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## **‘Treat others as you want to be treated’ - Three playschool teachers views on ethics and religious education in Icelandic playschools**

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### **Introduction**

The aim of this research is to explore how Icelandic playschool-teachers define and practice religious education and ethics in public playschools. The reasons for this research are more than one and in a way related to the history of playschool education and the National playschool curriculum in Iceland, but also to my own history as a playschool teacher and head-teacher. During the time I worked in playschools (1978 – 1997) the question on playschools’ role in religious education tended to create controversy in staff-meetings whenever mentioned. Those heated discussions have kept my interest alive over decades and inspired this research. The connection to history of playschool education is rooted from the time that the Ministry of education published the first National curriculum for playschools in Iceland 1985, under the name *Uppeldisáætlun fyrir dagvistarheimili*, or in English translation *Pedagogic plan for day care centres*<sup>1</sup>. In the pedagogic plan it says that the values it is based on and therefore also the pedagogical practice of each institution should be closely connected with the culture of the nation. It also says that the culture is based on a certain understanding of human nature and philosophy of life. Those Icelandic values are founded on centuries old visions of *democracy*, *strong national identity* and *Christian ethics* (Iceland 1985 p. 22). It also states that each and every playschool shall promote Christian ethics (Iceland 1985 p. 24). One reason given is that the compulsory school in Iceland is founded on Christian ethics and it is therefore necessary to create continuity in children’s upbringing (Iceland 1985 p. 22). In the newest edition of the *National Curriculum for Playschools, Aðalnámskrá leikskóla* (Iceland 1999), there is one sentence about educating children on Christian ethics, but a specific foundation for moral and ethical education is laid down. From the first official curriculum plan for the playschool it is clear that there is a certain emphasis on both ethics and Christianity.

In the beginning of July 2005 I wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education and asked if there was or is any official definition of the concept Christian ethics as used in laws and national curriculum for Primary and Playschools. In a reply that I received on the 21st. of September 2005, it says that the word ‘Christian’ in front of ethics entered into the primary school legislation during discussions in the parliament in 1974. It had not been included in the initial text from the ministry. The only reason for this which the official could think of was that in 1971 (when the new law was in preparation) a formal State-church assembly made a statement about the necessity of highlighting the relationship between schools and Christian values.

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<sup>1</sup> 1985 both the word day care centres as well as playschools were used officially

Almost no research has been conducted on either of these two concepts in Icelandic playschools and very little in primary schools. The only research that has been conducted on the topic in the playschool so far is my own. On the other hand, unofficial discussions have taken place on websites, both among people that believe in the relationship between school and church and those that don't. Both laypeople and professionals from both schools and church have participated in these discussions and they have also led to some articles in the main daily papers. Two discourses seem to be appearing, for and against education based on Christian ethics. Those that are opposed to Christianity as one of the bases of our school system refer furthestmost to international declarations on human rights, the Icelandic constitution and the society becoming multicultural. The supporters of Christianity mainly refer to the fact that the church is according to the constitution an official state-church, that Christianity is ingrown into the nation's culture and history, and that learning about Jesus and saying prayer has not hurt anyone.

### **Research question**

How do Icelandic playschool teachers define and practice religious education and ethics in public playschools in Iceland? What kind of practice do playschool teachers consider to support and promote children's ethical development? What are their views on a formal relationship with the State church?

### **Methodology**

#### *Design*

The design is flexible (as described by Robson, 2002 p. 163-177) and I find myself going through different stages, from research question to data to theoretical framework and then again and again repeating my steps. I found it difficult to place myself within a certain theoretical framework. I did for example find a strong relationship between my way of interpreting the data and Weber's writing on ideals and using comparative methods as a mean of gaining truth (Crotty, 2004 p 66-72; Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2000 p 56). On the other hand I am not quite comfortable with his ideas being based on the notion that there is a certain truth, otherwise there can be no ideal. That notion goes against some other writings that I am using from among others Dahlberg and Moss (2005) in which they deny the conception of ethical universalism that is based on one truth about what is wrong and what is right, and I have to agree with their assumptions. However, in this assignment I decided to use Weber's ideas, I am going to compare what my participants are saying with certain ideas on ethics. Not with the aim in mind to say that my participants are right or wrong, but to see how they reflect what is considered as being ethical and Christian education, at least in the Icelandic playschool context.<sup>2</sup> One can therefore state that the conceptual framework based on Weber influenced the research design and methodologies created in this study. The limitation of this study is its inability to generalize from a few people's point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Icelandic statistics (2005) over 90% of children aged 2 to 5 years are in playschools that are almost all owned and run by municipalities.

### ***Participants***

Purposeful sampling strategies were used to select participants. I chose to interview three playschool teachers that work in different neighbourhoods in Reykjavík. Another criterion was that I wanted my participants to be of different ages and have different status within the schools. One is a head teacher the others are deputy head teachers. I gave the participants pseudonyms. Agnes is 43 years old – she graduated in 1989. She is married with four children, a religious church-going person. Elsa is 27 years old, the youngest of the teachers; she graduated in 2003, she is planning to get married and has no children, she does not attend church but consider herself to be believer. Rún is the head teacher. She is 56 years old - graduated in 1970, and is very well known among playschool-teachers for promoting education for peace. Rún has three grown-up children and several grandchildren. She is an atheist.

### ***Data collection and analysis of the data***

Data was collected through interviews, each lasting about an hour. All the interviews were conducted in Icelandic and the data used, had to be translated to English. I had designed questions that I used as a helping tool but at the same time the interviews developed according to how my participants answered. (Kvale 1996). The background for my questions came from my theoretical reading and the National curriculum. I coded with free codes and went through the report of the coded text afterwards. Some paragraphs could be quoted with different codes. More themes occurred than I present here. Due to both word restriction and my own interests I choose the following themes: *Ethics, Respect and Religious education.*

### **Findings**

#### ***Ethics***

One of the main aims of playschool education is to promote children's Christian ethics. How do playschool teachers define ethics? The common theme being 'to be consistent with oneself and don't do anything to others that you don't want them to do to you'. Agnes described it by saying 'if you think about it in a wider sense, it is about not saying one thing and doing something else, you are true to yourself and yours, you don't cause offence with rules or ... by ridiculing others.' The core of ethics is respect. A good person speaks and behaves in a good manner. All my participants cited the Bible's Golden rule in one way or another. Thou shall not do to others that thou will not have them do to you. Generally speaking my participants did not see a difference between what is named Christian ethics and ethics. All agreed that in light of the fact that the nation is becoming multicultural it is time to take out the concept 'Christian' in front of the concept ethic in the laws about Playschool. As an explanation Agnes said 'I think it can upset, I think that's unnecessary to have a letter of the law that disturbs some citizens that want to use our services'. Part of good ethics is also that everybody senses that they are welcome; 'feel that they are included into the society, doesn't matter if they are from Iceland or Vietnam ... I think that's important' says Elsa.

Rún says that she thinks that ethics are in a way independent from faith, that ethical proclamations from different religions are fundamentally the same. She says that history shows that depending on the happenings in the world all religious sayings on what is right and wrong disappear. Doing things in the name of religion is used as a pretext for something else.

### ***Respect (valuing)***

The concept respect appeared repeatedly in my interviews. To respect oneself, to respect others was high on the participants' mind. Agnes tells that they emphasise that children do not let others stamp on them and therefore should not stamp on others. Other issues concern respecting the individual, respecting the environment and respecting what is happening at any given time at the playschool.

### ***Respect is listening***

The aim of playschool education and what should characterise children when finishing their playschool education were part of my questions. Respect and disrespect in some form were high on my participants' minds. Agnes wants to see joyful individuals with good self-esteem that respect themselves as well as their environment. Elsa adds that the emphasis should be on children being sociable, open, pleased and cheerful. Also the children should learn to trust themselves, not always be dependent on trusting others. They should be capable of listening to their own needs. Rún says that the main aim should be to teach children good communications skills. Good communication is a key to partnership within the school and with parents. It should be taught in partnership between home and school and both should do their best. She gives as an example, if a parent dislikes a member of the personnel it oozes over to the children. She says, 'when parents sit and talk badly about staff and teachers and the children are sitting nearby listening, I call that teaching children distrust, bad interaction and disrespect'.

Agnes says that disrespect toward children appears in not listening, for example when children are supposed to eat or taste food that they apparently can't. She doesn't want the children to bear what she calls a frightful respect for adults. Agnes says that she believes it is important to use appreciation during communications, for example accept when children like or dislike something. Part of this appreciation is listening and accepting children's views, even when the teachers want to direct children toward certain tasks - they have to listen to what the children are saying. Agnes says that nowadays she uses the practice of putting adults in children's shoes, so to speak, into children's situations. She thinks this is a powerful tool. As an example she says to her co-workers:

Girls would you ... if Elva [the head teacher] would sit in the staffroom all the time and say, no now you are allowed to speak [the voice gets higher], you be quiet, sit still, there is another one speaking and so on ... I take them and put them into the staffroom.

### *Practices that promote respect*

The practices that promote respect are among others being positive and talking with gladness in the voice, not nagging, etc. Other practices that are important are for children to sense that they are respected as persons. Elsa says, children have to feel welcome to this place and that they will be listened to, 'generally they get the opportunity to give their opinion, what they want and how they are feeling'. If they are allowed to do this 'then somehow, they will shine more, if they sense that they are important ... if they get time to say what is on their mind'. Agnes talks about the importance for every child to look after her/himself. As an example she says to the children that they have to mind themselves.

Because if I don't mind myself, then maybe the person next to me will be sad, because maybe you are breaching his space ... I think they get this and you can remind each about minding his or her space, that everybody mind their space ... if you are watching circle time, sometimes hands gets closer and the feet maybe gets closer and even poke the next person's toes and some can't stand getting poked.

When Elsa is asked about the difference between obedience and respect she says:

Obedience is just minding the rules ... something else than respect ... the respect is more the individual her/himself rather than something, then of course you have the rules and you are supposed to follow the rules, but you can always forget the rules in the heat of the game ... but at the same time respect your co-workers and the children.

### *Respect as reflected - view of the child*

Part of the respect emerges in a view of the child. Elsa for example believes it important that 'children learn how to deal with problems; it is unacceptable that they are always given the answers'. Rún says that it rubs her the wrong way that there is a separate level of respect for children on one hand and adults on the other. As an example she talks about comments and critique. Some people consider that it is no big deal to criticise children but if she would say the same thing to them, they would be appalled. People think it is OK to say things to children but if the same is said to them it is offensive.

### **Religious education – whose responsibility?**

All three playschools have head teachers that are very opinionated on the relationship between church and the playschools. It is clear that they draw the line that others follow regarding the collaboration with the church. In all three schools formal collaboration is limited; two visit the church with children before Christmas. No playschool is visited regularly by members of the congregations. One school has it as a part of a trauma plan to call a minister. In the same school a playschool-teacher informed me that after suicides in children's families the personnel got a minister to discuss with and a quiet moment in the Church. The playschool teacher thought this was an important role and did not put it in the same category as ministers visiting the children.

That religious upbringing is the responsibility of the family is a collective assessment of my participants. Rún says that even though the playschool has taken over some of the parent's responsibility regarding the children's upbringing, religious upbringing is not one of those. If parents need assistance for religious education they have the church Sunday-schools. She adds that the relationship that is created between parents and children during evening prayer is a close personal relationship. She said she would not mind if her children said prayers in school but first and foremost it was the parents' responsibility.

Agnes agrees with this view and says that if parents want this kind of religious education they have the opportunity to apply for a playschool that is founded on religious principles. When parents apply for a municipality run playschool she doesn't think that they have religious education especially in mind.

All three agreed on not getting any education to talk on the subject of religious education through their formal teacher education. Ethics as a general subject was little better covered.

### **Discussion**

The views of my participants on the role of religious education in the playschool seem to be similar in most ways. They all share the view that religious education should be the responsibility of the parent, not the playschool. Their own religious beliefs did not affect that view.

The participants seem to regard their own religious practice in the playschool in light of Icelandic cultural heritage, rather than putting a religious meaning to it. Visiting church and celebrating Christmas is more tradition than religion.

When playschool teachers were asked to define the concept Christian ethics, a very surface definition was given. The golden rule seems to be the thread that all agreed 'says all that has to be said'. There is a strong link to the first *National pedagogic plan* (Iceland, 1985), where ethics is seen as respect based on caring; caring for children. It appears to be easier for the teachers to describe and refer to their practice when they are explaining what they mean; the knowledge seems in a way to be tactile knowledge. I am not sure that my participants in reality understand the difference between 'Christian' ethics and 'other' ethics. This is not said to belittle them, but rather to point out that they did not mention divine guidance. But that is the most important emphasis that theologians place on the definition of Christian ethics (Bexell and Grenholm, 2001/1997). On the other hand, the playschool-teachers use the ethics of responsibility as a guiding light toward moral choices. They are deeply occupied with the concept of respect; that we all learn to respect each other. It can be said that they believe that we are all 'our brother's keeper'. Both adults and children bear a responsibility for each other as well as for their own being.

It is interesting that when asked to define the concept good ethics, all three phrased the 'Golden rule' in some way. The Golden rule then seems to go as a thread through their

answers. Agnes illustrates this when she asks her co-workers to 'step into the children's shoes' and feel how it is to be treated as objects. The same can be said about Rún, when she talks about what is believed to constitute respectful behaviour, accepted for children on the one hand and adults on the other. It is OK to criticise children, but the same criticism is offending to adults. When Rún said that the ministers weren't interested in what the playschool is doing, it can be considered a variant of the Golden rule. 'You come to us and ask us to take you in, but you are not ready to be educated on what we are already doing'.

When the playschool teachers are describing practice that promotes ethical behaviour, they seem to weave their views into their practice, they give an example on how in reality you promote and live by the golden rule. One can even say that they look at education as a 'condition for ethics rather than site of implied ethics' (Todd, 2001). Means to do that involve an emphasis on listening, being sensitive toward others, putting oneself in others' shoes and the importance of relationships.

I wonder if Icelandic playschool-teachers are shy about religious education and, if so, why?

The explanations could be manifold, one being that little attention has been placed on religious education in the teacher's universities, another being that everything that has to do with religion has up until recently been regarded as a private matter. This can be traced to Lutheranism, where every person is ultimately responsible for his or her religious life. The discussion on religion is opening up in the Icelandic society and hopefully it will be on the plan of principles, rather than emotions.

### **Lastly**

I said before, that I would attempt to use Weber's ideas on the ideal as an influence on my analysis. I have strived to do so. I illustrated what the laws and pedagogical plans empathize as ethics and respectful caring, how theologians, who influence Icelandic ministers, define ethics and how the playschool teacher views the same subjects. I think this study can be looked upon as a beginning of a lively discussion and of further studies into the subjects.

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