Building Empowering Multilingual Learning Communities in Icelandic Schools

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Abstract

Linguistic and cultural diversity of preschools and compulsory school children and their families in Iceland has been steadily growing over the past few years, and currently around 11% of all preschool children and 7.6% of all compulsory school students have heritage languages other than Icelandic (Statistics Iceland. (2015a). Children in pre-primary institutions having another mother tongue than Icelandic 1998–2014 (Internet). Available from http://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/Samfelag/Samfelag__skolamal__1_leikskolastig__0_lsNemendur/SKO01103.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=ff370e55-3955-4013-b760-49b3ec5d0fb8; Statistics Iceland. (2015b). Pupils in compulsory schools having another mother tongue than Icelandic 1998–2014 (Internet). Available from http://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/Samfelag/Samfelag__skolamal__2_grunnskolastig__0_gsNemendur/SKO02103.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=ff370e55-3955-4013-b760-49b3ec5d0fb8). Although educational policies and curriculum guides in Iceland emphasize equity and inclusion, multilingual and heritage language issues have generally not been addressed thoroughly in these policies (see, e.g., Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. (2011). *The Icelandic national curriculum guides (Internet)*. Reykjavík: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Available from http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/publications/curriculum/; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. (2014). *White paper on education reform (Internet)*. Reykjavík: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Available from http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/menntamal/hvitbok/). The aim of the study was to explore innovative and empowering educational practices and processes of building multilingual learning communities with parents and children in Icelandic preschools and compulsory schools.

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P.P. Trifonas, T. Aravossitas (eds.), *Handbook of Research and Practice in Heritage Language Education*, Springer International Handbooks of Education,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-44694-3_44

The theoretical framework of the study includes critical approaches to education (May, S., and Sleeter, C. E. (2010). Introduction. Critical multiculturalism. Theory and praxis. In S. May and C. E. Sleeter (Eds.), *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis*. New York: Routledge; Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes. Creating multicultural learning communities* (10th anniversary ed.). New York: Teachers College Press; Trifonas, P. P. (2003). Introduction. Pedagogies of difference. Locating otherness. In P. P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change*. New York: Routledge) and multilingual education for social justice (Chumak-Horbatsch, R. (2012). *Linguistically appropriate practice: A guide for working with young immigrant children*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Cummins, J., and Early, M. (2011). Introduction. In J. Cummins & M. Early (Eds.), *Identity texts. The collaborative creation of power in multilingual schools*. London: Trentham books/IOE Press; García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan; Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2009). Multilingual education for global justice. Issues, approaches, opportunities. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty, & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social justice through multilingual education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters; Trifonas, P. P., and Aravossitas, T. (2014). Introduction. In P. P. Trifonas and T. Aravossitas (Eds.), *Rethinking heritage language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Methods included narratives and interviews with principals, teachers, and parents who have taken part in developing educational partnerships in three preschools and three compulsory schools as well as interviews with students in the compulsory schools and observations.

Findings from the study indicate that the development of empowering multilingual learning communities in the schools in the study has generally been successful and highly evaluated by parents. However, there are a number of challenges, such as educating and including all staff, ensuring succession, reaching out to parents and communities, and funding.

Keywords

Multilingualism • Empowering educational practices • Preschools • Compulsory schools • Iceland

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Introduction

Icelandic society has seen growing immigration in the past 20 years. In preschools and compulsory schools, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of children, students, and their families has been inreasing over the past years, and currently 11% of all preschool children and 7.6% of all compulsory school students have heritage languages other than Icelandic (Statistics Iceland 2015a, b). The ratio of immigrant children differs from one school to another, reaching up to 80% in some preschools in the capital, Reykjavík (Reykjavíkurborg, Skóla- og frístundasvið 2015). However, school communities all over Iceland are generally becoming increasingly diverse, and classes or divisions where students and children speak many heritage languages are common. This relatively new reality brings new opportunities and challenges to the educational system in Iceland. Many schools have responded by developing interesting initiatives to create multilingual learning communities with diverse families and their children and to ensure their active participation in the everyday school activities.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues national curriculum guides for preschools, compulsory schools, and upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2011) which contain the frame and conditions for learning based on the principles of existing laws, regulations, and international conventions. Six fundamental pillars have been developed within this frame, and they form the essence of the educational policy. These are *literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity.* They include the working methods, the content, and the learning environment at every school level and form important continuity in the Icelandic educational system. Municipalities develop their own educational policies for preschools and compulsory schools based on existing laws, regulations, and the national curriculum guides for these school levels.

The aim of the study was to explore innovative and empowering educational practices and processes of building multilingual learning communities with parents and children in Icelandic preschools and compulsory schools. The article draws on data from three preschools and three compulsory schools in Iceland, some of which participated in the Nordic research project *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries.* The objective of the project 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). Learning spaces refer to school 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 is defined as social as well as academic. By identifying success stories and good practices, the aim of the project was to provide guidelines for teaching and school reform based on these strategies.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Approaches to Education in Multilingual Settings

The main theoretical focus of this study is critical multiculturalism, multicultural education, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Banks 2010; Gay 2010; Nieto 2010). A second perspective is literature and theories on inclusive and empowering educational strategies for meeting cultural and linguistic diversity of children and families (Banks 2010; Brooker 2002; Cummins 2004; Gay 2010; May and Sleeter 2010; Noddings 2005a, b).

Critical multiculturalism is an important basis for this study as it critically addresses power relations within particular settings, within or between societies, communities, or schools, and ways to ensure equality, empowerment, and participation (Banks 2010; Nieto 2010; Parekh 2006). Critical multicultural approaches analyze the factors in societal structures or educational systems which cause and maintain unequal status and suggest reforms to counteract inequities (see May and Sleeter 2010; Nieto 2010; Parekh 2006). Parekh (2006) has claimed that each society needs to find its balance and ensure equal opportunities and access of individuals through active communication and agreements of groups without losing their coherence. The same challenges and opportunities apply to schools in diverse societies. Banks (2010) and Nieto (2010) claim that educational systems must critically address inequalities and ensure voice, dialogue, equality, empowerment, and social justice for their individual students and teachers.

While demographic changes in many countries and the diversification of societies and schools have started debates on various issues related to education and school development, research in many countries has revealed the marginalization of ethnic minority students and teachers in school systems. Educational policies and practices frequently exclude, devalue, or marginalize students from immigrant, minority, or nondominant language backgrounds and position them within a deficit framework, rather than acknowledging and affirming their strengths and abilities. In many cases, the majority language becomes the criteria by which student ability is measured, meaning that lack of majority language abilities is regarded as deficiency and results in labelling and categorization (Nieto 2010; Ragnarsdóttir 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas 2009). However, the benefits of bilingualism for individuals and societies have been discussed by many scholars (Chumak-Horbatsch 2012; Cummins 2014; García 2009; Ragnarsdóttir 2008; Ragnarsdóttir and Schmidt 2014).

Cummins (2004) has addressed the need for investing in social justice in educational communities and gaining understanding on how policy making, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations exclude some children while welcoming others. According to Cummins (2001), in order to create learning spaces that respond to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse groups of children and families, schools need to consider how to implement socially just and inclusive practices that welcome diverse backgrounds and identities. Additionally, in order to develop inclusive practices, it is important to build on children's prior experiences and knowledge. Chumak-Horbatsch, who has focused on linguistically appropriate practices (2012), notes that, if not addressed, transition into a new school where the linguistic environment

and educational practices do not match the child's former experiences can have negative results for their language and literacy development. She argues that monolingual practices carried out in multilingual settings can silence immigrant children's voices with unforeseen and often serious consequences. In such conditions, children experience 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. According to Chumak-Horbatsch (2012), results from a study on educational practices with multilingual children suggest that inclusive linguistic practices are needed to enhance the learning of all children in linguistically and culturally diverse learning contexts. Inclusive 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).

Kenner and Ruby (2012) note that research with children growing up in bilingual or multilingual contexts shows they tend to experience their linguistic and cultural worlds as connected rather than separate and that "at home and at their weekend complementary schools, the children lived in 'simultaneous worlds', switching between languages both in speaking and writing, and producing texts that expressed their bilingual lives" (p. 2). They argue that mainstream schools rarely recognize the wealth of multilingual knowledge and experience which children and young people possess.

Cummins (2014, p. 1) argues that "mainstream educators must share in the responsibility to support students who speak a heritage language (HL) to maintain and further develop their linguistic abilities." He derives this argument from the premise that schools should teach the "whole child." Cummins (2014) further notes that "When educators choose to ignore the linguistic competencies that students bring to school, they are also choosing to be complicit with the societal power relations that devalue the linguistic and cultural capital of their students. In other words, they become part of a societal system that squanders the human capital represented by the plurilingual resources of students and communities." In a similar vein, Trifonas and Aravossitas (2014, p. xiii) note that "Education and heritage language (HL) is not just a new dimension in the areas of linguistic and/or pedagogic sciences; it is linked to the processes of identity negotiation and cultural inheritance, through language that passes from generation to generation as a tangible legacy of the past that looks forward to a future."

Inclusion, social justice, and equity are keywords in this study. According to Sapon-Shevin (2007), inclusion begins with the right of every child to be in the mainstream of education. Inclusion thus assumes that all children are full members, while perhaps with modifications, adaptations, and extensive support. Sapon-Shevin (2007) argues that an inclusive definition of inclusion goes far beyond students with disabilities and looks at the myriad ways that students differ from one to another: race, class, gender, ethnicity, family background, sexual orientation, language, abilities, size, religion, and so on. Equality is often mistakenly associated with social justice in the way difference is treated. According to the equality perspective, individuals and groups should be treated according to need; that is, they should be

treated equitably. Treating individuals equitably rather than equally provides the potential of counteracting existing unjust differences. Those advocating for critical social justice seek a world that is fair and equitable, for everyone, not a world where everyone gets the same to reach the same goals (Ryan and Rottmann 2007).

Culturally responsive teaching is an approach which adapts to individual students' needs. It entails using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to, meaningful, and effective for them (Gay 2010). Teachers implementing culturally responsive teaching believe in their students and emphasize the development of all their strengths. They have a whole child approach rather than focusing on a limited ability of the child or deficits. 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 celebrate and affirm each other and work collaboratively for their mutual success, where empowerment replaces powerlessness (Gay 2010). In such contexts, care is also important. Noddings (2005b) claims that a caring relationship is one where both the cared for and the carer contribute. In the case of the youngest students, this relationship could be seen to extend to the parents, emphasizing the importance of good communication and cooperation between home and preschool. 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" (Noddings 2005a, p. Xxii).

Many advocates of multilingual education offer further perspectives for equity-based critical approaches to schooling in increasingly diverse contexts (Skutnabb-Kangas 2009; Trifonas 2003). These approaches question how and why certain privileged groups dominate at the expense of peoples from immigrant, minority, and indigenous backgrounds. Models of multilingual education not only question the linguistic discrimination that prevails in many societies; they also suggest alternatives to the normalization of oppressive and exclusionary practices. Many scholars argue that a meaningful multilingual pedagogy needs to be both critical and creative. Gounari (2014, p. 254) notes that the "tendency is either to reduce language to a simple code of communication or, in the best case scenario, to connect it with culture and identity and tie it with struggles for social justice and equality." She continues with arguing that "both perspectives do not even begin to capture the complicated net of geographical, social, cultural and political economy layers that language constitutes and articulates upon." Gounari emphasizes the need for developing a "radical pedagogy that makes languages other than English not just relevant, but also necessary for all students."

García (2009) notes that "Meaningful bilingual pedagogy revolves around the issue of *equity* – equity for the students, their languages, and their cultures and communities. This means that the teacher ensures that all students, regardless of language backgrounds or proficiency, participate equally."

Translanguaging has been discussed widely in recent years and is, according to García and Wei (2014, p. 23) "the discursive norm in bilingual families and communities." The notion of translanguaging highlights two concepts that are fundamental to education, but that have hitherto been under-explored dimensions

of multilingualism, namely, creativity and criticality (García and Wei 2014). Creativity is the ability to choose between following and flouting the rules and norms of behavior, including the use of language. It is about pushing and breaking the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging. Criticality refers to the ability to use available evidence appropriately, systematically, and insightfully, to inform considered views of cultural, social, political, and linguistic phenomena, to question and problematize received wisdom, and to express views adequately through reasoned responses to situations (pp. 66–67). These two concepts are intrinsically linked.

In their edited volume *Identity texts: The collaborative creation of power in multilingual schools,* Cummins and Early (2011) elaborate on creative ways of working with students in multilingual settings. The volume reports on "products of students" creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher" where they invest their identities in the creation of so-called identity texts "which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light" (p. 3).

To summarize, many scholars consider it essential to apply a holistic and caring-centered approach to learning in multicultural societies and to create learning spaces which empower linguistically and culturally diverse groups of children and implement social justice and inclusion.

Method

The article draws on data from three preschools and three compulsory schools in different areas of Iceland, some of which participated in the Nordic research project *Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries.* The objective of the project 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). In the *Learning Spaces* project, case studies were conducted in schools at pre-, compulsory, and upper secondary levels in urban and rural contexts in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (a total of 27 schools). Sampling was purposive in that all schools have succeeded in implementing social justice and creating inclusive learning spaces for all students. All schools had relatively high numbers of immigrant children or students. Internal and external evaluations and assessment of school authorities were used when selecting the schools in the project, and additionally, indicators such as average grades, test scores, and drop-out rates were used for selecting schools at the compulsory and upper secondary levels. National curriculum guides, laws, and regulations on education in each of the four countries were analyzed, in addition to school policies and curricula developed in each school. Analysis took place concurrently through the research period using qualitative procedures of content analysis, coding, and constant comparison.

The article draws on data, interviews, narratives, and observations from one preschool and three compulsory schools which participated in the *Learning Spaces* project. Data is also derived from presentations, narratives, and in-depth information from two preschools which introduced their practices in a conference for practitioners in Icelandic schools which the Icelandic *Learning Spaces* research team organized. All participants have given written consent.

In the *Learning Spaces* project, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, students, and parents of immigrant backgrounds as well as observations. The languages of the interviews, either Icelandic 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 chosen to elicit the views of the participants as clearly and accurately as possible (Flick 2006; Kvale 2007). This allowed the researchers to organize the contents of the interviews while at the same time giving the participants opportunities for open discussions. Based on an interview framework, the principals and teachers were asked to describe their practices. Through a narrative account of their professional experiences, they were invited to tell their professional stories concerning their practices (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The parents were invited to share their experiences of the preschools. The narrative descriptions generated by this approach provided the researchers with an understanding of the representations of the educational settings. In addition, observations took place in the preschools and field notes, photographs, and videos were collected for analysis. The researchers visited the schools several times in order to observe various activities (Ragnarsdóttir 2015).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed through the qualitative procedures of content analysis, coding, and constant comparison of data. The transcripts were read and reread by the researchers and analysis was collaborative and thematic through discussions. Excerpts from the interviews below which were in Icelandic have been translated into English by the author.

Findings

This chapter introduces findings from research in the three preschools and three compulsory schools in the study and highlights innovative and creative practices where heritage language use and developments are encouraged and supported.

Preschool Practices

The three preschools (P1, P2, P3) in the study all emphasize inclusive and empowering practices for all children and their families. The languages and cultures of the children are in focus and considered as important resources. Multiple creative measures and practices are employed to create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere in the preschools. The preschools are located in different areas of Iceland. Around 25–80% of children in the preschools have other heritage languages than the

majority language, Icelandic. The preschools have emphasized heritage language support as well as Icelandic as a second languge. A variety of innovative practices and projects have been developed in the schools to support heritage language teaching, to promote democratic participation within the preschools and to foster preschool–parent collaboration. Some examples of these are presented below.

P1 is located in the capital area. Around 80% of the children have other heritage languages than Icelandic. One practice in the preschool is called *language in a bag* which includes practical guidance for parents about language development and support at home. The preschool puts card games, pictures, and books as well as guidelines for parents (translated into nine languages) in a bag, and this is sent home to the parents. The parents also get a diary to write messages to the preschool.

Another practice is the *living word walls*. iPads are used to show pictures and an Icelandic word for each of these pictures. The child can push a button to hear the word spoken and can contribute with the word in their own heritage language. iPads are also used for other purposes such as creating picture books, stories, and songs. The children can record their own languages, create stories, and sing songs.

Bilingual teachers assist in building bridges from Icelandic to the children's heritage languages and vice versa. They provide support for the children in their heritage languages and Icelandic around the work and vocabulary in Icelandic being used each time so that the children have a deeper understanding.

The children are encouraged to use their heritage languages in the preschool with other children, parents, and teachers. The preschool 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.

Interpreters are also used to support children who feel insecure. The interpreter steps in and bridges the gap between the context, children, and parents. They represent the children's voices and this has been a successful method, not least with the older children who are starting preschool and do not speak a word in Icelandic.

P2 is located in the capital area. Around 50% of the children have other heritage languages than Icelandic and altogether 20 languages are spoken in the school. A multicultural policy is being developed where home and school cultures are interwoven and where emphasis is on the children's heritage languages as a bridge to Icelandic. The main emphases are on Icelandic as a second language, emergent literacy, and heritage language support for all children. Cooperation with parents, particularly concerning language development in heritage languages and Icelandic as a second language, is considered very important and is emphasized. Communication books are used for bilingual and multilingual children to explain to the

parents their children's activities in the preschool. The children are photographed during various activities and the pictures put in the book. The children bring the books home and the parents are encouraged to discuss the pictures with their children in their heritage languages. The parents are also encouraged to put pictures from home in the book. The use of the books has been very successful. In addition to presenting the children's activities in the preschools, the books include information about ongoing activities and themes and songs. The children are provided with tools to explain to the teachers some activities at home, which also provide the teachers with information about the children's home cultures and interests. In the oldest age group division, the books are created with the children and have drawn their attention to letters and writing, in addition to strengthening their self-awareness.

Language development is part of all preschool activities. Pictorial methods are used to support language development, for example, by drawing lyrics or stories and using artifacts or puppets and drama. Documentation is employed in order to discover what kind of language supports each child needs, making individual language support more strategic and purposeful. Based on this documentation, children can partly be divided into small groups with language support adapted to their needs.

The children in P2 have taken part in a festival of children's cultures in their community. After watching a recent film about prejudice, especially made for children, they were encouraged to discuss ways of welcoming children who were starting preschool and could not speak Icelandic. Persona doll methods (Brown 2001, 2008) were used to create a persona doll who had recently moved to Iceland from another country and was learning Icelandic. The children discussed how the doll called Paul was feeling and how they could welcome him. The children expressed many ideas and finally created art objects to welcome new children to their preschool. These included jigsaw puzzles, a language tree, and lyrics expressed in drawings.

P2 and P3 have shown interest in implementing the so-called LAP (linguistically appropriate practice), a method developed by Chumak-Horbatsch (2012). The focus is on making all languages in the preschool visible and creating opportunities to build on all children's heritage languages.

In P3, which is located outside the capital area, around 25% of the children have other heritage languages than Icelandic and ten heritage languages are spoken. The preschool has actively developed multicultural educational practices in recent years in cooperation with parents. It is now implementing the LAP method, the aims of which are to support the children's heritage languages and to make all languages visible and respected, in cooperation with the parents; to support the bridging between the children's heritage languages and Icelandic, thus increasing their fluency in both or all languages; to support active bilingualism in cooperation with parents in order to strengthen the families; and to prepare them to become active members of society. Parents contribute to the project by translating various words related to preschool practices and spaces into their heritage languages in order to make these visible in the preschool. The parents also bring pictures and music, translate, and read for the children. They bring the alphabets of their heritage

languages and numerals from one to ten to make these visible in all divisions of the preschool. The project has been successful and the parents have been very active. The plan is to develop a handbook for the teachers describing the project, aims, and methods. The LAP project has opened discussion about active bilingualism and increased teachers' and parents' knowledge about diversity in the community and the importance of bilingualism.

P3 has also developed a method with so-called *story bags*. The project began in 2013 and the aim of the project was to welcome the parents and strenghten the cooperation with parents. A special theme was diversity. The project is organized in groups where parents get together and choose a children's book. The books have been diverse, but books chosen generally have a positive focus, for example, dealing with friendship, being diverse, fairy tales, and such. The parents are responsible for decorating the bag and creating its content, at least four card games, dolls, toys, costumes, and other related artifacts. The story is recited and recorded and a CD is included in the bag. Each parent chooses an activity based on his or her talents. The aim is that the parents cooperate and create together. The activities take place after school hours and childminders are provided. Teachers support the parents during the activities and the project is organized by the community. The children have the story bags for a week at a time. The activities included in the bag support learning through play, language development in heritage languages and Icelandic through books and recitals, as well as supporting quality education for parents and their children. The teachers also use the story bags in their practices with the children.

Voices of Principals, Teachers, and Parents in Preschools

This chapter provides insights into views and experiences of principals, teachers, and parents in the three preschools and sheds light on the effects of the inclusive and empowering practices.

One mother explained how the preschool 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 preschool 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 program for the Polish people, most of us are from Poland here in this preschool and it was wonderful just wow, . . . I was not thinking about this and the kids were very much into this, just mommy 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!

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 preschools 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 describing her son's preschool 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, ok 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.

The importance for the child of having a bilingual teacher is clear in this quote. But parents also mentioned the importance of their children learning good Icelandic and drew attention to the importance of active bilingualism. Parents described how the teachers and principals had informed them of the importance of the home language, for example, this mother who said:

> I think it is very important . . . most important it is the mother language because . . . if she wants to learn Icelandic she must know mother language.

The principals and teachers discussed this as well and gave examples of successful practices with language and communication. Observations in the preschools confirmed a variety of such practices. A teacher 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 mother language, read in your mother language, you know if they succeed in their mother language they will learn Icelandic.

Such encouragement was also described by some of the parents who confirmed how much they appreciated this care.

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 preschool facilities are available for meetings and heritage language learning after preschool hours. Personal communication is emphasized on a daily basis, and formalities in relationships between the preschool 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. She explains 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 . . ..

Compulsory School Practices

The three compulsory schools (C1, C2, C3) all emphasize building bridges between home and school cultures not only to facilitate the integration of the immigrant students into the school community but also to enrich the schools by bringing in and building on the multiple resources which the children bring to the school settings, including their heritage languages. Various methods and empowering practices are used for this purpose, and the students' heritage languages are visible and actively used. Computers and iPads are used actively in the schools for facilitating access to resources and creative work in the students' heritage languages. Art is widely used to build on students' resources and help them express themselves in various ways. Bilingual teachers work in the schools and are active in teaching and supporting the students. Some examples of practices in the three schools are provided below.

C1 is situated outside the capital area. It has a student population of around 300 in grades 1–10. In C1 around 23% of the students have heritage languages other than Icelandic.

In C1 one of the teachers builds on the students' heritage languages in teaching about poetry. While teaching about the structure of poems, students were supposed to write poems about the seasons. The teacher discusses the process of writing a poem, starting by asking them about the seasons in their countries of origins and how they have managed to adapt to the seasons in Iceland. After a short discussion about this, she asks which poems or types of poems the students know. Next, she suggests that the students use words from their heritage languages if they lack a word which rhymes in Icelandic. In this way she creates a chance for the students to use their language resources while writing poems. The teacher also notes that teachers generally encourage students to write essays in their heritage languages and explains "To be able to learn our language well, they need to know their own heritage language, to be able to transfer."

She also notes:

> We need to let them see, let them flourish a little, to show the other children: These are my numerals and does anyone want to have to read it? I had to read your style of script, would you be able to read mine? As with the colors, to teach the children in class the colors in their languages and to write on the door good morning in the languages spoken in the classroom or have these visible somewhere in the classroom.

C2 is located in the capital area. It has around 500 students in grades 1–10, 27% of whom have other heritage languages than Icelandic.

C3 is situated in the capital area. It is a large school with around 700 students speaking 21 languages. 18 % of the student population have other heritage languages than Icelandic.

In a class in C3, students with other heritage languages than Icelandic are being taught about the digestive system. Their Icelandic levels differ. During the class, the teacher uses different ways of communicating about the topic. She talks about the digestive system and the names of the organs in a pictorial way. The students are

encouraged to find the terms in their heritage languages at the same time that they are learning these in Icelandic. She also encourages them to cooperate and use the computers if they think this will help them. The teacher encourages the students to use their heritage language as much as they want and need, no matter what method they are using to study. She explains her emphasis in the following way:

> We are learning about the human body, in the ninth grade, a good book and everything, but the text is a little difficult and you often have to learn this in your own language, because if one does not know it in one's own language, only in Icelandic, what is a gall bladder, then we don't really know what it means, . . . let's try to find it in your language. I don't know and you will find out, then we are trying to teach it in their language also.

Below is an example from a translingual event from teaching, when the teacher in C3, which has the same heritage language as some of the students, is building on their heritage language and Icelandic:

„Do you understand this?" Teachers asks Tomek. „and does it match with stomach?" Tomek nods his head.

„Good," says the teacher and walks towards the black board and writes the word ***melting*** (digestion). „Okay, then what is ***meltingarvegur*** (alimentary canal)? The teacher directs the question towards the Polish boys.

„***Proces trawienia*** (digestion process)," answers Bartek.

„Not excatly," answers the teacher. „***Meltingarvegur*** (alimentary canal)**,** what is ***vegur*** (road, way)?"

„***Sciana*** (wall)," answers Tomek.

„No," answers the teacher.

„***Scianka*** (small wall)," asks Bartek.

„No, ***veggur*** **sciana** (wall). ***Vegur***, like ***Laugavegur, Reykjanesvegur.***"

„**To jest ulica** (gata)," says Tomek.

Voices of Principals, Teachers, and Students in Compulsory Schools

Examples from interviews reveal that the teachers aim to create learning spaces for social justice. One of the teachers in C2 says:

> My aim in teaching is of course that my students learn good Icelandic, but I want them also to be happy individuals and that they are happy in the future first and foremost, because I can help them now, I can make them feel secure, I can help their families, and I can do whatever I can to help them now. This is my main aim, to help them to be strong, satisfied individuals that can

> speak Icelandic and that can do in the future whatever they want to do and not what they have to do because they are limited by the language fluency or their education and so on.

Another teacher in C3 notes that:

> My aim is to get the group together, to talk with them, and to talk about tolerance, that we are all different and that we should welcome others. So I have a certain aim. . . You don't have to turn off my candle so that yours shines brighter. I discuss this with them often, that they should not exalt themselves over others.

Student voices also reflect how learning and social spaces are created in the schools. A student in C1 describes how the teachers support them in developing their social network:

> Well, in the beginning, first day I simply went there and I didn't know which class I should go to. So I went, and then my teacher arrived, she took me, and then another teacher came to teach me Icelandic. They found a Pole and he told me everything. He showed me all the classrooms. And then during the break I went to the playground and I started playing football with Icelanders. And somehow slowly, a bit later I even tried to talk to them.

A teacher in C2 emphasizes that all students need to be able to communincate about their interests and flourish, irrespective of their background and heritage language:

> Once in a week I organize what I call encyclopedia . . . this is just my invention but then I allow them to stay in the computer room and use the Internet and create a book about their interests. This is of course clever as everyone can participate, also the students who have recently arrived in the country. I am always looking for something which all students can participate in and then I let them find something in their heritage languages and I say: „Now the language does not matter, now we are looking at areas of interest." And then everyone is flourishing, no matter which languages they speak, but not restrained by Icelandic.

The teachers acknowledge that it is important for the students to gain a good vocabulary in Icelandic to be able to fully participate in school and society. The teachers realize that when learning Icelandic, it is useful to first start discussing the topics in the students' heritage languages. One of the teachers in C3 says:

> We are not only teaching Icelandic. We need to teach natural science also. We look at the topic which is being taught, try to create a little simpler version and talk about it. It is also very important, for example if we are discussing health, to also speak in Portuguese if this is the student's heritage language. Ask what you do every day and then we see how good the student is in expressing himself in his heritage language. If he does not know any concepts in his heritage language about diet or protein rich food, how can I expect him to learn this in Icelandic? So, we first need to work in their heritage languages to fix this, and we need to have a little chat.

A teacher in C1 consciously uses the students' language resources to enable active social and academic participation of students who have not mastered Icelandic. She notes:

> Of course one needs to explain better for them [topics and assignments]. When Gabriella and Max arrived, and because Claudia is so clever in both languages, I asked her to explain in Polish . . . they did not know what they were supposed to do and I could not explain it to them in Icelandic or they did not understand. Then Claudia was allowed to explain for them what they should do. It went very well with her help, but it would not have worked otherwise.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore innovative and empowering educational practices and processes of building multilingual learning communities with parents and children in Icelandic preschools and compulsory schools. Creating an inclusive, just, and welcoming school community for all children and their families is a challenge for principals and teachers in Icelandic schools where diversity is growing rapidly.

The findings from this study and the examples provided indicate that when this challenge is met with an open mind and a capacity to develop culturally responsive practices and structures, all children and families benefit. The findings indicate that the schools are succeeding in creating multilingual learning communities where students and children are flourishing and where families feel welcome and included (Chumak-Horbatsch 2012). Observations and narratives reveal a number of empowering and inclusive linguistic practices where heritage languages are visible and actively supported to enhance the learning of all children (Chumak-Horbatsch 2012; Cummins and Early 2011). Creative and critical methods are used to enhance learning (García and Wei 2014).

Findings from interviews with teachers and principals and observations in the schools indicate that learning spaces have been created where the needs of all children are met and various educational practices and care are implemented to ensure a supportive educational and nurturing environment (Gay 2010; Noddings 2005a, b; Sapon-Shevin 2007). Successful practices with language and communication, building on children's and students' heritage languages, and educational partnerships with parents are emphasized in order to build mutual trust and support the linguistic development of their children. This has been observed in findings from other studies emphasizing the importance of building on linguistic and cultural experiences, identity, and knowledge of children and families with culturally responsive pedagogy and practices (Banks 2010; 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. Findings from interviews with the parents in the preschools reveal their satisfaction with the educational partnership with the preschools and the personal daily communication.

Although the schools in the study have developed inclusive learning spaces for all children and multilingual learning communities, some challenges are visible in the schools. High numbers of students and children who have other heritage languages

than Icelandic can create demanding working environments, althouth rewarding. Individual teachers and principals in these schools tend to lead the development of practice, and knowledge is not equally spread among the teachers. Working under such pressure can cause the danger of burnout. There is a necessity of including and educating all staff and ensuring succession of knowledge and experiences in the schools (Ragnarsdóttir 2015).

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