of other Scandinavian countries. Everybody, for example, reaps the benefits of free health care, free education, and guaranteed pensions, and parents have the right to 6 months paid leave for pregnancy and childcare.

Icelanders keep long working hours and women's participation in the labor market is high. At the same time, the birthrate is higher in Iceland than in most Western European countries with a total fertility rate of 2.08 (The Statistical Bureau of Iceland, 1996).

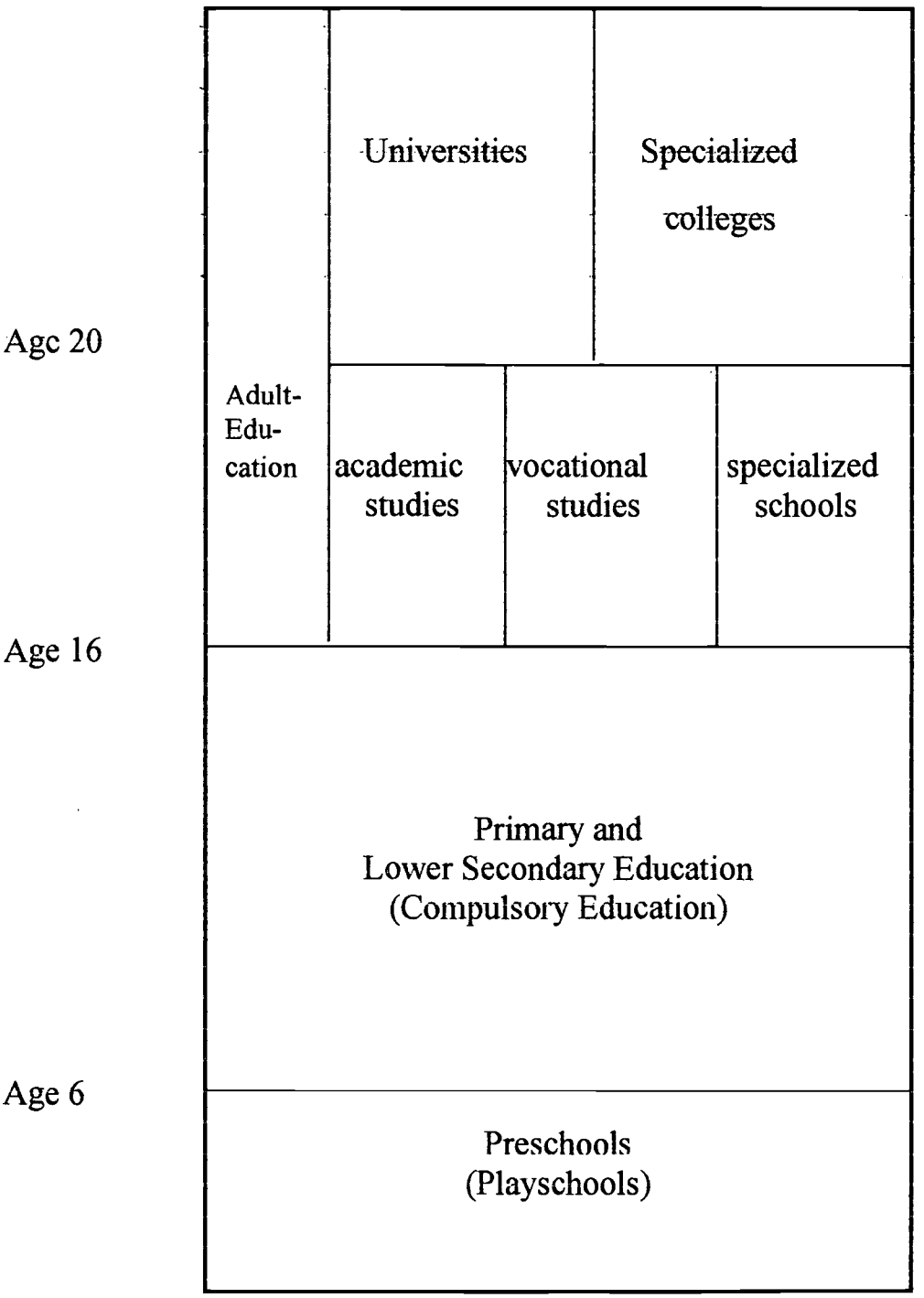
Icelandic early childhood education is built on a Scandinavian family welfare model, the natural environment of the country, and the cultural heritage. This paper discusses the influences of these factors as well as foreign influences on early education in Iceland.

The Education System

The Icelandic Education system is divided into preschool education, primary and lower secondary education, upper secondary education, and higher education (Figure1). Compulsory education starts at the age of six and ends at sixteen. Preschool education is

the first level of schooling in Iceland. Preschools are intended for children during the end of the parents' maternity leave, when the children are six months old, until they go to primary school in the fall of the year they turn six. With few exceptions, education programs in Iceland -- preschool through university -- are public schools and almost free of charge, however parents must pay for their children to attend preschools. Single parents pay 30-50% less than married parents do. This payment covers roughly 30% of the costs of operation (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1995).

Figure 1. The Icelandic Educational System



Early Childhood Education

The history of early childhood education in Iceland is relatively short. No early childhood programs existed until this century. Since then, these programs have expanded tremendously and dramatic changes have occurred in early childhood schooling, both its role and emphasis.

Early childhood education in Iceland can be traced to the charity work of the Women's Alliance in Reykjavik. As a consequence of an influenza epidemic in 1918, many children lost their parents. The women of the Alliance responded to the urgent need to feed and shelter these poor children, and to keep them off the street, they opened up a day-care center in 1924. In 1940 they established a program called playschool (Guðmundsson, 1949).

Two concepts, (1) day-care centers and (2) playschools were used for early childhood education programs in Iceland until 1991 (figure 2). The curriculum of these two programs was primarily the same; the difference was only in the length of the school day. Children stayed for up to eight or nine hours a day in day care centers, but stayed only four or five hours in playschools. Also, in playschools the youngest children to be admitted were two years of age, while some day-care centers accepted children at six months or even younger. In addition, day- care centers limited their admission to priority groups, including children of single parents and students. In contrast, the playschools were open to everybody. Today the term playschool is used for all early education programs for children up to six-year-olds (Law on preschools no. 48/1991).

Currently the local authorities establish most preschool facilities. The Ministry of Culture and Education supervises the operation of the preschools and establishes the curriculum. The ministry publishes an educational plan for the preschools that is legislated as a national curriculum plan (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1993). According to a 1994 law, preschool education is the first level of schooling in Iceland. The activity of the charity women who were motivated to feed and shelter poor children and keep them off the street has elevated preschools into educational institutions. (figure 2)

Children are not required to attend preschool education, but according to legislation, all children must have the opportunity to do so if their parents so desire (Law on preschools no. 78/1994). Approximately 83% of children aged three to five, and approximately 23% of children 0-2 years of age attended preschools in 1995 (The Statistical Bureau of Iceland, 1996), but the attendance rate has been rising in the last few years. In spite of the legislation, the number of places available in preschools is still insufficient (although improving), especially for children under three years. This has resulted in the creation of day-care in private homes for the youngest age groups. Children with disabilities and children from single parent families have priority for preschool services where there are insufficient facilities (EURYODICE, 1996).

Figure 2 Early Childhood Education in Iceland

IDEOLOGY

Bank Street

High/Scope

Reggio Emilia

Rudolf Steiner

Progressive education

Froebel

Preschools as the first level of schooling	---	1994
All early childhood programs are "playschools"	---	1991
National curriculum plan for preschools	---	1985
Preschools the responsibility of municipalities	---	1976
First law on early childhood education. The government supports the programs	---	1973
College for preschool teachers established	---	1946
The first playschool	---	1940
The first day-care center	---	1924

SOCIAL SYSTEM

CULTURAL HERITAGE (LANGUAGE-LITERATURE-HISTORY)

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Land and the Culture

Spodek (1991) suggests that the content of all education is culturally defined, traditionally in terms of how each society defines the ideals of truth, virtue and beauty. Furthermore there is a core of language, traditions, values, behaviors and the like, which are a part of any one culture but not a part of other cultures. In order to function within a particular culture, children must learn this core. Therefore the cultural content of preschools in one society will not be found in the curriculum of preschools in other societies (Spodek & Saracho, 1996). Iceland was very isolated from the rest of the world for centuries and has developed its own culture, a culture that is related to the natural environment of the country, its native tongue, and its history (Skúlason, 1994). When discussing Icelandic early childhood education it is necessary to analyze these factors that form basis for the of early childhood education programs.

Natural Environment

Iceland is an island, situated in the North Atlantic, midway between Europe and North America where the Gulf Stream meets the ice flows of the Arctic. Thanks to the Gulf Stream, Iceland enjoys a temperate ocean climate, cool in summer and fairly mild in winter. Given the location of the country, it is no wonder that it long remained undiscovered -- and probably was the last country in Europe to be inhabited (Rosenblad, & Rosenblad, 1993). Iceland is the youngest country in the world in geological terms. Volcanic forces are still very active. About four-fifths of the country is uninhabitable.

The physical environment has played an important part in shaping the life and fate of the Icelandic people. The location of the country and the magnificent landscape has molded the nation through the ages. The people of Iceland have depended on the weather and the gifts of the land and the sea around the island for their livelihood. This seems somewhat far away from Icelandic children today who are brought up in modern technology and buy their food at the supermarket. However, many old traditions are honored in the Icelandic preschool curriculum (Einarsdóttir & Tryggvadóttir, 1996).

The weather plays an important part in the life of the nation. It is changeable to the extreme and is often unpredictable. However, playing outdoors daily in almost every kind of weather is a vital part of the early childhood curriculum. As a consequence, an important part of preschool buildings is the hallway or clothing room where the children put on and take off their outdoor and indoor clothes. Furthermore, the playgrounds in Icelandic preschools are spacious, well equipped, and adapted to use all year round. A separate chapter in the national curriculum plan is called "putting on and taking off clothes" which analyzes the pedagogy of the clothing room. The Icelandic language is rich with words that describe all types of weather. In many preschools, the day starts with discussion about the weather: how the weather is today, what it is called, and the types of clothes that are preferable in this kind of weather.

History

The history of Iceland begins with independent people who left Norway in the 9th century because of the oppressive conduct of the authorities. They sailed across the

Atlantic Ocean in open boats and settled in a country where it seemed almost impossible to live. They struggled for centuries to keep alive, and many died in natural catastrophes and during long, hard winters.

Iceland was predominantly rural until the beginning of the 20th century. Children participated in and contributed to the work of the family but were also given freedom and opportunity to play in the natural setting. This arrangement was disrupted by the changes that occurred in Icelandic society as result of the urbanization that started at the turn of the century. The changes created by the industrial revolution were unusually sharp as the society transformed from being predominantly rural to urban and industrialized culture in only a few decades (Gíslason, 1990).

The capital of Iceland, Reykjavik, is the only city in Iceland. It grew from being a fishing village at the turn of the century into a little town and then into a city. Today more than 90% of the nation lives in urban areas and approximately half of the nation lives in the Reykjavik metropolitan area (The City of Reykjavík, 1996), a city with most of the advantages and disadvantages of urban life. In spite of the movement toward urbanization, children in Iceland today are still allowed much freedom and at an early age many of them are expected to take responsibility for themselves and even for their younger siblings.

Language

The native tongue Icelandic is a Scandinavian language, a subgroup of the Germanic languages. Icelandic is the language that was spoken all over Scandinavia

centuries ago. It has remained relatively uniform and has resisted change for centuries, while the other Scandinavian languages have undergone many changes in their grammar, becoming more simplified and adopting words from other languages.

Icelanders show a great interest in their language and are very proud of it. They have an image of themselves as a tiny nation that has maintained a strong literary tradition over centuries and preserving the purity of their language in spite of extreme hardship, natural catastrophes and colonialism. They emphasize the purity of Icelandic and put great effort into creating new words for modern things like the telephone and computer, as Latin and Greek words are not suitable for the language.

For Icelanders, language is an instrument for the enrichment of their culture and the cultivation of thought. Language is viewed as a living being, and the aim of the language policy is to prevent the speakers from doing harm to their language (Pálsson, 1989). This view of the language is also emphasized in the education system and the National Preschool Curriculum Plan states:

> A common language --mother tongue -- tends to unite people as it strengthens identity within the group. Language plays an essential role regarding the culture of nations and self-concept even among the very young.
> As the playschool teacher and other members of staff set examples for the children regarding use of language it is important that they take care in how they use it, both when choosing words as well as pronouncing them (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1993, p. 54).

In a survey on the visibility of the cultural heritage in Icelandic preschools, many preschool teachers emphasized their role as a good language model, using rich and structurally correct language and pure Icelandic when communicating with the children.

Some mentioned that their preschools emphasized that the children should be proud of their country, origin and language (Einarsdóttir & Tryggvadóttir, 1996).

Literature

The main backbone of Icelandic culture is a strong literary tradition. In the 13th and 14th century, Icelanders wrote the Icelandic Sagas and Nordic mythology in their native language, a literature that has enriched the culture of the world. This literature, as well as the country's isolation, explains why the nation has been able to preserve its ancient language and cultural characteristics (Einarsdóttir & Tryggvadóttir, 1996).

The rich literary tradition is obvious in modern Icelandic society. A Scandinavian statistical record on cultural activities notes that reading and purchasing books is the most common cultural activity in Iceland (The Statistical Bureau of Iceland, 1994).

The literary heritage is also reflected in the preschool curriculum, of which a noticeable part is reading to the children. Storytelling is also a part of Icelandic tradition, and the old art of story telling is honored in the preschools. Preschools also introduce rhyme, poems, and patriotic songs to the children that many of them learn by heart (Einarsdóttir & Tryggvadóttir, 1996).

Influences from Abroad

Also to be considered are the external factors influencing early childhood education in Iceland. Since the country is located midway between Europe and North America, influences from both continents are evident. Currents of thought in early childhood education can be traced to both directions.

When day care centers and playschools were first established in Iceland, various early childhood programs had already evolved throughout the world. The ideas of Friedrich Froebel had spread all through the world and kindergartens had been opened up in Europe, N-America, S-America and Asia. Maria Montessori had created her Children's House in Rome and had developed her program of systematic education of the senses, and nursery schools had been established in England. Furthermore, the American progressive movement following John Dewey's ideas had already been influencing the thought and practice of early childhood educators in the world (Spodek & Saracho, 1994).

Icelandic preschool education has from the beginning been influenced by a Scandinavian preschool tradition, which has strong roots in the Froebelian pedagogy (Lindqvist, 1995). The pioneers in early childhood education in Iceland received their education in Scandinavia and the United States (Guðmundsson, 1949), as there was no training available in the country until 1946, when a college for preschool teachers was established. Today, many Icelandic academics study abroad at some stage in their career. This is also the case among the early childhood educators. The College of Preschool

Teachers has been a leader in the field of early education and many of the faculty members have sought their further education abroad, many in Scandinavia but some also in W-Europe and the United States.

This has led to broader perspectives, and influences from both continents can be noticed in the preschool curriculum. The Reggio Emilia program from Italy, the High/Scope curriculum, Caroline Pratt's Unit blocks, the Bank Street Approach from the United States, and Rudolf Steiner's philosophy from Austria are specific examples of such international influences in the last decades. Currently there is one preschool using the Reggio Emilia approach and many others are also adopting ideas from Reggio. The High/Scope curriculum has been used in methodology courses in the college for several years now, and its influence is evident in the curriculum of many preschools, where they are giving the children opportunity to choose among a selection of activities in a structured way. The college has offered a course on the philosophy and the use of the unit blocks in the last few years. Units blocks are now becoming a common material in the preschools. Furthermore, two Waldorf schools building on Rudolf Steiner's philosophy are currently operating in Reykjavik.

Early Childhood Education Today

Icelandic preschools today vary in size, from one-classroom preschools with only few children to a six-classroom preschool with 140 children. However, most have from 40 to 80 children, with 18-20 in each classroom. The children are sometimes divided by

age into groups, but in other instances there are mixed-age groups, with, for example, 3-4- and 5- year-olds together in groups, or 2- and 3-year olds may be placed in one group while 4- and 5-year-olds are in another group. The school day may last from four to six hours if it is a partial day, and up to nine hours for a whole day.

The teacher/child ratio is in accordance with legislation, 3-4 children per teacher for the youngest children (0-2 years), and 6-8 children per teacher for the 3-6 year-olds. (Reglugerð um starfsemi leikskóla, 1995).

In preschools 36% of the staff are qualified preschool teachers, with a three year college degree, 7% have various other types of teacher training, and 57% of the staff do not have a formal education (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1995).

Currently most preschools in Iceland are housed in buildings specially designed as such. The preschool classrooms often have one main room and several smaller rooms, each of them housing different activities. One room may for example contain all the necessary materials for dramatic play (typically including cloth, clothing for dress-up, kitchen appliances, dolls, doll beds, strollers, table, and chairs), while another holds manipulatives and games, and the third provides a variety of materials for art activities. Areas for unit blocks, movement, and large motor activity are also common, and all preschools have fully equipped outdoor areas.

According to legislation the aims of preschool education shall be:

-To provide the children with care, provide a good environment for their development and safe facilities for playing.
-To give the children opportunity to participate in play and activities and to benefit from varied educational opportunities in a group of children, under the supervision of pre-school teachers.

> -To strive, in cooperation with the homes, to stimulate the children's overall development in accordance with individual needs, and to give them emotional and physical attention so that they can enjoy their childhood.
> -To encourage tolerance and broad-mindedness in the children and give them equal opportunities to develop.
> -To inspire Christian moral values in the children and lay the foundations necessary for them to become independent, conscious, active and responsible participants in a democratic society, which is constantly and rapidly changing.
> -To cultivate the children's expressive and creative abilities, in order to strengthen their self-image, feelings of security and ability to solve their disagreements peacefully (Law for preschools no.78, 1994, article 2).

The Ministry of Culture and Education establishes the curriculum for the preschools and publishes a National Curriculum Plan. The curriculum plan is very broad and gives general guidelines. It emphasizes; (a) caring and daily routine (b) play (c) language and language stimulation (d) visual arts and creativity (e) music, sound and movement (f) environment and (g) social studies (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1993).

In a frequently cited article, Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) identified three streams of curriculum, each driven by different curriculum ideologies. The cultural transmission ideology emphasizes the transmission of information, rules, and values of the past generation to the present generation. The romantic ideology is concerned with the interests and natural development of children. The progressive ideology is concerned with children's development through interaction with their environment.

If one views Icelandic preschool programs according to these ideologies, they tend to reflect a romantic ideology, in spite of the influences of the above mentioned progressive educational programs in the last decades. Play is considered the main activity of the

preschools. Indeed all early childhood programs since 1991 have been called playschools (figure 2). The curriculum plan emphasizes that children should learn through play, and that play should not only be the nucleus of education of all preschools, but also its ends and means (The Ministry of Culture and Education, 1994, p. 36). Children are generally allowed much freedom when playing. A study on adult's roles in children's play in Icelandic preschools found that children are often left to themselves, without interference or supervision from the adults. The preschool caregivers were often not present when the children were playing, who played by themselves in a separate and sometimes closed room (Einarsdóttir, 1997). This is very different from American classrooms where all activities take place in one room, and an adult is to be in the room at all times. However, this is similar to what can be found in the other Scandinavian countries (Ivarson, 1996). The creative arts are also highly emphasized in the preschool curriculum and in the larger society.

As a generalization one could say that Icelandic preschools are child-entered and reflect a romantic view in spite of various progressive programs that have been introduced and adopted in the preschools the last few years. It appears that the preschool teachers select from them what fits their own view, believes and philosophies -their folk psychology. However, it is important to note that in spite of a national curriculum, there are differences among Icelandic preschools, both in the physical layout, the organization, and the ideology.

Conclusion

The history of Icelandic early childhood education only stretches over three-quarters of a century. An establishment that started during the beginning of urbanization in the 1920's as a refuge for poor children has now become the first level of schooling. Although still optional, most children attend preschools at some time during their preschool years. There is a great deal of pressure from parents on the municipalities to provide enough preschool spaces. The goal of most municipalities is to provide sufficient spaces for all children. Some have already achieved that. The city of Reykjavík plans to build and create enough preschool spaces before the year 1998 (The City of Reykjavík, 1997).

The last ten years have been a time of great expansion of preschools in Iceland. After years of such fast expansion and growth, the main concerns of Icelandic early childhood educators in the years to come has to be on the quality of the pedagogy and the content of the curriculum. What children should learn, and when and how they should do so (Katz, 1991) are the fundamental questions that need to be the considered. Another issue, however, related to this one is the education of the preschool staff. It must be a primary goal in the years to come to fill the preschools with well-educated professionals.

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