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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. Three overlapping contexts were found to shape Kristin and Helga's work: (1) the culture of the preschools; (2) the educational context; and (3) the Icelandic cultural context. These contexts influenced the content of the curriculum, the teachers' goals, and their values and beliefs. Findings were examined in relation to the national curriculum and the changing educational and cultural context. (Contains 38 references and 3 figures.) (KB)

Tradition and Trends: Two Icelandic Preschool Teachers' Practices, Goals, and Beliefs about Early Childhood Education.

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Teachers' theories, beliefs, and values influence 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.

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. He used the term "microsystem" for the immediate setting containing the person. The "mesosystem" is a system of microsystems and includes the interrelations among major settings. An "exosystem" is an extension of the mesosystem including other social structures. The "macrosystem" refers to the overarching values and structures of society as they affect the lives of the person. Van Fleet (1979) builds on Herskovits' (1963) idea of cultural transmission and suggests that teachers acquire

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knowledge and beliefs about teaching through three different processes of enculturation, education, and schooling:

Enculturation according to Van Fleet (1979) 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).

Like Van Vleet, Bruner (1986) has proposed that culture is important in shaping human life and the human mind. He argues that our life is understandable to us and to others only by understanding the virtue of cultural systems. Bruner (1986, 1996) also stated that all cultures have as one of their most powerful constitutive instruments a folk psychology – the underlying beliefs in a culture about human tendencies, and beliefs about how minds work. Bruner and Olson (1996) discussed the notion of folk psychology and folk pedagogy. They suggested that teachers' folk psychology is reflected in their teaching. Teachers' folk pedagogy reflects their folk psychology. In trying to change practices or introduce innovations, we have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk pedagogies that guide both teachers and students. In other words, introduction of an innovation in teaching will involve changing the folk psychological and folk pedagogical theories of teachers.

Different variations in childhood worlds across human populations, and differing beliefs about child rearing and interpersonal relationships in different cultures throughout the world have been identified (Shweder, Goodnow, Jatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 1998). It can be assumed that beliefs and actions of

teachers have its roots in cultural beliefs and the values of the larger culture. Spodek and Saracho (1996) have pointed out that, as the early childhood programs that originated in Europe and the United States have evolved around the world, teachers have adapted and modified both theory and practice, to make them 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.

According to Van Fleet (1979), education is the directed and purposeful learning either formal or informal that has its main task to bring 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. The literature suggests that the social context of the school can affect beliefs and actions of teachers. 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 education are more likely to report using developmentally appropriate activities than teachers with other academic degrees (Snider & Fu, 1990; Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White, & Charlesworth, 1998; McMullen, 1999).

The present study was conducted in two 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, 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).

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.

When studying teachers it is important to link their life and work in the classroom to their lives outside the classroom; that is, to link their classroom lives to the social and cultural environment in which they live. That way you will be able to make better sense of their actions. Erickson (1986) argued that the focus of social ecology is essential in interpretive social research on teaching, because interpretive research is concerned with the relation between meaning-perspectives of actors and the ecological circumstances of actions in which they find themselves. Thus, interpretive research on teaching looks at teachers in context and is therefore concerned with “the specifics of meaning and actions in social life, that take place in concrete scenes of face-to-face interaction, and that take place in the wider society

surrounding the scene of action” (p.156). Interpretive studies link the immediacy of the local lives of students and teachers, both inside and outside the classroom, to non-local and general aspects of social structure and culture. The task is to discover the specific ways in which local and non-local forms of social organization and culture relate to the activities of specific persons. For classroom research this means discovering how the choices and actions of all the members constitute a definite curriculum and learning environment. Graue and Walsh (1998) emphasized the interaction of context and differentiated between the local context where the research is conducted and the larger context where the local context is embedded and by which the interpretation is framed.

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.

Data were continually analyzed throughout the study using methods developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). I interpreted the teachers’ actions and ideas in connection to the larger contexts; the culture of the preschools, the educational context, and the cultural context of Iceland. To build trustworthiness, several techniques were used, such as triangulation through different sources and different methods, prolonged engagement, persistent observations, and member checking.

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.

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.

Figure 1 presents the distinctive features of each teacher's work and also common features of their work.

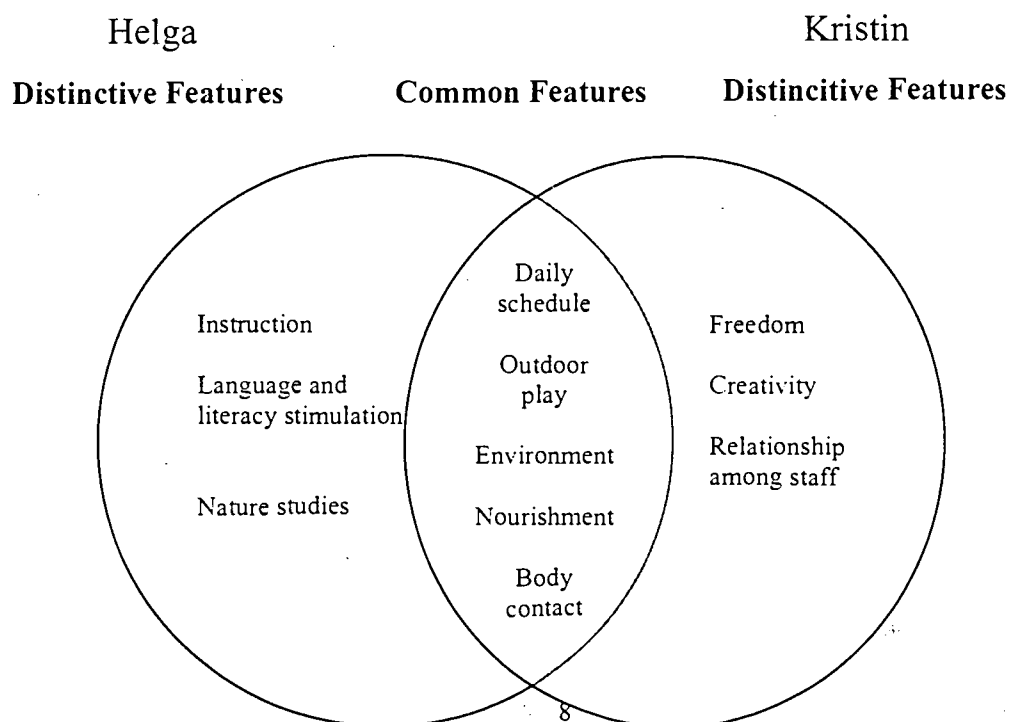


Figure 1 Distinctive features and common features of Helga and Kristin's work

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 reflecting 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.

The results show that both Helga and Kristin 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.

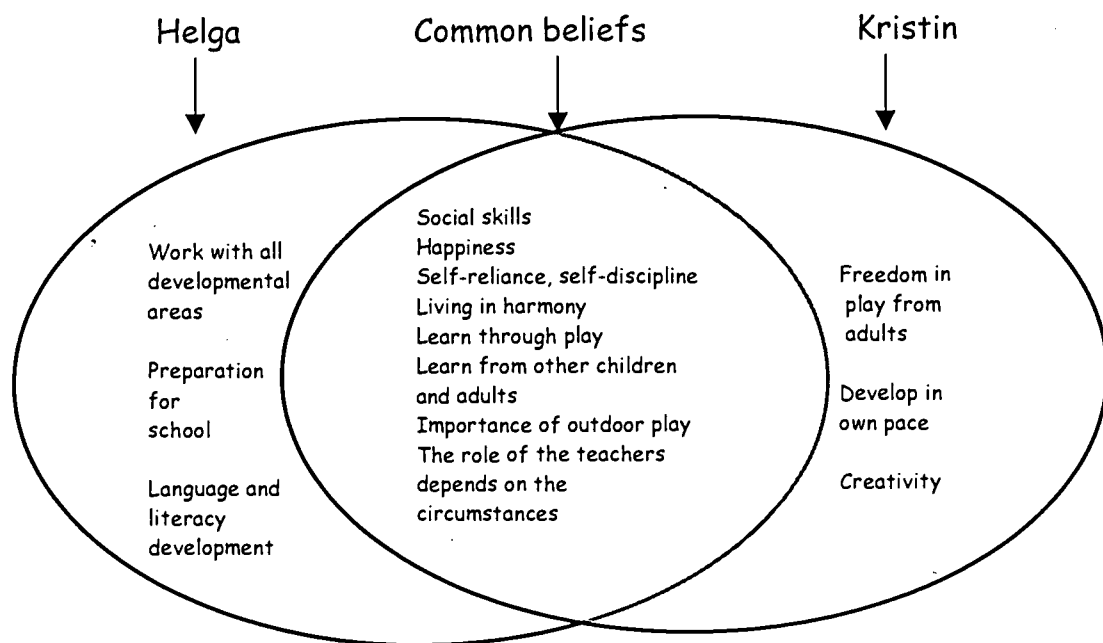


Figure 2. Commonalities and differences of Kristin and Helga's educational beliefs.

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. 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.

Analysis revealed that three overlapping contexts shape Kristin and Helga's work: the culture of the preschools, the educational context and the Icelandic cultural context (figure 3). The culture of their preschool is an influential context. Both preschools have the characteristics of a community, where according to Sergiovanni (1994), the staff is bound together by shared values and beliefs. Helga and Kristin's methods and beliefs are congruent with the goals and the methods used in their preschools and when they talked about their beliefs and goals, they often reflected the ideology of their preschools. The educational context overlaps the preschool context. The educational context consists of the evolution of early childhood education in Iceland, the law on preschool education, the National Curriculum for Preschools, the Preschool Policy of the Preschool Teachers' Union, and the educational preparation of preschool teachers in the country. The educational context influences the teachers' actions and beliefs and also reflects interrelated values of the preschools. The cultural context of Iceland, which contains the society's view of children and child rearing, is

the context that encircles the other contexts and influences the values manifested in the other contexts.

These different contexts quite clearly influence the content of the curriculum and the way it is taught, the goals of the preschool teachers, and their values and beliefs. The similarities in Helga and Kristin's methods and beliefs are due to the educational context and the Icelandic cultural context, while the differences are due to the individual experiences and the culture of their preschools.

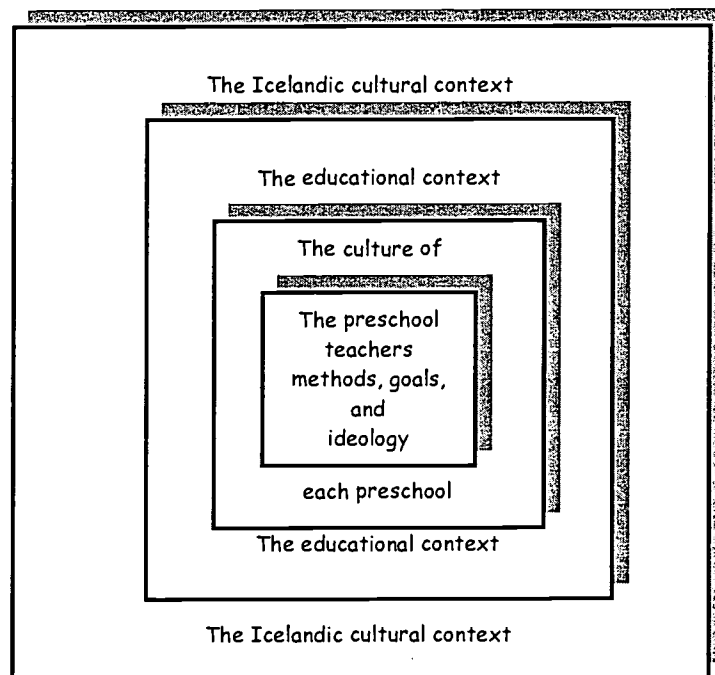


Figure 3 The context of Helga and Kristin's work.

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 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 and, 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. 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.

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 refuge 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.

Although Helga and Kristin's methods and beliefs are in many ways similar, their pedagogical work differs in other ways that reflect somewhat different views on how children learn and how they should be taught. Helga underscores more content oriented goals, focusing on preparation for school, on language, and on literacy development. Her methods and goals are more in line with the ideology presented in the contemporary literature on early childhood education especially coming from the United States. Kristin's goals, on the other hand, are more global and related to the Scandinavian and Icelandic preschool tradition, focusing on creativity, and on less structured and more informal methods. She, for instance, emphasizes that children should 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. The difference in their beliefs and work is due to the differences between their preschools and their differences as individuals.

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. 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.

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.

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