

# Perspectives on bi- and multilingual children's participation in kindergartens in Iceland

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir  
University of Iceland

Cultural and linguistic diversity of kindergarten children in Iceland has been growing rapidly in recent years (Reykjavíkurborg, Skóla- og frístundasvið, 2017; Statistics Iceland, 2017), creating challenges for kindergartens. The main aim of the paper is to explore how principals, kindergarten teachers and parents in three kindergartens in Iceland experience diversity, inclusion and participation in their kindergartens and what learning spaces and educational practices seem to be instrumental for their children's participation. The paper builds on data from the Nordic research project *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic countries* (2013–2015), the aim of which was to draw lessons from success stories of individual immigrant students and whole school communities at different levels that have succeeded in developing learning contexts that are equitable and socially just (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015; Ragnarsdóttir & Kulbrandstad, 2018). Case studies were conducted in three kindergartens, including semi-structured interviews with kindergarten teachers, principals and parents as well as observation (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). The findings indicate that the kindergartens have developed various inclusive and empowering educational practices to respond to the growing diversity. However, some challenges appear in the findings, including lack of sustainability of good practices.

**Keywords:** inclusion, social justice, kindergartens, Iceland

## Introduction

As a result of growing immigration in Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2017a), cultural and linguistic diversity of kindergarten children has been growing in recent years (Reykjavíkurborg, Skóla- og frístundasvið, 2017; Statistics Iceland, 2017b).

This new reality brings challenges to kindergartens, which respond by developing various inclusive educational practices. Many of these are creative initiatives where principals and kindergarten teachers reach out to parents in order to develop educational partnerships based on mutual trust and to ensure their active participation in everyday school activities. The main aim of the paper is to explore how principals, kindergarten teachers and parents in three kindergartens in Iceland experience diversity, inclusion and participation in their kindergartens and what learning spaces and educational practices seem to be instrumental for their children's participation. The paper presents findings from case studies in three kindergartens in Iceland with focus on learning spaces and educational practices. While identifying inclusive and empowering practices, the paper also addresses continuing challenges in these kindergartens.

## **Background and context: Kindergartens in Iceland**

Iceland is a small country with a current total population of 338,349 (Statistics Iceland, 2017a). Migration to the country has grown rapidly in recent years. While in 1995, 1.8% of the population were non-Icelandic citizens, in 2017, 12% of the population originated from other countries (Statistics Iceland, 2017a). This diversity is also reflected in the education system. Thus, in 2016 around 12.6% of all kindergarten children and 9.3% of all compulsory school students had heritage languages other than Icelandic (Statistics Iceland, 2017b, 2017c).

Education in Iceland is largely public and compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16. Kindergarten and secondary school participation, although optional, is widespread. Kindergarten education is subsidized by municipalities for children from two years old or even younger and enrolment of 3–4 year-olds is over 95% (OECD, 2016).

The basic principles of the Icelandic education system are: equal access to education irrespective of sex, economic status, geographic location, religion, disability and cultural or social background. These are stated in the Constitution of the Icelandic Republic (Constitution of the Republic of Iceland no. 33/1944) and in the legislation pertaining to the various educational levels (Compulsory school act no. 91/2008; Preschool act no. 90/2008; Upper Secondary education act no. 92/2008).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issued National Curriculum Guides for kindergartens, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools in 2011 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, n.d.), based on the educational legislation from 2008. Six fundamental pillars of education form the essence of Icelandic educational policy and encompass basic values and beliefs of Icelandic

society. These are: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. Schools are expected to implement these pillars and prepare children and youth for critical and creative thinking, and active and democratic participation in society (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, n.d.).

While educational policy and curriculum guides in Iceland emphasize equity and inclusion, multilingual and heritage language issues have generally not been sufficiently addressed in these policies (e.g. Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Research has documented the inequalities and marginalization of immigrants in schools and communities in the Nordic countries, including Iceland (Holm & Londen, 2010; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010; von Brömssen & Rodell Olgaç, 2010), while, on the other hand, findings from recent research in Iceland have indicated that particular schools and communities have succeeded in their quest for inclusion, equality and social justice (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015; Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014).

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

The main theoretical focus of this study is critical multiculturalism, multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy (Banks, 2013; Gay, 2010; May & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto, 2010). An additional perspective is literature and theories on inclusive and caring practices for meeting cultural and linguistic diversity of children and families (Brooker, 2002; Cummins, 2004; Noddings, 2005a, 2005b, 2008).

Critical multiculturalism is an important basis for this study as it critically addresses power relations within particular communities or schools and paths towards equality, empowerment and participation (Banks, 2013; Nieto, 2010; Parekh, 2006). Different approaches of critical multiculturalism emphasise the position of minority groups in societies and their educational systems from a critical perspective and analyse the factors in the societal structures or educational systems which cause and maintain unequal status (see May & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Parekh, 2006). Parekh (2006) maintains that societies need to seek balance and ensure equal opportunities and access of individuals through active communication and agreements. This also applies to schools in multicultural societies. According to Banks (2013) and Nieto (2010), educational systems generally and schools particularly need to critically address inequalities and ensure voice, dialogue, equality, empowerment and social justice for their individual students and teachers. Nieto (2010) maintains that empowering multicultural learning communities should be developed within educational systems in multicultural societies.

Cummins (2004) and Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) have emphasised the importance of social justice in educational communities and gaining understanding on how policy making, attitudes, beliefs and expectations exclude some children while welcoming others. Cummins (2001) maintains that in order to create learning spaces that respond to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse groups of children and families, schools must consider how to implement socially just and inclusive educational practices that welcome diverse backgrounds and identities. In order to develop inclusive practices, it is important to build on children's prior experiences and knowledge. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) maintains that most multilingual children are emergent bilinguals who enter early childhood education with some proficiency in their home language and a basic understanding of literacy. Many young children also have parents that want them to learn the new or majority language while developing their home language and literacy (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Mosty, 2013).

To start in a new kindergarten where the linguistic context and educational practices do not match the child's former experiences can have negative results for their language and literacy development if not addressed. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) argues that monolingual practices carried out in multilingual educational settings silence immigrant children's voices with unforeseen and often serious consequences. She notes that children quickly understand that their language has no meaning and that their way of speaking is less important and more primitive than that of the children speaking the majority language of the kindergarten. Findings from a study on educational practices with multilingual children indicate that inclusive linguistic practices are needed to enhance the learning of all children in linguistically and culturally diverse learning contexts. Such practices focus on a daily basis on multilingual, multi-literate and multicultural lives of children and provide language and literacy materials in the home languages while maintaining close cooperation with parents (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012).

Culturally responsive teaching entails building on and using the frames of reference, prior experiences, cultural knowledge and performance styles of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to, meaningful and effective for them (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This entails that teachers implementing culturally responsive teaching believe in their students and emphasise that they develop all their strengths on a daily basis. These teachers have a holistic approach towards the child rather than focusing on a limited ability of the child or his or her deficit. In other words, they do not blame the children for the shortages of the educational system. These teachers aim to develop a community of culturally diverse learners who mutually celebrate and affirm each other and work collaboratively for their mutual success, where empowerment replaces powerlessness (Gay, 2010).

Care is also important in inclusive educational contexts. Noddings (2005b) claims that in a caring relationship, both the cared-for and the carer contribute. In the case of the youngest students, a caring relationship can be seen to extend to the parents, emphasizing the importance of good communication and cooperation between home and kindergarten. Noddings (2005a, p. xxii) maintains that it also has wider societal implications because: “To care means to respond to needs, and needs do not stop (or start) at the schoolroom door”.

To summarise, many scholars consider it essential to apply a holistic and caring-centred approach to learning in diverse school contexts. In order to create learning spaces that empower linguistically and culturally diverse groups of children, social justice and inclusion need to be implemented.

## The kindergartens

All three kindergartens in the study have diverse groups of children in terms of heritage languages, background as well as disability and extensive experiences of working with diverse groups. However, these kindergartens differ in many ways which will be explained below, based on information gathered in the study.

Kindergarten 1 (P1) is located in the northern part of Iceland. The municipality includes around 4% immigrant population. The school was established in the 1950s and accommodates 90 children, thereof 18 with immigrant background at the time of the study. The staff included 24 women and 2 men when the data was collected, most of whom had a university degree in pedagogy and kindergarten education. Two of the staff had an immigrant background. Staff retention rate is high in the school and the high rate of educated kindergarten staff is common in the municipality. The core principle of the kindergarten is *learning through play*. The kindergarten has four divisions where children are grouped by age. The divisions share an open space, where the children have their meals and communicate in different activities, including art and free play. Other than this, each division works independently and shares information about daily activities to the parents and on the school homepage.

Kindergarten 2 (P2) is located in the capital area. This part of the capital had around 18% immigrant population at the time of the study. The kindergarten was founded in 1975. It has specialized in work with children with special needs. Approximately 30% out of a total of 86 children were of non-Icelandic or mixed background at the time of the study. The kindergarten has an exceptionally diverse staff composition. At the time of the study, the staff of 29 included eight men and 21 women, thereof seven who had immigrant backgrounds, including European and Asian. The age range of the staff was broad in comparison to

other kindergartens. The school has specialized in inclusive education for many years and emphasizes *democracy, equality and social justice*. It has also increasingly responded to the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of the children by emphasizing culturally responsive practices. Daily activities include free and organized play both outdoors and indoors as well as organized assignments.

Kindergarten 3 (P<sub>3</sub>) is situated in the capital area. This part of the capital included around 25% immigrant population at the time of the study. The kindergarten was established in 1980 and is organized into three age-based divisions. One third of the kindergarten staff had immigrant backgrounds when the study was conducted. 46 out of a total of 57 children (approximately 80%) had immigrant backgrounds. The kindergarten's motto is "*Don't fear diversity – embrace it*" and its core values are equality, well-being, language, democracy, play and creativity. The kindergarten's ambitions are to make parents and children feel welcome and send out the message that they are valuable members of the kindergarten community. At the time of the study, the kindergarten provided heritage language support for the children and Icelandic language classes for parents. The kindergarten has been awarded a number of grants for development projects which support the linguistic development of bi- and multilingual children, for promoting democratic participation within the kindergarten, educational partnerships with parents, strong ties with other school levels and cooperation with a local sports team.

## Method

The paper builds on data from the Nordic research project *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic countries* (2013–2015), the aim of which was to draw lessons from success stories of individual immigrant students and whole school communities at different levels that have succeeded in developing learning contexts that are equitable and socially just (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). The concept *learning spaces* refers to whole school communities, parts of these communities as well as other learning environments and practices than schools, which may be important or instrumental for the young immigrants' participation and success. In the project, students' *success* was defined as both social and academic. By identifying success stories and good practices our aim was to provide guidelines for teaching and school reform based on these strategies (Ragnarsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Blöndal, 2016). In general, success is often described as achieving set personal, political or social goals and can as such be either subjective or objective. Subjective success is the student's own perspectives and perceptions; in other words, it is the self-

fulfilling feeling of achievement based on personal goals, such as those relating to wellbeing, family or agency. Objective success relates to the political or societal success that has to do with education and employment, material goods and status and is based on a standardised or measurable view of what it takes to be successful as an individual, a school or a community (Layne, Dervin, & Longfor, 2018). Concerning *inclusion*, *social justice* and success, in the case of the kindergartens, the focus in the research was on to what extent multicultural and multilingual learning communities were created with active and equitable participation of children and their families.

Sampling in the project was purposive in that all the participating kindergartens were judged by experts and educational authorities to be successful in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all children. Furthermore, all the kindergartens have diverse groups of children in terms of heritage languages, background as well as disability, extensive experiences of working with diverse groups and they have been successful in creating inclusive learning spaces for children. Internal evaluations and external evaluations of school authorities were used when selecting the kindergartens. Case studies in these kindergartens included semi-structured interviews with kindergarten teachers, principals, other staff and parents as well as observation (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). The principals were chosen due to their formal position, and they chose experienced teachers and other staff in matters of immigrant children and asked parents to participate in the interviews. Data was collected in interviews in 2013–2015. The participants chose the settings for the interviews. The languages of the interviews, either Icelandic as the majority language or English, were chosen by the participants and some of the interviews were in both languages. The duration of each interview was on average one hour. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a method to elicit the views of the participants as thoroughly and accurately as possible (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). This gave the researchers the opportunity to broadly organize the contents of the interviews, while also giving the participants possibilities for open discussions. Based on an interview framework, the principals and kindergarten teachers were asked to explain and discuss their practices, thus providing a narrative account of their educational practices and professional experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the interviews with the parents, they were invited to share their experiences of and views about the kindergarten. The descriptions generated by this approach provided the researchers with an overview as well as an understanding of the representations of the educational settings. Additionally, observations where field notes, photographs and videos were produced took place in all the kindergartens. The researchers visited each kindergarten several times for interviewing and observations (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015). All interviews with kindergarten teachers, principals

and parents were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data derived from the interviews was analysed through qualitative procedures of content analysis, coding and constant comparison of data. The transcripts of the interviews were read and re-read by the researchers and the analysis was collaborative through discussions and thematic. The data from the field notes, photographs and videos was analysed similarly for triangulation. Excerpts from the interviews below which were in Icelandic were translated into English by the author. The study was reported to the national data protection authority in Iceland and written informed consent was obtained from all participants in the interviews. Additionally, national curriculum guides, laws and regulations on education were analysed as well as kindergarten policies and curricula.

## Findings

Findings indicate that the kindergartens have succeeded in developing a collaborative, empowering and inclusive culture with parents and children, actively building on their heritage languages. In the analysis of data, three themes emerged as central: *Leadership, empowering learning spaces and educational practices; multilingual practices and heritage languages* and *educational partnerships with parents*. Findings related to each theme are summarised and discussed below.

### Leadership, empowering learning spaces and educational practices

Leadership in the kindergartens is generally supportive and participative. This entails that staff, children and parents are encouraged to be active participants and to influence daily practices and policy. In the interviews, parents and kindergarten teachers express how they feel their voices are heard and how they are encouraged to share their ideas with others in their kindergarten community. The principals and kindergarten teachers make an effort to create inclusive learning spaces for the children and their families. This entails encouraging their participation in free play as well as organised activities. One of the kindergarten teachers in P3 noted:

I would say that there is a lot of respect for the children here and they have a lot of freedom, up to a certain point. There is also discipline, but regarding play for example, we respect the play. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

This quote indicates that an effort is made to encourage children to participate in free play in inclusive learning spaces, while there is also discipline. All three principals have clear visions of how to create inclusive communities in their schools,



and although their visions differ, they all emphasise equity and democracy. The kindergarten principal in P3 emphasises reaching out to the community through an open-door policy for parents and personal communication on a daily basis. To achieve this, she notes that formalities in relationships between the kindergarten and parents have deliberately been reduced. This has helped in facilitating stronger educational partnerships with parents and building trust. One of the parents in this kindergarten said about the principal:

If I have a problem I can just go and talk to (the principal) and she just helps me, and not just me, just everyone. She is very open and I see that just all the kindergarten is just open, the people there just do everything, everyone just smiling, and just, yes, come on let's play with us ... this is how it is ... you can always go, be with the children, just look at Facebook and the pictures and everything for the parents and children, to create a relationship with everyone.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This parent describes an open and flexible partnership with the principal, which facilitates communication and builds trust.

The kindergartens have developed various educational practices to create learning spaces for the diverse groups of children. These include organised activities where the children are encouraged to participate as well as free play where they are supported by the other children and the staff. The interviews with the kindergarten teachers reveal positive attitudes towards diversity and an atmosphere of care as the following quotes reflect. A kindergarten teacher in P1 noted:

Life is cooperation and to be able to hug the parents which feel bad is just part of this and ... more positivity and more respect ... and personally, when the children come and hug you, they are still in your division or they have moved and are still hugging you just to get a hug back, this just makes me happy in my job, then I have managed to develop a relationship with the children and this is one of the things we build on here.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This quote reflects respect towards all children as well as a positive attitude towards cooperation with the parents.

A notion of strong professionalism also appears in the interviews with the kindergarten teachers and an understanding of and respect for diversity. A kindergarten teacher in P2 said:

Then I would say that ... of course you know that there are children here, children are of course first and foremost children, no matter what, then there are children who need something extra and then it is our role to find out what this is. Children are always experiencing that they are just playing. It is our role, the adults' role to know that we are teaching something special.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

The quote from this kindergarten teacher reveals an in-depth understanding of the different needs of children and how to respond to these while emphasizing inclusive learning spaces.

The kindergarten teachers in the research study were very well aware of the importance of continuously developing their professionalism. While a large proportion of staff in Icelandic kindergartens do not have kindergarten teacher education, a kindergarten teacher in P3 emphasised the importance of the kindergarten teacher education for developing professionalism:

I felt proud of having finished the studies of course, ... and you know also to get this responsibility, I felt this, it is different to work when you have not studied. You feel this professionalism and professional responsibility.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This kindergarten teacher, after having worked for many years in a kindergarten and having through her work developed extensive experience, realised after completing kindergarten teacher education how important this was for her professional development.

The interviews with the teachers reflect respect for the children, belief in them and an emphasis on empowerment. Although the kindergartens emphasize teaching Icelandic to the immigrant children as well as building on their heritage languages, they are also aware of the importance of the children's social skills for participation. A kindergarten teacher in P3 noted:

People often ask, they (the children) don't know the letters and it is bad for the school and I always say, this does not matter. What matters is that an upright individual leaves the school, one who has friends and who can communicate with children, who dares to ask, dares to join the play – this is what matters, it is not that you know all the letters in the alphabet or know how to read a little, this will come. It is the social competence which I think matters the most, because it is so difficult to join new circumstances and you do not dare, you are so broken that you do not dare to look into people's eyes, do not dare to ask if there is something that you do not understand and so on. This is what you should worry about, rather than not knowing all the letters of the alphabet and not knowing what two plus two equals, this will come.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This kindergarten teacher, although aware of the importance of knowing how to read a little when they finish kindergarten, emphasizes empowering the children and developing their social competence so that they will have the strength and courage to participate in their new school environment in the compulsory school.

The interviews with kindergarten teachers also reflect a happy and joyful atmosphere, and staff that enjoy their work. A kindergarten teacher in P1 comparing her former job to her present one said:

It is of course a thousand times more enjoyable to work in a kindergarten than ever to sit in front of a computer ... I cannot compare this. Here you come to the kindergarten and it is just: (the name of the teacher) is here! You know, you are a superhero every day and you get to participate and see incredibly big victories and how they deal with adversities and how they, you know, there is simply nothing that gives you more, so it is of course, I just would not want to swap this life experience.  
(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This kindergarten teacher reflects on how much she enjoys her work and how rewarding it is on an everyday basis to watch the children learn and develop. This is echoed in an interview with a parent in P2 who talked about the importance of communication and how happy her child was in the kindergarten:

I see the schedule ... I like how they are learning, because I've seen the groups, how they are doing ... the dances and the free time and like the sporty time, and yeah it's, and they are going to the "göngutúr" (walk), nice, it's nice, because I would, I have problem in the other "leikskóli" (kindergarten) with him, because, or maybe it was just the timing between you know in our family, he wasn't really happy, he didn't want to go to leikskóli sometimes you know he just, or maybe there was something he didn't like, and I was, this was my biggest worry when we moved to this one, so I was really worried, how he was going to get you know get into with the new people, and he just, it was just perfect, there was no one day he told me he didn't want to go to the leikskóli.

This parent has witnessed the daily educational practices in the kindergarten and compares these with another kindergarten which her child previously attended.

A kindergarten teacher in P1 emphasized that it is important when working with diverse groups of children and children generally to try to empower them and look at the positive sides:

... do what you can to support the positive sides and give them positive attention when they do something right and so on ... they want attention and why not give them attention on what they do well and praise them exactly for something they do, not just, you were so diligent yesterday, I mean praise should be fresh.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This kindergarten teacher emphasizes positive attention towards all children to empower them.

Another kindergarten teacher in P2 emphasizes the importance of inclusion similarly noted that the kindergarten has the responsibility to respond to the children, not vice versa:

... I think both these children with special needs and the other children benefit a lot from working together and be ... part of the same community, it just creates a certain basis and certain criteria which I think they will benefit from all their lives. ... We should not start by making the boxes, and either you fit into this box ... we should be breaking down the walls ... you know, you can find your own place.  
(Translated from Icelandic by author)

The quote from this kindergarten teacher indicates an interesting view on diversity and inclusion and how children in diverse groups can learn from each other.

The quotes above reflect the views of staff and parents about the three kindergartens and reveal atmospheres of respect, care and empowerment. Communication and participation of children and their families is emphasized. These kindergartens also make special efforts to include and build on the children's heritage languages and encourage their use as will be discussed in the following section.

### Multilingual practices and heritage languages

The children are encouraged to use their heritage languages in the kindergarten with other children, parents and teachers. The kindergarten emphasizes that all languages should be met without prejudice or fear of being excluded from the conversation. The children are free to speak and communicate in their heritage languages, but encouraged to also explain in Icelandic to the children and staff what they are saying. The principal describes this in the following way: "We ask, what are you talking about? And then we communicate back in correct Icelandic (the triangle is created)". She describes how they have noticed that the children then reflect this reaction when a child speaking another language approaches them or when a child is more fluent in Icelandic will communicate and support its friends who are not as fluent in Icelandic. The children are thus supported in communicating across languages while supporting both heritage languages and Icelandic. A kindergarten teacher in P1 noted:

We are using every opportunity to encourage them to ... communicate and participate and it is very, I don't know if the people here are so incredibly clever that they do this unconsciously, it just happens. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

The way that this kindergarten teacher describes communication across languages indicates that such educational practices in the kindergarten have become a part of everyday work in the kindergarten.

One of the principals has a clear vision of creating a multilingual community in her school guided by values of equity and social justice and developing educational partnerships with the parents. She emphasizes reaching out to the community through an open-door policy for parents and kindergarten facilities available for meetings and heritage language learning after kindergarten hours. Personal communication is emphasized on a daily basis, and formalities in relationships between the kindergarten and parents have deliberately been reduced in order to facilitate stronger educational partnerships with parents. The principal is bilingual and has an understanding of what it means to be a recent immigrant in Iceland. In the interview, she explained her view on communicating with immigrant parents:

I am bilingual myself but it is increasingly Icelandic we use, I feel they do not have to speak Icelandic perfectly, and the staff is really emphasizing this, we have had a number of courses about prejudice and you know, how we meet people in the middle or half-way and show patience. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

The principal's insight into being an immigrant appears to have helped develop an understanding in the kindergarten of how to communicate with bilingual parents showing patience and counteracting prejudice towards them.

Kindergarten teachers in all three kindergartens are aware of the challenges of working with diverse groups of children and the importance of paying attention to their needs and encouraging their participation. A kindergarten teacher in P2 noted:

It can be tricky, for example when I was starting I put the children in groups and it somehow happened that in one group there were children who either did not speak at all or did not speak Icelandic, so of course there were no conversations in this group, so that one needs to think how to group the children, that is, children who speak well and children who have some disabilities, bilingual children, children who are not speaking as well, then I also try to have a gender balance and so on, so that all the groups I am working with are very diverse and broad and then you also get more diverse opinions and more discussion and it can be a lot of fun and the children who are behind in learning in one way or another, they learn so much from just being in this discussion and everyone is given a chance and no one is allowed to be left out. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

This quote from this kindergarten teacher indicates an understanding of inclusion and encouraging participation of diverse groups of children, and additionally an

awareness of the importance of organising groups so that the children will learn from and support each other.

The kindergarten teachers and principals are aware of the need to support heritage languages and the parents are supported in teaching these. Various practices with languages and communication were observed in the kindergartens. A kindergarten teacher in P3 explained how they sought to discuss with parents the importance of building on the home language while learning a second language and how parents could support the linguistic development of their children:

We try to encourage parents, you know, speak your heritage language, read in your heritage language, you know if they succeed in their heritage language they will learn Icelandic. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

Such encouragement was also described by some of the parents who confirmed how much they appreciated this care. One mother in P3 explained how the kindergarten valued and built on the children's cultural background and how important she considered these activities to be for herself and the children. First she described a project carried out with the big group of Polish speaking children in the kindergarten where parents were included:

Everyone brought something from his or her city and some story and read a book, there was always something and she did the programme for the Polish people, most of us are from Poland here in this kindergarten and it was wonderful just wow, ... I was not thinking about this and the kids were very much into this, just mummy tell me about Warsaw, where you are from and we will do something and we will sing the Polish song and the story and everything and the show and it was wonderful yes!

Such efforts of actively building on children's cultures and heritage languages were well received by the parents in the research study.

In most of the interviews with parents, teachers and principals, issues of communication and language were addressed several times. One recurring theme in all the interviews with parents was the language and literacy learning of their children, both in regard to learning Icelandic and the home language. Parents described how important it was for them and their children that the kindergartens valued and built on their children's knowledge and background in the home language and how helpful bilingual teachers were in that respect. A mother in P3 describing her son's kindergarten and the bilingual teacher said:

One of the reasons why it's going so well in school, because when we came here and she (the teacher) started to speak our language, he felt like, okay that's the same song, and it's so great ... if she wants to cool him down she just can tell him in our language so nobody else will understand and he knows that nobody else will understand, it's just for him.

This mother emphasized the importance of bilingual teachers which could speak the children's heritage language.

Some of the kindergartens provided heritage language support for children and second language courses for the parents. Language and literacy policies focusing on active bilingualism were developed in some of the schools and bilingual teachers assist in building bridges and providing support from the majority language to children's heritage languages and vice versa.

The kindergartens also use IT-technology to facilitate learning and use Ipads for example to show pictures and an Icelandic word for each of the pictures. A child can push a button to hear the word spoken in Icelandic and can speak the word in her or his own heritage language. Ipads are also used for creative work, such as developing picture books, songs and stories. They are used for recording children's voices and different languages of the children in storytelling and singing. Other practices include the so-called *Language in a bag* where the kindergarten teachers prepare bags that children bring to their homes. These bags include practical guidelines (translated into various languages) for parents about language development and language support, card games, books and pictures and books as well as a diary where parents can write messages to the kindergarten.

### Educational partnerships with parents

The kindergartens have developed various ways of reaching out to parents and creating trust, in order to develop educational partnerships with parents. A kindergarten principal in P3 noted:

I am overwhelmed by the role that the school can take in empowering and supporting parents ... so I thought, there is an opportunity to do something and reach out to parents ... I want the parents to have agency and to know that ... we are real partners and ready to reach out. (Translated from Icelandic by author)

This principal emphasized developing partnerships with parents from the beginning, by encouraging the parents to cooperate in decorating the child's locker. While the principal and parents were doing this, they could have informal conversations which the principal said created a much better atmosphere than in a formal meeting in her office.

Many of the kindergarten teachers talked about the importance of creating trust, especially with newly arrived immigrant parents. A kindergarten teacher in P3 noted:

They also need to learn how to trust us, although they have been here for three days, you know, I mean it is difficult for all parents to leave their children crying

in the kindergarten, not to mention those that do not understand the language and I think this is extremely difficult for them.

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

The quote from this kindergarten teacher shows an understanding of the difficulties which all parents, but particularly immigrant parents experience when bringing their children to a kindergarten in a new country and how important it is to develop trust between teachers and parents.

A kindergarten teacher in P<sub>1</sub> noted how important it is to know how the immigrant parents feel about the kindergarten and thought about developing better ways of communicating with them:

It is of course also interesting, if you think about these immigrant parents and I would personally want to know, how they are experiencing (the school), do they feel they are getting enough information, is there anything that they miss, because I mean the other parents they come to me and say, you know, why was this not written on the message board, or could you send us an email to remind us or something like this. I would personally want to get more feedback, and you know, can we not develop a way to have something like this?

(Translated from Icelandic by author)

This kindergarten teacher talks about the importance of finding new and different ways of communicating with immigrant parents who do not speak the majority language and will not be able to understand written messages in Icelandic.

The parents were generally happy with the kindergartens and the cooperation with the teachers and principals. One parents in P<sub>3</sub> said:

I don't know I just like all the teachers they are really so I feel like I'm safe with, I know that they would be careful with my kid you know 100%.

The quote from this parent reveals trust towards the kindergarten teachers and feeling safe leaving his child with them. This parent also mentioned an example of a kindergarten teacher communicating with his son:

Even he was in a bad mood, she comes to me you know before we leave, (name of child), is there no hug? And then he runs to her ... and then he just likes, she knows how to come you know close to him, even he is in bad mood.

Many of the interviews with parents, principals and kindergarten teachers reflect care and respect. A kindergarten teacher in P<sub>3</sub> noted about parents generally:

I think that with the parents, you know, it is a different partnership with parents when you have so many children with foreign backgrounds, it becomes closer, you need to speak more face to face with people, it is not enough to throw an



ad. on the board about a day off and yes, this is already on the board and now it is your responsibility as all the Icelandic (parents). First of all, many parents are illiterate, and you know, there is so much, you need to talk to people and you need to, you know, also just show this warmth although we perhaps do not understand each other and then just smile and nod in the morning, feel that they are welcome.  
(Translated from Icelandic by author)

The quote from this kindergarten teacher indicates an understanding of the importance of respecting diversity, and the need to develop close and caring educational partnerships with immigrant parents. A parent in P1 described how she experienced such care from a kindergarten teacher, as an example of the atmosphere in the kindergarten:

I would be ready to pay everything that I have to be a person like her ... when I came here for the adjustment, when I saw what the children were doing, and she was sitting there between them and was just calm ...  
(Translated from Icelandic by author)

To summarise, according to parents, kindergarten teachers and principals, the three kindergartens have developed collaborative, empowering and inclusive cultures with parents and children, actively building on their diverse languages and characterised by an atmosphere of trust and care. However, there are some challenges which these kindergartens need to address, including low staff retention in some of the schools and lack of educated kindergarten teachers, resulting in lack of sustainability in their practices. This will be discussed further in the final section.

## Discussion and conclusion

According to the findings, the kindergartens in the research study have developed a collaborative, empowering and inclusive culture with parents and children, actively building on their heritage languages.

The findings indicate that the teachers and the leaders in the study emphasize inclusive and empowering learning spaces for all children. They also consider care to be an important factor in creating inclusive and just learning spaces for children. The findings are in line with Noddings' work (2005a, 2005b) who argues that an ethic of caring relationships may create more effective learning environments. Furthermore, the teachers in the study ensure that all children who want to participate are included in play and peer groups and provided support and resources as needed. The findings revealed an emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy in the kindergartens where the kindergarten teachers built on and used

prior experiences and cultural knowledge of the children in order to make learning encounters more relevant to, meaningful and effective for them (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; May & Sleeter, 2010). Such emphasis was also seen in the educational partnerships with the immigrant parents.

The children have the opportunities of developing linguistically through inclusion in play and to participate in the educational and social activities of the kindergartens. The findings indicate that the kindergarten teachers are present in the play and make an effort to create opportunities for appropriate linguistic scaffolding, which can benefit immigrant children and other children who are at risk of being excluded in peer relations, such as the second language learners in the group. This is in line with Banks' (2013) and Nieto's (2010) argument that educational systems generally and schools particularly need to critically address inequalities and ensure voice, dialogue, equality, empowerment and social justice for their individual students and teachers.

The kindergartens in the study have succeeded in creating multilingual learning communities where students and children are flourishing and where families feel welcome and included (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012). All kindergartens have developed empowering and inclusive linguistic practices where heritage languages are visible and actively supported to enhance the learning of all children (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Cummins & Early, 2011). Furthermore, creative and critical methods are used to enhance learning (García & Wei, 2014). The leaders and teachers in the kindergartens in the study who were interviewed generally have positive views towards linguistic diversity. They also find ways to support the children's mother tongues with different educational activities and by hiring bilingual staff.

Educational partnerships with parents are emphasized in the kindergartens in order to build mutual trust and support the linguistic development of their children (Banks, 2013; Brooker, 2002; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Cummins, 2001, 2004). The principals, teachers and other staff in the schools emphasize democracy, equity and diversity in their daily practices and communication with parents. The kindergarten principals and teachers support the immigrant parents in different ways in integrating into the society as well as showing care and respect for their cultures, languages and backgrounds. The findings from the interviews with the immigrant parents in the kindergartens indicate that they are generally active participants in the school communities (Nieto, 2010). One can say that the kindergartens thus become bridges between the families and society and succeeded in creating safe and caring environments of trust where they communicated with the parents. These findings are in line with Noddings's (2005a, 2005b) writings on caring relationships.

Although all three kindergartens in the study have developed a collaborative, empowering and inclusive culture with parents and children, several challenges appear in the findings. Although the kindergarten teachers in the study strived to create inclusive learning spaces for all children, there were examples where second language learners were not as active as the other children and missed learning opportunities of some of the immigrant children were thus observed. These children are at risk of being marginalised while they have not yet learnt the language of the kindergarten. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) notes that most multilingual children are emergent bilinguals, entering early childhood education with some proficiency in their mother tongues and a basic understanding of literacy. Therefore it is of high importance to develop educational practices in kindergartens where the child's former experiences and knowledge are acknowledged and built upon and where they can develop a sense of belonging from the first day. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) argues that monolingual practices carried out in multilingual settings silence immigrant children – with unforeseen consequences. To respond to these challenges, the kindergartens in the study need to strengthen their teachers' formal training in bilingualism, multilingualism and communication across linguistic and cultural differences and develop empowering multilingual practices in line with the writings of Cummins (2004), Cummins and Early (2011) and Chumak-Horbatsch (2012).

Another challenge appearing in the findings is that some of the kindergartens in the study have demanding conditions related to a low retention of kindergarten teachers. In such conditions, where there is a lack of professionals, both principals and kindergarten teachers find that diverse groups of children can be a challenge.

Although the educational partnerships with parents generally appeared to be successful in the findings, there were examples of some lack of communication with immigrant parents, related to the use of the majority language in messages to parents. However, interpreters were used where needed in formal meetings with immigrant parents. Furthermore, although the kindergartens in the study had policies that emphasized democracy, some cases appeared in the findings where there was a lack of initiative in reaching out to the immigrant parents. These could be related to lack of confidence or knowledge among the kindergarten teachers on how to communicate with immigrant parents and indicate that further education and training of the kindergarten teachers is needed.

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## Address for correspondence

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir  
School of Education  
University of Iceland  
Stakkahlid, 105 Reykjavik  
Iceland  
[hannar@hi.is](mailto:hannar@hi.is)