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The National Curriculum for Icelandic pre-schools

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Background and Context

Pre-school traditions in Iceland can be traced back to 1924, when most Icelanders lived in rural areas. The roots of the pre-schools lie in Froebel's theories of pedagogy and the kindergarten, built upon the work of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, together with influences from the work of Dewey. The concept of 'play-school' has been used since 1991 (Act 48/1991) for all kinds of pre-school, nursery school and early childhood programme.

Iceland provides financial support through the tax system for families with young children. Both parents are entitled to 3 months' maternity leave, and they can then decide which of them will stay at home with the child for a further 3 months. An allowance covers the major part of the income lost during parental leave, and it is usual for one parent to be at home with the child for a full year, albeit with half the salary. A large part of the early childhood educational system is both financed and managed by the municipality, and the few schools that are privately owned are also partly financed by the municipality. Parents pay for pre-school on a sliding scale according to their income, paying somewhere between 20% to 50% of the cost of running the schools. Most children aged between 3 to 6 years old spend 6 hours or more in the pre-school.

The biggest threats to the pre-school system have been low wages and the high proportion of unskilled people in the work force. Educated pre-school teachers (B.Ed. degree) make up about 40% of the pre-school work force; the others are untrained. The child-adult ratio is from 4:1 for the youngest children, rising to 10:1 for the oldest children (Regulation 225/1995). Persons who work with children with special needs are not excluded from this ratio (the National Curriculum requires they are taught inclusively).

The National Curriculum for pre-school

Iceland's first Act concerning pre-schools was passed in 1973. Under this law, pre-schools were regarded as educational institutions under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, and the government had to finance part of the pre-school's building costs. This decision was unusual for a Nordic country; at the time pre-schools in comparable Nordic countries were looked upon as social and family matters, and also as a fundamental part of the battle for equality between women and men. The same discourse took place in Iceland, but it was thought to be in the best interests of the subject matter to place it at the Ministry of Education.

From that time pre-school was viewed as education. In 1984 Iceland produced its first draft of a national curriculum for pre-schools and this was published as a National Curriculum in 1985. This National Curriculum was updated and re-published in 1993, after the pre-school law was changed. A new Act for pre-schools in 1994 acknowledged, for the first time, that pre-school was the first stage of our formal education system. In 1999 a new National Curriculum for all schools was published, which although building on the earlier version, was completely different.

Each curriculum is and will be a child of its own time: it will not and cannot be anything else, and it reflects the society from which it has grown. One of the aims of the curriculum

is to emphasise what we think is beautiful and right, and to work against what we think can damage our society, our relationships and our way of living. The aim of the curriculum is to control, or at least to affect, the 'what' and the 'how' of what we are doing in the schools. The National Curriculum for pre-school emphasises that the pre-school is one of society's fundamental institutions, and that what happens in pre-schools is of benefit to society.

The 1985 National Curriculum for pre-schools stated that the curriculum builds on national values which date back to Iceland's beginnings (Iceland was settled somewhere between 840-900, and our parliament was founded as a democratic foundation in 930). Those values are build upon ideas of democracy and a belief in giving one's own word (*drengskap*). The Curriculum emphasises our need to look at the child as a whole, that childhood is a special period in a person's life, and that childhood has its own rights. The pre-school has a role in guarding these values for future society.

These values are also the foundation for the new National Curriculum for pre-schools. What is different in the 1999 curriculum is the image of the child, as an able, gifted and clever being. The Curriculum states that the aim of the pre-school is to prepare the child for living and participating in a democratic society, and we know that for most children the foundation school is part of their future. (It is for this reason that I dislike the term 'pre-school' which indicates that this stage is a preparation for something else rather than of value in its own right. I prefer the American concept 'early childhood program', but even nursery school is better, although this is also often misunderstood in other languages).

A National Curriculum is a frame; it emphasises the right of the child, and what the children have a right to within the pre-school, but it says very little about how the staff should do their work. In a thorough and detailed curriculum, freedom of choice will be minimal. Options for choosing ideology and methods will be less and schools are likely to be more like each other - freedom to choose a less-travelled pattern is narrow. Some believe that such a curriculum will lead to teachers feeling that they have little control over their work and over their own development as professionals. Our older curriculum was of this type, with detailed descriptions on how to do and what to do.

The new National Curriculum is an open and minimal curriculum. By keeping it open and flexible, the diversity and development of each school is emphasised, and the choice of values and ideology is a shared and democratic process. To safeguard this, it is required that each schools shall write its own school curriculum, and that all members of the staff (not only teachers) shall participate in the process. It is also required that all schools evaluate themselves, and that all interested parties take part in this, including parents - and children.

The children must participate, particularly in evaluations and decisions concerning themselves. The age of the children can be an issue, because in Iceland children from a few months' old have the right to attend pre-schools. It is therefore the teacher's responsibility to find a way for the voice of the children to be heard. As a method for listening to the voice of the children, the curriculum recommends pedagogical documentation (a method developed in the pre-schools of the municipality of Reggio Emilia in Italy).

For pre schools to write their own school curriculum it is necessary to recognise the codes in the National Curriculum. There are very important key codes to be aware of:

- **play** – play is the child's way to express itself; play should be a cornerstone of the every pre-school curriculum
- **equality** – to play, to be, to participate in decision-making
- **the image of the child** – every child is gifted and able; in the pre-school we shall look for what the child can do, not what it cannot.

Other key codes are caring, happiness (or gladness), participation, and being together. Conflict-resolution and accepting change is emphasised. It is also stated that it is important for each child to belong to a group of children.

There are also key learning areas of the pre-school. They are *movement, language, creativeness, music, nature, culture and society.*

Key areas of the National Curriculum for the pre-school

Movement
Iceland has a long tradition of playing outside in every kind of weather: both parents and teachers support this, so the National Curriculum lay stress on playing outside. The pre-school building regulations also reflect this – the playground around the schools is supposed to be suitably large. In many Icelandic pre-schools the daily schedule is rather tight. Much of the work is organised around periods that the teacher controls in some way, and the teachers make most of the choices (or opportunities) for children. In the playground, the children choose for themselves. In an interview with 5 and 6 year-old children I asked if they had control over things in the school. The children replied that outside they could be whatever they liked; they could choose who to play with, how and what to do.

Many Icelandic pre-school teachers believe that the playground outside the schools is the last bastion of children's power and control in the pre-schools. Many believe that the playground is also an exercise in democratic values. The children have the opportunity to decide, make choices, come to agreement between themselves, to interact with other children, and to become part of a self-chosen group. In the playground the children have the opportunity to participate in experiences which our well-organised daily schedule does not allow inside the school building.

Language
The National Curriculum recognises language as one of our most important communication tools. Our national heritage, from the Sagas, is the thread that binds together our past and our present. Therefore it is looked upon as very important to tell children stories, to ask open questions, and to teach old nurseries rhymes. It is emphasised that language is part of everything we do; it is not supposed to be taught as a subject, but should be interwoven in daily life at the school.

The National Curriculum lays stress on using philosophy with children as a desirable method. It is a way to listen to children and to listen to the child pondering over her own thoughts.

Creativeness

Creativity as a method of understanding the world is important. By being creative, children express their feelings and experiences. The Curriculum regards participation in free play as one of the most important factors in becoming a creative person. The chapter on play states

> The creative child is sensitive toward her environment, and the environment promotes the mind of the creative child, so it becomes fruitful. The creative child interests herself in the small thing in nature; texture, size, colour and smell. The creative child is able to accept emotional change, and she is more likely to think and act in original way. In play, the child improvises with her playmates.

One of my student's interview with a pre-school teacher demonstrates how the boundary between creativeness and playing is unclear - but also shows the importance of asking questions. The pre-school teacher and her group of children had taken a walk into an inhabited place near the school. With them they took a trolley of clay.

> On arrival the children stood looking around. I asked them, "Can everyone find something that reminds them of something, and then take some clay and add to it, so all of us can see what he or she can see." The children began to search for objects and I stood there watching. One boy came to me and said "Elín, I am thinking about that big rock over there." "Yes, what are you thinking?" "I have not quite finished thinking". "Just walk over to the rock, walk around it, look as much as you like at it, and see if you come up with something."
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> A little later he came running toward me and said "Elín, I have thought about it. It looks like an iron (for clothes)." "Yes, and what else? Can you add something to it, so everybody can see that it is an iron? Or have you thought about it, about adding something?" "Yes" he says, and show me with his hand how he holds an iron. He got the clay and I watch him climb up on the rock to make an ironing board.

The National Curriculum makes it clear that play is important, and also states that all educational subjects must be woven into the daily schedule through play. Play is both a means and a method in the pre-school. Good, long and uninterrupted time should be given for play every day; and the environment should support free, creative play.

As stated earlier, in many schools the daily schedule is very tight. Time for play, or free play, often depends on time being left over after the teachers have done everything on their own agenda. Teachers think that if they are not actually doing things with children, they are not working. They feel that they have to be working on some kind of project most of the time, but when this happens, free play is omitted (except in the playground). In an interview with children at pre-school I asked 4 to 6 year-old children what they could control in their life at school. "Outside" they replied but also inside - during playtime - they can control what they do. It is time of being creative, a time when the child feels her own power and is in control.

Music
Music plays an important part in the everyday life of most pre-schools. The National Curriculum emphasises participating, improvising, listening and moving as important aspects of music education. It states that music is one of mankind's best ways of sharing and of belonging to a group. To listen to music from different times and places is part of working for a larger understanding and against prejudice. The National Curriculum stresses that that part of music education is to listening to the sounds of the environment, both artificial and natural.

In most pre-schools in Iceland there is circle time every day, and part of that time is dedicated to singing and improvising music. But in most schools, music is also part of other work or themes. The democratic aspect of music education is in my view quite clear.

Nature
In Iceland most children are brought up to feel close to nature. This is partly the result of being outside every day, and also because nature is seldom gentle toward us. Nature reminds us constantly who is the master in Iceland: there are earthquakes, volcanoes, avalanches, heavy storms and the ocean. It is very important for us as a nation to love, respect and sometimes even to fear nature. Part of nature education is to be able to draw conclusions from experiences of the natural world. Some schools have a "weather child," others a nature corner, but the most important thing is for the child to be able to enjoy herself and love nature.

One of my students interviewed an experienced pre-school teacher about trusting children. As stated earlier, children in our pre-schools play outside in every kind of weather, so it is very important for the child to be able to know for herself what kind of clothes to put on. The teacher said

> I cannot feel what your body needs. Not everyone has to put on the same kind of clothes, not everyone has to put on both a jacket and a sweater. It is not the same body for everyone. We are different and have different needs. And then you hear from the staff 'Put on a jacket, put on a muffler, put on a hood.' It gives me the creeps … How can I expect a child to develop knowledge of its own body if she hears commands from above all the time? The child has to learn to listen to and trust her own voice. Mine says to trust the children.

Culture and society
The National Curriculum requires every school to strive to be part of, and to participate in, the society surrounding the school, and that schools reflect their local society. All children mist feel respected, and that their various backgrounds are respected. It is for example quite clear that in Iceland family patterns are changing, that children come from various and different kinds of families: the school is obliged to accept this change. It is also within the power of the pre-school to make sure children are acquainted with their local environment outside the playground.

The National Curriculum declares that it is important for us a nation that our children are aware of and celebrate our traditional holidays. Some of those holidays are church holidays, other are related to our fight for independence, and still other are rooted in our history. To be able to connect to and celebrate other nations and countries, it is important to know our own roots.

The voice of the child

The Icelandic government is a signatory to the 1992 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the voice of the child should be listened to. The child is a citizen, and the ownership of the childhood is no longer in the hands of parents and government: the child herself is a free individual with her own opinions and free will. Accordingly, it is an obligation for those around the child to look for and listen to their point of view. It is in the spirit of the UN convention to reach within us and look at what forms our view of the child.

Graue and Walsh (1999) say that children are more often than not put in contexts and situations in which they have little or no control. Adults take most decisions for the child, most of the time, without asking for the child's opinion. Unlike the adult, the child can seldom avoid situations she does not like, and has to develop skills to cope with and change these situations into learning opportunities. A child who does not like the pre-school or the pre-school class she is attending cannot change to another class or school, as adults can usually do if a situation becomes unbearable.

The privacy of the child is also very limited in the pre-school. The child is almost always under surveillance or in the proximity of an adult. The child can hardly ever be alone with herself, or if she can, it is in a very restrictive way. Graue and Walsh say although this is so, it is not true that the child is completely without power. Children can create their own world, their own context, within the grown-up world. In most cases these worlds are invisible to the adults, because we are not looking.

Can there be equality between child and grown-up in the pre-school? Is there a possibility, or even the will, to define the child as a person with an interest in, or even as a specialist in, her own life? Dewey (1973) said it was a paradox for the western world to look at the school system as a cornerstone of society, because it was difficult to find more undemocratic institutions than schools. He also said that the threat to democracy is from within, from our own personal beliefs and the beliefs of the ruling classes over the institutions of our own society.

There is the possibility for the pre-school to be a democratic institution, both for members of staff and for the children. But to be so, teachers need to trust the child, need to listen to the child, need to look for the world inside the world, to acknowledge the child as the main player in her own life, and to acknowledge the adult role is on the sidelines. The democracy of each school and classroom is, first and foremost, up to us.