Hjallastefnan and Professionalism: Preschool Personnel’s Sense of Security

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Abstract

This research is the first case study on Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s professionalism and their sense of security. Data was collected by observation and interviews with two preschool personnel, Kate and Maria. Their values towards work were explored: Kate values ‘respect’ and Maria values ‘friendship’. Kate and Maria show responsive characteristics in practice, however their levels are different; Kate has progressive aspects of a teacher, whereas Maria is reflexive while maintaining a traditional Icelandic childcare provider’s role with a mother’s aspect. My comparison was focused on exploring what I learned from Kate and Maria, in the light of Hjallastefnan’s six principles, professionalism as well as the Icelandic preschool context. It raised an unrevealed challenge which Hjallastefnan is facing, yet it has never been discussed within the school: Fostering each personnel as an individual professional. The discussion concludes with my suggestion for creating a positive sense of security: Keep a good balance of ‘independence (documentation)’ and ‘interdependence (communication)’ while feeling respect and friendship at work. The study revealed that Kate and Maria’s joy, passion, interest and dilemma are all genuine. However, further research on any aspect of Hjallastefnan is needed.
Hjallastefnan og fagmennska: Öryggistilfinning leikskólastarfsmanna

Rannsóknin er tilviksrannsókn (e. case study) á fagmennsku starfsmanna í leikskóla Hjallastefnunnar og öryggistilfinningu þeirra. Gögnum var aflað með athugunum og viðtölum við tvo starfsmenn leikskóla, þær Kate og Maria. Skoðað var hvaða gildi þær lægðu til grundvallar starfi sínu. Niðurstöður sýna að Kate metur helst virðingu en Maria metur vináttu mest. Kate er framsækin í sinni kennslu, en Maria er sveigjanleg þó svo að hún heldi í hefðubundnar og móðurlegar aðferðir við umönnun barna. Í ritgerðinni eru starfaðferðir og gildi Kate og Mariu skoðuð í ljósi sex undirstöðuatriða Hjallastefnunnar og fagmennsku í samhengi við íslenska leikskóla. Í umræðukafla eru settar fram vangaveltur um hvernig hægt er að skapa jákvæð vinnuskilyrði og ákvæða tilfinningu fyrir öryggi með því að hafa gott jafnvægi á milli sjálfræðis og samskipta og að viðhalda vináttu og virðingu í starfi. Rannsóknin leiddi í ljós að ánægja, ástríða, áhugi og áskoranir Kate og Maria voru einlægar. Þörf er á fleiri rannsóknnum á hugmyndafræði og starfsaðferðum Hjallastefnunnar.
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1 Introduction

1.1 As the boy, so the man

Preschool may be the first place where children experience how society works. I still remember my preschool days in Japan. I met wonderful little friends with whom I am still in touch after a few decades. We sang songs, read books, ate lunch and played together. When I try to remember my teachers, my favorite homeroom teacher always appears first. She was in her early twenties, and now I think she was just full of energy and enthusiasm. She played the organ and we sang along. I still sing those songs I learned at preschool with my young daughter Særún, who is going to an Icelandic preschool. She reminds me of my old days and makes me surprised how childhood memories can remain clear. I wonder if she will sing the songs she learns at preschool with her children in the future.

As in this proverb ‘as the boy, so the man’, childhood memories can influence children’s lives. Robert Fulghum, an American author, still recalls his preschool experience after fifty years. In his contribution to the book ‘The Good Preschool Teacher’, he describes that he learned fundamental things he needed to know to live: How to take care of yourselves; take responsibilities; respect others; keep a good balance in life (As cited in Ayer, 1989). At preschool, adults are always there by the children. Children copy and learn things from adults. Especially after becoming a mother, I feel a strong responsibility towards my child’s life because of the influence I give. I must not be the only one feeling this way, so I wanted to learn more about parents and childcaretakers in Iceland. Its culture is different from mine and my point of view may not be the same as Icelandic people. As a mother and a researcher, I wanted to learn about adults working at an Icelandic preschool, but I did not know exactly what I wanted to know about them until I encountered Hjallastefnan.

1.2 My past experience with new teaching methods

In my previous teaching experience, with compulsory school children in Japan, I learned the importance of professionalism. I tried to be creative to enhance children’s learning outcomes as much as possible. Since then, it has been a fundamental part of my attitude towards teaching. Besides my own teaching experience, I also had an opportunity to manage English conversation schools for young Japanese children. Those schools had native
English speaking teachers and used a unique method called PLS (Pacific Language School, n.d.), which was founded and developed by a couple of Japanese and American teachers to teach conversational English effectively to Japanese children in 1970’s. Although my role there was not teaching, I had to learn their method to run a few schools and took seminars with other native English speaking teachers. I was strongly influenced by their methodology and philosophy: ‘Student-centered’ and ‘teacher’s professionalism.’ Throughout my five years of experience there, I learned both the joy and the challenges of developing the new approach, as well as dealing with native English speaking teachers who had different cultures from mine. These experiences as teacher and school manager expanded my perspective and developed my sense of professionalism.

1.3 Meeting Hjallastefnan

A few years later in Iceland, when I started looking for a preschool for my own child, I encountered the Hjalli model, so-called Hjallastefnan. Learning about their general practice was quite interesting, such as their gender segregation and open-ended materials. It is a rather new pedagogical method, and reminded me of PLS. In both methods, each activity was well-structured with clear purposes. It was also created by teachers who actually witness children’s development and learning on site. My curiosity towards Hjallastefnan gradually increased. Due to my lack of comprehension in Icelandic, I could not learn much about them by reading their Icelandic flyers. Then, I asked some of the teachers at the University of Iceland and other friends whose children go to Hjallastefnan schools what they think about it. Their answers were actually opposite; teachers questioned the method but my friends admired it. Why were there different opinions? I decided to visit one of the schools to see with my own eyes.

In my first visit, I felt a similarity to what I had personally experienced in Japanese preschools, such as discipline. Children were quietly standing in line when they were waiting for the teacher to lead them to other classrooms. When I recall the same scene in Japan, teachers were always yelling and children looked timid. But children at Hjallastefnan had smiles on their faces and there was no yelling. Things looked very simple but organized at Hjallastefnan. Instead of having pictures on the wall, there was a lot of tape on the wall, floor and everywhere for children to identify where things should be placed after they had used them. I had never seen anything like that in Iceland before, but both children and teachers looked very happy with the way things were. I felt that I wanted to learn more. I asked the preschool counselor for
permission to let me spend a few days at some of the other Hjallastefnan schools, to see how the children spent their days.

When I was at one of their preschools, I had a chance to speak with some teachers who had many years of experience with Hjallastefnan. I asked one of them about the purpose of the activities for choice time, in which children participate twice a day. I was expecting to hear a clear explanation but the answer was, ‘Well...I am not sure’. I wondered why she could not tell the purpose of the activities her children were engaged in. Our communication was carried out in English and it had been smooth until this moment; it did not seem to be a matter of language. Being confused by her response, I asked other teachers about the purpose of keeping a record of the activities each child chooses. They always keep records of the children’s choices, and I wondered if they utilize the results of the record for curriculum development. They did not have a specific answer. In some casual conversation, I noticed that some teachers were very comfortable with their way of teaching. Some of them said that they could feel a ‘sense of security’. This sentence rang a bell. I have heard something similar from some teachers in my previous experience, at the school where I was working in Japan. The PLS method was very structured and the teachers had to strictly follow guidelines. New and inexperienced teachers studied hard and they were keen to practice, but experienced teachers tended to become relaxed in their teaching because they knew what to expect in the classroom. They stopped questioning what and why they were doing and paying much attention to how children were reacting, because they just had to follow the curriculum and use the teaching materials provided by the school. It made their day easy but their lessons became complacent in their lessons. As a result, children often lost their interest during the lesson. If Hjallastefnan teachers feel a ‘sense of security’ in their teaching, it could turn out to be something like I had experienced before in Japan.

1.4 Purpose of this study and research question

In this research, I explore what Hjallastefnan personnel value most at Hjallastefnan, while comparing their practice and views with research in other Icelandic preschools (Einarsdóttir, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2006). The purpose of this research is to hear two Hjallastefnan teachers’ voices and learn how they value their professions with outsider’s eyes, but not to compare or evaluate their work. Results of this research should suggest alternative approaches to enhance Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s professionalism as well as personnel overall in any preschool.
2 Literature

For my main theoretical background, I will review how early childhood workforce and quality, which underlies teachers’ professionalism, are understood in different contexts. In order to understand how the Icelandic preschool system and teachers are, I will review the Icelandic preschool teachers’ work, beliefs and discourses as well as cultural context by Einarsdóttir (1998, 2000, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2006). Since Hjallastefnan follows the Icelandic National Curriculum, the personnel’s work and views will be compared with other Icelandic preschool teachers’ views.

2.1 Preschool personnel’s views of early childhood professionalism

In this chapter, I will explore how preschool teachers’ status, their professionalism, quality, and types of professionalism are reviewed in the literature. Terms such as workforce, practitioners, and personnel are used interchangeably according to the literature and its context.

2.1.1 International understanding of childhood workforce

According to the OECD family database (2010), the quality of childcare has various aspects such as: standard of hygiene and safety; staff to child ratios; the size of groups; parent involvement; and compliance with certain educational policies (p. 1). In order to provide high quality service in childcare, it is also essential to have appropriate workforce who have certain qualities. OECD (2010) categorized the early childhood workforce under three types:

*Childcare worker* – Upper secondary level vocational diploma in children’s nursery;

*Auxiliary staff* – Varies in education from no formal training to upper secondary level vocational training;

*The pre-primary/primary teacher* – Generally trained at the same level and in the same training institution as primary school teachers (p. 2).
These three types may differ from country to country, but they suggest general ideas of how the childhood workforce can be categorized. It is not included above, but they note that there is another type of workforce in Nordic and central European countries called ‘pedagogues’ (p. 2) who have received upper-secondary or tertiary education with a focus on early childhood services, rather than primary teaching. Childcare workforce in Iceland will be discussed later.

Moss (2006b) reviews the public images of the early childhood workers as follows:

- The worker as Substitute mother;
- The worker as Technician;
- The worker as Researcher.

In his description, early childhood service is often described as care work with an atmosphere of a substitute family. It produces an image of its workers not requiring much education because their practice is based on maternal instinct. ‘The worker as Technician’ implies that workers have different levels of skills and qualifications but their practice is systematic as there is a predicted outcome. In this view, childcare workers lack in flexibility and they are expected to achieve certain goals. The image of ‘the worker as Researcher’ is from Reggio Emilia, as workers constantly develop their understanding and gain new knowledge through their daily practice. Reflection and dialogue are important parts of their practice and they are receptive to different thinking.

International understandings of childcare workforce and the public images of childhood workers are described and their roles and commitment may be similar or different according to the context in which they work.

### 2.1.2 Preschool personnel’s professionalism

Defining professionalism in early childhood is not easy (Oberheumer, 2005; Miller, 2008; Cables & Miller, 2008), but the description of Spodek and Saracho (1988) might sound reasonable from today’s academic point of view. As they describe, ‘professionals in any field possess a high level of knowledge and skill developed over a rather extensive period of preparation’ (p. 59). In their interpretation, ‘knowledge’ is established upon research, theory and practice and ‘skill’ is to provide a service. When professionalism in early childhood is discussed in past literature, they often assume that a person who is called a professional is highly trained or educated and has obtained a teaching qualification (Katz, 1988; Slin, 1988;
Spodek, Saracho & Peters, 1988; Spodek & Saracho, 1990). Paradoxically, a person with passion for childcare may not be called professional, if she is uneducated or unqualified.

In traditional teachers’ education, which is the process of getting an academic degree to become a qualified teacher, student-teachers learn how children are from various aspects. This knowledge helps teachers make decisions about what to include in their program and how to adapt them to a particular group of children (Spodek & Saracho, 1990). It may also be a present international understanding that relevant and sufficient education for practitioners is a key principle when defining childcare workforce’s professionalism (OECD, 2010).

Today’s interpretation of professionalism still includes classical views, as I described above, but it has been developing to suit various changes and demands in society. Cable and Miller (2008) summarize six themes underpinning recent notions of professionalism after having edited various studies on early years’ professionalism: Quality, standard, expertise, reflection, identity, and social status (p. 172-173). Some of these themes will be explained later in this chapter.

Unqualified early childhood workforce’s practice and their sense of professionalism seem not to receive much attention in the literature. In past literature, Katz (1984) calls qualified teachers ‘professional’, and unqualified early childhood workforce ‘amateur’ (p. 27). In her description, Katz stated that an ‘amateur’ would simply follow her feelings, as she would want to take certain actions because of the love of it, while a ‘professional’ aims at high standard in her performance, no matter what she would feel. Research conducted by Einarsdóttir (1998) is also one of few. She investigated how Icelandic preschool teachers and staff were involved in children’s dramatic play. It included a comparison of qualified teachers’ and unqualified staff’s approaches and ideas about their roles, but the unqualified staff’s voice is not shared. Ayer (1989) collected six American preschool teachers’ narratives. Most of them finished their formal education to become qualified, but one of them never had college level education. Instead, she is a self-educated practitioner who reads various materials regarding childhood development and early childhood education to develop her knowledge. In her narrative, she mentions how her experience underlies her practice, and how a key person influenced her improvement as a childcare practitioner. She values children’s empowerment for which she yearned when she was a child, because her self-esteem was low and she could not talk about her feelings. After she started a
daycare center, as the founder and director, she put her effort into a child-centered environment. Childcare environments have changed since this narrative was collected in the 1980’s, but it is still a good example of how an unqualified practitioner tries to compensate for the lack of education.

2.1.3 Quality of professional preschool personnel

In the previous section, I reviewed preschool personnel’s professionalism and its connection with education. The study on an unqualified childcare practitioner’s narrative (Ayer, 1989) implies that it is necessary to review the quality of childcare, because extensive experience and self-study may help practitioners enhance their service and practice. In summary of Cable and Miller (2008), quality is one of the key concepts of professionalism. How is the quality of childcare viewed as a part of professionalism in the literature?

Quality is valued and expected in early childhood settings (Cable & Miller, 2008). It is natural for parents to expect that their children spend their day in a safe and secure environment provided by qualified, fully skilled early childhood professionals. However, the quality of the childhood workforce is ‘a challenge, something to be achieved, rather than a problem, something to be questioned’ (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007, p. 3). It may be difficult to measure the quality level unless there is a specific measurement to evaluate. OECD (2010) acknowledges that it is difficult to identify the quality of preschool education because there is no specific way to evaluate the quality of service and teachers’ interaction with children. One of the measurements can be a license approved by the educational authority but the level of qualification or the training system varies from country to country (Oberhuemer, 2008). It is still legal to work in preschools without having a license or qualification in some European countries such as Germany, Malta (Oberhuemer, 2008) and the United Kingdom (Moss, 2006b). For example, 40% of the childcare workforce is not qualified to the basic level of training in the United Kingdom (Miller, 2008). Work conditions are poor and pay is very low; it is a challenge for the government to resolve this situation while enhancing the quality of childcare (Moss, 2006b; Miller, 2008).

Although having any level of license seems to be expected to enhance the quality of childcare which a practitioner can provide, it is necessary for us to be aware of what underlies early childhood quality. This is related to political factors which need to be enacted and implemented in daily practice (Cable & Miller, 2008). The concept of quality has been discussed as problematic (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Urban, 2008). It is versatile and answers may vary according to the circumstances. The term ‘quality’
does not offer a simple answer to childcare. It needs to be questioned when exploring ‘better quality’ (Urban, 2008: p. 138) because it is not easily fulfilled. Early childhood practitioners need to be able to question the purposes, equity and social justice, then negotiate and agree on the meanings of them. Quality is not something which is simply provided. Questioning should come from various perspectives. (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Cable & Miller, 2008).

Besides knowledge and skills, having passion and love for children may also be important to enhance the quality of childcare. In the past, preschool education was ‘almost entirely women’s world’ (Ayer, 1989, p. 4) and no matter if they were qualified or not, their roles often reflected a maternal aspect. To become a good preschool teacher, loving children was as important as having academic qualification (Ayer, 1989).

There are some obstacles which could affect the quality of childcare personnel. Thorpe et al. (2011) conducted research among third year B. Ed. students in an Australian university, and found that they wish to become preschool teachers because they love children. But, at the same time, they revealed that salary and work conditions could be barriers to encouraging university graduates to pursue careers in early childhood settings. Poor working conditions of the unqualified workforce will be discussed later, but even qualified teachers’ conditions are considered to be poor by those who wish to be a teacher. Cameron and Moss (2007) also criticize that teachers’ social status is low, even though their work is recognized as important, valuable, and meaningful.

Although research is still limited in this field (Thorpe et al., 2011), reconceptualizing childcare is considered because of the connection between early childhood experience and its influence on children’s later lives (Balsky et al., 2007; Sylva, 2010). Children who spent their early life at a preschool that scored highly on the English ECERS-R (The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised) quality measurement had better academic outcomes in English and mathematics national tests when they were aged 7 and also 11. The results also revealed that many children showed positive social-behavioral outcomes in those age groups (Sylva, 2010).

Preschool administrators at English preschools expect that the early childhood workforce should meet each child’s individual needs and help them to develop social skills, self-confidence and independence in a happy environment (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). These factors need to be valued when we discuss the quality of childcare, while acquiring decent academic preparation is expected in preschool education (Kosnik & Beck, 2009).
In short, childcare personnel take strong responsibility for childcare and its quality and it requires not only their knowledge and skills but also love for children. But their working conditions and low social status need to be improved to provide quality childcare.

2.1.4 Reflection as a professional

From the Japanese point of view, reflecting on one’s own practice may be a challenge because of its self-criticism culture. Japanese people critically view their own performance and point out rather the negative aspects of it because they tend to believe that success awaits them only after failures and struggles (Kitayama & Markus, 1999). However, reflection in professionalism is considered to be a key attribute of professionalism (Cable & Miller, 2008) and it is ‘a specialized form of thought that lies at the heart of professional practice’ (Loughran, 2010, p. 183).

According to Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009), reflection is ‘a process that helps develop meaning from experiences’ (p. 5). Without reflecting on one’s own experience, the benefit of learning through experience is limited. It also helps a teacher remain objective which keeps her professional challenges under control (Andrews & Edwards, 2008). For childcare practitioners, reflecting on themselves and their own practices could be the way for questioning the quality of childcare they offer. Teacher educators consider reflection as a teacher to be valuable and to improve effectiveness in teaching. Loughran (2006) encourages teachers to become metacognitive. He notes:

Becoming more aware of the thoughts and actions that influence the development (or not) of one’s own understanding, offers insights into teaching and learning dramatically different to being told what to know and how to think (p. 93).

Loughran (2006) argues that teachers should be able to question their own learning and practice. In his point, teachers can find questions from their own stories regarding themselves or their practices. It makes the purpose of teaching and learning clear. He believes that enhancing metacognitive skills should be included in teacher education programs.

While sharing her feelings as a teacher and a teacher educator, Kosnik (2007) explains how reflection enhanced her confidence as well as skills as a teacher. In her teacher education courses in the beginning, her focus was on external aspects of teaching such as introducing practical resource tips, strategies and materials. Later, she realized the importance and benefits of
knowing the internal aspects of teaching, such as conducting action research, which helped her reflect on herself as a teacher and review the sequence of her practice, as it empowers teachers and deepens their holistic understanding of teaching.

There are different ways to reflect on one’s own practice such as reflective writing (Loughran, 2010), journal keeping (Loughran, 2006, Loughran, 2010; Castle, 2012), portfolio (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Castle, 2012), professional learning, and research, particularly action research (Cable & Miller, 2008; Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009). Journal keeping is encouraged to keep a record of one’s practice for thinking and self-evaluation (Hatton & Smith, 1995). A typical form of journal keeping is in a notebook, but Castle (2012) describes various other forms including on pieces of paper, cards, sticky notes, or in a computer file.

In her journal entry ‘Learning through reflection on practice’, Cate Baird (as cited in Loughran, 2010) analyzes her challenges through writing. Initially, her purpose of keeping a journal was to reflect on her practice and use it as a data source for her students’ learning in order to develop a better understanding of pedagogy. She describes the period of reflection as ‘an eye-opening experience and a confronting time for me professionally’ (p. 167). Throughout reflecting on her performance with her class, she noted:

As I have worked through my journal I have started to reflect on the strengths and weakness in my practice. I began to develop a sense of the underlying principles that guided my everyday practice. Before embarking on this journey of professional discovery I believed I was a reflective person...I know that in the everyday running of schools teachers generally find little time to reason through why they teach in the manner they do...consequently it is easy to rationalize one’s practice and see no need to change. Conducting this project has helped me to challenge my taken-for-granted assumptions and views and see the need to better understand what I do and why, to make the tacit in my practice much more explicit, both for myself and in trying to talk about and explain my teaching to others (p. 180).

Cate discovered that the most important principle of her teaching was ‘establishing and maintaining a positive relationship within the classroom’ (p. 180). She also had an opportunity to discuss her reflection on journal keeping with her colleagues which allowed her colleagues to think about their practice while furthering her development as a professional.
What literature on reflection emphasizes is that ‘it can be a means of empowerment, leading to change at the individual and social level’ (Cable & Miller, 2008, p. 173). A habit of reflection makes a teacher an independent practitioner with confidence and journal keeping is one of the practical ways to reflect on your practice daily or over long periods (Castle, 2012).

2.1.5 Identity of a professional

Identity of preschool personnel is one of the common themes along with quality and reflection (Cable & Miller, 2008). Kosnik and Beck (2009) define it as ‘how teachers perceive themselves professionally’ (p. 130). It includes goals, responsibilities, style, effectiveness, level of satisfaction, and career trajectory. It is also added that teacher’s identity may be influenced by their childhood memories and dreams.

Feeling a ‘sense of belonging to’ and ‘being recognized as belonging to’ is an important aspect of professional identity (Cable & Miller, 2008, p. 173). Cable and Miller describe that teachers’ qualifications, training, roles, responsibilities, and expertise influence an individual personnel’s level of ‘self-concept’ and ‘self-esteem’. Titles and status can be important for forming teacher’s professional identity.

Kosnik and Beck (2009) followed 22 newly graduated teachers’ first three years of teaching experiences in their educational settings. Research showed that exploring and developing professional identity is important. Kosnik and Beck explain a key reason is ‘to have a professional self-image that supports effective teaching and gives them a positive view of their contribution’ (p. 131). Teachers’ work is complex and a teacher has to take various roles not merely as an instructor of subjects but also students’ understanding and class management.

Day (2010) points out that teacher’s professional and personal lives may affect their practice positively and negatively. For some teachers, challenges can increase their job satisfaction or cause stress. It is suggested that teachers connect their professional expertise and their personal self to enhance their practice. Teacher’s wellbeing, purpose, and beliefs about their profession are closely related with their professional identities and they influence students’ learning. However, every teacher’s professional identity and commitment to their work vary. It is not simply characterized because there are a number of influential factors like status, political, social, institutional and personal lives and their identities are not always stable (Day et al., 2006).
Teacher’s burnout can cause an imbalance between a teacher’s high commitment to her work and workload and collaboration with colleagues (Day, 1999; Day, 2010). Brouwers et al. (2001) made a hypothesis to examine secondary school teachers’ three burnout dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment) in the Netherlands. Their hypothesis model was that they expected when teachers perceived lack of emotional support from colleagues, it would influence negatively teachers’ perceived self-efficacy and they would attempt to isolate themselves from others by showing negative attitudes towards them. Results showed that teachers who perceived insufficient support from colleagues and principals had less confidence in their capability of receiving support. If they were not satisfied with their performance, they would begin to deny their ability to ask for advice or elicit necessary support. Lack of confidence in themselves hinders them from asking for support. Brouwers et al. concluded that developing a training program to enhance teachers’ confidence in their ability to elicit sufficient support from their team. It implies that it is a joint responsibility for the administrations and teachers: The administrators provide training in which teachers actually feel they are learning something beneficial to their work, and teachers put effort in improving their knowledge base and skills so that they can enhance their confidence and efficiently implement what they have learned into their daily practice.

Perceiving themselves as professionals helps teachers widen their perspectives because there is a tendency for teachers to view their roles with a narrow perspective which restricts their flexibility (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). Day et al. (2006) also point out that ‘sustaining a positive sense of effectiveness...is important to maintain motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy and job satisfaction, and commitment to teaching (p. 614). At the same time, it helps them draw a line between personal self and professional as a teacher because personal identities can easily intertwine (Kosnik & Beck, 2009).

2.1.6 Characteristics of a professional

Previously I have explained quality, reflection and identity of a professional as common themes of early childhood personnel as Cable and Miller (2008) suggest. These three themes I emphasized seem to intimately intertwine but there is one more theme that needs to be added. Characteristics of a professional may not be discussed specifically in the literature, but I include professional characteristics as an important component of professional
identity. Day (1999) emphasizes that ‘teachers cannot be developed (passively), they develop (actively)’ (p. 2). Professional characteristics should be at least positive and active. There are two positive and active characteristics to explain in this section: effectiveness and responsiveness.

**Figure 1. Twelve characteristics of effective early childhood teachers**

![Diagram of twelve characteristics of effective early childhood teachers](image)

(Colker, 2008, p. 70-71)

**Effectiveness**

Teacher effectiveness may be one characteristic of a professional but it is a rather broad concept, as Colker (2008) identified in twelve effective characteristics of early childhood teachers. Although teachers’ effectiveness in early childhood is discussed and possible criteria are introduced in the literature, Colker criticizes that it is often produced by teacher educators, or those who are currently not classroom teachers. In order to compare the gap between literature and reality, she interviewed 43 early childhood practitioners with various backgrounds in the United States to discover their perceptions about the personal characteristics of effective early childhood teachers, and provided twelve characteristics that would make them effective (see Figure 1). Her results reveal that a combination of good
education and teachers’ effective characteristics make an effective teacher, with potential to provide quality childcare.

Future teachers might potentially possess those effective characteristics or love for children as Cloker and Thorpe et al. (2011) suggest, but their passion and caring nature also could be a burden. Hastings (2010) explored teacher educators’ emotional expectations towards pre-service student teachers. Teacher trainers feel emotional discomfort when their pre-service student teachers do not match their expectations. Teacher trainers would feel ‘disappointment, frustration, anger, guilt and hurt’ (p. 211) as they evaluated that pre-service student teachers lack in commitment for teaching. It can also cause teacher educators’ emotional burnout (Day, 1999; Brouwers et al., 2001; Day, 2010). It is essential to provide proper education for the workforce (Spodek & Saracho, 1990) and enhance their metacognitive skills to become effective teachers (Loughran, 2006; Kosnik, 2007; Colker, 2008).

Responsiveness

As well as effectiveness, another important characteristic is responsiveness (Guðjónsdóttir, 2000). It is a personnel’s collaborative work with colleagues and flexible response to adjust her practice according to a child’s personal needs or other factors. Their flexibility becomes professional and efficient when professional knowledge base about teaching, learning and child development and an ethical and social commitment to children are integrated.

When observing a primary school teacher’s class, Guðjónsdóttir noticed that the teacher flexibly changed her lesson plan from what it had been planned. She took students outside. The teacher explained the reason:

It is very important that children have the opportunity to work with their hands, to work collaboratively with the concepts in different ways. The children in my class are very different and their learning styles also...therefore I need to expose them to the learning in many different ways. I could not miss this opportunity of the good weather today to go to the beach (p. 95).

Originally a different activity was planned for the day. But the teacher decided to take students to the beach in order not to miss an opportunity to observe geographical components such as fjord, coves and peninsula which they had previously studied with their eyes. Because the weather in Iceland would not be stable enough to wait for the next time, the teacher decided to connect students’ learning and the natural scenery.
The responsive characteristic of a professional may be equal to how close a teacher works with students physically and mentally. Loughran (2010) also points out the importance of teachers’ responsiveness for high quality teaching because children do not learn in the same way. Responsiveness is a positive reaction of the mixture of teacher’s theoretical knowledge and instinct as a professional.

2.1.7 Professional development

Teaching means career-long learning about teachers’ work (Day, 1999; Kosnik & Beck, 2009). The term ‘professional development’ includes various concepts to identify what and how teachers develop their skills and knowledge. Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009) coherently sorted out three interchangeably used terms associated with professional development as follows:

*Professional development / in-service program*

Short, one-off training events often delivered by experts. Teachers have little responsibility to determine content and there is no structured teacher learning processes back in school.

*Continuous professional development (CPD)*

Sequence of training events such as workshops, degree, courses, programs, conferences, often delivered by ‘experts’ with which teachers having little responsibility to determine content and no structured teacher learning processes back in the school.

*Professional learning*

Long-term approach. Teachers have strong influence in determining the content. Multiple teacher learning can be a collaborative form of this process (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009, p. 8-12).

The concept of professional development above implies an expert’s responsibility for the teacher’s contents of learning. Day (1999) emphasizes:

Professional development opportunities must provide a range of learning experiences with encourage teachers to reflect upon and inquire into their thinking and practice through interaction between their own and others’ experience, so that they are able to embrace the challenge of new teaching roles and see these as challenges rather than burdens to be borne (p. 201).
Day describes teaching as a complex process, as he calls it ‘synthesis of the head and heart’ (p. 2). It demands interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as well as personal and professional commitment. Teachers may learn and enhance their skills and knowledge by experience, but it limits their development. CPD is a continuing process of professional development and teachers may be able to continuously learn new skills and knowledge by participating in events. The problem with CPD is that teachers’ professional development may be interrupted when they stop participating in training events for some reason, because teachers are not responsible for the contents of training events, and it does not stimulate their autonomy for learning.

Professional learning is the collaborative form of professional development and it is about ‘educating teachers’ rather than ‘training’ them (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009, p. 11). Roberts and Pruitt (2003) emphasize that professional development is essential in order to collaboratively improve children’s learning as a team. Since its nature encourages teachers’ collaborative learning, teachers take responsibilities for decision making about what they need to learn and aim at in order to develop as a team. It respects teachers’ autonomy and support to foster educational personnel’s collaborative learning culture and interdependence, which is often called ‘professional learning community’ (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; DuFour, 2004; Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009).

2.1.8 Professional learning community

To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results (DuFour, 2004, p. 6).

As the quote above explains, a professional learning community is a team of learners, in this context educational personnel, who collaboratively analyze, discuss and work for children’s positive outcomes. DuFour suggested three core principles as ‘3 Big Ideas’:

1. Ensuring that students learn;
2. Culture of collaboration;
3. A focus on results (p. 8-11).

The first idea describes that students’ learning is a motivation for educational personnel to improve their work. They ask themselves what makes children’s learning successful and how they can approach it. Quick response to children’s needs and directive and additional assistance are
expected when children are struggling. The second idea is that educational personnel work together to achieve their collective purpose to enhance children’s learning and they foster a collaborative culture. A team of professionals analyze and improve their practice together. It is an ongoing cycle of questioning and answering to deepen their knowledge and understanding of practice and issues. As a result, children’s achievement is also enhanced. The final idea is to focus on how children’s learning outcomes are produced. Educational personnel can work individually, but they can ask their colleagues to peer review collected data or results. Those results may not be positive, but they need to face it because it can be a motivation for continual improvement of the team.

Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009) point out that a community does not easily appear, so it is something to nurture so that it does not disappear. As DeFour (2004) suggests in his three big ideas of professional learning community, Roberts and Pruitt (2003) also describe that professional learning community is ‘a culture of collaborative instruction’ (p. 117).

While nurturing a professional learning community, a team of professionals may confront some challenges associated with understanding of collective goals and individual personnel’s motivation towards their work. When Sigurðardóttir (2010) conducted research on three Icelandic schools’ effectiveness, she discovered that great aptitude for a team’s collaborative learning was recognized when they focus on discussing subject teaching rather than task and management issues. She also points out the tendency of Icelandic educational personnel to work independently rather than interdependently. They do not know much about each other’s practices. It hinders the improvement of school effectiveness and she suggests that school principals and school personnel should generate more time for collaborative work such as team-teaching.

In her article on exploring complex relationships among several relevant concepts about professionalism, Evans (2008) explains that sense of professionalism varies according to people. She continues that professionalism consists of ‘professionality’, which refers to knowledge and skills, and a team of professionalism creates ‘professional culture’. For professional development, she emphasizes that improving knowledge, skills and practice is important. But these improvements require cooperation of others. Roberts and Pruitt (2003) suggest that educational personnel open their classroom and invite their colleagues to observe and discuss what has been done and learned continually. Throughout the process of fostering a professional learning community, communication, reflection and interde-
pendency to share responsibility among educational personnel should be enhanced and valued.

2.1.9 Pedagogues and democratic professionalism

Challenges may remain in childcare, but Oberhuemer (2005) points out that the quality of childcare services is increasing in many European countries. She also states that personnel’s roles vary. For example, she discusses the Danish and Swedish pedagogues’ extensive roles in society. In both countries, public funding is sufficient to support pedagogues’ professional work because of the value of women and childcare in society. Its training scheme offers 3.5 years of full time professional training for college or university level. After completion of the training, pedagogues are qualified to work; in Denmark, they can work at various social sectors, and in case of Sweden, within the educational system and they have the title ‘teacher.’

In Denmark, a pedagogue has an occupational role within the social welfare sector and it is in a broad conceptual framework. It allows them to work with various age groups and with various backgrounds of people. Thus their working environments vary: preschool, out of school services, residential care, and facilities for people with special needs. Its training scheme is popular, even among men more so than in other countries. The system is inclusive and it gives an opportunity for mature students with prior learning or working experience to be able to take part. Since the project of the training scheme for Danish pedagogues was launched in 1992, its effectiveness has been studied and the government proposed many revisions for improvement such as to enhance the theoretical knowledge base.

On the other hand, Swedish pedagogues’ role is that of ‘teacher’ since they work in education sectors and their field of work responsibility may be limited compared to Danish pedagogues. In Sweden, all early childhood services are put under the responsibility of the education sector according to the reform of 1996 and pedagogues are qualified to work with preschool children between 1 and 5 years old. Since 2001, Swedish pedagogues take a common university degree-based program as school teachers and out-of-school service workers. Acquiring a higher educational degree enables Swedish pedagogues to be able to work with older children of up to 11 and 12 years old.

Oberhuemer admires these models as having the ‘explicit goal of developing a new relationship between schools, early childhood centers and out-of school services based on shared understandings of childhood,
knowledge, learning and care’ (p. 10). She continues that pedagogues’ roles are significant and they support youngsters’ growth and development within a collaborative culture of institutions and the community.

For traditional practitioners, the field of practice is usually specified in certain age groups but pedagogues are expected to work more flexibly. Moss (2006a) interprets the concept of pedagogy as ‘education in its broadest sense’ (p. 73). Moss and Petrie (2002) describe that the pedagogues deal with children holistically. In addition to Oberhuemer’s introduction of pedagogues in Denmark, Moss and Petrie describe the Danish pedagogue’s training system as having become more integrated since 1992. It used to be three types of training which were divided according to age groups: for children aged 3 to 6; for work in free-time provision for school-age children; and for under 3 year olds, in residential settings for looked-after children, or with children and adults with disabilities (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 142). In Denmark, pedagogues' work is extensive such as including early childhood institutions, free-time centers, and residential settings. Integration of the training system enables them to work effectively in their working environment. Pedagogues understand every child’s ‘whole body, mind, emotions, creativity, history, and social approach’ (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 143). According to the Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators (2006), most Danish pedagogues work in early childhood settings and they are comparable to the position of ‘preschool teacher’ in other countries. In addition, Oberhuemer (2005) argues that ‘early childhood pedagogues need to be able to reflect openly on their personal and professional beliefs, relating these to the expectations arising from the documented principles’ (p. 12). Moss talks of them as ‘a new type of worker’ (cited in Cable & Miller, 2008, p. 174) and values their potential in the early childcare services.

Pedagogues’ work meets changes in economics, the context of the labor market, the family system, and demands from family and society. As the pedagogues’ roles become versatile, the childcare workforce requires more alternative ways to conceptualize its professional role. The concept of ‘democratic professionalism’ suggests a new perspective in professionalism and Oberhuemer (2005) defines it as ‘participatory relationships and alliances’ and it focuses on ‘collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders’ (p. 13). She introduces four levels of activities to enhance democratic professionalism as:

1. Interacting with children;
2. Center management and leadership;
3. Partnerships with parents;
4. The professional knowledge base, autonomy in decision making in curriculum, and the content of their professional practice.

In the first level, it expects educational personnel’s professional attitude to respect children as ‘social agents, participating in constructing and influencing their own lives’ (p. 13). Educational personnel are expected to listen to what children say, try to understand children’s perspectives, their interests and questions as well as their intentions with professional skills. It makes them learn to respect children as individuals and involve anyone in democratic dialogue and decision making. The second level distributes leadership, sharing knowledge and collective learning, management and changes in the organization to which they belong. The third level is finding ways to communicate with every single parent meaningfully. The final level of activity is to develop personnel’s knowledge base in order to encourage educational personnel’s self-reflection. It is important for them to reflect on their beliefs and values from different points of view because there are different ways of perceiving things. Oberhuemer explains it as the ‘professional skill to sensitively discuss pedagogical and ethical view points against a background of increasing cultural, social and economic diversity to recognize and examine both personal and publicly endorsed assumptions’ (p. 14).

Oberhuemer’s four levels of activity have similarities to a culture of professional learning community I have described earlier, but the difference may be that democratic professionalism is a concept while professional learning community is a culture.

Whitty and Wisby (2006) point out that democratic professionalism suggests that responsibility which educational personnel take is not only inside of the classroom but also their surroundings. Their professional roles have to be acknowledged broadly and they take collective responsibilities with their colleagues, regardless of their title, and other stakeholders. Whitty and Wisby also suggest that it is the time to re-conceptualize professionalism and they note their point of collaboration for democratic professionalism:

It now needs to begin working with others to develop approaches to education that relate not only to the legitimate aspirations of the teaching workforce but also those of the wider school workforce and the wider society — and that must include those groups which have hitherto not been well-served either by the teaching profession or by the state (p. 55).
In addition to the above, Whitty & Wisby (2006) and Whitty (2008) emphasize that democratic professionalism has a greater possibility to be enacted by practitioners in the field, and they conclude that this new perspective empowers teachers and pupils for a democratic future.

Democratic professionalism questions the traditional understandings of professionalism and the necessity for involving different groups of people in childcare. It implies that the early childhood workforce, who used to be excluded from decision making because of their insufficient qualification, can take part in professional collaboration with others. But it requires individual educational personnel’s professional development which is discussed earlier in this chapter.

Compared to the traditional view of professionalism as education and qualification-based (Katz, 1988; Slin, 1988; Spodek, Saracho & Peters, 1988), democratic professionalism may be more flexible, inclusive and autonomous.

2.2 History and the context of preschool education in Iceland

Every country has its own preschool education system, and the Icelandic preschool education system is developed upon its historical and cultural background. ‘Playschool’ is the direct translation of Icelandic term ‘leiðskóli’, but I use the term ‘preschool’ when I refer to the Icelandic preschool system.

2.2.1 History

The history of the Icelandic preschool system is built upon its characteristic as a daycare center, which was first opened by the Women's Alliance in Reykjavik in 1920’s. Its enrollment was limited for poor or single-parent children while their parents were working (Einarsdóttir, 2003a, 2006). In 1940, a preschool was also opened by the Women's Alliance for a part time basis while the daycare was full time. In 1973, the Ministry of Education took both daycare centers and preschools under their jurisdiction, which enabled them to be regarded as a part of the national education policy (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Although the concepts of daycare centers and preschools were separately used in Iceland until 1991, the difference in their curriculum was in the length of their care, and together they were called ‘leiðskóli’ (literary translated as ‘playschool’) in Icelandic (Einarsdóttir, 2003c, 2006). Finally the Ministry of Education legalized the preschools as the first level of education in the Icelandic school system in
1994 for children under 6 years old (Pre Schools Act no.90/2008) but it was neither compulsory nor free of charge (Einarsdóttir, 2006).

2.2.2 Influences from abroad

Traditionally, Icelandic preschool culture is influenced by other Nordic countries and teaching theories and practice in Iceland are influenced by Europe and North America. Because of its geographical condition, Iceland has had been culturally influenced by both Europe and North America (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Many Icelandic students studied abroad, and upon their return to Iceland, they have also brought various pedagogical approaches such as High/Scope from the United States, Reggio Emilia from Italy and the Waldorf approach from Austria (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Today many preschools in Iceland adapt some essences of respective pedagogies to improve their curriculum (Einarsdóttir, 2006).

2.2.3 Cultural context

From the cultural point of view, Icelandic children have often been raised without having much adult supervision (Einarsdóttir, 2002, 2006). Traditionally, Icelandic women went to sea among men to take care of fishermen on the boat (Lacy, 1998) or Icelandic parents worked inside or just outside of the house on farmland, and children were not only expected to contribute to the work of the family but also allowed to play freely (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Even today, Icelanders recognize farming life as the model of traditional Icelandic culture (Koester, 1995). This situation has developed children's freedom and independence as well as self-reliance (Lacy, 1998; Einarsdóttir, 2002) which has influenced the fundamental views of the preschool system.

Although the enrollment for preschool is not compulsory, almost all parents choose to send their children to preschool. According to the OECD (2011), 55% of children under 3 years old and 95.9% of children between 3 to 5 years old went to Icelandic preschools in 2008. After the economic crisis, it might be getting more difficult for parents of young children under 3 to send them to preschool. According to the marketing report by Íslandsbanki (2011), the average birth rate in Iceland between 2008 and 2010 increased by 15.5% compared to before the crisis. Ward (2009) described one of the reasons as increased unemployment leaving more time for procreation. The number of children has been increasing, but cost cutting in the preschool sector has been also conducted, such as reduction of staff (Ministry of education, science and culture of Iceland, 2011).
implies that the number of children’s enrollment for preschool has to be decreased despite the intention of unemployed parents who wish to send their children to preschool so they can seek employment. At the same time, staff may be over loaded due to covering the lack of manpower by combining classes or not hiring extra staff (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, 2011).

In November 2011, the City of Reykjavík announced that they try to plan their 2012 budget to be able to offer all children born in 2010 to enter preschool (Reykjavíkurborg, 2011). This research and the news article above imply that many parents value preschool and expect children to start attending early.

A qualitative research about Icelandic parents' expectations for their children's preschooling shows that they wish their children to have opportunities to develop social skills rather than gaining knowledge and other skills (Einarsdóttir, 2010). Originally, Icelandic preschool education was established upon the charity work of the Women’s Alliance in Reykjavík to save poor children in the early twentieth century (Einarsdóttir, 2003c). Today Icelandic parents view preschool as a place to make friends and experience democracy to live in modern society (Einarsdóttir, 2010). Both function and expectations for preschool seem to have been changing from the establishment of preschool in Iceland and today.

2.2.4 Caregiving-Teaching

Although Icelandic preschool education is a part of the educational system, its concept was built upon the idea of ‘caregiving’ and ‘freedom from adult supervision’ which were apart from terms such as ‘knowledge’, ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ (Einarsdóttir, 2006). While politicians try to include more academic subjects (Einarsdóttir, 2006), Icelandic teachers did not feel comfortable using the term ‘teaching’ because they could not connect it with their practice (Einarsdóttir, 2003c). Teaching and caregiving were interrelated in Iceland, but the concept of caregiving was considered to come first by teachers, because children could learn better if they were cared, loved and respected (Einarsdóttir, 2003c). Icelandic preschool personnel purposefully create a comfortable atmosphere for children to feel like they are at home and the relationship between children and adults may be like a family (Einarsdóttir, 2006).

Einarsdóttir (2006) divided Icelandic preschool teachers’ proper roles into three camps:
1. Emphasize free play and development with providing care and emotional support.
2. Educate children as they are in the first level of education.
3. Ensure both care giving and teaching before children start formal compulsory education.

Einarsdóttir points out that it is a struggle of the Icelandic preschool system whether they remain traditional or cosmopolitan while the country becomes globalized.

2.2.5 Teachers’ belief in children’s freedom

Research revealed that Icelandic preschool teachers' practice used to be based on ‘freedom’ (Einarsdóttir, 2002). Similar to how Icelandic children were traditionally raised by parents, teachers provided freedom in play and freedom in choice of activities the children wanted to do. Research showed that about 50% of a day was devoted to the activities which children chose by themselves (Einarsdóttir, 2002). But freedom in this context did not mean that teachers let children do whatever they wished. Teachers provided enough space, safe environment, equipment, materials and time for children to play and do their activities freely within these factors (Einarsdóttir, 2002). While children were playing, Icelandic teachers would spend their time differently according to their circumstances or beliefs (Einarsdóttir, 1998). Some of them played with children or stayed by them, but some might be doing preparation or talking with others. It was common in Icelandic preschools that children were allowed to play without adults' supervision (Einarsdóttir, 2003c). The teacher who did not play with children claimed that being unsupervised would give children a chance for autonomy, and she would intervene if there was some problem (Einarsdóttir, 2002). This shows that Icelandic preschool teachers believed that offering freedom is important, but they also had to keep an eye on children's independent activities.

2.2.6 Teachers’ qualification

Until 1998, it was not required for preschool personnel to obtain a Bachelor's degree (Einarsdóttir, 2002). Educated and qualified teachers used to be often in administrative positions, and childcare was left to the least educated personnel (Einarsdóttir, 2006). It might have been demanding for the least educated preschool personnel to acquire Bachelor’s degrees, but various complex social issues made their educational status even more challenging. For example, preschool
children’s smooth transition to primary school made early childhood educators concerned that preschool teachers and primary school teachers might need to have similar educational background (Einarsdóttir, 2003a). According to the Act on the Education and Recruitment of Teachers and Head Teachers in Pre-School, Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School no. 87 / 2008, it has been required for preschool teachers to obtain Master’s degrees since 2008 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, 2008). Those who received the legal title of ‘preschool teacher’ before 2008 are allowed to keep their rights. This law also regulates that at least 2/3 of the childcare workforce at all preschools in Iceland should be filled by preschool teachers.

The dilemma behind this act seems that while the administrators and policy makers are well-educated, the number of qualified preschool teachers who actually face the children and practice their teaching is lacking. To substitute for qualified teacher positions, preschools are allowed to hire unqualified personnel. It is legally accepted as the Preschool Act No. 90 (2008) states, ‘Non-skilled personnel may participate in the care and education of children, provided that skilled preschool teachers are not available’ (p. 3). In 2010, preschool teachers with diplomas are 34% (Statistic Iceland, 2011). This means that preschools can hire uneducated personnel to take a great deal of responsibility for children’s education while they lack in qualified teachers or have to cut their budget. As Einarsdóttir (2006) criticizes this situation as a ‘serious threat to Icelandic preschool system’ (p. 161), it could cause a deterioration in quality and professionalism of teachers and influence children. These acts may resolve the current situation to enhance quality of preschool workforce, but it may take years to achieve the government goal to fill each preschool with preschool teachers, because a complete education to become a preschool teacher takes at least five years. Each preschool should be expected to improve the quality of childcare while preschool teachers are not yet available.

2.3 Summary

In the first half of this chapter, I have explored various concepts associated with professionalism. ‘Quality’, ‘reflection’ and ‘identity’ are acknowledged as main themes when we discuss professionalism in early childhood (Cable & Miller, 2008). In addition to these three themes, I suggested ‘professional characteristics’ which represent early childhood personnel’s effectiveness and responsiveness in their practice. ‘Professional development’ consists of
the different levels of personnel’s development as a professional and they require continuous reflection and interaction with others. ‘Professional learning community’ and ‘democratic professionalism’ are both strongly connected to professional development. These two terms have similar meanings at a glance, and I tried to sort out their differences: ‘Professional learning community’ is a culture to encourage educational personnel’s collaborative learning to enhance children’s learning. ‘Democratic professionalism’ is a concept which tries to reconceptualize early childhood personnel’s professionalism with four levels of activity (Oberhuemer, 2005).

The Icelandic preschool system is explored in the second half of the chapter. The Icelandic preschool system has been developed upon the history of children’s social welfare. Icelandic preschools’ pedagogical approaches are influenced by North America and Europe but childcare personnel seem to remain traditional in their view of raising children with respect, love and care while offering them freedom in their choices. Icelandic parents also expect their children to develop social skills. A threat which the Icelandic preschool system is facing is the lack of qualified preschool teachers and there are only 34 % of qualified preschool teachers in Iceland in 2010 (Statistic Iceland, 2011). It is a challenge for the Icelandic preschool system to fill each preschool with many qualified preschool teachers and they still rely on unqualified personnel’s manpower. Moreover, another challenge is whether the Icelandic preschool system will remain traditional in its view which prioritizes caregiving, or enhance learning, or integrate traditional and cosmopolitan views to meet the globalizing society (Einarsdóttir, 2006).

Understanding the concepts of professionalism and the Icelandic preschool context is necessary as I will discuss the Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s professionalism and sense of security later in this dissertation. In the next chapter, Hjallastefnan and their system are introduced in detail.
3 Hjallastefnan

Hjallastefnan (‘the Hjalli model’ in English) is a pedagogical method founded by Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir in Hafnarfjörður, Iceland in 1989. It started with one preschool in Hafnarfjörður, but there are twelve preschools and five primary schools on a semi-private basis all around Iceland, and they employ about 380 personnel today. The newest school for two to fifteen year olds was built in autumn 2012.

The name also refers to their semi-private preschools and primary schools. Their practice may be well-known in Iceland, but literature or research regarding their practice is limited. My knowledge is built on data from the essay written by the founder (Ólafsdóttir, 1999), their booklet (Ólafsdóttir, 2011), preliminary research in February 2011, and informal interviews with school directors and preschool personnel. In this section, the focus is on Hjallastefnan’s six principles, school context, and training systems.

3.1 Six principles

Hjallastefnan has its original principles to stay focused on their practice and to achieve their goal that ‘every child should have all possibilities in the world regardless of their sex’ (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). These principles summarize their school philosophy as follows:

1. Children and parents - Expect children’s different needs;
2. Staff - Promote positive attitudes;
3. Environment - Provide suitable learning environments for every child;
4. Material - Promote children’s creativity and imagination;
5. Nature - Teach children to enjoy nature;
6. Society (Community) - Educate children with positive and caring ways.

These principles should be reflected in children’s daily activities, and school personnel are expected to strive for children, parents, and themselves, as well.

3.2 School context

Hjallastefnan is built on the philosophy that all children should have equal opportunities and possibilities, regardless of their sex or traditional gender
roles, to achieve equal rights. Although the current Icelandic school system is built upon the concept of inclusion (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2004), boys and girls are segregated within the school building because it is believed that boys and girls need different approaches. For example in the boys’ department, different age groups of boys stay in one big classroom with smaller cells. They are divided into different groups according to their schedule and curriculum. Basically, all boys spend the day together, and the same format is applied to the girls’ department. For only a short time per day, boys and girls are mixed, to do some activities. This limited unification is regarded as an important part of their education to foster children’s feelings of cooperation with respect.

Positive discipline is Hjallastefnan’s method to encourage children to achieve equal rights. According to one of the school directors, school is the first place where children experience social rules, order, and routine, and where children can practice in visible and tangible ways before they enter society. For example, there is vinyl tape on the floors, the walls, and even the inside of drawers which are divided into many small sections with the tape. Children know where to put things away. There are arrows in the hallway, to point to which side children should walk. The daily routine is well structured and repetitive, and children learn courtesy and manners throughout their school life. It is believed that these aspects promote children’s sense of security. Positivity is also expected among school personnel’s practice and attitude. It is believed that positivity helps teachers deal with issues and express their opinion clearly, for a better outcome. Teachers greet children, families, and other colleagues with smiles and speak in a friendly, but respectful, manner.

Creativity also seems to be a key word. Open-ended play materials are used in proactive ways to stimulate children’s imagination, because versatility offers possibilities to change them into things they wish to make. Teachers and children make clay and chalk by themselves, and create their own books. There is not much decoration on the wall, because it is believed that it interrupts children’s concentration.

In addition to the school characteristics I have explained above, during my preliminary research some boys’ and girls’ teachers expressed their feelings for security in teaching at Hjallastefnan. School curriculum is structured and the daily schedule is fixed (see Table 1). School personnel can expect what will happen next and they will be prepared.
### Table 1. A basic daily schedule at Hjallastefnan preschool.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 – 9:00</td>
<td>Children arrive, breakfast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 – 9:15</td>
<td>Circle time (Samvera)</td>
<td>Cleaning up the breakfast table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:15 – 9:30</td>
<td>Group time (Hópatími)</td>
<td>Inside/outside/integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 – 11:45</td>
<td>Choice play time (Val fundur leiktími)</td>
<td>Personnel take turns for coffee break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:45 – 12:00</td>
<td>Circle time (Samvera)</td>
<td>Lunch preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 – 12:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Cleaning up the lunch table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 14:00</td>
<td>Group time (Hópatími)</td>
<td>Inside/outside/integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:00 – 15:00</td>
<td>Choice play time (Val fundur leiktími)</td>
<td>Personnel take turns for coffee break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:00 – 16:30</td>
<td>Refreshment, departure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 In-service training system

Staff training at Hjallastefnan depends upon their school directors, but the administration also offers general training for newcomers, and an annual conference for all employees. They also have optional training, for those who do not obtain qualification, in collaboration with local upper-secondary schools and an educational institution.

#### 3.3.1 General training for new teachers

Hjallastefnan has expanded rapidly in the last few years. In 2005 there were three schools, but the number increased up to ten by 2008. There are about 380 personnel working at Hjallastefnan schools in Iceland. According to two preschool directors, the ratio of qualified and unqualified staff may be about fifty-fifty. However, schools still need to rely on unqualified assistants.

Offering consistent training and building strategies for teachers’ improvement depends upon school directors at each school. Besides that, the administration has started offering two days of six hours training for newly started personnel, regardless of their background since 2008. Demand for formal training was proposed by directors who directly deal...
with new teachers who might not have any knowledge regarding Hjallastefnan or early childhood education. Until then, the founder visited schools, offered training and joined meetings as often as possible. But the expansion of schools made it difficult for her to offer sufficient training.

General training for new personnel takes place in autumn and January, when many newcomers start working, so they can do their job smoothly. The number of participants varies, but there could be from fifteen up to thirty. The door is also open for experienced Hjallastefnan teachers to brush up their knowledge and skills.

Content and trainers are planned by the preschool counselor. She invites school directors or teachers who are good at certain skills, such as storytelling, yoga, physical exercise, and dancing, to show what could be done in their teaching.

Participants are expected to read some material, such as the school booklet, to have prior knowledge of Hjallastefnan. The preschool counselor regrets that there was not enough reading material available for participants to read, because their focus has been on their daily practice with children. But the personnel handbook with school guidelines has been updated and became available with more detailed information in 2012. Participants are not asked to submit an essay or any assignment to summarize their learning or reflection. It may be related to their ideologies that they do not give pressure or stress to children. It applies to teachers as well. Instead, sometime after training, school directors are encouraged to invite participants to speak about their feelings and maintain good communication. It depends upon school directors, and the administration does not receive specific feedback for reference.

One of their challenges is to keep participants’ motivation towards the training. The preschool counselor wishes to offer more time, but she feels participants lack in their enthusiasm because it is after working hours and participants did not have much energy. However, she noted that she felt much better interaction among participants when she had less than twenty participants. Hjallastefnan seems to be strict about their hiring criteria and people who wish to work there are expected to have high motivation towards work. But one of the school directors explains that some people just apply because they need to work and do not show much interest in working with children at Hjallastefnan. Time for training is limited and each participant works in different teaching environments. School directors’ support, to promote participants’ autonomy and independence after training, is very important.
3.3.2 Hjallabrú – assistant teachers’ training

Hjallastefnan used to collaborate with some local upper secondary schools and other educational institutions, to offer one year comprehensive training for their employees called ‘Hjallabrú (Hjalli’s bridge)’ but it is not offered today, due to financial reasons.

For Icelandic public preschool employees, there is the advanced training system called ‘Leikskólarliðabrú (preschool assistant bridge)’ offered by Mímir-Símenntun, which is a limited private company owned by the Icelandic Labor Union. ‘Leikskólarliðabrú’ is not for rookies. In the case of Reykjavík, any preschool employees who do not have proper education to work at preschool are encouraged to take the basic training called ‘Fagnámskeið starfsmanna leikskóla (Professional education for preschool staff)’. After finishing 230 hours of course work and three years of working experience at preschool, they are eligible to apply for ‘Leikskólarliðabrú (assistant preschool teacher’s bridge)’ to get a promotion to the title of ‘teacher assistant’. It makes a difference in their responsibilities at work and salary.

At Hjallastefnan, ‘Hjallabrú’ has a similar training component to Leikskólarliðabrú. The difference is that content is customized for the Hjallastefnan way. General subjects such as pedagogy, psychology, childhood development, nutrition, and daily routine are taught, as well as other practical things that benefit preschool personnel when they work at Hjallastefnan.

Although it is not compulsory, many Hjallastefnan preschool personnel participate in this program. Seminars are held on every Thursday afternoons plus, one Friday and Saturday a month for a year. A diploma is given upon completion.

3.3.3 Annual conference

There is an annual conference for all Hjallastefnan personnel across the country. They gather in Reykjavik on one Friday afternoon and head back home on Saturday morning. The first conference was held in 1997 and it used to take place biannually, but for whole days. They stayed in the countryside, and participants spent two nights together.

The main purpose of this conference is to offer an opportunity to meet everyone, whom they usually do not get to see. The reception in the evening is a very important part of the conference for everyone to strengthen their unity as ‘the big Hjalli group’.
Content of the conference is decided by the committee consisting of school directors and administrators. They are divided into groups with those who are in charge of developing preschools or primary schools. For example, one of the teams is the so-called ‘Hjalli-culture’ that plans the conference and reception for all staff. Then some take care of finances. Content is finalized by the founder and the administration, but they respect the committee’s autonomy. Content changes every year. In 2010, besides the big group gathering, teachers were divided into small groups and received assignments to continuously work on after the conference. In 2009 and 2011, it was lecture style. It is getting challenging for them to plan activities for everyone to participate in at the conference, as the number of participants grows each year.

3.3.4 Hjallastefnan’s teachers’ guidelines

In daily practice, personnel at Hjallastefnan are expected to follow the school guidelines (written in Icelandic), which specify Hjallastefnan’s pedagogical method and philosophy regarding school environment. The guidelines are supposed to be revised when needed, so that teachers and staff can keep their knowledge updated. It contains:

- The rules and resolutions of the school including the six principles;
- Job descriptions;
- Expectations from the school.

Job descriptions should be defined clearly, and every personnel can find exactly what needs to be conducted. The guidelines also describe the procedures of daily work, and ways of coping and responding to possible situations. This is not open to the public.
4 Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain my research design and question, data collection and the three steps I took, purposeful sampling, treating data, terminology, ethical issues, and limitations of the research.

4.1 Research design and question

This is a case study of qualitative research. Lichtman (2010) describes that case study is ‘an in-depth examination’ and it ‘involves the specific and detailed study of a case or cases’ (p. 81). The key aspect of case study is that ‘you identify the characteristic, trait or behavior in advance and then identify individuals who have or are thought to have the characteristics’ (p. 82). I had already finished my preliminary research and found my interest, but I did not have enough knowledge about the school yet.

Through this research, I try to explore my research question:

What do personnel working in Hjallastefnan schools value most at Hjallastefnan?

Cases can be limited to study a particular behavior (Lichtman, 2010), and case study is a suitable research design to explore teachers’ value at work.

4.2 Data collection

My main data collection methods were observations and interviews. Preschool personnel’s and the administrators’ voices were collected in order to explore their views on teaching this specific pedagogical method ‘Hjallastefnan’. Throughout the research, I observed preschool personnel in two preschools, took notes, and conducted interviews in order to discover their values, as well as read documents, such as an essay, and the English booklet written by the founder (Ólafsdóttir, 1999, 2011).

For data collection, I took three steps:

1. Meeting the founder;
2. Observing children and personnel’s interaction;
3. Interviews with two personnel.

Details of each step will be described in the next sections.
4.2.1 Meeting the founder

After the preliminary research, I visited the founder at one of their schools in the Reykjavik area, in September 2011. I had already been to some Hjallastefnan schools by then with permission. The letter of consent was presented during the meeting with the founder, but not with the potential research participants. I also tried to read literature regarding early childhood teachers. Before meeting the founder, I got permission to start visiting the school, to gain general ideas from the preschool counselor. It included these points: purpose of the research; the research question; period of research; and their participation on a voluntary basis as well as promising confidentiality of information I might learn. Then, I received the official permission for the research and asked her about:

- her view of Hjallastefnan in the past and today;
- how she developed its pedagogy;
- what she expects of teachers; and
- how much time she spends at each school and/or works with the staff.

In this research, I expected it would be essential to find out about the founder’s ideas, and how close she and teachers could work together. If teachers have opportunities to speak directly with the founder, they can develop a better understanding of the pedagogy and generate motivation for their practice. After this meeting with the founder, the preschool counselor answered my questions when I needed additional information.

4.2.2 Observing children and personnel’s interaction

At the suggestion of the founder and the preschool counselor, I selected two preschools in the country: Mountain School and Ocean School (both pseudonym).

The purpose of observation was to find out what personnel working in Hjallastefnan schools value most at Hjallastefnan. Thus I focused on observing how preschool personnel interact and work with children during this period.

I officially started visiting for my observation in September 2011 and finished in March 2012. By my second visit, I selected Kate at Mountain School and Maria at Ocean School for candidates for my project, based on the purposeful sampling method that I will describe in detail later. I visited both schools seven times each. While I was at school, I usually stayed from 9 am until 2 pm. When my time allowed, I tried to stay longer. To get to
know how personnel interact with their children, I took the role of a participant observer (Lichtman, 2010). I was in their classroom, zipped up children’s winter jackets, went outside to go on sleigh rides, explored in the woods, sat at the lunch table, helped them clean the table, sang and danced together, followed their coffee break, and tried to observe them as closely as possible. This was also to get familiar with the preschool personnel, to reduce their stress of having a researcher in their teaching environment, as well as collecting the spontaneous voices of their feelings.

4.2.3 Interviews with two personnel

At the end of the observation period, I interviewed two times with Kate and Maria about their work and views about Hjallastefnan. They took about 50 to 60 minutes each. I visited their schools and interviewed one personnel at a time. By the time we had interviews, I felt that we had built a good rapport and that I had gained their trust. Questions for interviews were both semi-structured and unstructured. I had a list of basic questions to ask, but I let it flow when they had things to say. Before starting our interviews, I always asked them for permission to use the IC recorder for my reference. I tried to remind them that they would not have to say things if they did not want to, but both of them always tried to answer my questions. It was difficult for them, especially for Maria, when I asked about their feelings. She could tell me her feelings in Icelandic, but I did not understand it. I often had to repeat what she meant. Examples of questions I had in my list were:

- their basic information (education, overall teaching experience, Hjallastefnan experience and something relevant);
- how they describe their relationship with children and colleagues; how they reflect on their teaching.

During interviews, I tried not to ask them direct questions such as their relationship with children and their values. I had a list of sample questions but I tried to let our dialogue flow. As our dialogue developed, these themes which I will introduce in next chapter naturally appeared.

Lichtman (2010) suggests finishing the interview question with ‘Do you have anything you want to add that we have not talked about?’ because your interviewee might give you additional information which surprises you (p. 145). At the end of interviews, I asked, as Lichtman suggested. Kate and Maria usually started telling me more stories of themselves, or things they experienced, which sometimes gave me invaluable information or key words that they did not say during the interviews.
4.3 Purposeful Sampling

Participants were chosen by purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2008). In this sampling method, participants are intentionally selected ‘to learn or understand the central phenomenon’ (p. 214). To select my research participants, Kate and Maria, I consulted criteria which Einarsdóttir (2000, p. 72) set for her research with two Icelandic preschool teachers’ beliefs, about early childhood education and the goals of their programs.

Participants must:

- Be willing to participate in study;
- Have been teaching at least five years at Hjallastefnan;
- Be dedicated to their work;
- Be confident in what they are doing;
- Be a likeable person from whom I can learn;
- Be teaching the same sex and age group.

Participants’ qualifications were not a concern when I was setting criteria and selecting participants, because it was natural for me to think that dedicated preschool personnel should be qualified. But, one of the directors told me that Maria could be one of the top personnel of all Hjallastefnan schools, but she is not qualified. It made me curious to find out how unqualified personnel could be called one of the best personnel. I decided to study Maria. When I met Kate, who has a Bachelor’s degree in compulsory education, I could feel her passion and dedication to work. I decided that Kate could be a good example to explore my research question. Kate and Maria are responsible for four year old boys. Neither of them ever participated in any research like this, but they were willing to have me around and generously shared their feelings. After finishing the observations, I asked Maria how she felt about having an observer in the classroom, she said, ‘you were like a fly on the wall’. I was glad that I was not disturbing her practice.

4.3.1 Kate

Kate is 39 years old, a qualified personnel with a Bachelor’s degree in compulsory education and she works at one of the Hjallastefnan preschools called Mountain School. She always wanted to become a teacher since she was a child, because of the influence of the book called ‘The new teacher (Nýi kennarinn)’ by Jane Carruth. It is about a girl and her new teacher. Kate had a similar experience as the main character had.

Prior to her bachelor’s study in education, she began her academic career with anthropology and English studies, because being an
anthropologist or a linguist was one of her dreams, besides teaching. She continued studying English, in addition to Icelandic, while she was studying to become a teacher with a bachelor’s degree. Those experiences in different fields from education expand her knowledge, and she tries to combine them and utilize them in her teaching.

She had taught in the public school system for ten years, but decided to change her career to a preschool personnel when her daughter was enrolled in one of the Hjallastefnan preschools. This is her seventh year at Hjallastefnan, and she describes that she loves working with people and that Hjallastefnan is part of her life, as she applies her values in both her private and professional life. She also speaks excellent English which made our communication go smoothly.

4.3.2 Maria

Maria is 45 years old, an unqualified personnel, but her reputation within Hjallastefnan is remarkable. She works at one of Hjallastefnan preschools called Ocean School. Her school director described her as one of the five top personnel among the 380 workforce in all Hjallastefnan schools. She first started working there as a janitor. Soon the founder noticed that Maria was good with children and found the potential as a preschool assistant. The founder asked Maria to work with children. She never thought of being a childcare assistant at preschool, but it seems that it perfectly fit her character. She has been with Hjallastefnan for twenty years as an assistant and is a mother of three children.

Maria took a one year in-service training ‘Hjallabrú’ and received a diploma in 2007. That was the only formal training for preschool assistant education she took, but she is a self-educated assistant who reads books and tries to learn things she wonders about. She often has discussions with her colleagues if she comes up with questions or problems.

Maria is relaxed and cheerful when she is with children. While observing her, she was always singing or made everything into a song. Her appearance also reminded me of Maria from the classic movie ‘The Sound of Music’. I decided to call her Maria from the first day I met her.

4.4 Treating data

On each one of my visits, I took field notes and transcribed the voice data I recorded during the interviews. I also had discussions with the directors and the preschool counselor when I had questions. They allowed me to ask any questions or have discussions regarding Hjallastefnan or the Icelandic
preschool system, or even about cultural aspects that might reflect preschool personnel’s practice. I also recorded them with permission and transcribed them. For coding, I went through my field notes and the transcription. Instead of using modern technology such as coding software, I used my daughter’s crayons to color relevant topics. Four big themes appeared for my findings: discipline; motivation for self-study and self-reflection; colleagues; and values.

Data interpretation was also a difficult process. My challenge was to analyze data without misinterpretations or misstatements. Lichtman (2010) pointed out the potential pitfall a researcher might experience while interpreting data that the researcher might over interpret or misinterpret with insufficient data or evidence. After a few visits, I began to feel comfortable being there, and I enjoyed every visit. When I was looking at my field notes at some point, I started feeling my perspective was getting subjective and not balanced. I spent many days and hours at Hjallastefnan, I was becoming over reactive to what I was seeing, because everything I saw seemed unique. I had to rely on personnel’s voices and my interaction with them because I did not have enough English materials or research data about Hjallastefnan. To refresh my vision, I decided to visit other public preschools, to learn more about the Icelandic preschool system in general. In February 2012, my daughter started going to a local Icelandic public preschool, and I started meeting public preschool personnel on a daily basis. It broadened my perspective and helped me analyze my findings from different points of view.

4.5 Terminology

In early childhood education, many different terms are used to explain one thing, but these can be slightly different according to the context or the countries in which they are used. In this section, I will explain the terms I decided to use for my thesis to keep consistency.

4.5.1 Preschool and playschool

In Icelandic, preschool is called ‘leikskóli’ which is literary translated into ‘playschool’ in English. Einarsdóttir (2003a) describes playschool as, ‘general term for out-of-home, group care for children up to six years old in settings other than private homes’ (p. 101). Although playschool is the accurate translation, I decided to use the term ‘preschool’ instead of ‘playschool’ because preschool is often used in literature and legal documents about Icelandic preschools (Einarsdóttir, 2006; PreSchool Act No.90).
4.5.2 Teacher, assistant and personnel

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland (2008) implemented the new act regulating the title of ‘preschool teacher’, requiring them to complete a Master’s degree. This act allows those who had obtained a Bachelor’s degree, before the act became effective, to keep their rights for the title of ‘preschool teacher’. In literature and public understanding regarding Icelandic preschooling, ‘preschool teacher’ is used for a person who is qualified with a Bachelor’s degree in education (Einarsdóttir, 2003b, 2003c) and the position of ‘preschool teacher’s assistant’ is applied to a person who has completed ‘leikskólaliðabrú’ (Mímir-Símenntun, n.d.). A person without a qualification or vocational training working at a preschool is called ‘practitioner with no formal training’, ‘untrained person’ or ‘untrained assistant’ (Einarsdóttir, 1998, p. 99). Research about unqualified preschool staff in Iceland is limited, but the term ‘educational personnel’ is used to point out preschool employees in any position in Icelandic literature (Einarsdóttir, 1998) and the term ‘non-skilled preschool personnel’ is used in law (The Preschool Act no. 90 / 2008). Based on literature and laws regarding preschooling in Iceland, I decided to call adults working in the Hjallastefnan preschool as:

*Preschool teacher* – A person who is qualified with a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in preschool education;

*Preschool assistant* – Unqualified personnel;

*Preschool personnel* – A person either qualified or unqualified with skills and experience.

In Hjallastefnan’s context, one of my research participants, Maria, seems to take the same responsibility as a preschool teacher because of their culture of no hierarchy. However, she is called ‘preschool assistant’ in this thesis because she is not legally qualified. The other participant Kate is called ‘preschool personnel’. She is qualified as a compulsory school teacher, but not a preschool teacher.

4.6 Ethical issues

Throughout the research these ethical issues based on Shamoo and Resnik (2009) came up:

*Autonomy*

When I conducted interviews with preschool personnel or stakeholders, their autonomy should be respected. Participants had the right to stop the
interview whenever they wanted. It was also important to make sure the participants understood the purpose of the study, and that the information I gained would be anonymous and confidential.

**Beneficence**

When the research was carried out, their well-being needed to be promoted. Hjallastefnan administrators, with whom I spoke, told me the lack of research would be one of the things they need to improve. Through my research I would learn their pedagogy, and I expected my questions and results would help them see their practice from different points of view.

**Honesty, objectivity and openness**

It is extremely important to honestly report the data, results, methods, and procedures. Hjalli pedagogy is very unique, and everyone who is involved in their system is very proud of it. This was one of my concerns, that if I found anything negative about their practice, I might be afraid of reporting or suggesting. I needed to strive for objectivity in data analyzing and other aspects of the research where objectivity was required. It was also important to share data, results, and ideas.

**Respect for research subjects**

During school observation, it was necessary to show my best respect to personnel, children, and other stakeholders. I also should not interfere during their time and activities.

Establishing trust with them was my major concern, not only because I was an outsider but also because I was a foreigner from Japan. My cultural background could be so far away from theirs that I could have been like an alien from another planet to them. I knew our common sense could be opposite, and my questions and comments, even the way I sat in the classroom could have very easily seemed offensive. But, it seemed to be a pointless fear. Preschool personnel, children, directors, the preschool counselor and even kitchen staff always welcomed my visits with warm smiles. Everyone was very supportive and accepted our differences. I tried my best to take responsibility for my actions.

Concerning ethical issues, I did confront a misconception between the participants and myself. My explanation of how interviews and observations would be discussed in the thesis was not clear enough in the beginning, and the two participants did not expect that I would directly quote their words which I was recording during the interview. The reason
for the misconception was caused by the lack in receiving personal consent from each of the participants. I had received it from the founder, and discussed the purpose and procedure of my project with the administration, and they gave me examples of participants who might meet the requirements of my purposeful sampling. The school directors of Mountain School and Ocean School informed Kate and Maria about my intention first, then I individually spoke with them to receive agreement for observations and interviews. But the letter of consent was not signed on the personal level. It was a critical defect of my project, and I had discussions with the participants to approve my project to be finalized. As a result, I erased some parts of my findings, and I received their approval.

4.7 Limitations of research

My prior knowledge about the Icelandic preschool system was limited, especially about Hjallastefnan. I did not find much academic data about their practice, because there is not much material written in English. During my research period, the translation of their six principles had just become available as a booklet (Ólafsdóttir, 2011), and that helped me understand their practice better. Now I recall that it was a huge hurdle, but having no information became a positive motivation to explore my curiosity. In fact, everything I saw at Hjallastefnan seemed unique and different. Both Hjallastefnan schools I visited were similar in many ways. School directors and the preschool counselor helped me understand Hjallastefnan and explained everything coherently.

The biggest challenge was the language barrier between Hjallastefnan and myself. All the documentation and voice data had to be in English, due to lack of my Icelandic comprehension. Participants tried to use English for me as much as possible, but I was unable to catch children and teachers’ dialogue in detail during class observations. Sometimes it worked better without knowing the language, because I could sense how children might be feeling. But it was difficult when I had interviews with the research participants. Kate was comfortable with sharing her feelings in English, and it helped me collect more detailed data about the way she feels. Although she was communicative, Maria was not confident with her English, and it limited my data collection. But she often surprised me with the simple words she used that would explain the whole thing. With Kate, I collected more of her feelings with her own words. With Maria, I tended to rely more on observations, and focused on the simple words she used to describe her practice and feelings.
5 Two different personnel and two different values

Kate and Maria are two different preschool personnel with different values, but they still have similarities in some aspects. Narratives are collected from interviews and observing. They are organized under four mutual themes that explain Kate’s and Maria’s attitudes and feelings towards their work separately. It is necessary to emphasize that my intention is not to compare two preschool personnel. It is to hear their feelings.

Four mutual themes are introduced as follows: discipline; motivation for self-study and self-reflection; colleagues; and values.

5.1 My thoughts

Visiting Hjallastefnan for preliminary research was interesting because I did not have much knowledge about their practice before. To understand what Hjallastefnan is, I tried to observe things with an open mind. I felt that teachers are proud of what they have achieved and how well their children perform. Children seem attentive and their way of discipline looks practical and reasonable. But one teacher’s comment, ‘feeling security in teaching’ made me wonder what they meant. In my experience, I believed that teachers should not feel comfortable about work. Do Hjallastefnan personnel feel comfortable because they are confident with their practice? I asked the teacher who expressed her sense of security the purpose of some activity. She said she was not sure. How can teachers feel comfortable without knowing the purpose of an activity? How can they develop their practice without having academic data? In Japanese culture, we tend to be critical about our own performance (Kitayama & Markus, 1999). Do I perceive ‘sense of security’ differently because of the cultural difference? I was confused and decided to explore teachers’ values for their work while following my research question: What do personnel working in Hjallastefnan schools value most at Hjallastefnan?

5.2 Discipline

Discipline is a very important part of Hjallastefnan’s principles. Both Kate and Maria put emphasis on discipline, but their perspectives and approaches are different, while they try to achieve the same goal: positive discipline.
5.2.1 Kate – Three steps, Respect and trust

Three steps
Kate says that discipline is to ’show them affection’. She believes that scolding is not the way to discipline children. For example, on my second visit, a boy was standing up on the table. She held him and reminded that it was not the place to stand on. She informed him that he could go under the table instead. Her big hug calmed him down and he listened to her very well. Kate explains that she sets the degree of discipline in three stages: Attention; warning; then discipline. The boy on the table received attention from Kate. On another day, I saw another boy standing in line waiting for his face to be cleaned. He was not behaving as he was previously warned, and so he was asked to go by the wall. He was punished, but Kate never raised her voice. She sat down by him, looked at his eyes and spoke to him quietly. Kate treated him just as other boys after that punishment, and the boy was doing well.

Respect and trust
Kate assigns one child as ‘a role model’ in her group and it was often seen during lunch time. The role model child helps teachers prepare the lunch table. He was putting dishes and cups on the table. Later, I noticed that some boys sometimes acted demanding, but they were concentrating on their work. They take turns and it helps them feel responsible and behave well. Kate believes children need to do things by themselves, but she needs to keep a close eye.

At Hjallastefnan, positivity is a key word for their school life (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). Whether positive or negative, Kate feels that children have to know how to deal with their feelings.

During the interview, she gave me an example:

There were two boys going through their parents’ divorce. They were quite uneasy, cried a lot, they had that anxiety, you know, saying good-bye to their parents in the morning. Then I could say, ‘hush hush, let’s be happy!’...trying to deny their feelings. (Instead) I say ‘it is OK. Just sit down here and finish your crying. This is something you have to work out. Just sit here’. But you know, I know the difference in children’s crying if they’ve been bossy, hungry, or hurt or you know. And at some point, I’ve told them ‘this is enough. Now you are just
moaning like a bull in the stall. You can live up with that bulls in
the stall, but you are a boy at Mountain School and I can nearly
hear that you are finished with crying and now it’s turning into
something. Let’s just do something’.

She sets the boundaries because she cannot let them ‘marinade in own
misery’ she said. She helps them explore their limits and set it by
themselves. She respects how children feel, and she lets them cry at first.
But she trusts that they are capable of managing their feelings.

### 5.2.2 Maria – Dialogue and songs, Motherhood

**Dialogue and songs**

One remarkable action I noticed with Maria is that she seldom uses the
word ‘ekki’ (‘don’t’) to stop children from doing something. One day, I
happened to be alone with younger preschool staff at one of the schools. In
their discipline, they kept saying ‘ekki’ to keep the children under control.
This may be an advantage of my insufficient Icelandic comprehension
because my perception toward this word is rather sensitive. I noticed that
the children act oppositely from what teachers want them to do when
teachers use ‘ekki’. When I asked Maria why she does not say ‘ekki’ to the
children, she told me that the founder gave her the advice that it is not
good to use ‘ekki’ to children when she first started working at
Hjallastefnan. Maria practiced not saying negative words such as ‘ekki’ to
stop children.

When Maria needs to discipline her children, there is often a dialogue
between them, or she starts singing a song so that she gets full attention
from the children, and they start singing along. On my first observation day
with Maria, she took the children outside to play ‘lion hunting’. The children
pretended as though they were hunters in Africa. They had sticks in their
hands and shouted to hunt imaginary lions. Maria was singing songs and
the children followed as she was running around just as chasing lions. When
some children were over excited and started arguing, she ran over to them,
listened to each of them, and suggested they reconcile. Then the group
kept going. During the interview, Maria referred to the fact that boys
become more of a handful from year to year. But it seems she encourages
children’s unity. Once I was outside with Maria and the group of her boys.
We went out for sleigh rides. It was freezing and still dark at 9:30am. She
walked in front of the boys and they were following in a straight line. The
snow was deep and it was difficult for the children to walk, but they walked
carefully and slowly so that their feet did not get swept off by snow. She was singing a song and the boys were singing along. When we got to the hill by the school, everyone ran up to the top of the hill and started sliding down. Maria told me that she took them out because they were too excited about Christmas coming, and they needed to release their energy, otherwise they would crash into each other. All the boys were sitting closely, holding onto the one in front of them and sliding together. When time was up, Maria announced that they would go back to school, but two boys were having an argument. She ran to them, asked both of them what was happening, then let them hug each other to reconcile. They started singing and went back to school. I found that when she takes the boys outside of school, she utilizes big spaces and often plays something everyone can join, such as the lion hunting I saw before. She says that her boys are a handful, but look happy when playing together. Dialogue and songs play an important part in her discipline.

**Motherhood**

Breakfast and lunch time are also good opportunities for Maria to develop her dialogue with children. At their table, they share their stories, or Maria asks questions, such as what they did over the weekend. She always listens and responds. There is laughter and smiles on the children’s faces. Children can say ‘takk’ when they are helped and ‘nei takk’ when she offers them more, but they are finished. Her children also encourage each other to be polite and say things appropriately. Once in their group time before Christmas, Maria’s boys and a group of girls gathered in a meeting room to have Christmas cookies and hot chocolate together. One of the girls accidently burped loudly. A boy sitting next to her reminded her, ‘you need to say excuse me’ in Icelandic. It was a very natural behavior for him and he might have seen or been told by Maria before.

It seems that Maria uses daily routines to practice manners as mothers do. I also noticed that she shows flexibility in her daily life with children. After having breakfast or lunch, Maria starts singing a song and children sit where they are supposed to sit. Sometimes children help when they make flour clay or when they make a mess on the floor. But cleaning up the table after meals is often Maria and a class assistant’s task. While Maria is busy cleaning or finishing up doing something, she sings a song and they sing together, or she will give the children something to do. Once I saw her making holes in a piece of paper during lunch time. She gave the boys the paper and a thread when they finished eating. Her purpose was to give them something to concentrate on, as well as training their motor skills. On
another occasion, I saw that Maria gave the children a sheet of paper with a printed picture, so that the children could color them while she was cleaning up the table. In Hjallastefnan principles, they motivate children’s creativity and they use open-ended materials (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). Without asking, she told me that she understands that she should not give ready-made materials, but she needs to finish her work fast, so they can start the next activity.

Later in an interview, Maria commented:

(At Hjallastefnan) They should create what they are doing by themselves. But it comes far sometimes...Boys ask me ‘can you draw the car for me’ or something like that. I say yes. But it shouldn’t be like this. I think you can teach a child to draw.

I noticed that preschool personnel might need to finish something within a certain time frame. Maria probably learned the balance of adapting and adjusting philosophy according to situations from her experience.

5.3 Motivation for self-study and self-reflection

Kate and Maria keep studying to explore their questions and improve their skills. Kate has a university degree in teaching, but she believes that she needs to keep learning. Maria does not have a degree, but she is a self-educated personnel who is keen about finding answers for her questions. Their focus for self-reflection varies and Kate uses journals while Maria does not use a tool.

5.3.1 Kate – Passion for progress, Journals

Passion for progress

Kate believes that when teachers feel comfortable in teaching, they do not progress. In her past experience, as a compulsory school teacher, Kate met senior colleagues who did not show enthusiasm in teaching. She shared a good story. When she is teaching, she often uses food items as her teaching tool because students are familiar with them. She developed her creativity when she went to folk school in Norway and she is always implementing what she learned into her teaching. She used her creativity when she was teaching history at compulsory school. To teach about China, she brought spaghetti, to explain how it was brought to Europe. She used feta cheese when Greece was the theme. But her senior colleague shook his head and
said, ‘Kate, you are so new, you will wear out soon’. For him, she looked so enthusiastic and was putting so much energy into teaching. She disagreed, ‘No, this is me, this is what I like’. After she moved to a different school in Reykjavík, she met another teacher who had been teaching there for forty years. Kate was disappointed with that senior colleague’s attitude. She never tried to learn how to use modern technology to rationalize their work, such as using a photo copy machine instead of stencil printing, and asked Kate to make photo copies of some documents.

During the interview, she expressed her feelings after telling me about this experience:

I said to myself. I will never be so comfortable with my teaching. Because then that’s not positive for me. That’s stagnation. When people are getting too comfortable, I think they should add something because that is complacency. Because then all creativity dies. All spontaneity goes away. That is very essential. I think teachers should not become too comfortable.

Kate added that technologies are always developing and teachers need to catch up, so their teaching skills will develop as well. She did not want to become like her senior colleagues. She promised herself that she would never become comfortable with teaching. It became her motivation to continue studying to improve her skills and herself as a person. Her old colleagues were negative examples, and she realized what kind of teacher she wanted to become. Her interpretation of positivity is not just to smile and be happy, but also to keep moving on, so that she will not be stalled.

Journals

Self-study and self-reflection make a strong foundation for Kate to improve as a teacher. She started keeping a journal of her teaching seven years ago, just before she started working at Hjallastefnan. It was suggested by another colleague, and it has been an important part of her improvement as a teacher. She finds journals are a good tool to analyze her personal and professional feelings and practices.

Kate gave me an example of when journals helped her practice:

Its purpose is to make an inventory of a day. It’s personal, but it affects my department as well, because I use it to think what I can do better tomorrow. I take it daily. Sometimes I write
down, sometimes I just do it in my head. It works better if I write it down, because it’s different when your words become something on the piece of paper. You see it, you just don’t think about it, because the mind can be influenced. I just think about ‘Oh, I just do it’ and go back to the day. If I write down, I am focused.

According to Kate, keeping a journal can be useful when she has difficulties communicating with parents, especially when things are related to child welfare and social services. I asked if she shares this idea with others.

Kate answered:

Yes, I do. Especially when they are having difficulties in communication with parents. Especially concerning child welfare or social services. When they have to intervene, I recommend that keep track of what they are doing, what they are benefiting, what they both are doing to protect themselves because it’s so easy for people to say ‘what have you been doing, I can’t see anything’. Then take the record in the file. It professionally and personally (shows) how you are going through because it’s so easy to become so personal when it should be professional.

Recently Kate faced a difficulty in her personal and professional life at the same time. Some boys were suffering from family issues, and emotionally having hard days.

Kate poured out her feelings:

I wanted to rescue each child, but knowing my limit, group limit, that was totally a different story. I can’t mend. I can’t mend the wound if a child was suffering from family issues. I can’t patch it up. So I can’t stop the family doing so.

Kate seemed to have concerns about how she would be as a teacher. I asked her what she feels about herself as a teacher, she commented:

Mixed emotions because I’ve been doing this for very long time. I love teaching, I love working with children, I love working with people. I get sick in a minute if I’m in front of the computer...When days are like that, it’s difficult to be a teacher
because there are so many things to attend to. You know like children’s well-being in general, physical and psychological. I think I am a good teacher, good observant, I am caring. And I give them all I have. Sometimes I don’t know the limit, I give too much.

When she was telling me her feelings, I felt her passion for teaching. I asked her why she thinks she gives too much.

Kate continued:

I put too much energy in it...When you get home, you have no energy left...I don’t think my daughter is suffering, but before I was aware of this, and I think she suffered in a way that I didn’t have energy and focus on her. But I’ve changed the course and action so I have more energy now. I feel better about teaching. I know how to draw the line.

She added that it took some time to be able to draw the line in her teaching. Some class environment made her decide to draw the line. She stepped back from her group and reflected on what caused her feelings and how she could deal with it. Difficulties in her personal life also aggravated her energy loss and she tried not to bring it to work. While she was having those difficulties, journals helped her focus and analyze the issue from an objective point of view.

She explained:

Of course these areas in teaching, they (personal and professional) are mixed together otherwise you would be very strict and stuck up teacher. But the balance should be like two circles, going into each other. They slide and mix, and there is a professional part and a personal part.

By writing down her work and feelings, she could draw the line between work and home, yet keeping a balance of professional and personal feelings.

5.3.2 Maria – Passion for learning, Learning by doing

Passion for learning

Maria is a self-educated assistant. She wanted to go to school to study about early childhood education, but she was not eligible to apply for university because her former education was not sufficient. The founder of Hjallastefnan was the director at Maria’s school when Maria first started
working at her school twenty years ago. Maria did not know anything about teaching except the experience and intuition she gained by raising her own children. The founder taught Maria basic skills and knowledge she needed to have so that she could work smoothly with children. Maria also tries to find out things she has questions about from books. Some of them are written by the founder. But she reads other books written by different authors to look for the answers for her questions and interests.

The Hjallastefnan guidelines are a good implement for Maria. When I asked what she learned about dealing with children from the guidelines, she pointed out ‘consistency’. This consistency might include several meanings. One of them is that she learned that children need clear and consistent answers from a teacher. If she says no, she cannot change to yes later. She is also consistent with the things she learned that she believes important. One of the examples would be the way she tries not to use ‘ekki’ as I explained in a previous section.

Maria commented:

I have learned that we don’t say...we practice not to say 'ekki'
for many years ago. I always think about it. It's in my life, too.

Through her experience at Hjallastefnan, she might have learned how consistency would be important and she implements it in her life, too. Other ‘consistency’ I noticed would be that she never loses motivation to look up in literature if she is not sure about something. She says, ‘it’s always fun to find out why’. Her twenty years of experience shape the way she is today.

To enhance her knowledge in preschool education, Maria took the one year training ‘Hjallabrú’ offered by the Hjallastefnan administration. The purpose was to give an opportunity for preschool personnel without proper education to study about relevant topics. Subjects were about child psychology, development, nutrition, and so on. By the time Maria participated in seminars, she already had a good experience with children and she felt that it was not new to her. But she enjoyed this learning opportunity, because things made better sense to her afterwards. She might have not noticed, but it was the opportunity for Maria that her experience and theories intertwined. She also emphasized that meeting other personnel from other schools was valuable.
She recalls her training experience:

It was fun time. Já, fun time. Yes. We...met other women at Hjallastefnan... It was fun to talk about what other teachers are doing and we talk, we ask, communication was always good. Discuss with other people and use my job. But it's fun to learn. It's fun to read (about) psychology. It's always fun to know something...I was getting more education.

This is the only official training Maria took while she has been working at Hjallastefnan. She enjoyed her experience, the discussion with others and sharing experiences, and felt satisfied in gaining more education.

*Learning by doing*

Maria does not use any specific tool to reflect on her practice. She says that when she looks at young preschool personnel, she remembers when she was about their age. This could be her way of self-reflection. For example, she has a young staff member to assist her group. There are some other young personnel and some of them are temporary, before they go on to continue their education sooner or later. According to the director of Maria’s school, even new preschool personnel are often given a group to take care of so that they feel responsibility and attachment to the school. It seems to be the same since Maria first started working at Hjallastefnan. At that time, her school director was the founder.

Maria explained how it was:

I remember the first day I came here at Hjallastefnan... When I was coming, some girls were inside. She (the founder) said 'what are you going to do? You have to do something'. She said ‘Just go to play or do something. You are the toy, you have to fix it. I am going to leave you here, you have the kids. Find it out.'

Maria continued:

(The founder was like) Just do it. (She) Throw me out in the swimming pool, don’t know how to swim. What shall I do? Maybe I can play.

Today, Maria laughs at this experience, but it seems she appreciates the way the founder treated her. Maria agrees that it is good to learn from experience. She pointed out Emily, one of the newest and youngest personnel, and commented:
(When looking at them) I often remember about when I started. I see Emily for example, I see when I think she is not doing it right. I can’t always come with her. But I try later to tell her something. I think it’s good about Hjallastefnan, if it would be like that (for younger personnel to take responsibility) when new teachers come...learning by doing.

Maria recalls that the founder was always there to support when she first started working. She had to learn from experience as Emily, but it seems Maria felt secure that she had someone whom she could ask for practical advice. Young personnel do not have the founder near them. Instead they have the school director or senior colleagues like Maria for advice and assistance. But Maria feels it is not easy for senior personnel to give advice all the time.

Maria added:

We will give some advice (to young personnel)... I will have time for more advice but I don't have time. I’m with my boys. I have no time to see Emily. I want to give her advice. I have my boys. I will tell her later. Sometimes I remember, sometimes I don't remember that.

Maria’s priority is her own group. But she remembers that in her old days she learned from the mistakes she made and advice she received.

After twenty years of experience, Maria still feels that she is learning with children.

She commented:

If I make mistakes when I say something, I am like “Ugggg, NO!” ...I am not perfect... (For self-reflection) It’s very often we talk about something and I am going to say something to boys. If it was not something I should say. I try to change it.

She does not keep a journal of her teaching. External factors stimulate her self-reflection, such as discussing with colleagues or looking closely at young personnel. Now, it is Maria’s turn to pass it on to them but she feels it is not easy to find time while taking care of her own group. Yet, it is one of her future dreams at Hjallastefnan to become an in-service trainer.
5.4 Colleagues

Both Kate and Maria emphasize that they are happy with the people with whom they are working. Just as their six principles describe, Hjallastefnan has in its foundation for teachers to be proud of who they are and with whom they work. But the two personnel’s perceptions towards their colleagues and school are different.

5.4.1 Kate – Sharing the same vision, Dilemma

*Sharing the same vision*

As she explained her feelings towards ‘stale teachers’ who do not try to improve their skills, Kate was very happy to find out what Hjallastefnan personnel have in mind. Her relationship with the school started as a parent. She knew what Hjallastefnan would be like before, but reality was much better than what she expected. She decided to join the group.

Kate expressed her excitement:

> It was liberating to find a group of people working according to their philosophy and values in life. And they were dedicated to their work and children at Hjallastefnan. It was inspiring to meet a group of people working like that, because I have been in compulsory school system for, at that time, almost ten years... It was like a breath of fresh air to have met totally opposite, where everyone is positive. But I became to realize that this is genuine because people chose this line of work because of their beliefs... Working with children.

Hjallastefnan actually has many personnel whose first encounter with the school was as parents. They see the school system and its philosophy through children and decide to become a part of it. In Kate’s case, she had already been teaching at compulsory school for many years and feeling uncomfortable working with her senior colleagues who did not show passion in teaching. Finding a place where she could be herself was like an oasis in the desert. In addition, Kate met a senior colleague who motivated her and made her realize important things in teaching. Kate’s sense of professionalism was enhanced after working with her. Kate is now becoming like that senior colleague, who motivates others and changes the atmosphere at work. On my first visit with her group, I saw that all personnel in the classroom were in red. It was a coincidence, but Kate said to them that they were the team red. With her effort the general
atmosphere in her working environment becomes positive. It seems that she takes advantage of the opportunities she has and tries to stimulate everyone’s motivation with her humor.

However Kate might have been feeling a distance with some colleagues, especially when they are young and uneducated. Her junior colleagues seem to perceive Kate as different from them. Kate’s passion and enthusiasm are established upon her belief and experience, but it can be interpreted differently. Her colleagues took over Kate’s group while Kate was away. Kate talked to her colleagues when she came back to work because they took over her group and had to deal with the same children. Until then, her colleagues seemed to have been frustrated that they could not manage as Kate did. But she shared her feelings that it was difficult for her as well. It did not mean that Kate was hiding her feelings, but she did not know what the problem was and how she could ask for support. This incident eased up her relationship with her colleagues, and Kate felt that they could be more supportive to each other.

**Dilemma**

Kate acknowledges that there are some different types of teachers who push themselves to improve, and give a good influence to others or those who may be relaxed with their teaching. Kate calls the latter personnel in their ‘comfort zone’. She wants to keep improving and give positive pressure for herself but she feels that she might be taken as arrogant, as though others are not doing their job properly.

Kate commented:

If you are working with teachers, who are not on the same wave, they often perceive you are as arrogant because you are well...They feel like I am sending them a message that they are not doing their job properly.

Kate had an experience in which some colleagues went to the director and criticized the way Kate was, without speaking directly to her first.

Kate commented:

They came and talked to the director after talking about me behind back. Director supported me. She said that ‘it’s not you, it’s their lack of self-esteem, and it’s their insecurity. You are doing good things’. ... I do not want to participate in their comfort
zone... If I have ever made them feel I am arrogant, that was not intentional, I cannot be responsible for their own security.

It bothers Kate that if she unintentionally made others feel inferior or if she looked arrogant. She simply wants to concentrate on her teaching and follows her beliefs.

She commented:

I am not saying I am better or so because I am focusing on my own philosophy and work, how they benefit me and see how they benefit children...That’s where education is relevant because usually those who are insecure, low self-esteem, they are young staff who hardly have any education. Maybe master’s degree could help but still the same, education. It is important because they often do not have student próf [upper secondary degree]. They are great persons but that’s how I can see that education is beneficial.

In her analysis, Kate feels that educational background may influence this aspect. If personnel have proper education, they can see what is important for children and themselves, so that they can concentrate on the children. For example, it is natural for Kate to put priority on the children and she has her own way of reflecting on her practice. Those who criticize Kate’s way of teaching and thinking are often young assistants with insufficient education. Kate often explains her purposes of doing things and suggests materials to them so they can read to improve their knowledge. But it is a challenge for her to make them motivated. She felt burnout in taking responsibility for educating young colleagues while keeping her focus on her children. She shared an example.

One of the young assistants Becky suggested a field trip to the farm to see what things would be like. Kate and the other teachers admired that idea and asked Becky to plan the trip in detail, so that the children could enjoy their visit. But when Kate came to school on the day they were supposed to take the trip to the farm, nothing was ready. She asked Becky the reason. It was because she did not know how to check the bus schedule, and she never tried to find out. Becky just said that they should call the parents to postpone the trip, but Kate persuaded her that it was not professional behavior and she should take a responsibility for doing her job, not only for the children’s but also for Becky’s sake. Unfortunately Becky took it personally. It was difficult for her to understand what Kate was
trying to say and she showed it in her attitude. It happened not long ago since Kate shared this experience.

Kate commented:

I did this in loving manner, but there comes insecurity and low self-esteem. Becky thought I was telling her off because I did not approve. She was getting too comfortable, ‘let’s just cancel it and let’s go another time’...I am not sure she took it wrong because she thought I was telling her off. Now we have a distance after this incident. And Thursday, we have a meeting and I will state this. ..Because this shouldn’t be left hanging. This is her chance, her opportunity to learn responsibility.

Kate still feels a distance and a gap between them, but she cannot let Becky be irresponsible for what she said. Kate thinks that in-service training is a director’s responsibility and she wants to concentrate on her own teaching, but it does not mean that she ignores others. Because she is so enthusiastic and compassionate, she wants to help them but her priority is her children. She feels a dilemma.

5.4.2 Maria – Cooperation, Autonomy

Cooperation

Maria’s relationship with her colleagues seems to be strong and respectful. While observing her at coffee time, I noticed that she often speaks up to share her feelings with others. She told me that she always asks her colleagues or her director if she has questions regarding her practice or the children. She is a self-educated assistant who developed her skills and knowledge through experience and self-studies. Her intuition may initially come from her experience as a mother of three children, but it influences her practice a great deal. But, when it comes to something complicated, she does not hesitate to ask others for their opinions or advice.

Maria gave me an example:

This winter, I have boys. There are some difficult boys. I have questions about why and think about what I can do to change...We (Maria, the director, other colleagues) talk about it together.

Those teachers Maria goes to ask questions are qualified teachers and knowledgeable about children’s behavior. Maria may be older and more
experienced working at Hjallastefnan than other colleagues, but there is no hierarchy and she respects what others have and offer her.

Besides those teachers, Maria often mentioned her colleagues’ names while I was with her for observations or interviews. One of the examples of cooperation is the way she works with the other assistants, Cindy and Emily, who share the departments. Cindy has a similar background as Maria, unqualified but with over ten years of experience at Hjallastefnan. Emily is rather new, but she was a former Hjallastefnan student and she is familiar with the school and philosophy. All the children in their department gather in the play room and sing songs every day in the morning and before lunch. Maria and Cindy take turns to lead music sessions. Maria is always singing, dancing, jumping up and down and moving around with children. I always join in this and run out of breath, but Maria is still full of energy. She uses her whole body during this period. When Cindy takes this turn, it is rather opposite. She uses a CD player for music and brings her original open-ended material, which is made of wool. These two assistants’ approaches are different and they usually do not stay with their boys while the other assistant is leading. But, Maria sometimes stays in the room while the boys are singing along with the CD player. Maria sings and dances just as the boys do. It may be a chance for Maria to take care of other things, while the boys are playing, but it seems she joins to bring additional excitement when she is available.

With Emily, I did not see much cooperation yet, since she was in charge of the youngest group. I often saw that Emily was cleaning up or preparing for lunch while Maria was playing with children including Emily’s. Emily would sometimes stay in the room, but was just sitting and watching. I have never noticed that Maria asked Emily to join the group and move around together. This cannot be called cooperation, but Maria might expect Emily to learn how to work with children by watching her, because it could be Maria’s tip for young colleagues: learning by watching (doing).

**Autonomy**

Maria feels that people around her respect what she tries to do. In the six principles of Hjallastefnan, they state to respect teachers’ creativity and autonomy. One day, I saw a child lying on a big piece of paper. Maria was drawing the shape of that child. When it was finished, she put the paper on the empty space and the child started painting with water-based ink. Then Maria spread another piece of paper and asked the other boys to lie down. According to Maria, she decided to make this activity rather spontaneously. They were
looking at a book about the human body and she came up the idea of drawing
the shape of the body to see where they have hands, lungs and the heart. At
Hjallastefnan, their day is structured and preschool personnel make plans for a
week. But, it is up to personnel to decide what things to do according to how
the children are on that day. Maria caught that moment when the children
showed interest in the human body and improvised. Another day, she had an
opportunity to share her idea with her colleague Nancy. They have boys’ and
girls’ group time, which they have once a day, and teachers take turns leading
an activity. It was Maria’s turn and she decided to take the boys and girls to the
beach, where her boys call it ‘the pirates’ land’. The place was used for fishing
in the old days and there were boats, fishing nets, a hammock and lava. Maria
put a pair of a boy and a girl at the boat, another pair at lava field and so on. It
was the first time for the girls and their teacher, Nancy, to go there and play
Maria’s activity. Nancy was concerned that the boys and girls would get all
together, and boys and girls play separately. The goal of this group time was for
them to be integrated and play together, no matter whether they were a boy
or a girl.

Maria commented about her action:

Then I gave Nancy advice because she thought they were all
going to play all around. I said no, because if we split them and
one boy and one girl, it will be a good connection to them. If
we let them play all together and free, then it will be just boys
play together and girls play together.

It was Maria’s idea to play this way. Maria paired up boys and girls because
she knew that two of them would play together, from her past experience with
other occasions. I asked if Nancy disagrees with the way Maria did.

Maria answered:

It was my time to do something. Next time it’s Nancy. She can
choose. If it works, it will be OK. If it doesn’t work, we will
change. We have to communicate and say it doesn’t work and
we have to change it.

It seems they feel comfortable practicing ideas even though they are
unfamiliar, and they have flexibility to adjust if it does not work as they expected.
Nancy was not sure how this pirates’ land play would work and questioned, but
she respected what Maria decided and gave it a try. Maria also expects that she
would receive feedback from Nancy, whether it worked well or not.
Maria says this is something good about Hjallastefnan, that personnel’s autonomy is respected and she can do things for children when needed.

She commented:

(Autonomy) that’s good about Hjallastefnan. You can always come with...it’s just like with kids, you can create. Just like kids.

5.5 Values

When I asked what is important for their work, both Kate and Maria’s answers were very clear and convincing, after observing their interaction with children. Kate values ‘respect’ and Maria values ‘friendship’. They have different values at work, but ultimately their values are both based on their passion for work.

5.5.1 Kate – Respect

*Respect*

Kate is a teacher who is enthusiastic and shows her affection to the children and her surroundings. She values ‘respect’ in her professional and personal life. She does not treat her children as young and naïve, as this example illustrates.

It was a day after we had a lot of snow, before Christmas. Kate and another preschool personnel, Sandy, took her boys in the woods near school during the group time after lunch. It was bright outside with gentle sunshine, and things were still visible in the woods. When we got there, the boys ran and scattered. Some of them started snow fights, some of them were playing hide and seek, and some of them were making snowmen. I was worried that it could be dangerous if teachers just let them run around, because the snow was deep and there could be dangerous obstacles. But, Kate said that the boys should know the area well, and they should stay where teachers could see them. Kate and Sandy were just standing and talking while the boys were running around, but Kate’s eyes were always on the boys, and she called the boys to come back right away if they were going too far. I found that Kate gives boys freedom under rules, because she knows what they can do and they keep their promise with her. It seemed that she tries to show the best respect to her children and people around her, as much as possible. She also feels how other people show their respect to her.

Kate explains that in the Hjallastefnan guidelines it is explained about ‘respect’. She feels that society does not take any initiative to respect others, but the Hjallastefnan environment clearly states and fosters the
sense of respect. While I was conducting my research at Hjallastefnan, this topic was raised sometimes with Kate and other colleagues.

Kate told me that she felt the same, but her opinion would be different:

When I came to Hjallastefnan, I was like I found people were thinking like me. And I went into a whole thing without open-minded like ‘great!’ In general, I agree with the founder. But there are some things I do not agree with, because I think positivity also can be used as manipulating people. I have learned that should recognize your feelings. It’s OK to feel what you are feeling...

Even though the school’s six principles emphasize teachers’ positivity, you cannot make fake smiles in front of children, if you are not happy. Kate thinks she can let her feelings flow and deal with it, then finds peace and harmony back in her life. She feels that her opinion is respected, so that she can disagree and be honest with her feelings within Hjallastefnan.

Kate continued:

We can agree to disagree. And that’s OK because that’s life.
We just have to work it out together then.

It is easy for people to disagree with other people’s opinions. But Kate thinks these opposed ideas could be accepted and her teaching environment allows this because there is respect among people.

Kate told me what she was feeling when she started teaching boys after being with girls for a few years. She felt that boys are very different from girls. She did not know how to approach them. She studied materials written by the founder and that helped her a lot. She keeps her ‘basic value’ while she is teaching boys, after having taught girls.

Kate commented:

I approach them differently. I equally allow girls to experience their emotions, as boys experience their emotions. But there are certain exercises we do in group sessions that aimed to break down that barriers that are built around boys, and barriers built around girls...I am trying to break down their barriers, and I am trying to widen their horizon to see that. Just be yourself.

Although she was surprised with the difference between boys and girls in the beginning, she treats everyone the same with care and respect, because
that is what she means by her basic value. No matter how old they are, or where they come from, Kate respects who they are. It never changes whether she is at work or at home. Her basic value is always inside of her.

5.5.2 Maria - Friendship

When I asked Maria how she describes her relationship with children, she said that it is ‘friendship’. During the first interview, she used the word ‘fun’ 15 times to describe her feelings towards work. I also asked if she feels like she is ‘teaching’ things to children. She said, ‘I am a friend’. She often joins children’s play, but friendship is a common topic among her and her children. I asked if she liked to be friends with them, she said, ‘very much’. But she is not only having fun with children. Throughout her experience at Hjallastefnan, she learned many things from discussions and interaction with colleagues and different children. One of the things she emphasizes is how she uses the time.

Maria commented:

In group time, we decide to do one thing, and then it’s done. Then we can do something else. We can tell a little story, talk, maybe we can use few minutes to train children to do many things. Use the time, that’s the point. Use the time. It’s not so much time but you can train so much in that time. Not waste the time. Maybe we are going to the next activity, but we have 10 minutes. What we can do, we can play a game? Or you can teach a song…

A minute is very important for Maria. She is always singing and moving around with children. I thought she just likes to sing and dance. But it may be a part of her teaching strategy. She seems to sing when she wants children’s attention or to remind them of something. Her philosophy and value reflect her singing.

Maria recalls that she used to be more short-tempered, but now she has patience and flexibility to accept the way things and people are. In the past, she quit Hjallastefnan twice, due to some family matters. In the 1990’s she moved to Norway for two years with her family. The other occasion was to stay home with her children. At both times, she still tried to be involved in child care work, such as working in a preschool in Norway or taking care of her own and other children, at home as a ‘dagmamma’ (‘day mother’ providing in-home childcare). She realized that she was a popular personnel in Norway, and enjoyed her new experience, but they did things differently.
Maria commented:

Actually I didn’t miss it (Hjallastefnan). No. Because I was happy in Norway. But when my family decided to move back to Iceland again, I knew where I should go...I wanted to work at Hjallastefnan, no other school. Because I knew they are always doing something. Think about kids always. (School in Norway) it’s just different. Hjallastefnan is Hjallastefnan. Montessori is Montessori...Yes, they could come and set me down and play with some toys. You know, not fun. I rather use myself to teach. That is fun. I did that, and all teachers were (sound of a gasp). They were always playing too much with toys on the floor. And kids go around and play. They look well, you know. But it’s fun to use body. I am the toy, you know. That is fun.

Maria simply enjoyed being with children in Norway, but it was just for ‘fun’ as she recalls. Her heart told her that she could feel more satisfaction if she was with children and colleagues at Hjallastefnan. Calling herself ‘a toy’ precisely explains her attitude and value towards work. At Hjallastefnan, they use open-ended materials and children can create many different kinds of play from one material. Maria believes that her body is also like an open-ended material. She sings, dances, runs, tells stories and plays together with her children.

She commented:

We have thought about why boys are difficult today than 20 years ago. But we have to, for boys, we are the toys. It always has to be fun. They have to do something. They all have to do something...Group time, we are the toys. We decide to do. We have to give something from us.

Children can be bored with commercialized toys, but if a teacher is a toy, she can offer endless usage as long as her imagination and creativity lasts.

Maria continued:

Use the idea. Use the idea you have. We have to use the idea if we get some, use it. Because you are the toy.

Maria may not have proper qualification as a preschool teacher, but her school director says that she is mentally qualified in the Hjallastefnan context.
6 Summary and Discussion

In the previous chapter, I have quoted the voices of two preschool personnel, Kate and Maria, at Hjallastefnan, and explored what they value most in their work. Kate is a teacher who initially started her teaching career in compulsory school and changed her teaching site to preschool. Maria is a preschool assistant, with significant experience within Hjallastefnan. Although their backgrounds are different, their personal characteristics seemed to be similar, in several aspects. My challenge was to explore their values with an open mind, not to evaluate them because sense of their professional identities may not be the same or always stable (Day, et al. 2006).

Analyzing my findings from observations and interviews while studying them in the light of the Hjallastefnan’s school principles, the Icelandic preschool context and professionalism theories, I have sensed what Hjallastefnan is trying to achieve while learning how their personnel strive to provide a better environment for children according to their values.

When I chose my research participants, it was not my concern that neither of them would be qualified as a ‘preschool teacher’ according to Icelandic law. From the Japanese point of view, it was natural to consider that all preschool personnel who work at a preschool and take strong responsibility should be qualified. I was informed by the school director that Maria, who is an unqualified teacher assistant, should be called one of the best personnel at Hjallastefnan when I was in the process of deciding a research participant. It made me interested in exploring how she could be called so. Kate, on the other hand, is a qualified compulsory school teacher. It was also my Japanese point of view that she would still be called as ‘teacher’ because she has a Bachelor’s degree in education and she is ‘a teacher’. I never critically questioned my participants’ qualification as ‘preschool teacher’ until I was in the middle of this study. However, I believe that my choice of participants was successful in light of preschool personnel’s professionalism in the Icelandic context. In the literature, research participants are often legally qualified in the field of research such as Einarsdóttir’s study on two preschool teachers’ practice at Icelandic preschools (Einarsdóttir, 2000). In the Icelandic preschool system, the majority of the workforce does not obtain the legal title of ‘preschool teacher’ such as Kate and Maria and their voices are rarely collected for research purpose. Through my study, Kate and Maria both revealed their
sense of professionalism with what they are and who they are. It gives a positive impact on the contemporary preschool system in Iceland.

However, there is a gap between experienced and inexperienced personnel which affects a collaborative development of Hjallastefnan personnel as a team of professionals. What makes the gap between them? What can they possibly do in order to fill the gap?

In order to continue my quest, I categorize Kate’s and Maria’s professional characteristics first. Next, I try to explore the quality they provide for their children and the environment which is based on their professional characteristics and Hjallastefnan’s school principles. Thirdly, Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s sense of security is explored while reflecting on my initial interpretation of sense of security from the Japanese cultural point of view. Finally, I refer to the Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s work and try to understand their way to enhance professionalism as a team.

### 6.1 Professional characteristics

The results from observations and interviews revealed that the two preschool personnel Kate and Maria have different values, while aiming at the same Hjallastefnan’s six principles (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). Their pedagogical work is consistent with Hjallastefnan’s principles, which include Kate’s value ‘respect’ and Maria’s value ‘friendship’.

Kate is a reflective professional, with a habit of documentation and self-reflection. While studying the school principles, she tries to explore a better way to interact with children and improve her skills as a teacher. Her professional knowledge is established on her formal education, as well as her value ‘respect’. New knowledge and skills are implemented continually in her daily practice. Maria is always full of energy, and her value is reflected on her practice as well. She often showed the aspects of a mother, or a friend, through her interaction with children.

Similar to Kate, Maria also tries to find a better solution when she feels difficulties dealing with children, but her answers were found from books written by the founder, or other early childhood specialists, intuition gained through experience, and communication with her colleagues.

Table 2 displays the similarities in their characteristics, and differences between Kate and Maria’s practices based on their values.
Table 2. Similarities in the characteristics of Kate and Maria and differences in their practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kate’s practice</th>
<th>Similarities in characteristics</th>
<th>Maria’s practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful discipline</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Practical discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific planning</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Spontaneous/Instinctive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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</tbody>
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Considering their attitudes towards practice and values, as well as their similarities in characteristics above, they are consistent with effective characteristics which Colker (2008) suggests. In addition, I analyze that Kate and Maria practice differently, but have similarities in their characteristics, as Table 2 reflects in the same professional characteristics as ‘responsive’ (Guðjónsdóttir, 2000). Responsive refers to personnel’s collaborative work with colleagues, and flexible response to adjust her practice according to a child’s personal needs, with a habit of reflection. Kate and Maria both showed responsive characteristics in their practice, but their levels are different. There are some good examples I found during the observations and interviews with Kate and Maria.

6.1.1 Kate – Progressively-responsive

Kate’s professional identity has been shaped by her wish to become a teacher since she was young. She dreamed of being a teacher since she was 8 years old and it was an influence from a book she got as a Christmas gift. The story positively synchronized to her personal experience with her school teacher. Positive and compassionate to others are my personal impression of Kate’s characteristics. At the same time, I discovered her effective and responsive professional characteristics which are consistent with Colker (2008) and Guðjónsdóttir (2000).

Kate shows her responsiveness when she reflects on herself with her journal keeping. She uses it not only for herself to keep a record of activities but also to draw a line between personal and professional life which Kosnik and Beck (2009) also suggest. Her habit of reflection seems to influence her significantly as she keeps her journal frequently and utilizes it effectively as she says, ‘I use it to think what I can do better tomorrow’. Loughran (2006)
encourages educational personnel to be metacognitive because their thoughts and actions influence their development and offer insights into their practice and enhance their autonomy. As Hjallastefnan’s six principles state, Kate strives to provide a better learning environment according to children’s needs. Her passion for progress keeps increasing day by day through her reflection.

Kate’s respectful discipline, which underlies her values, was evident as I observed how she deals with children based on her values. What affects her responsiveness may be a dilemma she is feeling when she tries to collaborate with her junior colleagues and it will be discussed later in detail. In her practice, I observed various activities which underpin theories and Hjallastefnan’s six principles. Respectful discipline as I mentioned is one of them. Because Kate believes in what children can learn as Icelandic preschool personnel believe (Einarsdóttir, 2006), she lets them explore their potential to manage a task and capabilities to complete. For example, if a child was crying for some reason, Kate would let him cry. But her purpose is that he should explore his limit and set it by himself. It is part of her beliefs in children that they should be treated as a person, not a baby.

One of the interesting comments which show Kate’s responsiveness may be that, ‘we can agree to disagree’. It is said when we were discussing Hjallastefnan’s positive discipline. Positivity is the primary element when we refer to Hjallastefnan’s school characteristics. But Kate commented, ‘(I think) positivity can be used as manipulating people’. School or her colleagues never force each other to reach a consensus. It is their nature of respect that it is allowed for her to disagree if she cannot agree. If things like this would happen, Kate said, ‘we just have to work it out together then’. It is irresponsible if she just disagrees for no reason, but Kate seems to have strong and persuasive reasons when she opposes some ideas. Because there is a sense of respect, she feels free to express her opinions and flexibly discuss her way of thinking.

Kate is committed to her job and feels responsible for what she can offer to children. Although she may be in a dilemma, she believes in herself and her ability to promote children’s learning. She is always looking forward and exploring a better way. She never stops reflecting and learning. Her professional characteristic may be called ‘progressively-responsive’.

6.1.2 Maria – Reflexibly - responsive

Maria also showed her responsiveness and there were several practical examples I noticed during my observation such as her ‘imaginary lion
hunting’, ‘sleigh ride in snow’ and coloring activity before Christmas time. It was one of my findings that Maria has a mother’s aspect as she deals with children. In the Icelandic preschool context, caregiving is valued rather than developing academic knowledge and other skills (Einarsdóttir, 2010). Without having formal education as a preschool teacher, her academic knowledge of preschool education may be limited. But she tried to complement her lack of knowledge with experience, intuition as a mother of three children, self-study and communicating with her colleagues, which various theories on professionalism emphasize as essential for professional development (Day, 1999; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009). In a way, she was at a risk of simply being ‘a substitute mother’ (Moss, 2006b, p. 34) in the way that Ayer (1989) called childcare mother’s work. Considering the traditional understanding of the preschool system in Iceland as another home, and that preschool personnel may be perceived as a mother (Einarsdóttir, 2006), Maria’s characteristic of motherhood is relevant to the Icelandic preschool context. But Maria’s motherhood may be rather comprehensive compared to the traditional Icelandic view of preschool personnel as I described above.

Her encounter with Hjallastefnan was rather unique. She first started as a school janitor and she had never thought of being with children as preschool personnel. Her life was changed when the founder asked her to work with children. Maria said, the founder was like ‘just do it. You are the toy, I am going to leave you here’. The founder trusted Maria’s flexibility and intuition instead of giving her direction. Maria did not know what to do in the beginning, but she tried to interpret what the founder meant by calling her ‘the toy’ and tried to explore what she could do. According to Hjallastefnan’s school principles and Colker’s effective teacher’s characteristics (2008), preschool personnel should be creative and flexible. Just as an open-ended toy with which children play at Hjallastefnan, they tackle obstacles with a positive and flexible attitude. Maria never gave up and enjoyed her challenges.

When Maria took the children outside for ‘imaginary lion hunting’, she encouraged children to imagine as though they were hunting in the Savanna. In Icelandic preschools, children are believed to learn more through play and preschool personnel usually let them play freely (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Maria also believes it and promotes their play time, but she often joins their play because she sees herself with the children as ‘a friend’. In the lion hunting, although she was playing with children, her role was as a guide in the Savanna and the children developed their imagination for chasing lions. The children might have thought that Maria was playing
with them, but her intention was to let the children take initiative and hunt for lions and she was trying to stimulate the children’s imagination.

It is an interesting strategy for Maria to sing songs when she needs the children’s attention. It seemed that she did not notice her habit until I pointed out, but it was obvious that she effectively uses singing instead of giving children directions. For example, when she tries to gather the children as the group time comes to end, she starts singing a song. When the children hear her sing, they start singing along and complete their tasks of that period. Positive discipline is promoted in Hjallastefnan’s school principles and Maria explains that she tries not to say ‘ekki’. I could not find out about the process of how she stopped saying ‘ekki’ and started singing instead, but it is derived from a school culture and the Icelandic preschool context to encourage children’s learning through play (Einarsdóttir, 1998). From a responsive characteristic aspect as Guðjónsdóttir (2000) points out, it is clear that Maria encourages children’s learning through play by her singing. During the interviews, she mentioned that she feels that it is not easy to manage her children. However, her songs are comfortably perceived by the children and it stimulates their interest while she keeps their attention. Preschool personnel’s responsive practice also requires an integration of professional knowledge base and ethical and social commitment (Guðjónsdóttir, 2000). Although Maria is not legally qualified as a preschool teacher, her commitment to children’s wellbeing is significant which enhances her ‘reflexibly-responsive’ professional characteristic.

6.2 Quality of practice

Quality is one of the key concepts when we discuss professionalism (Cable & Miller, 2008). In order to provide better quality childcare, preschool personnel are expected to be flexible and continually improve their skills and knowledge related to their work as professionals because children are not the same all the time (Loughran, 2010).

6.2.1 Quality childcare in the Icelandic preschool context

In the Icelandic preschool context, the quality of childcare is improved when preschool personnel provide a home-like environment with care and love (Einarsdóttir, 2006). After the economic crisis which severely impacted Iceland in October 2008, providing quality childcare may not be as easy as it used to be. The number of children increased but the budget for the preschool sector has been decreased which caused a lack of manpower (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Ironically, those who lost their work (Íslandsbanki, 2010) find the time to pursue their academic
career at university. For Hajllastefnan, although it is a semi-private organization, the influence of the economic crisis interfered with their personnel’s development: Hjallabrú, one of the in-service trainings aimed at enhancing experienced preschool assistants’ theoretical and practical knowledge, has been abolished. Improving the situation is now up to each preschool personnel’s sense of responsibility for their own performance.

6.2.2 Icelandic parents’ expectations and quality childcare

The two preschool personnel Kate and Maria’s values towards work are reflected on the quality of daily practice.

For example, it is Kate’s way to offer quality childcare as she respects her children’s autonomy and capability of doing things. It is a common belief of Icelandic preschool teachers to give children a chance for autonomy while teachers remain a good distance from them (Einarsdóttir, 2002). A good example may be found when she assigns a role model child from her group of boys. It is based on her belief that children can take responsibility for doing some things without the help of an adult. Historically Icelandic preschool has taken a role of a second home to children (Einarsdóttir, 2006) and Icelandic parents expect that children develop social skills rather than academic knowledge (Einarsdóttir, 2010). Kate’s practice and values are consistent with modern expectations of quality childcare.

On the contrary, Maria values friendship and her approach to children is also consistent with traditional Icelandic childcare in which care and love come first (Einarsdóttir, 2003c). However, what makes Maria different from the traditional Icelandic preschool personnel’s role is that she spends much time with her children instead of leaving them unsupervised as traditional Icelandic preschool personnel would do (Einarsdóttir, 1998). It is based on her value of ‘friendship’ but she disciplines the children while playing together. One of the examples may be that her children seem to be attentive to manners and they advise each other on the appropriate way to excuse themselves such as when someone carelessly burped loudly at the table. Maria seems to teach children life skills which is also consistent with Icelandic parents’ expectations (Einarsdóttir, 2010).

6.2.3 Potential of pedagogues

According to the Icelandic preschool context and parents’ expectations, Kate and Maria’s practice and values can be compared with the three camps Einarsdóttir (2006) proposed as preschool personnel’s proper role: The first camp has the most traditional aspect of respecting children’s free
play based on care, emotional and social support; the second camp views preschool as the first level of education and qualified preschool teachers are responsible for children’s academic development; the third camp is a mixture of caregiving and teaching which expects a high quality experience and learning outcomes before the children start compulsory education (p. 177). Maria seems to fit the first camp, but she also encourages children to practice Icelandic parents’ modern expectation of children’s life skills (Einarsdóttir, 2010). Although Kate respects children’s freedom in play, which matches the first camp, she seems to mix her caregiving and educational aspects coherently as the third camp describes. It is not easy to categorize their complex practice and values under these camps. How can I better understand their practice and values associated with the quality of childcare in the Icelandic preschool context?

While studying Kate and Maria’s values and practices, I come to understand that their roles may be rather similar to the view of ‘pedagogues’ (Moss & Pence, 2002; Moss, 2006). I discussed Kate and Maria’s responsive professional characteristics in the previous section. Kate frequently reflects and interprets her values and belief in her practice and it may be relevant to what Moss (2006b) calls ‘the worker as Researcher’ (p. 36). Maria, who takes a role of a mother and a friend, may be consistent with a Danish pedagogue who works with a ‘whole body, mind, emotions, creativity, history, and social approach’ (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 143). The reason why I compare Maria’s pedagogue’s aspect with the Danish rather than the Swedish is because her practice reflects a mother or friend’s aspect. Danish pedagogues’ role is developed upon a concept of social welfare while Swedish pedagogues’ role is acknowledged within the educational sector (Oberhuemer, 2005). Icelandic preschool is included in the educational sector, which is the same as Sweden (Moss, 2006b). Kate’s pedagogue’s aspect may be between Danish and Swedish because her practice reflects on more theoretical aspects than Maria’s.

Collaboration and reflection are the core of pedagogues’ work (Oberhuemer, 2005) and it may not be balanced when I review Kate’s dilemma with her junior colleagues. Maria also has not made reflection a habit. In addition, Maria has not taken formal education as it is required as pedagogues’ qualification (Oberhuemer, 2005). It is not only necessary for Maria, but also anyone who works in educational sectors to continue learning to solidify their knowledge base and develop their metacognition as professionals (Loughran, 2006). It is not a simple challenge for Icelandic preschools to fulfill their workforce with 2/3 preschool teachers (Act on the Education and Recruitment of Teachers and Head Teachers in Pre-School,
Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School no. 87/2008). But an advantage of Hjallastefnan is that they are a semi-private organization and they have better autonomy to set their quality standard higher than other Icelandic public preschools. Children are always their main focus (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). However, their priority needs to be divided to pay attention to preschool personnel’s professional development because they are the ones who provide high quality preschool experience to children for their better future as research suggests (Sylva, 2010). It is expected that Hjallastefnan take strong initiatives to provide proper education to support preschool personnel’s professional development. Yet Kate and Maria’s responsiveness revealed a positive potential which Moss (2003) calls ‘a new type of worker who is a reflective practitioner, able to think and act for herself, rather than a technician trained to do as she is told’ (cited in Cable & Miller, 2008, p. 174).

The idea of pedagogue may not be found in the literature on Icelandic preschool yet, but examining Einarsdóttir’s three camps and pedagogues’ roles and Kate and Maria’s practice and values expands the possibility for the Icelandic preschool to reconceptualize their personnel’s professional work and potential to improve its quality of childcare.

6.3 Sense of security

Discussing preschool personnel’s sense of security, or feeling comfortable about their work, may be controversial. There are two aspects of sense of security: positive and negative. Why and how are they perceived differently?

6.3.1 Different perceptions

In my preliminary research at Hjallastefnan, I was confused by the word ‘sense of security’ used to describe a teacher’s feeling for work. Being raised in a culture of self-criticism, my understanding of feeling security in teaching referred to stagnation in progress, because Japanese tend to believe that success comes only after failures and struggles (Kitayama & Markus, 1999). In fact, my perception of a ‘sense of security’ was fostered as negative throughout my experience with the PLS method in Japan. Because PLS is developed in a self-criticism culture, it naturally is influenced by the Japanese cultural perception of ‘sense of security’.

However, Kate and Maria’s practice helped me understand that a perception of ‘sense of security’ may be interpreted differently from culture to culture, person to person. It has both positive and negative aspects. Crowther and Postle (1991) express in the Australian context a sense of
security as positive, that ‘professional growth be viewed as an ongoing, long-term process, teachers will feel a sense of security and personal identity that will contribute to their sense of professional worth’ (as cited in Day, 1999, p. 87). When preschool personnel feel comfortable with what they are doing, a positive atmosphere is created and will influence children’s behaviors, just as what I saw during my preliminary research. Sense of security underlies confidence, but the reasons for confidence may vary and it requires further research.

6.3.2 Stagnation of professional development

It is still my concern that a well-structured curriculum may cause a negative aspect of ‘sense of security’ among preschool personnel. Children seem to enjoy the same routine or simple play, but every child is different each day. Their interests may be different every day. What can preschool personnel do if she does not consider the purpose of an activity from various points of view? Is it possible for her to remain responsive enough to adjust herself to the child’s daily changes?

Maria, who calls herself ‘a toy’, would meet children’s changes. She did not know what to do when she first started working with children at Hjallastefnan and all she could rely on were the words, ‘being the toy’. She recalls her first day at Hjallastefnan twenty years ago, ‘(the founder) threw me out in the swimming pool, don’t know how to swim’. She had to struggle to find the ways she could deal with children, instead of remaining as traditional Icelandic preschool personnel’s aspect as mother (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Since then, she has been thinking about the meaning of being the toy and her responsive professional characteristic has been developed and shaping throughout her life at Hjallastefnan. It took her energy, struggles, self-study and collaboration with her colleagues but these experiences make her the way she is today.

Kate has an image that feeling comfortable is negative in the context of education. She says, ‘I will never feel comfortable with teaching because all creativity dies, all spontaneity goes away’. She calls feeling comfortable in teaching ‘stagnation’. During the interview, Kate shared some stories of negative examples of feeling security at work. One story was about her old colleagues at public compulsory school that did not try to learn new technology to improve their work. The other story was about her junior colleague Becky. Becky did not complete her task for planning the children’s field trip for which she was responsible. It seemed that Becky somehow expected her colleagues to let her excuse her lack of preparation because
she thought that it would be allowed if she would call parents for cancellation. Why did she think so? Kate pointed out Becky’s irresponsibility and encouraged her to complete the task, but it was taken personally even though Kate’s point was reasonable and professional. Why did Becky take Kate’s criticism personally? Why did Becky not ask anyone to help her to complete her task? In Kate’s analysis, it is caused by her lack of self-esteem due to lack of education. ‘Self-esteem’ is an important aspect which shapes professional identity (Cable & Miller, 2008; Day et al., 2006). Self-esteem may be enhanced if personnel gains knowledge of her practice and gains confidence. In their research on teachers’ burnout, Brouwers et al. (2001) explain that teachers cannot ask or try to elicit support when they are not confident. Becky did not seem to feel burnout, but she was probably not confident which made it difficult for her to ask for assistance. It was Kate who felt burnout in assisting junior colleagues with lack of commitment. Kate’s emotion may be similar to what teacher educators felt as disappointment when they had to deal with pre-service student teachers who lacked in commitment (Hastings, 2010).

Kosnik (2007) felt confidence when she reflected on her practice. It is also revealed in Kate’s practice that she is aware of her responsibility and challenges through a habit of reflection. Benefit of reflection is proved both in research on teacher education and Kate’s practice in the Hjallastefnan context, but would the value of reflection be easily understood? I wonder if Becky was even aware of how much responsibility she had for the task and that she should have asked for assistance if it was difficult to manage. It seemed that Becky did not see that the result of her irresponsibility would cause children’s disappointment. Becky’s unprofessional attitude makes me concerned that it could happen to any personnel if their self-esteem is not enhanced and they lack in confidence. It means that there would be more preschool personnel as Kate who would suffer from burnout. How can they enhance their self-esteem? Can their sense of security be positive when they gain confidence?

6.3.3 Questioning sense of security

During the interview, Kate said she puts ‘too much energy in it’ and she has no energy when she goes home after work. What saved her from this situation is her habit of self-reflection through journal keeping. It helps her shape her self-image of professional identity. To sustain a balance between personal and professional is important to maintain motivation, self-esteem, job satisfaction, and commitment to teaching (Day et al., 2006). Kate tries
to maintain her self-esteem and commitment to teaching with what she believes is effective.

It is important for preschool personnel to be aware of changes in children, even though literature of Icelandic early childhood shows that Icelandic children are raised without much adult supervision (Einarsdóttir, 2002). Hjallastefnan’s six principles state that their focus is on children’s welfare. A fixed schedule and a rotation of choice play activities may offer children a ‘sense of security’, but it is necessary for preschool personnel to continue questioning children’s welfare, and adults’ roles as professionals (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Cable & Miller, 2008). Moss (2006b) argues that preschool personnel should not sit comfortably when they raise children as an ‘active subject, citizen with rights and co-constructor of knowledge, identity and values, while maternalist assumptions, with their upbringing norms, can and do change over time’ (p. 39). The Hjallastefnan guidelines seem to clearly describe the pedagogical method, philosophy, their goals and daily practices. All personnel can follow and practice as the guidelines state. It provides them ‘security’ and ‘comfort’ because they simply have to follow without questioning. But I warn that it is necessary for preschool personnel to have flexibility and autonomy to deal with daily changes and challenges while following the guidelines. Although it can be the most reliable theoretical source for them to confirm their daily practice and understanding of Hjallastefnan, they need to be aware of the danger that simply following guidelines makes them ‘the worker as technician’ (Moss, 2006b). Obviously, this is not the intention of the founder as she advised Maria to be as flexible as a toy. Guidelines give them ideas for their practice, but their creativity and responsiveness makes their practice even more effective. Feeling comfort is important at work, but they need to remember that comfort and security costs responsibility and preparation for their progress as a professional.

Hjallastefnan’s six principles describe that preschool personnel should take their roles with positivity, responsibility, affection, respect and friendship to children. But there may be some preschool staff like Becky who cannot assume the importance of her work due to lack of confidence, and perceive the meaning of sense of security wrong. Similar circumstances might have caused Kate’s dilemma when her junior colleagues misunderstood Kate’s sense of professionalism. How can they make their sense of security positive? I will attempt to answer this in next section.
6.4 Hjallastefnan as a team of professionals

Traditionally, when we discuss professionalism, teaching qualification or relevant education has always been a requirement (Katz, 1988; Slin, 1988; Spodek, Saracho & Peters, 1988; Spodek & Saracho, 1990). After this study, I strongly agree with the idea to reconsider a new concept of professionalism as some researchers propose. In Europe, preschool personnel’s roles vary and the quality of childcare is improving (Oberhuemer, 2005). Moss (2006) points out rather flexible roles that pedagogues take and their potential in childcare. As I have discussed earlier, Kate and Maria’s practice seems to be relevant to what pedagogues are. According to the academic interpretation of professionalism, Maria’s background and value at work may not be considered as professional. But, my findings about Maria revealed that her practice and attitude are more complex than just being a mother or a friend to her boys. Kate and Maria’s professional characteristics and attitude support my argument to call for the necessity of reconsidering professionalism in preschool education.

There are two terms I need to review in light of Hjallastefnan as a team of professionals: Professional learning community and democratic professionalism.

6.4.1 Professional learning community

Professional learning community is a culture of collaboration (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; DeFour, 2004). DeFour (2004) outlines that it ensures children’s learning and their outcome. When I see different Hjallastefnan schools such as Kate’s Mountain School and Maria’s Ocean School, they seem to have different school atmospheres in some perspectives. For example, I felt that there was more interaction among preschool personnel at Ocean School than Mountain School. It is reflected in Maria’s friendship with her children as well. According to Maria, she often discusses problems or concerns with her colleagues at Ocean School. During my observations, I noticed that the school director of Ocean school joined the coffee break most of the time and she looked as though she was the lubricant of conversation for all personnel to take part in. On the other hand, Mountain School is smaller than Ocean School and it is possible that their physical space is limited for many personnel to take coffee break together. Their time for communication outside of the classroom may also be limited and it might affect the development of communication because their professional interaction is reduced.
It has been emphasized that Hjallastefnan’s six principles prioritize children’s better life and all personnel strive for achieving their goal as a team. It is consistent with De Four’s three big ideas of professional learning community (2004), but the level of their achievement varies according to personnel. Sigurðardóttir (2010) points out that Icelandic teachers tend to work independently. Reasons for individual work may be related to Icelandic culture, but professional learning community requires a culture of collaboration to nurture. Kate said that she feels distance with her colleagues. It is a challenge for her and others to encourage better communication and gain understanding but there are several obstacles that Kate and the school have to get over.

6.4.2 Dilemma for professionalism

As it is discussed earlier, a sense of professionalism varies from person to person and it can disturb preschool personnel’s professional development because of their different professional identities (Day et al., 2005). While studying two preschool personnel’s practices, I discovered Kate’s dilemma as a professional preschool personnel and it has been my major concern when I try to understand Kate’s professional identity.

During the interview, Kate shared her feeling about how she was perceived by her junior colleagues. When she first came to Hjallastefnan, she felt that ‘it was liberating to find a team of people working according to their philosophy and values in life’. It was empowering for her to be able to collaborate with personnel with the same vision. But not everyone was on the same wave. Kate had worked with junior colleagues with whom she had a hard time building positive relationships. Through their work, Kate experienced her colleague’s unprofessional-like action. When Kate was working with her junior colleagues, she felt that there is a distance as they perceive Kate’s work ethics as different from them. Although Kate did not mean it, her colleagues seemed to have been feeling that Kate would be sending a message that they were not doing their job properly. Kate said, ‘I am not saying I am better or so because I am focusing on my own philosophy and work, how they benefit me and see how they benefit children’. The level of Kate’s dedication for work and her junior colleagues’ were different. It is what Hastings (2010) calls the ‘unexpected’ reaction of pre-service student teachers who lack in commitment to teaching. It was a burden for Kate to assist junior colleagues.

A crucial incident was that Kate’s junior colleagues directly went to the school director to criticize what Kate was doing before talking to Kate.
According to Hjallastefnan’s school principles, school personnel try to communicate openly and positively. Unfortunately it was not understood by them. The director knew what and how Kate had been doing; she fairly defended Kate’s way of doing her job. It had been an extra challenge for Kate as she tried to explain her intention for doing activities and suggested what they could read to improve their knowledge while she was trying to keep her concentration on children, but it was not easily accepted. Kate felt burnout for motivating them. According to Brouwers et al. (2001), teachers would feel burnout when they have low self-esteem and do not receive support from colleagues and school directors. In Kate’s case, she had support from her director and her self-esteem as a professional is remarkable. But she felt burnout because it was an additional effort for her to educate junior colleagues which Day (1999) also points out as a reason for teachers’ burnout.

Kate analyzed that insufficient education might have caused her junior colleagues’ low self-esteem, and lack of confidence. Kate’s purposes for doing certain things were not appreciated or understood. It turned out to be a criticism behind her back. Such behavior is rather opposite from the concept of ‘professional culture’ (Evans, 2007), which is consistent with the collective characteristics Kate first found at Hjallastefnan. Since Kate’s junior colleagues are still young and naïve compared to Kate, there may be an invisible gap between what Kate expects of their professional attitude and reality. In addition to lack of education, junior colleagues may lack in working experience with any kind of job. It is reasonable to consider that their expectations for working at preschool remains as ‘preschool is the place for play’ from their childhood memory because they do not understand the theoretical aspect of play at preschool. It caused Kate’s emotional conflict as she tried to help them enhance their professionalism. It is part of the reasons why it is a challenge for them to foster a culture of professional learning community.

Considering Maria’s background as a preschool assistant, her background is similar to Kate’s junior colleagues. But Maria’s commitment to work is as remarkable as Kate’s and it is incommensurable. It is possible that twenty years of working experience makes a difference, but her positive personal characteristics seem to be beneficial for her to develop professional identity. Maria also expressed feelings of not being able to spend much time with her junior colleagues, because she needs to concentrate on her children. But she never mentioned burnout. Our language barrier might have concealed her feelings or a particular experience, but why does she not feel burnout? I assume that Maria’s values influence her relationship with her colleagues. Her value of
friendship is also built on respect, but it is on a different level than Kate’s. In her story of collaboration with other personnel at the beach, she was open and flexible to give or accept advice. I also assume that the school atmosphere of Ocean School may encourage Maria to ask any questions. It makes her feel comfortable to collaborate so that she does not feel burnout because she feels support and understanding by colleagues (Brouwers et al., 2001).

It is possible that Kate unintentionally draws a line between her and her junior colleagues because it is her way to show respect. She respects not only children’s autonomy, but also colleagues’. During the interview, Kate mentioned that there was a chance to share her feelings of difficulties managing children with her colleagues. Kate’s colleagues took over her children when she was absent. It was not easy for them to manage the children, but later Kate told them that it had been a challenge for her as well. Kate’s colleagues might have then felt Kate much closer, because Kate somehow had seemed to be almighty to them. They had not known Kate’s efforts and struggles until then. Kate said that she did not know how to express her feelings either because she did not know what the problem was. Why could she not just say that she did not know what the problem was? It was not revealed during the interviews or observations, but Kate’s reflection may be kept only in herself and not shared with others. Self-reflection is empowering (Cable & Miller, 2008) and it makes an independent thinker (Castle, 2012). Kate did not mean it, but her respect for her colleagues, her strong commitment for work and her determination to progress might have made her too independent, which interfered with her collaboration.

6.4.3 Their way to a more democratic future

Considering the condition of preschool personnel in Iceland, unqualified assistants may take a lot of responsibility for childcare, because the number of qualified preschool teachers is only 34% in 2010 (Statistic Iceland, 2011). Is assistant’s work regarded as unprofessional, because of lack of qualifications?

Democratic professionalism (Oberhuemer, 2005; Whitty & Wisby, 2006; Whitty, 2008) is a concept which suggests a possibility of collaboration among all stakeholders for a democratic future. It can be interpreted that regardless of their background, each individual takes an important part in preschool education with a positive attitude. It opens a new perspective that preschool personnel Kate and Maria, as well as their colleagues, can take part in decision making and collaboration without the concern of legal status.
Comparing to the four levels of ‘democratic professionalism’, Hjallastefnan’s six principles seem to meet these levels in several aspects. Kate and Maria’s practice is consistent with what Oberhuemer describes the first level of democratic professionalism: listening to children attentively, seeking to understand their points of view, their interests, their questions and their intentions, seeking to learn more about their individual lives (p. 13). Kate tries to understand and respect children’s point of view and stimulate their intellectual interest and motivation. Maria actually joins children’s activities and listens to what they say closely.

The second level of democratic professionalism distributes leadership. The Hjallastefnan preschool counselor and directors explain that they try not to set a hierarchy and respect each personnel’s unique skills or knowledge. As Kate and Maria described the way they feel respect and autonomy at work, they share the goal and strive for the ‘agreed task’ (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 13) to promote children’s positive life. This level also includes a culture of peer learning and evaluating organizational change, and these are what they can try as a new task.

Partnership with parents is the third level of democratic professionalism and it is not studied in this project and it requires future research.

The final level is the knowledge base which is relevant to the view of pedagogues. I have discussed the potential of Kate and Maria as pedagogues (Moss & Pence, 2002; Oberhuemer, 2005; Moss, 2006) earlier in this chapter. With their respectful and friendly approach to children and their way of developing professional knowledge, Kate and Maria’s work becomes more effective and responsive. Reflection and critical thinking are requirements for this level. It may not be fully enhanced if there is not a consistent individual or collective habit of reflection. It is also a challenge that Hjallastefnan can tackle with a positive attitude.

The concept of democratic professionalism is my guide when I try to explore the way to learn collective professionalism at Hjallastefnan but it is not the guideline that they must follow. I decided to compare Hjallastefnan and democratic professionalism because these four levels of activity reflect professional development theories and they try to meet the current view of early childhood workforce. At least they show some perspectives which may not have been discussed much at Hjallastefnan yet.

It is a critical situation for Hjallastefnan that preschool personnel’s knowledge base and commitment are not solid. How would it be possible for them to work on improving the situation? A hint might be found in the contents of the in-service training for new staff or experienced personnel.
Hastings (2010) argues that it is important for the administration to plan their pre-service training for student teachers to understand what is expected at educational sites. A gap between training and reality and lack of commitment can be serious issues when they try to pursue the same goal. The gap needs to be filled or at least acknowledged before experienced personnel feel burnout by encountering the ‘unexpected’ reaction of new staff (Brouwers et al., 2001; Hastings, 2010).

My suggestion is that in-service training can include more theoretical aspects, as well as practical tips to stimulate participants’ autonomy. Since Hjallabrú is no longer available, the general training is an important opportunity to enlighten new staff, concerning what is expected of them. Learning opportunities to enhance professional characteristics do not naturally occur, they need to be purposefully encouraged (Loughran, 2006). One way may be to introduce the habit of writing for reflection. The benefit of writing is discussed in literature (Loughran, 2006; Kosnik, 2007; Castle, 2012), and its efficiency is proved in Kate’s practice. What they might do, for example, would be to request a written essay by new staff prior to training, which would reflect their work visions. It would be helpful, for both participants and the administration, to reflect upon the participants’ perspectives. Then, communication will provide a better understanding with one another. When preschool personnel reflect on their practice, they can question their action and thoughts and stimulate their metacognition (Loughran, 2006). But it has not been seriously considered among Hjallastefnan. Instead, the preschool counselor explained that communication is valued as a tool to evaluate the work of each worker. Good communication is essential between personnel to develop a positive interdependency and it is revealed in Maria’s practice. But, does it help each personnel to effectively reflect on their practice from an objective point of view? How can they question their quality of practice, as Urban (2008) pointed out, to find a better way for the children? When I try to look at Maria’s close communication with her colleagues, it helps me realize that documentation and communication should be equally valued. Maria’s flexibility is remarkable, but if she does not constantly reflect on her practice it limits her opportunity to question, and it may be helpful for her to rationalize her work. She might be able to enjoy her autonomy even more, if she could challenge herself by questioning.

Based on my analysis, I discovered that an unrevealed challenge which Hjallastefnan is facing is to make each personnel an independent professional, who understands what and why she is doing. In my point, independence means individual preschool personnel can be responsible for
their work and they develop a good knowledge of practice and skills. Self-reflection takes an important role to encourage independence. When they reflect on their practice, for instance as Kate uses her journal, they can question their action and thoughts and stimulate their metacognition (Loughran, 2006). If communication is viewed effectively, and used as a tool to share their professional views, it reinforces each personnel’s belief and value at work. A good balance of independence (documentation) and interdependence (communication) will enhance each other’s motivation towards work, while educating each other with new perspectives. As a result, it strengthens the bond of the workers to build trust, mutual respect, and harmony. It fosters a culture of the learning community for a democratic future and enhances preschool personnel’s positive sense of security.

Since Hjallastefnan is expanding rapidly, every training opportunity is extremely important for the whole group to enhance not only the individual personnel’s skills, but also their confidence and self-esteem, which underlie values towards work. Hjallastefnan will be called a team of professionals with a variety of professional characteristics, such as Kate and Maria possess.
7 Conclusion

This project is the first case study on Hjallastefnan preschool personnel’s professionalism, and their sense of security. My purpose in the study was not to compare their work, because I assumed their effectiveness should be influenced by different perspectives, and it is not fair to evaluate their values. Every child is different each day, and it affects personnel’s professional identity and their work (Day et al., 2005).

We are standing at the entrance of looking into what Hjallastefnan is about. While conducting this project, I found various future research opportunities in order to delve into my research or simply to learn more about Hjallastefnan. Unfortunately it is impossible to look at them all at the same time. Since the focus of this project is on preschool personnel’s practice as professionals, my research is limited in various aspects. Further researches are needed in: examining the theoretical and practical aspects of Hjallastefnan’s school principles; exploring more about preschool personnel’s and children’s interaction; investigating collaboration between school and parents; and hearing the voices of young staff, school directors and administrations to learn how they view their personnel or work. In short, any research on Hjallastefnan is needed.

The most important finding for me is that there are preschool personnel who work with passion, love, and their values. Preschool personnel’s narratives tell how and what preschool personnel feel and act based on their values at work. Their joy, passion, interest and dilemma are all genuine and I believe that it helps us even visualize their daily practice with friendship and respect. It is not easy work. There are always new challenges coming ahead, but they look satisfied because they are confident as professionals. As Maria calls herself ‘the toy’, Hjallastefnan preschool personnel responsively keep moving for children’s better future.

Although this project took two years to complete, I am confident that I made a significant achievement in my study, and that I have been successful in opening the door to the field of Hjallastefnan studies within Icelandic society. However, the most valuable thing I gained throughout my study was the time I spent at Hjallastefnan, because every single moment the preschool personnel shared with me is a real treasure for my upcoming life as a responsive educator in Iceland.
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