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# Keeping preschools open during Covid-19: The employees' perspective

**Abstract:** During the first wave of the pandemic and Iceland's partial lockdown, preschools and primary schools were open and preschool staff members were defined as frontline workers. This study aimed to identify how the preschool personnel carried out their work and what they felt about being frontline workers during the lockdown. A questionnaire was distributed online in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic, and 658 preschool teachers and other preschool workers responded. Both statistical and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data collected. Most participants were optimistic and believed their work was useful. However, many felt they were in a vulnerable position and in danger of both contracting the virus and possibly transmitting it to their own families and the families of the preschool children. The employees trusted the civil protection authorities; despite this, many were worried and thought the authorities lacked knowledge of the working conditions within preschools.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, preschools, early childhood, working conditions

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## Introduction

»We are all in this together. Each of us is a civil public protectionary.« This has been a common slogan in Iceland since the beginning of March 2020. Suddenly, school employees became frontline workers, a concept new to many of them. Why? On 31 December 2019, news of an unknown virus that had infected people in Wuhan, China was released by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). The virus, which soon came to be known as Covid-19, spread rapidly, and at an early stage it was clear that this was a pandemic that would affect the entire world. Cross-border travel was vastly diminished, and every nation had to make decisions concerning how to curb the spread of the virus. Iceland declared a civil protection emergency due to Covid-19 on 6 March, when the first infection was detected domestically (National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police, The Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management 2020).

On Friday 13 March 2020, Iceland went into soft lockdown,<sup>1</sup> and a ban on social gatherings was announced, which came into force on Monday 16 March. Subsequently, many companies' offices were closed, and employees brought their workstations home; teaching in colleges and universities went online, and restrictions on leisure activities, entertainment and religious activities were imposed (Advertisement for restriction of meetings due to epidemics 217/2020). Primary schools allowed a maximum of 20 students in the same classroom, and classes could no longer socialise. Preschools could remain open, but measures were taken to ensure that groups were kept separate and small (The ban on Covid-19 will take effect 16 March 2020). *The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities* (2020) declared that the safety and health of children and staff was a priority. Preschools and primary schools faced the challenge of organising themselves based on the maximum number of people who could safely come together in a space while still meeting the demands to sanitise, for example, the toys and other learning materials each day (Pálsson 2020).

<sup>1</sup> The word »lockdown« is used as a synonym for bans on social gathering and social distancing, when the term fits the context. Iceland did not go into a complete lockdown, as shops, for example, were open (with restrictions) and people could go outside as much as they liked.

Before Easter, on 24 March, the lockdown was tightened (Advertisement for restriction of meetings due to epidemics 243/2020). Preschools and primary schools again had to review their practices and follow new norms (National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police, The Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management and The Directorate of Health 2020). On 14 April, a relaxation of the lockdown was declared, due to go into effect on 4 May. From that date forward, preschools and primary schools were to operate as normally as possible, and all schools were exempted from the two-metre rule (Government of Iceland 2020; Advertisement for restriction of meetings due to epidemics 360/2020).

It was not clear what this relaxation meant for schools because it was accompanied by confusing messages from the government. A public safety briefing on 19 April indicated that preschools and primary schools could operate in a traditional format after 4 May; however, on the evening news that same day, the Minister of Education stated that the two-metre rule would apply in schools, which would complicate their reopening plans (Sigurðardóttir 2020). On 20 April, the national epidemiologist stated that infections from children to adults »hardly occur«, and therefore the two-metre rule could be lifted for all children (Kjartansson 2020 a). The same message was repeated during a public state briefing on 21 April, when it was clarified that the two-metre rule applied only to adults (Kjartansson 2020 b).

As of 16 March, preschools and primary schools had to change how they were organised and operated to take into account the rules connected to the lockdown. This placed teachers in unprecedented situations, both in terms of working conditions and uncertainty about the potential personal risk of infection. As an example of contradictory information, Thor (2020), a paediatric epidemiologist, stated in an open lecture on the Icelandic National Hospital's website that there was no evidence that children played a major role in the spread of the virus. However, at the same time, he reported risks following the examination of children's oral cavities without virus-proof equipment. This left many teachers, especially those of the youngest children, feeling as if they had been left hanging; many were uncertain about their own health and safety, circumstances that led to increased general stress at work.

This article addresses school closures during problematic times and gives a voice to Icelandic preschool employees concerning their experiences and views on matters related to working during the first wave of the Covid-19 lockdown.

## Preschools in Iceland

Preschool attendance in Iceland is considered universal. Children start preschool around the age of 18–24 months. According to *Statistics Iceland* (2017), around 97% of children two-and-a-half to six years old, and about 80% of children aged between one-and-a-half and two years old, attend preschool. All preschools have full-day classes, and most children attend school for around seven-and-a-half to eight hours a day (Statistics Iceland 2017). In Iceland, 25% of the staff working with children in preschools are licenced preschool teachers (Statistics Iceland 2020). Icelandic preschools have, for many years, reflected the private labour market in

terms of their opening hours and operational days. Most preschools are open from 7:45 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and they operate for 220 days per year.

## School Closures

School closures, in some form, seem to have been considered an essential factor in stopping the spread of the virus worldwide. For example, China closed its schools early in the epidemic and sent more than 220 million children and young people, including 47 million preschool-aged children, into home quarantine (Wang et al. 2020). Data published by UNESCO (2020 a) estimates that about 70% of all children in the world were affected by closures or minimised schooling.

There are varying views, both medical and sociological, on the usefulness of school closures. Viner et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of school closures in connection with previous pandemics and declared that it is uncertain how effective school closures are, relative to the spread of a virus. The results of such actions are likely to be insignificant and would not be effective unless they were taken in parallel with more comprehensive action. The information on which these decisions are based tends to be scarce. They also suggest that school closures probably have little effect even when schools are only open to the children of frontline workers. Uscher-Pines et al. (2018) point to possible practices for keeping schools open; these include taking group sizes into account, using social distancing and keeping children in the same classroom all day to reduce children mixing. They also recommend shorter school weeks, closing playgrounds and suspending extracurricular activities. The mentioned issues call for a reshuffling of schools' organisation and planning, perhaps even including a reduction in the number of children present simultaneously in the school. It is worth noting that their ideas are comparable to the criteria used in schools in Iceland during the 2020 lockdown.

Others have pointed to the darker side of school closures, which must also be kept in mind. Wines et al. (2020) argue that school closures can have a variety of negative effects, such as on family finances if parents lose their jobs, and other effects on those who are frontline workers. They also mention issues such as grandparents taking care of children, which could place older people in danger and have a negative impact on children's education, the wellbeing of those belonging to marginalised groups and on health and nutrition.

Experience has also shown that the social consequences of school absence can be significant (Goldschmidt 2020). Children in a vulnerable position are at greater risk of being more affected by school closures than other children. In the long run, a closure will lead to more social discrimination and can have a severe impact on children's education in both the long and short term. In comparison, research from the US has shown that when children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds do not attend school for an extended period they are more likely not to return to school at all (Fry-Bowers 2020; Lancer and Parolin 2020). Wang et al. (2020) state that the risk of infection alone is not a sufficient reason to close schools. Overall, the impact of school closures on children's mental and physical health must not

be underestimated; stress, fear of infection, lack of communication with peers and friends, lack of personal space and even worries about the wellbeing of the family are all factors that can affect children's wellbeing, and must be considered.

Communities have taken different paths in reopening schools, and many have been hesitant in their attitudes toward reopening. The UNESCO (2020 b) guidelines highlighted the importance of keeping communication channels open, not only within the school community, with the government and school administration, but also with health professionals. These emphasise that trust among stakeholders is a prerequisite for success.

Even though Icelandic preschools and primary schools remained open with some restrictions, the infection curve in Iceland was flattened early (Dewan et al. 2020), which supports the decision to keep them open and shows it to have been a sensible one. It is important for the authorities to be able to build trust in their own actions, such as opening schools. According to a study conducted by Gallup (2020) in April 2020, 96.4% of respondents in Iceland said they trusted the authorities based on how they had dealt with the epidemic.

## Method

The study aimed to explore the opinions and experiences of people working in Icelandic preschools during the lockdown. The research discussed here is based on an online questionnaire comprising open-, semi-open and closed-ended questions answered by preschool employees.

### *Research questions*

The portion of the study presented here focuses on finding answers to the following research questions, which were intended to lead to a better understanding of preschool staff members' opinions and experiences.

Thinking about the lockdown, we asked preschool employees:

- How was the flow of information from the public sector to the preschools?
- How did preschool employees view their status as frontline workers?
- How was the working environment within preschools during the lockdown?
- What was the daily relationship with parents like during children's arrival at and departure from the preschool?

### *Data collection and processing*

A questionnaire was prepared specifically for this study. Questions were either open-ended, semi-open-ended or closed-ended. The closed-ended questions could be answered with »yes«, »no« and »irrelevant«, or »often«, »rarely« or »never«. Some

of the questions were followed up with semi-open-ended questions to obtain more in-depth answers. Specialists working within the preschool read over and were consulted in the drafting of the questionnaire, as they were considered to have inside knowledge about what was on the minds of preschool staff.

The questionnaire was distributed on social media, via Facebook, in two already-existing groups, one for preschool teachers and the other a general group about preschools' pedagogy and work for both teachers and general staff, and the questionnaire was open to all of those interested in participating. The targeted participants were all those working with children in the preschools. All survey responses were anonymous and untraceable.

The questionnaire was published on 8 April 2020, the Wednesday before the Easter holidays. This date was chosen because it was considered likely that people would have more time to respond during the break. It was republished on the Facebook groups after the Easter holidays with a new introductory text that encouraged preschool employees without formal teacher's education credentials to respond. This was done because the researchers considered it important to get a broad view of the experiences of all preschool employees, and this was one way of showing those without teaching licences that their answers were important for inclusion in the study. This led to more than 100 new replies, but the proportion of respondents who did not have a teaching licence and others remained the same. The survey was available on the website for 10 days and garnered a total of 658 responses, which accounted for about 10% of all preschool employees in Iceland at the end of 2019 (excluding those who work in food services and facilities cleaning) (Statistics Iceland 2020).

Of those who completed the questionnaire, 61% had a teaching license (today a Master of Education is required to obtain a teaching licence in Iceland); 14.6% had other types of university education, 6.9% were educated preschool assistants and 17.5% were unskilled staff.

This article is mainly based on answers to the survey's open-ended and semi-open-ended questions, but it also uses statistical data when appropriate to the context. Direct quotations are marked with the date when the person in question completed the survey, as events, decisions and knowledge in society can affect the answers at any given time and the status when relevant. The quotations were chosen to provide deeper insights into the minds of the respondents and give a sense of the discourses within the preschools. The quotes have been translated from Icelandic; all translation is problematic, and in this case an attempt was made to retain both the voices (feelings) and meanings of the quotes.

## Results

As mentioned above, 658 people responded to the questionnaire, and the results are based on those answers. The results are presented in four sections: information flow during the lockdown, being a frontline worker, working environment and the daily relationships with parents. Each of these was a contributing factor to the

overall feelings of staff members in Icelandic preschools during the first wave of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown.

### *Information flow during the lockdown*

The survey results show that preschool employees are most satisfied with the work of the civil protection team (92%), and that the municipal governments have done the least in providing information (58%). The main criticism of the local governments noted in the comments was that they paid little attention to the wellbeing of the schools' staff and their personal circumstances. Respondents also stated that the information provided needed to be clearer, and that the employees needed support. This view is crystallised in the comment: »Little or no information comes from the town council or the educational committee, other than refusing us to take a staff organising day [a day without children attending preschool]. No words of encouragement, or anything to lift the spirits of the staff« (8 April). Decisions did not consider everything that should be kept in mind, such as the need for shorter opening hours as the staff needed more time to, for example, clean and disinfect toys and common spaces. Employees also thought recommendations on how to prioritise care for the children of frontline workers should have been made, and that the access of other children should have been restricted. The necessity of coordinating the organisation between preschools and primary schools was also mentioned. The fact that preschools were open during Holy Week (the week before Easter) did not sit well with some; they felt it reflected different attitudes toward preschool and primary school teachers. This attitude led some teachers to consider moving to a primary school, which is possible in Iceland as teachers' licences are the same for both levels: »Don't get me wrong, I love my job and the children, but still, it has happened. I've decided to apply to teach at a primary school. I've done this after careful consideration and, yes, I am a little sad. I feel, on the eve of these new actions concerning Covid-19, it shows a massive difference in the workload and the facilities of teachers between the school levels.« (8 April)

Although preschool staff are satisfied with the work of the civil protection team, they stated that many people seem to lack knowledge and understanding of the nature of the work in preschools: »When the national epidemiologist said that instructions on restrictions on school work were precise, I felt uncertain about many things« (8 April). Another said: »How can it be possible to maintain preschool activities with no resources? No contact, no learning materials, limited playing areas, but they expect everything to be 'normal'!!!« (8 April).

Simultaneously, the main criticism of the civil protection team was that there was little or no real discussion about the preschools' employees, their risk of infection and the inevitable exemptions to the rules that were required when working with young children. As one teacher said: »I generally feel that there is a lack of better explanations and instructions from everyone at the national Covid briefings. There is little to no discussion about staff; children are the only ones mentioned, and I feel like they think the staff matter very little.« (8 April)

*Being defined as a »frontline worker«*

When it became clear that schools would stay open, with certain restrictions, during the lockdown, the decision came as a surprise to the majority of preschool employees. More than half (55%) said that the decision had surprised them, while only 32% had anticipated the decision. Others (13%) had not formed an opinion in advance, and therefore did not have certain expectations. As one said: »I am struggling, open or not open. I felt that too much emphasis was placed on the children being less infected and the staff were forgotten in the discussion. Then, it was stated in the news yesterday that those who carry the virus but are asymptomatic are most likely to infect others, and this also applies to children.« (16 April)

The question regarding how employees would prefer to oversee the opening of preschools showed that most did not oppose it; only 5.2% of respondents thought that preschools should be closed during the assembly ban. In comparison, 12.3% wanted schools to operate normally, while 57.5% wanted preschools to be open only for the children of frontline workers.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management defined preschool staff members as frontline workers. When asked how they felt about this definition, the answers reveal their strong emotions. On this question, there was an option to mark more than one reply, and the vast majority said they felt proud (57%), but people also said they were worried (43%) or felt defenceless (32%). Others mentioned feelings of anxiety (31.5%), gratitude (29.5%), indifference (8.6%), anger (8.5%) and, finally, joy (7.2%). Respondents were also allowed to comment on their experiences; here is a typical example: »Since I have worked in a preschool for many years and never received recognition for my job, it felt special that, all of a sudden, we became 'frontline workers'. It will be interesting to see how important we are after Covid-19. Will we return to being the invisible people who take care of the children?« (10 April)

The data shows that many people had conflicting emotions; on the one hand, they felt pride, responsibility and the importance of being a participant in this social project, but on the other hand, they felt vulnerability, anger, anxiety and fear: »I did not choose to be a frontline worker, so I experienced anger and anxiety, but at the same time, I was proud to do my duty. However, I was worried about being easily infected at work and that I would bring the virus home to my family.« (8 April)

Analysing the discourse of the open questions made it clear that staff members were concerned about infecting their families and felt that decisions, often made from above, did not always reflect what was doable in the preschools. They also wanted their jobs to be valued at other times as well, and they noted the hypocrisy in decision making from the top. They felt the emphasis was on the service role of preschools, and noted an expectation to do jobs that were not part of their job descriptions. Finally, many felt powerless concerning their working conditions. Here are a few examples of their thoughts: »The organisation of the opening seems to revolve around preschool being a service. All of the children have shown up in my class, some who have parents on parental leave and do not need the service, yet at the same time, there is a lack of staff due to illness, and there has been a



lot of pressure. The workload is more massive than usual, we have taken on jobs such as disinfection, washing toys, locking doors with keys, open and handing over toys and children, making sure disinfection and hand-washing is being done and not going between rooms. We have also had to wash the school laundry and use the professional preparation room as a cafeteria, which led to disruption for those preparing when people are talking to each other and grabbing coffee and such. It was decided from above that everyone could be there, and then we have to sort things out with just a spray bottle full of alcohol to protect us.« (8 April)

Another respondent said: »People initially felt that they were being thrown to the lions. We are on [a] shitty salary, supposed to be on the front line and have nothing to say about it. And then, we received such an empty thanks« (17 April). Another said: »Employees have done a great deal of work that is not as valued as that of healthcare professionals. For example, they are getting gifts and being applauded by society, but few thank the staff of the preschools for their work. Preschool staff are also heroes. They strive to disinfect, divide children into groups and make everything work so that all the people in the front line can go to their jobs. [...] I want preschool staff to be valued by the community.« (8 April)

Every day, preschool employees had to take time to clean and disinfect their schools, a job added to their other tasks, or as one described it: »[It is] morbidly hard work to clean and spray everything after each day and take care of it« (8 April). Yet more work was added to the staff members' working days, such as consultation meetings after the children went home, and there were examples of municipalities refusing to pay overtime.

»But, wow, how proud I am of my group! Everyone came in at 8:00 and stayed until 16:30. We started having small staff meetings at the end of each day, outside, to review the situation. [...] I thought this was a critical endpoint every day, mainly to thank each other for the day and to decide whether we could do something better.« (15 April)

### *Working environment*

The new working environment affected the professional work of the schools in different ways. One of the most significant influencing factors was that, in most preschools, there were fewer children and more space than usual. As groups of children were limited in size, there seemed to be much more satisfaction and more pride in the work. Play and creative work increased, and there were more opportunities to take better care of individual children, which the employees believed resulted in the children feeling better. Most of these factors are crystallised in a response from 8 April: »Due to the small number of children in preschool every day, there has never been such a driving force in creative work. All employees are trying new things and letting their lights shine. The reduced number of children has also allowed us to give some children more time than usual and take better care of them. There are quite a few who are much more willing to come to preschool now than usual, and they also feel a little better. They still ask for their friends and the other

teachers, and look forward to when the virus is gone and we can do something fun together. I also find it wonderful to be able to let them decide what we do, go on a field trip or whatever we can think of, even if there are limitations. It is also more complicated to want to give them freedom and strengthen their independence, but to be continually hammering about handwashing and not being allowed to do so alone. However, they have been quick to adapt and get used to the situation.«

Others found the situation more complicated. »I feel good, but I also feel a little detached, as the work is fragmented and each child gets so few [school] hours. Still, I always try to do something unique with them« (15 April). On a more positive note, the staff members mentioned that they hoped to take successful changes made during the lockdown with them into the future, not least having fewer children in each group: »I hope we can keep these smaller groups that we have created because the work is going much better and everyone is experiencing differences in the children« (16 April).

It seems that preschools with a strong work ethic before the lockdown had a foundation to build upon, and the staff were able to tackle the problem together. As stated in one of the answers, »The preschool has been incredibly successful in adapting to a completely changed way of operating as a result of a completely changed way of working. It shows the strength and the solidarity of the staff« (15 April). Others found strength in the preschool plans and curriculum: »I like the fact that the work environment is familiar, apart from us being much more and more in our classrooms. I could not work if everything became stiff and completely different. I think the children have taken this very well, and I think it is because we try to make everything look as normal as we can.« (9 April)

Part of the working environment is how well people are doing emotionally. The participants were asked questions concerning their wellbeing, and 657 responded. In general, people felt good; they were optimistic, coping well with problems and found it beneficial to be working, but some also felt anxious. Anxiety was the factor that separated the groups; for example, unskilled workers were more likely to experience anxiety (57.5%) than those with a teaching license (34.7%).

Several factors seemed to influence the wellbeing of employees, for example if they were afraid of being infected at work, but 18% of respondents said they were »very afraid« of being infected at work, and almost half were »somewhat in fear« of the same. One-third of the respondents had little or no concern about infection.

Staff members felt they had taken on an increased workload while working during the lockdown. Part of that included changes and uncertainty related to the lockdown, which caused additional stress and anxiety. For example, work protocols could be complicated during mealtimes. People were running back and forth, knocking on locked doors as the schools were split into quarantine sections and staff were not supposed to be in physical contact with one another.

»This has gone well, but it is still incredibly stressful. However, last week we closed earlier, at around 15:15. It is difficult to describe; our minds are not in the right place, the children are sensitive, there is tension in the air. Normalcy and the relaxed preschool work are missing, with all this alcohol spray and restrictions on learning materials. The job is also more monotonous, not going to visit between

classrooms, and there is more running, for example to pick up food and such. The need to knock on the fire door, then somebody comes from the other side.« (8 April)

It caused anxiety when staff members expected the civil protection team to make changes to the lockdown criteria, as can be seen in a quote from 17 April: »[...] I am very nervous how this will be from 4 May«. The same can be seen in a response from 8 April: »[...] it is half-past seven in the evening before Easter holidays, and I don't know how the plan will be after Easter. But I will probably be at work every other day with the same group as before«.

Others had already made plans and were looking ahead: »We are going to tighten operations after Easter and divide the staff into two groups; we are anxious about what is to come after Easter. We think it will be a challenging time ahead. We are exhausted in our school, but we still always have a smile on our face and help each other and are solution-oriented.« (8 April)

Employees reported missing the children who were not attending school, and found not seeing their co-workers difficult. However, they were also positive and happy with many factors, as reflected in this answer: »I think the organisation and the atmosphere have been good. I feel that some are more worried than others, which is understandable, and we have all understood that. I also feel that this distance between employees, and the fact that they have not had any contact with the other staff members after a change in planning, is a negative aspect. However, the current organisation is necessary as it is. I also miss the children who are not attending, and I hear from the parents who decided to have their children at home about how much they miss the preschool, but are at the same time enjoying being at home with their families.« (16 April) The job has been a challenge, and it has affected the wellbeing of employees.

### *Daily relationships with parents*

As part of the guidelines from most of the larger municipalities (Government of Iceland 2020), each preschool was encouraged to draw up rules concerning the daily relationship with parents, such as school drop-off and pickup times. Among others, they were to designate a pickup space and time slots. The results show that 96.5% of respondents work in schools with rules that are mostly respected (60% were »absolutely« respected, and 33% were respected »to a large extent«). However, there were variances in how the rules were enforced. In some places this went well, while in other places it went badly. The following are two examples that demonstrate this difference: »It is apparent how we organise, and both parents and staff follow the rules. Parents come to the cloakroom, and children are welcomed there. No one comes further into the school. Parents are very positive, cooperative and grateful for how we do this.« (8 April)

A later example also highlighted the employees' underlying fear of infection: »Many rules, such as parents not coming into the classroom, were only words on paper that no one followed. [...] Great disrespect on the parents' part. [...] The staff

must suddenly and daily endure being close to several parents who do not respect the rules and, consequently, have a bigger risk of infection.« (19 April)

Not all employees found it easy to deal with parents who had problems following the rules. There were more examples of parents stopping and chatting, or taking their time in the cloakroom, arriving late with the children or not keeping to the time allotted to them. Some preschools allocated parents a certain amount of pickup time to reduce the number of parents within the school at the same time.

It seems clear that the behaviour of some parents was worrisome for the staff, especially how many parents had trouble respecting the rules. The answer below is detailed but typical.

»Very soon, parents started to follow their children into the classroom. [...] During Week 3 of the lockdown, parents began to show up with their children in the classroom every morning, in the afternoon picking them up in class, bringing with them an associated increased risk of infection for staff and other children.« (19 April)

The results show that the physical layout of the schools sometimes hindered the implementation of rules and made it difficult to enforce them. For example, a cloakroom that many classes shared could make it difficult to restrict access, especially given that parents were coming and going at similar times. One employee described the problem as follows: »It is just very difficult to follow all the rules in this regard, with a common cloakroom for all the children and one entrance to the building« (8 April). In general, the children's arrivals and departures seem to have been a problem and put a strain on the staff, as can be seen here: »I find this most difficult because parents come into the school, and I am most afraid of being infected by them. I strongly urge parents to be quick and to stop for only a short amount of time, but still take care of their child. Some parents are careless and feel that all these rules are an unnecessary mess.« (14 April)

The survey also revealed that employees, too, sometimes forgot the rules and chatted with parents in the cloakroom, especially at the beginning of the lockdown. Some felt that parents needed time to talk or, as one said, »Parents are starving for communication and want to try to make up for it with a chat in the cloakroom« (8 April). Staff members also mentioned that adhering to the two-metre rule is not always possible when working with the youngest children, and it is impossible to enforce rules that are applied elsewhere in the community in the preschool due to the nature of its operations. An employee who works with the youngest children put it this way: »It is difficult to follow the rules completely when receiving the youngest children because they often have to be taken from parents' arms« (8 April). One of the rules set at the beginning was that all children should wash their hands as soon as they arrived at preschool. This could be problematic, as is clear from the comment below, and it added to the stress experienced by employees: »Under those circumstances, disputes between staff have arisen. Some find it difficult to let children know they are welcome, but to wash hands before they take them into their arms—yes, their arms—because those rules are contrary to the image of the preschool, which wants to be welcoming to children. And the parents are not allowed to come into the classroom, and some children also have a hard time

coming in; they feel this tension in everyone. We have children under the age of two, and you cannot get through the day with them unless you take them in your arms. [...] In between going to work, it's like I am in quarantine. I take off all my clothes when I arrive home, I meet no one outside of work and my daughter, who also works in a preschool, does not want to meet me and my husband out of fear that she will possibly infect us. (9 April)«

The rules concerning children and distance were difficult for both children and adults, as clearly stated in the words of one employee: »It was very difficult at first with the youngest children, who usually go from our arms to their parents' arms. It went incredibly well, to teach them to run to the teacher, or put those who have not started to walk on the floor and the teacher picks the child up as the parent backs out; still, it does not always work.« (8 April)

Working in preschools requires communication and close relationships with both children and their parents, and even if rules are set it does not mean that, in the heat of the moment, they are enforced—at least not without compromising the children's need for care and intimacy. Here is an example of such a situation: »On the other hand, it has happened that, when children are somewhat vulnerable and feeling bad, our physical closeness to parents becomes greater, for example if the child is crying and a staff member needs to take the child out of the parents' arms to be able to comfort her. This is a situation that probably cannot be avoided.« (9 April)

## Discussion

To successfully open a school, UNESCO (2020 a) advises nations to build trust, a good flow of information and close collaboration with scientists. Gallup (2020) stated that Icelanders' level of trust in the authorities' response to Covid-19 is one of the highest in the world. This trust in the civil protection authorities is evident in the staff members' responses. However, despite the confidence in the civil protection efforts, many were worried and did not consider the information they had received to be based on the best knowledge and/or understanding of preschool activities and the working environment in preschools. According to the employees, the public civil protection team should have discussed the situation in preschools in more detail and made statements about the employees' risk of infection. Even though there is trust in the civil protection authorities, the same is not true for the local governments; some of the preschool staff believed they were not in their corner and failed to acknowledge their effort, anxiety and extra workload.

Despite their overall goodwill, the preschool personnel worked in difficult and demanding conditions, both physically and mentally, in many places. The planning and carrying out of pedagogical work seems to have been successful in most cases, and people felt it was an advantage to be with children in smaller groups than usual. The possible lesson here is to look at the number of children in each classroom and the space they have. In Iceland, there has been discussion for some years regarding the lack of square metres available to children within the preschools, and how these small spaces affect the pedagogical work. During the

first wave, fewer children were in the schools and the pedagogy became unhurried in some ways. With more attention paid to the individual children, in some cases the play flourished and developed.

Although most participants were optimistic and thought their work was useful, some were worried about becoming infected at work, often by meeting those parents who had difficulty respecting distance and time limits. One cannot help but wonder how important the organisation and design of preschools are. Common cloakrooms and small spaces are typical in Icelandic preschools, and this became problematic during the lockdown. As Iceland is part of the Arctic Circle and outdoor activities are an essential part of all preschools' curriculum, children need bulky outdoor clothes that take up a lot of space during the winter, and this makes the cloakrooms feel even smaller. The nature of the work is another factor, because work with young children involves closeness and intimacy. It is not possible to withhold social distancing from children and, in many cases, from parents; small children, for instance, are transferred from the arms of parents to the staff and vice versa. This closeness is part of what worries the employees and has led to some of them self-quarantining at home between working days, which may lead to greater anxiety and personal fear.

It is worth noting that the social consequences of school absence can be significant (Goldschmidt 2020). With these concerns in mind, it is important to have schools open. However, one must also wonder about the parents who chose to keep their children at home, and whether this has, among other things, put children who should have been in kindergarten, for the sake of both their mental and physical health, in a vulnerable position (Wang et al. 2020). Who are the children kept at home, and why, should be questioned by the educational authorities.

From the outset, it was clear that there was little information about Covid-19 and how the virus that caused it behaved (Lipsitch et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2020; Zimmermann and Curtis 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that people have been feeling anxious and insecure. In many parts of the world, schools were closed early in the pandemic (UNESCO 2020 b); however, in Iceland, the decision was made to keep preschools and primary schools open, and both staff and parents were asked to trust Icelandic scientists. Although the trust was there, there was also simultaneously fear and anxiety; many staff members were afraid of carrying the infection to their families, becoming sick themselves or passing the infection on to the children. They felt that, even though they were designated as frontline workers, they were not protected, thanked or acknowledged like other frontline workers around the country, a situation which seems to have left some of them feeling both hurt and invisible.

This study attempted to draw a picture of aspects of the work in preschools during the lockdown, based on the experiences of the preschools' employees. The decision to keep schools open is not questioned or judged; however, attention is focused on lessons learned, on what went well and on what must be changed if Iceland has to deal with another wave of Covid-19. The importance of authorities becoming aware of the pressure, both personal and professional, on employees involved with keeping schools open during lockdown is stressed.

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### **IZKUŠNJA VRTCEV, ODPRTIH V ČASU PANDEMIJA COVIDA-19: POGLED ZAPOSLENIH**

**Povzetek:** Med prvim valom pandemije in delnim zaprtjem Islandije so vrtci in osnovne šole ostali odprti, zaposleni v vrtcih pa opredeljeni kot delavci v prvih bojnih vrstah. Cilj te študije je bil ugotoviti, kako so vzgojitelji in vzgojiteljice v vrtcu opravljale svoje delo in kakšna so bila njihova stališča do tega, da so bili med zaprtjem države med najbolj izpostavljenimi. Sredi prvega vala pandemije smo po spletu razposlali vprašalnik, na katerega se je odzvalo 658 vzgojiteljic in vzgojiteljev ter drugih predšolskih delavcev. Za analizo zbranih podatkov smo uporabili statistično in vsebinsko analizo.

Večina sodelujočih v raziskavi je bila optimistična; verjeli so, da je njihovo delo koristno. Vendar pa so se mnogi počutili ranljive ter v nevarnosti, da se okužijo z virusom in ga morebiti prenesejo na svoje družine oziroma družine predšolskih otrok. Zaposleni so zaupali organom civilne zaščite, kljub temu pa so bili mnogi v skrbeh, poleg tega pa se jim je zdelo, da šolske oblasti delovnih razmer v vrtcih ne poznajo dovolj dobro.

**Ključne besede:** covid-19, vrtci, predšolsko obdobje, delovni pogoji

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