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Religious education in Icelandic playschools

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> In a small playschool in eastern Iceland an educator was telling the children about why we celebrate Easter. She told them about the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, and the next day she said bad people took Jesus away and nailed him to the cross, where he died. When people came to his grave, a few days later, they discovered that he was not dead – he was alive 'again'. A small girl went home from the playschool and told her grandmother this story. When the girl finished she added 'but I don't know if I should believe her'.

Why research religious education in playschools[1] in Iceland? My own interest in religious education goes back almost 20 years to when I was a leader of a playschool in Reykjavík. There we had heated debates on whether we should take the children to church or not as part of our preparation for Christmas. At the time our views were divided and after a lot of discussions we decided not to participate in a formal relationship with the church. At the time it was a tradition in many playschools to go to church with children before Christmas; it was looked upon as a part of cultural education, as passing on traditions between generations. But Icelandic society is changing and people with different backgrounds are moving to Iceland. It is clear that there is more reason now than ever before to research and promote the debate on the subject of religious education – and the place of faith in publicly-run playschools. It is important to be aware of the ethical standpoint taken by those who work with young people at critical times in their development. The Icelandic educational system is changing and the 1999 National curriculum for playschools is due for revision. It is my conviction that this research can lead to a forum on the subject and open unique windows into playschools. The Icelandic State Church has recognised the importance of this debate, and has set up committees to discuss and formulate working guidelines for among others playschools. It is of utmost importance that educators have a voice in the ongoing debate, to be part of the agenda. For society it must be of some significance to map how playschools works with and preserve the religious heritage and history of the nation.

According to the law on playschools (Iceland 1994/78 paragraph 2)[2] it is the duty of the playschools to reinforce 'Christian ethics' among children. This is further established in the National curriculum for early childhood education (Iceland, A_alnámskrá leikskóla 1999). The clause in the law is based on article 62 of the Icelandic Constitution where it says that the Evangelist Lutheran Church shall be the state church and be protected and strengthened by the state (Iceland 33/1944). Until lately few questioned the article on Christian ethics officially, but in recent years there has been some debate on the article. Those that have been against 'Christian ethics' being part of the foundation of the school system and being taught from that perspective, have mentioned and argued for democratic ethics or general ethics. On the other hand people that have argued for 'Christian ethics'

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[1] In Iceland the term palyschool is used to describe all kind of schools and early childhood centres for children aged 1 to 6 years of age, hence I will use the same term.
[2] The same is also true for compulsory education.

mention the relationship between Church and State and the fact that around 85% of the population 'belong' to the State Church and 95% of the population are Christian. It is clear that children in playschools are coming from a more diverse cultural background and groups than ever before. It is evident for most that Iceland is moving away from being an almost completely homogenous Nordic society toward an intercultural society.

Faith in some ways is an unbreakable part of the upbringing, culture and background of most individuals. Religion in various forms is a part of the identity of individuals as well as whole nations. The history of Iceland has been strongly connected to the history of Christianity and Christian culture, so strongly that it is a truism in Iceland that to understand Icelandic cultural history in a contemporary context, one needs a profound understanding of the religious history of the country. It is unquestionable that the Church in Iceland has played an important role in significant moments both in the lives of individuals and that of the nation; from baptism to funerals, from the inauguration of parliament and president to moments of natural disasters that have beset the country. Even though aside from weddings and funerals most Icelanders only go to churches during Christian festivals, in particular at Christmas, it is undeniable that Christian traditions mould the lives of most people, one way or the other. The history of the Church is interwoven with the history of the country. The question now is whether this should be mirrored in religious indoctrination through education or be part of historical education.

Historically Icelandic has been remarkably homogenous: until 1990, over 90% of the nation belonged to the State church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Foreigners (the commonly used Icelandic concept) made up between 1.4% and 1.8% of people on the National Registry (Iceland Static 2004). However, over the last few years there has been a connection between an increasing number of immigrants and proportionally fewer people belonging to the State church. The last official National Registry number for people born abroad and living in Iceland is 3.5%[3], and the percentage of people belonging to the State church has fallen to 85.5% (Iceland Static 2005). Another indicator of more diverse religious activities in Iceland is the increasing number of religious sects. In 1996 there were 19 religious sects on record in Iceland. In 2003 the number had risen to 25. Among the new ones are the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches and the Muslim Society[4].

Articles 63 to 65 of the Icelandic Constitution are dedicated to the right of every citizen to be equal. The importance of this fundamental view is reflected not only in the Constitution, but also in various international human rights conventions that the Icelandic government has ratified and enshrined in Icelandic law since the establishment of the Republic in 1944. Among those conventions are the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *European Convention on Human Rights* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Part of the fundamental base for all these conventions is the belief that people are free to choose their own religion. It becomes clear from reading these

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[3] According to Iceland Statistics people living in the country in on first of December 2004 were 293.291. (Children born to foreigners in Iceland are included in this statistic).

[4] There is ample reason for religious sects to be recorded, one of them being that the government collects taxes for every member and pays directly to the respective religious foundations.

conventions that parents are considered primarily responsible for their children, but that the community has the duty to support them in their role as best it can. It is evident that both parents and children have the right to education and training according to their background as long as it does not endanger the public safety (see article 9 paragraph 1 and 2 in the *EU Convention on Human Rights* and Appendix 1. paragraph 2 in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*). Article 26, paragraph 2, of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* says

> Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

In the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* a similar view is presented. From the framework of law and human rights conventions that the Icelandic government has supported it is clear that there are key concepts one must pay attention to. Among them are respect, equal rights and opportunities, cultural and religious background, and fundamental freedom. Those conventions have implications as to how states promote national school curricula that take the above into account. An important part of the next step of this study is to find out how, for example, both those inside the playschools and the church and universities define what 'supporting Christian ethics' means, and what they believe is the best way to work with ethics. The only time the debate has been tackled in parliament was when the law on playschool was changed in 1994.

Dahlberg and Moss take up questions on if and how ethics can be a part of a fundamental philosophy in playschools in their book *Ethics and politics in early childhood education* (2005). They distinguish between different kinds of ethics and come to the conclusion that certain kinds of ethics are more relevant and of greater value than others. In their view, universalistic ethics have ruled the early childhood field, manifested in ideas on right and wrong practice. According to them, this leads to a technical practice instead of an ethical one. Dahlberg and Moss advocate what they call 'the ethics of encounter' which are based on the philosophy of Bauman and Levinas (in Dahlberg and Moss 2005: p 82). Three themes are strongly connected as the foundation of this ethical view – those of responsibility, respect for otherness and a rejection of calculative and rational thinking. In my view this definition of ethics is relevant to my research and can be used as a base to compare information gathered both now and later on. I shall also be using Campbell's (2003) work on how to be an ethical teacher; those that do it well she says, weave moral lessons into the fabric of their daily teaching, and it requires a great skill to do so without resorting to preaching (p 49). In a way, this is the core of the matter, the relationship between being a moral educator and being an indoctrinator of children. (Whether it is possible to be a moral teacher without being in some way indoctrinating is of great interest to me, although this question will not be tackled in this text.)

According to Kincheloe and McLaren (1998), the critical researcher must be understood in the context of empowerment of individuals, 'to confront inequality and injustice of particular society or sphere within society' (p 264). The question is; is it democratic or ethical to place parents of small children in a position of choosing even against family background or is it maybe the right thing to do? By rooting my research in theories of democracy and ethics it may be said that I am trying to understand the dilemma educators

find themselves in. In February 2005 I was asked to give a presentation on the subject at a left-wing political party meeting. In addition to academics, other presenters were from various establishments, such as the State Church and the Association for Civil Ceremonies. One of the Members of Parliament there asked later on if we in Iceland are running into a period where 'religionisation'[5] is becoming a trend or norm. As stated before, religious views and religious education is a sensitive research area where emotions can overtake rationality. For several months after this political meeting there was an ongoing discussion[6] on religion in the media in Iceland: one of the daily papers even mentioned people coming out of the 'religious closet' and declaring themselves. The discourse has been along the lines of 'I learned to say a prayer and that did not hurt me' or 'people that are against prayers or religious indoctrination in schools are likely to be relativist, without morals' – in other words, second-class citizens that do not care for anyone except themselves. This is of course a simplified picture.

Method

To map out to a certain extent how religion is part of what happens in playschools I sent a questionnaire by email to head-teachers in 224 playschools all over the country. These were all the playschools in the country that had educated playschool teachers working in them. I received responses from 148 of them (about 66%). The school's geographic location seemed not to affect answers. Although I did not get a full response rate, I will generalise the answers as those of all playschools in Iceland. In this paper is not possible to look at all the data but I will show the findings that I think are of some interest.

Conclusion and debate

Figure 1: Visit church / participate

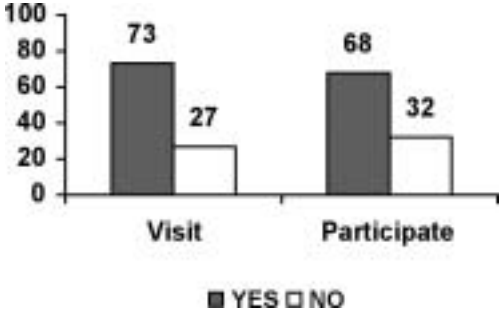


Figure 1 shows how many schools visited church and what their activities there were. Some 73% of playschools do visit churches at least once a year; more or less 70% of the children that visited those schools did participate in some kind of ceremony – this could be anything from saying prayers with the minister to acting out Christmas plays. According to this over half of all children in playschools do participate in some activates

[5] The word is made the same way as globalisation.
[6] Debate would be too strong word, as these writings have been more or less

at church during their playschool years (around 95% of all children aged from 2 to 5 attend playschools in Iceland).

Figure 2: Playschool visited by a minister

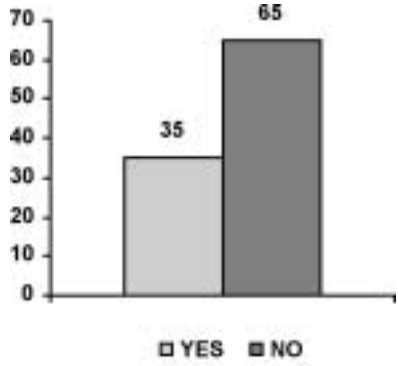


Figure 3 shows that over 20% of the schools are visited by member of the church as part of their preparation for Christmas and Easter. Few schools are visited monthly and most of those that answered *other* are visited more often, even on a weekly basis. The schools that have most visits are visited by ministers or staff member of the church, usually a person that is also overseeing Sunday school.

Figure 3: Playschool visited by a minister

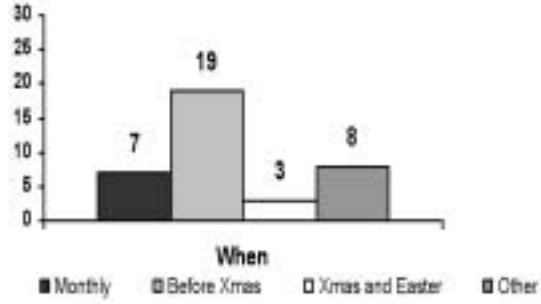
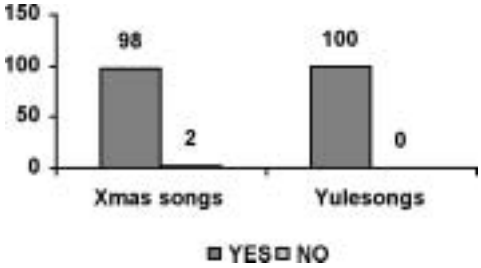


Figure 2 shows that about 35% of all the playschools that answered were visited by ministers. The question was answered by 141 head teachers.

Figure 4: Yuletide songs – Christian and heathen



The reason for the question about classic Christmas songs and non-Christian Yule songs is that in Iceland there is a strong tradition of singing and believing in *Yulelads*. Most parents try to hide the fact that they do not exist from children and play along. The originated in old beliefs based on folks stories. These lads are very popular among Icelandic children and are strongly connected to Christmas traditions, but at same time completely heathen and against church belief. It is my belief that most playschools base their work around Christmas more on tradition than on what might or might not considered to be the teaching of the church. As one can see in Figure 4, all preschools sing about the *lads*, even those few that do not sing other Christmas songs.

Figure 5: Do teachers discuss the purpose of the visit with the children?

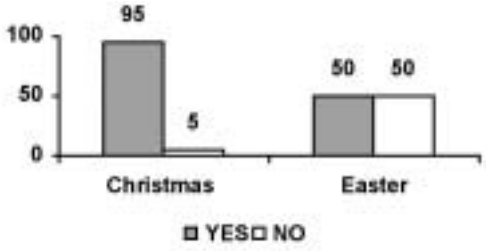
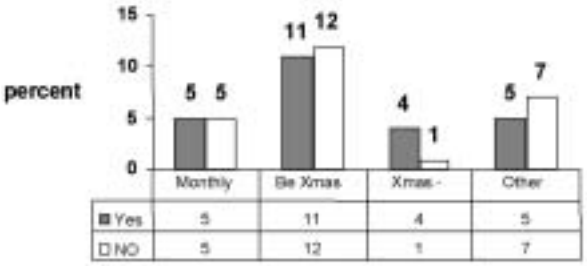


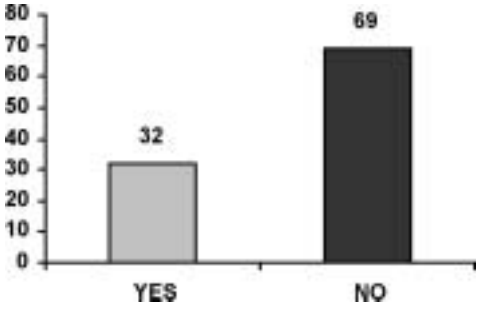
Figure 6: Purposes of Easter by visit of the minister



In Iceland, as in many other countries, Christmas is consider to be a festival for children, though Easter is considered to be the more important Christian festival. Because of this I was not surprised by the responses. On the other hand, I thought that in schools that have

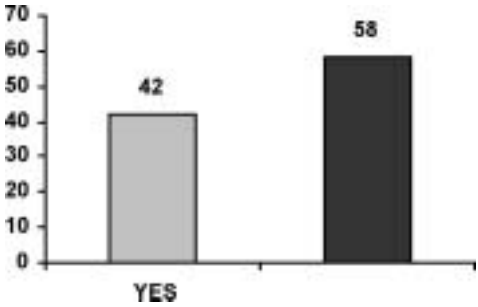
visiting ministers that they would discuss the history of Easter with children. But this was not so: in about half of these schools (Figure 6) this was not on the agenda. This is most interesting and worth further investigation.

Figure 7: Ought the church to have a role?



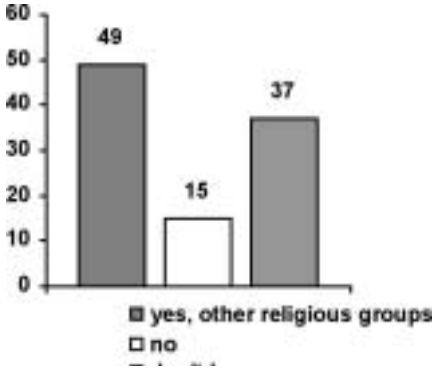
Even though according around 70% of playschools visit churches and therefore have a relationship with church [figure 3], only about 30% (Figure 7) believe that the church should have a role in the playschools. It seems that the playschools like to have a connection, but only on an informal basis and on their own ground. This finding actually supports my view that in the playschool the church is viewed as part of the cultural history of the country. When I more closely examined the group of playschools that was visited by ministers, half did not think the church should have a role in the playschools. It appear that the church is viewed more as part of the playschool environment, and therefore part of what is happening in schools, than as a source of religious education.

Figure 8: Ought there be an organised connection between playschool and the church?



Further support for the idea that head teachers do not see the church as having a role in the playschool can be seen in Figure 8. When asked to elaborate on how the head teachers saw the connection should be carried out, many mentioned visiting church before Christmas or a visit by the minister as the preferred relationship.

Figure 9: Children in school from religious groups other than the state church



In about 50% of the playschools there are children from other religious groups. Most are from other Christian sects, but not all. What I find interesting is that in around 40% of the schools the question of religion has not been raised in the schools.

Conclusion

This research is part of a larger ongoing research project that I am conducting. The next stage will consist of interviews with playschool teachers to attempt to understand how they define the concept 'Christian ethics' and how they believe they are best passed on to children. Is there, for example, in their mind a parallel between 'Christian ethics' and religious education?

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