

# Continuity between playschool and primary school

## EASE

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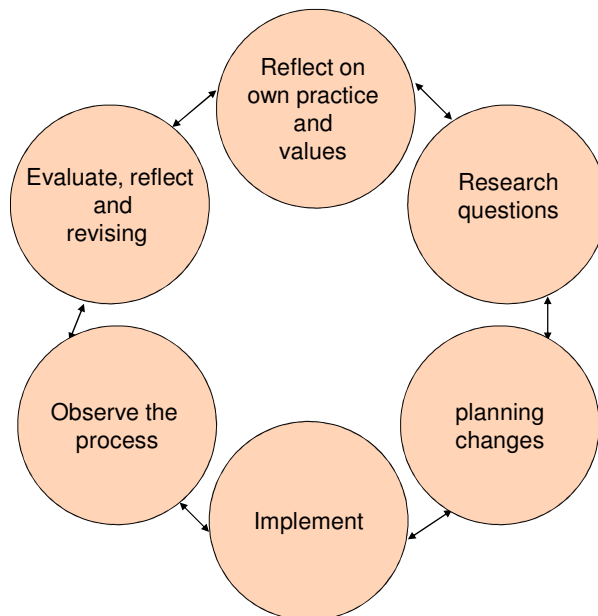
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The aim of this project is to create a strong and equal partnership between playschool and primary school and to promote educational continuity and flexibility in early childhood education. To this end, playschool teachers and primary school teachers were enabled to work together in order to develop a unified approach and a common understanding of education that could be adopted within both educational levels.

### Method

A collaborative action research (Wagner, 1997) was conducted by researchers at the university and teachers in three playschools and three primary schools in Reykjavík. The purpose of action research in schools is to develop and improve practice. Teachers who participate in action research focus on changing and improving their own practices. New methods that are developed in part by the teachers themselves are tested. Records are made of the actions that are taken, and data is gathered and analyzed throughout the study period (Koshy, 2008; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003). In this project, playschool- and primary school teachers worked together with university researchers in developing a common ideology and pedagogical practice.

Figure 1. An action research model.



## **Participants**

Teachers from three playschools and three primary schools in the city of Reykjavík participated in the project. The playschools and the primary schools were chosen using purposeful sampling. The following guidelines were used:

- Teachers and directors of the schools were interested in participating
- The ideology and pedagogical practices of the participating schools were not the same;
- A majority of the teachers in the schools were educated and trained in teaching;
- The playschools and the primary schools were chosen in pairs due to their close proximity to one another; and
- Each school pair was located in a unique part of the city as compared to the other pairs.

The first three pairs of schools that were invited to participate did not accept the offer, but the next three pairs of schools enthusiastically agreed to participate. Two to three teachers from each school participated. In some cases, both the principals and assistant principals were also active participants. The participating schools and the teachers involved are as follows:

- Vesturbæjarskóli: 2-3 primary school teachers and the assistant principal,
- Dvergasteinn: 2 playschool teachers and the principal,
- Selásskóli: 2 primary school teachers and the assistant principal,
- Rauðaborg: 1 playschool teacher, 1 primary school teacher, and the principal,
- Norðlingaskóli: 2 primary school teachers and the principal and assistant principal,
- Rauðhóll: 2 playschool teachers and the principal and assistant principal.

Other participants in the project included: (a) Three research assistants from the university, each acting as a contact person for each of the school pairs, (b) Seven specialists from the university (i.e., assistant and associate professors), (c) Consultants at the Playschool and Primary School Office for Reykjavík acted as collaborative partners in this project and assisted with identifying schools to participate, and (d) The project leader, i.e., Johanna Einarsdóttir.

## **First Phase – Preparation (spring – summer 2009)**

The project started in the spring of 2009 with meetings and presentations for the participating playschool and primary school teachers.

In the beginning the participants were introduced to the concept of action research and the importance of continuity and transitions between the two school levels. A booklet introducing aims and characteristics of the action research process was distributed to each participant, and a presentation was given to the group.

The participants were asked to come to the next meeting with some ideas about what they would like to emphasize in their cooperation with the other school level. Some of the school pairs decided to meet prior to the next organized gathering to discuss their ideas. At the next meeting, the school pairs discussed and developed possible projects, which resulted in the following projects:

- Pair I: Early literacy, play and outdoor teaching,
- Pair II: Early literacy and play, and

- Pair III: Early numeracy and play.

The next step for the project leader was to inform the specialists from the university about the teachers' decisions. Due to their prior introduction to the project, the specialists were ready to work with the teachers.

At the next meeting, the groups worked independently and discussed their project. Table 1 shows the members of the groups. In addition, consultants from the Reykjavík City office attended some of the meetings with the teachers.

Table 1 – The groups and their members

<b>Pair I</b>	<b>Pair II</b>	<b>Pair III</b>
Playschool principal	One playschool teacher One primary school teacher employed in the playschool	Two playschool teachers
Primary school principal Specialist in early literacy	Two primary school teachers Playschool principal Primary school principal	Two primary school teachers Playschool principal Primary school principal
Specialist in play Specialist in outdoor teaching Research assistant Project leader	Specialist in early literacy Specialist in play  Research assistant Project leader	Specialist in early mathematics Specialist in play  Research assistant Project leader

At the next meeting, the participants listened to a presentation on the transition from playschool to primary school and the continuity between playschool and primary school. Then they were given the opportunity to discuss these topics within their groups. Additionally, they were given material to read on their own. The fourth common meeting of the group took place in the middle of May. At this meeting a guest lecturer from the Institute of Education at the University of London i.e., Liz Brooker talked about the transition between school levels and play. Following the presentation, the participants had the opportunity to discuss within their small groups. In addition to the large group meetings the groups also met separately in the participating schools between the larger meetings.

During this preparation stage, the researchers from the university interviewed the participating teachers and parents individually. The interview schedule that was developed by the EASE partners was used together with some additional questions. Parents of children who were approaching the end of playschool were interviewed in focus groups. They were asked about their experiences related to their child's playschool education and their expectations for primary school. Between the meetings with the group, the university participants met to discuss and reflect.

Table 2 – Schedule for the first phase

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activities</b>
February 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2009	Introduction to the project. Participants work in groups and discuss possible projects.
March 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2009	Presentation on action research. Teachers work in groups and decide on common projects.

April 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2009	Presentation on transition and continuity. Participants work in groups that include teachers, specialists, and teacher assistants.
April through May of 2009	Groups meet independently to plan and discuss
May 20 <sup>th</sup> , 2009	Presentation on transition and play.
May of 2009	Interviews with participating playschool and primary school teachers.
May of 2009	Group interviews with the parents of playschool children.

### **Second Phase – Implementations (fall 2009)**

In the second phase of the study, the participants continued discussing ideas and ways to create continuity between the school levels. Ideology and pedagogical practices that were suitable for both school levels were collaboratively developed by the researchers, playschool teachers, and primary school teachers. Simultaneously, these ideas and projects were put into practice in the playschools and the primary schools. The teachers participated in a workshop that met twice a month; there they listened to experts' presentations, and discussed, reported and reflected on their practices (see table 3). The school pairs also met between the meetings. During this period the teachers kept journals in which they wrote down their thoughts and ideas related to the implementation of the new methods and ideology. Video recordings were also used. The teachers took videos of things that they were satisfied with in their practices and showed them to each other (the school pairs).

Table 3 – Schedule for the second phase

August 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2009	Meeting of the whole group.
September 14 <sup>th</sup> 2009	Sustainable development and transition from playschool to primary school – Ros and Mike Littlelyke, University of South Australia
September - October 2009	Groups meet independently to plan and discuss.
October 1 <sup>st</sup> 2009	Presentation on observations and recording – Jóhanna Einarsdóttir Discussion
October 8 <sup>th</sup> 2009	Presentation on play – Hrönn Pálmadóttir, Kristín Karlsdóttir, Ingibjörg Ó. Sigurðardóttir, University of Iceland Discussion.
October 19 <sup>th</sup> 2009	Emerging literacy – Steinunn Torfadóttir and Helga Sigurmundsdóttir, University of Iceland
November 10 <sup>th</sup> 2009	Participating teachers showed each other video clips from their classrooms.
November - December	Groups meet independently to plan and discuss.
December 7th	Example of a developmental project on unit blocks in playschool – Elva Önundardóttir

This second phase of the study has been characterized by a lot of talking. The teachers had intense discussions about their practices and how to create continuity between the school levels. These discussions have revealed different views and ideologies of the teachers of the two school levels. The teachers also use concepts in different ways (e.g., play). This has been frustrating for some of the participants, especially the playschool teachers who felt that the primary school teachers did not understand or value what they did.

The teachers seemed to separate play and learning very distinctively. The playschool teachers' method to implement literary resources in the playschool was, for example, to set up special lessons instead of integrating play and literacy. They started by doing school-like activities. It was also evident that the teachers had difficulties in finding time to fit the project in their daily schedule and they have also had difficulties finding time to meet that suits teachers at both levels.

The three master students that were assigned to assist each school pair pulled together an interim report that was given to the participants and the specialists.

### **Third Phase (spring – summer 2010)**

During the spring semester there will be a continuation of the collaboration between the teachers and the university researchers. On their first common meeting they will be given a presentation on play and learning and a booklet in Icelandic will be distributed. A discussion about these concepts and how they connect will follow.

They will be introduced to ways to generate data in order to evaluate the practices.

During the spring semester the participants will listen to presentations from others who have participated in action research studies. They will also during joint meetings of the whole group present for each other good practices that they would like to share. (table 5). The contact persons from the university will meet with them once a week in their schools.

Table 4 – Schedule for the third phase

January 19th 14:30-16:00	Play and learning – Jóhanna Einarsdóttir Evaluation of fall semester – Discussion in groups Data gathering
February 18th 14:30-16:00	Example of action research – Hafþór Guðjónsson Discussion in groups
March 24th 14:30-16:00	Groups present good practices to create continuity between the school levels.
April 26th 14:30-16:00	Groups present good practices to create continuity between the school levels.
May 28th 14:30-16:00	Groups present good practices to create continuity between the school levels.
June 10th	

14:30-16:00	
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**Fourth Phase (fall 2010 – spring 2011)**

During the fourth phase, study reports will be written, and the project will be presented to practitioners in the field. Policy formulation will be developed based on the results of the project. The final product will be used as a curriculum framework for continuous early childhood education.

Table 5 – Data generation that will be employed in order to evaluate the project:

The implementation of the practice in the classroom will be observed;
The teachers will fill in evaluation sheets.
Video recording of best practices
Video recording of new practices
The teachers will keep a journal related to the implementation of the new method;
Teachers will be interviewed in the beginning and the end of the project;
Parents will be interviewed in the beginning and the end of the project; and
Children will be interviewed in the beginning and the end of the project;.

The data will be analyzed during the project period and also at the end.

**References**

Koshy, V. (2008). *Action research for improving practice: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

McNiff, J., Lomax, P., & Whitehead, J. (2003). *You and your action research project*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Wagner, J. (1997). The unavoidable intervention of educational research: A framework for reconsidering researcher-practitioner cooperation. *Educational Researcher*, 26(7), 13–22.