

*I don't have to say it because of my culture I have to shut up. I'm going to tell you as it is.*

**Narratives of Maternal Action and Cultural Reevaluation in Relation to the Transition to School**

**Abstract**

The transition to primary school is widely seen as a period of multifaceted transformations and adoptions of different strategies for parents, yet relatively little is known about lived transition experiences of parents from diverse (linguistic, cultural, socio-economic) backgrounds. This paper explores the issue by examining maternal narratives in the context of having a child starting school in settings defined by family diversity through the lens of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Four rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with two mothers of children from diverse backgrounds during their first year of primary school in two neighborhoods in Reykjavík, Iceland. The findings show that for these mothers, engagement with the Icelandic ECEC system before and during the transition to school triggered them to take action when they felt their concerns about the child's wellbeing were not taken seriously. The mothers' experiences furthermore brought about critical reevaluation of their cultural background.

**Keywords:** Transition, Diversity, Mothers, Narrative analysis, Freire.

## Introduction

The start of primary school has been framed as a time of change, challenges and concerns for parents in international academic literature. When children transition to primary school their parents undergo their own transition; roles, responsibilities, relationships and identities are altered by becoming parents of a school child and old contexts are replaced with new which need to be explored and made sense of (Dockett, Griebel, & Perry, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2013). These internal and external transformations call for families to adopt new strategies, routines and skills (Dockett, 2017). Although the transition to school is a unique experience for each family due to differences in circumstances, cultural background, personal history and expectations (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Rogers, Dockett, & Perry, 2017), research on parental experiences has shown that many parents are concerned about their children's safety, adjustment to the school environment, socioemotional competence and behavioral skills at the outset of school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2010; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007).

Challenges faced by parents in transition have been identified on the *individual* (construction of a new identity, increased sense of responsibility and the sense of losing control), *interpersonal* (new relationships with educators and other parents) and *contextual* (change in routines of the week and holidays, combining the spheres of home, work and school) levels (Griebel & Niesel, 2013). The transition to school is therefore an ambivalent time of vulnerability and opportunity (Ackesjö, 2017) for parents as they adapt to their dual role of supporting their children's transition and navigating their own (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Hanke, Backhaus, Bogatz, & Dogan, 2017). Although becoming a school parent can be a shocking experience (Ackesjö, 2017) for anyone, undergoing the transition can be especially complicated for parents from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. These parents, in addition to encountering language barriers and cultural differences (De Gioia, 2017), have often to adapt to paradigms of family involvement and home-school relations that tend to privilege dominant social groups (Dockett, Griebel, et al., 2017) or be otherwise unresponsive to their needs (Goff, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017).

Responding to the needs of students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds presents a variety of challenges for educators and school administrators, which have led researchers to explore strategies of mitigation and culturally responsive management. Among these is what Brown et. al. (2019) have coined as *distributed culturally responsive leadership*. This approach to school management envisages a form of leadership that empowers educators, administrators, parents and students to acquire a sense of agency within and ownership of the school community by offering them a genuine role in decision-making, which in turn enables the school to react more rapidly to changing circumstances and implement policies and practices accordingly. It furthermore entails concern for social justice and responsiveness to and respect for diverse cultural traditions. Culturally responsive education aims for inclusive school communities where assessment frameworks

take students' cultural backgrounds and ways of communicating into consideration; where educators become sensitised to possible structural inequalities and diverging academic, personal, and social needs within diverse classrooms and cultivate respectful and reciprocal relations to children and their parents (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020; Nortvedt et al., 2020; Nayir et al., 2019).

Granting that empirical research on parental experiences and views on early education and care in diverse settings has become more prevalent (Draghici, 2019; Garnier & Brougère, 2017; Tobin, 2016; Van Laere, 2017), research focusing on lived experiences of parents from diverse (linguistic, cultural, socio-economic) backgrounds during the transition to school is rare (removed for peer review). Furthermore, parental transition to school research generally places a relatively narrow focus on parental experiences of becoming school parents as such; on parents positioning themselves and being positioned as parents of school students, making sense of the new school context and their place within it (Dockett, Griebel, et al., 2017). How the experiences of having a child starting school may coincide with a wider and more radical transformative change in parents, e.g. one that triggers a critical reflection and/or subversion of prevalent ideas and values within their own cultural background and prompt action against social structures perceived as unjust is less explored. Although many researchers have been moving away from and challenging deficit assumptions about families from diverse backgrounds, viewing them as having strengths, knowledge and capital worthy of recognition – even reporting on them countering dominant narratives on school readiness (Lehrer, 2017) – parents are rarely portrayed as taking action in transition research.

This article aims to contribute to the field by examining parental narratives of taking action and re-evaluation of cultural backgrounds in the context of having children of diverse backgrounds transition to school. The authors draw on Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in general, and his concepts of *conscientização* (conscientization) and the *culture circle* in particular, to shed light on these narratives. Freire's work, which was inspired by his leading role in educational programs and activism for the betterment of illiterate and poor people in rural Brazil and Chile, examines and advocates for the relationship between education and social change (removed for peer review). Freire sought to help the have-nots fight oppression in the form of injustice and exploitation by enabling them to realize the structural conditions of their situation and recognize the causes of their oppression/dehumanization. To Freire that involved dialogue and trust between a teacher and his learners, as he warned that attempts to liberate the oppressed without their reflective and active participation would lead to objectification, as if they were things to be carried out of a burning building. *Conscientização* refers to a process of developing a critical awareness of social reality through reflection and action: "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2014, p. 38). It is a process of inner change in a social context, one in which social action – the "radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures" (Freire, 1998, p. 514) – is a constitutive element. The closely connected concept of a *culture circle* represents a forum for dialogue where individual experiences are examined through a

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collective lens in a way that is defined by equality and mutual respect. The circle's purpose is to raise the participants' awareness of their reality and promote actions to transform it for the better (Homer, 2011).

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## Research Context

Investigating parental narratives of children from diverse backgrounds transitioning to school in contemporary Iceland provides a good opportunity to further our understanding of this underresearched topic, as attendance to preschool is almost universal among all children in Iceland, including children from families who have recently immigrated to the country. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions in Iceland have witnessed a substantial increase in the numbers of children from diverse backgrounds (culturally, linguistically, socio-economically) in recent years (Leskopf et al., 2015; Statistics Iceland, 2019a, 2020). These developments have coincided with the growth of the immigrant population from 4.6% in 2006 to 14.1% in 2019 (Statistics Iceland, 2019b). Both preschools and primary schools are administered and funded at the municipal level in Reykjavík as is the case for the rest of Iceland. Attendance to preschool is nearly universal for children from 2 – 5 years of age and costs of attendance are heavily subsidized. On the national level, 95-97% of children aged 2 – 5 and 48% of 1-year old children were enrolled in preschool by the end of 2018 (Statistics Iceland, 2019a). Although preschool educational policies in Iceland are centered on care, wellbeing, social development and play (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011), it is not uncommon for preschool graduation classes to be exposed to basic literacy and numeracy. However, the execution of these academic activities varies from one preschool to another and are not universally practiced.

Children transition to primary school in August of the year they turn 6 years old. All children are guaranteed a place at their public neighborhood school, but some private school options are available for families in Reykjavík. They begin in what is known as *first class* of compulsory education in schools which normally house classes 1 – 10 (ages 6-16) on the same premises. Attendance to compulsory education is mandatory by law and free of charge but parents can opt into paying for lunch subscriptions and after school care. Policymakers envisage fairly high levels of parental involvement on both preschool and compulsory school levels in Iceland. According to the Preschool Act and the Compulsory School Act from 2008, parents are guaranteed the right to have their say on school operations in general through parent and school councils and take part in the school community through parent associations. Individual parents are furthermore required to monitor their children's educational development and share information and cooperate with teachers to the benefit of the child's education and wellbeing.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

For the purposes of this study, the term *diverse background* denotes families where children have one or both parents born in another country and have another mother language than Icelandic or are emergent bi or multilingual. Parents of children who were born in 2012 (about to transition to primary school in the fall of 2018) were recruited in the spring of 2018 through parent-teacher interviews at two partner preschools from different neighborhoods in the municipality of Reykjavík, Iceland. Children from diverse backgrounds made up around 60% of the graduation classes in both preschools at the time of recruitment. Introductory letters were translated to all mother languages and parents were introduced to the study with the help of interpreters if required. Out of an initial pool of 37 families, 10 mothers and 3 fathers from 11 families of various nationalities decided to take part. Three were born and raised in Iceland and had children with foreign nationals. Four rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of a whole year (June 2018, October 2018, February 2019, June 2019), beginning at the end of the children's stay at the preschool and continuing throughout their first year of primary school. As foreign-born parents have been underrepresented in Icelandic transition research (Einarsdóttir, 2010, 2019) and the majority of the participants were mothers, a decision was made to analyze narratives of foreign-born mothers having a child transitioning from preschool to primary school in Reykjavík. Two mothers (pseudonyms Mercy and Claire) were selected for narrative analysis of lived experiences due to their extended engagement with the researcher (completing all four rounds of interviews) and their contrasting cultural backgrounds and socio-economic and family circumstances. [Interview transcripts from the remaining participants who were engaged throughout the study period were considered less suitable for this kind of analysis, as they were either interviewed with the help of interpreters or came from Icelandic backgrounds.](#)

Mercy, mother of daughters Lisa (6) and Sophie (9), had lived in Iceland for 11 years. She was born in rural settings in West Africa and was halfway through secondary education in a boarding school when she entered the labor market. She first came to Iceland as an au pair where she met Taylor, her future husband and compatriot. Lisa and Sophie were born and raised in Reykjavík. Mercy had mainly done low paid shift work since arriving in Iceland, while Taylor was on disability pension battling illness. The family predominantly spoke English at home, mixed with Icelandic and the occasional use of dialects prevalent in their country of origin. Claire, mother of Simon (6) and Eve (2) had lived in Iceland for 8 months with her Icelandic husband Elmar at the beginning of the study period. Claire had first moved to Iceland in 2008 after meeting Elmar while studying a semester abroad. A job opportunity spurred the couple to move to the US, where their children were born. Both were university educated and employed. Simon spent the first five years of his life living in the US

before the family moved back to Iceland in late 2017. The family spoke English and Icelandic at home.

### *Data Generation and Analysis*

Participants were contacted after expressing their willingness to participate in the study and given a choice of a time and place to their liking to meet with the researcher. Elmar, Claire's Icelandic husband, joined his wife for the third round of interviews. During the first interview, participants were kindly asked to take photographs of their children during the first days and weeks of school and bring to the next round of interviews to discuss with the researcher. They were then asked to continue to take photographs related to their children's school lives and bring to the subsequent interview rounds. The purpose was to engage in photo-elicitation (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2017; Given et al., 2016; Pink, 2013; Rose, 2007) during the interview sessions; to stimulate discussions with visual material, evoke reflection, unlock memories in greater detail and give the participants an opportunity to discuss important aspects that might otherwise have gone unnoticed by the researcher. The interview sessions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim. Multiple thorough readings and the writing of familiarization notes were followed by an analysis of participants' narratives of navigating the transition in Icelandic school settings, which was gradually narrowed down to stories of taking action and re-evaluation of cultural background. These narratives underwent structural narrative analysis; combining analysis of the function of particular clauses and how sequences of utterances are said (Riessman, 2011) which required close attention to audio recordings and dividing the narratives into stanzas. Member validation was observed with the two mothers during the data generation period. The main topics of each interview were reiterated with the participants in the following interview session to establish continuity and follow their developments closely.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The research project was approved by the partner preschools, the Municipality of Reykjavík and (removed for peer review) and notified to the Icelandic Data Protection Authority. The study was informed by Perry's (2014) perspective of 'socially just' transition to school. For Perry, social justice includes valuing families for what they bring to the new setting during the time of transition and establish partnerships based on respect and perceived competence and integrity. The interview guides reflected this emphasis and prioritized getting to know the pre-existing strengths, interests and values of the participants and their children. Thus, the study aimed to offer participants opportunities to present their strengths while acknowledging their needs and challenges. Furthermore, by asking the participants to take and select photographs from their daily lives and bring to discuss during interview

sessions, they were viewed as subjects with rights to participate directly and actively (Bertram, Formosinho, Gray, Pascal, & Whalley, 2015) in the research project. The participating parents were thus regarded as creative and unique individuals (Pink, 2013) and provided with an opportunity to decide what was important for their families at this juncture. The first encounter began with explaining the purpose of the study to the participants and obtaining informed consent. Their level of commitment (four encounters over twelve months) was explained along with the purpose of photo-elicitation, pursuance of anonymity and their right not to answer questions or to withdraw at any stage without consequences. These issues were briefly reiterated during subsequent rounds of interviews. Participants' photographs were neither collected nor shown to third parties. Mercy and Claire were asked further permission to have their stories highlighted in this article during the data generation period. Due to the small size of the local communities in which the study took place and to protect the identities of the participants, their origins are only linked to the large geographical areas of the Midwestern United States (Claire) and West Africa (Mercy). Pseudonyms are used for everyone mentioned by the participants.

## Findings

An overview of the mothers' backgrounds, circumstances and transition year will be presented, followed by a discussion of the structural analysis focused on narratives of taking action and reevaluation of cultural background.

### *Mercy – A Year in Transition*

At the beginning of the study, Lisa (6) was enrolled in the neighborhood public preschool while Sophie (9) had attended the neighborhood public primary school for three years. Mercy's narratives centered on fighting for her daughters' education and her deep concern for their future. Mercy explained how throughout her time at school, Sophie had been struggling with learning the Icelandic language with dire educational consequences. She estimated that her older daughter was well behind her peers in reading as she did not fully know the Icelandic alphabet, was still bringing first grade reading material home and had difficulties with understanding what was going on in class. At the beginning of fourth grade she had been sent to the second grade as a "helper" while her classmates took the national standardized test. Mercy said that she was frequently assured by the teachers that Sophie was still young and "would pick up" in her Icelandic skills at a later stage by the teachers, without them planning for or qualifying how that might happen. Mercy had been told that Sophie had passed her exams at the end of third grade, but she was suspicious towards such reports as she did not believe her daughter to comprehend everything she was doing at school. The lack of language

proficiency resulted furthermore in social isolation as Sophie felt she was forced to give up practicing gymnastics because she did not understand the instructions given by her trainers. Mercy's concerns were growing as she also feared for Lisa following her older sister down the same path after learning from the teacher that she too had difficulties with reading comprehension and following instructions in class.

Mercy described with vexation how she had gone to "meeting upon meeting with" the teachers, school authorities, social workers and psychologists without getting the help she believed her daughter needed to master the language. Initiatives from the local municipal service center designed to help Sophie with reading and homework, foster her Icelandic language proficiency and get her socially active had either been abruptly discontinued or failed to start. The Icelandic speaking personal assistants tasked with attending Sophie had reportedly quit or failed to show up, without Mercy getting the chance to give feedback on the family's experience or anyone for the center following up on their progress. The blame for her family's predicament was in part placed on the preschool for not heeding Mercy's requests for teaching her daughters the Icelandic alphabet, at least enough to write their own names. Mercy placed the lion's share of the blame on the primary school and the municipality for not coming up with suitable solutions to her older daughter's language learning difficulties. She recounted sharing her troubles with coworkers and remarked that "only we foreigners are in stress about our kids and it is difficult to get the help." Not only did Mercy feel that the school had responded to Sophie's language learning difficulties with a lack of urgency, but also responded angrily to the school's slow and limited reactions to incidents of racial prejudice. Sophie had been bullied in the first grade because of the color of her skin and Taylor had been subjected to racist comments by students when picking his children up at school. The family was therefore concerned, frustrated and on guard, as was evident during Lisa's transition to school:

**Researcher:** ...how has it been for Lisa? The first few weeks of school? **Mercy:** Ah... not easy (laughs) but it is supposed to be expected, so...we are just trying to go along with it and see how... [shows a photo on her smartphone] this was... her first day at school... **Researcher:** Is she in her classroom? **Mercy:** Yes. They were on *sýningu* [exhibition]. **Researcher:** Ah, and how did she feel on the first day? **Mercy:** Ah, I think strange and you can see from her face... not too excited to be there...

#### *Claire – A Year in Transition*

Claire's son Simon (6) had attended one of the partner preschools for 8 months at the beginning of the study, after having transferred from another preschool in Reykjavík which she considered to be unsafe for her son. Claire's narratives centered in large part on the differences between American and Icelandic parental and school culture. When Simon's transition to primary school drew closer, she noticed how parents' conversations differed from those commonly had in the US, where parental discussions centered around finding the best schools, best teachers, schools with high test score

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averages, low numbers of students per teacher, extracurricular activities on offer and the like. In Iceland, by contrast, parents seemed to be content with sending their children to the neighborhood public school without considering other options. Claire decided to tour a private school and the neighborhood public school before making a final decision “because we have to do this... [it’s] in our culture... you have to root out, like, the good schools.”

Claire’s hopes for a good school start were materialized, thanks to what she considered to be good transition practices and no less to her son’s convivial and “extrovert” personality traits. As a parent, Claire found herself navigating the transition to school as a parent in a foreign culture with different social norms and expectations of education and parenting, which she regarded as liberal or casual in comparison to what she was accustomed to in the United States. Simon enjoyed a good social life at school and in the new neighborhood. Claire wondered whether she should contact other parents when she got wind of that some of the girls were kissing her son. She was equally perplexed when she caught her son off school grounds when picking him up at after school care. She complained to a member of staff, who replied unapologetically that she simply *could not keep her eyes on everyone all the time*. Claire was initially shocked that this could have happened and by the staffs’ lax reaction; such an incident “would fall really hard on the school” in the US. Her situation was however mitigated by the fact that she could turn to her spouse for reference and venting over frustrating situations. Claire also felt keenly was what she referred to as “language intimidation” which was part of the “reality of any foreign person” in Iceland and stood in the way of her getting more involved with the parent association – insecurities about situations where she would find herself in a group of native Icelandic speakers and being neither able to understand everything nor willing to interrupt to have people repeat what was said. Nonetheless, Claire regarded the first year of primary school to have been overall a positive experience. She thought her son had grown during the period and was by now “fully transitioned.” Simon’s Icelandic reading and writing were reportedly coming along excellently, although he was still catching up on correct conjugations and pronunciations in everyday speech. Asked to identify a single photograph most definitive for the transition period, Claire chose one of her son in front of the afterschool care center:

Oh, I think this one is super sweet. This is him in... yeah this is after school, I picked him up. He's just a happy kid, that's like the entrance at school. Yeah, I think that is it, I think it's sweet. He's happy there, he loves it, he wants to be there. Yeah, that's sweet isn't it (laughs)?

#### *Narratives of Taking Action*

Mercy and Claire both told stories of taking action when they believed their children’s education institution to be failing them. Both narratives contain the element of their child’s wellbeing at stake and of them being ignored or not being taken seriously by school administrators. Before attending one

of the partner preschools, Simon was shortly enrolled in another preschool which was not deemed to be up to the task of providing safe conditions:

**Claire:** Yeah, we actually went to one preschool first and for two weeks he was there, but he was extremely bullied, so we took him out of there really fast. We just saw that right away and saw that the administration's non-reaction to it and non-acknowledgement of it and we just thought: *I'm not even wasting my time* and so we moved which was the best thing we could have done. So there was a moment of him... being an outsider and being bullied... and I think that is why we were nervous that it wouldn't occur but at his new school it was much more international and... he just picked right up so... **Researcher:** So, in what way was he bullied or left out? **Claire:** Well, they would fight like... they would go outside for recess time and they would have one adult for like, 30 kids and there are areas where the kids cannot be seen and, I mean, he just told us stories like, they would literally just push each other down these hills and like, he would get shoved and he got like, pushed into a bookshelf and had a huge bruise on his ear and he... he just had bruises on his body that were not ok and... and then he came home with a black eye, a kid had thrown a cup at his face and they just kept saying *oh, it's an accident*, it's like, no, that's not...

Highlighted in this story is the preschool's denial and inaction and the ease and unilaterality with which Simon is removed. Time was not wasted as the situation was not seen as requiring further collaboration or confrontation with the preschool administration. Claire positions her son as an outsider in this situation, echoing anxieties about the child not getting along or fitting in. The decisive action is evaluated positively as the family's tribulations were momentary and ameliorated. The remark of the new preschool being "much more international" implies that the first preschool's less diverse settings were perceived as less tolerant or accommodating for a child of Simon's background. The cultural resources drawn upon include prevalent discourses on safety, adult supervision and staff per child ratio in the US (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) and school choice (Dockett & Perry, 2017). Mercy's interviews also contained narratives of parental action when school authorities were considered to be failing to respond to events that were threatening her child's wellbeing at school:

**Mercy:** ...she [Sophie] almost thought in the first grade... because some kid was calling her brownskin, teasing her all the time and she was not comfortable with that and she's not you know... a loud person, so it has to take me, I have to go there and be angry. I called them on the phone. They didn't react. Then I went there very angry and was like: *if you don't talk to this boy and my kid's stop school... first grade. Then he want to see brownskin, I am going to come to this school naked* before they took me serious. So, there are some things that maybe can... because couple of kids were talking about if they have seen this boy bullying Sophie but it seems nobody was doing anything about it. ♡ And since she is already... you know, not feeling very comfortable and... you know, she has this low self-esteem and you compare... and this thing goes on for a long time, then it is like putting the child off because first, she cannot speak the language and someone is teasing her so she there is going to be so many problems for her. ♡ It has to take me to stop going to work and walk her to school and talk to her before she was able to feel better again and start going to school with her father.

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Mercy's course of action was confrontation and setting an ultimatum to be taken seriously by the school administration. In stark contrast with Claire's story, these tribulations have been going on for a long time with no obvious solutions in sight. Here too the child is seen as victimized by the parent, but through racial bullying which exasperates the child's underlying marginalization. The child as an outsider is a recurring theme in Mercy's narratives, where confrontational encounters with educators, school administrators and service center workers are numerous. In one of these narratives, she confronted the preschool principal over her daughter's poor Icelandic language fluency. Given the fact that the child was in the educators' care for the majority of her waking hours, she thought they should have used that time for language learning, echoing calls for more focus on direct teaching in preschools among immigrant parents (Tobin, Mantovani, Pascal, & Priessing, 2016). However, Mercy recognized more than once that she needed to be "sensible" and not to "overdo it" in her dealings with the school system:

**Mercy:** I have very good relationship with all of them [preschool educators], I just... I make fun of them when it is bad weather and I am like *we are going to move back to Africa* and (laughs) yeah so I just talk to them and... for me, I feel they are doing what I cannot do so I don't have to be angry even though it is something wrong, I have to be in the best mood that I can to, to attend to that issue.

Mercy's confrontational approach is balanced with tact and charm as anger alone is thought of as getting her only so far. As moving her children elsewhere would require overcoming considerable obstacles with regard to cost and transportation, she is left with having to continue to engage with the educators and administrators through conversation and confrontation.

#### *Narratives of Reevaluation of Cultural Background*

The two mothers talked of how their experiences of being a foreign parent in Iceland had opened them up for reflection and re-evaluation of their own views and cultural background. When talking about the difference in prevalent American and Icelandic attitudes towards school choice, Claire remarked that it was an "extreme privilege" for those parents who had the means to place their children in a school of their choosing. Although she said it was hard for her to simply trust the neighborhood public school without looking into other options, she remarked that a competitive school system where "people are fighting to get the best thing" was both "sad" and "not working for everyone." Critical views of widely held attitudes towards childhood, parenting and sexuality in her home country were also taking hold, which were brought center stage when she and her husband talked about the fact that her son Simon was popular among the girls:

**Claire:** I do think that the kissing thing is a big cultural difference (Elmar laughs) because for me, where I grew up, like... children are like extremely sheltered sexually like, they just... it's just like *no kissing, kissing is bad...* which is sad I think... and like here it's just interesting because Elmar's parents were like: *Yes, he's got a chance!* And I'm like: *Wow!* (laughs) like, what are you even going to say? I mean it's good, I think it's, you know... but that is definitely... this is going to be... and you know, another friend was like... I was saying like: *Oh, yeah they wanted to go to this room and they had the door shut and I kind of have a no closed door policy and I kind of...* **Elmar:** You said that? **Claire:** Yeah, Adam was like: *It's not like they are going to get pregnant.* (Elmar laughs) And I was like: *Oh my God!* (both laugh) See? He's laughing at the whole thing (laughs) yeah, this is a cultural... this is a huge cultural difference. Yeah, I mean like, if you think of like... puritan American like, *clothe thyself*. [...] I think like navigating that, like the boundaries of what... privacy... privacy is what it is. Privacy for children, like what is ok privacy because culturally my privacy is much more constricted and yours is a lot more freedom. Like children have so much more freedom. **Elmar:** We just never talked about this growing up (laughs)... my parents never talked about it. **Claire:** They did more than you realize, like for them to say *oh, he's got a chance* - like, that's talking about it even if it's not... **Researcher:** It's implicit? **Claire:** Yes, exactly. There's an implicit acceptance of it as opposed to be like *no, no, no!* Like, *you don't do that!*

heeft verwijderd: Researcher: Interesting. Claire:

The narrative suggests that Claire is undergoing gradual reevaluation of ideas and practices towards childhood, parenting and education through her contact with Icelandic school and parental culture. She has the opportunity to have dialogues with her husband where they navigate contentious issues and negotiate appropriate responses and strategies. Mercy, whose navigation of Icelandic school culture had been more taxing, described how fighting for herself and her children in a foreign land away from the support of her family had made her reevaluate and challenge the values of her upbringing. The following narrative follows a description of a scene at the airport in the country of origin upon her arrival with the family on vacation, where she complained forcefully to airport officials for long queues in the sweltering heat and not giving any assistance to people travelling with young children:

I was screaming, everybody was like... there is like... we are trained not to... they think I'm being rude, yeah. **Researcher:** So, you are trained to...? **Mercy:** To, to, to be respectful. Even when it's hurting you, you don't have to say anything. **Researcher:** So, how did the airport authorities react to this? **Mercy:** Oh, they were like surprised and were like: *Were you an actress when you were in [country of origin]?* I was like: *No, I'm just saying my mind.* Before maybe I was scared to say it but here [Iceland] has opened me up not to be quiet. I have to fight for my right. So, I felt that is what I should do there. And... as soon as I finished, and I didn't even finish they were calling me *please come through* and they started calling those with kids.

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Mercy's subversion of societal expectations of showing unquestionable respect, even in disadvantageous circumstances, was placed within the context of her having had to learn to fight for herself and her family. She was critical of her cultural upbringing and the reported reactions of members of her extended family in Africa suggest that her change in attitude is fundamental:

**Mercy:** I'm no, no going to retrain to be polite. You cannot speak back when an elder, elderly person talks... you just have to, you know, not too much eye contact... we are like

ok... this... that kind of respect but now is a bit, you know... so my family, they are like: *You are going crazy. You talk too much your mind. You have to be careful* aaa. No, no, no. **Researcher:** How did you open up to this in Iceland? Just by interacting with people? How did you learn this? **Mercy:** You know, when... of course, sometimes they say (claps hands) literacy make you dumb... and I can read a little bit, I, I can... I know... I... can think for myself, you know? When you are... you are... think basic education... that is why I'm fighting for my kids to get the basic... when you have the basic you know... what is right for you. I'm not overdoing it but at the same time I don't want somebody to step on my toes. If is going to hurt me, I'm going to tell you: *You are hurting me*. I don't have to say it because of my culture I have to shut up. I'm going to tell you as it is.

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## Discussion

The findings presented above are limited by the number of participants and the study does not aspire for any sort of generalizability about the transition experiences of parents of children from diverse backgrounds. However, the narratives of the two mothers suggest that for them, engagement

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with the Icelandic ECEC system before and during the transition to school heralded complex external and internal transformations and called for adopting certain strategies (Dockett, 2017) – including taking action when the child's wellbeing was considered to be at stake. Their experiences are in many ways similar; being immigrant mothers who have to overcome problems with the (pre)school on their own (i.e. without outside help), but these similarities intersect with very different sets of social capital. As seen above, the mothers' contrasting socio-economic and family circumstances set the stage for their possibilities of action. Claire had the resources to "not waste time" and take decisive action whereas Mercy had little choice but engage in what she described as a drawn-out uphill battle. That both mothers repeatedly experienced not being taken seriously by ECEC administrators and felt like they had no choice but to act, suggests that they did not have access to proper avenues for a dialogue on the institutions' modus operandi and pedagogical values. Yet paradoxically, Mercy's narratives had numerous references of meetings with teachers, school administrators and social workers to address Sophie's difficulties. Mercy's strong sense of the meetings' futility and resentment over not being given the chance to give feedback to the proposed (and to her mind failed) solutions, indicates minimum or no reflective and active participation (Freire, 2014) of her part in the initiatives proposed by representatives of the ECEC system. The narrative pathos of describing the pain of not being recognized also suggests that, in the Freirean sense, she is positioned as a "marginal person" who in the eyes of the ECEC system needs to be adjusted to its patterns by changing her mentality (Freire, 2014, p. 68).

The examples of critical reflection on and reevaluation of dominant ideas from their cultural backgrounds, show however that these developments were not entirely solitary affairs for the mothers; but were shared with their families and in Mercy's case, impacted how she interacted with others. Although Claire developed critical attitudes towards parental messages to children of not displaying any forms of sexuality (regarding them as "constricted" and "puritan"), Mercy's critical reflection on

and active subversion of the social expectations of respect and remaining silent in adverse situations are closer to Freire's concept of *conscientização* – which Freire understood as a collective process where individual reflection is shared and private concerns are molded into collective needs. As seen above, Mercy mentioned sharing her problems with a group of coworkers where only the foreign parents had reportedly encountered similar obstacles. This raises the question if parents who find themselves in these kinds of situations should have to deal with education authorities on an individual level. Nominally at least, representatives of the parent bodies (councils and associations) could have acted as intermediaries or provided a platform for a dialogue among equals, but neither mother mentioned these as a potential source of support. Here the Freirean idea of the *culture circle* – concrete empirical examples in contexts of education and family are not wanting (Akinyela, 2006; Hickling-Hudson, 2014; Torres, 2010) – could provide inspiration for providing opportunities for foreign parents to share their experiences of the education system to better recognize and understand structural injustices and find ways to rectify them. [The challenges faced by parents of children from diverse backgrounds within ECEC will to some degree always be family-specific, but educators and school administrators have examples to follow to become sensitized to them and work towards their reduction and mitigation. The narratives indicate that the educational institutions in question are, or at the very least are perceived to be, lacking in most of the practices distributed culturally responsive leadership \(Brown et. al, 2019\) model strives to promote – which, if enacted, would have had the potential for a more appropriate reactions on behalf of the schools.](#)

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