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# Guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools and afterschool programs

*Languages  
of the heart*

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Guidelines for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in school and afterschool programs.

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## Introduction

“Everyone on Earth has a mother tongue”, said Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for languages, on the occasion of the International Mother Language Day in 2014. She spoke of the risk that major business languages, such as English, may drown out smaller languages, and she encouraged the Icelandic people to appreciate and strengthen Icelandic while respecting at the same time the mother tongue of all who move to Iceland.

Plurilingual children who live in Iceland share the experience of growing up using more than one language. In these guidelines, the term plurilingual children is used about children who have Icelandic as a second mother tongue from birth or as an additional language. Knowledge of Icelandic is a prerequisite for successful schooling and participation in Icelandic society, while the mother tongue of plurilingual children forms the basis of the children’s relationship with their parents, relatives and friends in Iceland and elsewhere. The spread of English in the community means that the majority of Icelandic children hear and use at least two languages on a daily basis. Knowledge of more than one language is a treasure that must be nurtured and developed, as all languages open up the doors to different cultures and make our lives richer. The diversity of the language skills of citizens means not only that they create opportunities for themselves, such as a broader range of educational options and more diverse job opportunities, but it can also facilitate Iceland’s international collaboration. Icelandic society is democratic and is based on the participation and skills of its citizens being sufficient to enable them to play an active part in life, education and work. Children strengthen such skills in school and afterschool programs and in relationships with their families. It is our shared responsibility to create an environment that appreciates language knowledge, as it should be. Belonging to a community and being proud of one’s origin and mother tongue is a source of strength for all children. Plurilingual children play an important role in Icelandic society because they build bridges and connect countries and communities in various ways. At the same time, Icelandic society’s opportunity to find its place in the ever-changing and globalized international world increases. Plurilingualism

is a tool to promote social justice as well as enriching the community. With proper guidance, plurilingual children become strong individuals and active participants in the community. Societies that appreciate plurilingual children and individuals for what they are worth are less likely to promote prejudice against them.

Society's attitudes and views of the range of languages used by children in school and afterschool programs have an effect on the development of self-image and the feeling that children have of belonging and experiencing their linguistic knowledge as a tangible resource. It is important that all those who work with plurilingual children and young people adopt a positive attitude toward the diversity of languages.

These guidelines are based on laws, policies and research as well as on the experience and ideas provided by professionals and practitioners on site. The guidelines discuss the importance of supporting the active plurilingualism of children and young people in preschools, compulsory schools, afterschool programs and in upper secondary schools (referred to henceforth as school and afterschool programs), developing co-operation with parents and strengthening communications with children in their daily work. The guidelines also contain advice, instructions and useful information for parents, schools and afterschool program providers. The first section casts light on the right of children and young people to maintain and strengthen their mother tongues. Definitions in the second section facilitate shared understanding of the subject. The role of all school levels, afterschool programs and parents in connection with strengthening languages is described in sections three and four. Section five contains a short discussion of electronic technology and the possibility of learning languages online. The final section contains practical ideas and ways to implement support for mother tongues and active plurilingualism in schools, afterschool programs and within the family. The ideas are divided into simpler means of supporting plurilingual literacy and into ways that require more time and organization. Finally, there is a list of web links that may be of use for schools, afterschool programs and parents.

# Children's rights – mother tongue and plurilingualism

Icelandic laws, policy formulating documents and national curricula all contain provisions on the right of students to maintain their mother tongue and provide for active bilingualism. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that was adopted into Icelandic law in 2013 appoints the state to ensure for all children lessons in their own mother tongue. The Convention also provides for the unequivocal right of children to maintain their own mother tongue. According to the interpretation of the office of the Ombudsman for Children, their letter dated 6.12.2013 states:

The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the Convention on the Rights of the Child means that efforts must be made to ensure for children lessons in their own mother tongue. In support thereof, mention may be made of a number of provisions contained in the Convention (Articles 2, 6, 8, 29 and 30) (...) The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the above provisions of the Convention mean that the state is under obligation to seek means of ensuring mother tongue teaching for all children. As a result, it is considered a violation of the rights of the child if state and local authorities make no effort to ensure such lessons for children. If the language in question is spoken by few, however, it can be difficult to ensure such lessons, e.g. if no teacher is found in Iceland to teach the language. Under such circumstances, however, efforts must be made to seek other measures, in consultation with the parents of the child. If parents feel unable to teach their children, it could be possible to examine the option of distance learning over the Internet or other means that may be available. In this context, it should also be noted that it is first and foremost the parents who are responsible for their children's wellbeing and that they have, therefore, certain obligations as regards the right to maintain their own culture and language. The state, however, is under obligation to assist parents in fulfilling their role and to take action when it is clear that the parents are unable to fulfil their duties.

The Nordic countries' language policy is an instructive and innovative policy regarding language. The policy states:

The Nordic countries today are a plurilingual region where citizens have good language skills and where language policy rests on a democratic tradition. In a globalised world, the Nordic countries can consequently become a model for other regions with regard to language policy. Plurilingualism provides the basis for skills, creativity, perspective and international contacts to an extent that is impossible in monolingual societies. Developing it requires a unified, long-range and effective language-policy effort.

The policy also stipulates that all Nordic residents who are of foreign origin are entitled to defend and strengthen their own mother tongue as a minority language in the country, as well as learn the local language, one other Nordic language and an international language, such as English.

According to the above, it is clear that the rights of plurilingual individuals in Iceland to maintain and strengthen their mother tongue is in effect, but the arrangements are placed in the hands of those who provide such services. The policy of the Icelandic authorities is quite clear and includes the responsibility of finding ways to support the mother tongues of children and young people. The policy of the authorities aims to develop a community in school and afterschool programs that ensures equality, justice and respect for a variety of languages, for the benefit of the children themselves and for Icelandic society.



## II. Definitions

The following key terms are used in these guidelines, the same as appear in the Draft of the policy on education of children and youth with diverse language and cultural background, published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

### Plurilingual children and youth

Plurilingual children and youth in school and afterschool programs are, as a group, defined in different ways depending on their origin, the nationality of their parents or their Icelandic skills. The terms used are “children of foreign origin”, “students with a foreign background” and “students with Icelandic as a second language”. The term “plurilingual child or youth / plurilingual student” has positive connotations and indicates both origin and skills in Icelandic, irrespective of whether the student is born overseas or in Iceland, has dwelt overseas, has one or two foreign parents, is bilingual or plurilingual from birth or has added Icelandic as a second language. The shared goal for all children and youth is to achieve age-appropriate milestones in Icelandic and active plurilingualism.

### Mother tongue

The mother tongue can be defined in many ways, although it is usually seen as the child’s first language and the language to which the child has the greatest affinity, which his/her parents speak and where the child’s language skills are the best. This, however, is not always the case for plurilingual children because they may have two or more languages as their mother tongue, and their skills in foreign mother tongues are often inferior to skills in the language of the school and society. Language development in mother tongues can differ according to circumstances and the language environment. The skills of children in foreign mother tongues are poorer if not maintained. Mother tongues can be defined by the origin, skills, the function of the language and identification (their own or by others), but it is most often best to define the mother tongue of minorities based on origin and what the person involved feels. Mother tongues are also often called home languages, languages of origin or heritage languages.

### Plurilingualism

In these guidelines, the term plurilingual children is used to refer either to children in Iceland who do not have Icelandic as a mother tongue and Icelandic is therefore their second language or to children born to plurilingual households and who have Icelandic as their mother tongue. Bilingualism and plurilingualism (henceforth plurilingualism) is a complicated term that involves many different combinations of language knowledge and different abilities in different fields (e.g. as regards comprehension, reading, speaking and writing). Plurilingual persons use their languages regularly for different purposes in different situations with different people. It is very rare to be equally fluent in all languages but normal for abilities and skills in different registers and fields to be different in each language. Such abilities develop in accordance with



use and needs and for the most part according to the quality of the language stimulation in the environment, which can change over time according to circumstances each time. Most children in Iceland are plurilingual to some extent due to English, which is taught in all schools and used for various purposes. Plurilingual children are a diverse group, and as a result, plurilingualism has varied and complicated implications. The Council of Europe defines plurilingualism as the overall language proficiency of an individual, whether of high or low degree, and all languages, dialects and modes of speaking that are a part thereof. In general, plurilingualism is seen to have educational value and a basis for recognizing diversity and awareness of the equivalence of languages despite different purposes and use.

### Active plurilingualism

Active plurilingualism involves the active regular use of two or more languages. Such benefits may be achieved if staying in two or more language environments and skills in all languages are therefore developed simultaneously. In order to achieve this, children and parents must cultivate their mother tongues, use them in communication among themselves and with others and have access to books and entertainment material in the mother tongue. It is, however, a basic requirement that plurilingual persons are interested in maintaining all their languages; the encouragement and/or the need to use the language must be present. This is why it is important that all languages be respected throughout the community, within the home and the school and that each and every language enjoy respect. In the Icelandic educational environment, active plurilingualism is an educational goal where efforts are made to ensure that children achieve good results in the school language (Icelandic) while at the same time developing their mother tongue skills.

### Icelandic as a second language

Children who are born in Iceland and who are exposed to two or more languages during their first few years tend to adopt what has been called simultaneous bilingualism. Children who move to Iceland after the first period of language acquisition (sometimes defined as the age of four) and add Icelandic to their repertoire learn it as their second language, a process called sequential bilingualism. Plurilingual children who use Icelandic daily together with other languages naturally have different levels of competence in each language, and it is necessary to make high demands to their language use and to give them clear, positive and constructive messages of their progress and goals. The goal in teaching children with Icelandic as a second (mother) tongue is to ensure that they reach age-appropriate milestones in Icelandic within reasonable time, according to the curriculum in Icelandic as a second language. It is a basic requirement that they are provided with good expert support as needed from an early age or immediately on arrival to Iceland to ensure that they have the same opportunities as their peers who have Icelandic as their mother tongue to continued education and success in Icelandic society.

## III. The role of schools and afterschool programs

Schools and afterschool programs have the role of supporting children and young people to master a rich Icelandic vocabulary. In addition, these institutions are under obligation to respect the language resources of plurilingual students, i.e. their language skills in all their languages and that of their families, and to create an encouraging environment with the goal of strengthening all the language proficiencies of children. In addition, the parents of plurilingual children should be encouraged to establish for themselves a conscious language policy in the family, with the goal of offering children a rich language and literacy environment.

### III.A Language policies in school and afterschool programs

Schools and afterschool programs are encouraged to formulate a language policy as guidance for staff and students in their daily work and communication. While shaping a language policy, it is important that staff reflect together and reach an agreement on the points of focus that should be dominant in their workplace in connection with Icelandic and diverse languages. The language policy must explain how which languages are used in communication and daily life and how the interest and engagement of all students can be supported. Language policies generally consist of three parts – language ideologies, language use and practice and language management. The foundations of school language policies are the laws and language policies that apply in Iceland, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the resolutions of the Icelandic Language Committee, Iceland’s language policy and the language policy of the Nordic countries.

Iceland’s language policy, Íslenska til alls, states: “It is extremely important to secure the position of the Icelandic language in the school system.” Language policies do not just contain decisions but also proposals for implementations and actions to preserve and strengthen Icelandic. It is important that children have good language role models and a steady and concentrated language stimulation in daily schoolwork.

The Nordic Language Policy describes the following goals for children:

- **develop strong Icelandic according to age-related criteria**
- **develop a strong mother tongue**
- **develop strong English (international language)**
- **develop one Nordic language other than the society’s language**

A considered and encompassing language policy is important for everyone who works with plurilingual children and youth. All teachers and all staff who are involved with and communicate with children have a role to play in strengthening their Icelandic skills. It is also important that everyone realizes the importance of

promoting respect and a positive attitude to diverse languages, that they support children in strengthening skills in their mother tongue and thereby promote active plurilingualism.

### **III.B Mother tongue support and active plurilingualism at the beginning of school attendance**

When a child begins to attend preschool or a new student begins compulsory school, every effort is made to obtain information on the child's earlier education and mother tongue ability:

- **a meeting is held with the parents to ask about languages spoken at home, earlier schooling, the number of years, the content of the education, etc.**
- **available documentation, such as report cards and confirmation of earlier schooling, is requested**
- **a progress file (European language portfolio) is created and then remains in use during schooltime and shows what progress has been made in Icelandic, the mother tongue and in the study in general**

It can make a difference that schools and afterschool centers work to map the language assets that children and employees have, with the goal of being able to build on the language resources available. The languages of everyone attending school or afterschool programs are respected. Employees are aware of the mother tongue of children and students. Employees of foreign origin can use their language to support children and students as well as being a language role model in the use of Icelandic.

Dynamic parental collaboration is a key aspect in the support of the mother tongues of children and youth. Work on creating a multicultural environment and educational space is started as soon as possible in preschools. According to the National Curriculum, preschools are under obligation to take the initiative in collaborating with and promoting the participation of all parents regarding the wellbeing of children and their development as their guiding light. There is a strong tradition of collaboration between preschool employees and homes. Compulsory schools also encourage close collaboration with parents and their participation, in such areas as the education of children, their social position and progress in Icelandic. There is less of a tradition for parental collaboration in upper secondary schools, an aspect that is replaced by the increased independence of students as regards their studies. Communication with parents of foreign origin and the dissemination of information continues to be important at the upper secondary school level. School and afterschool centers take the initiative in ensuring

positive relations with parents, for instance by displaying greetings in all the languages of the children in the entrance to the school. Communication with parents is conducted in the languages understood by the parents, and efforts are made to use all available support (e.g. the use of interpreters, translation software and technology, the knowledge of the employees of the language in question). Messages, advertisements, notifications and other communications are issued in the language of the parents to the extent possible. It is also important to discuss with parents their role as school parents and as the language role models of their children.

In order to optimize the possibility of good parental collaboration, it is possible to use the services of interpreters, bilingual and plurilingual teachers and the help of language and cultural mediators or bilingualism consultants. Language and cultural mediators are employed by Reykjavík City, and they are experts who themselves have a mother tongue other than Icelandic and have the role of providing training, advice and education to teachers, parents and students of foreign origin. Their assistance is particularly directed toward children who have recently arrived in Iceland or who are being transferred between schools. Language and cultural mediators assist students, teachers and parents to create a bridge between languages and cultures and thereby encourage mutual understanding. In addition, bilingual teachers are employed in a number of locations throughout Iceland and support students in learning their mother tongue, e.g. through the preparation of classes, terminology work, mastering the substance of subjects and/or with homework. The goal is to ensure that the education of students in different subjects continues parallel to working with Icelandic as a second language.

It is equally important, at all levels of education, to recognize the mother tongue of children and youth formally at the beginning of their schooling. Mother tongue recognition in school and afterschool programs can come in many forms, but it is important that it is there, is real and is tangible. There are a variety of ways to acknowledge the mother tongues of children and youth.

### III.C Diverse languages in schooling and daily activities

Work with diverse languages in school continues through their entire schooling, with the goal of showing all languages respect, supporting the active plurilingualism of students and building on the language resources available. Many benefits may be gained through the active use of languages:

- **Working with diverse languages in school and afterschool programs increases everyone's awareness of languages, intercultural skills which include cultural sensitivity and the ability to communicate across languages and cultures. Such skills are to the benefit of all, both in communication and in language learning.**

- **Cognitive development and the development of languages go hand in hand. Knowledge acquired in a mother tongue becomes the underlying knowledge in Icelandic as a second language. Knowledge can also travel in the opposite direction; children gain a variety of knowledge in schoolwork in the Icelandic language which is subsequently useful when reading about the material or discussing it in the mother tongue.**
- **Support for diversity of mother tongue in school and afterschool programs increases society's respect of languages.**
- **Students learn and gain experiences in languages and culture in accordance with their personal needs and expectations, in order to be able to develop their skills independently in their further studies. All languages are important tools for communication, strengthening ties and for the child's sense of belonging. Rich language skills can also strengthen students in their schooling, lead to greater open-mindedness and increase the number of options available for further learning.**

Multicultural teaching aims to ensure access to education and create learning space and equal opportunities for education for all. Teachers build on the resources of students, their mother tongues, previous knowledge, strengths, culture and experience which students bring to the school. All students have a voice that is listened to. Educational material reflects complexity, the team of employees is diverse and the educational environment is empowering for all.

Varied teaching methods are necessary to meet the needs of all. Translanguaging entails a multi-layered form of communication in diverse languages and multilingual realities that plurilingual individuals use in their interactions. The term translanguaging is based on the criteria that all the languages of plurilingual individuals are a part of their language repertoire which they use for interactions. Translanguaging is also a teaching approach where the languages of students are respected and systematically made visible. Examples of this would be the teacher explaining to a particular student the goal and methods of the lessons in one language and the solutions of the student or discussions taking place in another language, either with the teacher, other staff or other students. This approach provides the student with the option of using alternate languages under different circumstances within the same educational space.

It is important that compulsory school students who learn Icelandic as a second language become, as soon as possible, participants in the school environment and that they are ensured access to all the education that their peers enjoy. Teaching of Icelandic as a second language and of other subjects must be mutually supported and be directly linked so that general vocabulary, subject-specific vocabulary and the substance of the subject material are worked with at all times in a simple manner.

### III.D Student assessment and long-term support

Student assessment has many uses, such as determining the level of language skills and of education after arriving to Iceland, what educational progress the student has made and what aspects need more attention. In addition, the assessment is used for comparisons with age criteria and educational goals in national curriculums. The understanding and knowledge of students is assessed at the beginning of schooling, and then study plans are prepared thereafter. The goal should be that plurilingual children born in Iceland who attend preschool and compulsory school achieve age-appropriate language and literacy goals in Iceland at the level that their peers do. According to measurements revealed by tests such as PISA and Milli mála, as well as research, plurilingual children who attend preschools and compulsory schools in Iceland generally score under the average among their peers, both first- and second-generation immigrants. For that reason it is necessary to review and increase the support so that they achieve an acceptable level that is sufficient for successful study here in Iceland.

It is useful to take advantage of the assessment and screening tools available to teachers in preschools and compulsory schools to assess the language development, reading skills and Icelandic skills of children and youth. It should be kept in mind, however, that the tools available here in Iceland are, for the most part, designed to examine the position of monolingual children in Icelandic, and their results, therefore, must be viewed with some reserve. As a rule, plurilingual children and youth need support to master Icelandic, develop language skills and school vocabulary and literacy. It is the role of teachers to build upon previous skills and to ensure appropriate education and support while at the same time monitoring children's progress.

It is important to keep track of the education of all children from the beginning of preschool attendance, and to ensure early intervention, a smooth transition between school levels and support for active learning. The assessment of progress in Icelandic and long-term support in Icelandic studies as needed are a prerequisite for tangible educational progress in Icelandic schools.

The following points are especially suitable to assess or open a dialogue on the language skills of plurilingual students:

- Regular and structured discussions between parents, students and teachers on the skills of the students, their knowledge and progress in their mother tongue and in Icelandic.
- One preschool, many languages (instructions on the manner in which to record the progress of children in Icelandic as a second language).
- Evaluation for new compulsory school students (translated and adjusted from Sweden).
- Milli mála test for compulsory school children aged 6–16.
- Common European Framework for Languages, (CEFR – all languages).
- Lesferill from the Directorate of Education.

According to The Icelandic national curriculum guide for compulsory schools and for upper secondary schools, the schools are to use a new formative assessment which is considered to be the most effective to support students toward further education and independent working methods. Formative assessment ensures that the student receives regular constructive feedback on tasks which explains means of making improvements. Formative assessment for plurilingual students and portfolio in which language abilities are monitored specifically can support students and teachers in mapping and monitoring progress and establishing goals based on the actual position of the student.

## IV. Role of parents

Parents and teachers regularly discuss the wellbeing and progress of students. The mutual flow of information is important, as well as keeping the parent informed on the importance of rich language and literacy environment for the continued education of the children and on their actual progress. Parents need encouragement to cultivate the mother tongue in the home and wherever else possible. It matters not only in regards to the language, but a strong emphasis in the mother tongue can also strengthen family ties, ties to cultural heritage, self-image, intercultural skills and metalinguistic awareness. This is a collaborative task of the home, school and afterschool programs, and all parties need to make an effort to create respect for all languages and thereby encourage students to aim toward active plurilingualism. The upper secondary schools approach autonomous young people directly to find ways to better use their language resources in their studies and the manner in which it may be possible to create a learning space that recognizes and supports the diverse languages of the students.

### IV.A Family language policies

Families who use different languages create their own language policies that reflect their varied circumstances. The family language policy includes conscious decisions on which languages are chosen for communication in the home, how languages are used by family members and what measures are taken to manage and to ensure that the languages are used within the family. The family language policy takes account of the diverse attitudes of each family member with respect to the language and their language use.

Patterns in the use of languages in communication between parents and children include:

- **minority language at home**
- **one parent – one language**
- **time and place**
- **code-switching, code-mixing, translanguaging**

Parents play an important part in shaping and developing the family language policy and ensuring that their children enjoy a rich linguistic environment. Children in families that have a focused language policy are more likely than other children to develop fluency in all the languages used in their linguistic environment. It is believed that children need at least 25–30% of their waking hours with secure access to each language to ensure that they maintain fluency in that language. As the child develops, however, simple access is not sufficient. Languages develop through rich



language use that occurs when there are a variety of reasons for their use in the life of the child and when attitudes in society are positive toward languages.

Language choice and use among family members, as well as reading habits in the home, can be conscious or unconscious, and they can also develop over time. A conscious language policy means that the family makes informed decisions on a systematic language plan where all family members know what language to use in communication among themselves, with relatives and with friends. In addition, the family endeavors to create opportunities for children to be in regular contact with all their languages within the home and outside through books, leisure time, travel, music, theatre, games, screen time and mother tongue education. The unconscious family language policy occurs when the use of languages is without plan or management, language is seen as automatically learnt and language stimulation is minimal or none at all.

#### **IV.B Initiative for systematic support and information flow to parents**

The parents of plurilingual children often need instruction, training and advice on the language upbringing of their children. Parents should be given the proper information and advice as soon as they attend infant care at their health clinic and then throughout the preschool and compulsory school years. The child's language literacy development must be supported throughout childhood, both formally and informally. Parents need to keep communicating in the language of the home, but at the same time, they need support and advice to create more opportunities for strengthening all the languages of the child outside the home. This may include interactions with other children and adults who speak the same languages, visits to the theatre, visits to libraries to borrow books in various languages, visits to the home country and interactions with family members with the help of telecommunications technology and/or through participation in mother tongue schools. It is equally important for parents to support their children's studies in Icelandic. Many studies have also shown that parents of foreign origin who understand the language of the school and of the society have a positive impact on the child's attitude toward that language. It is important to encourage and create opportunities for parents to learn Icelandic because this helps them to take care of their other role as school parents in Iceland and strengthens their position as the linguistic role models of their children. Systematic support of plurilingual children is a good addition to the ways in which parents can strengthen all the languages of their children.

## V. Electronic technology and learning opportunities on the Internet

Electronic technology has become a normal part of the learning environment of students as well as in their private life, and most students find such technology easy to use. As a result, it is an excellent idea to use the electronic environment and tools to support the language of students in a positive and constructive manner. Electronic materials change faster than printed material, and as a result, it is difficult to point out active web links. To ensure the usefulness of technology and media in strengthening plurilingualism, it is important to think about the use based on three viewpoints: Content, context and the child itself.

- **Content – it is important that the material have educational value and be recognised educational material or be recommended by experts.**
- **Context/circumstances – it is important that the material used for education and play have a link to reality and the circumstances that the child is familiar with (not use e.g. material that is far from any form of reality); this will make it more likely that the child will add to the vocabulary he/she knows and uses on a daily basis.**
- **The child itself – the material must be appropriate to his/her age, knowledge and skills in the language.**

Here are a few Icelandic examples of materials and their use that may be useful:

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[A summary prepared by the staff of the Center of School Development at the University of Akureyri about apps and IT, useful in learning and teaching students of foreign origin.](#)

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[Use of electronic technology, such as computers and tablets, in language classes as well as other subjects.](#)

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[Example from Stóri-Vogaskóli on mother tongue teaching.](#)

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[Example of apps and IT-projects in the field of IT on the website Tungumál er gjöf \(Language is a Gift\).](#)

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The opportunities to learn and maintain languages on the Internet are many, such as in Internet communities, on blog pages, through teleconferencing equipment, through music and videos, in real time or published material, anonymous or by logging in. School and afterschool programs must take account of personal data protection and the age criteria that apply to programs, apps and websites.

## VI. Ways and practical ideas for the support of mother tongue and of active plurilingualism

It is important that all those who work with plurilingual children and young people adopt a positive attitude toward a diversity of languages and ways to show support by action. Drawing positive attention to all languages that are spoken in the group of children or students shows their importance. It is very important to think about language as a tool for learning and communication that builds the child's knowledge, self-image and social capital.

Building up a plurilingual society can begin by placing "Welcome" cards in various languages at the entrance of a school. By doing so, we send a message that all children and adults are welcome to the school, whatever language they speak. The next step could be putting up a sign by the entrance of each classroom in several languages which indicates that the students are proud of their languages. Language is thereby turned into a resource for all.

There are numerous ways to activate, support, work with and draw attention to diverse languages. In the following sections, they are divided into two categories, from the simple, which is first and foremost to attend to the visibility of languages, up to ways to work with literacy and study. The following methods can be of use to schools and afterschool centers in formulating their own language policy.



## VI.A Simple methods that support a diversity of languages

Employees of schools and afterschool programs can:



- Create a positive language culture; languages are a resource, interesting, recognized, desirable.
- Show an interest in languages. Teachers need not know all the languages spoken in the group because they can rely on the knowledge of the children, the parents or employees in many languages. They are all experts.
- Take account of self-assessment lists when assessing support for diverse languages in daily work.
- Encourage parents to maintain the children's mother tongue and use it in communication with children.
- Encourage students to attend mother tongue classes.
- Draw the attention of all students to how important it is to know languages.
- Draw attention to the languages of the students in the school.
- Learn a few words in the mother tongue of the student during the welcoming process.
- Encourage students to learn a few words in the mother tongue of the student. This can be one word a week (word of the week) or a few words a week (language of the week).
- Prepare posters with the writings of students in various languages.
- Play music in numerous languages.
- Encourage students to write in their mother tongue.
- Encourage students to use Google Translate for fun and see how much a text changes when it is translated.
- Allow students who have the same mother tongue to assist each other using the mother tongue in specific projects when appropriate.
- Write key terms in Icelandic or English on the whiteboard so that students can use dictionaries.
- Ask students whether they know, in their mother tongue, the name of various terms that they are learning in Icelandic.

- Find words that are similar, such as names, numbers, customs, colors, fruit, vegetables, calendars, celebration days, days of the week, the months, alphabet, language sounds, representative sounds (onomatopoeia) and anything that teachers and students can think of.
- Investigate whether animal sounds in different languages are similar. Icelandic lambs say me, me while English lambs say baa, baa. What about cows?
- Check whether you can find famous people that speak or who spoke a language that the students of the school speak as their mother tongue.
- Use various languages for communication in different circumstances (such as cards on Environment Day, poems to mother on Mother's Day, superhero projects).
- Learn songs, games and how to count in different languages.
- Get children and parents to assist with finding appropriate material on the Internet.
- Hold an open week where parents are encouraged to come to the school and see the work being done.
- Ask parents to visit and read aloud in their mother tongue.
- Organize a language and work presentation for parents where the parents come and talk about their language and their job.
- Older students read for younger students in their own mother tongues. Older students visit preschool students and read for them in their own mother tongues.
- Celebrate language days ([European Day of Languages, 26 September](#); Icelandic Language Day, 16 November; [International Mother Language Day, 21 February](#)).
- Prepare posters with words relating to families, such as mother, grandmother, grandfather, in the languages of the school.
- Create space for the children to play with words and language and, at the same time, ensure the visibility of the languages.
- Collect books in many languages.



## VI.B Paths to active plurilingualism

Employees of schools and afterschool centers can:

- Show that the school and afterschool centers are proud of their linguistic richness. Prepare a language policy, school paper and presentational material.
- Encourage and assess home reading in all languages.
- Allow students to read comparable texts in their mother tongue, e.g. on Wikipedia, if they can be found there.
- Collect reading material in the languages of the class in the class library.
- Make use of books in a variety of languages that are accessible electronically or in libraries. The library of Móðurmál – the Association on Bilingualism (over 6,000 books in more than 60 languages), for instance, is listed in Gegnir (search word MODPG, classified according to language).
- Organize cultural events. Multidisciplinary methods in working with children and adults are intended to cast a light on the strengths and variety of the cultural worlds of the participants.
- Provide more support to students who need long-term support of Icelandic as a second language.
- Build on the existing language repertoire and knowledge of students in teaching and studies.
- Concentrate on developing learning vocabulary in Icelandic and link this with existing vocabulary in other languages.
- Attend training and life-long learning and get experts to visit.
- Create bilingual dictionaries, bilingual books and personal comics.
- Encourage students to use more than one language in homework, preparations and tasks.
- Maintain an overview of which students are attending mother tongue classes and how fluent they are in their mother tongue.
- Encourage parents to send their children to school with schoolbooks in their mother tongue.
- Allow students to use their mother tongue to do schoolwork comparable to what other students are doing in Icelandic. The work may be written, oral, relate to music, acting, visual or a mix of all these.

- Give students the opportunity to use their mother tongue to discuss things they have learned.
- Encourage students to use their mother tongue when discussing lessons with their parents.
- Teach parents how to help their children with homework even if they do not know Icelandic. Parents can ask their children about images, terms and other things in a written text and link these to their own experiences.
- Help students to learn their mother tongue independently on the Internet or in another manner and provide them with access to quality web links.
- Teach students how they can use the languages that they already know to learn more languages.
- Have students think about what a language is, how one learns a language, how one teaches a language, how many languages they know and whether they recognize a language that is played back to them.
- Examine with students the manner in which exotic languages are written and compare them.
- Work with written material and computer material from *Tungumál er gjöf*.
- Hold a course in school-related Icelandic for parents. The course should also impart information on e.g. culture, the collaboration between home and school, plurilingualism and children's language acquisition.
- Work with language and literacy in afterschool programs; ideas can be found e.g. on the website [fristundalæsi.reykjavik](http://fristundalæsi.reykjavik).
- Prepare a language bank with information on all the languages that children and adults speak in school and afterschool programs. The bank can be on the Internet and/or on posters.
- Prepare a plurilingual book with pictures where a story is translated into all the languages of the class. The shared preparation of the book and its reading strengthens students who become experts in their mother tongue and can share this knowledge. All languages are respected equally.
- Create bilingual books with pictures and text in Icelandic and other languages. Older and younger students can help each other in the project, as the pairs consist of those who speak Icelandic and those who speak another language. In preschools, such books can be created with parents or the children themselves, e.g. by means of a picture dictionary for preschools *Ljáðu mér orð* and with bilingual communication books.

- Give children the opportunity to use their mother tongue in work with new terms, which will deepen their understanding of the studies while activating their knowledge.
- Encourage schools and teachers to collaborate with other schools overseas, e.g. Erasmus and eTwinning.
- Find a school in another country to twin with.
- Use co-operative educational methods so that students can learn from one another, e.g. about each other's culture and language.
- Develop co-operative educational methods (CLIM, PALS, Daily Five, the Jigsaw method).
- Create study pairs to learn Icelandic and a new language together. When a new child who is learning Icelandic as a second language and who can fully speak, write and read his own mother tongue begins at the school, it is a good idea to match that child with a student in the group (class) through the tasks of the day. The pair has an exercise book (or tablet) and writes in it new words in both languages that must be learned. This leads to communication between the children and supports reading, literacy, writing and an awareness of languages. At the same time, a dictionary is created that can be used for communication. Such working practices strengthen social interaction and make the entire class responsible for welcoming the new student.
- Use tablets to build on their own mother tongue to understand the material that children are expected to learn in Icelandic.
- Use the European language portfolio to monitor the student's progress.
- Seek advice and co-operation from language and cultural mediators and bilingual advisors or teachers.
- Invite students with a mother tongue other than Icelandic to attend mother tongue classes, which will replace classes in foreign languages (Compulsory School Act, Article 16), and have such courses assessed as a subject in compulsory school and/or optional course at youth level.
- Recognize mother tongue classes held by outside entities as a part of the formal education of plurilingual children and assessed as grades in a compulsory school and ECTS credits at upper secondary school levels.
- Offer assessment tests in the mother tongue of teenagers and young people with comparable criteria for all languages.
- Offer students at the lower and upper secondary level with a mother tongue other than Icelandic the option of maintaining their mother tongue as a selective, if they so request (Act on Upper Secondary Education No. 92/2008).



## VI.C Useful links for schools and parents

This section contains links to a wide range of material to support speaking mother tongues in school and afterschool programs. Some of these apply to specific levels of education, although their material can easily be used across age and school levels.




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**Brúarsmiðir í Miðju máls og læsis:** Education and advice for teachers, parents and students.

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**ECML:** Inspiring language learning in the early years.

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**Council of Europe platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education:** Education, sources and references on languages in school systems.

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**Fjölmennigarvefur (Multiculture website):** Website about different countries for children.

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**Frístundalæsi (Free-time reading):** Website on strengthening language and reading fluency in afterschool hours.

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**Fjölmennning í leikskóla (Multiculturalism in preschools) – Allir með en enginn eins (Everyone together but no one the same):** A large number of practical ideas on how to support the language of children in preschools.

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**Foreldravefur Reykjavíkurborgar (Reykjavík City parents' website):** Information for parents on day-care parents, preschools, compulsory schools, afterschool, multiculturalism and active participation in schoolwork.

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**Heimurinn er hér (The world is here):** The Reykjavík City Multicultural Policy

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**Icelandic Language Policy:** Public policy in the affairs of the Icelandic language.

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**Icelandic courses and education** at Tungumálatorg.

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**Preschool literacy policy:** Ways to work on literacy through play.

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**Menntamálastofnun (Directorate of Education):** Teaching and educational material.

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**Reykjavík City Education Policy:** Goals, ways and tools for all age groups.

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**Miðja máls og læsis (Centre for Language and Literacy):** Interesting information, projects, useful links.

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**Móðurmál – Association on Bilingualism:** Umbrella association for mother tongue language groups responsible for teaching plurilingual children their mother tongue.

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**Multilingual families:** Projects that support plurilingualism in schoolwork.

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**Students with Icelandic as a second language:** Information and educational website of Akureyri which contains adapted educational material, instructions and practical information for schools and parents.

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**Communications between homes and schools:** Messages from schools to parents in various languages, ready for use.

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**Language is a gift:** A diverse range of ideas on how preschool teachers can develop effective collaboration with parents regarding the language and literacy of their children, with a focus on learning Icelandic as a second language while supporting the mother tongue at the same time. Below are links to material that directly relates to supports for the mother tongue of children:

- **Conversations about mother tongues in the home**
- **Suggestions for questions to parents on language development and mother tongue.**
- **Guidelines for parents to support mother tongues at home**
- **Ideas for working with the diverse mother tongues of preschool children in daily work.**
- **The video “Language is a gift”, which focuses on the role of parents and schools in supporting the development of the language and literacy of plurilingual children.**

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**Tungumálatorg – Idea Bank:** Ideas for events involving languages, e.g. International Mother Tongue Day.

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**Welcome:** Communication tools to make it easier for schools to receive, adapt and connect with parents and students with mother tongues other than Icelandic.

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## Conclusion

Languages are valuable, and plurilingualism is valuable to plurilingual children and youth, as well as to the society in which they live. Supporting and strengthening active plurilingualism creates circumstances in which individuals can build up communication networks in more than one language and can use their language wealth to strengthen themselves as the language holder of many languages, as participants in society and as being global citizens. By respecting, recognizing the importance and worth of the languages of all people in society, we give everyone the opportunity of using their strengths, being proud of their background and feeling welcome to take part in Icelandic society.

Plurilingual children who grow up in Iceland learn Icelandic in school and in their afterschool programs as well as in the community at large. It is, however, crucial that they receive help as needed to learn Icelandic, because with a good vocabulary, reading comprehension and the ability to express themselves in spoken and written Icelandic to a level comparable to that of their peers and in accordance with general educational criteria, their options for further education increase significantly. A guiding light of support for mother tongues and plurilingualism should not overshadow or drown out the focus on concentrated, professional assistance with Icelandic that is sufficient for successful study in the Icelandic school system and active participation in Icelandic society.

English is an international language that is firmly entrenched in Icelandic society, particularly in the business sector, technology and online, and also in higher education in Icelandic higher learning schools and universities. English is taught as a foreign language in most schools from the youngest level of compulsory school and is often likened to an “additional language” in Iceland due to how widespread, popular and vital it is in numerous circumstances. Its value in communication and possibilities in study and employment are indisputable.

Danish and other Nordic languages are taught in the school system, and the close relations between the Nordic countries make it possible for students to attend classes and obtain reading material in those languages. Approximately one hundred languages are spoken in Iceland, some by large numbers of people, such as Polish, while others have only a few native speakers. Language skills in various languages is a valuable addition to children’s education and their social engagement. From the point of view of human rights, all children and youth are entitled to use, maintain and develop their mother tongue and have the right to live in a society that respects all languages. A society that supports active plurilingualism creates an environment where the citizens have a voice and can take an active part in shaping its future.

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