Spring 2022

The Ethics and Philosophy of Outdoor Education: Hidden Lessons Within the LeikSkoli Curriculum in Isafjordur, Iceland

Cici Conroy
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Early Childhood Education Commons, Education Policy Commons, Elementary Education Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, and the International and Comparative Education Commons

**Recommended Citation**

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
The Ethics and Philosophy of Outdoor Education: Hidden Lessons Within the LeikSkoli Curriculum in Isafjordur, Iceland

Cici Conroy
SIT Study Abroad: Climate Change in the Arctic
Advisor: Mattias Kokorsch
Academic Director: Dan Govoni
May 27, 2022
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.........................................................................................3
Abstract........................................................................................................3
Research Question.......................................................................................4
Objectives.................................................................................................4
Justification...............................................................................................4
Definition of Nature....................................................................................5
Context.........................................................................................................6
Literature Review.......................................................................................8
Methods......................................................................................................14
Ethics..........................................................................................................16
Results........................................................................................................17
Discussion.................................................................................................23
Appendix....................................................................................................25
Bibliography..............................................................................................26
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my instructors and advisors Dan Govini and Matthias Kokorsch. Their knowledge and advice greatly impacted my research and thought process. I would also like the instructors at the LeikSkoli for allowing me to participate in forest school, and understand their core values within their curriculum. This allowed me to recognize the principles behind raising the next Icelandic generation.

This project would not have been possible without the other students joining me in this SIT program. Understanding how we all interpret anthropogenic climate change, and what will happen next, forever shifted my views and my drive toward aiding not only our planet but also future generations.

Abstract

The Icelandic curriculum structures itself amongst six pillars: “literacy, sustainability, health, and welfare, democracy, and human rights, equality and creativity” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). The United States national standards for their state public schools focus on two central points: math and English language learning (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022). The way these structures are upheld reflect values, goals, and systems of knowledge. Depending on where a child is raised, the skills learned in the classroom will result in a completely different attitude toward environment, place, and success. In the United States, success seems to be defined by grading and test scores. Icelandic schools are rated based on how much outdoor time and play the children receive, along with how these six pillars are instructed. There is little testing amongst the younger school districts. This paper will aim to contrast the different ideologies behind these two curriculums, and uncover the deficits inherent in the United States educational system. I reveal that contrasting definitions of knowledge establish how one interprets values and perceives our natural world, and how this perpetuates into younger generations. As climate change intensifies, it is necessary to reveal these paradigms and educate young students on the ethics of coexistence within their changing environment.
Research Question
How does the kindergarten curriculum in Isafjordur steward appreciation for the local natural environment? How is this different from the curriculum in the United States?

Objectives
My objective in studying these questions is to look at how Isafjordur sets an ideal example for how the kindergarten, and general curriculum, is taught and upheld. Kindergartener students spend around half of their school day in the classroom, while the rest is outdoor time. This includes extracurricular activities, general play, or a scheduled outdoor class. I want to examine how this style of education increases overall place attachment, what principles the curriculum draws upon, and why this approach allows for more growth and development within the individual, along with advancing the community. I will be drawing from early environmental and educational philosophy works, indigenous knowledge, Friedrich Froebel’s principles, recently published scientific and psychological studies, informal interviews and experiences with the town's teachers, and participant observation of how young children spend their time outside of the classroom. After experiencing the public school curriculum in the United States, and speaking with two teachers, I hope to understand the differences in both nations' educational, and outdoor, philosophies. Although kindergarten education in Isafjordur is different from other districts across Iceland, outdoor time and play are becoming more and more common throughout the country. I aim to investigate how crucial this outdoor time is for our growing generations.

Justification
We live in a time where access to the outdoors is becoming increasingly scarce. Parks, gardens, and green spaces have been created throughout urban areas globally to ensure populations of all ages can reach a sort of outdoor escapism in their day-to-day life. This practice is not revolutionary or new age. The modern park movement was created in the 1840s throughout New York City, later gaining immense popularity and necessity throughout the United States in the 1880s (Evelev, 2014). The purpose behind these green spaces was to provide men and high-class citizens with an escape from urban life (Evelev, 2014). Soon, philosophers, reformists, and general urban populations began to act upon this exclusion. With enough political support and a specific call to action, this exclusion was partially dismantled. Soon after, racial
segregation began to permeate itself throughout the outdoors. This ostracism in race, gender, and class has become embedded into our outdoor spaces and general outdoor environments.

Growing up in the United States, and recently becoming involved in local environmental groups throughout the east coast, it is clear that outdoor time and recreation come with extreme privilege, and are extremely place-dependent. Traveling to Iceland, in particular Isafjordur, for my study abroad, I began to notice differences in how people associate themselves with their natural environment. In visiting Isafjordur, one will observe that outdoor time is not a subset of their lives, but instead becomes embedded into routine. Many individuals will participate in Nordic skiing, alpine skiing, hiking, biking, and walking throughout the week. No matter the weather, there seems to be a reason to find outdoor time. Parents will leave their infants in a stroller outside to sleep, letting them breathe in and feel the clean air. This outdoor regime carries itself into the younger generations. Teachers and parents generally have the same attitude towards the natural surroundings, so young children will learn to experience the outdoors in formats usually not accessible. This is also due to the trusting nature of the town, and the accountability held by each town member. With this tight-knit community caring for one another and feeling passionate about their local environment, I chose to investigate how this affects the younger generation, and why Isafjordur paves the way for a contemporary, environmentally conscious, generation.

**Definition of Nature**

There is no concrete definition for the word “nature”. Depending on which culture someone is apt to, where they relate to home, and what routines make up their daily life, each individual will look at the term differently. Some feel emotional towards nature, others feel distant. In indigenous communities, and those extremely intertwined with their environment, there is no such thing as “nature”, just simply a coexistence between humans and the rest of the world. The duality between the two is nonexistent. The term has been politicized since the beginning of mankind, gaining relations to the arts, literature, religion, colonization, resources, and ruin.

I will be discussing and analyzing nature with respect, relating to the viewpoints held by those throughout Iceland. The school system I spent time in here teaches its students how to talk and think about the weather, how to live in any environmental condition, and how to find
different local perspectives and beauty in the town. I will be honoring this sentiment. Nature is not something only found within a virgin landscape of forest or mountains, but instead everywhere around us: the air we breathe, what we touch, how we feel, and what we see. This is taught through experiential lessons in the Isafjordur LeikSkoli, the Icelandic term for kindergarten, directly translating to “Play School” (Participants 3 and 4, personal communication, 2022).

Context

Experiences, education, and everyday events mold young people's minds. When an infant begins their educational journey, each day is a learning experience. One will learn how to speak, communicate, problem-solve, and begin their understanding of the world we all live in. This is why it is crucial to introduce our natural world. For young minds, a classroom is a place where new concepts and ideas are brought to life, lessons that are not typically found at home or in casual time. They learn how to write, the function of numbers, how to read, etc (Participants 3 and 4, personal communication, 2022). What is not a central part of the general curriculum are the lessons learned in the classroom that have nothing to do with the basic lesson plans. Some of these lessons include collaboration, coexistence, reciprocity, curiosity, and appreciation. Ever since the 18th century, philosophers and theorists have emphasized the importance of these hidden lessons.

Frederich Froebel, the philosopher and educator I will be drawing from, supports the notion that nature and the environment are essential to the development of an adolescent population. Many academic papers, from the 18th century to the present day, detail the “psychological benefits of nature experience” (Hartig and Kahn, 2016). Examining psychological studies, there has been an immense global trend that looks at the benefits of nature to children. These survey the children's cognitive skills, emotional capacity, general attitudes towards nature and other humans, how much information is retained when taught about the natural environment, and what the lasting impacts are for students who experienced nature-based play or education (Bakir-Demir, Berument, & Sahin-Acar, 2019; Windhorst, 2015).

Environmental psychology has opened as a much more expansive field since the inclusion of children and their learning environments. With studies finding that these nature-based learning environments are necessary for young minds, it is necessary to investigate populations that may
not have a formal nature-based curriculum. These include all areas that provide a vast amount of outdoor time and play informally, contrasted with areas and populations that do not promote outdoor learning or play.

This all connects back to creating a generation that is much more environmentally conscious than those predating. Most communities worldwide recognize the threat of climate change. Still, it is challenging for the older generations to imagine what the world will be like once our actions snowball into greater climatic disasters. These may include floods, increase in intense weather, heatwaves, droughts, contaminated water and air, etc. Generally, those implementing crucial policies, laws, sustainable inventions and solutions, habitual changes, and designers of curriculum, are not going to be immensely affected by anthropogenic climate change. It is the children finding new skills and joy in outdoor activities and play that will be dealing with the severe consequences of past generations.

The Government of Iceland has published curriculum guides accessible to all. One of the main points within their preschool guide states a crucial learning goal for preschool students: “that we leave the environment to our descendants in no worse condition that we received it, and that we endeavour to meet the needs of the present without reducing the possibilities of future generations to meet theirs… The environment and thereby nature surround human society.” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p 18). They emphasize that change is necessary to achieve this, and not something that Icelanders should be hesitant in. Both the small and large sustainable changes are to be celebrated and honored (p. 18). The curriculum guide also states that sustainability and environmentalism are found with equal respect between humans and nature:

In order to obtain equality, democratic methods have to be employed, the diversity of mankind respected and multiculturalism ensured. Diversity is a source of strength that can eradicate poverty, contribute to peace and secure living conditions and quality of life for all, wherever they live in the world. Sustainability is a prerequisite to understand the importance of one’s own welfare and that of others (p. 18)

To be sustainable is to be neighborly, look out, and care for current citizens and the future Icelandic generations. This seems to be a recurring theme throughout the curriculum guidebook. The guide for compulsory education states the same referendum regarding sustainability. It is one of the main pillars of education and upholds a democratic system if one hopes to edify the next
Conroy 8

generation of equality. The compulsory guide states that “it is unthinkable to support human rights without simultaneously espousing sustainability and balanced social development” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p. 16). Sustainable education intersects with all sectors of forming an equitable society, becoming an objective and pillar in education instead of a simple lesson (p. 16).

This way of thinking, teaching, and learning about sustainability and environmentalism is extremely advanced in the context of general global education. To embed sustainability into a new generation is not to teach on a chalkboard, or hand out lackluster assignments, but instead to encapsulate environmentalism as a pillar of becoming. These “fundamental pillars” are embedded into Isafjordur’s youth, ones who engage with their environment on a daily basis and learn about the natural world with respect (p. 16).

Literature Review

Literature regarding environmental, outdoor, and sustainable education dates back to the 18th century. Still, this thought of instructing a new generation on a sustainable lifestyle is the foundation of most indigenous cultures. Crediting these nations and cultures with this education system is necessary. In examining publications that represent this indigenous knowledge, one can conclude that this curriculum is not a revolutionary thought from some European philosopher. This is why the foundation of my literature review will be based on indigenous cultural thought. With the goal being the application of these lessons to the global curriculum, it is necessary to look at the implications of colonization on education. The Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy recently published a report that “provides insight into how the First Nations-managed schools conceptualize sustainability and navigate systemic and localized barriers to incorporating sustainability in education” (Bentham et al., 2019, p. 191). The literature pertaining to a resurgence of indigenous thought and culture in postcolonial curriculum makes note that this subject matter intersects with all areas of life (Akena, 2012; Anuik, 2013; Battiste and Henderson, 2009; Bentham et al., 2019). Bentham et al. (2019, p. 191) state “identities, languages, ways of being, cosmologies, belief systems, sciences, and pedagogies have developed within the context of their relationships with the land”. In exploring how indigenous knowledge is translated into the growth of their young, approaches appear much more holistic than the rigid structure supported in a western school. Much of these lessons are
place-based, and indigenous knowledge is usually sacred (Batisse and Henderson, 2009, p. 5). Indigenous knowledge, abbreviated as “IK”, operates on a larger time scale than Eurocentric knowledge, “EK”, with its goal of passing on generational sustainability and an “ecological centered way of life” (p. 5-6). Eurocentric knowledge believes that progress only pertains to new technologies, inventions, and convenience (p. 6). When indigenous communities were forced to assimilate, these structures of education did not translate to indigenous challenges and ways of life (p. 6).

Genocide, assimilation schools, confinement, lack of resources, and overall neglect left many indigenous communities worldwide with a cultural crisis (Akena, 2012, p. 600). The forever-lasting effects of colonization blight this entire planet. Understanding what happened in history, and how thought processes and values evolved to reflect monetary success, is necessary if one wants to imagine a new curriculum. Dr. Francis Adyanga Akena discusses the implications of our colonial history on the development of new generations, and how they consequently relate themselves to the world:

The production of ‘legitimate’ knowledge has been closely related to the context, class affiliation, and the social identity of the producers. Knowledge producers, politics, class affiliation, and group identity symbolically influence each other in a complex manner, creating a hybrid knowledge that is a product of such interactions… since colonial knowledge is a hybrid of local context, class, and ethnic interactions… Western knowledge imposed a monolithic worldview that gave power and control in the hands of Europeans. It delegitimizes other ways of knowing as savage, superstitious, and primitive (Akena 2012, p. 600)

There is no such thing as true wisdom when examining modern western thought and knowledge. To hold wisdom in a westernized context typically comes with an association of fame, power, and wealth. The top researchers and scholars are funded for their work and broadcasted through highly elite channels. This personal, stagnant growth will advance through generations in monetary funding, stardom, and the perpetuation of western knowledge. The perpetuation, therefore, eliminates any other thought pertaining to a different culture and belief system. Global education has evolved through the eyes of colonizers, appropriately sustaining growth based on their made-up ideals. To stray from this lens, it is necessary to look at indigenous knowledge that expands itself globally “from North America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Asia, Oceania,
and parts of Europe… It is the body of historically constituted knowledge that is instrumental in the long-term adaptation of human groups to the biophysical environment” (p. 601). These indigenous knowledge networks associate themselves with place-based wisdom. There is no power relation, nor dominance, related to its expanse (p. 601).

The purpose of knowledge depends on who it will serve and benefit. This is why recent liberation movements have been extremely successful and powerful when reshaping western thought (p. 602). The political media may be quick to undermine this new wave of thought, no matter what subject it pertains to. Much of this relates to religion, and the inability to coexist with different belief systems (p. 603). This then supports the parameters of thought and allows for complete dominance in one religious reality. All local-place value is lost, and foreign ideals begin to shape an alien landscape: “Dominant groups produce subjective knowledge in order to produce more credible and effective socioeconomic and political perspectives for whatever struggle they are engaged in… Knowledge production should be examined from the perspectives of struggles among different groups that constitute a society” (p. 604). If the global curriculum eventually learns to dismantle these core colonial structures, communities will learn to raise a “holistic individual”, one that may create new ways of thought, passion, and purpose relating to their environment (p. 605). Applying this to observations made throughout my time in Isafjordur, it is apparent that the local school system is one step ahead in this overall process.

The history of Iceland’s production of knowledge and belief is unique. Written history is scarce, and little is recorded about the true era of Christian conversion. The details of relations between people and the land, gender equality, rituals, spirits, and environmental history are better understood through folklore, myth, and oral history. Icelanders first arrived as the first humans on this volcanic island. They settled, and the land instigated an entire religion, culture, and aptitude which embodied generational respect (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). After clear-cutting the island’s birch forests, Icelanders had to now deal with the consequences of forever altering their environment (Aradóttir et al., 2013; Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). With “ecosystem degradation and desertification” over the next hundreds of years after settlement, the climate grew harsh, and living conditions were nearly unbearable (Aradóttir et al., 2013). 42% of Iceland is now considered a desert, and grazing of sheep and cattle continues to debilitate any regrowth. In recognizing that the past millennia have forever changed the ecology of Iceland, Icelanders seem to have an interesting relationship with their natural place.
Iceland formally endorsed Christianity around the year 1000 (Jochens, 1999, p. 620). It is thought that the adoption of this religion and its practices instigated the use of written parchments. We know much about this time of conversion, how Icelandic tradition was held, and some traditions underwent practical and daily change (Jochens, 1999). The calendar changed, the language shifted, and communities began straying from oral tradition and lore (Jochens, 1999). Controversy, therefore, fell over what is legitimate history, and what is a folk saga:

Since the 1970s, however, saga narratives - in particular the sagas of Icelanders - have enjoyed a renaissance precipitated by poststructuralism and anthropology. At the same time the sources relating the conversion have been exposed to new theories of typology and biblical prefiguration that have yielded important interpretive results but have cast new doubts on the historicity of the evidence (Jochens, 1999, p. 624)

Oral history has historically been degraded and oppressed by colonization and religious conversion. With the global suppression of story, culture, and lore across different beliefs, these structures become described as primitive and ignorant. These structures seldom find themselves situated in the sciences, history, or education. Iceland’s oral history shares an understanding of how people here have associated themselves with the nation and their natural place. In the past 50 years, Icelandic sagas and stories have emerged back into its curriculum. Tales passed generationally are appearing throughout schools (Strmiska, 2000). In 1995, the Icelandic government funded a “theatrical performance” revolving around Eddas from ancient Ásatrú, the Norse religion of nature and life (Strmiska, 2000, p. 110). The performance took place in the Reykjavik Opera House and was attended by the president, mayor, and two other government officials (Strmiska, 2000). Strmiska (2000) states that “such government involvement with an explicitly Pagan theater production… would be unthinkable in the United States, with its markedly Christian identity, [and] the increasing influence of Christian fundamentalists at all levels of the political system…”. It is said that the resurgence of this cultural history bonds the nation, and reconnects Icelanders with their ties to this land (Strmiska, 2000).

When reading and researching the general religion of Iceland, regardless of religion and belief, nature embeds itself into stories and daily practice. Visiting the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavik, many exhibits showcase this old way of life:
Figures 1 and 2: Winter Travel Tradition (National Museum of Iceland, 2022). The exhibit states that Icelanders traveled throughout the winters with this outdoor gear.

Figure 3: “Malleus Maleficarum” (National Museum of Iceland, 2022). “Various means were used to fend off ghosts and other perils, whether human or natural… Certain plants and stones were believed to have supernatural powers that could be useful under certain circumstances” (National Museum of Iceland, 2022).

Figure 3 displays a bed panel with “magical symbols intended to safeguard the sleeper from evil”, a ring that brings good fortune, and “Aaron's Rod, a drawing of branches, for protection against evil spirits” (National Museum of Iceland, 2022). Nature in Iceland has always been a part of ritual, no matter Christian or Norse pagan.

It is difficult to draw immense conclusions from the past beliefs and how this constitutes past and present Icelandic culture. Some Icelanders feel strongly about their ties to Norse
paganism, others want nothing to do with it (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). The country now has few ties to its churches, and Christianity is not a strict practice amongst the majority of the population (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). What does seem to live on, however, is the knowledge of sagas, myths, and stories. With this comes an appreciation for the land, and how it has shaped all past beliefs.

Creating an individual that holds to their culture in Iceland is a goal the LeikSkoli in Isafjordur strives to achieve. With LeikSkoli directly translating to “play school”, I began to question where the global term “kindergarten” originates from. Federick Froebel, a philosopher and educator, coined this term around the 18th century in Germany (Frost and Sutterby, 1880, p. 292). After working with a forester, and receiving neglect throughout his childhood, he was placed into prison when not paying rent at his university (p. 293). Falling into poverty, a schoolmaster spared Froebel and pulled him into apprenticeship in an all-boys school (p. 293). It was then that Froebel began understanding the principles of education. His ideas in the creation of kindergarten towards the end of his career were so radical that the kingdom of Prussia banned this system of education.

Froebel envisioned four main principles in general adolescent development. Much of his rhetoric is inspired by his religious practice in Christianity. His first pronounces that all children are children created equal under God (p. 293). Second, all education should follow the “method of Nature”: that the universe provides the foundation for guidance and inspiration (p. 293). He claims “to try to educate a child by putting knowledge into his memory from the outside, without the waking, training, and unfolding the child himself, is like the trying to raise peaches by tying peach-blossoms… on the palings of a garden fence” (p. 293). The third principle discusses the importance of parents. Froebel states that parents must be involved in the child's “spiritual world”, understanding and mentoring emotional and mental wellbeing (p. 293). The fourth “is not to make of a child a machine to do a special sort of work, but to develop a child to a true woman or man, in the broadest sense of the word” (p. 293). Froebel's four principles envision an experience in which lessons and maturity are found throughout the entire life, not just in the classroom. Lessons are to be taught alongside the natural world, aiming to create an individual, not a worker.

Froebel's philosophy became popularized during the 1850s when it moved to the United States. At the same time as assimilation schools and intense racial segregation, the United States
was backing a radical movement to educate within the “Garden of Children”, as it directly translates (Frost and Sutterby, 2017, p. 83). An educator who studied with Froebel carried his ideas to the states, and his philosophies were backed by acclaimed physiatrists Herbert Spencer and G. Stanley Hall (p. 83). Soon after the backing of politicians, “universities formed centers for child study, and play and outdoor play environments in kindergartens were considered to have significant educational value” (p. 83). The playground movement came after kindergarten, believing that urban spaces needed a safe space for “immigrant children” to keep them “from the hazards of playing in the streets” (p. 83). This gained quick political support, and soon public schools across the nation all had kindergartens and playgrounds (p. 83).

**Methodology**

Initially, I did not know where my research would end up. After sending emails, talking to people around Isafjordur, and getting contacts through word of mouth, I was able to speak with a multitude of individuals all involved in outdoor education. I was therefore able to conduct many informal interviews and observations. I designed a set of general questions that allowed me to understand what the local environment meant for the educators, students, parents, and their children. Depending on who I met with, we would discuss different aspects of a child’s daily life here in Isafjordur. When not meeting formally, it was quite easy to walk around town and observe children at play.

I first began to understand the school system and outdoor time through my program’s host mom. After raising two daughters in Isafjordur, working in special education, and receiving a kindergarten education certification, she was able to help me brainstorm who to reach out to in the community, and help me understand why this town has pioneered Icelandic outdoor education. I later met with my host mom and her daughters towards the end of my research to get a better understanding of their place attachment, and how they find themselves relating to their local environment.

Thanks to my host mom, my second line of contact was with two ski school instructors. The instructors, also elementary school teachers, met with me in the town's cafe. I designed a set of questions to guide the conversation, although we ended up discussing many different elements of education, skiing, and outdoor activities.

**Interview Questions:**
1. How many students are involved in skiing? Is the sport growing?
2. Why are your young students granted an excessive amount of outdoor time?
3. How much outdoor time does the elementary school grant daily?
4. How long are they in school?
5. Are there field trips?
6. What do they learn inside the classroom?
7. What is the goal when children graduate and advance through the public school system?
8. Is there a correlation to the Icelandic lifestyle (i.e., Norse pagan myth, tradition, folklore, habits, etc.) that appears in the curriculum?

Through my conversation with the two ski instructors, I learned about the “Mini-Olympics” held each year for the lower grade levels, how gear is passed through the community, and how ski practices are run for younger students.

I then reached out to the head of the department at the kindergarten. I set up a meeting with her and her work colleague to discuss the outdoor efforts in the kindergarten, curriculum, and extracurricular activities. I designed a new set of questions to better understand the core values involved in education, and why LeikSkoli has adopted outdoor education.

Interview Questions

1. How long are kindergarteners in school?
2. What do they learn inside the classroom?
3. How much outdoor play? Is it daily? Are there field trips?
4. What is the goal of the kindergarten curriculum?
5. Why do you feel it is important for each child to learn how to stand on skis?
6. Why does LeikSkoli directly translate to “Play School”? What does this reflect?
7. Is there influence from your home (Norway) that led you to incorporate more outdoor education?

This conversation is where I draw most of my conclusions from. I learned a significant amount about their values, and how LeikSkoli students interact with one another in the outdoors.

The following week, I joined the LeikSkoli in their forest school. Although I do not speak Icelandic, I was able to participate in outdoor play. The two teachers I accompanied set up a slackline, a tray of apple slices, and were equipped with first aid gear. For the next 90 minutes, the children played. We built stone walls, picked Lady’s Mantle, walked on the slackline,
constructed forts, and explored. The head of the LeikSkoli toured me around the campus afterward, showing me signs, play areas, and how the classroom operates.

Figures 4 and 5: My day spent in the forest with the LeikSkoli.

I had the privilege to visit with my host family one last time to ask the youngest daughter about her experience in LeikSkoli and understand the family’s take-aways. We discussed the overall school system, what they like to do outdoors, myths and folklore, their favorite outdoor spots around town, and how they feel connected to their local land. This conversation was extremely informal, as we chatted over a dinner provided by my host-mom.

Living in Isafjordur for over two months, I have participated in an immense amount of informal observation. Anyone can watch the students run throughout the town, socializing with one another and exploring the streets. Living with two younger children in the host stay, it is obvious that regardless of the climate, there is always time to spend outside daily. Since children are taught how to handle themselves in all elements of weather, there seems to be no excuse to stay indoors. Through these informal observations, interactions with students, time in the classroom, and discussion amongst instructors, I am confident that I have received a general understanding of the values reflected throughout the LeikSkoli curriculum, along with the students that undergo their education there.

Ethics

To construct ethical research in this project, I met with professor and Anthropologist Dr. Matthias Kokorsch. It was concluded that there was no need to incorporate consent waivers in my discussions and meetings due to education and outdoor play being a lighthearted and general
topics. This is why I exclude any name or identity from my final report. Living in a small town, informal conversations and observations are critical and extremely credible. I have been able to gain great knowledge and breadth in the understanding of environmental and outdoor education just by taking part in the community throughout the past two months. When speaking with individuals and attending a couple of classes at Tangi, everyone was made aware of my project and what I was researching. The conclusions I draw are perspectives supported by the town's educators, parents, and patrons.

It is also critical to incorporate indigenous knowledge, tradition, and credit into this research. Given that colonialism has stripped different knowledge systems from public curricula globally, and how we construct success and western intelligence, it is extremely necessary to acknowledge who first understood the necessity of local environmental experience in new generations. To ethically discuss the worldwide curriculum, while drawing on references from the United States and Canada, one must recognize these colonial systems.

**Results**

There is no finite answer to my initial question. To ask whether or not an educational experience increases place attachment is dependent on how a child is raised, their experience with the community, and how they situate themselves in their environment. Education can support children's love and connection for their environment, and that is what LeikSkoli strives to attain. After meeting with two teachers at the school, understanding daily operations in the classroom, watching the children interact, and attending forest school, it can be concluded that these children relate to their environment in many ways. Forest time, and any outdoor time, is playtime. Play is not viewed as a break, but instead a learning opportunity. Children learn how to communicate, relate to each other, understand their natural surroundings, explore, and learn to fill their time with meaningful experiences. Having the space and time to explore creates a trusting atmosphere.

Speaking with older children in Isafjordur, they do not view this outdoor time as a "recess" (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). It is a part of their educational experience and therefore viewed as a holistic learning environment. The LeikSkoli teaches their students how to walk and breathe in the wind, where the streets are, what the names of Fjords mean, how to walk on the rocks at the beach, how to dress for cold weather, and eventually show
them how to walk up to the Troll Seat in the one of the town’s Fjord (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022).

Figure 6: View of TrollSeat from Forest
Figure 7: View in TrollSeat of Isafjordur (McCarty)

The head of LeikSkoli shared that the entire surrounding is the classroom (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). Teaching students that there is one room to be instructed is not effective in terms of holistic education (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). The goal of taking the students to the TrollSeat is to give them a new perspective of their environment (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). It is to train them how to walk and use their bodies in a way in which their minds will benefit.

The students have two special places outside in which they spend most of their time: the forest and the beach (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). With the students being able to access these areas weekly, they can create special bonds with different elements in each area. No matter what the weather, these special areas are used (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). The instructors talk about the weather with respect, it is never a bad day in the rain, snow, or wind (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022).

Figure 8: Depictions of different weather, and the opportunities within the weather. This is displayed in the central hall of the LeikSkoli.
They simply state “today there is a storm”, and find possibilities in this (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). When asked what the goal of the overall curriculum is, they concluded it is to train them outside every day, and to not take their natural surroundings for granted (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). The head instructor states that this sometimes needs to be retrained in students, yet because they are still so young, it is an easy task to learn new appreciation (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022).

Some students do not have access to this outdoor time when home (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). Although most parents seem to involve their children in extracurricular activities, it cannot be assumed that this is the case. These outdoor skills are therefore crucial in the curriculum. The children are provided with skis in the winter at recess to teach themselves balance and play (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). This gift was fundraised through the town, providing 16 different pairs of skis, and many different pairs of shoes (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). If a child wishes to participate in the outdoor activities in the winter, they now all have the opportunity to access the equipment and skill. Some parents have complained to the town that they do not wish their children to participate in these activities, yet the instructors insist that this is necessary for education in Northern Iceland (Participant 3, personal communication, 2022). Much of this philosophy is drawn from Norwegian sources, a country the head instructor is especially familiar with. Applying this knowledge in Iceland began popularizing in the early 2000s, and has only grown more sought-after since (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022).

When inside the classroom, they learn about their environment and how this relates to other sectors of life. This all draws back to the national curriculum’s six pillars: “literacy, sustainability, health, and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Activities relate to their environment, and how the role in which the community plays here. One example of this is an activity where the students all pick words that relate to their universe or environment and create a project off one specific word:
It is essential to get the children in their local outdoors for them to recognize the holistic essence of the environment. When instructors fail to do so, it comes from a lack of passion and understanding of the new generation they are raising (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). With regulations being extremely rigid regarding the structures of playgrounds, the local environment is necessary in becoming their place of play and learning (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). Projects to increase natural surroundings in grade schools are popping up across the nation after seeing how effective this new style of education is. In this, it is important to continue Icelandic cultural lessons (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). With forests being scarce, the coast and fields can be used to instruct history, culture, and nature (Participant 5, personal communication, 2022). Instructors, therefore, need to have rigor and passion to continue these lessons; ones that are rooted in national culture and place.

Figure 9: “Umhverfi: The Environment”. Words depicted here include “cars, boats, sun, school, volcano, toys, streets, house, grass, mountain, flowers, tree, birds, church, planes, food, northern lights, boots, butterfly, sea, etc). The offset project went into depth on one of these words. For example, what sort of birds, what kinds of ships, what streets, etc).

Figure 10: List of Icelandic birds related to their environment; created by the LeikSkoli students.
Comparing this curriculum to the United States is difficult. States operate on whatever their political party dictates as “important” when instructing younger students. I had the privilege to speak with an elementary educator in Massachusetts. The teacher instructs second grade in a large city school near Boston. The population is mostly new to the United States, coming from the Dominican Republic. They have little to no knowledge of their new place, how they relate to it, or how it is different from their home. With Massachusetts holding high standards in rankings, this particular school and town fall extremely low when compared to other state towns: “It is purely standardized test scores and only academic pillars… Common core standards are in Math and ELA [English Language Arts]. Only reading, writing, and math. That is their unified standard, so each state will take its own sub-interpretation. Other states choose what to care about, and Massachusetts holds close to the standards” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022). The teacher's class was so underperforming the past few years because their test scores were low. It had nothing to do with community outreach or contribution to the larger community, and only with low grades. Most of these values are also reflected in other Northeastern states, and penalize teachers who cannot get test scores higher. With English being their second language, it is difficult to compete with students in other towns who have the language and place advantage, along with much higher funding (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022).

There is no discussion of social or emotional learning. If a child does not reflect well on paper in math or ELA, it translates poorly for the student and the teacher. The student will receive this poor test score, and continue to place low in classes. This is typically most common in school districts with little funding, little support at home, where English is the second language, or where students lose passion. There are no skills taught, and all ratings depend on the test scores. If a teacher wishes to enact change in any of these realms, there is immense pushback from the school district and general fear of losing their job. The teacher states that there is little funding that gets pooled into resources to attempt any sort of resolution to any of these issues (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022).

This school district, along with many others across the nation, grants the students 15 minutes of recess daily. In this particular elementary school, students from second to eighth grade get a field for their outdoor time, weather permitting. There is no playground due to the complete lack of funding. If the weather is warm, they may get upwards of 25 minutes. The interviewee was unsure if there is a law for recess in the state, and there is no policy for outdoor
time nationally. This free time is usually dependent on the instructor. Although it is difficult to advocate for outdoor time, some may grant breaks while in the classroom. The issue here is that when the children go home, most do not ever get access to outdoor time within their city. It is far too dangerous to send children out in their local environment, and the city offers limited green space, and nowhere to explore. The city operates as “every man for themselves”; parents will deem other families as safe and unsafe, which limits the child's social circles (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022).

The interviewee states that in the past few years, they have seen an extreme decline in mental health among the students. COVID-19 exacerbated these circumstances, masking students and calling for intensive social distancing. They state that almost all of the teachers are aware, but there is no chance to change the system in their position. The curriculum has turned into a guide set of strategies to test well, instead of what the student is learning. Almost nothing within the subjects is interdisciplinary, and it is difficult for the students to apply this to their own lives. This creates a complete divide between education and self. With states being able to create their own rules and regulations off the loose national curriculum standards, the interviewee acknowledges that they can only speak for Massachusetts, and specifically within this school district. Still, these issues are common nationwide, and easily recognizable city to city (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022).

When asked how they envision change and progress in curriculum nationwide, the teacher answered that it must be from the bottom up. Perhaps this is new officials implementing larger change and new standards at the state level, but the interviewee states that it may be most efficient coming from passionate teachers. They are the ones in the classroom watching young children struggle with testing methods, math skills, and English literacy. If a student finds no passion in these tests or subjects, it is almost impossible to encourage growth. The interviewee gives breaks inside often, having their students watch “Our Planet”, attempting to expose them to outdoor settings they do not have access to. After moving to the United States with no knowledge of the environment and nature, and some not knowing where they are, the teacher tries to induce place attachment and lessons about the environment subtly. All of the teachers in this school district agree that experiential learning is how knowledge sticks, yet none of this is put into practice (Participant 6, personal communication, 2022).
Discussion

The differences between Iceland’s national curriculum and the United States are immense and disheartening. Experiencing the classroom in Isafjordur, and the attitude of the students here, felt alien. Coming from the United States and being familiar with the goals and expectations that amount to the defined success, I was left unsurprised, and discouraged, after speaking with the second-grade instructor in Massachusetts. It is almost incomparable. Isafjordur is a safe town with a small population. The townspeople care for one another, and there is accountability held. The environment has played a part in Iceland’s population for millennia. Access to the environment is everywhere, supported by myth, lore, religious emblems, and stories. In the United States, there is little to no generational connection to the land. Those of indigenous heritage were forcibly relocated to foreign landscapes, where many struggled with connection and spirituality. The landscape and culture forever shifted towards a white, colonial gaze.

The United States now has cities with little green space, asphalt playgrounds, unsafe recreation, and seems to have complete touch with the principles of education since colonizers arrived. The goal is to raise a child who tests correctly and is proficient in math and ELA. Any regard for their relation of self and place is neglected. Teachers and instructors who may support a return to this are easily shut down by the administrative board, as it does not reflect in the state's statistics and rankings.

What are we ranking? I am not interested in comparing the dropout rates, language proficiency, test scores, or higher education between Iceland and the United States. My goal in this research is to examine what sort of a child each country is raising: what their values are, their passions, their fear, how they mature and become, and their overall relationship with the environment. I honor indigenous knowledge and tradition in this, acknowledging the takeover of western thought. Colonizers established the foundations of how we interpret knowledge. Any culture or individual who did not fit this narrative was soon assimilated through education. What we are left with is a nationwide school system power-hungry for test scores. The goal is instead to raise a worker, a machine, as coined by Froebel. Children are left with little to no outdoor time, no space for collaboration, and no chance to uncover themselves. Instead, the process of creating a machine indoctrinates young minds at the beginning of their public education. As Froebel articulates, “to try to educate a child by putting knowledge into his memory from the outside, without the waking, training, and unfolding the child himself, is like the trying to raise
peaches by tying peach-blossoms… on the palings of a garden fence” (Frost and Sutterby, 1880, p. 293). To disengage a child's mind from their thoughts, fears, and experiences manipulates a being that grows dependent on the very institute it must confine to.

Iceland’s curriculum is radical when compared to the United States. The local LeikSkoli of Isafjordur aims to raise the holistic individual, one who experiences and relates to their natural environment. When watching the children throughout the town, they explore and create. The town is their playground. If the United States wishes to raise a different individual, there needs to be a complete restructuring of the national core curriculum. Math and ELA hold no comparison to the pillars of Icelandic schools. The United States must start with the incorporation of longer recesses, and a great amount of funding. The funding can support the restoration of playgrounds, urban greenspace, school gardens, and reward teachers and educators with appropriate salaries. The curriculum must restructure itself to create a student who relates to their world. Perhaps it is then that our next generation of adults can solve the issues and ailments that plague nations.

Being most concerned with the climate crisis, my goal in this research is to assess how our future generations will handle our climatic consequences. It is unfair to raise a population in the standards of our success if the world we leave behind is crumbling due to our manufactured definition of power, success, and knowledge. To raise a population and attempt to restructure values, education must coincide with our natural world. Creating local place attachments secures a bond that cannot be stripped with western ideals of success. It is through these emotions and lessons that perhaps the next generation can salvage the carnage of colonization and anthropogenic climate change.
Appendix
IK: Indigenous Knowledge

EK: Eurocentric Knowledge

ELA: English Language Arts

Participant 1: Isafjordur ski school instructor and elementary educator

Participant 2: Isafjordur ski instructor

Participant 3: Head of LeikSkoli, Isafjordur’s kindergarten.

Participant 4: Instructor at Isafjordur’s LeikSkoli

Participant 5: Host mom, parent, and trained and licensed adolescent educator

Participant 6: Second-grade teacher in Massachusetts, USA
Bibliography


https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0102


Participant 1 - Isafjordur Ski School Instructor 1, & Participant 2 - Isafjordur Ski School Instructor 1. (2022, April 14). [Personal interview].

Participant 3 - Tangi Leikskoli, & Participant 4 - Tangi Leikskoli. (2022, May 5). [Personal interview by the author].

Participant 5 - Isafjordur Parent and Academic Instructor. (2022, May 18). [Personal interview by the author].

Participant 6 - United States Elementary Instructor. (2022, May 21). [Personal interview].


https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2000.4.1.106

http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76v8x.14

file:///Users/catherineconroy/Downloads/Old_Gutnish_Historical_Phonology_and_the%20(1).pdf