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Nichole Leigh Mosty, Samúel Lefever
og Hrafnhildur Ragnarsdóttir

Parents' perspectives towards home language and bilingual development of preschool children

► About the authors ► Key words

Parents in households where more than one language is spoken are faced with decisions regarding their children's language upbringing. These parents don't necessarily calculate the advantages and disadvantages of raising their children to speak more than one language, but the choices they must make include deciding which languages to teach their children, how to teach them and when to begin. If parents have positive views towards bilingualism, they are likely to use their mother tongue in the home and want their children to learn it, even if it is a minority language. Since preschool-aged children are in the throngs of language acquisition, it is important for parents who speak a minority home language to make informed and conscious decisions about their children's home language development.

In this mixed method study, 43 parents of preschool children participated in a quantitative survey with questions pertaining to language use, home language environment and reasons for home language development. Six of the participants also took part in qualitative interviews. The purpose of the study was to explore parents' perspectives about their children's home language and bilingual development and how they facilitated language development in the home. Results indicated that these parents had overwhelmingly positive perspectives both about their children's home language use and their Icelandic language development. Communication in the home language was seen as important for learning the language, and parents made conscious decisions as to why and how the home language was used. Moreover, travel to the home country was important to parents as it linked home language development with cultural and personal identity.

Viðhorf meðal foreldra leikskólabarna af erlendum uppruna til móðurmálsins og tvítýngis

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Leikskólabörn eru á næmiskeiði þegar kemur að máltöku. Á heimilum þar sem fleiri en eitt tungumál eru töluð, þurfa foreldrar því að taka ákvarðanir sem snúa að máluppeldi barna sinna. Þeir eru ekki endilega að velta fyrir sér kostum og göllum sem fylgja tvítýngi en þeir þurfa að ákveða hvort og hvaða tungumál þeir vilja að barnið læri, hvernig og hvenær. Viðhorf foreldra til máluppeldis hefur oftast áhrif á hegðun og málnotkun þeirra heima fyrir. Ef foreldrar hafa jákvætt viðhorf til tvítýngis eru þau líklegri til að nota móðurmál sitt og leggja áherslu á að börnin sín læri það.

Í þessari rannsókn voru 43 þátttakendur sem svöruðu meginlegri spurningakönnun um viðhorf til móðurmáls, málnotkunar, tungumálaumhverfis á heimilinu og mikilvægi þess að kenna börnum móðurmálið. Einnig voru tekin viðtöl við sex þátttakendur. Í rannsókninni var leitað eftir upplýsingum sem tengdust viðhorfi foreldra til móðurmálsins og tvítýngis, hvernig foreldrar notuðu tungumálin og stuðluðu að málþróun barnanna heima fyrir. Niðurstöður sýndu að foreldrar höfðu mjög jákvæð viðhorf gagnvart báðum tungumálum, móðurmálinu og íslensku sem öðru máli, og þeir töldu rétt að tala móðurmálið við börnin til þess að þau tileinkuðu sér það. Einnig kom í ljós að foreldrar voru meðvitaðir um hvers vegna og hvernig þeir vildu nota móðurmálið og að ferðalög til heimalandsins væru mikilvægur liður í að halda við tungumálinu ásamt því að styrkja sjálfsmynd barnanna.

Introduction

The influx of immigrants to Iceland during the last decade has created a new linguistic and cultural reality in many of the country's schools and preschools. The increase in the number of children of foreign background is clearly noticeable in preschools in areas where immigrant families have settled (Statistics Iceland, 2012).

Children born to immigrants are not necessarily presented with a choice as to whether they would like to learn more than one language. Many immigrants speak their mother tongue or home language with their children and when the children enter school they are introduced to the majority language of the society. But are all parents sure about the decisions they make about their children's language development? What effect will learning a new language at preschool have on the children's home language development? These questions and others are of concern to immigrant parents.

One of the most important aspects of home language development in preschool-aged children is the amount of exposure to the home language (or input) they experience in the home environment. Pearson (2008) describes five key factors which often determine whether or not children become bilingual: "input, language status, access to literacy, family language use, and community support" (Pearson, 2008, p. 400). She further states that attitudes, values and social situations greatly affect the amount of input which children receive in their home language.

The purpose of the study described in this article was to investigate the perspectives of parents raising bilingual preschool-aged children in Iceland on home language and bilingual development. This study's foci were parents' views towards home language and

Icelandic development, language use practices both in the home and outside, and parents' rationale for decisions about their children's language development.¹

Review of the literature

Bilingual language development

Bilingual language development in children can be influenced by a number of factors. Children who learn more than one language in childhood differ from children who learn only one language because they experience diverse language environments, communicate in a manner which challenges them to use different resources, and are sensitive to different cultural worlds (Bialystok, 2001). Pearson (2008) refers to bilingual language learning as either Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) or Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA). The first term refers to children who learn two languages simultaneously and thus have two first languages. Theoretically, if children receive adequate input and exposure to each language, learning two languages is the same cognitive process as single language acquisition for a monolingual child. However, it is not uncommon that children who start out with two or more languages often end with one dominant language if language input and exposure dwindle in the minority or home language (Cummins, 2001; Pearson, 2007).

Research has shown the importance of home language to children's success in learning a second language (Bialystok, 2007; Cummins, 2001; Miller Guron & Lundberg, 2003; Pearson, 2008; Quiroz, Snow, & Zhao, 2010). Cummins (2001) states that, "Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in their school language" (p. 17). Thomas and Collier (2002) found that the amount of formal home language support children receive is the most significant predictor of second language achievement. Children who were schooled in bilingual programs often outperformed their monolingual counterparts in academic achievement after an estimated four to seven years in dual language programs. Furthermore, Thomas and Collier found that children with a minority home language who were immersed into mainstream second language schooling and received no support in their minority language represented the lowest performing groups and the highest dropout rates in later years of school.

Research conducted in Iceland by Ólafsdóttir (2010) showed that bilingual children scored lower on tests of Icelandic vocabulary than monolingual children did. She concluded that home language skills are important building blocks for second language acquisition and that parents and families should be encouraged to continue language development in their home language through communicating, reading and other forms of multimedia use.

Parental role in language development

Parents play an important role in their children's language development because they provide the children with a constant source of language input. Tabors (2008) explains that most of the cognitive development which occurs in early childhood requires children to develop ideas about how the world works and learn the vocabulary that helps them express these new understandings. This is done through the types of discourse carried out between adult and child. Bruner (1983) discusses the relevance of play and various games used by parents when children are in infancy for the development of language

¹ This article is based on Nichole Leigh Mosty's M.Ed. thesis project under the supervision of Hrafnhildur Ragnarsdóttir and Samúel Lefever: Mosty, N. (2013). *Where parental perspective, practice, and reasoning meet. The relevance of home language development for parents with bilingual preschool-aged children in Iceland*. M.Ed. Thesis. Reykjavík: University of Iceland.

skills. Rhymes such as Peek–A-Boo, This Little Piggy, and Patty Cake engage children in play and “... often provide the first occasion for the child’s systematic use of language with an adult. They offer the first opportunity to explore how to get things done with words” (Bruner, 1983, p. 45–6).

A good example of social interaction between parent and child which facilitates language development is shared book reading. Reading to young children aids in the development of vocabulary, comprehension and other early literacy skills. DeTemple (2001) found that the conversation which takes place between parent and child while reading was an important factor in their language development.

The reader and the child are jointly focused on a self-contained illustration and text. This joint attention provides support for extending the child’s language. In providing the joint topic and focus, the book affords an opportunity for complex, explicit language such as explanations, definitions, and descriptions (p. 35).

The role of parents in children’s bilingual language development is most frequently linked to their role as language facilitators in the home language (Collier & Auerback, 2011; Cummins, 2001; De Houwer, 2007; Guiberson & Rodríguez, 2010; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galido, 2006). Juan-Garau and Pérez-Vidal (2001) found that high quality interaction, adult recasts, (a form of correcting linguistic mistakes through correctly recasting the proper utterance to the child) and focused language input in the home language by the parent contributed to the degree of home language use by the child.

Pearson (2007) developed a model called the “input-proficiency-use cycle” which demonstrates use and input of the home language (see Figure 1). The cycle illustrates the important role parents and the linguistic community play in developing and sustaining home language. Pearson believes linguistic input to be the greatest factor which parents and communities can provide, and if there is enough input there will be learning. “Without interacting with people using the language, no learning takes place. Without enough interaction, learning can take place, but the children do not reach enough of a comfort level in the language that they will willingly use it” (Pearson, 2008, p. 126). She further theorizes that children using language they have heard invites further input, so the cycle becomes self-supporting: “A greater amount of input leads to greater proficiency, which leads to more use, which invites more input and the cycle starts again” (Pearson, 2008, p. 127).

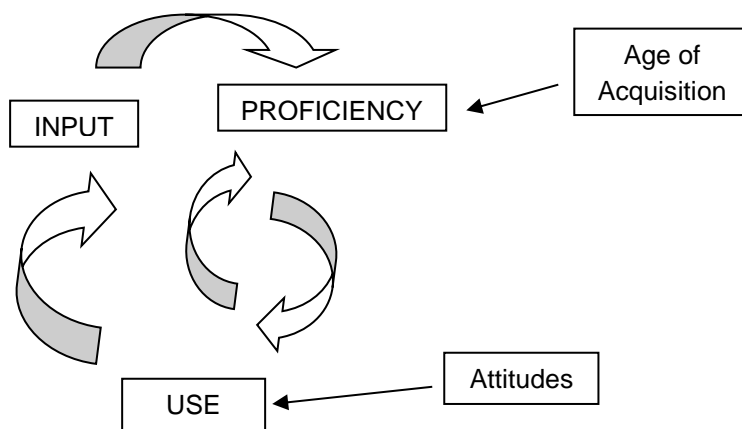


Figure 1 – The input-proficiency-use cycle (Pearson, 2007, p. 401)

Parents' views about bilingualism and home language development

Parental attitudes and perspectives towards home language and bilingual language development are often found to be strong motivators for language use. Worthy and Rodríguez-Galido (2006) found parents not only eager and capable of assisting in language development in their home language, but also “a virtually untapped resource of positive and powerful language models” (p. 597). Pearson believes that negative attitudes of parents and others in the community will detract from the value and use of the home language, whereas positive attitudes will add to the value and use (Pearson, 2007).

Smith and Gibbard (2011) found that when parents were informed about how language development is influenced by both the type and amount of language interaction between parent and child, it had positive effects on their attitudes towards language development, and more importantly, after these interventions, their children were found to have a considerably higher child word count.

Understanding the impact of negative attitudes may highlight even further the important role parents play in home language development. Cummins (2001) addresses the loss of home language and the role parents also play in this. As easy as it is for children to learn conversational skills in a majority language without familial and especially parental support, children can also quickly lose language skills in their home language. “Children’s mother tongues are fragile and easily lost in the early years of school. ...where language communities are not concentrated or ‘ghettoized’ in particular neighborhoods, children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school” (p. 19).

Wozniczka (2011) conducted research with Polish students enrolled in primary school in Iceland. The focus of her research was to discover whether the quality of home language input (reading and parent child interaction) affected children’s second language development in Icelandic and their progress at school. She found that Polish families encouraged and sustained mother language skills in the home environment, and that regardless of parental perspectives about second language acquisition in Icelandic, the use of Polish in the home environment was “helping their children to develop language skills that transferred to Icelandic (p. 79).

The research studies mentioned above have shown the beneficial effects of parents’ positive attitudes towards home language use and the important role they play in children’s bilingual language development. Next we will look at the language policy of Icelandic preschools with regard to bilingualism.

Bilingual language policy in Icelandic preschools

In recent years the number of children in Icelandic preschools with another home language than Icelandic has increased considerably. In the year 2000, 676 such children were enrolled in Icelandic preschools, a number that grew to 1,908 by 2011. In fact, the percentage of children with a different home language than Icelandic enrolled in preschool grew from 4.6% to 10% within a decade (Statistics Iceland, 2012). However, the recently revised Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011) does not address the home language or bilingual language development of children in any depth.

Resources for parents in households where more than one language is spoken are not widely available but some attention has been given to providing information to parents about home language and bilingual development by organizations that work with parents of preschool children. For example, the City of Reykjavík has published a Multicultural Policy for Preschools (2006). In the English translation of this document the importance

of home language is pointed out. It states that “the task of the preschool is to teach the children Icelandic but also to offer parents support in maintaining the proficiency of the child’s native language” (Atlafon, Jónsdóttir, Vigfúsdóttir, Einarsdóttir & Hjartardóttir, 2006, p. 8). The Reykjavík Department of Education also provides additional funding for the purpose of language development to preschools with large percentages of children of foreign origin. All preschools also have access to counseling and support from a specialist in multicultural and bilingual issues from the Department of Education (Reykjavíkurborg, 2010).

Another organization that provides information and assistance to parents with regard to home language development is Móðurmál, Samtök um tvítýngi (Mother Tongue Association on Bilingualism). This program currently offers home language schooling in twelve languages (Móðurmál, 2010) and is run by volunteer teachers who usually have a background in education and/or language development. One of the principal goals of this program is to increase children’s ability to use and understand their home language.

As stated above, research has shown that parents’ positive attitudes towards home language use play an important role in their children’s bilingual language development. The aim of the study described here was to investigate the areas of home language use and bilingual development of preschool-aged children in Iceland from the perspective of the parents. The main research questions of the study were:

- What are parents’ perspectives about home language development?
- What are parents’ perspectives about bilingual and second language acquisition?
- What role do parents play in their children’s bilingual language development?

Method

A mixed method approach was used to collect the data in the study. Information was gathered through the use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with parents of children enrolled in a preschool in a suburb of Reykjavík.

The preschool was purposefully chosen for the study due to the diverse linguistic makeup of the families whose children were enrolled there. At the time of the study (Autumn 2012), 84% of the children came from homes with a different home language than Icelandic. A total of fourteen home languages were spoken in the participating households.

The questionnaire for parents was divided into two parts. The first part of the questionnaire contained questions designed to gather background information about the home language environment and language use in and outside the home. Participants were asked to list which languages were used in the home environment, who spoke them, and how often the family travelled to their home country.

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 10 closed questions that were designed to ascertain parental perspectives and behaviors regarding language use, both in the home language and Icelandic. Participants were asked to rate how important it was in their views that their children learn home language(s) and Icelandic. They were also asked to indicate types of language activities used in the home and opportunities for using the home language outside the home. The questionnaires were made available in Polish, English, Icelandic and Tagalog.

In the second part of the study, follow-up interviews were conducted with six parents (five households) in order to gather further information regarding home language use and Icelandic development and how language development was encouraged in the home setting. The interviews allowed the participants to elaborate on their beliefs and attitudes and

explain their thoughts in more detail. Participants were chosen to represent the diverse make-up of home language environments. The parents were given the choice of being interviewed in their home language through the use of an interpreter, but all preferred to be interviewed in English or Icelandic. All five interviews took place in the parents' homes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and data that informed the research questions were coded. Recurring themes were identified and analyzed and supportive evidence in the form of personal statements were sought from the data.

Participants

Parents from 43 homes (76% of the number of families with children at the preschool) completed the questionnaire, all of whom spoke a different native language than Icelandic. The majority of the children of the participants were born in Iceland. The home language environments were diverse; in about 60% of the homes, two, three or more languages were spoken, while in the remaining homes only one language was spoken, in all but one case an Eastern European language. The majority of the parents, both mothers and fathers, used only their mother tongue when speaking with their children. About a third of the parents said they used more than one language with their children. A majority of the parents stated that they frequently travelled as a family to their home countries. Information about language use between siblings was also requested. Many parents reported that the siblings used both Icelandic and home language(s) at home, while in other cases siblings used only home language(s). In some cases, parents said the siblings used English with each other in addition to the home language. Overall, parents were more likely to use their mother tongue at home while siblings tended to use both Icelandic and home language(s) when communicating.

Findings

Questionnaire Findings

A statistical analysis of the questionnaire responses showed that an overwhelming majority (95%) of the parents felt it was important that their children learn their home language(s). They said it was important to enable communication with relatives and increase their children's future educational opportunities. Over half of the parents felt that learning home language(s) would increase their children's general cognitive development. Just under half of the participants felt that learning home language(s) would help sustain or strengthen cultural and nationality identity. Fewer participants listed developing an understanding for religious beliefs or returning to their home country as being important reasons for learning home language(s).

Almost as many parents (93%) felt learning Icelandic was important. Most parents said it was important to know Icelandic to be able to communicate in Icelandic society. A majority (86%) also thought it important that their children develop good Icelandic skills for schooling. Over 50% said that learning Icelandic would help their children learn about Icelandic culture and increase their chances for future employment. Being able to translate for family members and staying in Iceland were also given as important reasons for learning Icelandic.

Parents were asked to indicate ways they helped their children learn the home language(s). Daily communication in the home language(s) was given as the most common activity by most of the parents (95%). Television and DVD use in home language(s) were also predominant. Almost 70% of the parents said they read books in the home language to their children, and 60% listed listening to music in the home language as part of regular home language use. Only about a fifth of the parents let their children use the computer for language development and fewer used direct instruction in home language(s).

The results from the questionnaire showed that parents wanted their children to learn their home languages as well as Icelandic for a variety of beneficial reasons. Most importantly, they wanted their children to be able to communicate and interact in the home language with family but also be capable of participating in Icelandic school and society. Parents were aware of the important role they played in their children's language development. They felt that one of the best ways to teach their children the home language was by using it in daily interaction with them. They also thought other language activities were important, such as reading to their children in the home language.

In the next section the findings from the interviews with parents will be presented. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

Interview findings

The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to gather further information regarding parents' views toward home language use and Icelandic development and how language development is encouraged in the home setting. The four main themes that emerged from the interviews centered on 1) decisions about home language use, 2) parental role in language development, 3) views about bilingualism and 4) the link between home language(s) and cultural identity.

Conscious decisions about home language

All of the parents made conscious decisions about language use in their homes. All but one of the parents wanted their children to learn the home language first before encountering a second language in preschool.

The first household consisted of a single mother from Poland with three children. The mother, whom we call Susan, spoke only Polish in the home. Her decision was based on her belief that a strong background in the home language was important for second language development. She stated:

I worked as a translator and I understood early that my children would learn better Icelandic if I taught them Polish first and did not mix languages with them. I have never mixed languages with them, if they speak to me in Icelandic I answer in Polish or if they only know words in Icelandic I teach them the Polish words.

In the second household both the parents spoke Tagalog. The parents admitted to having spoken English with their children when they were younger. The siblings mixed Icelandic, Tagalog, and English with each other. Only the mother, whom we call Rose, participated in the interview. Rose said that her older child had encountered difficulties when she started primary school. She believed this was due to mixed language use during the child's early childhood, so when the second child started preschool the parents stopped mixing languages at home.

I worried about (the child) because she had difficulty in school learning to read at first, but then we changed our rules at home and we only speak Tagalog with our children. Now I think that my son is doing much better learning my language and I hope Icelandic. My daughter is doing good in school now too.

She went on to say:

First I did not think about them learning Tagalog because Icelandic was so hard for me. Now I am learning sometimes Icelandic from them because I am always teaching them the words in my language.

Both parents in the third household participated in the interview. The father was Icelandic and the mother was Thai so they did not share the same mother tongue. The mother made a clear decision to forgo using her mother tongue and to speak only Icelandic with her children. Her husband took it upon himself to support both his wife and their children in learning Icelandic. They expressed a very united front during the interview. The mother, whom we call Paula, said:

I was learning to speak Icelandic and decided my son was half Icelandic and would grow up here, it would be better for us both to learn Icelandic. I thought to myself that it is better he learns one language first, then if he wants he can learn Thai as a second language, later.

The husband, John, added:

We worked together to help our son, and in the beginning he did not speak much. We had to be very focused in how we supported him. I worked with him systematically, for example by reading daily, in order to ensure that the Icelandic he was learning was right and that he understood.

The fourth household provided a very good example of the complex reality facing many mixed language families. The mother was from the Philippines and spoke a regional dialect; the father was from a Slavic country. They met in Iceland and communicated in English. In this home language environment there were four languages being used interchangeably. The mother and father spoke English with each other and with the children when all of the family was together. The mother spoke in Filipino dialect when alone with the children, and the father used his Slavic language when he was alone with them. The children were learning Icelandic at preschool and sometimes switched between languages at home. The mother, whom we call Debra, participated in the interview. She said that she thought English was the predominant language used in the home, and that the children seemed content when speaking English:

I don't worry so much about how long it takes for them to learn all of these languages. I know they are learning and that we are doing what is right. I have looked for information about bilingualism and we do our best. I feel good about the progress my children make but I do not want to put pressure on them.

The parents in the fifth household were both from Nepal and the father, whom we call Robert, participated in the interview. The parents spoke Nepalese in the home. When their child was very young, his wife expressed an interest in teaching the child English as well.

My wife thought we should teach (the child) English because you can use that language everywhere, but she doesn't have interest, she is only learning Nepalese. When we start taking her to preschool they tell us we should just concentrate on our native language because then it would help her to learn better Icelandic. We are very happy with this because now she is learning both languages very easily.

In each household, parents had given thought to the issue of language use. Although their reasons differed, they all made conscious decisions based on what they felt was best for their children's current and future well-being.

The parental role in language development

All the parents felt it was important that their children learn the home language so they could communicate with both immediate and extended family members.

Debra said:

I want my children to be able to speak with all of my family because I have a very big family here in Iceland and even bigger in the Philippines. I want them to have connections to the Philippines and my family there, because you know they have dark skin and you can tell they are Philippine. I want them to not feel like outsiders if we go home to the Philippines.

In almost all cases the parents recognized the importance of using the home language in daily interaction with their children. They thought this was a good way to teach them the language. Emphasis was placed on speaking directly with the children, correcting them when they used the language incorrectly and helping them with words in their home language that they only knew in Icelandic.

Rose tried to help her children learn her language by using it at home and encouraging them to use it too.

I am just always talking to my children in Tagalog, trying to teach them new words and how to say things right, like make the right sounds. I think this is the most practice they can have using Tagalog, and I can best help them when we are talking together because I can help correct them and tell them they are doing a good job.

Debra stated that she purposefully used the home environment to teach her children vocabulary:

I use every opportunity to teach them words by pointing out everything and telling them what it is called in (Philippine dialect). I want them to know what the words are for the things in our home, and when we do things as a family.

Robert felt having opportunities to use the home language outside the home was important but in their case these opportunities were very limited:

Oh, when we meet with other people from Nepal it is really great to see her using our language with them, but she is always using Icelandic words mixed so I think it would be better if we had more friends and more time to spend with them, then she would maybe get better with our language and be much more sure she is speaking well. She is often shy when we meet people from Nepal at first and she will not speak right away, but after a while she is always okay.

The parents also encouraged the children to use the home language through listening to music, Skyping with family members, and reading books in the home language.

Susan placed importance on the value of reading in developing the home language:

I read to them every day. Sometimes I translate Icelandic or English books, more like telling the story. But every opportunity I have to read books written in Polish is important. If they will learn to read they must see the letters and words in Polish. (My daughter) is already starting to ask me about the alphabet and the letters in her name.

Robert, however, encountered difficulties in finding reading materials in the home language and was worried that the lack of print materials would affect his daughter's learning to read and write in Nepalese:

She is not learning to read and write, and she does not really want us to read to her if we have Nepalese stories. Sometimes I find computer books on the internet and she will listen then. I would like to have more books, and I ask people if I know they are going to Nepal to bring us some stories for children. I would like to at least teach her the ABCs in our language, then maybe she will learn to read and write.

Susan, Rose and Debra mentioned satellite television and DVD use as a factor which supported language development. Debra said:

We have a satellite dish and the girls can watch children's programs in my husband's language and English and I have some DVDs in my language. This is good sometimes because I see they are listening and learning and you know, they ask if they don't understand something so I know they are learning our languages.

The parents in the study wanted their children to learn the home language(s) so they could communicate better with family members and relatives. They recognized the important role they played in their children's language development. They saw the importance of providing their children with opportunities to use the home language(s) both in and outside the home to improve their language skills. They encouraged their children to use the home language(s) in a number of ways and through various media.

Parents' views about bilingualism

In general, parents had positive views about their children learning more than one language. They felt secure that their children were happy and were not experiencing any particular difficulties in learning more than one language. They talked about their children's experiences of learning second and third languages, and they believed that children have the capacity to learn more than one language at a time. Rose stated:

I know it is much easier for my children to learn Icelandic when they are young, because it is a very difficult language to learn and also Tagalog because it is a blend of other languages too. So I am glad they are learning now, and maybe when they are older they can learn even more languages if they want to.

Four of the parents mentioned that they were pleased with the fact that their children attended a multicultural preschool, and found this to be a positive element in their children's language development.

Paula made a conscious decision to forgo teaching her children her mother tongue, yet still held strong beliefs that her children would be more than capable of learning the language when and if they wanted to:

So many people tell me I am making a mistake and should speak my language with them, but I don't agree. I think they need to learn one language first and if they want to learn my language tomorrow I will gladly teach them. I will use the same focus to teach them to speak Thai as we did to teach them Icelandic. I have no problems with children being bilingual, I am happy for them. But I chose to do it different and I am happy with that choice. I hope they want to learn to speak Thai and my son is already making some friends at his school who also have Thai parents, he can understand some things and I am always ready to help him.

Susan made a strong argument that she believed parents needed to make an effort at being bilingual themselves and have positive influence on their children:

I believe that if parents don't learn to speak Icelandic too they will not be able to properly support their children. They will not be able to understand the world their children are living in here, to communicate with other parents, teachers, or out in public. Their children might not want to learn to speak Icelandic if they think their parents will not understand them. I think my children see me as a positive role model because I have learned Icelandic, I am going to university and they say Mamma learns at school like me. I am proud of my children growing up bilingual and see only positive outcomes for them as bilinguals.

Debra was also positive towards multilingualism (her children were learning four languages) and was secure in her belief that multilingualism is a resource, not a burden:

I am very pleased with my children, because you know, not every child has the chance to learn two languages and mine are learning four. I know we are doing what is right, we cannot change our situation, we are a mixed family and to be happy we must communicate and learn together with all of our languages. We are very lucky that our children attend a school with other bilingual kids, and go to a church where almost everyone speaks two languages. It might take them longer to learn than children who speak only one language, but I know if I don't put any pressure on them and keep doing what is right they will be fine and clever later in life.

The parents' positive views about bilingualism showed their confidence and belief in their children's ability to successfully learn more than one language. However, Paula and John chose not to place importance on learning two languages simultaneously.

Home language and cultural identity

All of the parents wanted their children to establish connections with family still living in their home countries. Also, they wanted their children to learn that they have two cultural backgrounds, not only two languages. They also talked about how language is an important part of personal and cultural identity and how sharing the same language gave them a closer connection to their children.

Susan emphasized the importance of identity and how she wants her children to identify with her through learning and speaking Polish:

It is important to me that my children learn Polish from me not only so they can communicate with me, but because I am their mother and I want them to connect to me, to learn about how I grew up and who I am because of that. I feel that the best way to do this is through speaking my native tongue, Polish.

Rose expressed a similar desire:

...it is important for me for my children to speak with my family in Tagalog when we go to Philippines. I think they will learn more about me, like the foods I like to eat, and why we live like we do even if we are living here in Iceland.

Susan commented on the importance of cultural identity as well:

I want my children to learn about traditions that I grew up with, like Christmas and Easter celebrations. You know there are words for these things that do not translate in Icelandic. I want them to know we are Polish and in Poland we do things different and that is a good thing, something to be proud of. Even though I do not intend to move back to Poland, I want them to feel Polish if we visit Poland.

Although Paula had decided not to teach her children to speak Thai as their mother tongue, she still expressed a desire for them to learn about Thai culture by travelling to her home country, and hoped that they would want to learn Thai as a second language:

I want my children also to be proud to be Thai, even though they are more Icelandic. I think that travelling to Thailand will open their eyes and minds for being Thai and speaking Thai.

Robert had not yet travelled to the home country with his child. He hoped, though, that by visiting Nepal his daughter would develop a connection with the language and the culture.

I am waiting for us to go for the first time to Nepal with her, I think then she will have much more interest for learning Nepalese and for being from Nepal. Right now she does not care; she only thinks some things are nice when you say them. When I play music from my country she only listens a little and then asks for me to put the hip hop on. She understands much Nepalese now but, I think after we visit she will speak more and it will be important to her.

Several responses from the parents showed the close link between language and cultural and personal identity. The parents felt it was important that their children learn the home language in order to better identify and connect with them. The parents also wanted their children to gain a sense of their cultural background and realize that it is a part of who they are.

Discussion

The responses of the parents who were interviewed mirrored and supported the findings of the questionnaire. An overwhelming majority of the parents in the study had positive views towards bilingualism and understood the importance that home and second language learning can have in their children's lives. Research has shown that positive attitudes towards home language and second language learning often influence how language will be used in the home. De Houwer (1999) states that positive attitudes are often the first step for parents in determining how they will use language with their children and this contributes directly to the development of language skills. This was evidenced by the ways in which the interview respondents approached language development and support in the home setting, and how satisfied they were with their children's progress in home language development. According to Pearson, "positive attitudes of parents, siblings and peers toward a language can add value to the language and make it more attractive to the child" (Pearson, 2008, p.128).

Many of the participants in the study expressed the belief that if children possessed good language skills in the home language they would be better able to learn a second language. They also expressed awareness of the responsibility they have as language models for their children. The home language environment of some of the participants was very complex. In some cases the parents had different mother tongues and spoke in separate languages with their children. They were very aware of their role as models for home language use and used every opportunity to teach their children to speak in the separate languages.

Although it is widely recommended by specialists that parents speak their mother tongue with their children from birth, one of the respondents chose not to. She chose to forgo using her mother tongue in order for her children to learn Icelandic first. She had full support from her Icelandic speaking husband, and believes she has made the right decision. However, she also hopes that in the future her children will want to learn her mother tongue and learn about her home culture.

The parents in the study felt that daily use of the home language was the most important way to help their children learn the language. They encouraged their children to communicate in the home language with immediate and extended family members and friends who spoke the same language. They tried to give their children a variety of opportunities to use the home language and travel to the home country was seen as an important opportunity for children to develop their communicative skills in the home language as well as strengthen family ties and cultural ties to the home country.

The importance of reading to children in the home language was also evidenced. Arnbjörnsdóttir (2010) discusses how developing reading skills in the home language helps prepare children for the language culture which exists in school. This was also seen in a recent study by Wozniczka (2011), who found that reading between parent and child in the home setting contributed directly to Polish children faring well in Icelandic elementary school. Participants were also aware of the value of using music, television and other media to promote home language development.

The parents felt it was important to take an active part in teaching their children the home language(s). They gave examples of how they did so by pointing out and naming objects, correcting their mistakes, and helping them with specific phonemes in the home language. Not everyone put equal emphasis on the same type of activities, but the study shows that parents are aware of various ways to promote language development and they encourage their children to use them.

The study also sheds light on what motivates parents to teach their children their home language. Above all, parents want to make choices about language learning that will be beneficial for their children's social, emotional, and future well-being. The participants' responses illustrate how language is an essential part of personal and cultural identity. Participants expressed very strong attitudes about the importance of personal connections with their children that can be achieved through the use of the home language. This reflects what Nemeth (2012) says: "Language, identity, and self-esteem are also interlaced. For each of us, our language is a part of who we are. For infants and toddlers, language is an inseparable part of who their parents are as well" (p. 11). The parents in the study understood that if they did not teach their children home language(s), it would be difficult for them to gain an understanding of their parents' roots and home culture. The parents sensed the strong links between language, culture, and homeland and recognized that visits to the home country can help motivate their children to learn the home language.

In addition to learning home language(s), parents in the study wanted their children to learn Icelandic. They want their children to have good Icelandic skills so they can succeed at school and get good jobs. They also believed that learning Icelandic would help children learn about Icelandic culture and thus better adjust to Icelandic society. This is important since, according to the results of the questionnaire, a large number of participants (45%) intended to stay in Iceland.

Conclusion

This study shows that immigrant parents residing in Iceland are concerned about their children's welfare and education. They recognize the importance of strong language skills both in the home language and in Icelandic. They see bilingualism as being an advantage and actively support their children's bilingual development.

Policy makers and educators need to be mindful of the importance and weight parental views can carry. As Shannon and Milian (2002) point out: "The choice and voice of par-

ents are fundamental to the implementation of quality educational programs. Indeed, it is the right of all parents, regardless of ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic background to make informed educational choices for their children" (p. 695–6).

The perspectives voiced by the participants in the study are personal and individual and not necessarily representative of other parents' views. Nevertheless, the findings of this study draw attention to the complex nature of home language use and bilingual language development currently found in Icelandic homes and preschools. With further research we can expand our knowledge of bilingual language development and better inform language policy and practice at all school levels.

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About the authors

Nichole Leigh Mosty (Nichole.leigh.mosty@reykjavik.is) is a preschool principal with a B.Ed. in Early Childhood Education (2007) and a M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning Studies (2013) from the University of Iceland School of Education. She has worked in preschools in Reykjavik for 13 years. Nichole is currently educating preschool staff and parents about the importance of mother tongue and second language development.

Samúel Lefever (samuel@hi.is) is an Associate professor at the University of Iceland and teaches language teaching methodology at the School of Education. He has a MA in Education from the University of Kansas, USA. He has done research on the English skills of young children in Iceland and on English teaching at all school levels. He is currently looking at immigrants' language use and participation in Icelandic schools and society.

Hrafnhildur Ragnarsdóttir (hragnars@hi.is) is a professor of developmental science at the University of Iceland and the director of the Centre for research in language, literacy, and development. She completed a doctoral degree in psychology and education from the Université d'Aix-Marseille in 1990. Her research areas include oral and written language development from early childhood through adolescence, and the relationships between language development, cognition, socio-emotional and literacy development.

Key words

*bilingualism – home language use – preschool children
– language development – parents' perspectives*

Um höfunda

Nichole Leigh Mosty (Nichole.leigh.mosty@reykjavik.is) lauk B.Ed.-gráðu í leikskólakennarafræði frá Kennaraháskóla Íslands árið 2007 og M.Ed.-gráðu í uppeldis og menntunarfræði frá Háskóla Íslands 2013. Hún hefur starfað hjá Leikskólum Reykjavíkur í 13 ár og starfar nú sem leikskólastjóri. Nichole hefur beitt sér fyrir fræðslu fyrir starfsfólk og foreldrar um mikilvægi móðurmáls fyrir málþroska tvítyngdra barna.

Samúel Lefever (samuel@hi.is) er dósent og kennir kennslufræði erlendra tungumála á Menntavísindasviði Háskóla Íslands. Hann lauk M.A.-gráðu frá Háskólanum í Kansas, Bandaríkjunum, í uppeldis og menntunarfræði með kennslufræði annars máls sem sérsvið. Hann hefur rannsakað enskukunnáttu barna á Íslandi og enskukennslu og námi á grunn- og framhaldsskólastigi. Hann vinnur nú að rannsóknum á málnotkun og þátttöku nemenda af erlendum uppruna í íslenskum skólum og samfélagi.

Hrafnhildur Ragnarsdóttir (hragnars@hi.is) er prófessor í þroskavísindum við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands og forstöðumaður Rannsóknarstofu

um þroska, mál og læsi barna og unglínga. Hún lauk doktorsprófi í sálfræði og menntavísindum frá Universit  d'Aix-Marseille 1990. Rannsóknarsvið hennar eru málþroski barna og þróun málnotkunar og textagerðar í ræðu og riti frá frumbersku til fullorðinsára og tengsl málþroska og málnotkunar við aðra þroskaþætti og læsi.

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