Building partnership
with parents
in inclusive ECEC

Two case studies from Iceland



Co-funded by
the European Union

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

- The teams from the preschools *Suðurborg* and *Múlaborg* (*City of Reykjavik*)
- *City of Reykjavik*
- University of Iceland
- All *Be-In* partners from Belgium and Portugal

AUTHORS OF THE REPORT:

- Anna Magnea Hreinsdóttir, University of Iceland
- Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, University of Iceland

REFERENCE:

Hreinsdóttir, A.M. & Einarsdóttir, J. (2025). *Be-In: Two cases from Iceland*. Be-In Erasmus+ project. Reykjavík: University of Iceland.

With financial support from European Commission.

January 2025

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Two case studies from Iceland



1 Introduction

This country report from Iceland is written to document and analyse the outcomes of the Be-In action research project conducted in two Icelandic preschools from *City of Reykjavík — Múlaborg* and *Suðurborg.* The *Be-In* Erasmus+ project was a three-years transnational project over building partnership with parents in inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, with partners from Belgium, Iceland and Portugal. In each country, collaborative action research was designed and implemented to investigate those two topics: inclusion in ECEC and partnership with parents.

The primary goal of this report is to explore how ECEC settings can foster more inclusive practices by strengthening partnerships with parents of children with special needs, from the experience of the partners in this action research. Specifically, the report examines methods to enhance parental involvement in team meetings, empower preschool educators to take more active roles in communication with families, and involve children as participants in discussions that concern them, that were experimented in both pilots' settings. Through this, we aim to contribute to broader efforts in improving inclusive education practices and provide actionable insights for ECEC professionals, policymakers, and educational researchers.

The case studies report is intended for preschool educators, special education professionals, educational policymakers, and stakeholders involved in inclusive ECEC practices. We want the readers — whether they are educators seeking to improve their engagement with parents, or policymakers looking to refine inclusive education policies — to implement the strategies and insights derived from our research. Many educators may already value parental involvement but might not know how to make parents active participants in team meetings or how to integrate children's voices into educational planning. Others might struggle with establishing collaborative relationships between special educators and preschool educators. This report addresses these gaps by presenting practical examples from our research, including methods like using videos to showcase children's progress, restructuring team meetings to prioritise parental input, and fostering ongoing, open communication between preschool educators and families. Through these examples, we aim to provide readers with concrete tools and evidence-based strategies to foster more inclusive and collaborative preschool environments.

2 Situating the partners in their context

2.1 Macro context: Inclusion in ECEC in Iceland

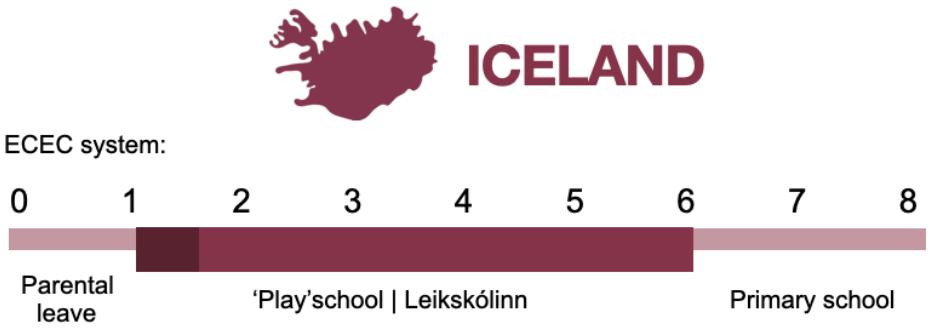


Figure 1. Organisation chart of the education and ECEC system

The beginning of early childhood education in Iceland can be traced back to 1924, when the Women's Alliance in Reykjavík opened the first full-time day-care centre for poor children. In the 1940s, the first playschools opened as part-time centres for all children. In 1973, the Ministry of Education took over and integrated both programs. Since 1991, the concept playschool (*leikskóli*) has been used for all early educational programs in Iceland and since 1994, preschools have been the first level of schooling in Iceland.

Most children in Iceland start their preschool education around the age of 18 months. Icelandic children start formal compulsory schooling in the autumn of the year they turn six years old. According to the OECD (2017), preschool children in Iceland have one of the longest preschool days compared to children in other OECD countries as both parents usually work full time in Iceland.

The Ministry of Education and Children is responsible for the implementation of legislation pertaining to all school levels. Most preschools are run by the municipalities, although there are around 17% of private preschools that are also under the supervision and responsibility of the local municipalities.

A focus on inclusion in the policy

Inclusive education is based on ideas that are rooted in human rights movements. The education policy in Iceland is based on the Salamanca declaration that itself is based on a vision that is characterised by democratic values, teaching and pedagogy that revolves around the child, diversity as a norm and quality education for all children. In recent times, the term "school of diversity" has gained ground, but it is broader and refers to the diversity of culture, language and religion, and focuses attention on the diversity of students and schools instead of differentiating teaching or children (Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2016). This widespread view can be found in the Icelandic Preschool Act no. 90/2008 that focuses on children's interests and well-being the primary mission of all preschool activities. Children

must be provided with care and education, a healthy and stimulating environment to grow up in, and safe conditions for learning and play.

Children with special needs have priority in preschool admission in most municipalities. The amount of support at pre-school level for each child is usually determined by the special support services of the municipalities, often based on diagnosis by one of the four main national agencies: the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre, the Icelandic Organisation of the Visually Impaired, the National Hearing and Speech Institute and the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Department of the National Hospital. Each agency works in consultation with the parents. There are indications that, in general, preschools in Iceland have struggled to develop activities that effectively accommodate a diverse group of children, and that too much emphasis has been placed on diagnoses as a prerequisite for support for children with special needs (Ragnarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2016).

According to the Regulation on municipal services to preschools and primary schools and student support councils in primary schools (nr. 444/2019), the purpose of the services is to support inclusion and strengthen schools as professional institutions. The services are intended to promote the best possible use of pedagogical and psychological knowledge in practice and to provide educators and principals with access to counselling and support in pedagogical issues as well as in professional development. Additionally, the services are intended to provide parents with guidance in parenting, and to carry out equal prevention work with observations and diagnoses of children who have psychological or social difficulties that affect their education.

A National Curriculum

The current National Curriculum Guide was published in 2011, with the main part and the main ideology common for all school levels in Iceland, besides education at the university level. The Curriculum Guide is based on the Preschool Act No. 90/2008 (*Lög um leikskóla* nr. 90/2008). There are six fundamental pillars that should underline education at all three levels. These are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

The National Curriculum Guide for preschools describes the role of education, upbringing and caring of the preschool. In the Curriculum, a great emphasis is put on developing and supporting children's social skills. This is done by putting the value of play in front and the importance of democracy and equality in all school activities. It is highlighted that children learn through play and by participating in the preschool community. Preschool teachers and other personnel should ensure that every child is equally respected, and that the learning environment is organised in such a way that children can enjoy their childhood. The preschool curriculum lays down guidelines for preschool activities and discusses the learning areas of the preschool. Icelandic preschools may choose different ways to achieve the same goals, and each preschool uses its own working methods and devices its school curriculum guide and operation plan.

A new educational policy was presented in the Icelandic parliament in November 2020. The goal of the new education policy is to provide excellent education in an environment where everyone can learn, and everyone matters. The guiding principles are perseverance, courage, knowledge, and happiness.

The pillars of the policy are:

- equal opportunities for all
- teaching at the forefront
- skills for the future
- well-being in the forefront
- quality in the foreground

Professionalisation of ECEC professionals

According to the Act on Education, Competence, and Recruitment of Teachers and School Administrators in Preschools, Primary Schools, and Upper Secondary Schools No. 95/2019, preschool teachers are required to fulfil two thirds of the full-time teaching positions in preschools. Hence, only those who have a master's degree from an accredited university can use the occupation title 'preschool teacher'.

According to the TALIS 2018 report, one third of those working in preschools in Iceland have not completed education that prepares them to work with children, the highest proportion among participating countries. Often, the only experience that assistant teachers have with preschool education is having attended preschool themselves as children.

The standards for assistant teachers, individuals without preschool teacher education, are generally the same as those for preschool teachers. They perform almost all the tasks within the preschool department, often act as support staff for children who need additional assistance, fill in for department heads, and sometimes even take on the department head roles when preschool teachers are unavailable. As mentioned, the educational perspective of assistant teachers is based on different factors than the theoretical knowledge that shapes the educational approach of preschool teachers.

Staff-child ratio in ECEC

According to the regulation on the preschool environment (no. 655/2009) the preschool director, after consulting the local school officer at the municipality, decides on the number of children in the preschool at any given time. The decision considers the length of time children stay each day, their age and needs, the staff, and the scope of specialist services. To achieve the goals of the law on preschool and the national curriculum, it must be ensured that there is sufficient space for each child in each department where most of the care, learning and education takes place. Special attention should be paid to the fact that children with special needs may need additional space. Municipalities can tie the municipality's license to a certain maximum number of children. The local school council decides the number of staff in consultation with the preschool director. The decision shall be based on age, needs and the number of children. In the case of children with special needs, the relevant support should be sought.

Monitoring and evaluation of quality control

According to the regulation on assessment and evaluation in preschools and the information obligation of local governments on school management (no. 893/2009), the aim of assessment and evaluation of the quality of work in preschools is to ensure that the preschool practices are in accordance with the law, regulations and the national curriculum guidelines. Also, to ensure that children's rights are respected and that they receive the services they are entitled to. Every preschool must evaluate the quality of their practices through a systematic internal evaluation. Staff, parents, and children are to participate in the evaluation. Active internal evaluation should be integrated into everyday preschool activities. Internal evaluation must be reform-oriented and cover all the main aspects of the practices. The preschool should then publish on their website, or by other public means, information about the implementation of the internal evaluation, the main results, and the improvement plan.

Participation rates of children with special needs

The number of children attending preschools in Iceland has been increasing over recent years. In 2020 around 93% of all children from two to five years old attended preschool and about 58% of children from one to two years old. About 15,6% of all preschool children in Iceland were of foreign nationality in 2020, a percentage that is also rising very fast. Children with special needs and receiving support in preschool were 11,2% (Statistics Iceland, 2022).

Possible support

According to the regulation on municipal school services for preschools and primary schools (no. 444/2019) school services should include support for children in preschools and their parents and offer support for school activities and staff. School services provide school staff with guidance and assistance in their work but at the same time focus on promoting schools as professional organisations that can solve most of the issues that arise. Suitable assessment and evaluation tools should be used, for example, standardised survey tests, screening tests, diagnostic tools, surveys, observations. Support for school staff includes, for instance, advice on teaching and caring for children and advice on learning for children with special needs. Support for staff also includes advice on the practices, innovation and development activities, and the work environment.

Participation of parents

From the year 2020, the parental leave in Iceland is 12 months and is divided between the parents. According to preschool laws and Preschool Curriculum Guidelines parents are expected to be actively involved in their children’s education, both at the individual and communal level. Parents have the right to receive and are required to share information on the child’s well-being with educators (Preschool Act, 2008). Parents and educators are expected to cooperate to further the child’s academic advancement, and these relationships are to be built on respect for diversity in family constitution, culture and language. Parents are guaranteed the right to have their say on preschool operations in general through participatory representation in parent and school councils and parents’ associations.

Challenges for ECEC in Iceland

(i) With the act on maternity and parental leave (no. 144/2020), changes were made to parental leave that took effect in Iceland on 1 January 2021. The main change is that maternity leave is extended from 10 months to 12 months for children who are born from 1 January 2021. The independent entitlement of each parent is six months. There is a gap in care for children from 12 months old until about 18-24 months old and parents must rely on day parents (dagforeldrar) until the children can start preschool.

(ii) The group of children attending preschools in Iceland today is not only younger but also more diverse. 15% of the children have a foreign background and 11% have defined special needs. This calls for qualified teachers and other professionals.

(iii) Shortage of preschool teachers is another challenge. Many municipalities have emphasised preschool for children from 12 months old but are having difficulties recruiting preschool teachers as there is a lack of educated preschool teachers working in preschools in Iceland. According to the law on education, competence and recruitment of teachers and leaders in pre-, primary, and secondary schools (no. 95/2019), at least two thirds of all staff members in each preschool should have a master's degree as preschool teachers. Nevertheless, the reality is that at the end of 2020, only 24% of those who worked in preschools have their master's degree as preschool teachers; 18% had another university degree related to preschool teacher education, such as primary school teacher education or social education (Statistics Iceland, 2022).

(iv) Yet another challenge facing early childhood education in Iceland is the push-down of formalised pedagogical approaches. In Iceland, some municipalities, which oversee and operate the preschools, have considered shifting away from play and holistic child-centred practices towards more structured, formalised teaching. And in some instances, there has been a policy proposal which suggests dividing the preschool class into academics taught by preschool teachers and play and social issues overseen by less educated persons.

2.2 Description of the two Icelandic preschools

All 'playschools' in City of Reykjavík are inclusive settings. However, some preschools do have more specialisation in supporting the special needs of children. For the *Be-In* project, the two pilots' preschools were selected for participation based on the staff's experience and expertise in working with children with special needs.

Múlaborg preschool

Múlaborg is an inclusive preschool in Reykjavík, Iceland. The team describes here their preschool:

> In *Múlaborg,* we have worked to build an environment where all children with different abilities can participate and thrive equally. We believe that all children are active learners, some simply need additional support. Early education teachers and special educators work together in each

classroom to develop an environment which benefits the needs and learning styles of every child. There are 52 people working at *Múlaborg* with all kinds of education and experience. We pride ourselves that we no longer consider our preschool to be special or experimental, more a picture of society as it should be, a place where everyone belongs. At *Múlaborg*, there are 129 children, 18 of them with special needs. In *Múlaborg,* we emphasise equality in a broad context; equality involves, among other things, equal rights between men and women but also in allowing individuals, with and without disabilities, to enjoy learning, playing and being together. We don't look at what children can't do, but we try to find ways so that everyone can participate on their own terms. Space and methods are adapted to each child. The preschool has many years of experience and development in teaching children with disabilities and emphasis is placed on them enjoying their childhood like other children. Children learn to respect each other and be considerate of everyone.

With children who have difficulties in communicating, we facilitate the use of augmented alternative communication, with Sign Language or Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) to enrich both communication and the language/learning environment. All children can benefit from those methods of communication to build stronger language skills, but especially with children who need additional assistance with learning, saying and understanding new words. Because it is a large part of the preschool environment, it has shown us that all children have built better language comprehension skills. This gives the children an important tool to be understood and create a sense of self assurance and security.

We believe our educators to be active learners as well and that their individual learning styles, backgrounds and experiences give our school depth and further improve the work that we do. This is the reason we are always seeking to develop new ideas. We have received two awards this year, one for recognition of our work on inclusion and one for our work with unconventional materials and approaches in play. Respect, trust and equality are the three main principles for achieving our goals. We put emphasis on the fact that every child and family receive a warm reception upon beginning preschool. Each child and family are treated with respect in order to feel secure and welcome.

Every six weeks, there is a meeting where parents and specialists meet and talk about the child with special needs (team meetings). Parents can invite others to the meeting like grandparents and support family members. We set goals for the child in collaboration with the parents and other specialists in this meeting and review them in the next meeting. To make our inclusive school constantly evolving, to accommodate individual learning styles, abilities, interests, and changes within society, we have always been open to the use of many different educational theories. We welcome new methods and ideas to improve our work.

Suðurborg preschool

The team of *Suðurborg*, the second *Be-In* pilot, presents here their preschool:

The preschool *Suðurborg* is in Breiðholt, Reykjavík. The preschool has six different classrooms for children aged 1 – 6 years old. *Suðurborg*'s values are responsibility, care, friendship, and

safety. They are the guidelines used in all the preschool's dimensions and work. *Suðurborg* is a specialised preschool for children with autism, where the emphasis is placed on behavioural intervention methods. The preschool is also a counselling school when it comes to behavioural intervention. The preschool works according to PBS, which stands for *Positive Behaviour Support*. PBS is an effective method for steering the children´s behaviour in the right direction in a positive and constructive way, promoting social skills and strengthening their self-image. We do this by focusing on positive behaviour, instead of pointing out the inappropriate behaviour. PBS has positive and clear rules, and the children learn in a fun way, and they learn to recognise their own feelings as well as the feelings of others. In the PBS method, there is a strong emphasis on praise and positive reinforcement. Another focus of the preschool´s work is on language and literacy. *Suðurborg* is an active participant in a project about literacy along with other preschools and elementary schools in the neighbourhood Breiðholt under the management of the Breiðholt service centre. *Suðurborg* is a very multicultural preschool where children with foreign background are around 50% of our students.

Our special education program is based on behavioural interventions. Each child with special needs is assigned hours according to their diagnosis and are also provided a special education teacher who oversees their teaching. The focus is based on the strength of each child, and their needs. The teaching is mainly conducted in the large group of children in each classroom to empower their social skills. However, if needed, two special education rooms are available for teaching, which is based on the child's individual needs. If needed the children in special education are taken out of the classroom to these rooms for special teaching for approximately 1 – 2 hours each day and get to invite their friends with them.

In *Suðurborg*, there are regular team meetings concerning children that need special education. The meetings are every 6 – 8 weeks and present at the meetings are everybody that have something to do with the child, department head, head of the special education, special education teachers, parents, and a special education consultant from *Suðurmiðstöð* (Breiðholt service centre). The meetings are approximately an hour each time and we try to set the meetings at a time that is convenient for the child´s parents. The meetings are in three parts that are divided equally between parents, department (classroom) and the special education. It is emphasised that parents have good communication with the department head, as the child is first and foremost a child of the department. However, the head of special education is always there if something needs to be discussed in relation to special education. Free play is the child´s main way of learning, and *Suðurborg´*s focus is on promoting creativity with diverse and open-ended materials. Imagination and creativity are focused on where the educators support and encourage the children. The preschool wants and expects that everyone is an active participant in the work of the preschool and goes home happy at the end of each day.

3 The Be-In action research path

3.1 The baseline study: An overall satisfaction but...

Collaborative action research was conducted in the two preschools, *Múlaborg* and *Suðurborg*. Regular meetings were held with the preschool educators, representatives from the city of Reykjavík, and researchers from the University of Iceland.

In the beginning of the project, interviews were conducted with parents. The finding indicated that parents were satisfied but they felt powerless. The most important thing in the minds of the parents was that their child was happy. They also found it important that their child was a part of the group instead of being taken out of the room for special training. Despite this overall satisfaction with their child's preschool, the parents did not seem to know much about what their child was doing in preschool, nor the pedagogical methods used. The parents found the regular team meetings held in the preschools useful, but they did not find they had any direct influence on the discussion there. These team meetings consisted of the parents and preschool educators together with diverse specialists. The parents called for good information on how their child was doing and found it important that there was a holistic approach to the child – preschool and home.

> *"It must be... I've actually forgotten... They have told me everything they are doing, but I just say yes."*
>
> - Parent

Other interviews were done with the educators. In those interviews, the educators emphasised that children's learning takes place in the preschool classroom - not in individual training sessions or separate settings. They found it important that the child does not feel that he/she is in a training session, but rather playing with the children. The special education educator has had the responsibility of working with the children with special needs and managing all the team meetings. The educators wanted to change that and involve the classroom head educators more in the relationship with parents as they have been experiencing that they do not know the parents well. They find it difficult to deal with daily interactions because they did not feel they knew the parents.

> *"The special education coordinator led the meeting, and it was really the specialists who came and provided the information. So, it felt more like a conversation between them, you know, while the child's support staff and the parents were mostly just listening."*
>
> - Teacher

3.2 Refining the learning question

Specific learning questions from *Múlaborg* preschool

The project started in mars 2022, with the aim of the project was to strengthen the competence of pre-school professionals working with children with special needs and to build partnerships with parents of children with special needs. We wanted to improve team meetings. Team meetings are meetings held every 6 weeks bringing together parents of children with special needs, the special educational teacher from the preschool, class leader, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, one specialist from the Counselling and Diagnostic Centre and one specialist from the North Centre. In these meetings goals are set with the parents and other specialists and reviewed in the next meeting. Those team meetings exist in *Múlaborg* for a long time, but the team wanted to make them more meaningful for parents, allowing them more space for influence, and make sure that everyone is working towards the same goals.

When the project team from *Múlaborg* were in Portugal in October 2022, the idea came up to add to the study how we can empower the child as a participant in meetings that concern them. They agreed on those research questions:

General learning question:

- How can we improve team meetings and parent participation regarding children with special needs?

Specific learning questions:

- How can we involve parents in the team meetings and focus on their needs?
- How can we put the main focus on the active participation of the children in the team meetings?

Specific learning questions from *Suðurborg* preschool

At the beginning of the *Be-In* project in 2022, the team from *Suðurborg* started to think about their focus regarding our special education set up, especially the team meetings. Before starting the project, the team meetings were mostly directed by our special education director and specialists from the municipality (*Suðurmiðstöð). Be-In* focuses on connecting parents and making them more inclusive in relation to the work and teaching made with their children each day. Throughout the years, the staff had also noticed that a lot of the communications regarding children in need of special education was mainly between the parents and the special education director. They wanted to focus on connecting the parents and department head teacher more, as the children are first and foremost a part of the whole group.

In October 2022, a project team from *Suðurborg* attended a transnational meeting in Agueda, Portugal with partners from Iceland, Belgium, and Portugal. Those sessions were for them very enlightening and confirmed their interest in continuing with what they had set out to do in the beginning. When

they got back from Portugal, the planning of our research began, and the research questions were formed.

When the children start their preschool journey, they are between 1 – 2 years old. As stated in the previous section, in *Suðurborg* children are divided into classrooms based on their age. Staff are experienced and aware of any behavioural and developmental concerns and usually the process of evaluation and diagnosis, for children with special needs, can start already around the age of 18 months. However, the process can take time, and until there is an official diagnosis, the preschool is not given financial support to provide a special education teacher. During this period, communication regarding the children with special needs occurs mostly between the parents and department head educator. When the children are around three years old and get a diagnosis, they are transferred between classrooms around the same time. They noticed that after the transition of the children from the younger to the older classroom, the lines of communication were blurred. The parents were not sure of who to talk to regarding their children's education and care or how their day had been. Now, they were in contact with the special education director and often two special education teachers as well as the department head educator. That made the parents a bit insecure, and they were sometimes left with a lot of questions at the end of the day. The project team of *Suðurborg* started from this observation when formulating their first research question.

In May 2023, they went to Águeda, Portugal, for a week of job shadowing. In that week we followed the staff and watched and participated in their daily work. They learned about their social platform and the app that they use to communicate with parents. They noticed that at the beginning and end of each day the parents had to check in and check out via the app. By doing that, the communication between the teachers and parents was good and they noticed that a lot of good conversations occurred during that time. Another thing they noticed during their stay was that the specialists from the community working with the preschool and assisting with children that have special needs mostly work at home assisting the parents in their daily or nightly routine. When they come to the preschool, they seldom meet with the child, rather they sit down with the teacher and mediate their guidance and information to the teachers working with the child. After observing and learning in Portugal, we came back and refined our first learning question:

- How can we strengthen **the relationship between the department head educator and the parents** in daily communication regarding the child?

In the first few months of the *Be-In* project, the project team of *Suðurborg* were determined to focus on our team meetings that are held every 6 – 8 weeks for all children in special education. Present at the meetings is the special education director, department head educator from the classroom, specialists from the municipality (*Suðurmiðstöð*) and the parents of the child. Throughout the years, the meetings were controlled mostly by the special education teacher and the specialists from the municipality (Suðurmiðstöð). It was always the goal to have everybody listed previously present at the meetings, but they noticed that the first person to be dropped from the meeting was the department head educators of the children. As stated earlier, the children are first and foremost a part of the group so that was something they wanted to change. Another observation they made was also that the parents were more listeners rather than participants. They took some time to figure out how we could

involve the parents and the department head educators more in the meetings. They decided to divide the meetings up equally between all members present at the meetings and started working on an introduction letter to be sent out to parents of children with special needs. They held meetings with the special education teachers and the department head educators and finalised their other research questions:

- How can we **empower parents' participation** in team meetings?
- How can we **empower** the departments head participation in team meetings?

3.3 Implementation and documentation of the action research in each preschool

The focus of this project concerned a crucial aspect of early childhood education, particularly the education of children in vulnerable situations, with an emphasis on interactive communication, parental influence, and empowerment. The process began as the preschools set goals and research questions. Data was collected throughout the process, and at the end, the researchers analysed the findings. Alongside this process, participants engaged in reflection and reassessment of their work.

Department heads, special education coordinators, and administrators from two preschools in Reykjavík participated in the action research in collaboration with a project manager from the School and Leisure Department of the City of Reykjavík, who supported the preschools and oversaw the work on behalf of the city. Additionally, interviews were conducted with two parents from each preschool at the beginning of the study. The preschools were selected for participation due to the staff's experience and specialisation in working with children with special needs. The participants from each school informed other staff of the project development on regular staff meetings.

Researchers from the School of Education at the University of Iceland, collected data through interviews, observed the work in the preschools, followed up on the project in regular meetings, documented the process, and ultimately analysed and interpreted the data. At the beginning of the project, interviews were conducted with four parents, two in each preschool. At the beginning and end of the action research process, interviews with the educators were conducted.

Each pilot developed an action plan based on their learning questions and started with implementing changes in their practices towards parents. A couple times per year, during the implementation phase, intervention meetings between the project teams in the two schools, were organised by the University of Iceland and the *City of Reykjavík*, to bring further reflection. At international level, exchanges between partners were also supported, through live coordination meetings and online interventions (3/years).

4 Zoom on *Múlaborg* preschool

4.1 Their learning questions

As describe in the previous section, the project team of *Múlaborg* started their action research process from one general, and two specific learning questions:

General learning question:

- How can we improve team meetings and parent participation regarding children with special needs?

Specific learning questions:

- How can we involve parents in the team meetings and focus on their needs?
- How can we put the focus on the active participation of the children in the team meetings?

4.2 Highlights, actions and observed changes

The project team from *Múlaborg* described there *Be-In* journey in a chronological way:

2022: The first action was to reflect

"Our first action was to reflect on the work we are doing and looking at how we can improve. Collaboration between parents and professionals should be based on trust and shared responsibility. When we were reflecting on team meetings, frequency, structure, content, participants, child involvement were factors we had in mind. We wanted to deepen the relevance of the meetings and empower parents as active participants."

2023: An iterative process to change the role of parents in scheduling the meetings

In March 2023, we travelled to Bruges, Belgium, for job shadowing at De Blauwe Lelie. Immediately afterward, we launched the first phase of implementation. This experience was an invaluable learning opportunity, and as a result, we placed greater emphasis on making team meetings more structured and tailored to parents' interests. Our goal was to encourage parents to become active participants with real influence in their children's meetings. Additionally, we aimed to involve children more meaningfully in discussions that concerned them.

One of the first changes we introduced was allowing parents to decide when team meetings would be held. Previously, the preschool determined the most suitable time. With this change, parents were given the flexibility to choose times that worked best for them. However, this led to complications

when specialists were unavailable on the selected days. As a result, meetings had to be rescheduled frequently, making the coordination process complex and challenging.

By autumn, after implementing these changes, we gathered feedback from both parents and professionals. The consensus was that while the intention behind the new structure was positive, it ultimately created confusion and scheduling difficulties.

To address these concerns, we consulted with parents and agreed on a revised approach. Meetings were scheduled for the entire school year, with postponements only occurring when parents were unable to attend. This allowed professionals to plan ahead and attend meetings when possible, without the expectation of being present at every session. An informal survey revealed that both parents and professionals preferred this arrangement, as it provided structure and clarity.

Giving the first words to the parents

Recognising the importance of parental involvement, we further prioritised their role in team meetings by ensuring they had the first opportunity to speak. This adjustment has been highly effective, as parents now take the initiative and actively engage in discussions about their child. We have observed that meetings have become more meaningful, with parents showing greater involvement and openness.

Bringing the voice of children in the meeting

To strengthen the children's agency in meetings, we introduced a new practice: showing a video of the child playing and interacting with peers at the beginning of the meeting. This initiative has been well received, especially by parents.

One notable case involved a child from a foreign background whose mother had previously struggled to understand the preschool's approach. She expressed concerns that her child was not receiving direct training, as she associated learning with individualised instruction. Despite our reassurances that language stimulation occurred throughout daily activities, she remained sceptical.

During a team meeting, we played a video showcasing her child washing hands, dancing, and completing an assignment—fully engaged in preschool activities. Seeing the video was a turning point for the mother; she suddenly realised the extent of her child's participation and progress. She became visibly moved and expressed deep appreciation for the insight the video provided.

2024: From pilot actions to systematic implementation

This winter, we entered the second implementation phase. The initiative of including the child as an active participant in meetings has proven successful and is now integrated into nearly all team meetings. We are incorporating these practices into Múlaborg's framework, collaborating closely with the special education team to ensure a consistent approach across all meetings. The emphasis includes beginning meetings with a video of the child in group activities and further empowering parents.

Interestingly, the benefits of the videos extend beyond parents; professionals have also found them valuable for understanding the child's development. Since January 2023, we have consistently started one child's meetings with video footage, and the mother remains delighted by the skills her child demonstrates. Over time, different videos have been used, and professionals report that these visual insights significantly enhance their understanding of the child's progress.

We have also shared these videos within the staff group, highlighting the child's development. This has had a motivating effect, as seeing tangible progress on video resonates more strongly than verbal reports alone.

Strengthening participatory adjustment methods

Our participatory adjustment method, where parents and children stay together in the preschool for the first three days, has become a key strategy. We are committed to ensuring that all staff understand this approach and its purpose. Participatory adjustment serves as a tool to build a trusting relationship between parents, children, and staff from the very beginning.

To support this, we plan to develop a comprehensive guide for new department heads and staff at Múlaborg. While some elements may seem fundamental to experienced staff, they may not be intuitive to newcomers. By clearly outlining our methods step-by-step, we aim to create an accessible resource that ensures all staff share a unified understanding of our approach. This guide will facilitate consistency in building relationships with parents and fostering trust, ultimately reinforcing the meaningful participation of both parents and children in the preschool experience.

Through these initiatives, we are systematically transforming our team meetings and strengthening collaboration among parents, professionals, and children—ensuring a more inclusive and participatory approach to early childhood education.

> *"With a step-by-step guide we can explain our methods and be confident that everyone is working in the same direction which is building this trust between the preschool and parents. "*
>
> - *Múlaborg* preschool staff

5 Focus on *Suðurborg* preschool

5.1 Specific learning questions

The project team from *Suðurborg* developed their action plan from three specific learning questions:

- How can we strengthen the relationship between the department head and the parents in daily communication regarding the child?
- How can we empower parents' participation in team meetings?
- How can we empower the departments head participation in team meetings?

5.2 Highlights, actions and observed changes

The project team from *Suðurborg* described their different actions.

When we began this process, we agreed to restructure our team meetings and enhance communication between the department head educators, and parents of children with special needs. Upon reviewing the meetings, we observed that specialists dominated the discussions, overwhelming parents with information rather than engaging them as active participants. This was a key issue we aimed to address. Additionally, we noticed that department head educators of children with special needs were often absent from these meetings. When they did attend, they primarily observed rather than actively contributed. Strengthening their involvement became another priority for improvement.

Empowering parents

At the outset, our group met to discuss how we could restructure meetings to foster meaningful change. Our primary goal was to empower parents to actively participate while also involving department head educators more effectively. To achieve this, we considered ways to redesign the meetings and decided to structure them into three distinct parts. Our aim was to ensure that everyone felt like an integral member of the team, rather than the team being cantered solely around the parents and child. As part of this effort, we drafted an introduction letter for parents of children in special education. Before finalising it, we sought feedback from the University and consultants at Suðurmiðstöð. Once refined, the letter was distributed to all parents of children with special needs.

Below is the finalised letter that was sent out in September 2023 to the parents.

Letter to the parents

Dear parents,

In the kindergarten Suðurborg, there are regular team meetings because of children in need of special education. The meetings are every 6 – 8 weeks. Present at the meetings, in addition to the parents are, the department head, head of special education, special education teachers, a special education consultant from Suðurmiðstöð, an interpreter (if needed), and sometimes an occupational or a physical therapist.

The meetings are held at a time that is convenient for the child´s parents and are approximately an hour each time. Three days before each meeting, the head of special education sends out an email to the parents and those present at the meeting and requests information regarding topics they want to focus on at the meeting. The meetings are in three parts that are divided equally between parents, department (classroom) and the special education. At the beginning of each meeting, the meeting notes from the last meeting and the status of training are reviewed, and then the parents get the word to discuss how the child is outside of the kindergarten and then lastly the department head. To conclude the meeting the common goals and priorities for the coming weeks are reviewed. Our goal is that everyone has something to say at the meetings with the child´s well-being as a guiding light.

We emphasise that parents have good communication with the department head, as the child is first and foremost a child of the department. However, the head special education is always there if something needs to be discussed in relation to special education. We believe that the parents of kindergarten children are the experts regarding their child, and we are interested to improve the cooperation with parents even further. It is very important to us that the parents and the kindergarten work well together regarding the work that takes place in the kindergarten as well as how the child does in situations outside of the kindergarten.

We hope that these changes are for the better for everyone, especially the children and their families.

Regards,

Leikskólinn Suðurborg

Different reactions from 'new' and 'old' parents

In the fall of 2023, we began implementing the changes to our meetings. Several children started special education in September and October, and while the meetings were generally successful, we observed differences in parental participation. Parents of newly enrolled children were highly engaged, taking an active role in discussions and even guiding the meetings more than the specialists. They clearly felt like valued members of the team. However, parents of children who had been in our special

education program for a few years were less involved than we had hoped. Moving forward, we are committed to strengthening our efforts to empower long-time parents and encourage their active participation.

Strengthening the connection between parents and department head educator

Another key aspect of our research focused on strengthening the connection between parents and department head teachers. As discussed in earlier chapters, communication about children with special needs primarily took place between parents and the special education director. This was something we wanted to change. One case that stood out was a boy who had recently received a diagnosis just as he was transitioning to a new classroom. Suddenly, he was working with multiple teachers and specialists, leaving his mother unsure of whom to contact about his daily progress. She received information from the special education director, the special education teacher, and the department head teacher, which led to confusion. In his previous classroom, before his diagnosis, communication had been primarily with the department head teacher, as he had fewer hours with the special education teacher. Taking this into account, we aimed to make such transitions smoother for parents by clarifying communication channels and empowering department head teachers to take a more active role in daily communication with parents of children with special needs.

In addition to sending out the letter, we met with the department head teachers and special education staff to discuss these changes. We also communicated the new approach directly to parents in face-to-face meetings. When the next classroom transition took place, we observed a significant shift—parents primarily communicated with the department head teacher rather than relying on the head of special education or special education teachers. In the fall of 2023, we had the opportunity to implement this approach with a new child with special needs who transferred from another preschool. Before the child started, the department head teacher held an extensive meeting with the parents, establishing a strong foundation for effective communication and collaboration. As a result, the parents now primarily communicate with the department head teacher and actively participate in meetings.

> *"We have noticed a lot of changes for the better in Suðurborg and are looking forward to work according to them in the future."*
>
> - *Suðurborg* preschool staff

6 Discussion

6.1 Challenges and success factors

When the preschool educators reflected on the project at the end, they agreed that it had given them a deeper understanding of their own work. The project provided them with an opportunity to compare their own practices with those in other preschools, both locally and abroad, in the participating countries. "You naturally learn a great deal," said one department head, though they added that the project had been time-consuming and "more extensive than one might have realised at the start." Despite the challenges, the staff expressed satisfaction with the results and the impact on collaboration with parents. "We wouldn't be in the same place if we hadn't participated in this," said a preschool teacher, who believed the project had led to lasting changes in the preschool.

Research indicates that preschool participation positively impacts children's well-being and academic success. Ensuring that all children, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to quality early education is a key priority (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice, 2025). Preschool education can reduce social inequalities and bridge gaps between children from diverse backgrounds. However, access to preschools remains inadequate in many European countries, including Iceland. Many municipalities struggle with gaps in early childhood care between parental leave and preschool enrolment, and children with special needs are not always welcomed into all preschools (Leseman & Slot, 2014). Parents of children with special needs advocate for their children's right to inclusive education and their participation in society (Cologon, 2022).

Despite existing policies supporting inclusion, families often face difficulties in determining whether their child with special needs will be accepted into a preschool and what support will be available (De Schauwer et al., 2023). In Iceland, there are no laws mandating universal preschool access, although preschools are considered the first level of education (Preschool Act No. 90/2008). Some municipalities prioritise preschool placements for children with special needs (Hafnarfjordur, n.d.; Reykjavík City, n.d.). The Act on Integrated Services for Children's Well-being (No. 86/2021) aims to ensure that children and parents who require support can access coordinated services without barriers.

Despite these policies, parents of children with special needs frequently face challenges in finding preschools that meet their children's needs. International studies have shown that parents encounter systemic barriers, negative attitudes, prejudice, and exclusionary practices within educational institutions (Eilers, 2020). When children with special needs are placed in special schools or segregated programs within preschools, early childhood education can become the first step towards exclusion (Macartney & Morton, 2013; MacLure et al., 2012). Research indicates that many schools are unprepared to meet the needs of all children due to a lack of resources, trained staff, and specialised facilities. This results in a failure to implement inclusive policies effectively, often leading to solutions that promote segregation within the school setting, such as specialised training (Cologon, 2022; Underwood, 2012).

Findings from this study highlight that, despite policies supporting inclusive preschool education, barriers persist, indicating that not all preschools are genuinely inclusive. Empowering parents and ensuring that their perspectives are acknowledged increases the likelihood that children with special needs receive appropriate support. Strengthening the role of classroom head teachers and incorporating creative strategies, such as using videos in team meetings, enhances inclusive practices and improves collaboration between parents and preschools. These findings have practical implications for preschool staff seeking to implement inclusive practices. Ensuring that policy implementation aligns with practice is crucial to guaranteeing equitable access to preschool education and fostering learning environments where all children can thrive.

> *"It was an inclusive school with segregation… It was like two workplaces in one. There was special education, and then there was preschool."*
>
> - Preschool teacher, *Suðurborg*

6.2 Next steps

Building on the insights and successes from the *Be-In* action research project, the next steps focus on embedding these practices into the daily operations of *Múlaborg* and *Suðurborg* preschools to ensure long-term sustainability. The key areas of focus include institutionalising inclusive practices, fostering continuous professional development, enhancing parental engagement, and promoting inter-institutional collaboration.

Firstly, institutionalising inclusive practices requires that the improvements made in team meetings and parent-teacher interactions become standardised procedures rather than isolated projects. Both preschools will integrate the use of videos showcasing children's progress as a regular feature in all team meetings. This approach has proven effective not only in empowering parents but also in providing valuable insights for educators and specialists. To ensure consistency, a step-by-step guide outlining best practices for conducting these meetings will be developed and shared with all staff members. This guide will emphasise the importance of parental empowerment, child participation, and collaborative goal setting.

Secondly, fostering continuous professional development is crucial for sustaining the momentum of change. Regular training sessions and workshops will be organised for both new and existing staff to reinforce the principles of inclusive education and effective parent-teacher collaboration. These sessions will include practical modules on using visual tools, facilitating parent-led discussions, and incorporating children's voices in educational planning. By making professional development an ongoing priority, both preschools can maintain high standards of inclusive practice.

Enhancing parental engagement beyond team meetings is another vital step. While significant progress has been made in involving parents during formal meetings, there is potential to deepen this engagement in everyday interactions. Both preschools will explore digital platforms and communication tools, inspired by practices observed during the job-shadowing experience in Portugal,

to facilitate real-time updates and continuous dialogue between parents and educators. This approach will help bridge the communication gaps identified in earlier stages of the project.

Finally, promoting inter-institutional collaboration will play a key role in sustaining and expanding the impact of the *Be-In* project. Both *Múlaborg* and *Suðurborg* will continue to collaborate with the University of Iceland, municipal education departments, and international partners to share best practices and learn from ongoing research. Participation in transnational meetings and exchange programs will ensure that the preschools remain at the forefront of inclusive education innovations. Furthermore, establishing a community of practice among preschools in Reykjavík and beyond can facilitate the broader dissemination and adoption of successful strategies. By embedding these steps into the organisational culture and daily practices of the preschools, the *Be-In* project's outcomes will not only be sustained but also serve as a model for other early childhood education institutions seeking to enhance inclusivity and parental engagement.

6.3 Conclusion

The *Be-In* action research project has demonstrated that meaningful partnerships between ECEC professionals, parents, and children can significantly enhance inclusive early childhood education. Through focused interventions at *Múlaborg* and *Suðurborg* preschools, we have seen how restructuring team meetings, empowering parents, and involving children as active participants can lead to more effective and holistic educational practices. These changes have fostered a sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect among all stakeholders, resulting in improved communication, stronger relationships, and better educational outcomes for children with special needs.

One of the most impactful strategies has been the use of videos to showcase children's daily activities and progress, which has provided parents with tangible insights into their child's development and fostered a deeper sense of trust in the educational process. Additionally, by shifting the role of department heads to be more involved in daily communication with parents, we have bridged gaps that previously left parents feeling disconnected from their child's educational journey.

The success of this project highlights the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation in educational practices. The willingness of educators to embrace new methods, engage in cross-cultural learning, and remain open to feedback has been pivotal in achieving these outcomes. However, sustaining these changes requires ongoing commitment, professional development, and collaboration at both local and international levels.

In conclusion, the *Be-In* project has provided a roadmap for creating more inclusive and collaborative early childhood education environments. By continuing to prioritise parent and child participation, fostering professional growth, and sharing knowledge within and beyond our preschools, we can ensure that the principles of inclusion and partnership remain central to our educational practices. The lessons learned from this project serve as a valuable resource for educators and policymakers aiming to build stronger, more inclusive communities in early childhood education.

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