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## **Infected with neo-liberalism: The new landscape of early childhood settings in Iceland**

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### ***Abstract***

*Over the last few decades neo-liberalism has been growing as a political ideology, globally as well as nationally. It has become the ruling, and at the same time hidden, hegemony of many societies. In Iceland the manifestation of neo-liberalism is mostly noticeable in discourses related to the right of the market for among other things; deregulation, accountability, choice (for example of schools), and privatisation, both in the school system as well as in wider society.*

*The aim of this article is to explore and make visible the influence of neo-liberalism on the Icelandic preschool system. Among the influential forces in Icelandic society is the Iceland Chamber of Commerce which published in 2006 a futuristic free market vision of, among other things, how to run the preschool system. These ideas will be scrutinised in connection with Hursh's (2005) frame on neo-liberalism in the American and English school systems. The frame points toward certain key concepts to look for as part of public discourse on schools. One concept, for example, is school choice. In the paper a special attention is given to this concept and its connection to the McDonaldization (Ritzer and Goodman, 2003) of preschool education in Iceland. The main conclusions are that neo-liberalism has had an evident influence on the public structure of pre-schools, that neo-liberal ideology has been a constructive force with strong indicators showing that in the private sector McDonaldization is already a reality.*

**Keywords:** *neo-liberalism, democracy, preschool, early childhood education, educational policy, administration*

Neoliberalism has been a part of the Icelandic business as well as the governmental mandate for the last decade at least. After the crash of the Icelandic financial system in 2008 many people in Iceland thought over why this had happened and most of them pondered over how or if we – the people – could have done anything to prevent the financial crash. A part of the restoration of the society was an investigative committee established by the Parliament that analyzed the past and the learning that could be drawn from it. A part of the Parliament's committee conclusion was that 'we' had not as a nation been critical toward the signs that were facing us or the ideas that were presented as the right and sensible ones by different stakeholders (Rannsóknarskýrsla Alþingis). In a way, one can say that neoliberal thinking became the new hegemony and as such most of us did not see it or understand how it was shaping a paradigm shift in our society. It became our social doxa (Bourdieu).

Just over a year ago I began researching the impact of neoliberalism on the Icelandic early childhood scene (I also use the concept preschool and preschool system). The

privatization of the system had been a concern of mine for years but I had not given myself time to cover the field, systematically with analytical lenses. My aim was to understand if or how, by changing the system, the pedagogical work and landscape was in turn changed to favour Capital. At first, I got a lot of questions and the raising of eyebrows. People indicated concern, such as “why are you writing or researching this, there were and are no visible connections between neoliberalism and our early childhood educational system’, others pointed out that; ‘those neoliberal ideas were just a part of our financial system’”. The concept of for example the quasi market had not been full-blown in Icelandic society. Despite much disinterest I decided to go on and try to obtain an eagle vision of the development of the early childhood system.

Months later, after publication of my paper (Dýrfjörð, 2011), few people had contacted me and none up to this day have publicly contested my findings. At the same time there was ample interest in the paper. It was downloaded from the journal’s website almost 800 times the first two weeks (In a nation of 300 thousand people). I have presented parts of my findings at conferences in Iceland, Denmark and York. As a result I have been invited to participate as the Icelandic delegate in a Nordic group on the effect of neoliberalism on the Nordic early childhood field. But that’s about it; if there is an interest it is more apparent outside the country than inside.

One could wonder why I am going over these matters as a part of this article. It is because I see the reaction as a part of how the system protects itself. By answering, contesting or even discussing the article, my concerns are given a voice - my ideas gain power. A better way is not to acknowledge its presence, to silence it. The question is for whom and why is it important to silence a study into neoliberalism in the early childhood educational system? Who is to gain?

### **Background of the early childhood educational system**

The early childhood system, not only in Iceland but in the wider world, seems to be vulnerable to marketization and the neo-liberal worldview. Even to a greater degree than the primary school system. This stems, among other factors, from a historical point. The origin of the Icelandic preschool system is associated with the women’s alliances of the early twenties. At the beginning, women’s unions and associations built and ran the preschools (Guðmundsson, 1949). The same is true in many other countries, for example the Nordic countries, as well as Australia (Balke, 1990; Wodorw and Press). In Iceland, during the early sixties and seventies, the municipalities took over both running and building the preschools with financial support from the state. In 1991 a preschool law was passed, where preschool enrolment was declared as the right of a child and in 1994 the preschool was declared as the first step in the Icelandic educational system. At the time, almost all preschools were run by the municipalities, few schools were what one could call alternative preschools (for ex. Steiner schools). No schools at the time were run for profit or as a part of a school chain (Dýrfjörð, 2011). The primary schools, on other hand, have from the beginning been a part of the public sphere, first through the priests (church) and later the state and communities. Because of the preschools origin, they have been open for discussion on alternative ways of both running them and of the ownership.

### Neoliberal hegemony

Discussions about neoliberalism and early childhood are not new and they are certainly not a specific Icelandic matter. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have written about the danger of early childhood education becoming a victim to accountability standards as well as technical solutions. Moss (2008) uses the concept ‘market model’ to describe the development in the UK. According to his paper the ‘childcare market’ is one of the fastest growing corporate sectors in the UK as well as in Australia and the USA. Woodrow and Press (2007) have analysed the Australian system and how it has fallen prey to the market and marketing solutions. Sumsion (2006) uses the concept ‘corporate preschools’ of Australia. Vincent, Braun, and Ball (2010) have researched how parents’ school choices affect the early childhood system in England and the danger for social equality that lay therein. Ahrenkiel, Nielsen, Schmidt, Sommer and Warring (2012) have analysed how the pedagogy of Danish preschools is more and more under a neoliberal thumb. In Norway, Seland (2011) researched the influence that very big preschools have on children and pedagogy. In the USA, post-colonial, post-structural and queer researchers (Cannella, 2005; Blaise, 2005) have written about the dangers of the white worldview as well as about how the standards are used to push the pedagogy into a certain frame that supports the needs of the market. Many are worried about the ability of democracies to survive this new neoliberal time. Especially worrisome to many is how the neoliberal worldview is becoming the new norm. How the new hegemony is the neoliberal hegemony. As such it becomes an essential part of how people form their opinions. The neoliberal hegemony is becoming the measurement of social change and to what decisions are held up against. It is debatable if this development is bad or good. In this paper neoliberal hegemony is not a part of a preferred worldview; it is looked upon as a danger to democracy and social justice.

Hursh (2005) has written extensively on neoliberalism and the educational system in the USA and England. He has put forward an analytical frame where he defines the main characteristics of neoliberal schools. Among key concepts in his frame are curriculum standards, assessment and accountability, privatisation, choice (market) and diversity. He has laid out how each of these concepts are related to the neoliberal view of our societies and how the discourse is hidden within the discourse of democracy and rights. Hursh points out that what can be a choice for a middle class families can in reality lead to social inequality for the lower classes. How, at the end, the aim is the capital and the right of the capital to shape the social environment. In table 1 I use a frame based on Hursh’s frame to analyse the Icelandic system over the last 20 years. It is remarkable to see the evolution over the last ten years toward a stronger neoliberal model. To clarify these changes I also point out the kind of government that rules at each point.

**Table 1. The development of the preschool system in Iceland – overview**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2011</b>

Government (always coalition)	Left (spring 1991)	Right (1991 -2009)	Left (2009 - )
Curriculum standards	Educational plan for the preschools 1985/1991 /Act of law on preschools 1991.	Preschool as the first part of the educational system 1994, first regulations 1995 a national curriculum 1999. The primary school discourse becomes evident.	Act of law 2008 key-concepts from the Bologna agreement. Knowledge, skills and competency. New Government 2009 – new direction – new national curriculum. New national curriculum 2011.
Diversity/ school choice	Little diversity between running schools or educational approaches. Schools with 2-3 classes (department) common.  Little or no choice for parents.	** In curriculum – not in ownership. Preschools become bigger. New schools, four and five classrooms (90-120 children).  Some choice for parents.	Diversity in who own and run schools - in curriculum. Schools become even bigger and tendency to emerged smaller schools with other pre-and/or primary schools.  Parents right to choice schools and philosophy.
Privatization/ ownership	Almost no privately owned and run schools.	Few schools owned or run by private organizations.	About 14% owned and/or run privately
Evaluation/ Accountability	Almost no accountability.	Some accountability – ministry evaluate.	Institutes that shall be responsible for accountability – evaluation.
Regulations (de)regulation	Regulation, very little consensus about how to run preschools.	Regulation – written with the union – agreement on staff ration square meters.	Regulation for the marked. No bottom on square meters, no limit on children: staff ratio. Every schools or communities responsibility.

### **The shift and renewed interest in early childhood settings as a business opportunity**

One can wonder why the neoliberal expansion was as strong as it appears to be in Iceland. Who promoted and pushed the neoliberal wagon? It is clear that just after the millennium shift the Icelandic business world started to show some interest in the preschool system.

This interest aligned with what was already happening in the USA, Australia and England where the preschools were at the same time a fast growing 'industry' (Moss, 2008). Icelandic businesspeople saw both unused business opportunities as well as chances to shape the preschool's pedagogical ideology toward a pedagogy that in the long run would serve the market. According to their view, the 'only' obstacles in their way were regulations and laws concerning the preschools (Viðskiptaráð Íslands, 2006). The Icelandic Chamber for Commerce assembled a Think tank in 2006 to draw up preferred futurist scenery for the Icelandic society. Part of their futurist vision was an interesting chapter on early childhood education as an upcoming market opportunity. Concepts and words close to the market (for ex. child care *industry*) were used to describe their desires for the future. According to Hursh (2005) this can be looked upon as a result of Keynesian ideology concerning the welfare state. Although part of the goals concern 'unused' marked opportunities, another part touches on the desire for the neoliberal society to create a 'competitive' citizen. To be competitive is in other words to be an adjustable or flexible citizen, a citizen that is able to change according to the needs of the market. The aim is for the system to 'make' good workers and followers that will in the long run secure the interest of the capital. It could be argued that it does not serve the Keynesian model that citizens become too critical and/or reflective; a school system that promotes such characteristics can be looked upon as dangerous to the neoliberal worldview. It is within this Keynesian worldview that the Icelandic Chamber for Commerce (CfC) operates.

But who are the CfC and why do their opinions matter? Their website is a good source of information, there it says:

Membership to the Chamber is voluntary. ... This puts the Chamber in a unique position, since its operation is only subject to **the interests of its members**. This is particularly important to the Chamber's role of being an advocate towards the authorities. Since the Chamber is independent of contribution or other services from the authorities it is in a stronger position to provide them with **the necessary supervision and restraint**. The Chamber exerts itself for **positive changes in law, regulation and administrative decisions** which regard the business community. The Chamber receives from parliamentary committees, for review, all bills that bear upon the interests of the business community. Comments are made in collaboration with members and are presented to the committees. Through this the Chamber operates as an **advocate towards the Parliament**. In addition the Chamber appoints representatives of its members to serve on public committees.

(The Icelandic Chamber for Commerce,

<http://www.vi.is/english/service/an-advocate-towards-the-authorities/>)

From this text it is quite clear that the CfC looks at itself as vigilantes of sorts, for those that have money and connections in the society. They are first and furthest a self-serving community of business people. It can be read that their main interest is to serve their owners but not the wider society, the society's role is to serve their interests. Vigilante is a strong word but when read in comparison to the following paragraphs it is not so far ahead:

Member's interests are followed up with *effective restraint towards governmental officials and institutions* by letters, articles, and arrangement of work-groups, publication of reports and with informal communications. ... Companies often struggle with functioning within the extensive regulatory environment. Various fields are constricted with *unnecessary bureaucracy and inefficient regulation*. The Chamber, in its operation, emphasis on *improvements in the regulatory environment* and provides its members with assistance and support in particular cases.

(The Icelandic Chamber for Commerce,

<http://www.vi.is/english/service/an-advocate-towards-the-authorities/>)

The growth of the public sector seems to be like poison in their blood. As stated above, the preschool system in Iceland has its roots outside the public sphere. And therefore it is easier for CfC to claim the right of the market to involve itself in the running preschools.

It was and is supposed to be part of the market, in their view:

The Chamber puts considerable emphasis on minimization of state affairs and strives against the *expansion of the public sector*. ... The Chamber has been a leading force in the debate of private operations and amongst other things *pointed out the benefits of enhanced private enterprise* in health-, educational-, and energy affairs.

(The Icelandic Chamber for Commerce,

<http://www.vi.is/english/service/an-advocate-towards-the-authorities/>)

Part of the unnecessary regulations mentioned are regulations concerning the running of the preschool system. For example; the size of the schools, the staff-to-child ratio, the teacher's education and so on. Many of these regulations are strongly related to educational-quality of the schools. It can be argued that the main users of the 'market' (in this case the parents) will take care of the quality; parents will not send their children to low-quality schools. But then one can also ask, if the CfC is successful in getting their viewpoint through into the laws and regulations, what kind of **criteria** do parents have to evaluate or even know which school is low or high quality? Most parents will probably believe that the state and/or the municipality will have the children's interests at heart and that this should be sufficient quality insurance.

The CfC, as an independent organisation, may not be able to participate in running or owning schools companies. But the people that are the leading forces on the board and committees can, as persons, support those companies. The biggest private school chain in Iceland, *Hjallastefnan*, now runs 13 preschools (according to numbers from the Iceland statistics and 3 primary schools (2012). This marks around 5% of all preschools for about 6,5% of all children attending preschools in the country. Many members of the CfC board and former CEO's are also part owners of this school chain. By being in this position they show their moral and financial support.

#### **Case study: Private school chain**

In the next part of this paper I consider it to be useful to look at how Ritzer (Ritzer and Goodman, (2003) McDonaldization and relate this definition to the running of the biggest school chain in Iceland *Hjallastefnan ehf.* *Hjallastefnan* was founded as a company with the aim of running schools at the year 2000, at first as a preschool approach developed by its founder Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir and later also as a primary school approach. Ólafsdóttir is connected to the cradle of neoliberalism in at least two ways, she is on the board of CfC and she was the first president of the organisation of privately run schools - under her presidency it was decided that the organisation became a part of the Federation of Trade and Services. Today her company runs 13 preschools and three primary schools and can be considered a large company on the Icelandic scale.

The process of McDonaldization of the society can be summarized as the way in which the principles of the fast-food restaurant such as MacDonalld are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world (Ritzer and Goodman, 2003). The same is true for Iceland, marketing approaches are becoming stronger and as a result branded school chains are appearing, school chains like *Hjallastefnan*. Part of the branding business is to promote the company's ideology of how their schools are better and more efficient for children and parents; that they offer unique educational 'services'. The company's logo and trade mark is promoted in varied ways. For example a teacher from the company was presenting at a conference in May 2012; she was not named as a teacher from a certain school as all other presenters, but as a representative from the company. If I ask parents in my neighbourhood in which school their children are, they are most likely to answer with the name of the company, but not the name of the school. Maybe it is because the company's name seems to give prestige to their educational choices; it has become a well-known brand.

As for an educational approach it can be said that *Hjallastefnan* has four main components; gender segregation, discipline, minimalized school environment (for example almost completely white walls with little of children's art visible), and lastly a strict streamlined curriculum. There are almost no toys or children's books allowed in the schools. Children are supposed to use their own imaginations and play with each other. The words simplicity, transparency and training are key concepts. For example, nothing shall hang on the walls because it adds confusion to the children's world - the same is true for toys and art materials. Every day children go through circle time where they choose what they like to do. The choices offered are always the same, the same number of children that can choose the areas and so on. This is both a part of the streamlined curriculum but also a part of the notion that children will not function in a cluttered or unorganised environment. There are special timeslots in the curriculum where children are allowed to do some educational 'exercises' across gender under the 'supervision' of teachers; otherwise it is total segregation. All the schools look more and less the same, lines on the floors and in cabinets to mark where every item has its place and children and staff are dressed in uniforms with the company's logo. When the writing style of the company's website is analysed technical language stands out. Words such as training, taming, discipline and simplicity are key words. For example, this text is from the English part of the company's website:



The Hjalli pedagogy is mostly known for its method of segregating girls and boys in preschool classes and by this trying to liberate the children from traditional sex-roles and stereotypic behaviors. Children at the Hjallastefnan preschools receive *training* in all human qualities as we believe that all children should have all the possibilities in the world regardless of their sex. But the Hjalli pedagogy is unique for other sakes as well: we only use open ended material instead of traditional toys at our schools and we believe that positive *discipline* is the way to *train* social skills.

(Hjalli, <http://www.hjalli.is/information/>, 2012)

It is clear from the text that the aim is to develop children that are self-secure and to promote gender equality. The schools have mostly been in affluent neighbourhoods. Today they are expanding to smaller communities around the country. The chain has over the last five months taken over three schools that used to be run by the municipalities.

It is a key to understand the connection between McDonaldization and neoliberalism, to take a closer look at how McDonaldization is defined and how it resonates with what is happening in Iceland.

#### *Efficiency*

Defined here as the optimal method for accomplishing a task. Efficiency in McDonaldization means that every aspect of the organization is geared toward the minimization of time. In schools that have little or no educational equipment there is no need for time to clean up. Part of the teachers' job description is to have control over the children's group, to overlook - supervise. To overlook does not necessary mean involvement with children. This leads to fewer teachers per children needed.

#### *Calculability*

Organizations want consumers to believe that they are getting a large amount of product for little money. Workers in these organizations are judged by how fast they are instead of the quality of work they do. For private school chain this could mean becoming the Adidas of schools. As many think 'quality' sport gear when they hear Adidas, the aim is for the parents or the public to think the same when they hear the name of the school company. To make the mental association; 'if your child is in a school run by the company, you get better and in the long run cheaper education for your child.' Your child will be able to compete in the future (for example starting to learn a foreign language at age three). The child has a greater opportunity to become a part of the nation's elite. To sum up; you are getting more for less.

#### *Predictability and Control*

"Predictability" means that no matter where a person goes, they will receive the same service and receive the same product every time when interacting with the McDonaldized organization. This also applies to the workers in those organizations. Their tasks are highly repetitive, highly routine, and predictable. "Control" is through standardized and uniform employees.

The aim is to be predictable like a can of Campbell's soup; it is supposed to taste the same all over the world, you open a can and the ingredients are the same, it tastes the same. School chains operate on a similar philosophy. For example the *Hjallastefnan*; all the schools are run by the same curriculum, everything is highly standardized within the chain. Placement of the furniture in the rooms, how many crayons are supposed to be in a cradle, colours of the span and spades, the children and staff uniforms. The daily schedule is the same in all the schools; they go through the same phase of the curriculum in alignment, the same circle every year. The curriculum is not to be changed without authorization from the founder and the main owner. As with Adidas or Campbell you are supposed to know what you are getting for your money, for your child.

### ***The funding***

To understand the power and growth of *Hjallastefnan* it is important to know how the company is financed and to try to map its ability to steer the agenda and media discussions in their favour. The model that the Icelandic society builds upon and identifies with is the Nordic social welfare model. For example, the main financing of the Icelandic pre- and primary school system, both the public as well as the private one, is through tax revenues of the municipality and the state. At the preschool level parents pay a low monthly payment that may cover the cost of food. Around 80% of the cost is covered by the municipalities. The main difference between publically run preschools and this particular private chain is that the latter schools are supposed to return some kind profit to the chain (Tómasdóttir, 2011). This is rather obvious in a newspaper interview with the main owner of *Hjallastefnan*; she says her schools are supposed to turn in a profit but also that the profit is not used for the greater good of her personal financing, but used for *school development* projects. She declares quiet profoundly that her company is a non-profit company (Tómasdóttir, 2011). That is all well and even remarkable given the official profit amounts that are regularly stated in the media. The key question is however; what constitutes as *school development*? According to the interview the owner defines school development as *building new schools*, maybe a bit different from the definition of the 'educational crowd' on school development. Part of her model is that the 'profit' from the schools is loaned to a holding company, with no return, and the payback of the loans are through renting the buildings to the mother chain for a marketing prize. Those holding companies on the other hand are not non-profit - so in the long run the profit from owning and renting the buildings goes to the owner of the holding company.

### ***The Power***

*Hjallastefnan* has a high profile in the media. The main owner was until the spring of 2012 a weekly guest at the National Broadcasting Service's morning radio program for almost two years discussing her ideas on child rearing and freely and without critique discussing her school's educational methods. She is a charismatic person and has the ability to get people to see things from her perspective. She was voted woman of the year 2011 by a large national magazine, she is the recipient of the presidential Order of the Falcon and she has gotten a number of different other awards. The co-owners of her

school chain are rich and influential people in Icelandic society. Many are strongly connected to the Chamber for Commerce, the banking system and politics as well as the media and they flag freely their connections to the company. The owners are part of a powerful elite in Icelandic society, an elite that has strings into media, the political as well as the business world. Another and different reason for people to be protective of these schools is the social status that parents gain or believe they gain by enlisting their children in these schools. It has become a trend in certain social groups to 'place' the children in these schools. As stated above, a requirement for both children and staff is to wear a school uniform (uniform or dress codes are otherwise not part of the Icelandic school system or school history). On the front of the uniforms is the company's logo and name. The parents are proud to be photographed with their children dressed in the uniforms. Those include many very well-known media persons, artists, politicians (left and right) as well as people from the business world and the academia. To have your child in a school owned by this company has become a social status. It is also noticeable that most of the schools owned by the chain are in affluent neighbourhoods. It is remarkable that the word product placement or branding are never used as part of the media description of the company or as part of the requirement for uniforms. Probably because product placement is a negative phrase and the press is usually very favourable toward the chain.

## Conclusion

To understand the power of politics it is important to understand the hidden as well as the visible connections and relationships between people. When the vice-chairman of the Icelandic Social Democratic Party for example decides to enlist his children into a private school run by a neoliberal school chain, he gives an indication of his view on social justice and education and he is not the only one of the powerful people in his party to do so. The same is true for other powerful people left and right. The chairman of the Social Democratic Party, today's prime-minister, gave a speech at the company's conference 2008. She was then the minister of social welfare and equal rights. At the conference she announced her long time admiration for the owner and her visions (Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, 2008). The political reasons for supporting *Hjallastefnan* and privatization of the school system may differ. People from the left side mainly argue from the gender standpoint and people from the right argue for private entrepreneurship but the end result seems to be similar, the strengthening of regulation and law environment to support and protect the right of privately run school chains. In that light it was understandable to see that the new educational policy of the Social Democratic Party leans toward more support to privately run schools, competitiveness, accountability and marketing of the educational system, all in the name of equality (Samfylkingin, 2011). For most; an ideology connected to conservative worldviews and "the third wave". Neoliberalism is the new hegemony of the Icelandic society and it becomes more and more of an effort to understand how it controls what people think is fair and just, it has become the main stream. I say more of an effort because obviously I am living in this hegemony and it must affect my thinking in some ways. It is also important to realize that to contest the neoliberal hegemony is not the road to popularity - it is a road less travelled.

I am a child of my history, both politically and professionally. I believe in schools run by the society for the society, to my view that is the way of democracy, social justice, equal opportunities and rights for all. But at the same time I understand the need of pedagogues to go outside the system, to try new things, to develop thinking and pedagogy that may not receive understanding within the system. I also understand why parents are protective toward their children's school. However, when one school or company becomes a corporate world of itself it is time to take a closer look. From my perspective to run one or two independent schools is quite different from running a school chain MacDonald style.

All the Nordic countries have been influenced by neoliberalism over at least the last decade (Ahrenkiel, Nielsen, Schmidt, Sommer and Warring, 2012). The manifestation is somewhat different in different countries but there is also a likeness, especially along the early childhood spectrum. Maybe because the historical roots of the preschools in all countries stems from the similar origin, and because of that they have not been as well equipped to stand against privatization of the schools and from the trend toward school chains. The words; choices, diversity as well as accountability are also heard in the Nordic countries. We are in the same boat and in my opinion we need to start rowing together to unveil the neoliberal doxa and name it for what it is. It is my assertion, and that of many others, that if we don't stand up against this trend in general democracy is in danger.

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