



Child-Initiated Play – a way to improve children's Icelandic Vocabulary in a Multicultural Preschool

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Leikskólastjóri í Ösp



Fellahverfi in Reykjavík city

- The Preschools Holt og Ösp
- Fellaskóli (Primary School)
- Vinafell (After-School Program)
- 500 children
- 85 – 90% with diverse linguistic and cultural background
- 25 – 30 languages
- The increased number of multilingual children required changes in the schools' practices
- MOLF – Language Development and Literacy Project in Fellahverfi 2020-2023



Frístundaheimili Fellaskóla





MOLF – Language Development and Literacy Project in Fellahverfi

Key Focus and Goals

- Enhance language development and literacy
- Change working methods
- Increase the children's Icelandic vocabulary
- Promote better well-being and stronger self-esteem among the children
- A lasting transformation in school practices

Guiding Principles

- Language Development and Literacy
- Guided Learning
- Music and Creative Arts

- The same Vocabulary Themes in all Schools



Ösp Preschool

- 52 children
- 3 classes
- 92% of the children are multilingual
- 85% in targeted Icelandic language environment in the preschool
- 20 languages





MOLF in Ösp spring 2023 – Action Research

- MOLF – Group activities and other teacher-led sessions are going well
- Next steps – enhance vocabulary through child-initiated play and activate participation of all children in preschool activities
- Teacher's roles in child-initiated play – uncertainty
- Action Research
 - Critical Friend – MML (Centre of language and literacy)
 - Saga Stephensen Project Manager for Multiculturalism at Reykjavik City - Department of Education and Youth
 - Field Observation – Identifying Learning Opportunities
 - Access to Materials and Learning Spaces
 - Participation Observations



Participation Observation and the Process of Change

- Materials became more accessible and visible
- Learning spaces opened up in tune with the play
- Increased flow in the play – children’s interest
 - Staff participated on the children’s terms
- Children’s voices
 - Children became more active and helped each other
- Teachers' proximity – preschool language
- Doubts – experimenting and testing
- Research diaries
- Participants’ narratives were shared with colleagues





From Participants' Research Diaries

I tried to be with them, to offer them something from what I was building. Erna was somewhat willing to let me join the play for a short while, but Amir kept pushing me away. **He told me I was disturbing them** and that I needed to stop. I tried to drive the train over to Amir – the one I had built with Peter – but Amir pushed me aside. **I had great difficulty joining their play... The worst part of all this was that Peter was left playing alone. He was only playing with me and couldn't get into the game with the others.**

Sandra, Filip, and Jakub were playing together and speaking their home language. Dóra repeatedly asked if Erika could join their play. **After a long time, they agreed and switched to Icelandic.** It feels uncomfortable when teachers don't understand what children are saying in a language other than Icelandic. **This is also a situation I could find myself in, not knowing what to do.**

A little off to the side of the group was Amina, quietly observing. She's a new girl who doesn't speak much Icelandic yet and is also a bit shy. But that didn't mean she wouldn't take part in the play. **Dóra began rolling empty shampoo bottles** on the floor with Jakub. After a little while, one of the bottles rolled toward Amina, **and they started playing together. Without words.** Just spending time together. **I can see how important the teacher's role is — how they can make everyone feel included and valued.**



Participants' Narratives

- **"We're mixing materials more now**, and it's surprising to see that children who previously chose not to play together are now doing so."
- "...the children were more often choosing what they really wanted to do, and the **staff had become more flexible and listened more to the children...**"
- "...when the children had more say in what was offered, **there was a greater sense of calm in the children's group and improved well-being...**"
- **Staff participation in children's play became more active**, with significantly more communication with the children.
- **"Now the children want to talk about their play and include me — they're always talking to me."**
- **Trust was built between the children and the staff.**





Participants' Narratives

- **The children listen more attentively** because they know the staff are listening to them.
- "It's not enough to just talk about something — you have to be part of the play to have the conversation. **I didn't know the children could have such great ideas about play.**"
- It was observed that **the children seemed more open and cheerful**. Those who had previously been passive in play and spoke little were now participating more and engaging in more interaction with staff and other children.
- "**Child-initiated play used to be a bit of a break for the staff — it was just the kids playing. But now we're always active, more present, listening and talking to them.**"





Reflections for principals

- Know the practices to provide guidance
- Be a role model in everyday situations
- Be present, listen actively, and be supportive
- Provide education depending on the needs of the team
- Give time for self-reflection
- Evaluation and follow-up





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