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# **Single-parent immigrant families in Iceland**

## **Lives and educational experiences of their children**

► **About the authors** ► **Key words**

The aim of this study is to explore what situations immigrant single-parent families face in Iceland, their process of integration into Icelandic society and the educational experiences of their children. This is a qualitative interview study where 11 participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy. Data was collected in 2012 through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The main significance of the study is to give a minority group a voice while also providing important information for Icelandic society and educational system. Findings of the study indicate that the families and their children initially experienced difficulties in society and schools, partly related to marginalization and discrimination. However, social support systems, such as support from social networks and financial support from the state, and school support systems, such as special school support, do have positive effects on the lives of these families. According to the findings of this study, it is clear that the work-family conflict is alleviated by the financial and social support system. All the parents interviewed in this study are concerned about preserving their children's mother tongue, but all of them put their first consideration on their children's Icelandic language learning. Discontinuities between home and school are also discovered in this study. Most children in this study experienced marginalization in Icelandic schools, particularly in the first few months of attending the schools, when they were rejected by groups of Icelandic children.

**Einstæðir foreldrar af erlendum uppruna á Íslandi: Reynsla af daglegu lífi og skólagöngu barna þeirra**

► **Um höfundu** ► **Efnisorð**

Markmið rannsóknarinnar er að kanna aðstæður einstæðra foreldra í hópi innflytjenda á Íslandi, ferli aðlögunar þeirra að íslensku samfélagi og reynslu barna

Þeirra af menntun. Rannsóknin er eigindleg og gagnasöfnun fór fram með viðtölum. Ellefu þátttakendur voru valdir með markmiðsúrtaki. Gagna var aflað árið 2012 í hálfskipulögðum djúpvíðtölum. Gildi rannsóknarinnar er fyrst og fremst að ljá minnihlutahópi rödd, en jafnframt að veita íslensku samfélagi og skólakerfi mikilvægar upplýsingar. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að fjölskyldurnar og börnin þeirra hafi í upphafi lent í erfiðleikum í samfélaginu og skólunum, m.a. tengdum jaðarstöðu og mismunum. Félagslegur stuðningur, svo sem frá félagslegum netum, fjárhagslegur stuðningur frá ríkinu og frá stuðningskerfum skóla hafa jákvæð áhrif á líf fjölskyldnanna. Allir foreldrarir sem tóku þátt í rannsókninni geta framfleytt sjálfum sér og fjölskyldum sínum með launum og fjárhagsstuðningi frá ríkinu. Allir þátttakendurnir í rannsókninni hafa áhyggjur af því að ná ekki að viðhalda móturmáli barna sinna en leggja fyrst og fremst áherslu á að börnin læri íslensku. Ákveðið bil á milli heimilis og skóla kemur einnig fram í niðurstöðum, en flestum börnum í rannsókninni fannst þau vera skilin útundan í íslenskum skólum, sér í lagi fyrstu mánuðina í skólanum þar sem þeim var hafnað af vinahópum íslenskra barna.

## Introduction

Due to major social changes worldwide and increasing migration (Castles & Miller, 2009), the number of immigrants has grown in recent years. Similar changes have taken place in Iceland, where the immigrant population has grown rapidly since 1996. In 2012 there were 28,318 immigrants (first and second generation; 8.86% of the total population) compared to 5,702 (2.13% of the total population) in 1996 (Statistics Iceland, 2012a) (Figure 1). Similarly, the number of non-Icelandic citizens in Iceland has risen to 20,957 in January 2012, which is 6.56% of the population of Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2012b).

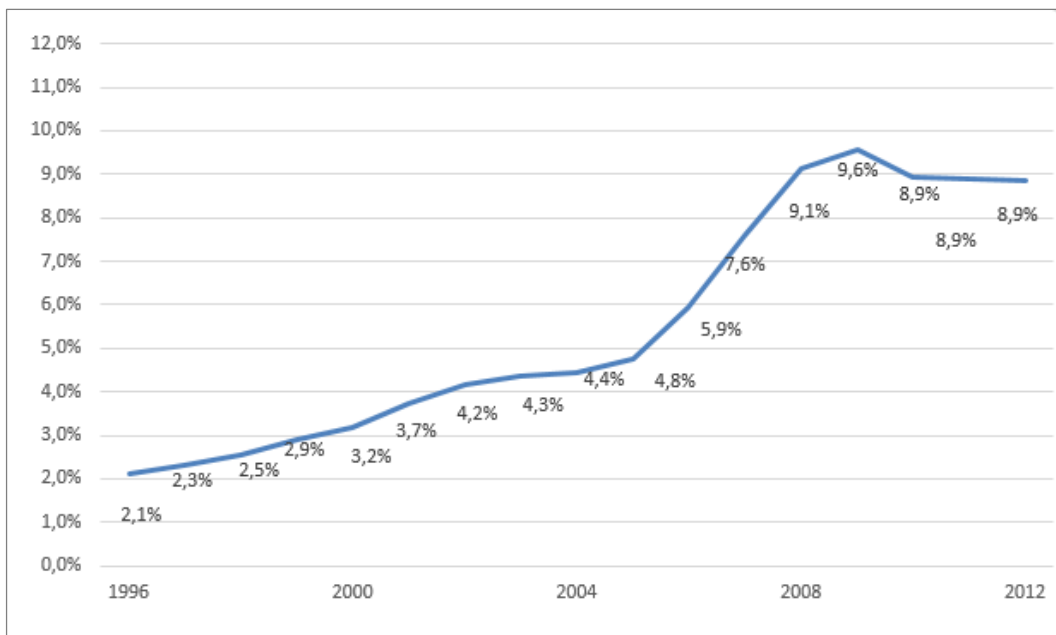
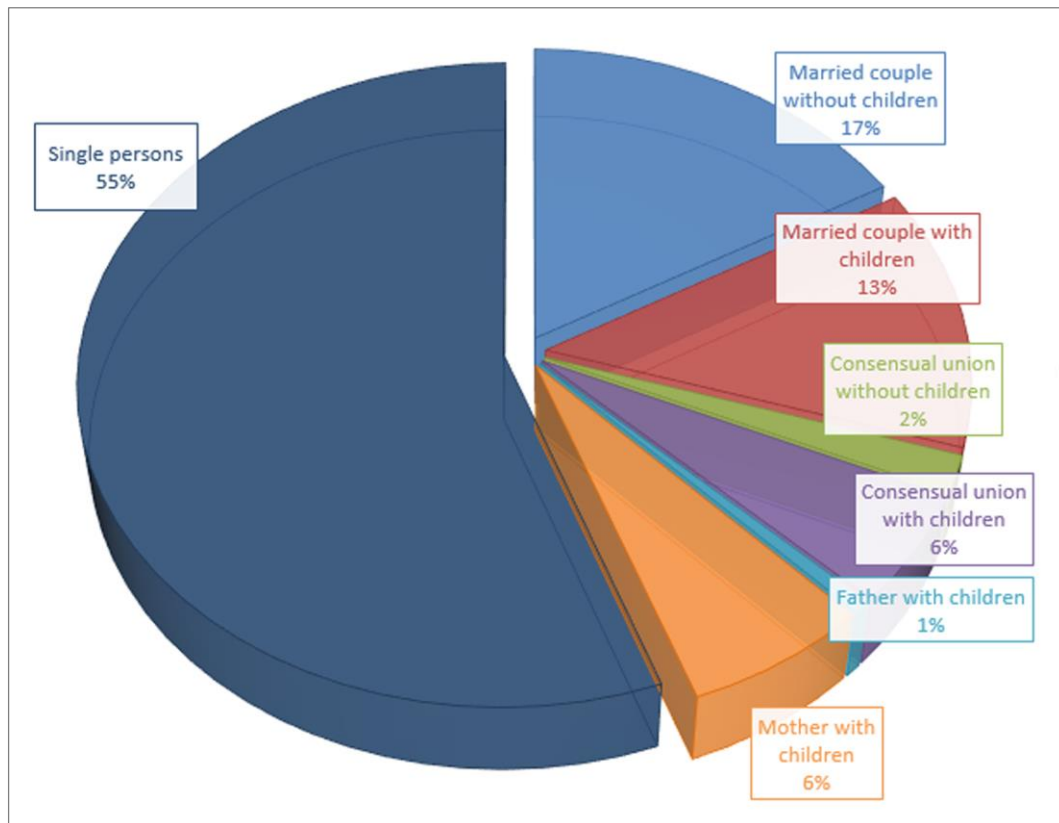


Figure 1 – The ratio of immigrants in Iceland 1996–2012.

Another change in Iceland's population is the development of multiple and diverse family forms (Júlíusdóttir, 2001) and the increasing number of single-parent families<sup>1</sup>. This is a

<sup>1</sup> In this research, the term *single-parent family* is defined as a family where a parent lives with dependent children, without a spouse or partner, either alone or in a larger household, such as non-married parent with children, divorced parent with children and single with children because of the death of the spouse.

common and growing trend in many countries (Ellwood & Jencks, 2002, 2004; Kiernan, 2004). According to *Population development 2011* (Statistical Series, 2012), in Iceland there were 77,621 nuclear families<sup>2</sup> in 2012, among which the number of single-parent families was 12,576, or 7.2% (see *Figure 2*) of the total number of families and 16.2% of the total number of nuclear families (Statistical Series, 2012).



**Figure 2 – Types of families in Iceland 2012 (Statistical Series, 2012).**

Iceland is a modern welfare country that guarantees its citizens access to universal health care, education, and a high degree of social security. According to the Central Bank of Iceland (2012), in 2009, over 31% of GDP was spent on health, education, social security, welfare and other social services. The Icelandic welfare system provides social welfare support for immigrant single-parent families, such as health care insurance, unemployment insurance and family support (Ministry of Welfare, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). In the family support system, support for immigrant single-parent families includes housing benefit, single-mother allowance, child alimony, child benefit, and free education (Ministry of Welfare, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Additionally, Icelandic social networks and various services and support systems provide social support to immigrant single parents who need assistance. For example, the *Directorate of Immigration* (n.d.), the *Multicultural and Information Centre* (n.d.), and Reykjavik City's Service Center (City of Reykjavik, n.d.) provide immigrants with information on resident permits, housing, work, tax, education, health, leisure activities, Icelandic teaching and other issues. Furthermore, some unofficial organizations, such as the *International Parents Group* and *Mother Tongue* –

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term "nuclear family" refers to couples (married and in a consensual union) and children below the age of 18, single men and women with children below the age of 18. Persons above the age of 18 who live with their parents are not included in nuclear families (Statistical Series, 2012).

*Association on Bilingualism* provide information and services to immigrant parents, such as mother tongue learning.

Although research concerning immigration (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2011; Sigurgeirsdóttir & Skaptadóttir 2011; Skaptadóttir, 2004, 2010a; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2009; Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2008a, 2008b; Wojtynska, Skaptadóttir, & Ólafs, 2011) and single parenting (Júlíusdóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2011, 2013; Njálisdóttir, 2009) respectively is abundant in Iceland, research on single-parent immigrants<sup>3</sup> in Iceland is rare. Findings from studies with immigrants in Iceland have indicated that many of them have experienced marginalization in the labour market and in education (Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Sigurgeirsdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2011; Skaptadóttir, 2004; Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2008a, 2008b). Additionally, in recent years, as a result of a financial crisis and increasing unemployment, findings from research have indicated that many immigrants have experienced increasingly negative attitudes (Skaptadóttir, 2010a).

However, little is known of the experiences of single-parent immigrants and how they manage to support their families and educate their children in Iceland. The aim of this study was to explore what situations immigrant single-parent families face in Iceland, their process of integration into Icelandic society and the educational experiences of their children. As immigrants, these parents must cope with the process of migration and relocation in terms of culture, values and language. Furthermore, they must find a balance for their children between education influenced by their ethnic culture and by Icelandic mainstream culture. Findings from a study with Chinese immigrant children in the United States (Luo & Wiseman, 2000) indicated that parents and children in immigrant families face a difficult dilemma at the crossroads of maintaining ethnic language and being assimilated into the mainstream culture. Therefore, it is interesting to study what attitudes immigrant parents in Iceland have towards the maintenance of their mother tongue and how they balance their children's learning of the official language and the mother tongue. According to Himmelweit, Bergmann, Green, Albeda and Koren (2004), because of the absence of a parent, time and money inputs are much more limited in single-parent families than two-parent families. Thus, in this study research questions include: How do working single parents cope with the work-family conflict? What kinds of social or financial support do they receive in Iceland? How do single-parent immigrants support themselves and their children in Iceland? How do their children adapt to the Icelandic schools? How do the schools support or adjust to these children in Iceland? And how do the parents balance their children's learning of the official language and the mother tongue?

## **Theoretical framework and literature review**

### **Integration: Language, interaction, and discrimination**

Many studies on integration consider adaptation and learning of the majority language a sign of integration and the prerequisite for participation and integration into a new society (e.g., Esser, 2006; Picot & Sweetman, 2012). However, some researchers have found that even with excellent language skills, people with immigrant background still experience marginalization (e.g., Dávila, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). While findings from research have shown that immigrants whose family members or friends have already settled in the country can have better integration outcomes (Bergeron & Potter, 2006; Boyd, 2006; Lewis-Watts, 2006), some authors argue that although immigrants' participation in networks of people from the same background is

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<sup>3</sup> In this study, the term *single-parent immigrant* means that the single parent was born in a foreign country and migrated to Iceland for residence.

important and supportive, their interaction with local residents and participation in various social activities is also vital (Derwing & Waugh, 2012; Penninx, 2003; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2005; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). However, many scholars have criticized a one-sided approach to integration and argued that the integration process is the responsibility of the receiving society no less than the immigrants themselves (Banks, 2007; Parekh, 2006; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). Policies aimed at successful integration have been developed in many countries, and non-discriminatory practices and access, such as equal rights for all and various services provided for immigrants, are considered indispensable in forming a critical foundation for better integration (Council of the European Union, 2004; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007).

### **Time allocation: Work-family conflict**

According to international research, childcare can be a challenge for working mothers, especially for working single-mothers (Craig, 2004; Duncan, Paull, & Taylor, 2001; Himmelweit et al., 2004; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Scott, Edin, London, & Mazelis, 1999). Pong (2009) found that due to the traditional idea of blaming-the-victim and discrimination against single mothers, the informal support systems for single-mother families in China are limited. Duncan et al. (2001) recognized that mothers will not and cannot work unless there is an affordable alternative source of care for their children. According to Duncan et al. (2001), writing on conditions in the UK, there are three sources of childcare: Maternal care, informal care (such as relatives or friends) and formal care (such as child minders, nurseries or nannies). For some single-parent immigrants who have migrated to a new country without their families or relatives, it is impossible to use informal sources from families or relatives. Purchasing childcare replacements is limited by availability and costs. In this situation, financial support from the state can be a vital help and a solution to work-family conflicts for most single parents (Brink & Nordblom, 2005; Himmelweit et al., 2004; Millar & Ridge, 2001; Minagawa & Upmann, 2006; Sayer, Gauthier, & Furstenberg, 2004). According to research, many immigrant single-parent families need social support from the society and community (Ceballos & McLoyd, 2002; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Portes et al., 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). As introduced above, single immigrant parents in the Icelandic context have access to various forms of support from the state (Ministry of Welfare, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

### **Maintaining family values and mother languages in a new society**

According to research, family values, often related to cultural background, affect how parents raise their children (Boushel, 2000; Brooker, 2002; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007; Wise & Silva, 2007). In her study with 16 four-year-old children from diverse backgrounds who started school together in an urban UK neighbourhood, Brooker (2002) found that the small differences in family life, in parenting practices and in perspectives on childhood made big differences to the children's adaptation to school. Brooker (2002, p. 21) notes that "parents' aspirations for their children tell us a lot about their personal and cultural beliefs and values, and about the reasons why they bring their children up as they do." Immigrant parents face the challenge of educating their children in a new and often extremely different social and cultural environment. Findings from research have revealed that many immigrant parents prefer to emphasize their own cultural heritage in their children's upbringing and maintaining their mother language (Brooker, 2002; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; Hall, 2002; Inman et al., 2007; Kwak, 2003; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008), while simultaneously emphasizing that their children learn the dominant language and become acquainted with the majority culture (Hall, 2002; Kwak, 2003; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Perry, Dockett, & Nicholson, 2002).

## **Family and school cooperation**

According to Epstein and Sanders (2006), for the effective education of children, families, schools and communities must have shared goals and a common mission concerning children's learning and development. In the case of immigrant children, research findings have revealed that discontinuities between home and school cultures create conflict for the children (Brooker, 2002; Devarakonda, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). McCarthy (2000) emphasizes that connecting home and school is a shared responsibility and that parents must have access to information about school practices. However, findings from a number of studies reveal weak relations between family and school, such as parents' limited knowledge about the school structure and school practices (Brooker, 2002; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). In fact, an extensive American study (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009) showed that some immigrant parents even attended meetings with their children's teachers despite not understanding the content of the meetings, because they wanted to communicate to their children and to their teachers that they cared about education.

## **Immigrant children's integration to school**

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) consider successful adaption to school to be a significant predictor of a child's future wellbeing and contributions to society. In the case of immigrant children, studies in a number of countries have indicated that many immigrant children experience marginalization in a new school and do not succeed well (Banks, 2001, 2004; Brooker, 2002; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001), although there are exceptions (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014; Wrigley, 2000). Discussing findings from a study with ten immigrant families in Iceland, Ragnarsdóttir (2008) argues that some of the reasons for the lack of success of immigrant children in schools in Iceland are related to feelings of not being appreciated or valued, low self-esteem, lack of a sense of belonging or feelings of isolation, lack of knowledge of multicultural education in the schools and lack of cooperation between homes and schools. Perreira, Chapman and Stein (2006) have stressed that educational practitioners must continue to unmask the cultural differences that are associated with countries of origin, immigrant generations, socioeconomic status, and areas of residence, and move away from a stereotypical approach to culture and toward a dynamic approach. In other words, schools need to take into account the increasing diversity in contemporary societies, counteract monocultural approaches to education and develop culturally responsive educational settings and practices (Banks, 2001, 2004; Brooker, 2002; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

To summarize, research findings introduced above have shown that a number of factors can influence the integration processes of immigrant parents or children and that a critical approach to integration is important, as well as the development of non-discriminatory policies and practices. Moreover, social and financial support, such as family policy and social networks, can influence the lives of immigrant single-parent families. Furthermore, school support, culturally responsive practices and cooperation with parents are three essential factors for immigrant children's school adaptation and academic success.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to explore what situations immigrant single-parent families face in Iceland, their process of integration into Icelandic society and the educational experiences of their children. This is a qualitative interview study (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 1996) in which 11 participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy. Data was collected in 2012 through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participants (see Table 1) were six single immigrant parents (from Asia, Europe and South America), three

children (old enough to be interviewed) of the Asian parents and two teachers who had experience of teaching students from immigrant single-parent families.

The methods in this study were chosen to understand people's description of their own integration experience and to analyse how Icelandic policies influence their lives in Iceland. Qualitative research was chosen as it is of specific relevance to the study of social relations (Flick, 2006). Qualitative research interviews are important in understanding themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives (Kvale, 1996). The interview questions were organized in a way to obtain data that reflected the integration processes of the families and children, the power or lack of power to affect these processes, successful or unsuccessful experiences, attitudes towards education and experiences of education. The duration of interviews was on average one hour. For ethical reasons and to protect the participants' anonymity, the terms Asian, South American or European family are used for the participating parents and children. The interviews were transcribed and coded. The codes were categorized by grouping them according to the

**Table 1 – Overview of all the families in this study**

<b>Family</b>	<b>Asian family A</b>	<b>Asian family B</b>	<b>Asian family C</b>	<b>South American family</b>	<b>European family A</b>	<b>European family B</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Parent & Child	Parent & Child	Parent & Child	Parent	Parent	Parent
<b>Migration to Iceland</b>	2002	2003	2005	1997	2001	2006
<b>Year to be single parent</b>	1999	2012	2004	2003	2004	2011
<b>Mother or Father</b>	Mother	Father	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother
<b>Parent's age</b>	47	46	41	46	37	–
<b>Parent's Job</b>	Tourist guide	Nurse	Food processing	Preschool teacher	Preschool teacher	Artist
<b>Parent's education</b>	Bachelor	Master	College*	Master	College	College
<b>Children</b>	1	1	1	2	1	1
<b>Birthplace of children</b>	Not Iceland	Not Iceland	Not Iceland	Iceland	Iceland	Iceland
<b>School level of children</b>	Upper secondary school	Primary school	Primary school	Primary school	Primary school	Preschool
<b>Social network</b>	Families Friends	Friends	Relatives Friends	Friends	Friends	Friends

\* The "college" level in this study refers to the educational level above the upper secondary school and below the university degree.

relevance to the research questions. Thematic coding (Flick, 2006) was applied and all the themes from each family were considered and compared to look for similar themes in other families. These themes are introduced in the chapter on findings. Two points were emphasized in the data analysis: the first was to elicit each family's unique way of constructing their reality and the second point was to find similarities or differences of experiences among the families.

## **Findings: Experiences of integration**

In this chapter, three themes derived from the interviews will be introduced: Parents' integration experience; experiences of being an immigrant single-parent in Iceland; majority language and mother languages; and children's school integration experience.

### **Parents' integration experience**

The six families in the study have connections with their immigrant communities or friends of the same origin in Iceland, which they maintain had helped them with the integration process. At the same time, most of them had made friends with Icelanders. Some of them made Icelandic friends at their workplace, while others made friends with the parents of their children's Icelandic classmates. Although some of the immigrant parents experienced some prejudice and discrimination at the beginning of their stay in Iceland, most of them felt they had integrated relatively well into Icelandic society, meaning that they had become acquainted with and understood the way of life, the culture and the language and had become active participants in society. On the other hand, one of the mothers did note that she had experienced prejudice:

I think partly because I was a foreign newcomer and the employers had a little bit of anti-foreign sentiment. They did not want to employ an unfamiliar person. Another reason may be that I arrived here in winter, and there were not enough jobs.

Another parent noted that he experienced discrimination in relation to the accreditation of his master's degree and his work experience. He found the accrediting procedure incredibly hard and noted: "That was the biggest difficulty for me in the integration process".

All the parents realized the importance of possessing the dominant language in Iceland for being able to participate actively, and all of them made efforts to learn Icelandic, attending some Icelandic language classes. However, most of them claimed not to have made much progress in Icelandic since they moved to Iceland, the obstacles being impractical language teaching methods, limited time for learning and speaking the alternative language of communication, English, which is commonly used in conversation between Icelanders and non-Icelanders. All of them had jobs in Iceland, except one mother, who participates in art projects elsewhere. In addition, all parents mentioned that it was becoming increasingly difficult for immigrants to apply for jobs if they could not speak Icelandic well, which was different from the time when they moved to Iceland. To summarize, the parents in the study described various problems in the process of integrating and becoming active members of Icelandic society, such as language problems and limited time, which prevented access to necessary information such as financial support and the school system.

### **Experiences of being an immigrant single-parent in Iceland**

Most of the parents experienced a work-family conflict, especially when their children were young, but with financial support, all of them chose to work less and have more time to care for their children. Only two Asian families had relatives in Iceland. The parents in the study had two ways to cope with the work-family conflict. One was having



their children in preschool as long as possible and working to feed the family, and the other was giving up working time and organizing everything according to their children's needs. For those who chose the former, guilt was pervasive in the way that they talked about their experiences of work-family conflicts. On the other hand, all of the families in the study obtained financial supports from the state, such as child benefits, support for children's leisure activities, social housing, housing benefit or unemployment benefits, which helped them to cope with the work-family conflict.

All the parents in this study acknowledged that it was much better to be a single parent in Iceland than in their home countries, the most crucial reason being the positive attitudes towards single parent families in Iceland. Consequently, they did not feel ashamed of being single parents. They note that nobody treated single parents with disrespect in Iceland, while the situation is different in some other countries. For instance, one European mother noted that in her country of origin, having a baby outside marriage was not regarded positively. The South American mother noted that although people in her country of origin have no prejudice against single parents, some people feel uneasy about being single parents. Another aspect which the parents mentioned was the available financial support in Iceland towards families, which they thought would be impossible to receive in their home countries. Good quality and free education, and a safe environment for children to grow up were also mentioned by the parents as influencing their decisions to stay in Iceland. One mother noted that

The education is free here, which is the good thing, especially for the poor single-parent families. They do not need to worry about whether their children can get a good education.

### **Majority language and mother languages**

As for the attitudes towards their children's language learning, all the parents in this study were concerned about preserving their children's mother tongue, but they all considered learning Icelandic as quickly as possible to be much more important. The parents at first tried their best to provide their children with good access to their mother tongue, such as buying mother tongue textbooks from their home countries, teaching their children their mother tongue at home and sending their children back to their home countries during the school holidays. In addition, some children in this study had attended school in their home countries before moving to Iceland, such as those in the three Asian parent families, and the South American family, so they had a firm basis for continuing learning their mother tongue in Iceland. At the same time, all the parents in the study were aware of the constraints of living and working in a new country without having enough knowledge of the dominant language and culture. In fact, all the children in the study could speak and read in their mother tongue, and some of them could even write in their mother tongue. However, all the children in the study spoke very good Icelandic, and after many years in Iceland some of them used Icelandic more than their mother language. The three Asian parents chose to discontinue their children's mother tongue learning because in their opinion they needed to focus on Icelandic. One obstacle in learning the mother tongue emphasized by the participating teacher is the lack of learning opportunities for children outside their homes. She noted that children may give up their mother tongue when they come to believe that it is a language to communicate only with their parents.

### **Children's school integration experience**

Most of the children in the study adapted well to the Icelandic schools and society, and had friends at school, including some Icelandic friends, except the child of one of the European families, whose mother said:

My son has many friends from other countries but no one is an Icelandic child. He has tried to join Icelandic children's peer groups, but the Icelandic children refused to accept him.

Most of the children in this study, except for the children of the South American family and one European family, had in some ways experienced bullying, teasing and being excluded by the Icelandic children at school, especially during the first few months after their arrival. All the parents mentioned that they wanted to help with their children's education and adaptation, but they did not know what they should do, such as one mother who noted:

I even could not understand the school system here in Iceland and I do not know how and where I could get the related information.

As for parents' involvement in school activities, they noted that there were few meetings, but some of the parents had attended these. However, some school activities conflicted with their working time or they could not understand the Icelandic language sufficiently to attend. For example, one Asian mother said she often neglected Icelandic email, so sometimes she did not know that there was a school activity. Another Asian mother said:

I would like to go to school and attend the parent meeting. However, I couldn't understand what they are talking in Icelandic, and I only want to express that I am supporting my daughter's education.

The parents in this study knew very little Icelandic, which was not enough for them to support their children in their Icelandic studies. It was very difficult for them to get support from other people in translating or explaining Icelandic all the time, so they noted that it was essential and necessary that their children could get help from the school. In that regard, all the parents said that they could get support from the school for their children's Icelandic study.

Four types of school support systems are mentioned in the interviews. The first is arranging extra classes for the immigrant students' Icelandic language learning or extra teachers supervising their Icelandic homework. The second is a support system in which students can get assistance, including explanations of questions, homework proofreading, information about Icelandic culture, questions about subjects, life problems and so on. The third is psychological counselling, for example to express grievances and get advice to solve problems. The fourth provides opportunities to help new students make friends through group work or other school activities. These four types of school support include support for immigrant children's adaptation to the new language and school, new ways of teaching and counteracting their marginalization in the school. The children from one Asian family in this study mentioned that their successful adaptation to the society and culture was because of the help from the school.

The children in the study note that learning a second language is difficult without support. One of the teachers in this study similarly noted:

It is difficult for immigrant children to get through high school if there is no support system. For immigrant students who have no Icelandic grammar foundation or did not attend Icelandic primary school, they can't understand Icelandic and follow the Icelandic students especially in the first year.

One child said:

Without the school special support system, I would not graduate from the high school successfully.

One mother also stated that after her son got extra classes in Icelandic, it became easier for him to complete his Icelandic homework.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

### **Language, work, social relations and integration**

The findings of the study indicate that the parents feel they have integrated relatively well into the Icelandic society, meaning that they have become acquainted and understand the way of life, although they have not learned Icelandic very well. Most of them experienced marginalization during their first years in Iceland (Dávila, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). They have connections with friends of the same origin in Iceland, which they maintain have helped them with the integration process. This is in line with former research (Bergeron & Potter, 2006; Boyd, 2006; Lewis-Watts, 2006). At the same time, most of them have made friends with Icelanders. Findings from research have indicated the importance of communicating with local residents for successful integration (Derwing & Waugh, 2012; Penninx, 2003; Portes et al., 2005; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). The parents see Icelandic language as being a key to Icelandic society (Esser, 2006; Picot & Sweetman, 2012), whereas they note that if immigrants master English they may still find suitable jobs and have a good life in Iceland. The parents in the study described various problems in their process of integrating and becoming active members of Icelandic society, such as language problems and limited time, which prevented access to necessary information. The findings indicate that during their integration to society they did not receive enough support (Banks, 2007; Parekh, 2006; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

### **Social support and work-family conflicts**

Most of the parents in the study have experienced work-family conflict, especially when their children were young. Similar findings have been reported in a number of other studies (Craig, 2004; Duncan et al., 2001; Himmelweit et al., 2004; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Scott et al., 1999). Duncan et al. (2001) recognized that mothers would not work unless there is an affordable alternative source of care for their children. Most parents in this study faced the same dilemma, so they tried to establish a support network with others who understood their unique challenges and provided social support. The findings indicate that parents in the study who have families and relatives in Iceland can deal with the time allocating problem better than those who do not have any relatives or friends to help them in relation to the work-family conflict.

All the parents in this study acknowledged that it is much better to be a single parent in Iceland than in their home countries (Pong, 2009), one aspect being the financial support available for families in Iceland. The importance of family support for single parents has been reported in many other studies (Brink & Nordblom, 2005; Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Himmelweit et al., 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Millar & Ridge, 2001; Minagawa & Upmann, 2006; Portes et al., 2005; Sayer et al., 2004; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). The parents also mentioned good quality and free education, and a safe environment for children to grow up, as influencing their decisions to stay in Iceland. This is in line with the findings of research conducted by Ragnarsdóttir (2008).

### **The children's bilingual development and school experience**

Findings from a number of studies have indicated that many immigrant parents prefer to emphasize their own cultural heritage in their children's upbringing and maintaining their mother language (Brooker, 2002; Hall, 2002; Inman et al., 2007; Kwak, 2003;

Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). The parents in this study are concerned about preserving their children's mother tongue, and try their best to provide their children with good access to their language. However, there seems to be some inconsistency of emphasis among the parents, as they all consider learning Icelandic as quickly as possible much more important. These findings correspond with findings of studies in which parents emphasize that their children should learn the dominant language and become acquainted with the majority culture (Hall, 2002; Kwak, 2003; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Perry et al., 2002). The inconsistency of emphasis among the parents in this study may be a sign of the dilemma they face in supporting the bilingual development of their children. Such dilemmas have been reported in a number of other studies (Hall, 2002; Kwak, 2003; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Perry et al., 2002; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

Promoting immigrant children's bilingual development requires not only the parents' consistent support for learning mother tongue, but also the schools' support system for learning the majority language and its development of culturally responsive educational settings and practices (Banks, 2001, 2004; Brooker, 2002; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

Most of the children in this study had in some ways experienced bullying, teasing and being excluded from the Icelandic children at school during the first few months after their arrival. Other studies have revealed similar findings, with immigrant children experiencing marginalization in a new school and not succeeding well (Banks, 2001, 2004; Brooker, 2002; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001).

### **Discontinuities between family and school**

The findings of the study indicate that some of the parents attended parent meetings at the school, but they note that there are few such meetings. However, all the parents mentioned that they wanted to help with their children's education and adaptation, but they did not know what they should do. McCarthy (2000) emphasized that connections between home and school are a shared responsibility, and parents must have access to information about school practices. The findings of this study indicate that the majority of immigrant parents have limited knowledge about the school curricula and the various school activities and they express their desire to know more about school instructional practices and material.

Carreon et al. (2005) found that even when immigrant parents engage in activities designed to increase parental involvement, they often come away feeling confused by the school structure and implicit expectations. When asked about their involvement in school activities, the parents in this study had similar responses. Findings from a number of other studies reveal weak relations between family and school, such as parents' limited knowledge about the school structure and school practices (Brooker, 2002; Carreon et al., 2005; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

Epstein and Sanders (2006) suggest that educators, parents, and members of communities should combine efforts to create a coherent program to help students succeed. Findings from this study, as well as other related studies indicate that cultural difference and language of communication are two obstacles for immigrant parents' understanding of the school system and discontinuities between home cultures and school cultures create conflict for the children (Brooker, 2002; Devarakonda, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

## **School support system and school adaptation**

Many studies have indicated that immigrant children experience marginalization in a new school (Banks 2001, 2004; Brooker, 2002; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). This is also one of the findings of this study. Most children in this study experienced bullying, teasing and being excluded from their Icelandic peers at school. Various factors can cause this, such as negative impressions of immigrants in the media, other children being afraid of newcomers disrupting their peer group, lack of understanding, cultural differences or lack of common language of communication.

However, the four support systems of the schools introduced in this study not only helped immigrant children deal with their marginalization in their new school, but also provided support for their adaptation to a new language and new teaching approaches. In general, school support systems are vitally important for immigrant children to adapt into a new school. First, they can support immigrant students in becoming familiar with new teaching practices and a new school environment, thus giving them the possibility of academic success. Second, they can help immigrant students confront marginalization in an unfamiliar school environment.

## **Social acceptance and well-being**

In some countries, single mothers experience discrimination and blame, which causes the degradation of their children in schools (Pong, 2009). However, findings of this study show that the situation in Iceland is quite different. The parents in this study acknowledge that it is much better to be a single parent in Iceland than in their home countries and they are very happy living in Iceland. Generally, the high social acceptance and social support of single-parent families provide possibilities for these immigrant families to have a better life in Iceland. As for the social attitudes towards the immigrants, the analysis of the Icelandic immigrant policy (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007) reveals that immigrants in Iceland can enjoy equal opportunities and rights as local citizens. For example, the policy gives immigrants the same rights as Icelandic residents to enjoy welfare services in Iceland. The findings of this study have shown that although some immigrant single parents in this study experienced prejudice in some ways at the beginning of their arrival, most of them have overcome initial barriers.

## **Implications**

### **Develop a community for single-parent immigrants**

The main significance of this study is to provide useful and important information for Icelandic society and its educational system. One important implication of this study is to suggest and develop ways to empower single-parent immigrants in Icelandic society. Coping with daily lives can be extremely difficult for immigrant single-parent families, especially for those who do not have social networks in Iceland. Developing a community for immigrant single-parent families, such as through the *International Parents Group* and the *Mother Tongue Association on Bilingualism* could empower them in Icelandic society. Such a community could provide information and support and at the same time, they could share their own experience with others, such as advice for language learning, finding jobs, childcare possibilities and services, children's school adaptation, knowledge about social and financial support and the Icelandic school system.

### **Build school-family-community partnerships**

As discussed in the chapter on findings, immigrant children's marginalization experience and the family-school discontinuities indicated that the schools should find ways to counteract marginalization and involve parents in school instructional practices, such as

encouraging partnerships between immigrant parents and Icelandic parents. Such partnerships could help the immigrant parents and children become familiar with the Icelandic school system and the school curricula as soon as possible. Meanwhile, this could also help immigrant children to make friends with Icelandic children and counteract marginalization. Moreover, it could provide a channel for the Icelandic children to get to know other cultures and learn other languages. Last but not least, through this kind of partnerships, the schools could have more fertile grounds to develop multicultural education (Banks, 2001)

### **Encourage mother tongue learning groups**

The findings from this study indicate that most of the parents want to maintain their children's mother tongue in Iceland and teach this to their children at home. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage these children to learn their mother tongue with other immigrant children, to make friends with other children of the same origin and thus maintain their mother tongue.

### **Find creative ways to teach adult immigrants**

Few of the immigrant parents in the study have made progress in the Icelandic language since moving to Iceland. Their explanation is that Icelandic grammar is too hard for them, may indicate that adult language education for immigrants has not been developed as well as language education for children and/or that work obligations limit adults' chances of attending Icelandic courses. Most of the language schools in Iceland are said to emphasize grammar. Therefore, it may be necessary for the language schools to design creative ways to teach adult immigrants the Icelandic language.

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#### Key words

*Iceland – single parent – immigrant – integration – work-family conflict – social support system*

#### Um höfunda

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#### Efnisorð

*Ísland – einstætt foreldri – innflytjandi – aðlögun – togstreita milli vinnu og fjölskyldu – félagslegt stuðningskerfi*



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