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OF ICELAND**

**A Critical Approach to Migrant Parents'  
Perspectives on Children's Language Learning  
in Icelandic Preschools**

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# **A Critical Approach to Migrant Parents' Perspectives on Children's Language Learning in Icelandic Preschools**

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## Abstract

This study delves into the experiences of migrant parents residing in Iceland and their perceptions of their children's language learning journey in Icelandic preschools. With multilingualism playing a crucial role in today's diverse Icelandic society, understanding the perspectives of migrant parents is essential for fostering inclusive educational environments in preschools. By taking a critical approach my primary focus will be on identifying and analyzing the shortcomings within the educational institutions of Reykjavik City and their impact on migrant parents and their children's language development.

Through qualitative interviews with six migrant parents in Iceland, through narrative analysis, and an autoethnographic approach, this research aims at shedding light on the experiences and challenges of migrant parents as their children navigate language acquisition in Icelandic preschool settings while learning their heritage language at home. I will also ask the question of how much of the policies of the National Curriculum have been carried out in different educational facilities inside Reykjavik. Consequently, I want to discuss if preschools in Reykjavik stick to a multilingual policy or if they try to maintain a monolingual discourse for young children.

The parents I interviewed for this paper expressed concerns about communication issues with their children's preschools in Iceland. Additionally, they highlighted a perceived lack of staff in Icelandic preschools leading to the perceived lack of communication. The parents also felt that there was an overemphasis on the Icelandic language. This, in turn, made it difficult and frustrating for the children to communicate in their home or heritage languages.

The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of multilingualism in educational contexts in Reykjavik and aim at providing valuable insights for educators and policy-makers to support language development and integration for migrant children. There has been a long-standing interest in multilingualism in Icelandic preschools and the impact of the linguistically diverse upbringing of children in this country. With my research I try to contribute to the ongoing discourse on multilingual education in preschools.

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## Preface

I would like to extend my gratitude to Brynja Elísabeth Halldórsdóttir for her patience, valuable feedback, and the time she dedicated to meeting and discussing the thesis topic with me. I would also like to thank Ólafur Páll Jónsson, who is the specialist supervisor for this thesis, for taking the time to read and assist with finishing the paper. I am also deeply appreciative of my partner, Arnaldur Sigurðarson, who patiently listened to my ideas and thoughts throughout the research process.

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I would like to dedicate this work to my mentor and teacher, Manami Kusumoto, who not only introduced me to the joy of working in a preschool but also instilled in me a deep appreciation for embracing multilingualism and multiculturalism as integral aspects of the learning process.

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the University of Iceland Code of Ethics ([https://english.hi.is/university/code\\_of\\_ethics](https://english.hi.is/university/code_of_ethics)) and have followed them to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work.  
Signed:

Reykjavík, 29th May 2024

Friederike Börner

## 1. Introduction

There has been a long-standing interest in multilingualism in Icelandic preschools and the impact of the linguistically diverse upbringing of children in this country (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2018). Research has shown that young children who learn a new language in preschools highly benefit from maintaining their heritage language while getting support from educators (Ball, 2011; Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Diamond, 2010; Okal, 2014). UNESCO has encouraged instructions in heritage languages around the world in early childhood education since 1953, however monolingualism is still dominant in most countries (Ball, 2011, Björklund & Björklund, 2013).

There is little research on migrant parents' experience and how they experience their child's language learning and how much support they receive from preschools in Iceland<sup>1</sup>. Some of the research shows that children are doing overall academically well, but some parents experience lack of communication with educators, cultural differences between norms and values and the difference of expectations between their homes and the schools (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). A recent study found that schools are unable to provide teaching and resources in the children's heritage language and the main focus is on teaching Icelandic as a second language (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). However, we know by now that children would benefit more from a multilingual education (Cummins, 1986) and an understanding of diversity in the classroom. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) the speakers of a country's dominant language also have the right to benefit from multilingualism and children should be able to use their heritage language as a linguistic human right. To establish learning environments that cater to the requirements of linguistically and culturally diverse students, schools must prioritize the implementation of socially just and inclusive practices. This involves acknowledging and leveraging students' prior knowledge while embracing their diverse backgrounds (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020).

In this paper, I provide a short introduction to the Icelandic language and the linguistic landscape in Iceland. Additionally, I look into the preservative and conservative language policies related to the Icelandic language within the education system. To establish the foundation of my research, I compare the experiences of migrant parents with the actual policies outlined in the National preschool curriculum, which I outline briefly. Given the critical approach of this paper, I introduce terms and concepts, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), Linguistic Human Rights, multilingual education and second language acquisition and comment on my positionality within this research. Drawing on my own experiences as a former preschool

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Iceland defines an immigrant as a person who was born abroad, and their grandparents and parents have been also born abroad (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020).



teacher in the Icelandic education system, I will use an autoethnographic approach to share my personal observations and reflections from working directly within the early childhood education setting. Subsequently, I will describe my research project, including the research questions, objectives, and the process and challenges of conducting interviews. Using narrative analysis, I will analyze the interviews I conducted with six migrant parents in Iceland.

The research question examines whether parents receive adequate support for their children's language development. It specifically asks, to what extent do migrant parents of preschool-aged children in Reykjavik, Iceland, receive support for their children's language learning development, and are there any discrepancies between the national preschool curriculum and the actual execution of education within these institutions?

I also seek to identify any discrepancies between the actual language education provided in preschools and the guidelines outlined in the National Curriculum. Additionally, my research question aims to assess the effectiveness of communication between educational institutions and parents on this topic. By exploring these issues, my research can shed light on potential gaps or inconsistencies in the language learning support available to families. The findings could inform policy decisions, curriculum development, and communication strategies between schools and parents to better meet the linguistic needs of young children.

### **1.1 The linguistic landscape in Iceland**

Icelandic, the primary and official language in Iceland, is a member of the North branch of the Indo-European language family. Despite being spoken by approximately 320,000 individuals across a large island, Icelandic has not evolved distinct social or geographical dialects (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). While there may exist minor variations in pronunciation, these differences are not substantial enough to be categorized as distinct dialects within Iceland (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010, Jónsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018).

Iceland has a robust literary heritage and upholds a conservative language policy aimed at preserving its linguistic identity. Iceland's language policy has remained largely unchanged over the centuries, with a core principle of "preserving the unbroken literary tradition dating back to the 12th century" (Kristinsson, 2005). According to Hilmarsson-Dunn (2006) this conservative language policy is supported by the government and by Icelandic society

Geographically isolated, the country has maintained a remarkably homogeneous monolingual environment for an extended period of time (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). Icelandic Sign Language (ISL) is the only minority language in Iceland (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010, Jónsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018). Following a gradual rise in immigration figures from 1960 to 1989, there was a substantial increase in numbers, leading to

a significant shift in Iceland's demographics between 1999 and 2009 (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). Since 2000 with the global economic boom the population has transformed from a predominantly homogeneous society, where the majority shared the same primary language, to a diverse and multilingual nation (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). These numbers have steadily increased in recent years and in 2023, 17,9% of the total population in Iceland were foreign citizens (Statistics Iceland: The Population Increased by 3,370 in the Second Quarter of 2023 (n.d.)).

Despite this significant and steady growth of migrant populations in Iceland Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson (2010) point out that Statistics Iceland does not provide available data on the first languages of immigrants. Consequently, their primary language is based on their citizenship, although this method cannot be deemed entirely accurate. Individuals with Polish citizenship are categorized as 'Polish speakers,' those with Lithuanian citizenship are considered 'Lithuanian speakers,' and citizens from the US, Australia, the UK, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, and South Africa are classified as 'English speakers.' Considering that immigrants hail from 131 different countries, it can be estimated that there are approximately 100 official languages, aside from Icelandic and ISL, spoken by individuals residing in Iceland presently (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010).

Different countries often have a complex linguistic landscape, with distinct tribal languages, regional dialects, and nationally recognized official languages. These various linguistic forms can coexist within a population, reflecting the multilingual nature of many individuals (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, Seals & Shah, 2019, Ndhlovu, 2015). Citizenship is sometimes used as a marker of linguistic homogeneity, implying that citizens share a common national language. However, this oversimplifies the linguistic reality, as many individuals may already be proficient in multiple languages before arriving in Iceland. Additionally, countries like Belgium and Canada have bilingual policies, further complicating the assumption that any given citizen is monolingual. Other examples include Switzerland, which recognizes multiple national languages, and India, where numerous regional languages coexist.

The assumption of a single, unitary national language can obscure the existing linguistic diversity within a population (Ndhlovu, 2015). Individuals may use tribal tongues, regional dialects, and even foreign languages prior to moving to Iceland. This multilingualism can be overlooked when citizenship is treated as a proxy for linguistic identity (Seals & Shah, 2019, Ndhlovu, 2015). This holds true for Iceland as well, where migrants may introduce multiple languages.

## 1.2 A brief history of the Icelandic Language

The standard modern Icelandic language can be considered largely unchanged from the language used in classical Old Icelandic literature, at least in terms of morphology and syntax. This linguistic continuity and modern homogeneity make Icelandic unique within the European context (Hilmarrsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010, Leonard & Árnason, 2011). The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are recognized as the Golden Age of Icelandic literature. During this period, notable literary works such as the 'Sagas of Icelanders' (Íslendingasögur), the 'Sagas of Kings' (Konungasögur), particularly those authored by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century, and the anonymous poetic Edda, which includes myths of the Nordic pagan deities and ancient heroes, were created and subsequently preserved in Icelandic manuscripts.

The literary legacy, combined with the distinctive features of the language itself, has fostered a strong sense of cultural identity among the Icelandic population. According to Hilmarrsson-Dunn and Kristinsson (2010) this belief has been the driving force behind the longstanding ideology of preserving and nurturing the Icelandic language. The literature of Iceland, from the sagas of the past to modern Icelandic writings, has been extensively translated into numerous languages around the world and serves as a subject of international research and study.

From history we can see that even before the emergence of political nationalism and nation-building, the Icelandic people shared a unified literary language that served as a common identifier for all members of the developing nation (Hilmarrsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). From approximately 1770 to the present, the vocabulary of Icelandic has undergone a substantial expansion, particularly as the language has progressively extended its influence into various domains, including science, technology, and sports. Icelandic vocabulary has expanded by the use of neologisms<sup>2</sup> or the creation of compounds<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, Icelandic has incorporated a significant amount of foreign vocabulary, although its frequency may be lower compared to neighboring languages. These borrowed words are typically adapted to align with Icelandic phonology, orthography, and morphology (Hilmarrsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). Two important Icelandic language planning agencies shape the landscape of the language in the country today: The Icelandic Language Council on July 30, 1964 and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum) since 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> In the field of linguistics, a neologism refers to a relatively new and distinct term, word, or phrase that has gained significant recognition and is gradually being embraced within the broader language community.

<sup>3</sup> Compounding is the process of combining two or more words to create a longer word.

### 1.3 Icelandic Preschools and the Icelandic National Curriculum

The Icelandic educational system is divided into four main levels: preschool education, compulsory education (primary and lower secondary combined), upper-secondary education, and higher education. While preschool education is not compulsory, it is formally recognized as the first level of schooling in Iceland. As in the other Nordic countries, educational policies at the preschool level in Iceland focus on care, wellbeing, play, and social development (Egilsson et al., 2021). In Iceland, the term "playschool" is used to refer to all group care services for children between the ages of 18 months and 6 years old. This terminology emphasizes the central role that play holds within Icelandic philosophy and practice in early childhood education (Einarsdóttir, 2008). Importantly, the emphasis in Icelandic preschools is on learning through play and children are supported in their creative and social development.

Preschools cater to children under the age of six, or until they begin primary school in the fall of the year they turn six, whichever comes first. Most children start preschool at the age of two (Einarsdóttir, 2011). In Iceland, the cost of attending these preschool institutions is heavily subsidized for families, resulting in nearly universal attendance for children between 2 and 6 years old. As such, preschools are a natural and integral part of the daily lives of most families with young children in the country (Egilsson et al., 2021, Einarsdóttir, 2011).

The educational policy for Icelandic preschools is formulated by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, which publishes a national curriculum to guide the system. However, the ministry grants considerable autonomy to local authorities and individual preschools, allowing them to develop their own specific emphasis and approaches within the broader national guidelines (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011).

For my research I based my questions and my assumptions about how language education is conducted on the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools. The National Curriculum Guide serves as a reference for educational practices at the preschool, compulsory school, and upper secondary school levels. It is based on the Preschool Act (No. 90, 12 June 2008), the Compulsory School Act (No. 91, 12 June 2008), and the Upper Secondary School Act (No. 92, 12 June 2008). This guide provides a framework for school activities and offers insight into their objectives and goals. It presents a comprehensive overview of education and further elaborates on the educational policies outlined in these laws (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). The document I refer to is from 2012 and is 56 pages long, including topics such as the role of schools, general education, teacher professionalism, evaluation and supervision and more. The fundamental pillars of the education policy in Iceland are the following: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. These pillars are designed to shape the working methods, content, and learning environment across all levels of the educational system, ensuring important continuity

throughout (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). The national curriculum states that educational institutions should make efforts to operate according to the needs and status of children, and to encourage their active participation in a democratic society both within and outside of the school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

Literacy is mentioned first per document and further explained as being associated with the ability to write down one's thoughts and comprehend written text, encompassing the skills of reading and writing (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 16). The Curriculum guide includes media competency and digital literacy into this field; however, it does not explicitly specify Icelandic as the language in which students should develop their literacy skills. On page 30, Article 2 the main objectives of upbringing and instruction in preschools is explained, including now linguistic stimulation and contribution of common skills in the Icelandic language. Preservation of other languages or the term "heritage language of children" is not mentioned. According to the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, "Preschool should use everyday relations to stimulate children's sense of the Icelandic language by learning new words and concepts and developing their language" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 34).

However, the document also mentions that preschool operations integrate the principles of nurturing, care, and education. Children are to be treated with respect and compassion, receiving encouragement and engaging in tasks suitable for their development. They are regarded as valued members of the preschool community, actively participating in its activities (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Throughout my research and interviews with parents, I frequently make reference to the curriculum in order to draw comparisons between their experiences and the actual educational policies in effect.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature

Studies have demonstrated that young children who acquire a new language during their preschool years greatly benefit from preserving their heritage language with the assistance of educators (Ball, 2011, García et al., 2006, Diamond, 2010, Cenoz, 2012). Since 1953, UNESCO has been promoting the inclusion of heritage language instruction in early childhood education globally, yet monolingualism remains prevalent in the majority of countries (Ball, 2011).

As the research has noted, Iceland maintains a relatively conservative language policy that promotes the monolingual status quo of the Icelandic language (Kristinsson, 2005; Hilmarsson-Dunn, 2006). This linguistic orientation is particularly evident within the country's educational institutions. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the experiences of migrant parents, including their perceptions of their child's language acquisition and the extent of support they receive from preschools in Iceland to learn Icelandic while maintaining their heritage language (Jónsdóttir, et al., 2018, Gunnþórsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020).

According to Ragnarsdóttir (2020), certain research findings indicate that migrant children generally perform well academically, but some parents report experiencing difficulties in communicating with educators and perceive differences in norms, values, and expectations between their homes and the schools. Recent studies have also revealed that schools struggle to provide instruction and resources in children's heritage languages, with a primary focus on teaching Icelandic as a second language (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020, Jónsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018). However, it is widely recognized that a multilingual education, as advocated by Cummins (1986), would be more beneficial for children, promoting linguistic diversity and understanding in the classroom (May & Sleeter, 2010). In a global context, Icelandic is considered a minority language, spoken exclusively in one country by a limited number of speakers (around 400.000 people). However, within a kindergarten in Reykjavik and at the local level, Icelandic serves as the majority language and is dominant compared to other languages.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) argues that speakers of the dominant language (in this case, Icelandic) also have the right to benefit from multilingualism, and children should be able to exercise their linguistic human right to use their heritage language. The theoretical framework of the study incorporates critical approaches to education, such as Critical Race Theory (Stefancic & Delgado, 2017), as well as theories concerning social justice in multilingual education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009, and Cummins, 1986).

The concept of language rights has a long and complex history, spanning the era of the League of Nations, the drafting of constitutions, and the aftermath of World War I. However, the precise meaning and implications of language rights have not been adequately clarified, even by language experts and linguists (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998).

In contrast, the broader field of human rights has been more thoroughly studied and defined, involving a wide range of stakeholders, including international organizations, lawyers, courts, research institutes, and non-governmental organizations. Yet, according to Skutnabb-Kangas (1998) the intersection of language rights and human rights, known as linguistic human rights, is a relatively new and underexplored area that requires further scientific and political attention (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998, May & Sleeter, 2010). If children are not provided the opportunity to fully and properly learn their parents' language within the educational system, the chances of that language's long-term survival are significantly diminished (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998). The failure to support the acquisition of parents' native languages in schools can threaten the maintenance and continuity of those languages across generations. To establish inclusive learning environments that cater to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, schools must prioritize the implementation of socially just practices. This entails recognizing and valuing students' prior knowledge while embracing their diverse backgrounds (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020, May & Sleeter, 2010).

## **2.1 Multilingual Education**

Multilingual education refers to an educational approach that recognizes and promotes the use of multiple languages as mediums of instruction and learning within an educational system. It aims to provide students with opportunities to develop proficiency and academic competence in multiple languages, including their mother tongue or heritage languages alongside the dominant languages of the country they live in (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995). In multilingual education the languages are used to teach subjects rather than just the language itself (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). According to Cummins' 2009 study, there are three main outcomes associated with bilingual education:

Bilingual education supports a positive relationship between the first and second languages a child learns, even for language pairs that are not closely related, such as Chinese and English or Dutch and Turkish (Cummins, 2009). Furthermore, the most successful bilingual programs are those that provide long-term language support and help children become biliterate. When started in preschool and promoted throughout primary school, the success rate for learning multiple languages is very high (Cummins, 2009). Bilingual education for minority students is more effective than solely focusing on teaching them the majority language. The positive relationship developed between the languages learned from an early age does not hinder children from continuing to acquire additional languages throughout their academic development (Cummins, 2009).

Björklund and Björklund (2013) assert that Europe, including the Nordic countries, cannot be considered genuinely multilingual, as they have fewer than 300 living languages present

within their borders. In contrast, other continents across the globe are home to approximately 2,300 distinct languages. Most countries have a significant presence of languages beyond those officially recognized, including minority languages and indigenous languages (Björklund & Björklund, 2013). This is where multilingual education can become important to groups and individuals. However, the prevailing objective for second-language learners is often to attain native-like proficiency in the target language, leading to feelings of failure and a sense of incompleteness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). In addressing this issue, it is crucial to recognize that multilingual individuals and learners in the process of becoming multilingual should not be regarded as mere imitations of monolinguals in a second or additional language. Instead, they should be acknowledged as possessing distinct forms of competence in their own right (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) multilingual education also entails having bilingual teachers and granting the right to learners to enjoy and develop learning their own language while learning the majority language of the country they are living in. Multilingual education emphasizes the value of linguistic diversity, cultural understanding, and the cognitive, social, and academic benefits that arise from being proficient in multiple languages (Nieto, 2001, Lynn Kell Spradlin & Parsons, 2008, Higgins & Ponte, 2017).

## **2.2 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the benefits of multilingualism**

Learning a second language has proven to boost cognitive functions and it enhances and improves memory. Bilingual and multilingual speakers, due to their broader exposure to languages, often exhibit creativity, flexibility and linguistic playfulness that may not be accessible to monolingual speakers of the same language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). The ability to fluently navigate multiple languages appears to foster a more adaptable and open-minded mindset. Multilingual speakers often exhibit enhanced perspective-taking skills, allowing them to more readily understand and relate to diverse cultural frames of reference (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, Amelia, 2016).

Studies have shown that learning multiple languages from a young age trains the brain to focus on relevant information while disregarding irrelevant details. This skill of selective attention later translates to improved memory, planning, and multitasking performance in multilinguals (Amelia, 2016). The cognitive demands of managing and switching between multiple linguistic systems appear to confer tangible benefits to executive functions like focus, recall, and task-switching (Amelia, 2016). According to Cenoz and Gorter (2011), the communicative competence of bilingual or multilingual individuals cannot be equated with that of monolingual individuals. Consequently, within educational environments, the perception



that individuals who are non-native speakers lack proficiency in their communication skills persists (Ndhlovu, 2015, Phillipson, 2009).

Another point Skutnabb-Kangas emphasizes is that linguistic diversity is as important to human ecology as biodiversity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, p. 17). Languages are deeply intertwined with cultures, histories, and identities. Preserving linguistic diversity allows for the safeguarding of unique cultural traditions, knowledge systems, and ways of life (Nieto, 2001). Moreover, language is the primary tool for communication and understanding among individuals and communities. Linguistic diversity enables diverse populations to express their thoughts, emotions, and ideas effectively.

As we know by now, multilingualism has a variety of cognitive benefits for humans learning more than one language. They enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and creativity. Furthermore, maintaining linguistic diversity can also be beneficial for a more sustainable society. Indigenous and local languages often have deep connections with specific environments and ecosystems. They can contain ecological knowledge, including more sustainable resource management practices.

In alignment with Skutnabb-Kangas' standpoint (1995), it is evident that linguistic diversity holds a comparable significance to biodiversity in terms of the health and sustainability of our planet. Like biodiversity, linguistic diversity plays a vital role in enhancing the richness, vitality, and overall well-being of our global society.

### **2.3 Heritage language and mother tongue**

The rise in mobility and globalization has resulted in a growing number of individuals who relocate to areas where a different dominant societal language is spoken (Seals & Shah, 2019). Consequently, this has led immigrants to adopt the role of heritage language speakers (Seals & Shah, 2019). It is important to note that this phenomenon is not limited to recent times. In fact, there are numerous heritage language speakers who have been residing in the same country for multiple generations. According to Seals and Shah (2019) a significant portion of this movement can be attributed to various political and social factors that serve as both push and pull factors. Pull factors like the expansion of multinational corporations and the growing recruitment of international students by universities have contributed to facilitating trans-national movement. On the other hand, the ongoing global refugee crisis and Britain's departure from the European Union (Brexit) have created push factors, compelling individuals to seek new locations (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). Economic integration within the European Union promotes and facilitates the unrestricted mobility of workers and their families across member countries (Cummins, 2001, Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010, Gunnþórsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020, Harðardóttir et al., 2023).

While certain governments implement policies aimed at supporting heritage languages, others enforce measures intended to restrict or eradicate them (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). These policies can be specific to Indigenous languages, immigrant/diaspora languages, or include both. Some governments may not have explicit language policies at all. These policies can undergo changes over time, particularly when new political parties assume power. The terminology used to describe heritage language policies can vary across different regions, making it challenging to establish a universal definition. Some countries may prefer terms equivalent to minority language, community language, mother tongue, and so forth, while others may lack specific terminology for addressing the concept of heritage languages.

In this paper I use the term heritage language when talking about the languages immigrants in Iceland speak that is different from Icelandic. The immigrants I have talked to had different reasons to relocate to Iceland - some of them are international students, some of them moved here due to job opportunities. Not all of them speak a minority language or a specific community language, therefore the term heritage language applies best to the parents I spoke with.

The term "minority language" has a seemingly straightforward definition, but it is also problematic. In the most basic sense, a minority language is one spoken by less than 50 percent of the population in a given region, state, or country (Grenoble, Singerman, 2014). The crucial factor here is the size of the speaker population within a specific geographic context. An individual language may be considered a minority language in one region or state, but a majority language in another (Grenoble, Singerman, 2014). This is often the case with immigrant languages, where the speakers may continue to be a majority in their homeland but have a smaller speaker base in their new location (Grenoble, Singerman, 2014).

## **2.4 Linguistic Human Rights (LHR)**

Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) addresses the prohibition of discrimination. The full text of Article 14 states:

The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, color, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.  
(European Court of Human Rights, 1950, Article 14)

This article of the European Convention on Human Rights specifically prohibits discrimination on the grounds of language. This means that individuals cannot be denied the enjoyment of their rights and freedoms under the Convention based on the language they speak (European Court of Human Rights, 1950). While the ECHR does not establish a

freestanding right to use a particular language, Article 14 can be invoked to challenge discrimination against the use of minority or regional languages. Furthermore, the protection against language discrimination encourages the recognition and accommodation of multilingualism within European states.

Skutnabb-Kangas defines Linguistic Human Rights as part of human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). According to her, linguistic human rights include those language rights that are fundamental for leading a dignified life and are inherently granted to all individuals by virtue of their humanity. Consequently, no state or individual is permitted to violate these rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012, p. 237). It is common for dominant linguistic communities to establish explicit legal provisions for their language rights, especially when marginalized groups, such as indigenous/tribal peoples or various minority populations (such as immigrants) begin advocating for language rights of their own. Dominant language groups frequently overlook their own rights, considering them as automatic entitlements. This tendency persists even today, posing a significant challenge when addressing and defining linguistic or language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012).

Linguicide<sup>4</sup>, the violation of language rights, and the protection of language rights can all be experienced at both the individual and collective levels. Skutnabb-Kangas (2012) argues furthermore that being born into a linguistic minority context, where one's parents speak a language that is not the dominant language in the societal context, and experiencing disadvantages and inequities due to the low status attributed to this language, can be interpreted as providing a rationale for asserting a claim for "compensation." This includes having the state provide additional resources, such as education delivered in one's mother tongue, to address these disparities. Additionally, the maintenance of the existence of these minority groups for their ongoing generations should be ensured (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012, p. 242).

## **2.5 Baseline Recommendations for MLE according to Skutnabb-Kangas**

In the book *Multilingualism for all* (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995) baseline recommendations are given to schools and educational institutions as a collection of personal experiences made by researchers of multilingual education. Skutnabb-Kangas points out that it is the researchers' duty to think ahead of today's political situation. Although this book was published in 1995 most of the recommendations she is giving are still very valid today and can be easily integrated

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<sup>4</sup> Linguicide is the deliberate destruction or extinction of languages, an analogous concept to the genocide of human populations (Skutnabb-Kangas & Philipson, 1996).

into schools with different language programs. In order to have a chance in succeeding in schools Skutnabb-Kangas makes the following recommendations:

Support is crucial - minority children should be taught in their heritage language, children of the majority language should have access to the heritage languages of the other children (Wiley & García, 2016, Grosjean, 2020).

All children with different languages can be grouped together. Research and policy discourse in international education has often been framed from a deficit perspective (Aikman et al., 2016). Rather than recognizing the skills and knowledge that participants already possess and practice in their everyday lives, researchers who adopt this deficit approach to learning and education may find that their research agenda and questions are heavily shaped by the standpoint of providers and policymakers. By applying these deficit-oriented terms, researchers can inadvertently reinforce research agendas embedded in dominant, mainstream policies that have led to discriminatory practices (Aikman et al., 2016). To challenge this deficit-oriented viewpoint, it is important to adopt an approach that includes all children with their full range of languages. Rather than seeing the heritage languages of minority students as a disadvantage, these linguistic resources should be recognized as beneficial assets. Providing opportunities for all children, including those who speak the majority language, to learn the heritage languages present in the classroom can be a valuable skill-building experience.

All children will become high level bilinguals - the children who speak the majority language will benefit from learning the minority language of the other children. This embraces linguistic diversity as an educational opportunity for students of all backgrounds to develop new language capabilities (Aikman et al., 2016). By shifting away from a deficit discourse and toward an asset-based perspective, educational practices and policies can better support the linguistic needs and strengths of all learners.

Ensuring equality among all children in terms of their mother tongue and proficiency in the language of instruction is crucial. Skutnabb-Kangas points out here, that merely expressing admiration for the significance of diverse languages serves little purpose unless concrete actions are taken to reflect these sentiments in school organization and practices (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, p. 13).

All teachers have to be multilingual - this will make teachers good role-models for the children and they can be supportive of their language learning. According to a study conducted by researchers Higgins and Ponte (2017) at the University of Honolulu, their analysis reveals how teachers' own linguistic backgrounds and histories strongly shaped their perspectives on multilingualism in schools. However, the study also demonstrates that providing teachers with a formally sanctioned opportunity to experiment with multilingual pedagogies opened up new spaces for critical self-reflection (Higgins & Ponte, 2017). This process allowed teachers to better understand the connections among languages, their own identities as educators, and the

academic engagement of their multilingual students (Higgins & Ponte, 2017). Providing support for teachers to develop and maintain their own multilingual abilities can be highly beneficial within educational settings. Supporting teachers in developing and maintaining their multilingual skills can be greatly advantageous in educational settings. This does not imply that teachers in Iceland must speak all the languages represented by the children in their kindergarten. Rather, it means that teachers should have an open mindset, allowing their multilingualism to resonate with the student population, enabling students to see themselves reflected in their educators.

Foreign languages should be taught using the children's mother tongue as a medium of instruction, and preferably by teachers who are proficient in the children's mother tongue.

All children must study both L1 and L2 throughout their school education as a compulsory subject. While multilingual pedagogies can encompass officially sanctioned approaches that assign different languages to specific subjects or activities within the school day, the multilingual practices most relevant to our context are better characterized as forms of translanguaging (García, 2009). Translanguaging refers to the fluid use of multilingual resources in learning and teaching, allowing students to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires (García, 2009, Higgins & Ponte, 2017). Research has shown translanguaging to be an effective means of including children in the mainstream activities of the classroom. By making space for students to use their home languages as they participate and learn, translanguaging pedagogies facilitate greater engagement and meaningful learning. This stands in contrast to more rigid, compartmentalized approaches to multilingualism in education (García, 2009, Canagarajah, 2011). Both languages (L1 and L2) should be utilized as mediums of instruction at some stage during children's education. However, the progression and extent to which each language is used appear to differ between minority and majority children.

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) following these principles will also ensure that linguistic human rights are protected and a high level of multilingualism will be provided for both minority groups and the majority speakers of a language.

## **2.6 Recommendations for multilingual education to an Icelandic educational context**

Given Iceland's linguistic diversity, where multiple languages coexist within the educational setting rather than solely having one L1 and one L2, enforcing these foundational recommendations in schools may pose challenges. Nevertheless, by shifting perspectives and recognizing multilingualism in Iceland as an asset rather than a threat to the Icelandic language, it becomes possible to incorporate some of these recommendations into the Icelandic education system.

Studies have shown that Icelandic teachers and schools have been found to lack adequate multicultural competence (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018, Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). There is a need for greater understanding of the diverse cultural realities students bring to the educational setting and how these realities can affect their learning experiences and outcomes (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018, Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). The Miðborg and Hlíðar Service Centre Report (Daníelsdóttir, Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir, 2010) found that while some Icelandic schools have made progress in how they welcome and integrate foreign students, the overall Icelandic education system still has significant room for improvement when it comes to facilitating the social adaptation of diverse students and incorporating truly multicultural teaching approaches.

Icelandic education policy is founded on the principle of inclusive education. However, despite attempts to acknowledge diversity within the school system, the multicultural dimensions of the educational landscape have been largely overlooked (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018). Research by Karvelsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir (2010), which included interviews with 10 teachers across two Icelandic schools, highlights these shortcomings. As one teacher expressed, "I would like to better integrate these students into the class, but I don't know how to do it" (Karvelsdóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2010, p. 8). This quote illustrates the challenges Icelandic educators face in effectively supporting the inclusion and integration of culturally diverse students, pointing to a need for greater training and resources to foster truly multicultural teaching practices (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018).

A tool to better understand culturally diverse students and to help them integrate better can be culturally responsive teaching (Vavrus, 2008). Culturally responsive teaching is an educational approach that aims to better engage and motivate students of color. These students have often struggled academically and felt socially disconnected from their public schools in the past. The key idea behind culturally responsive teaching is to recognize and incorporate the cultural backgrounds of these students into the school curriculum. It seeks to make meaningful connections between the subject material and the students' own cultural communities and experiences (Vavrus, 2008). The ultimate goal of culturally responsive teaching is to empower students. By building on their cultural knowledge and identities, it helps convey important academic and social concepts in a way that is relevant and empowering for them.

The approach of culturally responsive teaching is not limited only to students of color in the United States. It can also serve as a valuable tool for educators working in other cultural contexts, such as Iceland. The underlying principles of culturally responsive teaching - recognizing and incorporating the cultural backgrounds of students, making meaningful connections to their experiences and communities, and empowering them through relevant, identity-affirming instruction - can be just as impactful for students from diverse cultural groups outside of the U.S. The renowned educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) cautioned

that public education is inherently a form of cultural expression. If classroom teachers fail to critically examine this, it can lead to a disconnect for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Vavrus, 2008). Without an awareness and examination of this cultural dimension of education, teachers risk creating an environment that alienates and disadvantages these students. Their cultural identities, experiences, and ways of learning may not be meaningfully integrated into the classroom.

By embracing the advantages of a multilingual context, educational institutions can explore ways to leverage this diversity to enrich the learning experience. It involves acknowledging the value of various languages and cultures, promoting inclusive language policies, and actively supporting multilingual students in their language development. By adopting this positive approach, the Icelandic education system can adapt and implement relevant recommendations to create an environment that celebrates and nurtures multilingualism.

## **2.7 Critical Race Theory**

The critical race theory (CRT) movement comprises a group of scholars and activists who are dedicated to the examination and transformation of the interplay between race, racism, and power. The movement sprang up in the 1970s formed by a group of activists, lawyers and legal scholars around the United States (Stefancic & Delgado, 2017, p. 4). CRT rejects the idea that race is a biological fixed category, instead understanding it to be a social construct (Kalwant Bhopal, 2023). While conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses address similar topics, the CRT movement takes a more comprehensive approach that encompasses economics, history, context, group dynamics, self-interest, and the role of emotions and the unconscious mind. Critical Race Theory adopts a comprehensive perspective on anti-racist and anti-exclusionary discourse. The focus is on historical, systemic, and institutional aspects of exclusion, rather than the individual "deficit model" approach. This latter model tends to draw on narratives of victimization and blame (Halldórsdóttir & Kjaran, 2020).

By adopting this broader perspective, CRT provides a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding race-related issues and promotes meaningful social change (Stefancic & Delgado, 2017). While CRT initially emerged in the United States, it has now expanded its influence to other regions across the globe. It perceives structural racism as a global issue that persists in societies where white privilege and racial inequalities are present (Kalwant Bhopal, 2023). When applying critical race theories outside of the United States or United Kingdom, in countries that have historically been viewed as culturally homogeneous, the argument is often made that such societies have limited experience with racial discrimination and other forms of ethnic exclusion. This perspective stems from the perception that many Western nations, in

contrast to places like the USA, UK, Australia, or France, do not have the same longstanding relationships and dynamics with ethnic minority populations. In other words, the racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the attendant issues of marginalization, that characterize the social landscapes of certain Western countries are not necessarily seen to be as prevalent or deeply entrenched in more homogeneous national contexts (Halldórsdóttir & Kjaran, 2020).

As nationalist and populist ideologies have gained traction in many Western countries, there has been a corresponding influx of students from various cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds entering traditionally more homogeneous educational environments (Halldórsdóttir & Kjaran, 2020). The rise of nationalist and populist rhetoric across the Western world has coincided with increased migration driven by factors such as famine, drought, and global climatic and political upheavals that are forcing people to flee their homelands for survival (Einarsson, 2017).

These shifting demographic trends necessitate a deeper examination of how education systems in the global North either support or impede the learning and cultural experiences of diverse student populations. CRT as a research tool holds significant importance, especially in educational settings where the beliefs and norms of the dominant social class and culture are frequently perpetuated and imposed upon marginalized groups. The inability to incorporate and recognize the cultural knowledge and experiences of individuals in the learning process can lead to a form of epistemic violence<sup>5</sup> (Spivak, 1988). By conducting research inspired by Critical Race Theory (CRT), I aim to shed light on and critically examine the power dynamics present within preschools and educational environments. Rather than placing blame on individual immigrant students for their lack of success within the education system, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework to analyze the structural barriers and power dynamics that impede the academic achievement of immigrant learners in Iceland.

Using CRT as a tool in my research shifts the focus away from a "deficit model" that casts immigrant students as solely responsible for their educational outcomes. Instead, it examines how broader societal, institutional, and systemic factors – such as inequitable resource allocation, curriculum biases, and discriminatory practices – can systematically disadvantage and marginalize immigrant populations within the education system. This analysis serves as a catalyst for change, encouraging the transformation of these oppressive structures. As Halldórsdóttir and Kjaran (2020) point out, being a researcher in Critical Race Theory (CRT) requires adopting a non-neutral stance. Instead, it involves actively aligning oneself with minoritized groups and their struggles for justice and equity.

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<sup>5</sup> Epistemic violence is a term coined by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak in 1988 to describe forms of indirect violence that occur in the production, dissemination, and recognition of knowledge.



By applying a CRT lens, educators and policymakers in Iceland can gain deeper insight into the ways in which power imbalances and institutionalized forms of racism or xenophobia create obstacles to the educational attainment of immigrant students. This understanding is crucial for developing more inclusive, equitable, and effective approaches to supporting the academic success of diverse learners.

## **2.8 Language policies**

According to Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008) Language policies are socio-cultural processes that encompass both official actions and documents, as well as everyday language practices. These processes express normative claims about which language forms and uses are considered legitimate or illegitimate. Language policies have implications for the status, rights, roles, functions, and access to different languages and their varieties within a given polity, organization, or institution (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008). The scholarly study of how decisions about language are formulated and implemented is often considered a subset of the broader field of language planning.

Parents usually also implement language policies at home. Some of these policies can involve having one parent speak one language, the whole family sharing a common language to communicate, or switching between languages depending on the social context. The most common language policy used by the parents I interviewed at home was the one parent, one language approach.

The One Parent, One Language (OPOL) approach was initially introduced by the French linguist Maurice Grammont in 1902 in his book "Observations sur le langage des enfants." Grammont proposed the concept of "une personne, une langue" (one person, one language), suggesting that if parents strictly adhere to speaking only one language each from the earliest stages of a child's language acquisition, the child would be able to learn both languages effortlessly, without experiencing confusion or language mixing (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). According to Grammont, the OPOL approach offered several benefits. First, it allowed children to associate a specific person with a particular language, reducing confusion in language acquisition. Additionally, parents had the opportunity to transmit their language to their child, demonstrating the language as used by an adult (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004).

Educational institutions can also apply their own language policies, not depending on what policies parents have with their children. Some schools use immersion as a language education policy, which immerses students in the primary language of instruction, whether that is the dominant language of the region or a target language the school is focused on (Uhl Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999).

Some educational institutions such as international schools can offer bilingual programs that provide instruction in two languages, often the dominant language and a minority or heritage language. This allows students to develop proficiency in multiple languages (Roberts, 1995). Another common language policy that schools may implement is English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as an Additional Language (EAL). Schools with linguistically diverse student populations often have ESL or EAL programs to support students learning the primary language of instruction, usually English (Callahan et al., 2008). The preschool I worked at in Japan was an English as a Second Language (ESL) school. The teachers used English to communicate with the children, who came from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds.

The specific language policies used can vary widely based on the school's student demographics, educational goals, and local/national regulations.

### **3. Methodology**

In this master's thesis, I use three kinds of data: Interview data, autoethnographic data and data generated through document analysis. For the interview data I used a narrative analysis approach to collect and examine data from six interviews conducted with migrant parents living in Iceland (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Souto-Manning, 2012). The central research question explored the degree to which these parents and their children receive support from educational institutions in Iceland, as well as the potential challenges and shortcomings they face. Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences through the stories they tell (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). By conducting in-depth interviews with migrant parents, this study aimed to gain a deeper, more nuanced perspective on their experiences navigating the educational system in Iceland as newcomers.

The six parents interviewed represent diverse backgrounds, coming from different countries and with varying lengths of residence in Iceland. Through their personal narratives, the research sought to illuminate the unique supports, obstacles, and overall experiences of this population in accessing educational resources and opportunities for their children. Some of the key areas of inquiry were the types of support (linguistic, cultural, academic) that migrant parents and their children receive from the educational institution and the challenges of these families understanding and engaging with the Icelandic educational system.

This investigation was framed through the analytical lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). By applying a CRT perspective, the research sought to unpack the ways in which structural inequities, power dynamics, and systemic barriers within the education system may be impacting the experiences and outcomes of migrant students and their families. Analyzing these narratives through the conceptual framework of CRT enabled the research to delve into

the underlying societal and institutional factors that shape the educational realities of this immigrant population (Taylor et al., 2016; Stefancic & Delgado, 2017). This multifaceted approach allowed the study to move beyond simplistic notions of individual deficits or shortcomings, and instead illuminate the complex, systemic issues that drive the challenges faced by migrant students and their families within the Icelandic education system.

By centering the voices and perspectives of the migrant parents themselves, this thesis provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of this population. The narrative approach allows for a contextualized understanding of the supports and barriers encountered, informing potential improvements to educational policies and practices to better serve the needs of Iceland's growing immigrant communities.

### **3.1 Choice of location and participants**

For this master thesis project I did research on the preschools in Reykjavik City (All preschools | Reykjavik. (n.d.). Reykjavik.is. Retrieved April 20, 2023). I choose this particular locality to narrow down my research, and therefore also narrow down my results. If I had chosen "Icelandic preschools" I would have taken private institutes such as the Waldorf preschool or preschools outside Reykjavik municipality into account. This would have been hard to compare, since policies of private institutes as well as policies of other municipalities might differ. I planned to get in touch with migrant parents inside Reykjavik city who match the following criteria:

1. They were born abroad, and their parents and grandparents were also born abroad.
2. They have at least one child attending a preschool in Reykjavik city (age 1 to 5).
3. They have the option to conduct the interview with me in English, German, or Japanese. (These are the languages in which I feel confident conducting interviews in and providing accurate translations.)
4. The migrant parent has no Icelandic partner.

To conduct the research for this master's thesis, I plan to establish contact with migrant parents residing in Reykjavik, the capital city of Iceland. I intend to reach out to these potential participants through Facebook groups catering to immigrant communities, as well as by leveraging my personal connections with friends who are migrant parents living in the city. Ideally, I would be able to interview 6 to 8 parents with diverse backgrounds for this study. Given my language proficiency limitations, I anticipate that the pool of participants will primarily consist of European citizens, American citizens, and some English-speaking individuals

from Asian and African ethnic groups. This is because I will need to conduct the interviews in English or German, languages I am able to comfortably communicate in. The restricted number of languages I can work with will necessarily limit the diversity of migrant parents I am able to include in the sample. During the interview process, I will serve as the sole researcher, handling all aspects of data collection without the need for a translator. This will allow me to maintain control over the interview dynamics and ensure consistency in the information gathered from each participant. Through these one-on-one interviews, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and support systems encountered by migrant parents and their children within the educational landscape of Reykjavik.

### **3.2 Interview Set-up**

To ensure flexible and dynamic conversations during the qualitative interviews, I plan to utilize a non-standardized, non-directive, open-ended approach (Taylor et al., 2015). This interview style will allow for more natural and exploratory discussions, enabling the participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and personal narratives in their own words. Whenever possible, I intend to conduct the interviews in face-to-face encounters with the migrant parents. This in-person format will provide me with valuable insights into their lived experiences and situations (Taylor et al., 2015). Meeting the participants in-person will also help establish a stronger connection and rapport, which can lead to richer, more authentic dialogue. I will take detailed notes and record the audio of the interviews to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis at a later stage. The flexibility and versatility of qualitative interviews are the primary reasons for selecting this method for this research project.

Given my defined research interests, I will be able to ask targeted questions while still allowing for organic conversations to unfold (Taylor et al., 2015). Additionally, the interview format will provide me with easy access to the migrant parents and their unique situations. This approach will enable me to gather a broad range of opinions, experiences, and perspectives from the participants. Considering the time constraints of this project (until June 2024), the interview method will allow me to collect the necessary data in an organized and timely manner to achieve my research goals (Taylor et al., 2015). The face-to-face interactions will also help ensure the audio recordings are of high quality, further facilitating the transcription and analysis process.

### **3.3 Narrative analysis & applying a CRT lens on my research data**

For data analysis, I utilize narrative analysis to work with the results of my interviews. I analyze the interview transcripts, identifying key issues, themes, and values that the parents express regarding their children's language learning experiences. Through this narrative analysis, I

examine how the parents make sense of their experiences and construct meaning through their stories about living in Iceland. Furthermore, I try to explore the ways the participants position themselves, their families, and the educational system within their narratives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Souto-Manning, 2012).

By applying a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, I will try to identify instances of systemic racism, discrimination, or marginalization that emerge from the participants' accounts. I will examine how power dynamics and structural inequities might shape the experiences of the migrant families with their children enrolled in Icelandic schools. Additionally, I will analyze how the narratives challenge or reinforce dominant racial ideologies (Taylor et al., 2016; Stefancic & Delgado, 2017).

Finally, I will weave the narrative data and the CRT analysis together to present a holistic and compelling understanding of the experiences of the migrant families. I will synthesize the findings to address my research question on the level of support (or lack thereof) received by the migrant parents and their children, as well as the challenges and shortcomings within the Icelandic educational system.

### **3.4 Autoethnography**

Autoethnography, originating from postmodern philosophy, serves as a research tool that challenges the prevailing dominance of traditional science and validates diverse methods of knowledge and inquiry. By allowing researchers to share their personal experiences, autoethnography contributes to the advancement of sociological understanding and social change (Wall, 2008). Working with autoethnography presents significant challenges, as it intensifies the focus surrounding issues such as representation, objectivity, data quality, legitimacy, and ethics. According to Wall (2008) the inherently intimate and personal nature of autoethnography makes it one of the most demanding qualitative approaches to undertake (Wall, 2008).

Autoethnographers exhibit variations in their focus on the components of a self, the sociocultural connection, and the research process (Wall, 2008). While some individuals perceive a personal narrative and autoethnography as interchangeable, others employ autoethnography as a defined method to establish explicit connections between literature concepts and their own narrated personal experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These proponents advocate for an approach to autoethnography that is rigorous and justifiable, comparable in validity to any other form of inquiry.

Drawing on my nine years of experience as a teacher and my expertise in multilingual education and pedagogy, I have opted for autoethnography as a means to explore the personal and structural factors that drive my teaching methods and shape my perspective on topics such

as multilingual education, linguistic human rights, and language learning. During my nine years as a teacher, I had the opportunity to work in both Japan and Iceland, which provided me with distinct experiences in teaching methods and multilingual approaches with students. Although my teaching approaches remained consistent in both countries, I encountered certain limitations and had to adapt my approach upon moving to Iceland. I also chose to incorporate my experience as a Kindergarten teacher in Reykjavik, Iceland, using an autoethnographic approach. To provide a different perspective for this thesis, I included my insights and experiences from my two years as the head of a department at a public Kindergarten in Reykjavik.

### **3.5 Conduction of interviews and challenges**

Despite the significant number of foreigners residing in Iceland and the easy accessibility of platforms like Facebook, I encountered considerable difficulties in recruiting participants for my interviews. I believe several factors contributed to the lack of participants in my research: I faced challenges in finding suitable time slots to conduct the interviews, as I specifically requested in-person meetings with parents. Opting for face-to-face interviews generally ensures better audio recording quality, facilitates a stronger personal connection with the participants, and simplifies logistical aspects such as obtaining signed parental consent. Another issue I encountered was that many parents did not meet the criteria of being a migrant parent with a non-Icelandic partner. Most of the individuals I approached within my workplace or social circle had Icelandic partners, which did not align with the specific criteria for my research. Furthermore, some potential participants did not meet the criteria of having a child enrolled in a preschool in Reykjavik. This further limited the pool of eligible participants for my research.

As a result, I made the decision to modify my research criteria to increase the chances of finding participants. I introduced the option of online interviews, providing parents with younger children more flexibility in participating. Additionally, I expanded the participant scope to include parents who had previously enrolled their child in an Icelandic preschool, as long as their child was not older than the specified age range. I also broadened the geographical criteria, allowing participants from outside Reykjavik who had their children enrolled in educational institutions. These adjustments aimed to increase the pool of potential participants and enhance the overall inclusivity of the research.

### **3.6 Research Questions and Purpose of Research**

According to The Icelandic national curriculum guide for preschools (2011) one of the tasks in preschools is to develop Iceland as a multicultural society. Fundamental pillars in education concern culture, nationality, language, religion and values (*The Icelandic National Curriculum*

*Guide for Preschools*, 2011). It is also specifically pointed out that preschool students are encouraged to express themselves through different means such as play, visual arts, music and language (which includes other languages than Icelandic). The national curriculum guide (2011) also states that children should daily be stimulated to learn the Icelandic language by encountering new words and concepts - therefore Icelandic language learning is encouraged while children's heritage language and their own culture is preserved and supported.

In contrast, research shows that on average children with Icelandic as SL (second language) tend to have more difficulties in literacy and they generally struggle to attain learning criteria, (Jónsdóttir, 2018). This is also due to parents choosing language ideologies at home, which influence the children's multilingual development as active or passive multilingualism (Jónsdóttir, 2018). Children's views of language usage and preference also play a part in how proficient they are in their heritage language and in Icelandic. For my research I want to ask the following questions:

To what extent do migrant parents of preschool-aged children in Reykjavik, Iceland, receive support for their children's language learning development, and are there any discrepancies between the national preschool curriculum and the actual execution of education within these institutions?

Some of the supplementary questions connected with the research question are:

- Are there regular parent interviews conducted?
- How does communication between educators and parents' function in practice?
- What is the current status of the child's language development?
- Is there a balanced usage of both Icelandic and their heritage language?
- Do the parents feel a need or pressure to increase the use of Icelandic when communicating with their child?
- From the interviews with the parents – can there be a reference made to how Reykjavik's preschools encourage or discourage heritage language learning?
- Can there be a reference made to a structural discrimination of heritage languages and the enforcement of Icelandic?

The research question focuses on whether parents are receiving adequate support for their children's language development. It also seeks to identify any discrepancies between the actual language education provided in preschools and the guidelines outlined in the National Curriculum. The supplementary questions delve deeper into the key areas of interest, such as parent-educator communication, language development trajectories, the role of heritage languages, and potential inequities or biases in the educational system.

Additionally, the study aims to assess the effectiveness of communication between educational institutions and parents on this topic. By exploring these issues, the research can shed light on potential gaps or inconsistencies in the language learning support available to families. The findings could inform policy decisions, curriculum development, and communication strategies between schools and parents in order to better meet the linguistic needs of young children. Through my autoethnographic approach, I aim to explore how some teachers in Icelandic kindergartens might perceive multilingual education. I will examine the challenges and ease with which children engage with their heritage language, as well as how actively teachers communicate with parents and facilitate school-to-home connections.

Although this research project may not reach a definitive conclusion, it addresses the research question and sheds light on the issues that form the main focus of the project. In addition to asking open-ended questions, I also included closed-ended questions to gather standardized data from the parents. These questions focus on their nationality, heritage language, and the language they choose to use when communicating with their children. I further inquired about their language policies within the home and in public settings. By asking these questions, I aimed to establish a framework for understanding the parents' perspectives on language education and their priorities regarding their children's language development.

### **3.7 Overview of participants**

To gather participants for my study on children's language development, I utilized Facebook and engaged with parents both within my workplace and through relevant online communities. On Facebook, I actively shared information about my research in various groups focused on topics like being a foreigner or a student in Iceland. Similarly, at my workplace, I discussed the objectives of my study with my colleagues, who kindly suggested potential participants among their friends and family members. As of April 11<sup>th</sup> 2024, I successfully conducted six interviews with diverse parents residing in Reykjavik and the surrounding capital area, representing different nationalities.

Among the participants, there were two individuals from the United States, one from China, one from Israel, one from Russia, and one from Brazil. Each participant had resided in Iceland for a minimum of two years, and their children either currently attended an Icelandic preschool or had recently completed their education there. Additionally, all the participants had a partner whose native language was not Icelandic, and Icelandic was not their own mother tongue.



### **3.8 How interviews were conducted**

Initially, I requested participants to meet me in person for the interviews, offering them time slots on weekends or after 17:00 on weekdays. Due to my own full-time work commitments from Monday to Friday, these were the only available options I could provide. However, as the interview process progressed, I had to adapt my approach and offer flexible online interviews instead. Unfortunately, most parents with young children in preschool had limited availability during the afternoons or weekends.

The first interview took place in person at a café, while the subsequent two interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The final two interviews occurred at the participants' home, with their child present as well. Each interview location had its own advantages and disadvantages. Meeting participants in person made it easier to establish a connection and ask follow-up or additional questions beyond the structured questionnaire. However, the noise level at the café during the first interview was quite high, prompting me to select a different location for subsequent interviews. Online interviews were better for a quiet environment and facilitated recording much easier. Interviewing participants at their homes with their child present posed some challenges, as they could become easily distracted during the interview.

Despite these challenges, I managed to have meaningful conversations with all participants for a minimum of 40 minutes or longer. I recorded the interviews using an audio recorder and later transcribed them on my computer. All participants were informed about my research topic, and they had time to read and sign the form of consent for the interview. They were also informed about their rights to withdraw their answers anytime and about the access to the interview material.

To ensure the privacy and protection of the children and parents in accordance with EU data protection laws, I have anonymized the interview data and assigned pseudonyms to the participants in this research paper. This measure enhances the readability and accessibility of the data analysis while respecting the confidentiality of the individuals involved. My interview partners were Maria from Brazil, Emily and Donna from the United States, Hua from China, Samuel from Israel and Alisa from Russia.

Maria moved to Iceland 4 years ago after her child was born in South Africa. Her partner is German and they relocated to Iceland due to his work. Emily also moved to Iceland due to her partner's work. They came to Reykjavik 3 years ago and her child went to preschool for only one year at the age of 5 before entering primary school in Iceland. Donna has been living for 8 years in Iceland. Both of her children were born here and went to preschool in Reykjavik. Hua is an exchange student who moved to Iceland with her partner from Palestine. They both have 4 children together, all of them enrolled in Icelandic preschool and primary schools. Samuel is

from Israel and his wife Alisa is from Russia. Samuel is a student at the University of Iceland and Alisa works as a nurse at the Landspítali in Reykjavik. Their child is 2 years old and was born in Iceland. The following table gives an overview of the participants:

Table 1: Overview of participants

Name	Nationality	Partner’s nationality	Years living in Iceland	Age of child	Child born in Iceland	Location of interview
Maria	Brazil	German	4	4	No	Café
Emily	USA	USA	3	6	No	Teams
Donna	USA	USA	8	4	Yes	Teams
Hua	Chinese	Palestinian	4	4,6 and 8		Teams
Samuel	Israel	Russian	5	2	Yes	Participants home
Alisa	Russian	Israel	5	2	Yes	Participants home

### 3.9 Ethical issues and the authors positionality

As I was planning to interview parents about their children’s development, I had to be aware of ethical issues which could arise when working with minors. I had to make sure that the children’s privacy and their rights are protected and that I would only focus on their language learning development. I was not going to conduct interviews with the children themselves nor was going to observe them. However, they will be part of my conversation with the parents (e.g. their development is discussed, their names are mentioned). Furthermore, I prepared a consent form for the informants and I made sure to protect their anonymity, including the children’s anonymity.

Before conducting the interview I informed the parents about my research, my goal and the benefits they could derive from the project (e.g. a better insight into the support of language learning in preschools in Reykjavik). I was going to share the records of my observation with the parents and they would have the opportunity to withdraw their interviews or recordings after they had been interviewed by me. Their personal data would be stored under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. A consent form is attached in the appendix.

Since the individuals I am working with are immigrants in Iceland and hold minority status, it is important for me to acknowledge and remain watchful about the potential disadvantages they may face. Furthermore, it is crucial for me to remain aware of my own privileges throughout the research process. As a European citizen, I embody characteristics associated with the “dominant culture”, including being white, middle-class and being well-educated. Recognizing and acknowledging these privileges is essential in conducting research that is sensitive to power dynamics and aims to promote inclusivity and equity.

During my research I inquired about the reasons, purpose, methods, and desired outcomes of my research on this topic. It was essential for me to critically examine whether it was appropriate for me to conduct this research, taking into consideration my current and previous social status. I also had to consider how my position within the dominant society impacted the perceptions and understanding of my participants towards me, both as individuals and as a researcher whom they can trust.

The questionnaire and consent form are included in the appendix of this thesis. The signed copies from the parents have not been attached in order to protect their anonymity.

## 4. Data Analysis & Findings

Based on my experiences as a preschool teacher and head of department in an Icelandic preschool, as well as the interviews I conducted with six migrant parents residing in Iceland, I was able to identify several key issues in preschool education regarding children with heritage languages other than Icelandic. A primary concern was the lack of clear communication between the preschool and parents about the child's language learning process. Additionally, there appeared to be a lack of dedicated language development support provided within the preschool setting itself. Challenges with staffing at educational institutions, leading to the closure of departments or less time available for parents to meet and discuss important matters with educators, also emerged as a significant barrier. Moreover, there seemed to be an overemphasis on learning the Icelandic language, which placed significant pressure on both the parents and children.

### 4.1 Multilingual Education in Iceland perceived by the parents

Based on the interviews conducted, all six parents expressed the belief that it is important for their children to grow up in a multilingual environment. The parents were uniformly positive towards multilingual education approaches and the benefits they can provide for their children. For example, Maria had already given considerable thought to the language policies for her child during her pregnancy. She told me that it was important to her that her child be able to communicate not only with members of the Icelandic community they lived in, but also with their grandparents in Brazil and Germany. Maria was so committed to this goal that she even convinced her husband, who had initially planned to speak only English to the child rather than using a one parent, one language approach.

He said, no, I'm going to speak English to the kids. And I was like, why? And he said, because [I am] not going to use German, English will be more useful. And then I told him, well, first of all, a language is not only a language, it's also a culture. You can't deny your kids to be in contact with your heritage. It's about stealing something from your kids. And secondly, I said, I want our kids to be able to talk to their grandparents in their languages. My mom doesn't speak English, but my in-laws do. But I don't want a situation [like this]. I want him to go to their countries and be able to communicate. (Maria, Personal interview, 24.02.2024)

Alisa explained that it is crucial for her to use her own heritage language when communicating with her child. She believes this is essential for her to fully express her feelings and emotions. Alisa shared that she struggles to convey the same depth of sentiment in English, and would not

be able to connect with her child in the same meaningful way if she did not use her native language.

I think because [of] my English [...], it's not enough to express everything if I want. I think it's important [to speak] your mother [tongue] to teach, not just for communication with my family, but also just with me. (Alisa, Personal interview, 11.04.2024)

Emily noted she had not considered how important multilingual education was until she moved to Iceland with her husband. She explained that the issue had not been a priority for them prior to relocating, but becoming immersed in the multilingual Icelandic context made them realize the value of their child developing proficiency in multiple languages. As a native English speaker, Emily had a certain advantage when moving to Iceland, a country with high English proficiency. However, Emily admitted that she was unsure how best to support their child's multilingual development on their own. Instead, she expressed a reliance on the educational institutions in Iceland to provide the necessary guidance and resources to foster her child's growth in this area.

I know nothing about it. Nothing. I don't. But I think it's super cool. And I love the idea of her getting that foundation in different languages and growing up with it, but I honestly have no idea how to support it. (Emily, Personal interview 09.03.2024)

Emily, as a native English speaker, said they were never concerned that their child would lose proficiency in English while living in Iceland. They explained that there is so much exposure to English through various media that they had no worries about their child's English language development. Another English-speaking parent I interviewed expressed a similar sentiment. In contrast, the parents who spoke a language other than English with their children at home voiced concerns that their kids were not getting enough exposure to their heritage language. These parents felt it was a challenge to ensure their children-maintained fluency in their home language given the dominance of Icelandic and English in the broader society. They felt they had to be more intentional and proactive in supporting their children's development of the non-English language. Most of these parents were not overly concerned about their child's language development and welcomed Icelandic as a second language. However, they did not express awareness of any special language policies, nor did they feel compelled to ensure their child received adequate exposure to English while living in Iceland.

Overall, the parents had a positive attitude towards multilingualism and their shared perspective on the value of multilingualism suggests they recognize the cognitive, social, and cultural advantages that can come with developing proficiency in multiple languages. They

seem to view exposing their children to diverse linguistic environments as a priority and an asset, rather than a challenge or hindrance to their child's development. This alignment among the parents interviewed indicates a strong appreciation for the merits of multilingual upbringings and educational models. The parents likely understand the ways in which being multilingual can enhance their children's communication skills, cognitive flexibility, cultural understanding, and future opportunities.

#### **4.2 Findings from the interviews – General overview & comparison**

In the following sections, I will present the findings from my interviews, discussing the key challenges and issues identified by parents regarding Icelandic preschools. Many of these issues align with my own experiences as a preschool teacher as mentioned above. The main points that emerged include lack of communication and collaboration between teachers and parents. Parents felt there was insufficient dialogue and information-sharing about their child's progress and needs. Parents also talked about limited understanding of child language development. Some preschools struggled to adequately support the natural language learning process for young children. Another issue mentioned was the staffing difficulties at preschools. Parents noted problems with teacher turnover, large class sizes, and insufficient one-on-one attention for students. The parents I interviewed also talked about an overemphasis on the Icelandic language. This made it challenging for some children, as well as parents from non-Icelandic backgrounds, to feel comfortable communicating in their native languages.

After giving a general overview of my participants, I will discuss these findings in more detail. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the participants throughout this research paper. This approach maintains the confidentiality of the individuals while also enhancing the readability and accessibility of the data analysis. Two of the parents I interviewed were from the United States, the other parents were from China, Brazil, Israel and Russia. Their native languages were English, Chinese, Portuguese, Hebrew and Russian which they also used with their children in different frequent amounts. The most common language policy chosen by four of the six parents was the one parent – one language policy (after this referred to as OPOL).

During my interviews with the parents, many of them mentioned a similar point, which has also been noted by researchers studying the OPOL approach. They emphasized that using the designated parent's heritage language facilitated the development of a natural emotional bond between the parent and child. The three parents I interviewed and who stick to this language policy at home and in public places felt very comfortable using it and understood the benefits of it. The remaining two parents I interviewed either did not have a specific language policy in place at home or were unaware of the need to establish one. In particular, the English-speaking parent had not actively considered implementing a language policy and simply spoke

English to their child as it was their heritage language. Occasionally, they would code-switch<sup>6</sup> to Icelandic in public settings to include their friends or other Icelandic speakers around them. One parent, Hua, expressed a deliberate decision against adopting the OPOL approach, citing concerns about inclusivity towards her partner and potential confusion for their children.

[...] I feel like I like to have a common language. Everyone understands each other. If you have one language, it's like we are one. But if they speak Chinese, excuse me, I have to always translate to their father's work and leave him all over there. I don't feel this is very nice. Now, the same way, if they speak Arabic with their father, and I don't understand, then I will not feel comfortable with it. I will always need them to translate to me. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

Hua argued that having to learn multiple languages could be exhausting for the children and for herself or her partner to constantly translate their conversations to the other parent. As a result, they had chosen to exclusively speak English within their family. However, this parent later admitted during the interview that she regretted not providing the opportunity for her children to learn the parent's mother tongue due to their chosen approach.

[...] But now I start to regret [it] a little bit. I feel maybe we should silence this a little bit. When we are alone with them, maybe we should speak our own language. When we are together, we speak English. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

All of the parents used the same languages they used at home with the children also in public places. Only one parent admitted to sometimes code-switch to Icelandic to be inclusive to friends of the child.

### 4.3 Educational expectation of the parents

Donna also noted in her interview that the lack of staff within preschools can hinder the ability to meet educational goals. This perception may clash with the expectation that Icelandic preschools are primarily focused on education, however preschools in Iceland and other Nordic countries use play-based approaches, as previously mentioned above. This play-based pedagogy is an integral part of the preschool model in these regions, emphasizing the

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<sup>6</sup> Code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within the same conversation or discourse. It is a common linguistic phenomenon observed in multilingual and bilingual speakers (Pieter Muysken, 2000).

importance of fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development through engaging, hands-on activities rather than strictly academic instruction.

The case of another parent, Emily, illustrates the potential disconnect between parental expectations and the actual practices within the Icelandic preschool system. Emily noted that she had the "wrong expectations" about her child's language development and the educational focus of the preschool. Emily mentioned the absence of a transition meeting before her child moved from preschool to primary school. As a result, her child found the initial months at the primary school to be overwhelming. The parent described a lack of sufficient preparation by the preschool to adequately equip the child for communicating and learning in Icelandic at the primary school level - "She would come home exhausted and crying and just, like, I can't talk, I can't ask questions." (Emily, Personal interview 09.03.2024). The perception that Icelandic preschools are primarily focused on academic instruction may clash with the reality of the play-based pedagogical approaches used in early childhood education across the Nordic region.

According to Donna's perspective, the teachers at her child's preschool appear to be selective in determining which students they assist and support first. Donna reported that her daughter, who has a language development issue, receives less attention and support from the special education teachers compared to other students.

The messaging about development has basically been that it's up to the parents to make it work. And that they provide a caring environment, but they don't provide an educational environment, basically. (Donna, Personal Interview, 06.04.2024)

The perception of unequal access to special education services may leave some parents feeling their child's needs are being overlooked or deprioritized.

#### **4.4 Language development supported by the Preschool**

Icelandic laws, policy documents, and national curricula all contain provisions that recognize and support the right of students to maintain their native or mother tongue. This has not only been mentioned in the National Curriculum from 2011, but also in a recent paper from September 2020 called "Guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools and afterschool programs" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). These provisions aim to promote active bilingualism among students. Specifically, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted into Icelandic law in 2013, requires the Icelandic state to ensure that all children receive lessons in their own mother tongue. The Convention unequivocally establishes the right of children to preserve and develop their native language (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). These legal



and policy frameworks underscore Iceland's commitment to safeguarding linguistic diversity and empowering students to retain their mother tongue while also learning the national language. This approach reflects a broader emphasis on active bilingualism in the country's education system (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, p. 6). While Icelandic laws and policies recognize the rights of plurilingual individuals to maintain and strengthen their mother tongue, the actual implementation of these provisions is largely left to the discretion of the service providers (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). This means that the realization of plurilingual individuals' linguistic rights can vary depending on the priorities, resources, and initiatives of the specific preschools, schools, or other educational entities responsible for carrying out the legal mandates. The rights exist in principle, but their practical application is mediated by the service providers.

#### **4.5 Lack of communication and information**

During my interviews with six parents, it became evident that several of them expressed dissatisfaction with the preschool's communication practices. They emphasized that they had to take a proactive approach to obtain information about their child's development. The parents noted a lack of regular communication from the teachers when picking up their children at the end of the day. One parent, Maria, mentioned that the teachers were friendly and supportive, but only if she actively approached them and requested meetings and feedback. She shared that she frequently called or visited the principal's office to directly ask for feedback, which she eventually received. However, she lamented that the teachers typically lacked availability during pick-up time, necessitating her constant initiative to initiate communication.

There was no end-of-day communication on paper at the preschool. Some of the parents used the mobile app provided by the City of Reykjavik to communicate with the preschool teachers on their phones. However, the information available on the app was very limited. Teachers could only enter the nap time (e.g. 12:00 - 13:00) and the amount the child ate (little, normal, a lot). There was a comment section on the app, but it was rarely used due to a lack of time. Furthermore, some parents expressed that they found this app challenging to use. Teachers were able to use this app to also share photos with the parents, however sometimes the system did not deliver the photos, or the parents did not receive it. Several teachers at my former preschool stated that they had very little time during the workday to regularly update the information in the app. They also noted that they were hesitant to be seen using a smartphone in front of the children during their instructional hours.

Teachers at preschools in Iceland are supposed to have preparation time during their work week (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2024). The amount of preparation time depends on the

employment status of the teacher, whether they are part-time or full-time. Part-time teachers may have 30 minutes to a few hours per week, while full-time teachers can have 4 or 5 hours per week. This preparation time is meant to be spent outside of the classroom, without the children present. During this time, teachers are expected to complete tasks such as: writing newsletters to send to parents, preparing activities and lessons for the children and working on the curriculum and lesson planning (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2024). When I was working in a preschool, I was supposed to have 5 hours of preparation time per week. Although preparation time is considered part of teachers' work in Iceland, I often found it nearly impossible to take advantage of these five hours. I was usually not able to take this full allotted time due to a lack of staffing and the need for coverage in the classrooms with the children. Any information that needed to be shared with parents was typically entered quickly into the mobile app during the children's nap time or while I was on my lunch/break time. There was limited opportunity to provide more detailed communication, as my focus had to remain on supervising and caring for the children during the school day. The lack of adequate preparation time and staffing made it challenging to fulfill all the expected administrative and communication tasks outside of direct interaction with the children.

Another parent, Emily, shared that she was consistently uninformed about significant cultural events included in the preschool's curriculum. She told me that the teachers usually had no time to talk with her about upcoming events, and the weekly newsletter was in Icelandic only, forcing her to translate it inaccurately with translation software. Emily also mentioned that parent meetings were exclusively held in Icelandic, and she always had to inquire about important information afterwards. She felt left out and frustrated by the lack of communication and accommodation for non-Icelandic speaking parents.

Consequently, she occasionally missed the opportunity to adequately prepare her child for these events, such as buying a costume for Öskudagur (Ash Wednesday) due to a lack of information from the preschool. Emily expressed that this situation heightened her stress levels and added an extra layer of pressure, as she always had to actively seek information from the school. While she did not believe that her child was disadvantaged in terms of language or culture, she felt compelled to stay well-informed about Icelandic customs and traditions, even shortly after relocating to the country.

The only thing I would say, maybe, is that there was an expectation that you understood kind of what was going on and what the culture of Iceland was. And so I always felt, like, three steps behind. [...] I didn't feel that [child's name] was excluded or anything, or that she wasn't allowed to be herself. But I did feel like they expected us to be on top of cultural celebrations here and cultural norms here that I just wasn't. (Emily, Personal interview 09.03.2024)

Samuel shared that his child's preschool relied primarily on oral communication during pickup time and a physical whiteboard display to convey information about daily activities and feedback regarding the child. This whiteboard would indicate details such as the child's sleeping duration and food intake over the course of the day. However, Samuel admitted that he rarely checked this whiteboard, and he also noted that the teachers sometimes forgot to update or display the board during the afternoon pickup periods.

We don't feel like we need that much information. Okay. Sometimes, if they don't forget, they hand this table of how the kids ate. We just search for their kid's name and breakfast, lunch, second lunch, whatever it is. But often they forget to hand it. (Samuel, Personal interview, 11.04.2024)

Among the six parents interviewed, two parents expressed dissatisfaction with the preschool's photo-sharing practices. They noted a scarcity of shared photos and, when photos were shared, there was often a lack of accompanying information about the activities taking place. During the course of the day, the preschool teachers would typically capture photographs of the children engaged in various activities with a smartphone provided by the preschool. These images were then either shared with parents via the mobile application used by Reykjavik City or included in a weekly newsletter distributed at the end of each week.

This lack of consistent, substantive information-sharing likely contributed to a perceived disconnect between the preschool and the home environments. Parents may have felt they lacked insight into the daily lives and enjoyment of their children while in the care of the preschool staff.

#### **4.5.1 Privileges of English-speaking parents**

One parent, Maria, said she was overall happy with the language development of her child since she was early invested in it and made sure that language policies were decided even before birth. Another parent, Emily, did not consider language as a problem until she moved to Iceland. Emily told me that her main concerns were the food allergies of her child and language was only secondary. Emily stated there was no awareness of having to deal with communication problems caused by another language.

I also think that because we speak no other languages, we didn't know what to ask or we sort of didn't know what to expect. And when we were walking through [...]. We were speaking English to the person who was giving us the tour, and two kids ran up because the kids wanted to see the new kid and everything and ran up and started speaking to us in English. And so I think just knowing that there were kids there that she could communicate with, I was like, well, we'll just see how this goes. (Emily, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

The prevalence of English was also mentioned by another parent, Donna. She explained that if her child's heritage language were any other language besides English, it might have been easier for the child to learn Icelandic. This is because English holds significant importance in Icelandic society, and even young children start learning English through movies or online videos, acquiring the language at an early age. Donna assumed that non-English speakers in the society might find it easier to learn Icelandic quickly since they do not have the option to switch to another language that Icelanders commonly speak.

And I've heard that that's the case, that English is this giant language with this gravity, right? And so if you don't speak English at home, then it's easier to learn that next language. If you speak English at home, then everyone just gets pulled into your English. And so we are the only family that I know that's dealing with that particular challenge, where we don't have a third language. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

It is undeniable that there is a certain privilege associated with being an English speaker in Iceland. Since the majority of the Icelandic population is fluent in English, it is typically easier for English-speaking immigrants to adapt more quickly and access support resources with greater ease (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011, Lefever, 2010). Across the Nordic countries, including Iceland, there is widespread exposure to English. This pervasive use of English can be seen in education, business, and various other sectors throughout Icelandic society (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011). According to Lefever (2010) the ability to comprehend spoken English appears to be a widespread skill among young children in Iceland, beginning to develop at an early age. However, the ability to actively communicate in English is not as common, even though many young children demonstrate the capacity to express themselves and engage in interactions using the English language (Lefever, 2010, p. 15). These language skills seem to be influenced by the type and amount of English language input children are exposed to in their natural environment (Lefever, 2010). Phillipson (2009) argues that English linguistic hegemony has been increasingly asserted within the EU system. This can be seen in the language choices for the initial drafting of EU texts, including laws, directives, and policy statements, over the past 40 years. Phillipson (2009) contends that this trend clearly strengthens the interests of English-speaking member states and northern European countries, where English proficiency tends to be high. Phillipson (2009) argues that the emphasis on the English language within the EU system has worrying implications. He contends that this trend will effectively exclude most minority language schools from accessing public services and resources. Phillipson believes the language hierarchy in Europe will shift, leading to increased inequality between native and non-native speakers of English in international communication, particularly within EU institutions.

The analysis put forth by Phillipson in 2009 appears to align with the experiences shared by the English-speaking parents I interviewed for this project.

[...] Especially now, they give this pressure to immigrants. You [...] have to speak Icelandic. You have to integrate. [...] other language is [a] threat [...] because Icelandic is maybe or it disappeared because more people speak English. They start to talk about it to make me feel like they want to see the immigrants as a threat, and they want to force people to [speak] Icelandic. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

Therefore, the assumption of some parents such as Donna that the use of English might hinder the Icelandic language learning process among children may have some basis in the high English proficiency observed in Icelandic children. However, there is no conclusive proof that the presence of English necessarily impedes or compromises the development of Icelandic language skills in young children (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011, Lefever, 2010). Nevertheless, this linguistic landscape in Iceland provides significant advantages for English speakers, both native and non-native, compared to those who do not have proficiency in the English language. The prevalence of English use across key domains creates an environment where English fluency confers a distinct privilege, facilitating smoother integration and access to resources for those able to communicate effectively in English (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011, Lefever, 2010).

Through these interviews, I realized that the experiences of English-native speaking parents differed significantly from those of migrant families coming to Iceland with a home language other than English. Unlike the English-speakers, the parents from non-English backgrounds voiced worries about their children maintaining proficiency in their heritage languages, as they felt the dominance of Icelandic and English in the broader society posed challenges in this regard. This contrast highlights the uneven playing field that can emerge when a language like English takes on a hegemonic status, as Phillipson described in his 2009 work. The English-speaking parents did not seem to face the same barriers and pressures around language maintenance that other migrant parents navigated. This dynamic speaks to the inequities Phillipson identified in terms of how linguistic hierarchies can privilege certain groups over others (Phillipson, 2009).

#### **4.5.2 Language development concerns**

Two out of the six parents raised concerns about language development issues observed in their children from an early age. One parent shared that they became aware of their child's language difficulties when the child was just one year old. They promptly sought assistance from a speech therapist, who provided online support for the child's language development in their heritage language. This parent mentioned encountering delays in receiving support from

the Icelandic preschool, which led them to opt for online speech therapy. Another parent, Donna, disclosed similar concerns regarding their daughter's speech acquisition, particularly in the Icelandic language.

So we have two children. Both were born here. Our first child is now six. And she has had some language troubles that we noticed very early, just like that relative to her overall signs of intelligence, her initiation of language was slower. And over time, she's developed more and more in English, and Icelandic has not been coming along very well. It is coming along, but it is much, much slower. And we have been working with a speech and language therapist about that. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

Donna informed me that they are now receiving support from the preschool, including the involvement of a speech therapist to aid in the child's language development. However, in order to access this help, they had to join a waiting list when the child was just two years old.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the child did not receive assistance until the age of four and a half. Donna shared that during the child's three-year health check, the nurse noted the child's significant challenges with Icelandic language skills and contacted the preschool to urge them to speed up the process of receiving speech therapy. Donna explained that while there were minor difficulties in communicating with her daughter in English, her pronunciation was quite good, and vocabulary acquisition posed no problems. However, the child struggled with grammar acquisition in both Icelandic and English. Donna told me that she was not happy with the help she received from the preschool and that there were concerns about using English, delaying the Icelandic language development further and causing her and her child stress.

#### **4.6 Challenges with staffing at the preschool**

High employee turnover is a significant issue for many preschools. This is often due to a combination of factors (Ellertsdóttir, 2016). One factor is low salaries: Preschool teachers and staff are frequently underpaid, especially considering the important work they do in educating and caring for young children. The low compensation makes it difficult to attract and retain qualified individuals (Weisberg & Sagie, 1999). Working in a preschool environment can be mentally and physically demanding. Dealing with large groups of active young children, managing classroom dynamics, and meeting the diverse needs of students can create high-stress conditions for staff (Ellerstdóttir, 2016). The challenging nature of preschool work,

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<sup>7</sup> There is a long waiting list for all special services for children in the Icelandic school system, sometimes it is one year, but it could last up to two years (Þórðardóttir, 2024).

coupled with low pay and high stress, can lead to burnout well before employees are ready to retire. This causes many talented preschool professionals to leave the field entirely before they have planned to do so (Weisberg & Sagie, 1999). Despite ongoing negotiations for wages and benefits through the teachers' union, employee turnover remains very high within Icelandic preschools (Björnsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2020). The average turnover rate in Icelandic preschools has been approximately 26% over the past several years (Kennarasamband Íslands, 2015, Ellerstdóttir, 2016, Björnsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2020). Another issue is that student teachers in preschool tend to advance slowly through their studies, resulting in low graduation rates in both undergraduate and graduate programs (Björnsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2020). Few graduates from the B.Ed. program in preschool education to pursue a master's degree. Most students who enroll in the M.Ed. program holds a bachelor's degree in a different field. The high turnover rate in preschools persists even with the collective bargaining efforts of the teachers' union to improve compensation and working conditions. This indicates that factors beyond just pay and benefits, such as workload, stress, or lack of professional development, may be driving many preschool employees to leave their positions (Ellerstdóttir, 2016).

Four out of six parents mentioned challenges in staffing in school and the lack of communication caused by it, having rarely teachers available to talk at drop-off and pick-up time. One mother mentioned that this even affects having meetings with the staff of the preschool.

What I would say is that the individual people who are with the kids, like the teaching assistants, [they] are so loving and caring, and they really nurture. So it is a very, very good environment. But then the head of each department has a lot of children to deal with and the special education teacher also has a lot of children to deal with. So getting time with them and having productive meetings has not been great. (Maria, Personal interview, 24.02.2024)

#### **4.7 The Icelandic language as majority language**

According to my interviews, four out of six parents expressed concerns that there is too much emphasis on the Icelandic language, which they believe hinders their ability to communicate effectively with the school. These parents worry that their children are struggling to keep up as a result. Additionally, two parents reported feeling that they miss out on important information, as they are never provided updates or communications in a language they understand, such as English.

I would say maybe 70, 80% of I'm informed. But I think I cannot participate in the language. Because everything they do is in Icelandic, and they never translate. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

The parents explained that during one-on-one meetings with the school, they are able to receive information in English. However, group meetings are always conducted solely in Icelandic, regardless of the varying fluency levels of the attendees. Hua, who had made the decision to speak only English with her children - even though it is not her native language - expressed regret over this choice. Her reason is that the heavy emphasis on the Icelandic language has caused her to feel aversion towards it. This has, in turn, motivated her to now make a greater effort to teach her children her own heritage language, even though she had initially moved away from it.

This don't make me feel comfortable. It made me want to...[...] This, I think, this actually gets the negative result. This reminds me that I have to teach my kids their mother tongue. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

Research by Krashen and Cho (1998) suggests that maintaining heritage languages should be a priority for these parents, as the loss of these languages can lead to significant intergenerational conflicts. When children lose proficiency in their heritage language, they may struggle to effectively communicate with their parents or extended family members. This can result in feelings of isolation and exclusion from their own ethnic community (Cho & Krashen, 1998, Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015). Furthermore, when these children return to the country where their heritage language is spoken, they may face additional communication barriers and difficulties integrating into the local communities. The inability to fluently converse in the heritage language can leave them feeling excluded once again, compounding the challenges they face. The loss of these languages can disrupt family dynamics, hinder a child's connection to their cultural roots, and create feelings of marginalization both within their country of residence and in their ancestral homeland. Proactive efforts to maintain heritage language proficiency may be crucial for supporting the well-being and social inclusion of these children (Cho & Krashen, 1998, Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015).

Emily expressed that the lack of information provided in an accessible language made her feel excluded. She explained that when the preschool would send out newsletters, there were no translations provided, forcing her to rely on asking other Icelandic-speaking parents for translations after meetings or during pick-up times. Emily felt sorry for her child, worrying that her daughter may unintentionally be excluded from social events simply because she, as her mother, had missed out on important information due to the language barrier.

And they had come to an agreement among parents on how we were going to do invitations and gifts and stuff for class birthday parties. And I'm like [...] that wasn't in the slide. The reason that was so important to me is because socially, it's a lot harder to connect with a different language and everything.



And I thought that [it is] a really important social thing when you're six is how birthdays work. [...] It's hard to be an active participant when you have to translate later and come back to it. (Emily, Personal interview 09.03.2024)

The parents I interviewed had varying levels of proficiency in the Icelandic language. However, all of them expressed feeling more comfortable communicating with their child's educational institution in English, especially when it came to important matters.

## **5. More findings: Balancing Linguistic Diversity and the gap between policy and practice**

Based on my experiences as a preschool teacher and head of department in an Icelandic preschool, as well as the interviews I conducted with six migrant parents residing in Iceland, I was able to identify the five key issues in preschool education regarding children with heritage languages other than Icelandic. Firstly, there appears to be a lack of communication between the preschool and parents about the child's language learning process. Second, language development support is quite limited within the preschool setting. Thirdly, both parents and educators see challenges with staffing at educational institutions. Fourth, according to the parents I interviewed, and according to my own experience in an Icelandic preschool, there seems to be an overemphasis on learning the Icelandic language within the preschool setting, which places significant pressure on both the parents and the children. Finally, there was a significant difference in heritage language learning needs between parents who came from English speaking cultures and those who did not.

Initially, my focus for this research had been specifically on learning about the language development of children. As a result, I was unaware that the parents would also mention other issues they were facing, such as a lack of communication or the shortage of staff within the preschool. However, upon further reflection, I realize that these additional issues raised by the parents are closely correlated with the challenge of providing sufficient language education and language support for the children in the preschool setting. The lack of communication and staffing shortages likely contribute to the difficulties in delivering the necessary language development programs and resources for the diverse student population.

My research uncovered discrepancies between how preschools operate, and the recommendations outlined in the National Curriculum for Preschools. Furthermore, none of the parents I interviewed were aware of the curriculum or its content. As mentioned previously, the national curriculum states that educational institutions should make efforts to operate according to the needs and status of children, and to encourage their active participation in a democratic society both within and outside of the school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). While many Icelandic parents may not have read the curriculum either, they possess certain advantages compared to migrant parents. They are culturally aware of how preschool education functions in Iceland or have experienced the same educational system themselves.

Based on the issues described by migrant parents and my own experiences detailed in my autoethnographic approach, there appear to be shortcomings in how preschools are meeting the policies outlined in the national curriculum which this section will examine in detail.

Following I will describe my own experiences from working in an Icelandic preschool for two years.

### **5.1 Being a foreign preschool teacher in Iceland - an autoethnographic approach**

I worked for about two years in a public preschool in Reykjavik, from August 2020 to May 2022. I had to resign in 2022 due to health issues which were diagnosed as a burnout. I started working in August 2020 and got promoted to head of department (i. deildarstjóri) in summer 2021. For almost a year I was planning curriculums and leading parents' interviews for my department for the two to three-year-old children. Our team consisted of three teachers, including myself, and we had a total of 17 children in our care. Many of the individuals working as educators in my study context were not licensed teachers and lacked formal backgrounds in education.

According to data from *Statistics Iceland: Three out of Ten Compulsory School Teachers with a Master's Degree* (2023), the proportion of teachers without a teaching license in Icelandic schools has been rising steadily since 2012. In the autumn of 2022, this figure stood at 16.9% - meaning that 974 out of the total 5,778 teachers were unlicensed. This represents an increase of 46 unlicensed teachers compared to the autumn of 2021. Given this context, it sometimes felt challenging working in the preschool, as I was the only licensed teacher on my team. The lack of formal educational backgrounds among my colleagues made certain aspects of our work more difficult, as we did not all have the same level of training and expertise in early childhood education.

A significant number of children in Icelandic playschools came from non-Icelandic backgrounds and spoke various heritage languages at home, such as Ukrainian, Hindi, Nigerian Pidgin, Spanish, and Polish, among others. Additionally, we had children with neurodivergent conditions who required special attention throughout the school day.

Upon my arrival in Iceland in 2020, my proficiency in the Icelandic language was extremely limited, to the point of being almost non-existent. Despite this, I was fortunate enough to be granted the opportunity to work at the preschool. I am grateful that the other teachers were very welcoming and made an effort to communicate with me in English during the initial stages, ensuring that I felt comfortable and accepted. However, it was expected of me to converse with the children exclusively in Icelandic, which occasionally made me feel uneasy. Given my own struggles with the language, I constantly worried that I might unintentionally speak it incorrectly to the children, who were language learners themselves.

During my employment in Japan, I encountered a similar situation where I was required to communicate with the children in either English or Japanese, neither of which were my native languages. However, by the time I worked as a preschool teacher in Japan, I had

developed sufficient proficiency in the languages to confidently interact with young children. To ensure effective and accurate communication during parent interviews, a Japanese teacher always took the lead. In the Icelandic preschool, I conducted parent interviews alone in English. Most Icelandic parents were fluent enough in English to engage in conversation with me. Nevertheless, I consistently felt uneasy knowing that I was expected to speak Icelandic with their children while being unable to converse with the parents in the same language. For parents with a migrant background, we made it a priority to arrange for a translator to facilitate understanding and address any issues in their native language.

Assuming the role of head of department after the previous head resigned was a challenging experience for me. I found it difficult to make decisions and offer guidance on teaching methods and language acquisition. As an outsider in the Icelandic community, I often found it challenging to propose suggestions and share my ideas. I felt a sense of hesitation, as if I lacked the authority to impose my own perspectives on the established practices of the school I was working in. One example of my proposed initiative was an "international" day, where children could express themselves through songs and conversations in their respective languages. I suggested incorporating English or Spanish songs during the morning circle time. Unfortunately, the headmaster did not approve this idea, and we were only permitted to hold such an event once per school year as a special occasion.

Additionally, I felt that the educational aspect of preschool education was lacking. Due to limited staff and a large number of children, there was never enough time to adequately plan and carry out activities with the children or engage in meaningful conversations with parents during drop-off and pickup times. Although we had a significant number of children with migrant backgrounds who spoke different languages, they generally had no difficulty understanding the teachers and gradually acquired proficiency in Icelandic. The most significant challenge we faced on a daily basis was attending to the needs of neurodivergent children, such as autism, who required more specialized attention than the three teachers in our department could provide. According to the Pre-Primary Schools Act No. 90/2008 in Iceland, preschools are required to have special assistance staff for children who need support in preschool (Pre-Primary Schools Act No. 90/2008). The act states:

Children who need special assistance and training according to evaluation by recognised diagnostic specialists are entitled to such services within the preschool. The service shall be carried out under specialist supervision according to decision by the preschool head teacher and the specialist services, cf. Article 21, with the parents' collaboration. (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2008)

In the preschool I used to work at, there was only one special assistance teacher for six children, and they visited the preschool once a week for short sessions with these children outside of our classroom. The rest of the week, the children stayed with the regular preschool staff, which was sometimes difficult to manage given the lack of regular staff within the department.

Another significant challenge was the frequent turnover of staff and the high rate of teacher absences. This situation occasionally resulted in the closure of entire departments, as we lacked an adequate number of teachers to ensure a safe environment for the children throughout the day. Throughout my two-year tenure at the Icelandic preschool, I remained in the same department, but the staff members changed almost every three months. Many of the teachers were young, part-time employees, and/or individuals without teaching licenses or a strong background in education. They relied on me for information on children's development and curriculum planning. Unfortunately, some staff members did not adhere to the department's policy of interacting with children.

Another challenge I faced in the Icelandic preschool I worked at was a perceived absence of a clear education policy for the children. It might have been on the website of the preschool or in a handbook, however it was never shared with me and no teacher was able to clearly define the education policy to me. In contrast, the school in Japan where I worked was an international Montessori-based<sup>8</sup> preschool, where English was predominantly spoken and children learned English during playtime. Our weekly meetings were centered around these teaching methods. However, in the Icelandic preschool, there was no defined approach, so I had to establish my own teaching policy in my department, which combined elements of Montessori education and respectful parenting/RIE approach.<sup>9</sup> I adhered to this teaching approach since I felt most comfortable when working with the children, and it seemed that many parents also appreciated these methods. The preschool teachers did not seem to have a preference for a specific approach as long as all conversations with the children during the day

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<sup>8</sup> The Montessori method is an educational approach that prioritizes children's natural interests and activities over traditional teaching methods. In a Montessori classroom, there is a strong emphasis on hands-on learning and the development of practical skills that can be applied in real-world situations (American Montessori Society, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> RIE, short for "Resources for Infant Educarers," is an approach founded in 1978 by Magda Gerber. The term "educarer" was coined to emphasize the importance of respecting even the youngest infants. According to Gerber and proponents of RIE, babies should be treated as capable individuals who can comprehend and learn from their surroundings. The primary objective of RIE is to foster the development of an "authentic" child who feels secure, competent, independent, and connected to their environment (*What Is RIE Parenting? Method, Definition, Pros, and Cons*, 2019).

at the playschool were conducted in Icelandic. In fact, the only clear policy I perceived of the school was the consistent use of the Icelandic language, which sometimes felt unnatural. Once again, this wasn't documented anywhere, but our meetings in the Icelandic kindergarten primarily focused on the children's proficiency in the Icelandic language and how to teach it effectively. This was particularly challenging for my department, where children between 18 to 24 months were grouped together. It was impossible to enforce constant Icelandic language use, considering that children typically begin speaking a few words around 12 months old, and by 18 months, they can speak 30 to 40 words in the language they hear most at home by their caregivers (Rescorla & Mirak, 1997). For the migrant children in my class, this was often their parents' heritage language. As a result, it was a significant challenge to expect these children to speak Icelandic due to their natural language development. Natural language development in children refers to the process by which young children acquire the ability to understand and use language through exposure and interaction with their environment. Natural language development is influenced by various factors, including social interaction, exposure to rich language environments, and individual differences. Support from caregivers and educators plays a crucial role in fostering this development (Rescorla & Mirak, 1997).

Typically, by the age of two, a normally developing child has a vocabulary of around 150 words and can combine two to three words (Rescorla & Mirak, 1997). However, their language skills are still developing, and while they can communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, and nonverbal gestures, they are still in the process of learning grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Rescorla & Mirak, 1997). During my time as a preschool teacher, I observed many colleagues who were unaware of children's natural language development and overestimated their proficiency in Icelandic. For instance, while working at the kindergarten I witnessed a 24-month-old child who only heard Polish at home and was unable to say the Icelandic word for milk (mjólk). He was consequently denied the receive the drink. I not only found this teaching approach to be incorrect and harmful, but it also demonstrated a lack of understanding on the part of the teacher regarding the child's language development. This approach also violated the child's linguistic human rights. In addition, I observed instances where children who were playing together using their heritage languages were asked by teachers to converse in Icelandic instead. This disrupted the natural flow of their play and felt unnatural for the children involved.

In my view, the excessive emphasis placed on the Icelandic language as the sole teaching principle in the preschool restricted the adoption of other teaching policies and hindered the development of a creative curriculum for children across all departments. It was stifling, not only for the children but also for skilled non-Icelandic teachers who had valuable ideas for play and interaction with the children. Unfortunately, due to the excessive focus on the Icelandic language, these ideas couldn't be implemented in the classroom. As non-Icelandic teachers, we

sometimes felt a lack of agency to advocate for our ideas. We also felt a sense of ingratitude, as we had secured a job as preschool teachers in a monolingual country and were still in the process of learning the language, just like the children, therefore we had to adjust to the ideas and recommendations given by the Icelandic teachers. We felt that our input was disregarded until we had achieved fluency in the language. This sentiment was shared among other non-Icelandic teachers when we discussed our experiences in Iceland and our workplace.

Despite the challenges I faced, working as a preschool teacher provided me with invaluable experience and served as inspiration for my master's thesis research. It also allowed me to acquire my first Icelandic words and phrases, thanks to the support and assistance of both parents and colleagues. Although the work was demanding, it was also immensely rewarding. Working with children is a continuous learning journey that constantly challenges educators to refine their teaching approaches and methods on a daily basis.

In my opinion, I would suggest that the preschool I worked at shift its focus away from solely prioritizing the Icelandic language and instead incorporate other teaching methods to introduce more organization and structure into the daily routine and annual curriculum. Implemented established teaching policies should be clear to all teachers and parents. Moreover, the acquisition of the Icelandic language would naturally occur through play and exploration. By alleviating stress and burnout among teachers by establishing clear teaching policies and setting clear goals, the overall quality of care provided to children would improve.

## **5.2 Lack of communication**

Based on my interviews, four out of the six parents I spoke to reported that they did not receive sufficient information from the preschools and felt a lack of cooperation with the educational institutions. By failing to share important information with parents as stated by Emily, Donna, Maria and Hua, and by enforcing the use of a language that migrant children are still in the process of learning as perceived by Hua, Donna and Emily, the preschools are not demonstrating responsiveness to the needs of their students.

The National Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture, 2011) and the Preschool Act of 2008 emphasize the expectation for parents to be actively involved in their children's preschool education in Iceland. Parents are guaranteed the right to have a voice in the education of their individual children as well as in the overall operations of the preschool. The Preschool Act states that educators and individual parents should share relevant information pertaining to the children's education and wellbeing. This relationship is built on a foundation of respect for the diversity in family structures and cultural backgrounds.

The national curriculum further specifies that preschools are tasked with providing linguistic stimulation and contributing to the development of Icelandic language skills among

children (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 30). The use of the word “contribute” here suggests a recognition that not all migrant children may join the preschool system at the same time, and some may have less time to establish a basic foundation in the Icelandic language before enrollment. This perspective aligns with the idea that preschools should function as institutions where children acquire language through play and interaction with teachers, rather than solely through formal language instruction. The curriculum appears to emphasize the importance of creating an environment that facilitates language learning through authentic communication and engagement, rather than relying solely on structured lessons.

Based on interviews with four parents, it was clear that the preschools their children were enrolled in did not adhere to effective communication guidelines, making it difficult for parents to actively participate in their children's education. Donna, Emily, Hua, and Maria often expressed feeling uninformed and missing important information. Emily's high expectations for her child's language learning highlighted her lack of adequate information from the preschool teachers regarding realistic learning goals and achievements.

### **5.3 The curriculums focus on learning Icelandic**

The national curriculum highlights the significance of enhancing children's self-esteem, confidence, and communication skills (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 30). It emphasizes that in Icelandic preschools, children are encouraged to learn the Icelandic language while also fostering respect for other cultures and diversity. Nevertheless, the curriculum places a strong emphasis on the Icelandic language itself.

[...] Preschool should use everyday relations to stimulate children's sense of the Icelandic language by learning new words and concepts and developing their language. (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 33-34)

The parents I interviewed were unable to comment on the extent to which their children were using Icelandic within the preschool setting. However, this suggests a potential lack of proactive information-sharing from the teachers' side. Unless a child exhibits language development delays that require additional support from the preschool, parents may not readily understand their child's language use and overall development within the preschool setting. It is understandable that Icelandic is the primary language used in Iceland, including in preschools and educational institutions attended by children of migrant families. However, there are concerns about an excessive emphasis on the use of Icelandic that prioritizes it over the children's native languages. Some parents have raised issues about a forced or unnatural use of Icelandic for these children, which can lead to them losing the opportunity to become truly multilingual. There is a risk of these children feeling excluded if their mother tongues are



not given adequate support and recognition. The use of heritage languages should not be viewed as a deficit, but rather as an asset. Children should have the freedom to utilize any language they are comfortable with, while still receiving effective instruction in Icelandic. This balanced approach can better facilitate the children's linguistic development and prevent them from feeling alienated from their cultural identities.

From my own experiences working as a preschool teacher and department head over two years, I also observed a discrepancy between the stated goal of allowing children to speak whichever language they feel comfortable with (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011 p. 34), and an overemphasis on learning Icelandic in practice. As mentioned in my autoethnography section, a key issue I witnessed in the preschools was teachers not responding to children's questions or needs when they used a language other than Icelandic. In some cases, children were even forbidden from using their heritage languages during playtime with other children who spoke the same language. This practice not only violated the fundamental language rights of these young learners, but also exposed a significant disconnect between the educators' actions and their understanding of child language development.

According to Skutnabb-Kangas' definition of Linguistic Human Rights (2012), these actions by the preschools could be considered a violation of the children's linguistic rights. The rigid focus on Icelandic usage, coupled with the dismissal of children's home languages, fails to uphold the principles of supporting linguistic diversity and empowering children's communicative abilities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). This disconnect between the curriculum's stated aims and the observed practices in the preschools suggests a need for greater alignment between policy and implementation when it comes to respecting and nurturing the linguistic identities of the children. The national curriculum clearly states that Icelandic preschools should stimulate children's senses to help them learn the Icelandic language. However, this is to be done while also respecting other cultures and helping children develop an independent sense of self. By being able to speak and develop their heritage language without suppression, children can cultivate a healthy and independent personality.

### **5.3.1 Communication with parents.**

Improving communication with parents would also help to establish a stronger, more cooperative relationship between the preschool and the children's home environments. According to the National Curriculum Guidelines (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011) and the Preschool Act from 2008, parents are expected to play an active role in their children's preschool education. Parents are guaranteed the right to have a say in the education of individual children as well as on the overall operations of the preschool.

The main objectives of upbringing and instruction in the preschool shall be:  
a. ) To monitor and encourage children's general development in close cooperation with parents (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 30)

The national curriculum guidelines and preschool regulations clearly stipulate that parents are expected to be actively involved in their children's preschool education. Parents are supposed to have a voice in decisions about their individual child's education as well as the overall operations of the preschool. However, my interviews have revealed that this is not always the case in practice.

I would say maybe 70, 80% of I'm informed. But I think I cannot participate in the language. Because everything I do is in Icelandic, and they never translate.  
(Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

There seems to be a disconnect between the official policy directives around parent engagement and the reality on the ground at many preschool facilities. In contrast to the stated expectations, there is often a lack of real communication and collaboration between preschools and the parents of enrolled children. Translations in meetings are usually not provided, unless parents have the chance to have a one-and-one meeting with an educator. When I asked Emily if they got translations at their parents meeting, she said: "No, I grabbed a parent afterwards and I'm like, can you tell me what was discussed?" (Emily, Personal interview 09.03.2024). This highlights a clear gap between parents' expectations for involvement and the preschool's policies.

By enhancing communication and information-sharing with parents, preschools can gain a deeper insight into the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. This understanding would allow educators to create more culturally responsive and inclusive practices that reflect the values of the families and support the overall development of each child. For instance, an information board at the entrance of the kindergarten, as Samuel suggested in his interview, could be beneficial. Additionally, providing a flyer or handbook to parents when they enroll their children, featuring information in three primary languages—Icelandic, English, and Polish—could further support this initiative.

#### **5.4 Language skills of the parents and the impact on communication**

Icelandic preschools employ various methods to communicate with parents. Based on my personal experience and the interviews conducted, I observed that they use direct oral communication, weekly newsletters, an app for interactions between parents and teachers, and direct messaging (SMS) or phone calls for urgent matters. Most of the parents I spoke with relied on the weekly newsletter, as it typically included information about preschool events and

closure times for staff meetings. According to my interviews, four out of the six parents expressed feeling disadvantaged due to their limited Icelandic language skills when communicating with the preschool. They reported feeling excluded or missing out on important cultural events, which placed stress on both them and their children. One parent, Hua, even mentioned that she had given up learning Icelandic, feeling discouraged and frustrated due to the lack of support and acknowledgement.

I thought it was my own experience. I was very active in learning Icelandic. I stopped it because I feel this social pressure. I stopped it. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

While the national curriculum emphasizes the importance of teaching Icelandic to children, it also stresses that the acquisition of other languages should not be suppressed (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 20). The curriculum encourages preschools to nurture the diversity and variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds represented in the student population.

Equality education incorporates, among other things, studies of gender and sexual orientation. The fundamental pillar of equality also emphasizes education concerning culture, nationality, languages, religion and values. One of the tasks is the development of Iceland as a multicultural society. (M. of E., Science and Culture, 2011, p. 20)

However, based on my own experiences as a preschool teacher and conversations with several migrant parents, the reality in many preschools does not always align with these policy-level commitments. In practice, I have observed a disconnect between the curriculum's stated goals and the actual implementation within the preschool setting. Donna explained that there is no consistency with her children in the kindergarten she is enrolled in. Important information for parents is shared in Icelandic, however, some teachers communicate with the children in English. There is a strong emphasis on using Icelandic, and parents are encouraged to use it as well, even if they are not native speakers.

So I feel like there's also this split that's running through, which is this cultural feeling that you need to be tough about only speaking Icelandic to preserve the language. For a while, they were, in my case, about speaking English in the coat room with my child, and I'm like, yeah, no. But this is not going to kill the Icelandic language, this little bit of chit-chat in the coat room. So there may be just some, you're here in Iceland, you speak our language, stuff going on there. And I know it's a unique situation because the country is so small. And I get all that. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

Donna mentions that she personally felt pressure to use Icelandic despite still learning it herself.

So I think there shouldn't be so much pressure on the parents. They should just continue speaking the language they feel comfortable with their children. But that's... Yeah. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

Donna raised an interesting point that other parents echoed. Because of the strong emphasis on the Icelandic language, she has decided to send her daughter to an international school for further education. Hua also expressed a desire to have the resources to send her children there. All the parents I spoke with supported the idea of raising multilingual children and were enthusiastic about learning Icelandic. They embraced the goal of having their kids fluent in several languages while wanting them to continue learning Icelandic without feeling frustrated or left behind. From my interviews, it appeared that public preschools in Reykjavik struggled to implement the multilingual support policy and lacked the resources needed by migrant parents.

Actually, we are going to start in the international school next year, specifically because they have a bilingual check that is, at least in theory, designed for people like us who don't speak Icelandic at home but want to be part of the culture. And so we're hoping that the kids being all at the same level because they're all learning it environmentally but not reinforcing at home, that that might help because right now it's being so far behind the other kids is a stigma. And so, yes. And we really support [...] We want a bilingual education that [...] We want, at the end, for her to be fluent in English and Icelandic and other languages to maybe spark an enthusiasm for learning. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

This discrepancy these parents mentioned and which I have experienced myself, suggests a need for more robust support and training to ensure preschool educators are equipped to effectively foster multilingualism and create an inclusive environment that values the home languages and cultural identities of all children. Improving communication and collaboration with migrant parents should also be a priority in order to bridge the gap between the school and the home. This should not only happen in international schools, but in preschools in Reykjavik as well.

### **5.5 Reliance on the educational system in Iceland to teach children Icelandic.**

Through my interviews and personal experience as a teacher, I observed that multilingual education tended to have a very positive image among parents, as well as within the

international preschool in Japan where I used to work. Samuel, who I interviewed here in Iceland, expressed a desire for his daughter to become fluent in Icelandic, Hebrew, and Russian, associating multilingualism with an enhanced intellect. This parent felt that developing proficiency in multiple languages would make their child "smart." This perspective aligns with broader societal perceptions that link multilingual competency to cognitive advantages and academic achievement. Many parents seem to view raising children with exposure to several languages as a means of cultivating their intellectual capacities and future opportunities.

It [being multilingual] is important. So is it also our main motivation that she can communicate with the family, [and] is it also because- Also just to be smart. (Samuel, Personal interview, 11.04.2024)

Research indicates that bilingual education does not result in any long-term disadvantages for students' academic development in the majority language of a country (Nieto, 2001, Cummins, 2009, Baker, 1987). While some educators and parents may have previously claimed that maximum exposure to the majority language was the only way to ensure a child's fluency in it, this argument has been discredited (Cummins, p. 21, 2009, C Baker, 1987, Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, García et al., 2006). Several studies have shown that children can become fluent in the academic language, the majority language of the country, and/or their heritage language spoken at home, as long as they receive proper support and instruction (Cummins, p. 21, 2009, C Baker, 1987, Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, García et al., 2006). These researches challenge the notion that maximizing exposure to the majority language is the only path to fluency. Instead, well-designed bilingual programs can foster additive multilingualism, where students build proficiency across multiple languages without experiencing negative academic outcomes.

Based on my observations as a preschool teacher in Iceland, as well as insights shared by parents during my interviews, there appears to be a strong emphasis on the Icelandic language within early childhood education settings (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024, Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024). This has led to a sense of pressure felt by both parents and children to rapidly acquire the majority language, often without being able to utilize their heritage languages as a resource:

You have to integrate between Icelandic and other language is thread [...] because Icelandic is maybe, or it disappeared because more people speak English. They start to talk to it to make me feel like they want to see the immigrants as a threat, and they want to force people to [speak] Icelandic. (Hua, Personal interview, 29.03.2024)

This dynamic suggests that some educational institutions in Iceland may still hold the belief that teaching only the majority language of Icelandic is the best approach, and that exposure to other languages could hinder the learning process. As mentioned above, learning a second language has been shown to provide cognitive benefits. It can boost brain functions and enhance memory capabilities (Cummins, p. 21, 2009, C Baker, 1987, Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, García et al., 2006). Bilingual and multilingual individuals, due to their broader linguistic exposure, often display increased creativity, flexibility, and playfulness with language that may not be as readily accessible to monolingual speakers of the same language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Rather than relying on a deficit model that casts children as responsible for their own educational outcomes, it is important to recognize that the structures within the Icelandic education system can enable the exclusion and hindrance of learning the language and successfully adapting to society.

The messaging about development has basically been that it's up to the parents to make it work. And that they provide a caring environment, but they don't provide an educational environment, basically. (Donna, Personal interview, 06.04.2024)

As mentioned in the interviews with parents, they felt significant pressure to stay informed, proactively request information, and be the ones to approach teachers. This suggests that the responsibility is solely placed on immigrant families – it is up to them to catch up and ensure their children's education, rather than the education system adequately supporting them (Kubota & Lin, 2009). However, the research indicates that a multilingual approach to education, which embraces and builds upon students' multilingual capabilities, can be highly beneficial (Taylor et al., 2016, Kubota & Lin, 2009). The responsibility should not be on children and families from immigrant backgrounds to overcome systemic barriers and assimilate, but rather on the education system to adapt and provide the necessary support (Taylor et al., 2016). By shifting away from a deficit-oriented perspective, we can recognize that the challenges faced by multilingual students are often rooted in the structures and practices of the education system itself. Addressing these systemic issues is key to enabling the full learning potential of all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Taylor et al., 2016). Furthermore, if educators had a deeper understanding of how children acquire language skills, and were more aware of the cognitive and academic advantages of multilingual approaches, the pressure on migrant parents and children to prioritize Icelandic over their home languages might be reduced.

From the interview, it was clear that parents sometimes had unrealistic expectations about their children's language learning, such as Emily who thought her daughter would become fluent in Icelandic after just one year of preschool.

And I was surprised because I thought her being in preschool for almost a year would have really set her up to have a good transition there [in primary school]. And apparently her Icelandic was pretty terrible. (Emily, Personal Interview, 9.03.2024)

Educators who are familiar with the stages and processes of child language development could have informative meetings with parents to help them develop more realistic expectations about their own child's language learning. By shifting the mindset and practices among early childhood providers, a more inclusive and supportive environment could be created for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Educators who are knowledgeable about multilingual language acquisition can work to dispel misconceptions and guide parents in understanding the natural progression of their children's language skills.

This shift in educator awareness and approach could help reduce the pressure on migrant families to prioritize Icelandic over their home languages. Instead, a multilingual model that embraces and builds upon students' existing linguistic resources could be fostered. Such an approach recognizes the cognitive and academic advantages that multilingualism can provide, and creates a more welcoming and empowering educational environment for all students (Cummins, p. 21, 2009, C Baker, 1987, Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, García et al., 2006).

Based on my experiences as a preschool teacher, along with interviews with six migrant parents, I identified five key issues in preschool education for children with heritage languages. First, there is a lack of communication between the preschool and parents regarding the child's language learning. Second, support for language development within the preschool setting is limited. Third, both parents and educators face staffing challenges in educational institutions. Fourth, an overemphasis on learning Icelandic creates pressure for both parents and children. Finally, there are notable differences in the heritage language learning needs between parents from English-speaking cultures and those from other backgrounds. While the national curriculum emphasizes enhancing children's self-esteem, confidence, and communication skills, it still prioritizes the Icelandic language, which contributes to feelings of exclusion among parents with limited Icelandic skills. This situation often leads to stress for both parents and children, who feel disconnected from cultural events. However, research indicates that bilingual education does not disadvantage students' academic development in the majority language and parents have a positive view on multilingual education for their children.

## 6. Conclusion

My research paper offers limited insight into the Icelandic preschool system, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions. However, as discussed, I identified several issues that resonate with both the experiences of parents and my own as a former staff member. Through interviews and personal observations, I noted a significant lack of support from preschools for the language learning of migrant children, stemming from various factors.

Addressing my research questions—specifically, the extent to which migrant parents in Reykjavik receive support for their children's language development, and the discrepancies between the national preschool curriculum and its actual implementation—I found that communication between preschools and parents is often insufficient. Information is not always accessible and is frequently shared only in Icelandic, which complicates efforts for non-Icelandic speaking parents to stay informed.

There are issues with staffing at the preschool level, which can limit the resources and attention available for addressing the language learning needs of diverse students. There is clearly an overemphasis on the Icelandic language, while dismissing the benefits of multilingualism and failing to leverage students' home language skills.

My research has shown that the majority of the parents I interviewed claimed there are no regular parent-teacher meetings conducted, contributing to the existing lack of information and communication. Additionally, four of these parents mentioned feeling pressure to use Icelandic, which felt difficult or unnatural for them.

This absence of support, along with a lack of emphasis on multilingualism creates barriers for migrant children in effectively learning and developing their language skills. A more inclusive, communicative, and multilingual approach from preschools is needed to better support the language development of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Based on my own experiences as a preschool teacher, as well as feedback from some parents, there are concerns about biases demonstrated by some educators towards children with heritage languages. Focusing on language development and heritage language preservation, the recommendations of Skutnabb-Kangas could serve as a starting point to be incorporated into the National Curriculum, potentially becoming an official policy for Icelandic preschool.

### 6.1 Implementing Baseline Recommendations in Icelandic Preschools: Strategies for Application

Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) offers recommendations that can be easily incorporated into Icelandic preschools and primary schools, although some may pose challenges due to various factors. Supporting children in their heritage language may not always be feasible, as Iceland does not have a single L2 but rather multiple L2s spoken by different minority groups (Polish, Ukrainian,



Lithuanian, English, German - to just mention some of the heritage languages spoken in Iceland). Implementing instruction in several languages in classrooms could be time-consuming and expensive, requiring the hiring of multiple multilingual teachers, which may be difficult given the unlikely availability of individuals proficient in a variety of heritage languages spoken by Icelandic children. Introducing multiple teachers in the classroom for a single subject could potentially disrupt the learning environment and hinder children from achieving their academic goals within the desired timeframe. Furthermore, rather than prioritizing the achievement of specific learning objectives in preschool, Icelandic play schools emphasize a more experiential, child-centered pedagogy centered on play and exploration. The goal is to foster holistic child development through engaging, enjoyable learning experiences, rather than solely focusing on preparing children to meet predetermined academic benchmarks.

Having a diverse staff of teachers can still provide children in Icelandic schools with broad access to their languages and the opportunity to communicate with at least one person in the school who speaks their heritage language. Children can be grouped together at any time, and code-switching<sup>10</sup> can become a common tool for communication. This, in turn, can foster bilingualism among children, providing Icelandic-speaking children with the chance to acquire additional languages through the process of third culture<sup>11</sup> acquisition. Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) emphasizes the importance of promoting equality among all children and enabling them to develop fluency in their heritage language while also acquiring another language. In Icelandic educational institutions, achieving this goal can be facilitated by allowing children to communicate with each other in their preferred language while ensuring access to Icelandic language materials. Additionally, incorporating multilingual teachers into Icelandic schools and preschools is a possibility, particularly considering the increasing number of immigrants in Iceland, many of whom come with teaching licenses from their home country. These individuals should be given the opportunity to work in educational settings while simultaneously learning Icelandic, rather than making fluency in Icelandic a requirement for becoming a teacher. This aligns with the sixth baseline recommendation, which emphasizes the importance of teachers being proficient in the mother tongue of the children.

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<sup>10</sup> In linguistics, code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or discourse. Code-switching is commonly observed in multilingual communities or among bilingual individuals who are fluent in multiple languages. (Code-switching, N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023. doi:10.1093/OED/9205364123)

<sup>11</sup> The term "third culture acquisition" describes children who are raised in a culture different from that of their parents. These children face the task of adapting not only to a new culture but also of acquiring new languages to effectively communicate and express themselves in their new environment (Solange Francielle Silva, 2021).

While accommodating numerous language varieties within a single Icelandic school or preschool may present challenges, employing teachers from different countries can serve as a supportive measure to fulfill this recommendation. By having a diverse staff of teachers, there is a greater likelihood of providing support for various languages spoken by the students. Implementing the last two baseline recommendations (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, p. 14) regarding explicit instruction in L1 (heritage language) and L2 (additional language) could pose challenges within the Icelandic school system. As Iceland is officially recognized as a monolingual country with Icelandic as the sole language of instruction, introducing subjects taught in languages other than Icelandic may not be feasible. However, prioritizing flexibility in code-switching, emphasizing the inclusion of all languages, and ensuring equal treatment of minority languages are crucial steps to make the Icelandic education system more accessible for migrant children. These measures are vital for enabling these children to develop fluency in both Icelandic and their heritage languages.

## **6.2 Cummins' recommendation for multilingual education in an Icelandic context**

The research findings presented by Cummins in his 2009 study are highly relevant to the considerations around supporting linguistic inclusion in the Icelandic preschool system. Building on the insights shared earlier about broadening the research to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives, Cummins' work offers compelling evidence for the benefits of bilingual education programs (Cummins, 2009).

Firstly, Cummins found that bilingual education can foster a positive relationship between a child's first and second languages, even when those languages are not closely related. This suggests that Icelandic preschools could potentially support the maintenance and development of minority children's home languages alongside Icelandic, without hindering their acquisition of the majority language. Secondly, Cummins emphasizes that the most successful bilingual programs provide long-term, sustained language support starting from the preschool years and continuing throughout primary school. This aligns with the recommendation to take a comprehensive, systemic approach to addressing linguistic inclusion, engaging not just parents but also teachers and policymakers. Finally, Cummins' research indicates that bilingual education for minority students is more effective than solely focusing on teaching the majority language. This underscores the importance of the Icelandic preschool system moving beyond a "transitional" model that prioritizes rapid assimilation into Icelandic, and instead embracing an additive approach that celebrates and fosters multilingualism.

By connecting Cummins' established findings with the earlier preliminary insights, we can better understand the evidence-based practices and policies that could enhance linguistic inclusion in Icelandic early childhood education. Implementing these research-supported

strategies would help ensure that all children, regardless of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, have access to a nurturing and enriching preschool experience. This approach would also align with parents' expectations for their children to grow up in a multilingual environment, reducing the pressure on them to learn Icelandic quickly or to use it exclusively. This is particularly beneficial for migrant parents and children, facilitating better communication and integration.

### **6.3 Outlook and further research**

Research has consistently demonstrated the academic and cognitive benefits of bilingual education for children (Björklund & Björklund, 2013; C Baker, 1987; Cenozm 2012; Cummins, 1986). This approach to language instruction is viewed positively by both parents and educators within international preschool settings. In recent years, Iceland has transformed into a more diverse and international society due to a significant influx of immigrants. According to government statistics, the number of foreign-born residents in Iceland has increased by over 50% in the past decade, from around 25,000 in 2010 to more than 38,000 as of 2020 (Statistics Iceland: The Population Increased by 3,370 in the Second Quarter of 2023, n.d.). As a result, providing a more linguistically inclusive environment in Icelandic preschools has become crucial for supporting all members of society.

However, there appear to be discrepancies between the inclusive policies and principles outlined in the national curriculum and the actual practices and experiences of migrant children in Icelandic preschools. Some parents have found it challenging to maintain their children's heritage languages, feeling restricted in their linguistic human rights. This suggests that the support provided for migrant children's language learning development, particularly in preserving their home languages, may be limited.

The disconnect between educational practices and the research-based understanding of language acquisition represents a shortcoming that must be addressed. Preschools have a responsibility to ensure their staff receive comprehensive training on the value of multilingualism and strategies to effectively support children's diverse linguistic abilities. Only by recognizing the language rights of children and aligning educational approaches with the latest research on child language development can we create truly inclusive and equitable learning environments that empower all children to thrive.

To address the issue of staffing challenges and lack of communication, municipalities should ensure better compensation, more robust benefits, and an overall improved working environment for preschool staff. By taking these steps, preschools can expect to experience less staff turnover, allowing them to hire and retain a sufficient number of skilled teachers. This, in turn, will ensure there is always a teacher available to engage in meaningful discussions with

parents during student drop-off and pick-up times. Improving staffing stability and increasing opportunities for parent-teacher communication are crucial for enhancing the quality of the preschool experience and fostering stronger connections between the school and the families it serves.

Given the limited scope of the initial research, it would be premature to make broad generalizations about the Icelandic preschool system as a whole. To better understand the experiences and perspectives of those involved, it would be helpful to broaden the research by interviewing a wider range of stakeholders. This should include interviews with more parents from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as the teachers at the preschools and the staff at the municipalities responsible for the financial distribution to preschools. Due to the limited timeframe and resources for this thesis, I was not able to talk with educators from preschools this time. However, including their perspectives would have given another important insight into the challenges and opportunities for supporting linguistic inclusion in Icelandic early childhood education. Additionally, speaking with the staff at municipal offices responsible for funding and overseeing preschool programs would shed light on the administrative and policy considerations that shape the resources and support available to preschools. These stakeholders could provide context on budgetary constraints, training programs, and coordination efforts between government agencies and individual preschools.

Broadening the research to capture a more comprehensive range of perspectives - from parents, teachers, and policymakers - would paint a clearer picture of the complex, multi-faceted challenges surrounding linguistic inclusion in Icelandic early childhood education. While the current study offers valuable insights, future research should make every effort to engage this wider array of stakeholders. Only then can we develop a thorough understanding of the systemic barriers and facilitators to creating truly equitable, multilingual learning environments for all young children in Iceland. During my research, I came across a new guideline published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in 2020. Titled *Languages of the Heart*, this document demonstrates that the Icelandic government recognizes the multilingual challenges facing the country and provides legal support and guidance for policymakers. On page 10 it clearly states:

Schools and afterschool programs have the role of supporting children and young people to master a rich Icelandic vocabulary. In addition, these institutions are under obligation to respect the language resources of plurilingual students, i.e. their language skills in all their languages and that of their families, and to create an encouraging environment with the goal of strengthening all the language proficiencies of children. In addition, the parents of plurilingual children should be encouraged to establish for themselves a conscious language policy in the family, with the goal of offering children a

rich language and literacy environment. (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020, p. 10)

This new guideline reflects a more updated and inclusive approach compared to the National Curriculum from 2011. It aligns with the recommendations in this thesis and the expectations expressed by the parents I interviewed (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). As Iceland welcomes an increasing number of migrants, this guideline is essential for accommodating diverse languages and cultures. In conclusion, it is crucial for educational facilities to commit to these guidelines and focus on improving their inclusivity and multilingual approaches. By doing so, they can cultivate a welcoming environment that meets the diverse needs of all children and promotes rich cultural exchange. This commitment will help ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive in a supportive educational setting.

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## Appendix

### Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves answering questions the researcher asks me (open-end questions) and elaborate on my personal experiences as educator/teacher and/or parent.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
- This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a master thesis at the University of Iceland, in the department of International Education.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the researchers personal Google drive file which is private and can be accessed under the following link:  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pwlVZ4fukGdi23KVpcJpY3FWn53ugbvD?usp=s\\_haring](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pwlVZ4fukGdi23KVpcJpY3FWn53ugbvD?usp=s_haring) until June, 30th 2024.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 12 months.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalization I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

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Signature of research participant

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Signature of participant

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Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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Signature of researcher

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Date

**Questionnaire for Migrant Parents**  
**Master Thesis Data Collection / Autumn & Spring 2023/24**

Topic: Exploring Migrant Parents' Perspectives on Language Learning of Children in Icelandic Preschools - A critical approach

Friederike Börner

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This questionnaire consists of four close ended questions and six open-ended questions.

- 1.) What is your nationality? What is your partner's nationality?
- 2.) What language is your mother tongue?
- 3.) What language do you speak with your child/children at home? What is/are the heritage language(s) spoken in the home?
- 4.) What language do you speak with the child in public places?
- 5.) Do you have language policies and if so - which ones are these?  
(eg. Do you speak a certain language only during play time or mealtime? Are there one parent one language policies or do both parents speak the same language? etc.)
- 6.) How do you experience your child's language development? Are there any challenges?
- 7.) What languages do your children speak when they are playing with you, with other adults, by themselves and with other children?
- 8.) How does the play school your child/ren go to support your child's language development? What kind of support do you get to develop your child/ren's language development?
- 9.) What is your experience when communicating with the educational facility of your child?
- 10.) What do you think about multilingual education?