

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 945

PS 029 528

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TITLE Principles Underlying the Work of Icelandic Preschool Teachers.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs; Cultural Influences; *Educational Philosophy; Foreign Countries; Preschool Education; *Preschool Teachers; Qualitative Research; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Iceland

ABSTRACT

This study examined the teaching methods of two Icelandic preschool teachers, their beliefs about early childhood curriculum, and the goals of their programs, emphasizing the connection between the context of the preschool teachers and their pedagogical work. Participating in the qualitative study were two preschool teachers from the city of Reykjavik: Helga, with 25 years of teaching experience, and Kristin, with 6 years of teaching experience. Data were gathered through observations in various locations, nine semi-structured interviews, and examination of artifacts such as letters to parents, guidelines, and planning sheets. The findings showed that the two preschool teachers' methods, goals, and beliefs had similar main assumptions, with pedagogical work characterized by informal teaching, play, and child-initiated activities. The two teachers found it difficult to explain reasons for their practices and to articulate their beliefs about pedagogical issues. Teachers' beliefs regarding goals, what children should learn in preschool, how children learn and develop, the role of play and outdoor play, the teacher's role, and teaching were compared and contrasted. Differences in the teachers' beliefs were found to be consistent with differences in their practice. Findings were examined in relation to the national curriculum and the cultural context. A cultural tension was found between traditional Scandinavian and Icelandic preschool traditions and more current trends in early childhood education mainly coming from the United States. The results suggest that the cultural context is influential in molding the attitudes and beliefs of preschool teachers and thus influencing the nature of the early childhood program. (Contains 53 references.) (KB)

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Principles Underlying the Work of Icelandic Preschool Teachers

Paper presented at the AERA conference in Seattle April 2001

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Introduction

In early childhood, teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices have typically been described as falling somewhere along a continuum from child-centered or child-initiated exploration and discovery at one end to teacher-directed or teacher-initiated experiences at the other end (Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White & Charlesworth, 1998; Marcon, 1999; Nelson, 2000; Stipek, 1991; Vartuli, 1999). One of these two extremes assumes that truth is known, that adults know what children need to learn, and that the educational task is to help children learn skills and responsible work habits within an adult-established structure. The second assumes that truth is emergent and adults do not know everything children need to learn. The educational task is to help children learn to play and work effectively, that is, to explore a wide variety of things with confidence and competence and to solve self-selected problems (Jones & Prescott, 1984).

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) identified three streams of curricula, each driven by different beliefs and ideologies. The cultural transmission ideology emphasizes the transmission of information, rules, and values of one generation to the next. The romantic ideology is concerned with the interests and natural development of children. Development is viewed as maturation and education as the unfolding of inner virtues and abilities. The progressive ideology is concerned with children's

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development through interaction with their environment. Education should help children achieve higher levels of development through structured natural interactions with the physical and social environment.

Other authors have used similar classification schemes to explain preschool teachers' beliefs and practices in various parts of the world. Holloway's (2000) grouping of Japanese preschools into three types, each characterized by distinctive beliefs on the part of the directors pertaining to the basic nature of the child and to the relation of the self to others, is in congruency with Kohlberg and Mayers' (1972) classification. Relationship-oriented preschools focused on having fun, learning routines, and forming friendships with other children. The role-oriented preschools focused on academic skills, and children's time was completely structured. Children were expected to make progress in the subject areas, and little time was set aside for pure fun. In the child-oriented preschools the setting was informal and most of the day was devoted to free play, with optional art activities introduced to individual children or small groups, and no direct instruction.

Similarly, Kihlström (1995) found in her study on Swedish preschool teachers that the preschool teachers understood the content of their work in several ways, and they adopted three different types of approaches: The first focuses upon looking after the children and making sure that they are happy at school. The second focuses upon developing the child's personal abilities including psychological, social, and motor aspects. In the third approach, the teacher focuses upon the activity of teaching and the content of the lessons.

In theory, it can be useful to categorize beliefs and practices in ways such as those described above. However, in practice, the beliefs that individual teachers

possess do not always fall under one particular theoretical approach (Buchanan et al., 1998; Bunting, 1984).

Researchers do not have direct information about how beliefs come into being or how they are supported or weakened (Nespor, 1987; Kagan, 1992). Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ideas on the interaction between individuals and the environment in which they live and grow can be useful in understanding the evolution of the beliefs held by teachers. Van Fleet (1979) builds on Herskovits' (1963) idea of cultural transmission and suggests that teachers acquire knowledge and beliefs about teaching through the three different processes of, enculturation, education, and schooling. Enculturation involves the incidental learning process individuals undergo throughout their lives. As a person, for example, goes through school he/she is exposed to a wide variety of teachers. Many of a person's beliefs about teaching and knowledge of teaching are acquired during this time. Studies have revealed that teachers' upbringing and experiences throughout their lives can be influential in shaping their beliefs and practices (Ayers, 1989; Clandinin, 1986; Hsieh, 1994). Education according to Van Fleet (1979), is the directed and purposeful learning -- either formal or informal -- that has the main task of bringing behavior in line with cultural requirements. This includes any directed experiences that aim to bring teacher behavior in line with specific requirements sanctioned by the school culture. Thus, actual classroom teaching and interaction with teachers and administrators constitute a major influence on teachers' beliefs. Studies have found that the beliefs held by individual teachers were related to beliefs held by others in the same environment. That is, beliefs appear to be interwoven with school culture and social climate (Smith & Shepard, 1988; Stolp & Smith, 1995). Schooling, according to Van Fleet (1979), is the specific process of teaching and learning that takes place outside the home. Teacher training

institutions provide a means through which teachers learn appropriate classroom behaviors and, the myths and traditions of the teaching profession. Studies on early childhood teachers have found that training matters. For instance teachers who have academic training in early childhood are more likely to report using developmentally appropriate activities than teachers with other academic degrees (Snider & Fu, 1990; Buchanan et al., 1998; McMullen,1999).

Research has shown that the beliefs teachers' hold can affect teaching and learning and shape their pedagogy (Fang, 1996; Isenberg, 1990; Kagan, 1992; Munby, 1982; Pajares, 1992; Vartuli, 1999). Price (1969) claimed that beliefs are guidelines to actions and practical decisions. Similarly, Spodek (1987) suggested that teacher's actions and classroom decisions are driven by their perceptions, understanding, and beliefs, and that they create conceptions of their professional world based upon their concept of that reality. These interpretations, in turn, become the basis for teachers' decisions and actions in the classroom.

Numbers of studies have shown that preschool and kindergarten teachers teach in accordance with their reported beliefs (King, 1978; Kagan & Smith, 1988; Yonemura, 1986; Spidell, 1988; Wing, 1989; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Other studies show some inconsistency between early childhood teachers' reported beliefs and their practices (Goldstein, 1997; Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Verma & Peters, 1973; Einarsdottir, 1998). And as grade level increases, more inconsistencies have been found between beliefs and practices and beliefs, and practices become less appropriate (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek & Rescorla, 1990; McMullen, 1999; Nelson, 2000; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999).

Inconsistency between beliefs and practices has been explained by various environmental, work related, and institutional factors. Teachers who report that they

believe in developmentally appropriate practices but do not practice it in their classrooms have, for example, explained the reasons to be that they are unsupported by parents, colleagues, and administrators. They also have the perception that they must emphasize skill development and prepare students for standardized tests (Hyson, 1991; McMullen, 1999). Research results also reveal that teachers who do not practice according to their reported beliefs are to a great extent the ones who work in more academic oriented programs (Stipek & Byler, 1997; Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek & Rescorla, 1990; Hatch & Freeman, 1988).

The discrepancy between beliefs and practices has also been explained by the complexities of classroom life that can constrain teachers' abilities to attend to their beliefs and provide instruction that aligns with their theoretical beliefs (Fang, 1996). Goldstein (1997) discussed the contradictions, saying that early childhood education is an on-going process and "inconsistency is not a problem but a fact of life in the open-ended, complicated teaching profession" (p. 21). In addition to a lack of support for teachers' practices, the methodology and instruments used in the research can also affect consistency between beliefs and behaviors (Einarsdottir, 1998; Fang, 1996; Mumby, 1982).

Studies conducted to identify the beliefs of early childhood teachers focus mainly on teachers' curriculum priorities, their beliefs about the role of children's needs and feelings, children's interests and freedom of choice, and the importance of social interaction among children (Spidell Rusher, McGrevin, & Lammbiotte, 1992).

The present study was conducted in preschools in Reykjavik, the capital city of Iceland. The purpose of the study was to investigate the teaching methods of two Icelandic preschool teachers, their beliefs about early childhood curriculum, and the

goals of their programs. An emphasis was placed on exploring the connection between the context of the preschool teachers and their pedagogical work.

Methods of the Study

Participants- Setting.

Two preschool teachers, Helga and Kristin, participated in the study. They work in preschools that are run by the City of Reykjavik.

Icelandic preschools follow the country's laws on preschools from 1994. According to the law all early education programs are called "playschools" and preschool education is defined as the first level of schooling. Preschools are intended for children at the end of their parents' maternity leave (at the age of six months) until they go to primary school in the fall of the year in which they turn six (Law for preschools, no. 78/1994). Most children start preschool when they are two or three years old. The local authorities supervise the building and running of preschools and bear the expenses involved. Parents' contributions cover roughly 30% of the costs of the operation. The Ministry of Education formulates an educational policy for the preschools and publishes the Preschool National Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999).

The aims in the Icelandic laws of preschool education state that children should be provided with emotional and physical care so they can enjoy their childhood. Their overall development should be supported as well as their broadmindedness and tolerance. Christian moral values should be inspired and foundations laid for the children to be independent, active, and responsible participants in a democratic society (Law for preschools, no. 78/1994, article 2). These aims are reflected in the National Curriculum and in the policy of the Preschool

Teacher's Union. The education of preschool teachers also builds on the law of preschool education and the National Curriculum.

Helga's preschool the Lake-Preschool was established in 1966 but Kristin's preschool the Mountain-Preschool was only two years old at the outset of the study. Helga has 25 years of teaching experience, whereas Kristin had been working as a preschool teacher for 6 years in the beginning of the study. The preschools are both located in the same middle-class neighborhood and they are similar in size, both having 3 classrooms and approximately 100 children altogether. Lake-Preschool has children ranging from 9 months to six years. Helga teaches children from 4-6 years old. Mountain-Preschool has children from 2-6 years old and Kristin has children from 4 to 6 in her classroom.

Qualitative Methodology.

This is a qualitative study following the ideas suggested by Erickson (1986). He used the cover term "interpretive" instead of "qualitative" and recommended using those methods (1) when one wants to study the invisibility of everyday life, because fieldwork research on teachers helps researchers and teachers "to make the familiar strange" (p. 121); (2) when there is a need for specific understanding through documentation of concrete details of practice; (3) when there is an interest in considering the local meanings that happenings have for the people involved in them; (4) where there is a need for comparative understandings of different social settings; and (5) where there is a need for comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting.

Data Gathering. I studied the teachers in context by observing them in their local contexts of their classrooms, the teachers' lounges, and the playgrounds, and I attended to the "concrete particulars" (Erickson, 1986) of their lives in these contexts.

I recorded those particulars in details, using the methods of qualitative inquiry. I then connected the local context to the larger culture and history (Graue & Walsh, 1998) and interpreted the teachers' actions in the larger context.

Observations. I began the study with observations in the two preschools. I observed the teachers in their classrooms, the dressing rooms, the hallways, the teachers' lounges and on the playgrounds. In order to observe the various activities taking place in each preschool, I made observations at different times on different days of the week. Observations varied in length from an hour to half a day. Altogether I visited, observed, and interviewed Kristin 38 times and Helga 40 times. I was mostly in the role of the observer as participant in the preschools (Spradley, 1980).

Interviews. Erickson (1986) pointed out that different individuals may have different interpretations of what appear to be the same behaviors or events. He made a distinction between behavior and action. Following Erickson, I attempted to understand the preschool teachers' actions instead of their behavior. I tried to reveal the meaning behind their behavior. I recorded their behaviors and then interviewed them and asked them about what they were doing and why they were doing it, in an attempt to understand their actions. I conducted nine formal semi-structured interviews with each of the preschool teachers, and I also interviewed the preschool directors. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and returned to the participants for their comments. In addition to these formal interviews I was also involved in frequent informal interviews and conversations with the teachers and the directors. Frequently I would talk briefly with the teachers regarding things that I had missed or events that had happened in the classroom.

Artifacts. Documents provide both historical and contextual dimensions to the observations and the interviews. They enrich what has been seen and heard by

supporting, expanding, and challenging the investigator's portrayals and perceptions. An understanding of the phenomenon in question grows when you have documents and artifacts that are a part of people's lives (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I collected various artifacts in the preschools, such as letters to parents, the year plans for the preschools, guidelines and planning sheets, pictures, etc. After I copied or photographed these artifacts, I analyzed the material.

Analysis. Data were continually analyzed throughout the study. In analyzing the data I relied on methods developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). I coded the transcribed interviews and fieldnotes by hand. First, I went through the transcripts, marked the units and created descriptive codes. Several categories and issues were identified and as the fieldwork proceeded, I looked more closely into selected categories and their interrelations. Later in the analysis I created interpretive codes, as the results were interpreted in the larger cultural context, the educational context of Iceland, and the culture of the preschools. To build trustworthiness, several techniques were used, such as triangulation through different sources and different methods, prolonged engagement, persistent observations, and member checking.

Results

The results of the study show that the two participating preschool teachers' methods, goals, and beliefs have similar main assumptions. Their pedagogical work is characterized by informal teaching, play, and child-initiated activities. The daily schedules are comparable. Approximately 50% of the school day is devoted to activities that the children can choose themselves, play time, and choice time. Approximately 35% of the school day is devoted to routine activities where the whole class meets or the class is divided into two groups, during lunch, breakfast, and snack time. Group-times adjoined these times. Only a small proportion, approximately 15%

of the school day, is devoted to preplanned activities, or group-work. Both preschool teachers emphasize play, and the children play freely on the playground, usually for two one-to-two hour periods a day. Nourishment and physical well-being is an important part of both preschool programs; body contact and environmental awareness were also important issues in both classrooms.

It was hard to identify the educational beliefs of the two preschool teachers. They described their practice with ease, but when it came to explaining why they did what they did – how they believed children grow, develop, and learn -- and what they believed about pedagogical issues including play, learning, teaching, and pedagogy -- it required more effort on their part. Each had difficulty putting her beliefs and philosophy into words and explaining why she did what she did. Both said that they were not used to talking about it. Kristin was especially open about it and said frequently that she had a problem putting into words what she was doing and what she found important. For instance, when we talked about her goals, she said that she was not used to putting her goals into words. She very rarely had to do that, because it is not every day that she is asked what her educational goals are. “But they are there somewhere Something that we [in the preschool] have been talking about for a long time, something that I learned in college, of course, and have gained from various directions.”

Having observed the two preschool teachers for a school year and having interviewed them several times, I developed a table for each teacher in which I pulled together their comments which reflected their views, attitudes, values, beliefs, and goals. I showed the tables to the preschool teachers, and together we filled in the places where there were not enough explanations and completed it to their satisfaction. Table 1 below shows the educational beliefs of Helga and Kristin

Table 1

The Two Preschool Teachers' Educational Beliefs

THEMES	KRISTIN	HELGA
Goals	<p>The main goals of the preschool are respect, creativity, and happiness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Respect means respect for each other, things, the environment, and nature. -Creativity means creative arts and creative environment where things are not readymade. -Happiness means the children and the staff are happy and comfortable at the preschool. <p>For the children happiness means that they are happy and feeling good and develop in their own pace. It also means that they learn human relationships, in particular about being courteous and self-disciplined.</p>	<p>The goals are that the children are happy and feel good, that they progress in all developmental areas, and that they become self-reliant. They should learn to show respect and consideration for other people and feel empathy and learn to get along with each other.</p> <p>Language learning is also an important goal.</p> <p>Another goal is to prepare them for elementary school. They should get used to paying attention, using utilities like pencils and scissors, and developing their fine and gross motor skills.</p>
What should children learn in preschool	<p>In the preschool the children first and foremost have to learn social skills, self-discipline, courteousness, good manners, and interaction with other people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Children need to learn how to be self-reliant in their daily life. -They need to learn to be considerate of other people. -They need training in all developmental areas.
How children learn and develop	<p>Children learn through play. From tasks that are stimulating. They learn from imitation, and they learn from older children and the educational personnel.</p>	<p>Children learn through play, and they learn from interaction with other people, both children and adults.</p>
Play	<p>Free choice is a frame around the play. Play is very important and it gets attention and time in the preschool.</p> <p>It is important that play gets enough time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Children need freedom to play, freedom from the grownups. -Children learn from play, they take on different roles, and they create the opportunity for play everywhere. 	<p>Almost everything we do with the children in preschool is play. Everything that children learn in their first years is through play.</p>
Outdoor play	<p>Outdoor play is very important. The children get an outlet for their energy and exercise, and</p>	<p>Outdoor play is very important. The children learn to be considerate of each other and of the rules of games.</p>

THEMES	KRISTIN	HELGA
	good air. They play freely on the playground.	It is good for children to play outside; they get good exercise and feel better afterwards, they eat better, and they rest better.
The role of the preschool teacher	<p>The role of the preschool teacher depends on the group of children, the environment, and the material being used.</p> <p>-In dramatic play the educational personnel is in the proximity. The educational personnel participates in the play when the children invite them, and sometimes they ask to join the play if the play is not going well or if they want to observe a particular child.</p> <p>-In creative art the educational personnel is present and guides the children with open questions and assist them if they are stuck or if they need material.</p> <p>-During group work the educational personnel directs the work and gives assignments that they have prepared beforehand.</p>	<p>Preschool teachers have to assess every time if they need to intervene in the children's dramatic play. They have to be present and observe the play to be able to follow the development of the play and prevent bad manners. When you are present you have a certain control over behavior. Children should be allowed to play in peace when the play is good, but sometimes you have to interfere. It depends on the individuals and the group that is playing.</p> <p>In centers like unit-blocks, they often need encouragement to play. In art we need to help them with the tasks. Preschool teachers should extend and intervene in the play.</p>
Teaching	The concept teaching is foreign, although when you think about it the educational personnel is teaching the children in all their interaction with them.	I am teaching the children all the time, from the time I sit down with them at the breakfast table. Teaching includes answering questions and talking. I teach them mostly indirectly through daily routine, group work and group time.

The table illustrates that Helga and Kristin both find it important that the children are happy and live in harmony in the preschool. They emphasize social skills and that the children learn to respect each other and recognize the rights and feelings of others. They also find the goal of preschool is that the children become self-reliant and self-disciplined and are able to help themselves and control themselves.

Helga and Kristin both highlight the importance of play and that children learn through play. Kristin explained that children make play out of everything they do in the preschool, and Helga said that she found that what they did with the children in the preschool was more or less play. Both of them find outdoor play to be significant

because the children get good air and exercise and feel better afterwards. They both described that the children learn through interaction with other people, children as well as adults. Finally both Helga and Kristin said that the role of the preschool teacher was dependent on the circumstances, which include individual children, the groups that are playing together, the material available, and the tasks that the children were working on.

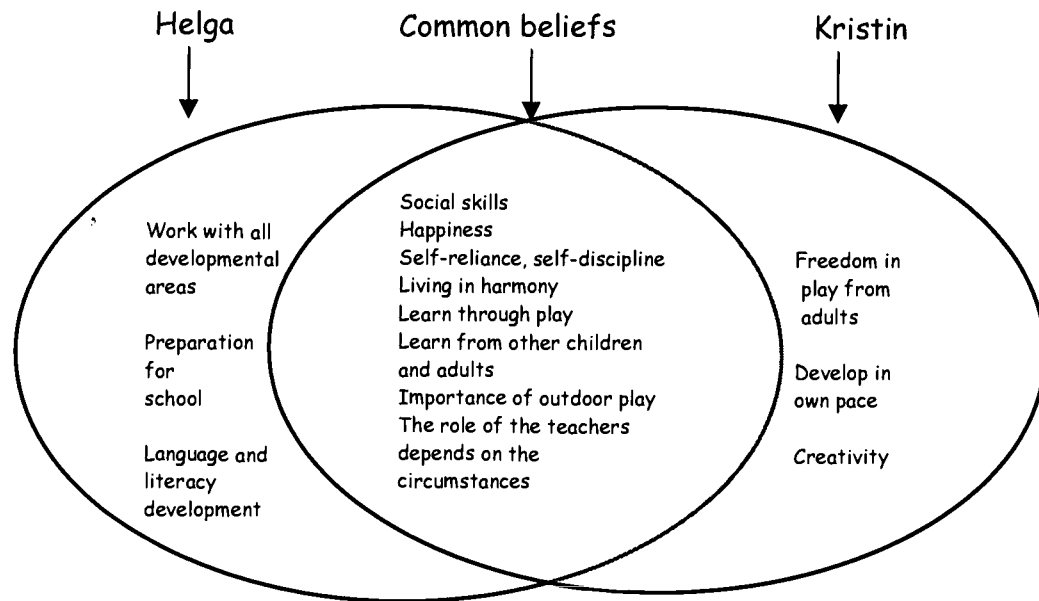


Figure 1. Commonalities and differences of Kristin and Helga's educational beliefs.

Although Helga and Kristin's educational beliefs have much in common, there are nevertheless some differences, and these are consistent with the differences in their classroom practices. Figure 1 displays the commonalities of their educational beliefs and the differences between them. Kristin emphasizes that the preschool encourages creativity. Most of the materials available in her preschool are open-ended, and the educational personnel guide the children with open-ended questions

when they are working and playing. Kristin emphasizes that the children have freedom to play undisturbed from adults, if the play is going well. This view is articulated in her pedagogical practice, where the children are often left undisturbed in a separate closed room without an adult present. While in Helga's preschool, on the contrary, the educational personnel divide themselves among the centers, and there are always adults present when the children are playing. Kristin feels that the children should not be pushed ahead in the preschool and that they should be allowed to develop on their own pace, and encouraged to learn and add to what they already have. Helga, on the other hand, stresses that the preschool should promote the development of the whole child and prepare them for elementary school by development of fine and motor skills as well as literacy stimulation.

When we discussed the concept "teaching", Kristin said that she finds it alien and that she does not use it much, although when I inquired of her as to when she thought about it, she said that when she thought about it, the educational personnel is teaching the children in all their interactions with them. The law in Iceland required all early childhood education programs in Iceland to be called playschools (Law on preschools no. 48/1991). Before that, full-day programs were called day-care and part time programs playschools. With the passage of laws in 1994, playschools were recognized as the first level of schooling (Law on preschools no. 78/1994). Prior to this change, the terms school and teaching were not commonly used in preschools. Kristin said that she isn't used to the term teaching yet, although she would never say that she was babysitting. Helga, on the contrary, is comfortable with the term teaching and feels that she is teaching the children all day, mostly indirectly but also directly things that the children need to learn.

Helga and Kristin's classroom practices are evidently influenced by their educational beliefs and views on how children grow, develop, and learn. Their educational beliefs are in many ways similar, just as their classroom actions have many things in common. The things that set their beliefs apart are also clearly articulated in their pedagogical practices.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the working methods of Helga and Kristín, two Icelandic preschool teachers, their beliefs about early childhood education, and the goals of their programs. An emphasis was placed on exploring the connection between the context of the preschool teachers and their pedagogical work.

The findings illustrate that play and child-initiated activities characterize the preschool teachers' pedagogical work. They both underscore the importance of play and the idea that children learn through play. This emphasis on play is in harmony with the educational context of the preschools. According to law (no. 78/1994), all preschool programs in Iceland are called "playschools." The National Curriculum stresses informal learning.

The pursuit of happiness and joy are also important goals in the minds of the two participating preschool teachers. Both of them mentioned happiness and joy as important goals of the preschool. The Preschool National Curriculum and the law on preschool education state that preschools should provide children with emotional care so they can enjoy their childhood. The Preschool Policy of the Preschool Teachers' Union places an emphasis on happiness in preschool, noting that preschool teachers have to be able to put happiness and pleasure into their work. Teachers should not forget to have a joyful and accepting atmosphere in their classrooms.

Both participating preschool teachers emphasized the importance of social skills and good interpersonal relationships. When talking about social skills, the two preschool teachers noted that children should learn to live in harmony, show respect and consideration for each other, learn to recognize the rights and feelings of others, feel empathy for others, and learn to get along with each other. This is consistent with the laws on preschool education, which state that the goal of preschools is to encourage tolerance and open-mindedness and to strengthen children's ability to solve their disagreements peacefully. The National Curriculum also emphasizes social competence and good behavior toward other people and to show tolerance toward different opinions. A survey among preschool children's parents in Reykjavik found that the number one reason participants mentioned for having their children in preschool was so their children could learn to interact and be with other children (Forskot, 1998).

Independence and self-reliance are issues which are highly valued by the two preschool teachers. The following were seen as important goals: that the children learn basic manners, self-control, and self-discipline, to be self-reliant in their daily life, learn how to feed themselves, help themselves at the lunch table, dress and go to the bathroom, and also learn to use basic implements like pencils and scissors. The laws for preschools state as a goal that preschool should lay the foundations necessary for children to be independent, active, and responsible participants in a society that is undergoing rapid and continuous development. When Icelandic parents were surveyed about the qualities that they wanted to elicit in their children, the four most frequent qualities mentioned were: tolerance toward other people, responsibility, independence, and good manners (Þórólfsson, Harðardóttir & Jónsson, 2000).

Both participating preschool teachers underscored the importance of healthy nutritious food without much sugar or fat. Cod-liver-oil, a natural vitamin supplement, is on the breakfast table daily in both preschools. Included in the preschools' fees are meals, and in every Reykjavik preschool there are people who are hired to prepare breakfast, lunch, and afternoon refreshments for the children each day. Both preschool teachers find outdoor play to be significant for children's health and well-being. Every day there are two outdoor periods that last one to two hours. The children go outside to play in any type of weather. The two preschool teachers feel that outdoor play is important as an outlet for children's energy; children feel better after being outside, and they eat and rest better. The first preschools in Iceland were seen as refugees for poor children, where they would be kept clean, get wholesome nourishment, warmth, and opportunity to play outside (Þorláksson, 1974). It is quite evident in the two preschool teachers' practices and beliefs that these traditional aspects of preschools are still part of the essential goals of the preschools. The current National Curriculum also recommends that children are served pure, appetizing, and nourishing food in the preschools.

If one views the methods and beliefs of the two preschool teachers according to Kohlberg and Mayers (1972) classification, their practices could generally be labeled as child centered and reflecting a romantic view. However, there are differences between their methods that reflect somewhat different views on how children learn and how they should be taught. Kristin's methods and beliefs would reflect a romantic ideology. She, for instance, feels that the children should not be pushed in the preschool, but that they should be allowed to develop at their own pace. Kristin's goals are more global than Helga's; she focuses on freedom and creativity, and her methods are less structured and more informal. She underscores creativity in

the preschool and providing the children with freedom to play undisturbed from adults, if the play is going well. This represents the traditional maturational view, which sees childhood as a period in life with a value of its own. It cannot be pushed forward or recaptured; it has to have its time. This perspective is in line with the traditional Icelandic preschool perspective. Helga's methods and beliefs are more progressive, although many characteristics in her classroom also point to a child-centered and romantic view. Her goals are more content oriented. She, for example, stresses that the preschool should promote the development of the whole child and prepare them for elementary school through, for example, the development of fine motor skills as well as literacy stimulation.

Spodek and Saracho (1996) pointed out that, as early childhood programs that originated in Western-Europe and the United States have evolved around the world, various cultures have adapted and modified both the theory and practice to make it consistent with their own cultures. In looking at programs of early childhood education from different countries, we can see how the culture of each country influences the content of the early childhood curriculum. Accordingly, early childhood education issues can be understood more deeply if studied in cultural context.

Different overlapping contexts shape Kristin and Helga's work. The culture of their preschool is an influential context, the educational context overlaps the preschool context, and the cultural context of Iceland is the context that encircles the other contexts and influences the values manifested in the other contexts.

The results of the study suggest that the cultural context is influential in molding the attitudes and beliefs of preschool teachers and thus influencing the very nature of the programs. Helga's and Kristin's goals, values, and beliefs are consistent

with the underlying beliefs and values of Icelandic culture and the society's view of children and child rearing. Icelanders strive to maintain their culture, and they see the history of the country, interaction with the natural environment and the native tongue as important pieces of that culture. This is reflected in the two preschool teachers' curricula. Along to Hofstede's (1997) four dimensions of culture, (power-distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance), the Icelandic society ranks high on femininity and uncertainty avoidance, relatively high on individuality, and low on power distance. Important Icelandic cultural values are freedom, happiness, and individuality.

The aims in the laws of preschool education and the educational context as a whole reflect the values of life evident in Icelandic society and culture and general aspects that rule the Icelandic way of life. Preschool education is considered a national responsibility in Iceland today. The Preschool Teacher's Union considers the right to attend preschool as a human right of all children, and they believe that the municipalities and other public parties should first and foremost run the preschool in order to ensure that all children can attend. Development of a national curriculum for preschools reflects the society's awareness of the importance of quality preschools for all children.

Just as the Icelandic society has changed tremendously in a relatively short time, the preschool has evolved and changed from being a shelter for underprivileged children, a substitute for the lack of nourishment and care of the home, to becoming the first official level of schooling. And in the process, the staff members working with the children have changed from being caregivers to being preschool teachers with university degrees. When all education programs for children under six years old became, by law, the first level of schooling in 1994, and the name of the preschool

professionals changed from “fóstra” [care-givers] to “playschool” teachers, many preschools started a more structured way of working. However, it seems that this movement towards more structure has shifted now, or is, at least, the exception if the preschools are teaching academics or moving the primary school material into the preschools. The two participating preschool teachers did not emphasize a structured program of academics in their pedagogical work at all.

The results of the study indicate that the two Icelandic preschool teachers are in some ways at a crossroads and their roles somewhat clouded. They have strong roots in the Icelandic preschool tradition, which focuses on care-giving, the needs of the child, socialization, and the assumption that children learn when they play. In the daily schedule only a small fraction of the day is devoted to preplanned and structured activities. This reflects a child-centered and romantic view of children and child rearing, a view, that the traditional Icelandic view of raising children espouses. In this view, children should be happy and free and they should learn from experiencing the environment. On the other hand, the roles of Icelandic preschool teachers have changed in the last few years, as a consequence of various things. Most notably, they now have the term “teacher” in their titles and they work in “schools.”

There is a certain tension between the traditional Scandinavian and Icelandic preschool traditions and the more current trends in early childhood education mainly coming from the United States. The Icelandic preschool tradition is consistent with the culture’s conventional beliefs about children and child-rearing. However, the views presented in contemporary literature on early childhood education emphasize a more active role for the teacher and more restricted freedom for the children, and these views are consistent with the current discussion in Iceland. There has been

criticism and concern that Icelandic children are left too much to take care of themselves and there is not enough discipline in schools and the society.

Both strands have received criticism. Dearden (1975) questioned what he calls the child-centered theory and the assumption that education should start from children's needs, interests, and growth. He pointed out that in no system of education can the teacher escape responsibility for the direction that things take. Even if the teacher withdraws as much as possible from the scene, he is making a choice. He is choosing an environment in which there will be no direction or explicit guidance, and therefore he remains responsible for all that happens as a result of that choice. Others (for example, Tobin, 1997) are concerned that Americans are becoming preoccupied with protecting children from possible danger and have questioned the growing degree of control that American teachers are forcing upon children and the restrictions placed on their movements, actions, and freedom.

Further studies are needed to investigate in more depth the tension between the traditional Icelandic and Scandinavian preschool practices and the current international waves, where this tension comes from, and possible explanations. More investigation and analysis on the interrelation between care and education in preschools could also further the professional understanding of the nature of the Icelandic preschool education.

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