

# Multicultural Policy for Preschools

Ana Isorena Atlason  
Fríða B. Jónsdóttir  
Kolbrún Vigfúsdóttir  
Kristín Einarisdóttir  
Steinunn Hjartardóttir



# **REYKJAVÍK PRESCHOOLS' POLICY ON MULTICULTURALISM**

REYKJAVÍK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 2005  
Approved by the Education Council of Reykjavík, January 2006

## A review of Reykjavík Preschools' Policy on Multiculturalism

In 2001, Reykjavík Preschools presented its Policy on Multiculturalism, following through on points that were introduced and emphasised in the City of Reykjavík's Policy on Multicultural Society that same year. A review of the Policy on Multiculturalism was planned for 2004 and a committee to carry out that task was appointed at the beginning of 2004. It held its first meeting on 29 January 2004. The committee was comprised of the following members: Ana Isorena Atlason from the preschool Fálkaborg, Fríða B. Jónsdóttir, assistant director at the preschool Garðaborg, Steinunn Hjartardóttir, head of the Reception and Information Division at Reykjavík Preschools and Kolbrún Vigfúsdóttir, preschool consultant and head of the committee.

The review took a substantial amount of time and was not completed until March 2005. The following specialists were consulted for help in defining specific terms: Ingibjörg Hafstað from Fjölmening, Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, lecturer at the Iceland University of Education, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, lecturer at the University of Iceland, and Einar Skúlason, director of the Intercultural House in Reykjavík.

The committee's first recommendation for a revised policy on multiculturalism was sent to the following divisions at Reykjavík Preschools for commentary: Preschool Division, Division of Counselling and Psychological Services and Human Resources.

A draft of the Multicultural Policy of the Reykjavík City Department of Education was sent to the following individuals for commentary: Anh-Doao Tran, Amal Tamini, Anna Guðrún Júlíusdóttir, Barbara Jean Kristvinsson, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Ingibjörg Hafstað, Róbert Jack, Toshiki Toma and Susane Torpe.

Reykjavík, April 2005

Kolbrún Vigfúsdóttir, Preschool Consultant

# THE POLICY OF THE REYKJAVIK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Preschools under the auspices of the Reykjavík City Department of Education operate according to legislation and a curriculum set for preschools, which assumes that preschools are for all children, irrespective of their mental or physical condition, culture or religious affiliation. Preschools under the auspices of the Reykjavík City Department of Education operate according to the ideology *a school without discrimination*. Each preschool is therefore entrusted with considering the needs of each individual child when it comes to educational methods and planning.

Playschools under the auspices of the Reykjavík City Department of Education operate according to the City of Reykjavík's Policy on a Multicultural Society.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS IN THE POLICY ON MULTICULTURALISM

### ***Immigrants/children of immigrants***

The term 'immigrant' refers to people who have moved to Iceland and are living there either on a temporary or permanent basis. Children of immigrants are children who were either born abroad or in Iceland.

### ***Native language***

An individual's native language is that/those language/es spoken by the family raising the child. A child can have more than one native language.

### ***Second language***

An individual's second language is the language that he/she learns next, after his/her native language. In Iceland, Icelandic is the second/third language of children of foreign origin.

### ***Bilingual/multilingual children***

A bilingual individual speaks two languages and a multilingual individual speaks three or more languages.

### ***Multicultural communities in preschools***

Multicultural communities referred to in this policy are communities where there is active interaction between immigrants and native Icelanders in preschools. In a multicultural society, different individuals not only play and work together side-by-side, they are equals, treat each other with mutual respect and work together to create the multicultural community in the preschool.

### ***Staff***

The term 'staff' in this policy refers to any or all preschool teachers, other child-care workers or instructors. As all preschool staff is engaged in raising and educating the children, as well as collaborating with parents, a single term is used for the entire group.

## **COLLABORATION WITH PARENTS – RECEPTION – ADAPTATION**

Collaboration with the parents of preschool children is based on an understanding and recognition of the importance of the home in the children's socialisation. It is the joint responsibility of the home and the educational system to prepare a child for life and work in a democratic society and a community based on diversity. The preschool staff therefore views parents and families as collaborators in the child-rearing and educational processes and looks for the best ways in which to meet the needs and wishes of each individual family through cooperation and open channels of communication. Emphasis is placed on viewing each person as an individual in order to prevent stereotyping.

### ***Reception / first interview***

In collaboration with the parents, the preschool should work to prevent all types of prejudice and discrimination.

- In the first interview, parents are offered the services of an interpreter if necessary, though this is always decided in collaboration with the parents themselves.
- In the first interview, staff should advise the parents of children of foreign origin as to the laws and regulations regarding the rights of children and parents in Icelandic society, provide clear information about the nature and

purpose of the preschool's activities and introduce the child-rearing policy on which the preschool operates.

### ***Adaptation***

Starting playschool is difficult when the language spoken is different from that which the children are familiar with, and when the surroundings are far removed from what they are used to. It is important to keep in mind that the child's adaptation to the preschool can place a great deal of strain on parents, teachers and other children in the preschool.

- A longer period of adaptation should be factored in for those children that do not understand Icelandic, and they should be given the reception and support they need.

### ***Information for parents***

Information about the work and activities in preschools are available in various languages.

- Preschools should focus on providing equal access to service and support insofar as possible, by having messages and other information for parents translated.
- An effort should be made to inform the parents of the day-to-day operations of the preschool and their children's' status in it as well as possible.

## **SUPPORT – EDUCATIONAL CONSULTATION**

The Reykjavík City Department of Education places emphasis on increasing and reinforcing specialist services relating to collaboration with parents, the teaching of Icelandic as a second language and work that focuses on the culture and native language of children of foreign origin, among other things.

### ***The tasks of the educational consultant***

For preschool staff to be able to attend to the needs of children of foreign origin as well as possible, they must receive, in addition to education about that aspect of the preschool work, good support from educational consultants and other professionals.

- The educational consultant provides counselling and support in evaluating the Icelandic-language proficiency of children of foreign origin, and assists in lesson planning and ways to stimulate the use of Icelandic. He or she provides counselling regarding communication and cooperation with parents, and ways in which to work with the child's native culture. The educational consultant also provides counselling and support with regards to measures for preventing prejudice and discrimination.

## **THE TEACHING OF ICELANDIC**

The preschool attendance of children of foreign origin provides an important foundation for their proficiency in Icelandic and their understanding of Icelandic society. This is how children become familiar with the Icelandic language, society, mores and norms. This foundation is the basis for their continued attendance in educational institutions and a prerequisite for taking advantage of all that Icelandic society has to offer.

Since bilingual children at all educational levels tend to have problems being on equal footing with their Icelandic peers when it comes to their education, the teaching of Icelandic must be adapted to their needs from the outset.

- The Reykjavík City Department of Education emphasises quality teaching of Icelandic in preschools for children of foreign origin.
- The teaching of a second language automatically takes place during play and all general activities of the preschools, through interaction between children and teachers and amongst the children themselves. Children of preschool age learn languages primarily in real situations in which they participate and consequently all preschool staff has a role to play in the teaching of the language. In addition to the language teaching that takes place through play and other activities, all children have the possibility of receiving special tuition if necessary. In that way, a special curriculum is prepared for each child.
- The individual curriculum, which is prepared in collaboration with the parents, is based on an evaluation of the child and its progress. The curriculum also specifies by what means the education of the child and the collaboration with the parents is carried out.

For these goals to be achieved it is necessary for staff to acquire special skills to teach Icelandic as a second language, as well as to evaluate the child's progress in Icelandic. In evaluating the language development of a child that has a native language other than Icelandic, the fact that the child does not have a full understanding of Icelandic must be taken into account. In such cases the evaluation must be carried out with the help of an interpreter.

## **BILINGUALISM / MULTILINGUALISM**

Many studies have revealed the importance for the child of speaking and understanding its parents' language and of having a strong sense of its own native language. Children of foreign origin that enter preschool come from varying backgrounds that will have an effect on their learning of both their native language and Icelandic. These children grow up with one, two, or more languages in their homes, and in some cases this includes Icelandic. The task of the preschool is to teach the children Icelandic but also to offer parents support in maintaining the proficiency of the child's native language.

- The Reykjavík City Department of Education emphasises the importance for children of foreign origin to become bilingual. The aim is for the children to maintain proficiency in the languages spoken by their parents and to learn Icelandic as a second language.
- The child's parents should be made aware of the importance of the child's native language. They should be encouraged to maintain the child's proficiency in the native language/languages and thereby help facilitate the child's bilingualism. Staff should encourage parents to speak their native language to their child and plan joint projects that facilitate the use of the native language.
- The preschool will attempt to make the native language of the child both visible and audible with the help of the parents. The parents are moreover encouraged to introduce their native language to the children and teachers in the preschool.

## **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

The Reykjavík City Department of Education emphasises that preschools should reflect the diversity of Icelandic society and respect the diversity among children and parents. In a community made up of various cultural groups it is important that there be mutual respect and that members of the society cooperate to create a multicultural society.

It is important for staff to make an effort to get to know the native culture and background of children and parents.

- Preschools should emphasise cooperation with parents based on a multicultural vision and should create an environment that reflects diversity. The preschool should strive to have good communication with parents with the aim of making their native culture visible to all the children in the preschool, and should facilitate natural cooperation amongst parents of diverse cultural origin.
- The preschool should take care of the children based on the needs and individuality of each, irrespective of whether they are native Icelanders or of foreign origin.
- The preschool should work on strengthening the interest in and opportunities for parents to actively participate in the work of the school and all that which relates to the child's education.
- The curriculum of each preschool stipulates in what way that preschool looks after the multicultural aspects of the preschool's work, i.e. cooperation with parents of foreign origin, teaching of Icelandic and language stimulation in Icelandic, work relating to the child's native culture, and the surroundings and activities of the preschool.

## **CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF STAFF**

Preschools should place emphasis on offering their staff education and training relating to multicultural work in the preschools, as well as other aspects relating to raising and educating children of foreign origin and collaboration with their parents. Examples of education and training of this type are:

- Cooperation with parents, the reception and dissemination of information to parents and the importance of the native language in the learning of another language.
- The learning of a second language.

- Teaching of Icelandic as a second language and methods for evaluating the proficiency and progress of children in Icelandic.
- Multiculturalism, a multicultural society and a multicultural preschool.
- Cultural literacy and interactions with individuals from other cultures.
- Work to prevent discrimination / education about prejudice.
- Educating and training teachers to work with interpreters.

## **HIRING OF FOREIGN STAFF**

### ***Criteria for hiring***

The Reykjavík City Department of Education sets the following criteria for hiring staff of foreign origin.

- The job interview should always be in Icelandic.
- It should be ensured that residence and work permits are in order.

Staff of foreign origin are advised that the learning of Icelandic might be a part of their continuing education. In other respects, the same regulations apply to the hiring of foreign staff as to the hiring of Icelandic staff.

### ***The reception of staff of foreign origin***

The strategies for educating and receiving staff incorporate informing staff about laws and regulations relating to children and child rearing, as well as the customary ways of interacting with children in Iceland.

- A special introductory session is held for staff of foreign origin that are beginning work in preschools.

## **LARGE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN OF FOREIGN ORIGIN IN PRESCHOOLS**

Special assistance may be necessary for preschools that have large numbers of children of foreign origin attending.

- If the number of children of foreign origin exceeds 20% of the total number of children in the preschool, special measures may be applied if necessary. An educational consultant shall evaluate the need in each instance based on the composition of the group. These measures may lead to a reduction in the

number of children in certain classes, an increase in the number of preschool teachers, or other support that the evaluating party feels is appropriate.

## **TRANSLATIONS**

- The Reykjavík City Department of Education stresses the importance of translating contracts of attendance and other information about the work of the institution into foreign languages. They must be made accessible to parents through published information on a website in languages other than Icelandic and information brochures about the purpose and work of the preschools in different languages.
- The Reykjavík City Department of Education in cooperation with other municipal bodies facilitates the design and distribution of posters in various languages, providing information for parents. The posters extend a welcome to parents and provide information about various aspects of Icelandic society.

## **COLLABORATION WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS**

- The Reykjavík City Department of Education emphasises collaboration when working in the interests of children and parents of foreign origin.

An educational consultant in a neighbourhood service centre, for example, collaborates with various other parties as appropriate, such as consultants in elementary schools, the Reykjavík Sports and Youth Council, social services and parties within the medical sector. This may be in the form of activities, as when workshops are planned for City of Reykjavík employees or when parties collaborate on research or development projects. An educational consultant will cooperate with the Intercultural House, the Red Cross, the pastor for immigrants, police authorities, and other parties. The educational consultant also participates in a consulting group at the Reykjavík City Hall.