

Iceland

Country Overview

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Country name

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Introduction

The educational system in Iceland is very progressive regarding the integration of social and emotional skills (SES) into the official educational system. Moreover, the country has developed a welfare model, which includes equal access to Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC) for all children. As defined by the 2008 Preschool Act, ECEC is a paramount part of childhood education, with established practices for the implementation and evaluation of SES skills. Furthermore, each municipality is empowered to decide how to integrate SES into the basic educational system, which allows freedom and flexibility for schools and teachers to experiment and adapt.

Although there has been much talk about restructuring the curriculum around having the last year of preschool to be more academic-oriented, free play has remained the status quo. A study by Einarsdottir (2016) showed that parents approve the ideas laid out in the National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschools and are satisfied with the level of competence, self-reliance, self-confidence and independence their children have adopted. Moreover, they emphasise that social and emotional skills are of paramount importance to their children's education. Although the study does not include the opinion of the growing number of immigrants in Iceland, it does echo the sentiments of parents interviewed on the same issues about a decade before.

The value of play underlines the principles of ECEC in Iceland and underscores all related educational practices. Social and emotional skills are taught through cooperation, encouragement and care, and educators help develop children's abilities to both collaborate and be more self-reliant.

Development

Leikskóli is the Icelandic term for preschool, which means Playschool. The term 'play' in Playschool is used with reason. Play is central to the Icelandic concept of "good childhood". Along with other Nordic countries, Iceland values the importance of play, both inside and outside. The educational system highlights that young children learn best through play, and this outlook distinguishes early schooling from compulsory schooling.

The National Curriculum Guide for Preschools in Iceland emphasises play as both an aim and a method. In Icelandic preschools, teaching methods are indirect, and teaching elements are playful and flexible. Play is valued as children enjoy a high degree of freedom — resulting in high levels of independence and social competence. Moreover, "Health and welfare" became one of the six fundamental pillars of education with the new National Curriculum Guides' implementation for all school levels (pre-, compulsory, and upper secondary schools), with the other five being: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. The system encourages positive self-image, physical activity, nutrition, rest, mental well-being, positive communication, security, hygiene, and understanding of one's feelings and those of others. The fundamental pillars, including the pillar of "Health and welfare", are aimed at aiding children to develop both mentally and physically, thrive in society and cooperate with others.

Other elements, such as a vision of the future and the ability and desire to create an impact and support society, underline the complexity of the national educational programme. The idea

behind the creation of this pillar was to ensure the upbringing of a generation of well-educated and healthy citizens, which would go on to promote an increasingly equal and democratic society.

In Iceland, both municipally and privately-owned preschools are mostly financed by the municipality in which they are located. Children start attending early childcare and education facilities at 18-months of age, but parents can issue a special request to have them start at 12. As of 2013, it has been estimated that about 97% of children between 2.5 and 6 years of age attend preschool, and, as most facilities offer a nine-hour stay, most children attend for 7.5-8 hours (Dyrfjord, 2014). Also, while preschool education is not free, parents pay on a sliding scale, depending on their income, marital and educational status, such as: students and single parents receiving a discount (Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga, 2011).

In addition to federal programmes, UNICEF is also involved in developing such practices in Iceland.

Assessment

Schools or specific aspects of school activities at all educational levels are subject to an external evaluation organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Evaluators from the Directorate of Education conduct an external review for pre-primary and compulsory schools and from 2014 for upper secondary schools. Each preschool issues a school curriculum guide under the responsibility of the preschool head teacher. The school curriculum guide is a more detailed version of the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools. It includes the preschool's operational plan for achieving the objectives and an outline of how it would reach them. In addition, the school curriculum guide considers the preschool's characteristics and the educational policy of the municipality in which it is located. The preschool head teacher is tasked with issuing a detailed operational plan annually and with regularly revisiting the curriculum. The plan provides information on year-round activities, such as the preschool calendar. A committee is then called to approve the school curriculum guide and the operational plan.

Moreover, there are three primary skills included in the educational strategy mentioned below in the Intervention section. What is essential for all of them is the so-called "Social responsibility" standard that involves four criteria: 1) contributing to the classroom and school community 2) solving problems in peaceful ways; 3) valuing diversity and defending human rights, and; 4) exercising democratic rights and responsibilities. There are four scales for different grade groups (kindergarten to 3rd grade, 4th to 5th grade, 6th to 8th grade and 8th to 10th grade). The assessment is based on accumulated observations over time, both in the classroom and on the playground. Schools can use this scale to assess the behaviour of primary school students, such as spontaneity, open-mindedness, and self-confidence.

Some other evaluation methods also include: school climate survey - aimed to describe the school social environment in terms of support for students and staff, relationships between staff and students and the safety of students and staff. For example, the questionnaire for teachers included such scales as "student sensitivity" (e.g. "Students in my classes generally respect viewpoints different from their own"), "student disruptiveness" (e.g. "Students in my classes generally disrupt what others are doing"), student helpfulness (e.g. "Most students are friendly to staff"). The student questionnaire also included several school climate questions, including "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school? - Students in this school have trouble getting along with each other, etc." (Jakobsdottir, 2019).

Intervention

Preschool practice and methods are characterised by tolerance and affection, equality, democratic cooperation, responsibility, concern, forgiveness, respect for human values, and Icelandic culture's Christian heritage. Teachers' behaviour is democratic as they give a lot of freedom to kids to do things themselves. Children learn primarily through play and can move freely around the room.

Icelandic teaching methods prioritise SES in preschool education as crucial for developing the skills needed for the transition to primary school. The main objectives of upbringing and instruction in the preschool are:

- a. To monitor and encourage children's general development in close cooperation with parents;
- b. To provide systematic linguistic stimulation and contribute to common skills in the Icelandic language;
- c. To provide children with mental, intellectual and physical care according to the needs of each individual so that they may enjoy their childhood;
- d. To encourage children's broadmindedness and strengthen their moral values;
- e. To lay the foundation necessary for children to become independent, autonomous, active and responsible participants in a democratic society that is undergoing rapid and continuous development, and;
- f. To cultivate children's expressive and creative abilities with the aim of strengthening their self-esteem, health awareness, confidence and communication skills (Jakobsdottir, 2019).

In fact, the official document outlining the educational guidelines for Preschool Education at the University of Iceland, "Training of Preschool Teachers in Iceland", reads that children are competent from birth and that play is to be encouraged, as it is their main tool for exploration and education. The environment used for play, be it inside or outside, is organised around the context of safety, but also around freedom of movement, self-expression, self-initiated exploration and the ability to experiment and challenge themselves.

To introduce the six fundamental pillars of education and support their implementation, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has developed a website and videos (Icelandic) (<http://namtilframtidar.is>). Some of the skills cited are: goal achievement, cooperation, and emotional management. Each teacher can access the platform and make use of the available resources. For example, concerning the category "goal achievement", the skills mentioned include a sense of responsibility, autonomy and diligence. The skills related to the category "cooperation" include respect for others, cooperation and a sense of solidarity. Finally, those related to "emotional management" include self-confidence, self-esteem and independence. While not all objectives refer to these skills, they aim to encourage general SEC, such as attitudes, social competencies and emotional development.

For school events, the curriculum suggests organising specific activities such as school trips through which students can experience intensive group interactions and learn to be respectful of others.

Aside from these activities, most schools organise the cleaning of school facilities done by students. This provides an opportunity for children to learn ways to collaborate with others and discipline themselves while helping to maintain a clean learning environment. In addition, there are guidelines on extracurricular activities, specifying time allocation for "creative experiential activities", including self-regulated activities, club activities, voluntary activities and career education.

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