



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Training of Preschool Teachers in Iceland

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Introduction

Preschool-teacher education in Iceland has a history of 65 years, a history which coincides closely with the history of early-childhood education in Iceland. It is also a history that is closely connected to the story of the Icelandic people and to the societal changes that have taken place in the 20th and early 21st centuries, and parallels that of preschool-teacher education in the other Nordic countries, although ideas from other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States have had influence as well.

This report endeavors to shed light on the education of preschool teachers in Iceland, its form and development. Both are closely tied to the history and position of early-childhood education in the Icelandic educational system, which will be briefly discussed. The quite rapid evolution of preschool-teacher education from a private initiative at the upper secondary level to a university program, requiring a master's degree for qualification, is mapped out before an outline is given of today's Preschool Teacher Education Program. The organization of the program, including the courses, the teaching methods, and the main goals, is described, as well as the ideas underlying the program. To illustrate the underlying educational philosophy and the theoretical standpoint and ambitions of the program, a description of research conducted within the faculty of Preschool-Teacher Education is given.

The University of Iceland, the largest university in Iceland, educates most preschool teachers. One other university, the University of Akureyri, offers a preschool-teacher education program and graduates a few students each year. This report will focus on the program at the University of Iceland.

Early Childhood Education in Iceland

The Educational System

The Icelandic educational system is divided into four levels: preschool education, compulsory education (primary and lower secondary combined), upper-secondary education, and higher education. Preschool education, though not compulsory, has the formal status as the first level of schooling in Iceland. Preschools are intended for children under six years old, or until they begin primary school in the fall of the year they turn six, whichever comes first. Most children start preschool when they are two years old. Approximately 96% of all children aged three to five, 93% of two-year-old children, and 35% of one-year-old children attended preschools in 2010 (Statistics Iceland, 2011) with the development in attendance shown in figure 1. Attendance rates have been rising in recent years, primarily because the majority of mothers are in the work force but also because of an increasing recognition of preschool as an important part of children's lives.

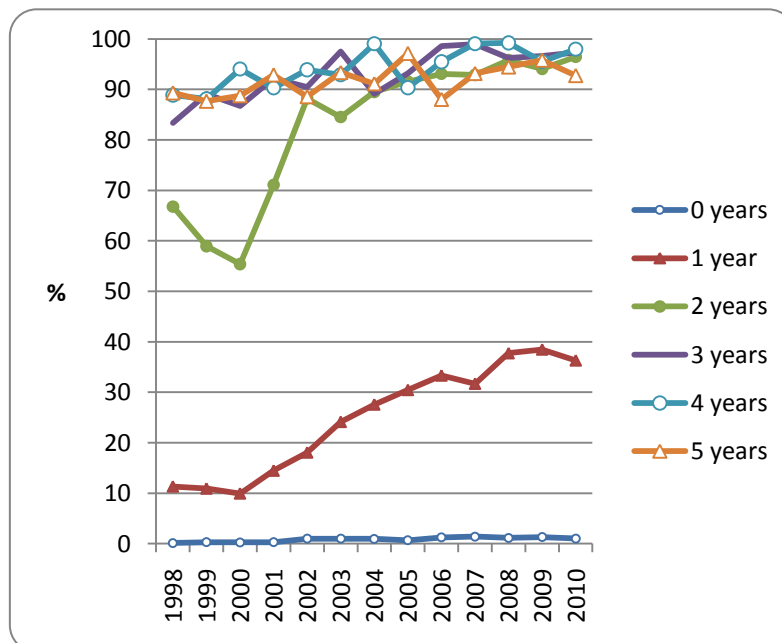


Figure 1 Percentage of a cohort attending preschool 1998–2010 (Source: Statistics Iceland)

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture formulates the educational policy for Icelandic preschools and publishes a national curriculum (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011), but gives the local authorities or individual schools considerable leeway to develop their own emphasis within the national guidelines. Local municipalities are responsible for taking the initiative of establishing and operating preschools for children in their districts and bear the expenses involved. Parents' contributions most commonly cover roughly 30% of the operating costs, except for the oldest children for whom, in many municipalities, preschool is free of charge for four hours a day. Although most preschools are established and run by the municipalities, other parties may operate preschools in consultation with the municipalities.

Today, preschool teachers have a legally defined profession, and thus, only those who have a preschool-teacher's degree and a license from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture can use that title. According to law, at least 2/3 of the positions in each preschool should be filled by preschool teachers (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla, nr. 87/2008). But in reality, only a minority (approximately 34%) of the staff working with children in the preschools have preschool-teacher education (Statistics Iceland, 2011).

Icelandic preschools are most often situated in buildings specifically designed and constructed for their operation. They vary greatly in size, from preschools with only one classroom and a few children, to an eight-classroom preschool with 165 children. Recently, some municipalities have started to merge together smaller preschools and even, on a few occasions, preschools and primary schools in the same neighborhoods. In some preschools, children are grouped by chronological age, but in other instances there are mixed-age classes, with, for example, three-, four-, and five-year-olds grouped together; or two- and three-year olds may be placed in one group while four- and five-year-olds are in another. Children can attend preschool from four to a maximum of nine hours a day. (see figure 2)

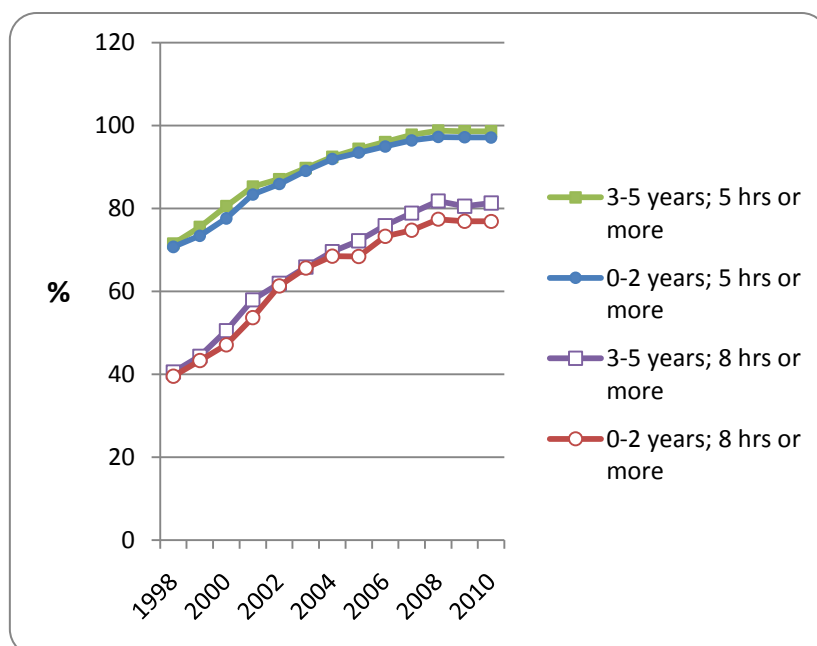


Figure 2 Percentage of children in two age groups attending 5 hours or more and 8 hours or more, daily (Source: Statistics Iceland)

Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Rapid urbanization in the first decades of the 20th century dramatically changed the living conditions of Icelandic children and created the need for out-of-home care. In the 1920's, a private organization called "Sumargjöf" (e. Summergift, i.e. a gift given to celebrate the beginning of summer) initiated by the Women's Alliance in Reykjavík opened the first full-time day-care center. A new part-time program, called playschool, emerged in 1940. Day-care centers were full-time programs and limited their enrollment to children from poor homes or of single parents, while playschools were half-day programs open to everyone. For the next 30 years, or until 1973, playschools and daycare centers were provided by the private organization Sumargjöf in the Reykjavík area, but by a variety of organizations or the municipalities outside the capital. In the early 1970s education at all levels was under review and after an intensive debate a new law for compulsory education was passed in 1974. In 1973 the state assumed financial responsibility for the preschools (as was in the bill for primary education) and thus these institutions were integrated under the Ministry of Education, and the care and education of children prior to compulsory school was no longer viewed as social policy geared especially toward poor children. Early-childhood programs,

regardless of whether they were full- or part-time, were now a part of the nation's educational policy (Lög um hlutdeild ríkisins í byggingu og rekstri dagvistunarheimila, nr. 29/1973) costs were transferred back to the municipalities in 1976 (Jónasson, 2008a, 2008b). The separate concepts of day-care centers and playschools were used for early childhood education programs in Iceland until 1991 (Lög um leikskóla, nr. 48/1991), but since then, the term playschool has been used for all early-education programs for children up to six years old, or prior to the age of compulsory education. This reflects the importance on free play in Icelandic preschool policy and practice. In 1994, preschool education became by law the first level of schooling in Iceland, although it was neither compulsory nor free of charge (Lög um leikskóla, nr. 78/1994; Jónasson, 2008b).

The ideas behind the first preschools in Iceland were similar to those in the other Nordic countries, both reflective of the spirit of the times, and in accordance with such knowledge about child development and early-childhood education that was available at that time. Preschools were social-welfare institutions which emphasized children's happiness, play, and social development through care giving (Barnavinafélagið Sumargjöf, 1976; Lenz Taguchi & Munkammar, 2003). These early Icelandic educators talked about the "whole child" and acknowledged the importance of all areas of development, including emotional, social, cognitive, language, and motor areas, and generally shared a firm belief in the idea that children develop from within, given the right "care-giving" conditions, including sufficient freedom from over-control by adults. This can be said to have been a rather romantic view of children and childhood. Terms like *knowledge*, *teaching*, and *learning* were not used in the preschool context because these concepts belonged to the realm of formal education. Caregivers purposefully created preschools with a homelike atmosphere where children were provided with warmth, wholesome nutrition and hygiene, and the opportunity to play. The central ingredient required for a successful preschool, a place where children could develop happily from within, was the establishment of warm, caring, almost familial relationships between adults and children. These ideas were rooted in Fröbels' ideology, the philosophy of the British nursery schools, and the child-psychology theories of the times, which emphasized growth and development evolving from within as a result of children's innate capacities, nurtured by caregivers (Einarsdóttir, 2006).

Laws and National Curriculum for Preschools

The current Icelandic law on preschool-education from 2008 (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008) state that children's interests and welfare shall be the primary mission of all preschool activities. The main objectives of preschool education include: monitoring and encouraging children's general development in close cooperation with the parents; providing linguistic stimulation and skills in the Icelandic language; nurturing them mentally, intellectually, and physically so that they may enjoy their childhood; and encouraging broadmindedness and strengthening their moral values. In addition, preschool should lay the foundation for children to become independent, autonomous, active, and responsible participants in a rapidly changing democratic society, and cultivate their expressive and creative abilities with the aim of strengthening their self esteem, health awareness, confidence, and communication skills. The aims of the preschool laws are implemented in the National Curriculum Guidelines.

The first national curriculum for Icelandic preschools was published in 1985 by the Ministry of Education and was called the *Pedagogical Plan for Preschools*. In 1999, a policy document called the *National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschools* was published (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999). And in May 2011, a new national curriculum for all school levels was published where the common thread was six basic areas: literacy, sustainable development, health and wellbeing, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. The new preschool curriculum highlights the importance of democracy, wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships in preschool education. The importance of the learning environment is stressed, and preschool teachers are encouraged to use play in a goal-directed way. Educational areas are integrated and have been grouped into the following four categories: (a) expression and communication, (b) health and wellbeing, (c) sustainability and science, and (d) creativity and culture. Cooperation with parents, built on reciprocal understanding and respect, is emphasized, and coordination between school levels and continuity in the children's learning stressed. Assessment should focus on children's learning and wellbeing and should include the involvement of parents, children, and staff. Each preschool is to compile its own preschool guidelines based on the national curriculum (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011).

Evolution of Preschool Teacher Education

The history of preschool-teacher education in Iceland corresponds with the history of early-childhood education and the reasons behind the operation of preschools through the years. The rationale behind the very first early childhood centers in Iceland was to assist parents who could not take good enough care of their children. The second rationale was the rapid urbanization taking place that demanded a more protected environment for children. The third rationale, calling for more space in early-childhood centers, was increasing parental employment in the latter part of the 20th century. And finally, the fourth rationale for increasing early childhood programs, which became stronger as time passed, evolved around the children: their education, development, and social upbringing (Jónasson, 2006).

Emergence of Preschool Teacher Education

Early-childhood education in Iceland can be traced to the beginning of urbanization when the first day-care centers were established by the initiative of “Sumargjöf”, a private organization established by the Women’s Alliance, to provide shelter, warmth, and wholesome nourishment for poor children, to ensure their health and hygiene (Barnavinafélagið Sumargjöf, 1974). Children in these daycare centers were cared for, typically, by personnel with no professional background. Sumargjöf was a pioneer not only in early-childhood education, but also in early-childhood-teacher education. Very soon after opening these day-care programs, they realized that they needed trained and qualified teachers for the centers. By 1946, they had founded a Pedagogical College for educating early-childhood teachers. Prior to that, only four Icelandic women had completed formal training in working with preschool children, studying in Denmark, Sweden, and the USA (Einarisdottir, 2004). The establishment of the Pedagogical College marked the beginning of professionalization for both preschool teachers and preschool-teacher educators. In the beginning, the program entailed two 9 month periods of training, divided evenly between academic knowledge and field practice. In 1954, the program was extended to two full years, the academic study part covering two 9 month periods, with practice in the field during the summers (Sigurðardóttir, 1974; Jónasson, 2006).

State Funded College for Preschool Teachers

From the beginning, the aim of Sumargjöf was to get the state to take over the school for the education of preschool teachers. That dream came true when the *Icelandic College for Preschool Teachers*, a governmental institution under the formal administration of the Ministry of Education, was founded by law in 1973 (Sigurðardóttir, 1974). From that time the preschool teacher education was three years of theoretical and practical studies. Until 1997, the College for Preschool Teachers was the only school in Iceland to offer education specifically for preschool teachers. Then the college merged with the Iceland University of Education, and the first students with B.Ed. degrees in Early-Childhood Education graduated in 1998. In 1996, the University of Akureyri, a small university in Northern Iceland, offered an early-childhood program in the Department of Education, and by that means, the education of preschool teachers became entirely university-level education.

Moving to the University Level – Iceland University of Education

The rationale behind moving preschool-teacher education to the university level in 1997 was both economic and professional. Education of compulsory-school teachers had already been at the university level for more than 20 years at that time, and it was argued that the change to university status would provide increasing autonomy in the field of early-childhood education. It was also seen as an advantage that by being a part of the University of Education, students could choose between a greater range of courses, preschool-teacher education would be a part of other teacher education, and some joint courses would be offered for students both in the primary-school program and in the preschool program. Greater interaction among students and educators at different levels of schooling could provide new insights. It was also reasoned that the working conditions of the faculty would be improved, there would be more effective use of library and other resources, and research would increase (Einarsdóttir, 1996).

The structure and the content of preschool-teacher education underwent considerable change on becoming a university-level program and a part of general teacher education, although the aim of the program was still to prepare students to work with preschool children under the age of six. At the same time, the first national curriculum for preschools was published, replacing the *Pedagogical Plan for Preschools*, which had influence on the course of study for preschool-teacher education. This period can be looked upon as the beginning of the transition

from pedagogical care to a more formal education when both the status and discourse became that of the school. In line with these changes the Preschool Teachers' Union united with the Teachers' Union and encouraged their members to use more school like concepts in preschool. The faculty of preschool teacher education has however been aware of this development and advocated strongly for the ideology of preschool.

By moving to a university level the three year program became more theoretical and a small part of the program, 15 units out of 90, were basic courses, the same for all students at the University of Education. In addition to these basic courses for all students, the early childhood program was divided into three groups of courses: (a) 21 units in early childhood education, including courses on play, current trends in early-childhood education, inclusion, documentation, and transitions between school levels; (b) 24 units of courses on the six educational areas of the preschools, as defined in the National Curriculum for Preschools: movement, language, arts, music, nature and the environment, culture and society. There, art and creative work were important areas. Emphasis was placed on pedagogical knowledge as well as knowledge of the educational areas with the aim that the student would be able to plan educational projects involving these areas with play as the key element; (c) 18 units in practice in preschools. In addition, there were elective courses and a final thesis (Einarsdottir, 2000).

In 2006-2007, the University of Education began revising its curriculum according to the Bologna declaration (Froment, Kohler, Purser, & Wilson, 2006). At that time, preparations for merging the Iceland University of Education and the University of Iceland had also started. The main changes that were made in the early-childhood program at that point were that (a) small courses were combined so they were all 10 ECTS, (b) three years of study were intended for the B.Ed. degree and two years for the M.Ed. and M.A. degrees, (c) joint courses were taught for student teachers at the preschool and compulsory-school levels, (d) field practice was integrated into the academic courses in order to make a stronger connection between theory and practice, and contracts were made with specific partner schools where students did all their field practice in the first two years, and (e) course objectives were defined in terms of competences. In the view of the early-childhood professional staff, some of these changes had a negative effect on the preschool-teachers' education program: in particular, they were critical of the fact that the field practice period was shortened (from 36 ECTS down to 24 ECTS). Also, by combining smaller courses in order to meet the Bologna

Declaration and to make the program more integrated, there was a decrease in emphasis on creative subjects such as art and music that had, previously, been highlights of the program.

Table 1 Evolution of Preschool Teacher Education in Iceland

Year	Length	Name	Responsibilities
1946	Two 9 month periods	Pedagogical College of Sumargjölf (Uppeldisskóli Sumargjafar)	Sumargjölf
1957	2 full years From 1954	Sumargjölf College for Preschool Teachers (Fóstruskóli Sumargjafar)	Sumargjölf
1973	3 academic years	The Icelandic College for Preschool Teachers (Fósturskóli Íslands)	Ministry of Education
1997	3 academic years. 90 units University education B.Ed.	Educational University of Iceland (Kennaraháskóli Íslands) – Division of Early Childhood Education	Ministry of Education
2008	3 academic years. 180 ECTS University education B.Ed.	University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands) – School of Education/Division of Early Childhood Education	Ministry of Education
2011	5 academic years. 300 ECTS University education M.Ed.		Ministry of Education

Preschool Teacher Education Today

According to laws from 2008 that took effect on July 1st 2011 teacher education in Iceland is now five years university education. Hence, only those who have a Master's degree from an accredited university and have been granted a license by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture can use the occupation title "preschool teacher". (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólustjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla nr. 87/2008). A regulation connected to the laws gives a more detailed description of the requirements of the teacher education programs (Reglugerð um inntak menntunar leik-, grunn- og framhaldsskólakennara nr. 872). There it states that for a master's degree in preschool-teacher education, pedagogy should comprise at least 150 ECTS, or half of the program, and at least

90 ECTS should be devoted to areas of preschool education. Here the focus will be on the program at the University of Iceland.

University of Iceland – School of Education

The University of Iceland and the Iceland University of Education merged on July 1st 2008, under the name *University of Iceland*. Five academic schools, consisting of three to six faculties each, replace the eleven faculties of the former University of Iceland and the four faculties of the former Iceland University of Education. The academic schools are: the School of Education, the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences, the School of Health Sciences, the School of Humanities, and the School of Social Sciences. The University of Iceland was first established in 1911 and offers today nearly four hundred undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The University has 14,200 students, and 2,260 students graduated in 2011.

The School of Education educates teachers for preschools, primary schools, and upper secondary schools, as well as sports and health scientists, social educators, and leisure professionals. The former Iceland University of Education is essentially the new School of Education. The School is divided into three departments: Teacher Education, which is by far the largest department, Educational Studies, which offers mainly post-graduate courses and Sport, Leisure Studies, and Social Education. All academic programs offered at the School of Education place a rich emphasis on ties with the field, e.g. schools and other societal institutions, which are connected with the relevant fields of study. The School of Education offers a doctoral program where the faculties act in unison. Two degree programs are offered: Educational sciences, Ph.D., 180-240 ECTS and Educational sciences, Ed.D., 180 ECTS.

The Faculty of Teacher Education offers undergraduate and graduate studies in Teacher Education and Preschool-Teacher Education, and, in addition, Teacher Certification programmes for upper secondary teachers. The Teacher Education and Preschool-Teacher Education B.Ed. degree programs are 180 ECTS. Graduate programs towards the M.Ed. and M.A. degrees are 120 ECTS.

Academic programs at the School of Education are offered in three modes: on-site, as distance education, or as flexible studies, a mixture of the two; the last option has recently become the

principal *modus operandi*. Undergraduate students can choose to study on-campus or through distance learning. Distance learning students are required to attend at least two campus-based sessions each semester. The Master's program is offered as flexible studies, with most courses structured so that students can take them regardless of location. They are based on a combination of on-campus sessions, together with computer- and internet communication learning (University of Iceland: School of Education, 2011). Even if courses have not been specifically designed for distance learners, they are usually web-facilitated or blended. In the last school year (2010-2011), the School of Education took the initiative to combine most undergraduate courses that have usually been offered both online (with campus sessions) and in the regular program, thus co-teaching distance and on-campus students (Jakobsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2010). So distance education or blended learning is becoming an increasingly common way of pursuing a degree in the School of Education.

The Preschool Teacher Education Program

The program in Preschool-Teacher Education is divided into undergraduate and graduate studies. Admission requirements are a matriculation examination or equivalent education; exactly the same as for all students accepted at the University of Iceland. A B.Ed.-degree allows for trying for the M.Ed., the degree which is required for a teaching license according to Icelandic law (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla, nr. 87/2008). The studies are closely related to the potential field of work and are based on the national curriculum for preschools, and the preschool legislation. For a B.Ed. degree in Preschool-Teacher Education, 180 ECTS must be completed. The Master's program in Preschool-Teacher Education is a two-year theoretical and professional postgraduate program. Admission requirements are a B.Ed. degree in Preschool-Teacher Education, or other similar undergraduate degree. For an M.Ed. degree in Preschool-Teacher Education, 120 ECTS must be completed. Figure 3 illustrates how the Preschool Teacher Education Program is divided among the educational areas of preschool, pedagogy, thesis, fieldwork, and general courses, and how these integrate.

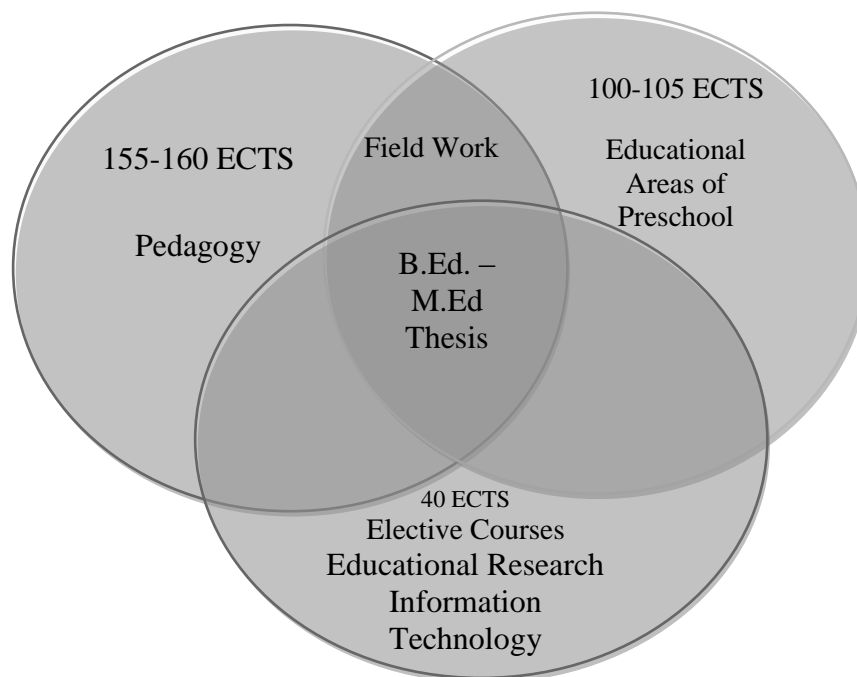


Figure 3. Major Components of the Program in Preschool-Teacher Education

Organization of the Program – Pedagogical Part

The courses that fall under the Pedagogical part of the program are illustrated in figure 4. Courses marked with an * are offered for students in both the preschool and the early-primary-school programs. On the undergraduate level the following courses are offered:

Early-Childhood Education I

This course introduces the preschool as an educational institution and examines its role in the lives of Icelandic children and parents. The course's aim is for students to get to know the Icelandic preschool curriculum, the pedagogy, and the methods used in preschools.

Early-Childhood Education II

The main emphasis of this course is on the idea that children are capable and ready to learn from birth, through play and self-initiated activities. Play as children's main source of learning, and documentation as an assessment tool are introduced.

Early-Childhood Education III

The focus of this course is on the preschool teacher as a professional in a field dominated by women. Student's pedagogical beliefs are discussed in connection with the ideological foundations of preschool pedagogy (e.g. Dewey, socio-constructivism, and post-modern ideas of early-childhood education) and the historical and cultural context.

Inclusive Preschool

This course builds on the assumption that preschools should welcome all children as they are.. The main aims of the course are to improve students' ability to manage diversity in the preschool, to have them look into their own attitudes towards diversity, and to get acquainted with the ideology of inclusion as well as ideas of early intervention.

Transition from Preschool to Primary School

The focus here is on not only transition and continuity between school levels, but also learning opportunities and methods suitable across different school levels. The perspectives of children, teachers, and parents on the transition from preschool to primary school are emphasized.

Communication, Collaboration, and Leadership

The purpose of this course is to enhance students' understanding of the complex system of communication and collaboration not only within preschools but also between the preschool and other stakeholders and professionals. Emphasis will be placed on the role of leaders in early-childhood education in this endeavor.

For graduate students, increasing emphasis is placed on theory and research. The pedagogical courses at the graduate level are:

Early-Childhood Education: Theory and Research

In this course, the students will explore various topics and controversial issues in early-childhood education. Special emphasis is placed on theories and research on different views of children and childhood, life-long learning and cooperation between preschools and primary schools, teachers' pedagogical beliefs, and cooperation between preschool and family.

Play and Creativity

This course emphasizes research, theory, and knowledge of creativity and play in early childhood education. The goal is for students to be familiar with and able to use research findings relating to creative work and play when organizing activities with preschool children. Students relate theory and practice in education, focusing on methods supported by play and creativity.

Research with Children and Youths

This course places emphasis on research with children: i.e. research where children are participants. Seeking children's perspectives and recognizing their points of view emerges from childhood studies, the children's right movement, and postmodern views on children which seek to explore childhood and children as areas of study in their own right. Special emphasis will be placed on methodological and ethical dilemmas in doing research with children.

Play and Learning in a Goal-Directed Practice

This course is taught in collaboration with the University of Gothenburg and Queensland University of Technology, and is partly taught in English. The goal of the course is to give students the opportunity to research the concepts learning and play, and to study the educational opportunities presented by the interweaving of the two when working with children aged 1-8. The course covers learning in different fields in relation to play, e.g. written language, expression, mathematics, science, nature, computer games, arts.

Professionalism and Leadership

This course is on the professional role of preschool teachers and the obligations embedded in it; how professional development and learning is enhanced; and the role of leaders within the preschools. Students choose an issue to carry out in an action research in the preschool field, in collaboration with the teachers in the course *Theory and Practice in the Field*.

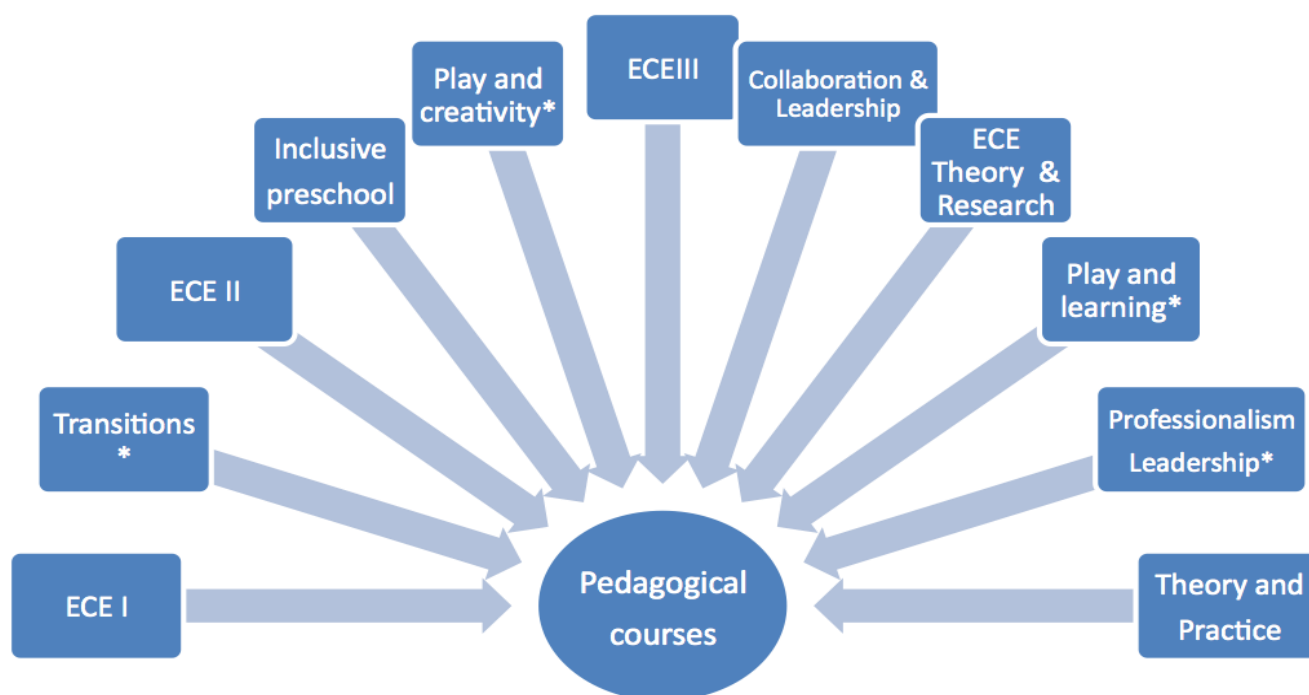


Figure 4 – Pedagogical Courses

Organization of the Program – Educational Areas

The courses that are categorized in the educational areas of preschools are:

Arts in Preschool

This course emphasizes theory and research within drama, speech, visual arts, and music. The goal is that students gain skills in leading creative activities in preschools with emphasis on visual and performing arts and music.

Movement and Dramatics

This course focuses on movement and dramatics in preschool, both indoors and out. Motor development is discussed and diverse methods are introduced for organizing the environment and developing activities in movement and dramatics.

The Local Environment as a Source of Learning

The course focuses on contemporary ideas of sustainable development. The emphasis is placed on research and methods on how to use the children's local environment as a source for learning about science, mathematics, movement, and health.

Language Development and Emergent Literacy

The course focuses on emergent literacy and language development. Emphasis is placed on methods to encourage and support language development, as well as early reading and writing. Also discussed are the main language abnormalities that may occur amongst preschool-age children, and untraditional communication methods.

Science, Community, and Arts in Preschool

The emphasis is on science, community, and the arts in the education of preschool children. Students investigate how to scaffold children's learning in these fields with an emphasis on "hands on - minds on" approaches. The importance of education for sustainable development is stressed, and students study different approaches using science, social studies, and arts to stimulate children's learning, values, and actions in that area.

Arts and Children's Culture

This course emphasizes research, theory, and the knowledge necessary for being able to work with literature, music, and visual arts in early-childhood education. The goal is that students should be familiar with the main teaching methods upon which creative work is based and be able to integrate these within the preschool classroom.

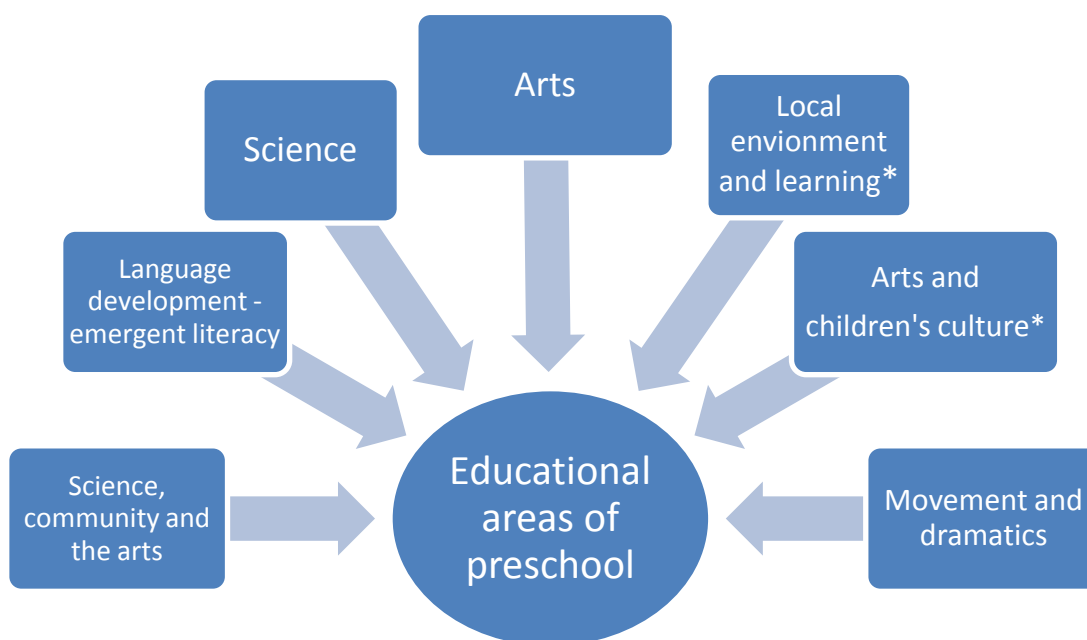




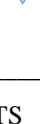
Figure 5 Courses in the Educational Areas of Preschool

Organization of the Program – General Part

The program in preschool-teacher education emphasizes strongly interactive communication between practice in the field and the theoretical studies that take place at the university. Field practice on the undergraduate level is integrated into both the pedagogical courses and the courses in the educational areas of preschool. In the beginning, the emphasis is on students getting to know the field through observation and documentation. As their studies progress, they more and more try out in the preschools ideas that are being covered in theoretical courses at the university. On the graduate level, connection to the field is through courses on theory and practice where the model of action research is emphasized, as well as through participation in developmental work and research in preschools.

In addition to the required courses in the educational areas of preschool and pedagogy, there are elective courses in these areas. The program also includes courses that are common for all education students, in particular theoretical courses in Education, Developmental and Learning Psychology, Sociology, and the Philosophy of Education, as well as courses on Methodology and Research Methods and Information Technology and the Icelandic Language. At the graduate level, students can specialize in various areas such as: special education, leadership, life-skills and equality, multiculturalism, and art and creativity. Table 2 gives an overview of the courses offered in the program listed by year. Students doing distance education or flexible studies, however, usually study part time while working in a preschool, and thus take a longer time finishing the program.

Table 2 Structure and Content of Preschool Teacher Education – Starting fall 2011

UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES		
	Fall	Spring
Year one	Introduction to Education 10 ECTS	Movement and Dramatics 10 ECTS FP
	Written and Spoken Icelandic 10 ECTS ** FP	Educational Research 6 ECTS Information Technology 4 ECTS **
	Early Childhood Education I: The Preschool as an Institution 10 ECTS FP	Early Childhood Education II: Play, Relationships, Documentation 10 ECTS FP
Year two	The Local Environment as a Source for Learning 10 ECTS FP	Inclusive Preschool 10 ECTS FP
	Developmental and Learning Psychology 10 ECTS **	Arts in Preschool 10 ECTS FP
	Arts and Children’s Culture (Music, literature and visual arts) 10 ECTS * FP	Elective course 10 ECTS
Year three	Science, Community, and Arts in Preschool 10 ECTS FP	Transition from Preschool to Primary School 10 ECTS * FP
	Early Childhood Education III: Professionalism and Pedagogical Ideology 10 ECTS FP	Communication, Collaboration, and Leadership 10 ECTS FP
	Language Development and Emergent Literacy 10 ECTS FP	B.Ed. project 10 ECTS
GRADUATE STUDIES		
	Fall	Spring
Year four	Research Methods - Quantitative 5 ECTS ** Research Methods - Qualitative 5 ECTS	Elective courses 10 or 15 ECTS Professionalism and Leadership 1 ECTS or Play and Learning (15 ECTS) 
	Theories in Sociology and Philosophy of Education 10 ECTS **	Theory and Practice I 10 ECTS FP
	Early Childhood Education Theory and Research 10 ECTS	Elective courses within specialization: 5 or 10 ECTS
	Elective courses 20 ECTS Culture, Media, and Language or Play and Creativity  Theory and Practice II 10 ECTS FP  Research with Children and Youths 10 ECTS	M.Ed.- project 20 – 30 ECTS

* Joint courses for students in the preschool and early-primary-school teacher-training programs

** Joint courses for students in the preschool and compulsory-school teacher-training programs

FP = field based practice is integrated into these courses

Elective courses = students choose one of two elective courses which are run simultaneously with the course Theory and Practice.

The program described above (table 2) is designed for those who start their university education in the preschool-teacher program. Those who have their undergraduate degree in primary-school education, or in a field connected to the educational areas of preschool, can take an individually oriented graduate program, with many of the same courses, but designed specially to meet the requirements of Icelandic laws and regulations on preschool-teacher education. After completing a Master's degree, students can apply for the Ph.D. or D.Ed. programs.

Ideas Underlying the Program

The official slogan of the Faculty of Teacher Education is *Alúð við fólk og fræði*, which can be understood as care (or dedication) to people and science, indicating that the program should build on democracy, equality, sustainability, and respect for individuals and diversity. According to a statute which was passed in the faculty about the role and policy of the Faculty of Teacher Education, the Faculty should place emphasis on scientific methods, ethical responsibility, critical thinking, and creativity. Diverse teaching methods and quality teaching, setting an example for teachers at other school levels, should be stressed. Importance should be placed on teaching methods that take into account the diversity of children, democratic school practices, critical thinking, connection to the environment, and an international vision. Organization, teaching methods, and the content of the teacher-education program are to be grounded in scientific knowledge and connected to research. The faculty places emphasis on cooperation with the profession through fieldwork, research, and developmental work (Kennaradeild Menntavísindasviðs Háskóla Íslands: Hlutverk og stefna 2010–2015).

The program presented above in preschool-teacher education is the new five-year program leading to a Master's Degree. It is built on the current laws and regulations for preschool-teacher education and the policies of the Faculty of Teacher Education. Common themes in the new curricula for all school levels in Iceland are the concepts of sustainable development, health and wellbeing, democracy and human rights, equality, literacy, and creativity (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011). These areas are reflected in the program. The program also builds on Nordic traditions of preschool teacher preparation which have distinctive philosophical and methodological underpinnings. Among the important features of the Nordic preschool model are: (a) a focus on care instead of school subjects, (b) aesthetics and creative arts instead of analytical facts, (c) a thematic approach instead of school subject matter, (d) a

focus on play, and (e) focusing on the group of children, not just on the individual child (Johansson, 2006).

Contemporary theories in early-childhood education and the role of the preschool in the 21st century are the foundation of the curriculum for preschool-education today. The pedagogical courses are taught by the faculty of preschool-teacher education who, for the most part, has backgrounds as preschool teachers and researchers. Their theoretical stance is based in general on contemporary ideas of children and childhood, where children are regarded as strong and competent citizens with rights of their own, and childhood is viewed as an important life stage in and of itself (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; Einarsdottir, 2007; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Socio-constructivist ideas of children as active thinkers who learn from each other with support from adults are also influential (Vygotsky, 1978a). Post-modern views of preschool as a democratic forum building on the past and concerned with both the present and the future are emphasized (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The important roles played by preschool teachers are particularly stressed: in particular, their role as co-constructors of knowledge and culture, both the children's and their own and thus supporters of children's learning; their role as professional, ethical, care-givers (Leavitt, 1994; Noddings, 1992); and their role as democratic professionals cooperating with different stakeholders in an open interaction with the community (Oberhuemer, 2005; Sachs, 2001; Whitty, 2008).

These theoretical perspectives are mirrored in the research undertaken by the faculty in the preschool-teacher program that will be described in the next section of this report. However, some of the courses in the program are the same for all teacher education students and in other cases the same courses are for students in the preschool-teacher and primary-school-teacher programs. Those courses are often not taught by the preschool-teacher faculty and may have different philosophical underpinnings. In some cases, for instance, the emphasis is placed on what children lack instead of their strengths and competences, the understanding of early intervention may be on how individual children meet the criteria of developmental scales or phonological tests, and the focus may be on disciplining through behavioral modification. This is at odds with the emphasis in the pedagogical courses offered in the preschool-teacher program. As the preschool-teacher students are a minority in these common courses, the inclination is, understandably enough, to focus on what is significant for the compulsory-school teachers.

Research in Early Childhood Education

The elevation of the education of preschool teachers to the university level has resulted in greater research and developmental work in the field. Since they merged in 1997, there has been a significant increase in research in the field of early-childhood education: 40% of the time of academic staff is to be devoted to research, and all courses in the program are to be based on research. This is an important change from the situation a decade ago, when the educator's time was devoted only to teaching. In recent years, an ever-increasing number of the faculty with backgrounds in preschool education are pursuing doctoral studies in early-childhood education, either abroad or at the University of Iceland, and, as a result, there is today a large group of these educators conducting research in the field. The results from that work inevitably become part of the course material in the program, and, at the graduate level, students participate in the research projects.

In May 2007, the *Center for Research in Early Childhood Education* was established within the Iceland University of Education. The principal aims are to increase and promote research in the field of early-childhood education and to serve as a forum for developments in the field. The Center aims to facilitate collaboration and cooperation between researchers and individuals dealing with policy and practice. It also disseminates its research results through publications, conferences, and meetings. Supporting partners of the research center are the Ombudsman for Children, the Icelandic Teachers' Union, and Reykjavík Preschools.

Since its establishment, the research center has published books and worked on several research projects involving both staff and graduate students. Many of the research projects are qualitative studies where the researchers probe deeply, spending considerable time in the field. There are also large-scale quantitative studies where questionnaires are distributed to a large population sample, multi-method studies, and action-research studies carried out in collaboration with preschool teachers in the field. Research projects that are being conducted at the time this is being written (July 2011) are here grouped into four categories: children's voices, transitions, professionalism, and the curriculum.

Children's Voices

The aim of this research is to gain understanding and increased knowledge of the perspectives and ideas of young children concerning various aspects of their daily lives and education, and

additionally, to develop methods for exploring children's understanding and the meaning they give to their lives. Increased understanding of the perspectives of children is an important foundation for policy formulation in early childhood education. This research is built on the conviction that children, like adults, are citizens who hold views and perspectives of their own, who have competencies and the right to be heard, and who are able to speak for themselves. Seeking children's perspectives and recognizing their points of view as separate from those of their parents emerges from childhood studies (e.g. Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997) and from post-modern view of childhood and children (Dahlberg, et al., 1999). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) also marked an important move towards recognizing the right of children to have an influence on their own lives. These research projects use qualitative methods that build on children's competencies and individual differences, including group interviews, individual interviews with and without props, observations, children's drawings and photographs, and learning stories (Einarsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2008). Several research projects fall into this category including:

- Children's voices and their influence on the preschool curriculum.
- The ideas of four-year-old children about the inside of their bodies.
- Views of children with special needs in preschool.
- Memories of 1st grade children of their preschool experiences (Einarsdóttir, 2011).
- Perspectives of one and two years olds in preschool.
- Young children's voices of femininities, masculinities and occupations (Þórðardóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2008).
- Preschool teachers documenting children's perspectives in Learning Stories (Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2008).

On the Same Path – Transition between Preschool and Primary School

The aim of this project is to create a partnership between preschools and primary schools in Iceland and to promote educational continuity and flexibility in early childhood education. Emphasis was placed on the connection between play and learning as inseparable dimensions in preschool practice (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). To this end, a group of preschool teachers and primary-school teachers in the city of Reykjavik were enabled to work together in order to develop a unified approach and a common understanding of education that could be adopted within both educational levels. Teachers from three preschools and three primary schools participated in an action-research project, forming three school pairs,

and working together with researchers at the School of Education. The purpose of action research in schools is to develop and improve practice. Teachers who participate in action research focus on changing and improving their own practices: new methods, developed in part by the teachers themselves, are tested; records are made of the actions that are taken, and data is gathered and analyzed throughout the study period (Koshy, 2008; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003). In this project, preschool- and primary-school teachers worked together with university researchers in developing a common ideology and pedagogical practice. The participating teachers made decisions about what exactly they would like to emphasize in their cooperation with the other school level. When the school pairs had discussed their interests and considered possible collaborative projects, they decided on the following topics:

Pair I: Early literacy, play, and outdoor teaching

Pair II: Early literacy and play

Pair III: Early numeracy and play

This collaborative project was a part of the Early Years Transition Project, funded with support from the European Commission (Einarsdottir, 2010; Müller, 2010).

Professionalism of Preschool Teachers

During the last decades, the discourse about professionalism of teachers has increasingly evolved around the different roles teachers play, where collaboration with different stakeholders is an inseparable part. The term democratic professionalism has been used when emphasis is placed on collaboration concerning the welfare and learning of the child. This includes collaboration among teachers, collaboration with other professionals, as well as collaboration with children, parents, and the local community (Oberhuemer, 2005; Sachs, 2001; Whitty, 2008). The core of democratic professionalism is cooperation between different stakeholders with an emphasis on transparency in all activities and functions, and open interaction between schools and the community. Three major projects on the professionalism of preschool teachers are being carried out by the faculty of early-childhood education:

The Professional Role and Leadership of Preschool Teachers

The purpose of this research is to investigate how preschool teachers and relevant stakeholders see the professional roles and leadership of preschool teachers in Iceland, and what factors, inside or outside the preschools, are affecting those roles. And additionally, how

the stakeholders' understanding of roles and leadership affect the professional identity of the preschool teachers. The theoretical framework used to analyze the findings is a typology of traditional, managerial, and democratic professionalism together with ideas of a professional learning community and distributed leadership (Whitty, 2008). This research is conducted from a feminist standpoint, giving women a voice and putting their experience in focus, since the preschool teaching force is almost entirely female (Francis, 2002).

Preschool Teachers as Professionals in a Field Dominated by Laymen

One of the major challenges in Icelandic preschools today is the lack of qualified preschool teachers. The majority of those working in Icelandic preschools do not have formal pedagogical training or qualifications for work in a preschool. Preschool teachers have to carry out a professional job and guarantee the quality of the professional work, while at the same time dealing with special challenges arising from or connected with the untrained staff. A survey was sent to all preschools in Iceland soliciting the views of preschool teachers, as well as preschool assistants, on their role, methods, collaboration, and division of labor. The study is being carried out in collaboration with Volda University College and the University of Oslo in Norway.

The Roles of Preschool Personnel in the Minds of Children

The aim of this study is to increase knowledge of the perspectives of preschool children on the role of the preschool personnel. Participants were 60 children in three preschools in Reykjavik. The study employs qualitative methods that build on children's competencies and individual differences (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009). The children were provided with disposable cameras with which to take pictures during the preschool day. The pictures were used as the basis for interviews, where the meaning the children put into their lives in preschool and the role of the educational personnel were examined. The study is based on the belief that young children have their own voices, the right to express their views, and influence their own lives and environment (Christensen & James, 2000; Dockett, et al., 2009). They are capable of participating, and expressing their opinions and views, if appropriate methods are used. The study also uses contemporary theories of professionalism as a theoretical lens (Whitty, 2008).

Other research projects that fall under the heading of professionalism are:

- Preschool-teachers role in collaboration with parents

- Newly-graduated preschool-teachers' progress

Curriculum

Other projects that are now being carried out by the faculty of preschool-teacher education focus on different parts of the preschool curriculum, such as play, literacy, outdoor education, and assessment.

Young-Children's Play: Arena for Social Interaction and Meaning Making

This study is intended to shed light on the ways in which toddlers in two playgroups in an Icelandic preschool interact with their environment, and the ways in which their social and physical environment are constructed. The focus is on the children's own perspectives of how they experience the environment in their social interactions and social relations in play situations in the preschool. The study also examines the preschool teachers' views and their reactions to the children. The research methods employed are participant observations, video-recordings, field-notes, and interviews with preschool teachers. The theories of Buytendijk (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996) and Merleau-Ponty (1994) are used to shed light on the data.

Preschool-Teachers' Views on Children's Play

The purpose of this study was to observe and describe how preschool teachers support children's play. It also focused on the ideas that preschool teachers had about play, and their role in it. Finally, it looked at whether there was a correspondence between the ideas they had and how they actually conducted their work, and which factors they considered to impact their work the most. The study used qualitative methods and the data was collected using participant observations and interviews. The participants were three preschool teachers, selected based on the purpose of the research. Vygotsky's theories on the zone of proximal development and scaffolding were used as a theoretical framework (Vygotsky, 1978b).

Playing and Learning Outdoors

This study focuses on the role of the outdoor environment in children's education from the perspective of different stakeholders. First, a discourse analysis was conducted on policy documents in Iceland. Secondly, teachers were asked, in an interview, how they saw the role of the outdoors in children's education. Thirdly, an interview was conducted with children to investigate their ideas and preferences about using the outdoor environment. Finally, the

teachers' use of the outdoor environment when teaching children about living beings was investigated through observation in the field, as well as in meetings and interviews with teachers. The study builds on socio-cultural theory about how people learn, derived from Vygotsky (1978), and a view of children as capable, competent, and active thinkers (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; United Nations, 1989).

Preschool Teachers Documenting Learning Stories

The purpose of this study is to explore in what ways two distinctively different curricular contexts support children's wellbeing and learning dispositions. A child's *wellbeing* is defined as the degree to which children feel at ease, find an atmosphere in which they can be spontaneous, and are satisfied in their basic needs (Laevers, 1994). According to the definition of *learning disposition*, the child is seen as a learner, who is interested, involved, persists with difficulties or uncertainty, communicates, and takes responsibility (Carr, 2001). The theories of learning and teaching supporting this study are socio-cultural theories (Bruner, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wells & Claxton, 2002). Multiple methods, influenced by ethnography, including observations, documentations, and reflections with participants are used to generate data; during the research process. Children's learning stories are documented by the researcher in co-operation with 4–5 year old children and their preschool teachers (Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010).

Cultural Literacy of Four-Five Year Old Preschool Children in Reykjavik

The aim of this study is to gain understanding of how young children use children's literature and popular culture to construct knowledge and create meaning from their cultural literacy. The theoretical framework of the study is Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron (1977). Through participant observations, interviews, and questionnaires, it is examined how children shape the pedagogy and curriculum in preschools, and how particular social conditions shape the dispositions of preschool children. Additionally, it is investigated how cultural discrimination is constructed through differing levels of knowledge of children's literature and popular culture in the peer group. Findings indicate that the cultural literacy of young children is contingent on gender, ethnicity, and the mother's education (Þórðardóttir, 2007a, 2007b).

Final Words

Preschool teacher education in Iceland can be traced back to the work of the Women's Alliance in Reykjavík in the early 1900s when they had the initiative of opening the first day-care centers in Reykjavík. In 1946, a pedagogical college for educating women to work in day-care centers and playschools was established. In the last two decades, the education of preschool teachers has undergone tremendous transformation, moving from being a three-year course of study at a college for preschool teachers, to a Bachelor's degree program at a university of education, where it was connected to the education of other teachers, and, finally, from there to a five-year Master's degree program at a research university.

This rapid development has created some challenges that educators of preschool teachers are now facing. By becoming a part of the education of teachers at all school levels, where preschool-teacher education is only a minor part, it may lose its special character and become more like the education of compulsory-school teachers. The transformation to a university education has resulted in fewer students attending the program. The requirement of a 5 year master's degree, starting in 2011, will probably lead to even more decrease of graduated preschool teachers, at least for the time being. That is not what the preschools in Iceland need. With only 34% of the preschool staff having preschool-teaching degrees, the daily work with the children in preschools is being done increasingly by unskilled or semi-skilled staff. The educators of preschool teachers at the University of Iceland are aware of these challenges and are trying to meet them by advocating for the distinctive features of the field of early-childhood education, and by building up a strong research team through the Center for Research in Early-Childhood Education. One advantage of being a part of the general teacher education is that the faculty is able to conduct research in the field, and indeed, in the last few years research has grown considerably. In the long run, the status of preschool teachers is expected to rise.

Preschool teacher education as a research-based university education is a novelty which should be beneficial for the field in the long run. It is important, however, that it continues to respect its very special and crucial role educating young children till the age of six and also respecting its strong foundations and the distinctive features that characterize the social-pedagogy approach of the Nordic preschools, where the focus is on creativity, thematic approaches, and care, as well as learning through play in cooperation with children and adults.

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