

# Extended education and well-being of children: A case study of Iceland

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**Abstract:** This article explores the emergent trend of global educational policy which focuses on educational values such as well-being and holistic skills. It makes connections between the emergent trend of “education-as-flourishing” and current developments of extended education, using a specific case for illustration, i.e. school-age educare in Iceland. The author argues that there is an internal tension in the current educational global policy which emphasizes holistic skills and well-being in education but eventually produces a policy framework that overlooks the educational pathways of learners through extended education spaces. The case study shows that the manifold learning outcomes of extended education are largely overlooked in policy and practice. There are external and internal challenges at play that feed this tension, specifically a lack of agency of stakeholders and a supportive social structure. A new Act on Well-being of Children in Iceland encourages municipalities and professionals to align resources from diverse sectors, such as education, health, and social services. This study indicates a primary need for policy makers to work strategically with educators from all sectors to develop innovative educational practices within and outside of school to support the education and well-being of children and youth.

**Keywords:** Educational policy, well-being, extended education, school-aged educare

## Introduction

Significant changes are shaping education systems around the globe, as societies tackle social and economic uncertainty, post-pandemic impact, digital transformations and extreme weather events (OECD, 2022). As our ideas about education and learning are transformed, so are our ideas about where, how and with whom learning takes place. In this paper, I argue that the field of extended education plays an increasingly vital role in shaping spaces to support the education and well-being of children and young people. Thus, knowledge and research on extended education programs, its professional aims and practices, contribute to developing our education systems and should be considered integral to any educational policy and agenda. Educational policy can be a driver for educational innovation and curriculum change. However, its implementation relies on whether or not the changes become integrated in to the existing social structures and agency of professionals and stakeholders within a specific culture (Priestley, 2011; Priestley et al., 2020). This study explores the case of Icelandic school-age educare as an example of extended education practices and its links to policy, and the sometimes, contradictory rollout of educational policy, before and during a pandemic crisis.

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Extended education researchers focus on understanding the process of learning that takes place in diverse situations in the lives of children and youth. Although extended research as a specific academic field may be considered relatively “young” (Kerfelt & Pálsdóttir, 2014), it in many ways rests on educational theories and academic approaches that can be traced back to ancient greek philosophy and could be summed up as “education-in-the-wide-sense” (see similar perspectives in Kristjánsson, 2020; Noam & Triggs, 2020). Similarly, the global education-as-flourishing movement seeks to rebalance our current education policy “... in the service of a broader idea: to nurture, in every human being, a suite of distinctive human intelligences, which equip us not only to flourish as individuals but also to contribute to flourishing societies and economies, in balance with the planet.” (Stevenson, 2022, p.5). Such ideals inspire countries and communities to create sustainable education systems that nurture each and every child and promotes its education and well-being.

I will explore the links between modern concepts of extended education and the current call for a more holistic educational outlook that today shapes educational discourse, whether amongst practitioners, researchers, or government agencies. Any educational endeavour is situated within a specific context, and as other scholars have argued, extended education is always shaped by its societies culture, values, current challenges and policy issues (Stecher, 2020). Hence, this study sheds light on global educational policy from the standpoint of an extended education researcher and in the context of a specific country, i.e., Iceland where the educational government have made innovative efforts to create a holistic policy on the well-being of children that aligns resources from diverse sectors, such as education, health, and social services.

## Extended Education

Extended education may be delivered in the form of a program, continuous activities or various sporadic offerings; it may be school-based or run by a community or a private agent, and it may take place within school hours or out-of-school hours (Ljusberg & Klerfelt, 2022). Noam and Triggs define extended education as “... an experience that provides opportunities for children and youth to increase their motivation, passion, and engagement in understanding the world (Noam & Triggs, 2020, p. 295).<sup>1</sup> This definition builds on a community approach which is sometimes expressed in the African saying “it takes a village to raise a child”. It is an approach that opposes the dichotomy of formal and informal learning which often permeates academic and professional approaches to education and creates silos between sectors (Pálsdóttir, 2015).

It is possible to identify different drivers of extended education programs depending on the social context. Bae (2020) identifies four different developmental models of extended education: Extended education may be: 1) driven by school-reform and a need for educational innovation, 2) seen as a sector for youth development, 3) driven by social needs, such as child-care services and summer programmes for immigrant and minority students, and 4) seen as a vehicle for social reproduction and upward mobility through academic achievements which

1 In fact, they argue that any programme which aim is to repeat or reinforce school learning, should be termed extended *schooling*, not extended education.

are reinforced through, for example, private tutoring (Bae, 2020). These diverse drives can, of course, be simultaneously at work within a specific community, although some of them will usually be prioritized, either within the practice itself or the chosen research lenses. However, each model of extended education development connects with a certain value or element of well-being, such as the idea of a quality education, youth development, care and security, equity, and social mobility.

## The Field of School-aged Educare

Extended education is the fastest growing field of education, although its implementation and characteristics varies between societies. The Nordic countries have a strong tradition of public extended education programs, such as educare-centres (s. fritidshem) for young school-aged children in Sweden, and leisure-time centres for six-to-nine-year-old children in Iceland (i. frístundaheimili). Diverse private recreational programs are offered as well in both countries (Klerfelt & Haglund, 2014; Pálsdóttir & Kristjánsdóttir, 2018). In some other countries, such as Australia and Korea, extended education programs are often run by private partners (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Woo, 2020). In Germany and Switzerland there has been a push towards all-day schools since the first PISA findings in 2000 with the main aim to “... have educational unity between instruction and care at the school”, thus strengthening the academic outcomes of students (Schuepbach & Lilla, 2020, p.59). These diverse programs for young school-children belong to a professional field of practice and research which is now most often referred to as “school-aged educare” (Klerfelt et al., 2020). It is a field often neglected in educational research, although it has become an integral part of children’s lives in many countries.

## Aim and Research Question

The aim of this article is to shed light on the new directions of extended education, specifically school-aged educare, and examine how it relates to the emergent trends in global education that focus on well-being and flourishing as an aim of education. The main research question is: What can the field of extended education contribute to the emergent global focus on education as flourishing or well-being? To ground such an overarching aim, I put forth the following sub-question: What conclusions can be drawn from the Icelandic context about the links between an educational policy, that highlights well-being, and school-age educare?

## Research Design

The research design for this exposition used an in depth case study approach to examine the phenomena of extended education and links to the educational debate and policy on well-

being and education. Stake (1995) defines case study as “studying the specificity and complexity of a case in order to understand its activity within its primary context” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). In this research, the author has gathered information from policy documents and research in extended education in Iceland. The information is used to illuminate the links between extended education and children’s well-being.

Stake (1995) describes two types of case studies, essential case studies and instrumental case studies. Essential case studies are applicable when the case in question is the centre of focus. However, it is the intention of the author to examine the Icelandic circumstances in depth because it helps to pursue external interest in the connections of extended education and global educational policy. This research project is an instrumental case study as the purpose is to gain insight into specific aspects of educational policies. The case study examines the Icelandic education policies against the backdrop of the current global educational policy. Furthermore, four extended education research projects within the Icelandic context are explored to shed light on the contribution of such research to current educational debates and policy on well-being and education. The advantage of the case study approach is that it facilitates an analysis of the connections between policy and extended education practices, as well as providing a context to understand what facilitates or hinders agency to promote specific educational values within a certain social structure.

## Data and analysis

This research is inspired by Priestly’s definition of educational policy and curriculum as a negotiated and complex process that is non-linear and relies on activities and enactment in practice (Priestley, 2011, 2021). Thus, research into a specific social context is vital to understand better the pedagogical links between the emergent global policy trend of well-being as the aim of education and the field of extended education. For this purpose, the author explored policy documents from OECD, specifically relating to the future of education and skills, and looked at how they have translated, or resurfaced, in the Icelandic policy documents since 2011. Also, key Icelandic educational policy documents were examined as well as the main policy documents that concern the role of leisure-time centres for young school-aged children, see table 1 below.

These documents were chosen as representative of current educational policy that are expected to transform and shape the social practices that support children’s well-being, and their education, both within formal and extended education. The global policy documents were used as supporting documents to further explore how the Icelandic education policy was shaped by the emergent trends in global policy. The Icelandic policy documents were analysed through open coding through a critical and interpretative lenses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A literature review on published research about leisure-time centres in Iceland was conducted to analyse the links between policy and practices of this particular extended education space.

**Table 1.** Key policy documents explored in the order of publishing date.

Title	Year	Publisher
The Icelandic national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools: General section	2012	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Iceland
Goals and Criteria for work of Leisure Centres for Children in Early Grades of Compulsory School	2017	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture & Icelandic Association of Local Authorities
The future of education and skills. Education 2030	2018	OECD
Iceland Education Policy 2030 and its implementation.	2021	OECD
Leisure-time centres. Play and learning. Thematic issue	2021	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Iceland
Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity	2021	Ministry of Education and Children
Education Policy Outlook 2022: Transforming Pathways for Lifelong Learners	2022	OECD

## Findings

### Global education policy and well-being

The findings of this study show that OECD educational policy as well as the United Nations policies have had considerable impact on the Icelandic educational policy. The rollout and impact of global educational policy since the millennium is interesting, to say the least, but also contradictory and questionable. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) marked the occasion by the first round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a large scale international comparative test of the academic skills in literacy, science, and maths of 15-year-olds in the participating countries. There has been plentiful of critique of the PISA methodology, but perhaps the strongest critique concerns how the findings are used to inform and feed an education policy that favours measure over meaning, and evidence over ideas (see, for example, Biesta, 2009). However, PISA has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of education and identifying huge challenges facing education systems around the globe, such as social inequalities, achievement gaps and unequal access to quality education.

A few years ago, the OECD launched its Education 2030 initiative calling for a new and a broader education goals, aimed at individual and collective well-being of students as the main aim of education (OECD, 2018). A recurrent theme is the notion of transformatory competences and holistic skills that education systems should nurture in every learner. Also, schools are considered to be a part of a larger eco-system in which they operate (OECD, 2018). It is evidence of an emergent trend that prioritizes the flourishing or the well-being of students over the academic, cognitive side of education (Stevenson, 2022). Paradoxically, in

the midst of a global PISA competition of a rather narrow academic ranking between countries based on skills, academics and policy makers repeatedly refer to the educational values of well-being that relate to the ancient Greek ideal that education should nurture each and every one to reach their individual and human capabilities and to flourish in community with others (Kristjánsson, 2020; Stevenson, 2022). However, the OECD defines well-being quite broadly as a combination of factors concerning both quality of life, among them education, subjective well-being and civil engagement, and material conditions, such as jobs, housing and income (OECD, 2019b). And when it comes to the role of education, the OECD specifies a range of *transformatory competencies* that education systems should nurture, such as taking responsibility, creating new values and reconciling tensions and dilemmas (OECD, 2019a).

Another theme that permeates the OECD policy is that education needs to prepare individuals and societies to tackle the huge challenges societies around the globe are facing, such as extreme weather conditions, wars, pandemics, and economic instability. It has become increasingly important for global organisations to initiate the development of common global goals and coordinate actions without borders. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have thus impacted the OECD educational policy. In fact, in one of the OECD documents there is a table that specifically connects and compares the UN SDG's with the OECD well-being components (OECD, 2019a). In accordance with the above, The OECD Education Outlook Report in 2022 emphasizes learner agency, life-long transitions and core skills that are needed to tackle complex and challenging problems.

This overview does, of course, not offer a complete picture of global educational policy, but it points to some drivers and developments. It depicts a clear shift in global policy towards a new and broader curriculum in which extended education could and should be considered. The clear message is that holistic well-being of individuals, as well as their communities, should be considered as the main aim of education. But it still remains unsolved that the term “well-being” is an umbrella for diverse factors. Quite clearly, social and cultural differences between continents and countries result in different understandings and approaches to what constitutes well-being or “a good life” (Ruyter et al., 2022). Diverse spaces and different academic and professional approaches are needed to support successful educational pathways of learners and their transformatory competencies.

## The Icelandic education policy and well-being

The Icelandic education system, similarly to other Nordic countries, has been built on fundamental values, such as democracy, equity, participation, welfare and progressiveness (Antikainen, 2006). The ideal of the social-democratic welfare state has shaped the Icelandic education system which is built on an inclusive public school system and extensive public day-care for parents of young children; a system that fosters a strong sense of state-wide as well as municipality responsibility to support the well-being of its citizens. The population of 388.000, living in the vast island in the Atlantic Ocean, a popular tourist destination between Europe and America, has changed drastically as the immigrant population has risen from about 3% since the millennium up to 20% (Iceland Statistics, 2023). The current educational challenges include a general decline in literacy and science skills and an increasing achievement gap between socially disadvantaged students and their peers (OECD, 2021). Although the majority of students in compulsory school report a feeling of belonging and general

satisfaction in school, students of immigrant background are more likely to experience a lack of connection with teachers and their peers (Pálsdóttir et al., 2021).

Iceland is an interesting case to explore the connection between global well-being trend in education and extended education, as Iceland has historically valued quality public education, literacy levels were high already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and youth and leisure activities are integral to the local communities. Two shifts in the Icelandic educational landscape and national curriculum policy are worth mentioning in the context of the current research. The first concerns the introduction in 2011 of six cross-curricular fundamental pillars of education in the national curriculum: *Literacy-sustainability-health and welfare-democracy and human rights- equality and creativity*. These educational values were intended to shape and inspire school practices at all levels. This innovative policy also marked the first holistic national curriculum for pre-school, compulsory school and upper secondary school which was built around the notion of holistic skills and a clear emphasis on the flourishing of students as individuals and citizens (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Although its implementation has not been formally evaluated, the holistic vision presented in this curriculum has inspired various integrative approaches. Some examples are the integration of school-subjects in various classroom practices and the occasional bridge-building between different school-levels. It may have prompted the City Council of Reykjavik, the capital in which about half of the population lives, to create their own holistic educational strategy which centres on five core skills: *Social skills-Empowerment (a strong sense of self)-Literacy-Creativity-and Health* (Reykjavik city, 2019). As in the case of the OECD policy, there is a general move away from highlighting specific school subjects towards a vision of broader range of integrated skills and competences.

The second shift is clearly identified in the most recent changes in Icelandic educational policy: Firstly, An Education Strategic Plan developed in collaboration with the OECD (OECD, 2021); Secondly, a new *Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity*, (hereafter, The Well-being Act) set forth in 2021 by the (then) Minister of Social Affairs and Children, now the Minister of Education and Children; And thirdly, the development of a new Ministry of Education and Children, established in 2021, which oversees the implementation of both the Education Strategic Plan as well as The Well-being Act.<sup>2</sup>

These policy changes mark an important shift as they focus on the education of the student as a whole and promote holistic skills and well-being as the core aim of education. The aim of the Education Strategic Plan 2030 is to “... provide excellent education in an environment where everyone can learn and everyone matters” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021a). Well-being is one of the policy's five strategic pillars and highlights the importance of health promotion, mental health, prevention, school counselling and student voices. Interestingly, the extended education sector is hardly mentioned in the above policy documents, although (as next section reveals), considerable policy exists in relation to school-aged educare services in Iceland. There is still considerable work to be done to build bridges between cultural, political and professional silos in the educational landscape. This is why the Well-being Act has inspired new hopes that changes will be made at the organizational level

2 The current Prime-minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, was the education minister in 2011 and responsible for the new curriculum in 2011. The current Education Minister, Ásmundur Einar Daðason, was previously the minister of social affairs and children and led the preparation of the Well-being Act.

which will allow new collaborative social structures to develop to harnesses the resources in the non-formal extended education sector.

The main aim of the Well-being Act is to align sectors and resources in society to work together to provide early support and interventions, as needed. In fact, the act states that professionals who work with children or young people should collaborate to provide individual and specialized support in the best interest of the child. Schools at every level, ranging from pre-school to upper-secondary schools, should work systematically with the health care, social services as well as extended education programs to coordinate preventive measures as well as responses when needed (Ministry of Education and Children, 2021).<sup>3</sup> The analysis of these Icelandic educational documents indicate a shift, at least on the policy level, towards new values and a broader vision on educational pathways through the (educational) community. How this will translate into practice remains to be seen. It will undoubtedly depend on which community sectors will be called upon and whether extended education spaces in children's lives will be considered as integral to their educational pathways.

### Icelandic policy on school-aged educare

In Iceland most municipalities offer school-based after-school care for young school-aged children. In 2016 the Icelandic government stipulated that leisure-time centres should meet the needs and interest of young school-aged children in their out-of-school time; furthermore, that emphasis should be on children's choice, free play and a variety of activities (see Pálsdóttir & Kristjánsdóttir, 2018). In 2017 the Icelandic government published *A quality framework for the leisure-time centres* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture & Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2017). This framework had a focus on: a) child-centered practices and children's rights, b) standards of human resources and professionalism, and c) guidelines for the management and organization of facility and daily practices. Following the establishment of these quality standards, the Ministry of Education published a self-assessment tool for after-school centers in 2021. The same year, the Ministry of Education published a thematic issue for leisure-time centers summarizing the non-formal curriculum basis of leisure-time centres for school-aged children in Iceland, titled *Leisure-time centres. Play and learning from the children's premises* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021b). It described the relevant pedagogy and provided leaders and practitioners with advice and ideas. The theme issue draws from academic-foundations of leisure-pedagogy, it provides diverse and effective case examples from practice and research, and discusses the quality framework. It is maintained that leisure-time centres should foster competences such as children's agency, social skills, creativity, and collaboration (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021b). Thus, the Icelandic government has at least partly recognized the possible educational impact leisure-time-centers can have and considered how connections and activities within such spaces contribute to children's well-being and education.

3 The Minister of Education and Children signed an agreement of cooperation with the United Nations in 2023 to work together on the implementations of a new methodology that protects children from violence and supports their well-being.



## Research on school-aged educare in Iceland

The first academic research on school-aged educare in Iceland was published little over a decade ago, as extended education was for many years a neglected field of study within the academic sector. This section explores the existing literature and research on the leisure-time centres for six-to-nine-year-old children in Iceland through the lenses of educational values, professional agency, and educational policy.

### First Wave Research Projects

The first research was a holistic review of the status of the leisure-time centres in Reykjavík, their historical origin as day-care institutions, the second period when the emphasis was on an extended-school-day, and their current status as a semi-professional pedagogical leisure-practices that focus on the care, learning and leisure experiences of children. The study revealed that these practices were important for children and their families, but that they were organizationally marginalized due to lack of policy framework and personnel did not feel empowered to drive changes or professional development (Pálsdóttir, 2012). A second opportunity to further explore the integration of school and leisure activities arose when Reykjavík City launched a project in 2012 called *The Day of the Child*. Five Reykjavík schools set out to integrate school and leisure by hiring leisure-care personnel to work with school-teachers during the school-day, as well as to work in the leisure-time centre in the afternoons. The overall aim was to develop holistic services and continuous support for young school-aged children. A research was conducted to explore the opportunities and challenges of this integration of school and leisure from the perspective of personnel (Pálsdóttir, 2017). The study showed that the teachers as well as the leisure-personnel felt that the increased integration supported the well-being of children. According to the research participants, the collaborative practices underlined the importance of children's informal and social learning and provided new opportunities within the school to tackle issues related to student communication, behaviour and friendships (Pálsdóttir, 2017). The findings revealed that this kind of integrative approach was specifically beneficial to marginalized students or students that needed specific support. One of the schools was predominantly a multilingual school, with about 80% of students having immigrant background. In this specific school, the school leadership in collaboration with city authorities decided that the leisure-time centre would be included in the school-program, thus free of charge until 3 pm in the afternoon (Pálsdóttir et al., 2014). The aim was to support the children's Icelandic language skills and strengthen their social inclusion in the learning environment.

The first wave of research on school-aged educare in the Icelandic context identified several challenges to the integration of school and leisure-practices, among them various organizational barriers, such as professional boundaries between leisure and school, unclear roles of leisure-care personnel and lack of active collaboration. In other words, the social structure was in many ways not receptive to the values and goals behind the innovative integration and the professionals and staff involved had little leeway to become agents of considerable change, at least not at the organizational level (Pálsdóttir, 2017; Priestley, 2011). However, there are clear indicators of the potential benefits of linking school and leisure to systematically support the well-being of children.

## Second Wave Research Projects

A second wave of research on the role of extended education in Iceland took place after the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational landscapes all around the globe. The pandemic was certainly a test of the resilience of education systems, professionals, students, parents and other stakeholders and bears witness to the vital role of extended education and community collaboration (United Nations, 2020). Unlike most countries, the Icelandic government never imposed a lock-down to pre-schools, compulsory schools, and public extended education programs; even though, upper-secondary schools and universities closed buildings over extensive periods and were only allowed to provide online digital teaching. The main aim was to keep schools and public recreational programs operating to ensure the rights of children to education and care during these challenging times. Amazingly, pre-schools and compulsory schools in Iceland generally managed to remain open during the pandemic, although with considerable restrictions on group sizes, health protocols and other systemic arrangements.

The first source on the role of extended education in Iceland during the pandemic is an electronic survey sent out in Spring of 2020 to leaders in public leisure-programs in the capital area. Responses were retrieved from 117 leaders, of those 69 worked in leisure-time centres for six-to-nine-year olds ( $N = 69$ ) and 48 were managers of youth-centres for 13-16 year olds ( $N = 48$ ) (Pálsdóttir et al., 2021). The results showed a significant difference in the impact COVID-19 had on after-school activities. Around 83% of managers of leisure-time centres reported that their programs had remained *open* during the lockdown, whereas 87% of managers in youth centres said that their program had been partially or completely *closed* during the pandemic. Disadvantaged children and youth, such as children with disability or immigrant background, were more likely to be not involved and to “fall through the cracks” (as one informant reported). Even so, few informants said that they had, out of their own initiative, reached out to marginalized children. Another significant difference between the two informant groups was the communication with parents and parental support. Leaders of leisure-time centres were much more likely to report a regular communication with the parents of the children in their care, than did the leaders of youth-centres: 70% of them reported that parents had contacted them regularly and expressed concern about their children, whereas within youth centres 45% reported such communications (Pálsdóttir et al., 2021). Some positive changes were experienced during the pandemic, such as smaller groups of children in the leisure-time centres, more collaboration with the schools and a close-knit coordination with co-workers. Nevertheless, the informants reported that they often felt marginalized as information and support from local authorities was aimed at schools and the extended education programs were forgotten.

The second source on the status of extended education in Iceland during the pandemic is found in a recent Nordic comparative study on children's and young people's voices and participation during COVID-19 (Helfer et al., 2023; Pálsdóttir & Guðjohnsen, 2023). Data was gathered by analysing various reports and policy documents, as well as through interviews with several individuals in leadership positions at government and municipal level as well as in the non-profit youth sector. The evidence showed that policy makers and administrators had concerns of the mental well-being of children and young people, as epidemiological measures caused major disruptions in their daily lives. The informants described a specific concern, raised on many occasions, of socially disadvantaged children and young people who became even more marginalized during the pandemic, but they also reported that

too little was done or could be done. The informants agreed that even though schools made enormous efforts into continued class activities and, for the older students, transfer teaching into the digital realm, the social aspect of schooling was generally overlooked. One of the conclusions of the overall project was that “... the importance of leisure and social gatherings for the well-being of young people has been, to some extent, misrecognised during the pandemic, and it has been a serious omission” (Helfer, Ibsen, et al., 2023, p.66). Thus, it is concluded that lessons learned from the pandemic crisis calls for a vision of a holistic well-being and a community landscape in which “... Schools, educational institutions, and recreational activities play an essential role in building the everyday lives and well-being of children and young people” (Helfer et al., 2023, p.136).

## Discussion

One of the more significant findings of this study is how important extended education is when considered in the light of the global focus on education as flourishing or well-being; but at the same time how marginalized extended education spaces are, considered here in the Icelandic context. The findings of this study show a strong alignment of the Icelandic educational policy with the OECD educational framework. It further shows that the field of extended education in Iceland, specifically school-age educare, has become more formalized, yet remains marginalized within the education system. This section explores the main thematic findings, the internal tension between policy and practice, the contribution of extended education to well-being and learner agency, and lastly, a call for professional agency and innovation.

*Firstly, the data explored reveals a certain tension between policy and practice, both at global and local level.* High level transformative competences and learner agency are put at the forefront of policy, but the connections between formal and non-formal learning spaces seem largely ignored. The current global and local educational policies centre on educational values of well-being, empowerment, and transformatory skills of student's; values and skills that lay at the core of many extended education practices, such as those explored in this study. Educational policy seems to recognize and, to a point, legitimate extended education practices; however, the case of Iceland, which has set an ambitious education policy and aims for cross-sectoral alignment, shows how challenging it is to implement innovative changes. It seems hard to resist the global push in education toward a outcomes-based learning and standardized testing. Take for example the OECD Education Outlook since 2018 which centred on holistic skills as the focal aim of education systems. Yet, when the OECD works with the Icelandic Education Ministry in the following years to develop a strategic plan until 2030, no reference is made to the educational role of leisure-time centres or youth centres.<sup>4</sup>

Their recommendations on skills for the future first and foremost aims to “... address Iceland's challenges of decreasing levels of reading, literacy and skills mismatch, by providing students with the skills required for the future, in the labour market, and more broadly for Iceland as a country” (OECD, 2021, p.16). How this should play out is quite unclear and

4 *After-school* is mentioned twice in this policy document; in the section on Prevention and Student Voices. *Youth centres* are mentioned once, in the section on Student Voices.

no attempt is made to connect to the six holistic cross-cultural educational pillars that weave through the Icelandic national curriculum (from 2011).

The post-pandemic data from the Icelandic context also provides evidence of the mismatch between educational policy and its rollout in practice. There was a general agreement about the importance of the out-of-school spaces, and that the leisure-time centres and youth centres could be instrumental in making children feel secure and support their social connections and sense of community. However, neither the political or administrative leadership nor the leisure-leaders themselves strategically used the resources to the fullest. Leaders did not in general reach out to specific vulnerable youth or children, and public administration often failed to support or connect with the leisure managers.

*Secondly, the findings of this study indicated increased governmental awareness of the potential role of extended education, both at a global and local level.* The development of a specific research field of extended education has clearly demonstrated that extended education programs, such as school-aged educare, can play a significant role in the well-being and the holistic education of children. In Iceland, the shared vision is to “... ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive and prosper on their own terms within the education system (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021a).” Within a rapidly changing society, digitalization and, most recently, the open access to an array of artificial intelligence tools, the role of school has transformed. There is ample awareness of this in global educational policy, but the policy frameworks explored in this study introduce broad and unclear concepts, their initiatives are somewhat contradictory and become quite unclear in practice. What kind of educational spaces and practices foster those transformative competences that permeate global and local policy? In this regard, extended education programs are unfortunately largely overlooked despite the unique opportunities they can provide to empower students. This is quite evident in global educational policy and in the field of extended education literature (Noam & Triggs, 2020; Pálsdóttir, 2017; Stecher, 2020). In the Icelandic context, considerable legitimization of school-age educare has taken place that recognizes the educational role of such spaces. Still, a new strategic educational plan hardly mentioned the role of extended education in the lives of children. Although further research is needed, the evidence from this study suggests that global educational policy calls for strategic investment in extended education.

*Thirdly, the findings of this study show that there are both internal and external forces that hinder professional agency in the field of extended education.* The leadership within the field of extended education were vulnerable and lacked resources in their efforts to become agents of innovative practices. Social and material structures that support the agency of actors within the field of extended education do not seem to be fully in place (Priestley et al., 2020). The policy makers, as well as local administrators, did not recognize the potential contribution extended education programs and professionals can or do play in strengthening our education systems. The Well-being Act is currently being implemented in municipalities around Iceland and may become a game-changer in linking the formal and non-formal sector of education, as well as aligning the welfare and health sector with the education sector. It opens a window of opportunity that, hopefully, policy makers, administrators and educators will seize. Innovative educational policy can only be implemented with professional agency which have the internal and external resources to change social structures and cultural norms (Priestley et al., 2020). Cultural and social structures within the educational practice often resist innovation and changes, specifically if the agents (professionals) do not believe in the changes, may not have

been a part of the policy process, and choose to stick to previous practices. Activities that previously were considered to be non-school or out-of-school are now in some countries becoming an integral part of school curriculum and practices (Klerfelt et al., 2020; Pálsdóttir, 2017; Schuepbach & Lilla, 2020). Thus, there is growing evidence that the professionalization of the extended education field is contributing to educational reforms and to school development (Bae, 2020). As Noam and Triggs say:

“We must fight for innovation and a more child-centred educational practice in all spheres of a child’s life, which makes education both extended and expanded. Just as our ideas of education are expanding, so are the opportunities for learning and the environments where these programmes takes place” (Noam & Triggs, 2020, p. 295).

## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to shed light on the contribution of extended education research to current educational policy and specifically explore the links between well-being and extended education. On a global level, the emergent trend is to define the main learning outcomes of any education systems as holistic skills sets, such as social skills, creativity, collaborative skills etc. There is a push to talk about flourishing and/or well-being as the main aim of education – a vision that has roots all the way back to the ancient Greek philosophers (Kristjánsson, 2020). These are educational values and skillsets that extended education practices are proven to nurture (Noam & Triggs, 2020). These conclusions are drawn from a case study of extended education practices in Iceland in light of global educational policy. Hopefully, they will inspire readers from other countries to reflect on their respective contexts to explore how extended education may support well-being as the aim of education.

This study raises important questions about the essential links between well-being of children and youth and extended education. The findings reveal that the emergent trend of well-being in education is currently widely acknowledged as the main goal of education (Ministry of Education, Science and & Culture, 2012; OECD, 2018; Stevenson, 2022). However, the data suggests a gap between policy and practice which is a, after all, a well-known phenomenon within the field of education and has a lot to do with social reproduction of existing culture and norms, that makes educational change extremely complex (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley, 2021). It does certainly not help that there are diverse concepts of well-being being defined as the main aim of education. The well-being and education discussion needs to develop more fully to become embodied in teachers’ and educators’ beliefs and their professional agency. Extended education researchers as well as practitioners have, not only an opportunity, but an obligation to speak up and show the various ways extended education programs, whether school-based or out-of-school based, contribute to the education and well-being of children and youth. The school-age educare programs in Iceland are, for example, considered essential community practices in children’s lives; however, it remains challenging for the professional workforce to be recognized, and to establish pedagogical practices within school boundaries. Further research is needed into professional agency within the extended education field, such as those that have been conducted within the field of formal schooling (Priestley et al., 2020).

To conclude, current literature on extended education and examples from the Icelandic context, suggests a strong link between well-being and extended education. Although the scope of this research was limited to the Icelandic context, the findings may have bearings for other countries. Policy makers should be encouraged to work with educators from all sectors to develop innovative educational practices within and out-side of school to secure the education and well-being of children and youth. It is also urgent that all stakeholders further conceptualize what well-being as an educational aim means and how it should be enacted within schools as well as within the field of extended education.

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