Opportunities and Challenges in Icelandic Early Childhood Education
The presentation

- Early childhood system in Iceland
- Views of children
- Views of preschool teachers
- Views of parents
- Challenges for the future
0 – 9 m
Parental leave

18m – 6 years
Preschool

6 – 16 years
Compulsory school

16– 19 years
Upper secondary school
Assist parents, who for various reasons could not take sufficient care of their children.

Rapid urbanization taking place, which demanded a more protected environment for children.

Increasing parental employment in the latter part of the 20th century.

The children: their education, development, and social upbringing.
1946
- Pedagogical College
- Two nine month periods
- Run by the women’s association

1973
- College for Preschool Teachers
- Three academic years
- The Ministry of Education takes over the college

1997
- The education moves to university level and requires a B.Ed. degree
- The College for Preschool Teachers becomes part of the Educational University

2008
- Preschool teacher education on Master level
- The Educational University becomes part of University of Iceland
Early Childhood Education in Iceland

The term playschool is used for all group care services for children from the ages of 18 months to six years old.

The accountability for playschools is divided between the Ministry of Education and the municipal authorities. The ministry formulates an educational policy for the playschools. The local authorities supervise the building and operation of most playschools and bear the expenses.

According to laws from 2008 that took effect on July 1st 2011 all teacher education in Iceland is now five years university education. Hence, only those who have a Master’s degree from an accredited university can use the occupation title "playschool teacher".
National Curriculum Guidelines

Fundamental Pillars

- Literacy
- Sustainable development
- Health and well-being
- Democracy and human rights
- Equality
- Creativity
Preschools should be the responsibility of the society and focus on children’s play, participation, socialization, and well-being.
Looking back to preschool – Children’s perspectives

40 first grade children in two primary schools in Reykjavik.

The children were interviewed when they had been in primary school for a few months. The children’s preschool teachers conducted the interviews with the children.

1. What is most memorable for the children from their preschool?
2. What do the children recall as most positive?
3. What do the children recall as least positive?
Looking back

• Important social space for participation and practicing interaction with other children.
• Social relationships were an important factor in children’s thinking about their early childhood settings.
Looking back

- Friends more important than educators
- Many of the children mentioned the educators when they were asked about when they felt safe in preschool
Looking back

The outdoor area and a spacious piazza where the children played together and were able to choose from various activities was mentioned as the best places.
Preschool teachers’ views

1. Preschool years as the golden age of free play and development. Preschool is to provide care as well as emotional and social support.

2. Preschool as the first level of formal education, where adults are teachers who make sure that children learn what they need to learn.

3. Care-giving and teaching are inclusive concepts, not only compatible but also both necessary in order to ensure a high quality experience and outcomes for Icelandic children prior to their entrance into formal schooling.
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Parents’ main expectation of the preschools:

- Social skills, respect for other people
- Enjoy themselves
- Learn self-reliance and independence
- Play as central part of the curriculum
Demographic changes

Immigrant population
• 1996 – 1.9%
• 2006 – 4.6%
• 2016 – 9.6%

Preschool children
• 1998 – 3.1%
• 2006 – 7.7%
• 2016 – 12.6%
Academication

- Iceland, like the other Nordic countries, has historically placed considerable emphasis on play in early childhood settings.
- During the last decade, this emphasis has been challenged, and warnings have been raised concerning the international academic push. In an era of accountability and increasing globalization, Icelandic early childhood education faces challenges similar to those of other Western countries.
Academication

• Forces emphasizing accountability, evidence-based teaching methods, and standardized assessment to determine whether or not children have met particular learning objectives have become more prominent in the western world in recent years.

• *Preschool PISA* or *Baby PISA*. The OECD is initiating a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes of 4.5 and 5.5 year olds.
Academication

This trend is also hitting the shores of Iceland. There are indicators that some municipalities that run the preschools are moving toward a shift from play and holistic child-centered practices toward more structure and formalized teaching in preschools.
The aim of the study was to shed light on Icelandic parents’ views on their children’s preschool education and explore if parents’ views had changed over the last decade.

- The same preschools were revisited
- 26 parents were interviewed
The findings from the interviews can roughly be categorized into three interrelated themes:

1. Social competencies
2. Personal competencies
3. Cognitive competencies
Many of the parent’s talked about the importance of the children learning to get along with other children, to be a part of a group, and to make new friends.

- Mother 1: As I said before, social interactions, play, learning through play, and relationships with other children.

- Mother 2: I find this preschool is doing a good job. What I find good here, and I think it is very important, is the social competence that they have been working with this year.
Tolerance and respect

The role of the preschool in preventing bullying was discussed by parents in one of the preschools.

There is a project here, a bullying project. [They were] strengthening the social skills, working together in a group, and somehow becoming more conscious about how they communicate within the group. We do not know how things started, but girls are sometimes difficult and often they start to become difficult early on. Therefore, I think the school should start to teach them how to treat other people at an early phase.
Play has been the hallmark of the Nordic ECEC tradition. There has been a consensus about children’s right to play and the necessity of giving children the opportunity for free play and self-initiated exploration.

In my view, the social skills should be worked on. They learn social relations through play ... I think that, for instance, with the younger groups, this free play is so important because there they, of course, learn to interact—through interpersonal relationships.
Personal competencies

The parents talked about the importance of the children learning to manage things by themselves and be independent.

R: ... what should children learn in preschool?
Mother 1: To interact with each other
Mother 2: I agree
Mother 1: Also, general manners and consideration for others and learning to share ... all the things that are important for you in life ... just to be a part of a group. Also, to learn to be independent ... participate in setting the table and cleaning up and dressing yourself.
Personal competencies

Some parents also mentioned that when the children started school they would need to be able to help themselves with daily issues and follow rules.

They should know how to dress themselves, clean themselves, manage toilet issues, stand in line and wait, and you know ask for assistance ... hang up their clothes and all be able to get along. I do not think that they need to know the letters of the alphabet.
Happiness – Well-being

Important that the children are happy and safe in preschool. Then, they themselves went happy and content to work and to the business of the day.

“My son is very happy; and I know that he is safe here, and I feel good bringing him here every day…”

I have two children in this preschool, and both of them have felt safe here. As you were saying before, it is the most important thing. Other things are bonuses ... they have learned a lot here: all kinds of things, both social things as other things ...
Learning

Some of the parents seemed surprised at how much their children had learned in preschool and were pleased with what the children were doing and learning there.

I think from my limited experience of preschools... that it is just an excellent job they are doing in the preschools. I would never have imagined that the children learned so much in preschool. So, I am very pleased with the two preschools that I know, in terms of the learning [that take place there].
Learning

When the parents talked about the final year of preschool, some of them mentioned academic issues.

What they should learn. Just what I mentioned before—relationships and independence. I think it is okay if they learn to know the letters of the alphabet, numbers, and shapes ... learn to follow instructions, work on assignments, and concentrate on one thing at a time, just to prepare them.
Learning

Many of the parents were pleased with more diverse activities during the children’s final year of preschool.

I am also very pleased with the art work and creative work that has been going on here this year. It was a project done in collaboration with an art school. They were divided into groups and went five or six times. My child made a lot of progress. It was memorable—she was always talking about it.
Summary

- The parents were satisfied with the preschools’ emphasis on holistic approaches, child-centered orientation, and play.

- Interpersonal relationship, social competency, friendship, and respect for other people were stressed.

- Personal competencies—such as independence, safety, self-reliance, wellbeing, and personal strength—were also emphasized.

- The parents did not have many expectations about preschool teaching academic issues, such as reading and mathematics.
Summary

• There was a consensus among the participating parents regarding the importance of play, and they took it for granted that children learned through play.

• Some of the parents seemed surprised at the number and variety of issues their children had learned in preschool.

• These findings call for speculation about the role of professional educators in explaining to parents the aim of the activities and tasks that children are involved in, what children are learning via such activities, and how they are learning
Conclusion

The findings from the study show a clear emphasis on democracy, well-being, care, and interpersonal relationships.

The views of Icelandic children and most of the parents are consistent with Icelandic e-c-e legislation and the Nordic social pedagogical approach.
Although Icelandic preschools have been under the auspices of the Ministry of Education since the 1970s and have been designated as the first level of the educational system since the early 1990s, an emphasis on care, democracy, social issues, play, and child-initiated activities has always been the priority.
Conclusion

• Warnings have been raised concerning the international academic push, emphasizing standardized assessment.

• This emphasis was not evident in the study with the parents.

• The findings illustrate the views of parents of the dominant culture.
Conclusion

• Icelandic society has changed from a homogeneous to a multicultural one in a short amount of time.
• In times of increasing diversity we need to reach out for these new citizens. We need to learn from them. It might challenge our views of what is good ece.
Societal changes, increasing immigration, globalization, new digital technology, and climate changes have resulted in new challenges as well as opportunities for ece.

Accountability, standardized testing, inclusion versus segregation, sustainability and playing and learning in a digital age are issues that are central in the discussions taking place about early childhood education today.
Finally

• How will early childhood education change when meeting globalization?
• Can we integrate these new ideas and new challenges into our existing ideology?
• „democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife“ (Dewey, 1936)
Thank you