

Leisure-time centres for 6–9 year old children in Iceland; policies, practices and challenges

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Introduction

Leisure-time centres (LTC) for six to nine-year-old children have in the last decades become a part of the basic services provided by municipalities in Iceland. LTC provide care and organized leisure-activities during out-of school hours while parents work or study. A national survey from 2014 showed that 92% of municipalities in Iceland operated LTC as opposed to 75% in 2010 and that around 60% of all six-to-nine-year-old children attend leisure-time centres (Pálsdóttir, 2014). However, participation is much higher for children from grades 1 and 2 and declines dramatically in grades 3 and 4.

We, the authors, have both worked as professionals and active participants in developing the services of LTC in Iceland. Currently, we are both teachers and researchers in leisure and youth studies at the University of Iceland. In this article we introduce policy in Iceland with regard to LTC and discuss challenges that lie ahead.

A brief history: Care, learning and leisure

From a brief overview of different periods in the history of the leisure-time centres in Reykjavík a lot can be learned about the importance of LTC and also, about the conflicting views regarding their primary purposes. The first day-care institutions for school-aged children in Reykjavík opened its doors in the year 1971 to children from socially disadvantaged families. In this first period, ranging from 1971 to 1992, the provision of *care* was the main objective. At that time, the few school-day care centres that operated in Reykjavík belonged to the day-care department which also oversaw day-care institutions for younger children. It was not until the 90's that compulsory schools in Reykjavík started to offer extended services in out-of school hours, thus the operation of School-Daycare began. This second period, ranging from 1993 to 2004 centered around the organization of a whole-school day, for example by offering help with home-work in the LTC and providing educational activities. However, a third period began in 2004 when the responsibility for the LTC was moved from the schools to the Recreation and youth department. The name *Leisure-Time Centre* (i. frístundaheimili) was introduced at this time, instead of School-Daycare, which exemplifies a shift in emphasis from learning to leisure. A fourth period began in

2012 with increased emphasis on integrating services of schools and leisure-time centres, although in practice LTC and schools still operate as different units with a separate administration and finance. Until recently Icelandic educational authorities had not developed any framework for leisure-time centres.

New legislation

A small clause in the Compulsory School Act from 1995 stated that schools were allowed to offer extended after-school services and to charge parents for such services (Compulsory School Act, nr. 91/1995). However, no further directives were to be found about the purpose or operation of such services. An important step was taken in the summer of 2016, when a new clause was added to the law, using the concept *leisure-time centre* (i. frístundaheimili) and thereby confirming it as the main term for extended school-based services. The new clause says, amongst other things, that leisure-time centres should meet the needs and interest of children in their out-of-school time; furthermore, emphasis should be on children's choice, free play and a variety of activities (Laws on changes to the compulsory school law no. 91/2011, no.76/2016). According to the new clause, local authorities are responsible for the operation of LTC and should aim to provide integrated services of school and LTC. There is no reference to the overall educational goals of leisure-time centres, qualifications of personnel, standards for facilities, or daily organisation; however, it states that the ministry of education will publish further quality standards in collaboration with the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities. Currently, a committee is working on setting such standards.

Educational policy

Elementary schools have changed dramatically since the beginning of 20th century when school became obligatory in Iceland. The purpose of schooling is no longer to teach only the three main R's, Reading, Writing and aRithmetic, but to support the overall development of children. Six pillar stones were introduced into the Icelandic educational national curriculum of pre-school, elementary school and high school in 2011. Those pillar stones are: Literacy, Equality, Creativity, Democracy, Human Rights, Health and Welfare (Ministry of education, 2011). These themes are expected to be intertwined into daily school practice, content and methods. Furthermore, the aim of the compulsory school is "to encourage pupil's general development and prepare them for active participation in a democratic society" (Compulsory School Act, no. 91/2008). School activities shall lay the foundations for pupils' autonomy, initiative and independent thinking and train their cooperation skills (Compulsory School Act, no. 91/2008).

Considering the educational policy of elementary schools in Iceland, the question arises what role LTC is expected to play in the education of children? We believe that educators in Iceland have already started to recognize that informal learning empowers children and should be considered a part of their education. In the next chapters we identify some of the characteristics of the Icelandic leisure-time centres.

Child-centered services

The philosophy that shapes the leisure-time centers in Iceland is characterized with an emphasis on a child-centered pedagogy where play, informal learning, choice and autonomy of children should be the focus point. Such pedagogical vision aims to enhance the development of children and identifies the child and its needs at the core of daily practices. Therefore, it is not difficult to see how the leisure-time centres could support the fundamental pillars of education as defined in the national curricula, discussed above. A good example comes from Reykjavik city; according to its policy on LTC, every centre should highlight democratic ways of working with children. Most LTC in Reykjavik operate a *children's council* which takes part in deciding activities within the program. Children's democracy helps to develop the quality of the work in the LTC's, promotes children's development and their social responsibility. Although we cannot say with certainty that democratic practices exist in all LTC in Iceland, our discussions with practitioners in Iceland show that they emphasize child-centered practices.

Play and informal learning

Most LTC in Iceland offer opportunities for valuable informal learning experiences. School-day is very structured and Icelandic children do not have much time during school to play or be with friends (Pálsdóttir, 2012). Therefore, it is important to value the flexibility offered for children within LTC to play and be with friends. Play is without a doubt the most important source of creativity for children of all ages. In play children strengthen their identity, learn empathy and practice their communication skills (Lillemyr, 2009). Although play is recognized in the Icelandic pre-school curricula as children's main way of learning, it is rarely mentioned in the curricula for elementary school. More national research is needed, but our communications with professionals and administrators throughout the country indicate that play and informal learning is emphasized within most LTC in Iceland.

Emphasis on friendship and social skills

Extended school day and changes in society have affected children's culture and spaces for friendship and social activities. There is evidence that LTC are replacing homes and outdoors playfields where children used to meet after school. Children themselves describe how important it is for them to spend time with their friends in LTC since they seldom can decide with whom they sit or work in the school and not even whom they play with (Pálsdóttir, 2012). Unfortunately, as in many Western schools, bullying has been an increasing problem in Icelandic schools. Leisure-time personnel in Reykjavik say that one of their main tasks is to support friendships and help children develop social skills.

Therefore, we see that LTC's can play an important role to support healthy and supporting relationships by being a place where children at this age can develop their social skills and cultivate friendship. Research indicates that if you are able to make and sustain

friends as a child you will have better skills to form relationships later in life (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). It is therefore important to educators to be conscious of that and support children that are having difficulties in finding friends. We believe that in every LTC there should be guidelines that support positive and constructive relationships. However, nothing is as important as personnel that are good role models, kind and caring.

Challenges

In the last few years we have seen a giant leap forward in the professional development of leisure-time centres for young school-age children in Iceland. The new legislation is a formal recognition of the importance of leisure-time centers within the education system. Here, we share our concerns on the main challenges ahead.

Recognizing the educational value of informal learning

There is multiple evidence that what children do in their out-of-school hours is a part of their learning and development (see for example Kumpulainen & Mikkola, 2015; Pálsdóttir, 2015). In the new legislation on LTC in Iceland it says that municipalities should focus on *integration* between school and leisure-time centre (Laws on changes to the compulsory school law no. 91/2011, no.76/2016). The meaning of this is unclear, but one can suppose that it means that school leaders and leisure-time leaders should collaborate to an extent. A survey from 2013 revealed that in most municipalities LTC are run by the schools, they are most often located in school buildings and school personnel work in LTC (Pálsdóttir, 2014). In the near future, it can be expected that we will see quality standards being set by the Ministry of Education, according to the new legislation. Reykjavik has already published their own quality standards to evaluate leisure-programs for children and youth (Reykjavik, 2015). Hopefully, we will see a more holistic professional development in every municipality and a careful consideration of how leisure-time centres can be organized to provide creative informal learning opportunities for children.

Educating professionals

One of the main challenges ahead is to educate and train professionals and personnel that work in LTC. Majority of the personnel in the Icelandic LTC have not received specific qualifications. In the Reykjavik capital area, many of the personnel are university students working part time, and often LTC's personnel are support staff at school (Pálsdóttir, 2012). A higher education program specifically designed to educate leisure and youth professionals, or leisure-time pedagogues, started at the University of Iceland, School of Education, first in 2001. The program was in the beginning only a three semester diploma but in 2003 it became a three-year bachelor-degree program. Since 2007 we also offer a M.Ed. graduate program in leisure and youth studies. It important to note that our students are not only aiming to work in leisure-time centres with young school-children but also "social centres, rec-

reational centres, youth houses, sports associations, elementary schools, preschools, service centres for senior citizens, and the offices of sports and leisure issues” (School of Education, 2017). This diversity can be seen as a strength, as students gain an overall knowledge of the importance of leisure and informal learning during the whole lifespan and in various settings.

Conclusion

Although there is no agreement on the purposes of leisure-time centres – whether they are *simply* a place for children to play and be cared for while their parents work or whether they provide, or should provide, educational opportunities through leisure and informal learning – LTC have become an important venue in the lives of children in Iceland. Lack of professional input and lack of policy and funding can all undermine the educational benefits of children participating in LTC. We believe that in Iceland there is a strong foundation and a general will to create child-centered out-of-school services for school-aged children. It is a field of opportunities, of creativity, fun and endless opportunities to support holistic learning for children, their social awareness and a sense of community.

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