

Language Policies and Practices of Diverse Immigrant Families in Iceland and their Implications for Education

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Kristín Jónsdóttir, Samúel Lefever,
Renata Emilsson Peskova, Artëm Ingmar Benediktsson,
Anh-Dao Tran, Kriselle Lou Suson Jónsdóttir,
Anna Katrín Eiríksdóttir



Research team


(from the left)

- Artëm
- Renata
- Kriselle
- Anh-Dao
- Anna Katrín
- Kristín
- Hanna
- Samúel



Language policies
and practices of
diverse immigrant
families in Iceland
and their
implications for
education (LPP)

Aims:

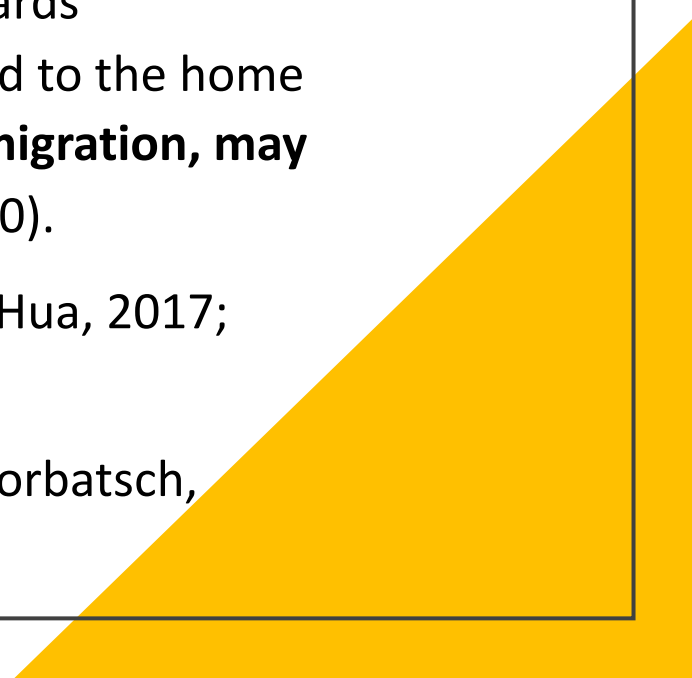
- To explore language policies and practices of diverse immigrant families,
 - how these affect their children's education,
 - the relationship and interactions between these families, their heritage language communities and their teachers.
- 

Family language policy



- The research field of family language policy presents “an **integrated overview of research on how languages are managed, learned and negotiated within families**” (King et al., 2008, p. 97).
- Spolsky (2004, p. 5) distinguished three components of family language policy:
 - 1) **language practices** „the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire“;
 - 2) **language beliefs or ideology**; „the beliefs about language and language use“;
 - 3) **language intervention**, „any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management.”
- Pro-active family language management might **interact with and be influenced by the surrounding ethno-linguistic community and schools** (policy-makers, teachers, and peers) (Schwartz, 2018)

Previous research

- Challenges of families in their attempt to bring up a bilingual or a multilingual child include: “... **identity conflicts, time pressure restraints in negotiating conflicting language demands and the negative effects of macro-level social processes** such as state language policy” (Schwartz & Verschik (2013, p. 1).
 - Language management of minority-language parents is often geared towards transmitting a linguistic heritage and associated with their emotional bond to the home country. However, **their children, who may be born in the country of immigration, may not share such a deep connection with the heritage culture** (Wilson, 2020).
 - **Language agency of children** and their multilingual development (Said & Hua, 2017; Schwartz, Kirsch & Mortini, 2020)
 - **Benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism** (Cummins, 2004; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012)
- 
- A large yellow triangle is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, pointing towards the top right.

Methodology

Qualitative research study, ongoing (2022-2024).

Participants are :

- 16 immigrant families with diverse languages, education, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- In four different municipalities; 4 in each.
- Children in preschools and compulsory schools (age 2-16).
- School principals, teachers, and heritage language teachers of the children.



Data collection and analysis

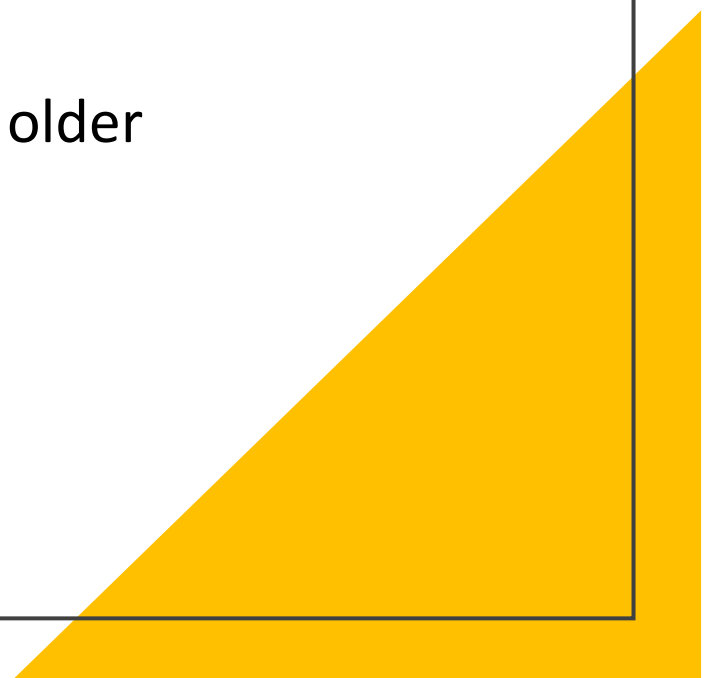
Semi-structured interviews with

- parents,
- children,
- teachers and principals in the children's preschools and compulsory schools.

Language portraits and discussions about these with the older children in the study (age 11-16)

Thematic analysis

- Atlas.ti used for coding interviews



Themes from preliminary findings

- Diverse language policies of the families manifested in diverse practices.
- The parents value their children's language repertoire and use diverse methods and resources to support language development.
- The children are active agents in developing the family language policies.
- Difference between the small heritage language communities and the larger ones when it comes to support and access to resources.
- Difference in access to resources and support in schools between smaller and larger municipalities.
- Home-school relations vary substantially between the schools.

Diverse family language policies and practices

- **Parent J (L1 English speaker):** I use only English with the kids.
- **Parent G (L1 German speaker):** We don't have any specific rules, but I try to speak only in German with the kids but then of course I need sit down at dinner table and German isn't that great. So I often also talk to at least to my older daughter actually in English. But then I also tried to say the same thing in German so she gets both of it.
- **Parent N (bilingual speaker):** Very difficult raising bilingual child [...] it's tough because you have to like be in between in all languages like we are here in Iceland, I wanted to speak Icelandic. I have to find a way of putting Icelandic into them and they have to find a way of putting English which is a common language and then and also my own mother tongue and this is three language now trying to put together. So, you don't know which to use at a particular time.

Parents value their children's language repertoire



- **Parent A (L1 Polish speaker):** We want her to be strong in both Polish and Icelandic and not just blend everything. (translated from Icelandic)
- **Parent G (L1 German speaker):** Icelandic is important because this is what our education will be [...] we have German and English because of the respect to relatives who don't always speak the other language so then can communicate with relatives it's important for them to speak English and German.
- **Parent U (L1 English speaker):** I mean our mother language is English so like I guess it's not so important because pretty much everybody for better or worse speaks it and everybody understands imperfect versions of it. You know what I mean so like anybody can pretty much communicate, make themselves understood in English. But I don't have any like really deep cultural connection to the language. ... I think about because it's kind of like the default language in the Western world.



Parents use diverse methods and resources to support language development



- **Parent A (L1 Polish speaker):** Sing, sing, sing and sing. Of course, also watch Polish films, and read. We always read a lot for the kids when they were little. Thus, to read, to sing and to talk to them - chat and chat. Now when they are teenagers, I feel that I miss being able to chat with them for so long. (translated from Icelandic)
 - **Parent U (L1 English speaker):** We haven't really been very strict about it, so now we just we have some workbooks that we have had to order ourselves and have shipped over and stuff like that. But otherwise we try to read a lot with the kids and encourage them to read a lot. We have a lot of books at home in English.
 - **Parent J (L1 English speaker):** When she does get to watch TV for twice a week and then she picks a variety of things mostly English sometimes. But I think TV is sort of defaulting to English these days that's a bigger range of things. She picks a lot of stuffs like Netflix is in English for the kids.
- 

Children are active agents in developing family language policies



- Parents Y and Z both have Arabic as a heritage language and this is the main language spoken at home. According to parent Z, 4-year-old Zara is doing very well in preschool and learning Icelandic quickly.
- **Parent Z:** *And sometimes I come to her in her room, she has perhaps a teddy bear and a doll or something. And talks to them in Icelandic: „You stay here. Go to sleep. You have to eat now.“ Like this.*
Researcher: *At home?*
Parent Z: *Yes, at home with her doll.*
Researcher: *Yes, ok. Speaks Icelandic with her doll.*
Parent Z: *Yes. Or tells a story or something. She loves to sing. All day just sings Icelandic at home.*

Differences between small and large language communities, and between municipalities

- Difference between the small heritage language communities and the larger ones when it comes to support and access to resources.
 - Larger HL communities are mostly found in the capital area. Most HL communities are small and some of the families in the study have no HL networks, they are the only family speaking their HL in their nearest community.
- Difference in access to resources and support between smaller and larger municipalities, while personal communication is more common in the smaller municipalities.
 - Two of the four municipalities are very small and have limited educational resources when it comes to multilingual issues. These are small towns, each with one compulsory school and limited budgets.

Case 1 – Different perspectives on own heritage language in the Polish community



- 2 families in the same municipality, one that has been in Iceland for 20 years, the other newly arrived;
- Family 1 (20 years in Iceland): Places rich focus on using Polish at home, maintaining Polish, i.e., by letting children read, attend Polish heritage language program on weekend, calling daily with children in Polish when they are not at home;
- Family 2 (newly arrived): Speak Polish at home but place rich focus on adjusting to the new country. The older boy uses English in communication with peers and at school and he learns Icelandic (high demand because of access to further education at upper secondary level). The younger daughter finds Icelandic friends in an easier way than her brother and the family thinks about letting her attend Polish heritage language program to interact with Polish speaking peers;
- Focus of the two families is different – family 1 is well integrated, parents and children speak excellent Icelandic and the parents value Polish heritage vs. Family 2 is in the beginning of the integration process, they want to settle, learn Icelandic and leave Poland behind.

Case 2 - English speaking parents of a child in primary school – and her teacher



F2: ... but I think you know like we're very lucky that we are **fairly well educated and have access to a lot of resources** so like **we're aware of the rights that we have** ... like the rights that the children have to language services. I'm not sure whether everybody is aware

F2: I mean, she speaks English very well, but she's never properly learned it. **We're working on that** at the moment.

F1: Yeah, because I realised ... My mom is a teacher ... so I get a little pressure about how (daughters name)'s English is **not at the fourth grade speaking level in English** ... And then in English like she ... the rhymes don't come ... Like the feeling isn't there.

Teacher: ... gives her a certain strength ... I often feel that she is more open in her studies. She naturally benefits from having these two languages. ... the parents have a different background, which means that there are slightly **different demands on the program**.

And I also felt that I wasn't doing my best. ... I knew **we could definitely meet her and do better**. We were not meeting her at all in her language ...

I would **like to see more resources in taking care of their mother tongue** ... And more learning material that is not just vocabulary learning material ... also just **based on the subjects we are working with**.

Case 2 English speaking parents of a child in primary school –and her teacher, cont.



F1: ... they seem to always be **focusing on ... just the behaviour and like the feeling in the classroom and being good friends** and these kinds of things. And (daughter's name) needs to be there in the classroom obviously for that. So, sort of like to create the whole group dynamic ...

F2: It's also the most important thing you learn in school, really. So ... yeah.

F1: Yeah.

F1: when you **sign up for school you click like what móðurmál (mother tongue)**. So then I was like: "Well, where does that information go?" Because **you would think if you clicked that you had other languages that you would get just even like a one-page pdf** from the school... Just so you know, here is our policy on like bilingual children. And here's the options as they get older ... Just so you know, we will be in contact with you if we feel their Icelandic ..." Just some kind of proactive ... Like: "Welcome to our school."

Case 3 – Family language policy in a multilingual family



Single-parent household with two children, one in compulsory school while the other in preschool.

The mother grew up in a multilingual country where her L1 is one of several minority languages. English is the official language and her main language of schooling.

"... When you start the preschool you know, so they are, they always told parents, which I **was told, that the best language to start with the child is the mother language** ... so they always teaches you to teach the child the mother language so **they appreciate that.**"

"I think more of the Icelandic because **I'm not even that good in [mother's L1] so I will support them more in English and Icelandic.** Yeah that's what I would do."

"Recently I saw that mother language is very very strong and it's good for them to learn like we traveled to [mother's country of origin] [...] So I then **I found out yeah it's very useful.** I never thought about it, that's the fact I never thought about it all right now I'm thinking about it and I'm trying."

Case 3 – Family language policy in a multilingual family, and home-school relations



Multilingual practices at home as part of home-school collaboration

"... He reads 20 minutes every day. At home he has to **read in Icelandic then explain to me in English what the story is all about** yeah what happened in what he read so because he's reading I'm not going to get everything that he is reading because I don't understand the language but I'm clever enough to look at the book and know what it is."

The teacher also uses multilingual practices at school, which elicits home-school collaboration

Teacher: (...) When he is for example reading something with me I sometimes have the feeling that he thinks about it in English although he is reading in Icelandic. **And he often asks** questions especially when there are difficult questions **if he can answer in English. And sometimes I allow him to do it and sometimes not.**

(Translated from Icelandic)

Teacher: I always have a word list that they create for **themselves**. That means **which goes home with them**. And I have selected six words from social sciences and six words from natural sciences. And they should **find them in their language**... Then I have words that I would use the following week. So they have translated them when I start talking about them. And then I just use word soup and crossword puzzles and such. In order to try to practice.

(Translated from Icelandic)

Next steps and contributions



- Continued analysis and presentation of the results to grassroots organizations, teachers, stakeholders.
- Information and forum for schools about diverse family language policies.
- Information and forum for parents about diverse practices with multilingual children in preschools and compulsory schools.
- Recognition of successful and interesting school practices with multilingual children.
- Access to expertise and support from the research team.
- Final report including main findings of the project.
- Developing statement for policy and social impact concerning bi- and multilingualism, language policies and practices.

+

•

○

Takk fyrir!

Thank you!