

Working and Going to School

Childhood experiences in post-war Reykjavík

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Abstract

Child labor was generally viewed in a positive way in 20th century Iceland. The school year was shorter than in the neighboring countries and a large majority of children in Reykjavík had possibilities to spend summer in rural areas working on farms. In the fishing industry there was also demand for surplus labor especially during periods of economic boom. Despite opportunities for children to find work during summer, ambitions to prolong the school year in urban areas appeared during the 1950s. Those ambitions were met with suspicion from the part of the children who preferred to work.

Introduction

In the spring of 1962 an inquiry on children's work was carried out by the Reykjavík School Board.¹ The investigation included all school children aged 12–14 years and its main objective was to assess the need for summer activities for those age groups. The authors predicted that socio-economic changes would eventually bring about difficulties in finding suitable work for children and youth during summer and that the only long-term solution to this problem would be the extension of the school year.

When the inquiry was performed, the school year in Iceland was considerably shorter than in its neighboring countries and during the long summer holidays pupils in the senior classes in the elementary school were

¹ Reykjavík Municipal Archives. Skrifstofa borgarstjórnar A5674. Nefndarálit um sumarvinnu unglunga dags. 5.2.1963.

expected to work. This article addresses the importance of work and school in children's lives in Iceland during the post-war period. Official documents have been used to shed light on prevailing views towards work in childhood. What were the reasons behind the relatively short school year in Iceland during the post-war period? Was there a consensus about this arrangement or would educational authorities oppose positive views towards child labor? Was the inquiry in 1962 on children's work a sign of changing views towards the role of children and youth in Icelandic society?

School attendance and child labor in the European past

In all Western societies, the 19th and 20th centuries were marked by a gradual increase in the importance of schools in children's lives. At the turn of the 20th century elementary education was compulsory in most European societies.² The expansion of the elementary school system in Europe went hand in hand with legislation prohibiting or reducing the possibilities of work during childhood. As early as 1833, the English Factory Act requested that children aged 9–13 that were employed in factories had to attend school for at least two hours a day. This arrangement was termed the half-time system and despite changes in subsequent legislations on child labor it was not abolished until the late 1910s.³

Despite the fact that elementary education became obligatory, child labor continued to be an important part of children's lives in most European societies during the first half of the 20th century. Positive views towards work prevailed and even though work of children in factories had been reduced considerably, child labor continued to be of importance in most European societies.⁴ There were, however, important differences in schooling arrangements between countries and between regions and those differences prevailed until the second part of the 20th century. The school year was generally considerably shorter in rural than in urban areas.⁵ Schools were run in harmony with the local economy and the custom to

² Cunningham 1996, Maynes 1985, Boli 1989.

³ Bolin-Hort 1989:226–236.

⁴ Cunningham 1996, Davin 1996, Bolin-Hort 1989.

⁵ De Coninck-Smith 1997, Schrupf 2007, Schrupf 1997.

exempt pupils from school during the harvest season or other labor extensive periods was not uncommon.⁶ In the case of the Nordic countries, it was common that children in rural areas went to school every other day. The oldest children were thus able to work at the farm while their younger siblings went to school.⁷ This tradition of going to school every other day was relatively long-lived in rural areas in all the Nordic countries and this arrangement was practiced at least until the post-war period.⁸

With the exception of Iceland, the early 20th century was characterized by centralization of the school system in the Nordic countries. An increasing attempt was made to organize the school in a uniform way, irrespective of the geographic and economic setting. Frequently, this resulted in a conflict between central and local authorities.⁹ A view that child labor was important for the local economy was wide-spread and caused both local authorities and parents to protest against changes in the organization of schools.¹⁰ This feature is exemplified in Sjöberg's study of four rural parishes in Bolstad in Western Sweden after the introduction of full-time schooling in rural Sweden. Sjöberg shows that children's work was of vital importance for most families in the area and that the positive views toward child labor was deeply rooted in a strong Lutheran tradition. Families in Bolstad were by no means opposed to schooling but there was a strong belief that the tradition of going to school every other day was a system that provided families and children with "time for both work and schooling".¹¹

The importance of school and work during childhood in Iceland

Differences in the organization of elementary schools between urban and rural areas came to be of little importance in the Nordic countries during the second part of the 20th century.¹² There was now a wide ranging consensus that school was the most important arena of children and youth. In

⁶ Sjöberg 1996 Chapters 3 & 6, Nissen 1973, Garðarsdóttir 1997a:160–163, de Coninck-Smith 1997:132, 145, Schrumpf 2007:65–68, Schrumpf 1997.

⁷ de Coninck-Smith 1997:147–151, Schrumpf 2007:65–68, Sjöberg 1996, 1997.

⁸ Guttormsson 2008a:119–121, de Coninck-Smith 1997.

⁹ de Coninck-Smith 1997:150, Nissen 1973:335–345, Sjöberg 1996:123–124.

¹⁰ Nissen 1973: 334–346, Sjöberg 1996:1–5 & chapter 6.

¹¹ Sjöberg 1996, 1997.

¹² Schrumpf 2007:66–67.

the case of Iceland, however, the differences prevailed. Compulsory schooling had been introduced much later in Iceland than was the case with the other Nordic countries. At the beginning of the 20th century, Iceland was one of the least urbanized societies in the Western world. A vast majority of the population lived in sparsely populated rural areas. In the entire country there were only three towns with more than 1,000 inhabitants and Reykjavík, with its 6,600 inhabitants, was by far the largest urban center in Iceland according to the census 1901.¹³ Urbanization proceeded rapidly during the 20th century and by 1930 40% of the Icelandic population lived in towns and villages. The same was true for almost 70% of the population in 1960. Differences in the length of the school year between urban and rural areas was more noticeable than was the case with the neighboring countries. When local authorities in the Swedish parish of Bolstad opposed the introduction of full-time schooling during the 1920s, a school year of twelve weeks was the general rule in rural Iceland. Only a small number of rural communities operated elementary schools on a permanent basis. A vast majority of Icelandic children were thus enrolled in ambulatory schools and Reykjavík was the only township where the school year extended six months.¹⁴ The ambulatory schools were widespread in rural areas in the other Nordic countries during the 18th and 19th centuries. They were organized in the way that the teacher travelled between the most affluent households of the school district and stayed for a period of few weeks teaching children in the nearby households.¹⁵

Despite the fact that the school year was considerably longer in the urban setting than was the case with rural areas, the school year in towns and villages in Iceland was still organized in harmony with the seasonal demand for labor force in rural areas. School ended before the lambs were brought to the world in May and started after the gathering of the sheep from the highlands in September. Thus, children living in urban or semi-urban areas were able to work in farms during summer.

In spite of a fast urbanization process during the first half of 20th century, the ties with the rural areas remained of great importance in Iceland and during the post-war era a large proportion of the inhabitants of towns and villages still had close relatives in rural areas. It was common for the people living in urban areas to work part-time of the year in the rural areas in particular during labor intensive periods like for example during the

¹³ *Hagskinna* 1997.

¹⁴ Guttormsson 1992.

¹⁵ Guttormsson 2008b.

heyning season.¹⁶ Many children living in towns and villages spent their entire summer holidays working in rural areas.¹⁷

In the eyes of school authorities, the tradition to send children to work in rural areas during summer was an important reason for the long summer holidays in Iceland. According to the school report of the Reykjavík elementary school in 1924 the extension of the school year in Reykjavík would be highly impractical for the following reasons:

Many school children who stayed in rural areas during summer would in any case not come to school until the end of September and some even later. Children working in rural areas would thus not return to the urban areas until after the gathering of the sheep. Moreover, school girls helping out in the homes in urban areas would be busy until the female servants came back from work in the rural areas.¹⁸

The tradition to send children living in towns and villages to relatives and friends in rural areas remained a common feature of the Icelandic society during the post-war era. It was a common view that the children and youth greatly benefitted from working on farms in summer. They were then prevented from the countless vices of the city life and above all they would not go idle during the long summer holidays.¹⁹ As long as a large proportion of Icelandic parents living in towns and villages had close links with the population in rural areas and as long positive views towards child labor prevailed, it was in all probability not feasible for educational authorities to put forward ideas about the extension of the school year. It must also be borne in mind that even though modernization proceeded rapidly in Iceland during the 20th century, primary industries continued to be of great importance in urban areas. A relatively large fraction of the population derived its livelihood from the fisheries or the fishing industry. The demand for labor in the fisheries was highly seasonal and during spring and summer schoolchildren in the senior classes of the elementary schools often worked in fish-processing. Other important industries, such as the construction industry and road building, were also characterized by the fact

¹⁶ Gunnlaugsson 1988:153–154.

¹⁷ Guttormsson 2008b, Garðarsdóttir 1997a.

¹⁸ Cited in: Garðarsdóttir 2001:424–425.

¹⁹ Guttormsson 2008b, Garðarsdóttir 1997b.

that labor requirements were most intensive during summer. In times of economic boom, there were relatively good opportunities for boys in the elementary schools to find work within those industries during summer. Moreover, the Icelandic economy was characterized by considerable fluctuations and an extensive need for surplus labor occurred during periods of economic growth. It was by no means uncommon to exempt pupils from school in fishing villages when large amount of fish was brought ashore.²⁰

Despite relatively important changes of the Icelandic school system in 1946 there was still a wide ranging consensus about the importance of work in lives of children in the senior classes of the elementary school. Following the 1946 Act the school year of children below the age of 10 was extended to nine months in Reykjavík. In this age group school started in the beginning of September and ended late May. On the other hand, children 10 years and older did not start school until late September and ended in the beginning of May. The school year of the children below the age of 10 was thus almost two months longer than was the case with children above the age of 10 years. It was apparently regarded as self-evident that a large majority of children that had reached the age of 10 would leave the city when the lambs were brought to the world in May and not return home before the sheep had been collected from the highlands. Others, in particular those who had reached the age of 13 or 14, were able to find work in the city.

A few years after the 1946 Act was passed in the Icelandic parliament, Iceland was faced with an economic recession. How would educational authorities in Reykjavík react in a situation when flocks of children and youth went idle during the long summer holidays? At this point in time, authorities did not choose the solution of proposing an extension of the school year. The solution to the problem of idle youth came to be the so-called work-schools. Work-schools were established in most towns during the late 1940s and 1950s and the aim was to meet the demand for work for children and youth during summer holidays. The work-schools were intended for children in the senior classes (13–15 years old). Initially, a relatively scant proportion of school children were registered in the Reykjavík work-school. A majority of all school children were indeed able to find work elsewhere. Figures on enrolment in the work-school show that there was a clear negative correlation between the enrolment rate in the

²⁰ Ibidem. For a discussion on the positive views towards work see: Ólafsson 1996:182–188.

work-school and economic conditions.²¹ Thus, enrolment rates were low during a period of economic growth in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then, around 10% of all children in the age group 13–15 years old worked in the Reykjavík work-school during summer. During the economic recession of the late 1960, on the other hand, the enrolment rates increased to a level of more than 30%. The period between 1970 and 1990 was then characterized by an unbroken increase in the proportion of children working within the framework of the Reykjavík work-school and in 1990 around 90% of children in Reykjavík were enrolled in the work-school during summer.

Working on farms or in the city?

The low enrolment rates in the Reykjavík work-school during the 1950s and the early 1960s strongly indicates that there was need for the helping hands of children and youth during summer. This was a period of economic growth in Iceland, in particular the years after 1952. The expansion of the fishing industry often created temporary need for surplus labor. School children, both in the senior school classes of elementary schools and in secondary schools, formed an important part of the labor force that could be seasonally mobilized.

Despite a prevailing positive view towards children's work, the late 1950s and the 1960s came to be a period of growing interest in reforming the Icelandic school system. Now the operation of the ambulatory schools in rural areas gradually came to an end, and the school year in rural areas was increased in length. The increased interest in school reforms was also reflected in the establishment of the *Department of Educational Research and Development* (Skólarannsóknardeild) within the Ministry of Education.²² The 1960s were characterized by a lively debate on educational issues and the problem of children's work was raised several times in the Parliament and the City Council of Reykjavík.²³ How would then school authorities act when facing the occasional demand for child labor from the part of the fishing industry?

²¹ See: Garðarsdóttir 1997b.

²² Kjartansson 2008:88–98.

²³ See: Garðarsdóttir 1997b:175–178.

In 1958, educational authorities in Reykjavík were faced with a rather unusual request. In late September, just before the pupils in the senior classes in the elementary school were supposed to start school, employers of all freezing plants in Reykjavík sent a letter to the Reykjavík School Board requesting that the beginning of the school year was delayed for children 12 years and older. According to the letter, half of the work-force in the freezing plants was school children.²⁴ The request of the fishing industry was discussed by the Reykjavík City Council and the Reykjavík School Board. In their note to the fishing companies, both instances sympathized with the standpoint of the fishing industry. Their dilemma was, however, that even though a considerable fraction of the workforce in the freezing plants consisted of school children only 10% of school children in the senior school classes were employed in the freezing plants. The postponement of school start would thus pose problems for local authorities to find suitable tasks for those children not employed in the fishing industry. A compromise was found resulting in the permission to headmasters to free individual pupils or entire school classes from attending school for a short period, if they asked permission to work in the fisheries.²⁵

The example above proves how important child labor was in Icelandic society during the post-war era. The question is, however, whether the educational authorities really agreed with the standpoint of the fishing industry. When the request was made by the managers of the freezing plants, there was a growing interest among educational authorities in Reykjavík to prolong the school year in the senior school classes of the elementary school and as a matter of fact only six years after the request came from the fishing industry the school year was extended. In 1958, however, school authorities in Reykjavík were not in the position to turn down this request from the countries' most important industry.

The extension of the school year in 1964 was preceded by the inquiry on children's work presented in the introduction to this article. The inquiry was initiated by the Reykjavík School Board and its objective was to evaluate the need for summer activities for children and youth. The 1962 inquiry was carried out in all schools in Reykjavík and included 89% of all children 12–14 years old. The concept of work was by no means defined narrowly and the inquiry was directed far beyond the scope of traditional

²⁴ This incident is described in: Garðarsdóttir 1997a:160–161.

²⁵ *Ibidem*:160.

wage labor. Thus, it included for example information on housework in the parental household.

The study revealed that a minority of all children maintained that they did not work during summer. Twelve year old boys were least likely to work, 8.0% reported that they had not worked during the preceding summer. The same was true for only 1.7% of girls of the same age (Table 1). The older children were more likely to work than the younger ones; only 0.5% of 14 year old boys and 0.3% of 14 year old girls had not worked during summer. Most children started working shortly after school break in May and ended when school started in September. According to the children's own estimates they had long working hours, more than two thirds maintained that they worked more than eight hours a day during summer.

Table 1. Summer work of 12–14 year old children in Reykjavík 1962 (%).

	12 years		13 years		14 years	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Farm work	54.5	35.9	48.5	29.6	41.9	20.7
Domestic work outside parental household	0.6	32.9	-	28.3	0.2	9.8
Domestic work in parental household	3.2	15.8	0.3	11.1	0.2	5.2
Running errands	17.4	2.0	16.4	3.6	10.9	2.8
Work-school	0.6	0.2	16.7	1.1	9.1	27.0
Unskilled work	6.3	3.7	12.2	14.2	30.2	21.2
Clerical work (retail and office)	0.8	1.5	1.5	6.4	3.7	9.7
Other	8.6	6.1	2.6	4.8	3.3	3.2
Without work	8.0	1.7	1.7	0.9	0.5	0.3

Source: Reykjavík Municipal Archives. Skrifstofa borgarstjórnar A5674. Nefndarálit um sumarmvinnu unglunga dags. 5.2.1963.

As expected, work in rural areas was the most common work for children. Here, however, interesting differences between the sexes are revealed. It is shown that the proportion of children working in rural areas declined with age. More than half of all 12 year old boys (54.5%) worked on farms whereas the same was true for slightly more than a third of 12 year old girls (35.9%). By the age of 14 the proportion of children working on farms had declined to 41.9% for boys and 20.7% among girls.

Girls were more likely to remain in the city during summer than was the case with boys. The majority of 12 and 13 year old girls who did not work on farms were involved in domestic work, either in their own homes

or outside the parental household. A third of all 12 year old girls were employed in other households than their parents' and another 15.8% worked in the parental household. By the age of 13 this proportion had dropped to 28.3% (outside parental household) and 11.1% (parental household). Domestic work was, on the other hand, not common among 14 years old (9.8% and 5.2%).

The study did not specify further the type of domestic work girls were made responsible for. It is likely that many were involved in child minding. By international standards, fertility was high in Iceland and by the early 1960s an Icelandic woman could expect to give birth to more than four children during her life-span. It is likely that a majority of teenage girls were preoccupied with looking after young children during summer.

Boys staying behind in Reykjavík during summer were frequently employed as errand boys by shops or other companies. This was in particular true for the youngest boys, of 12 year old boys 17.4% were employed as errand boys whereas the same was true for 10.9% of 14 year old boys. Running errands was not common for girls.

It was noted above that the work-schools were run by local authorities in urban areas in Iceland. In 1962, 16.7% of 13 year old boys and 1.1% of 13 year old girls worked within the framework of the work-schools. By the age of 14 the share had dropped to 9.1% among boys but increased to 27% for girls.

It can be concluded that the majority of 12–13 year old children in Reykjavík were involved in work that was exclusively intended for children and youth. By the age of 14, however, a considerable proportion of children were employed in traditional adult work. Almost a third of all 14 year old boys (30.2%) and slightly less than a fifth of all 14 year old girls (20.2%) were employed in unskilled work. Fish processing was common work for both sexes and boys frequently worked within the construction industry or in road building.²⁶ A noticeable proportion of 14 year old girls were employed in the retail industry (9.7%). The same was true for 3.7% of 14 year old boys.

From the report of the initiators of the inquiry on children's work of 1962 it is evident that the authors were in favor of extending the school year. Despite the fact that almost all children in Reykjavík worked during summer the authors expressed concern about the future development of children's work during summer holidays. With growing urbanization the

²⁶ Garðarsdóttir 1997b.

ties with rural areas would weaken and fewer parents would be able to find suitable homes for their children in rural areas. They argued that this would compel school authorities in urban areas to create work opportunities for children during their long summer holidays. The extension of the school year would be the ultimate solution to this problem.

Two years after the publication of the report, the Reykjavík School Board decided to extend the school year of 10–12 year old children so that they, like their counterparts in the junior classes, would begin school in the first week of September.²⁷ This change was by no means welcomed by children and youth. In interviews with school children published in one of the newspapers at the first day of school, the children who had worked on a farm during summer expressed their discontent with this new arrangement. Now, they would miss the event when the sheep were gathered from the highlands and this was the most exciting part of the work on the farms.²⁸

Conclusion

This article highlights the interplay between school and work in childhood in Reykjavík during the 20th century. It is argued that child labor was generally viewed in a positive way. Urbanization occurred at a late date in Iceland and by the middle of the 20th century most inhabitants of towns and villages had relatives in rural areas. As late as the 1960s a large majority of children living in urban areas had the possibility to spend the summer in rural areas working on farms for relatives or friends of their families. In the fishing industry there was also demand for cheap surplus labor especially during economic boom. Along with ample opportunities for children and youth to find work during their long summer holidays, ambitions to prolong the school year in urban areas appeared during the 1950s. Those ambitions were met with suspicion not the least from the part of the children who preferred to work. The investigation on children's work carried out in Reykjavík in 1962 revealed that almost all children in the age group 12–14 worked during summer. Nevertheless the initiators of the investigation drew the conclusions that social and economic changes called for the extension of the school year.

²⁷ Bernharðsson 1998:209.

²⁸ *Ibidem*:210.

The authors of the report of children's work during summer were certainly right in their assumption that the possibilities for children to find work in the rural areas would diminish and towards the end of the 20th century few children had the possibility to spend the long summer holidays in rural areas. By 1990, 90% of all 13–15 year old children in Reykjavík worked within the framework of the work-school during summer. This proves that it would be difficult for children in this age group to find work outside the work-schools. It is also worth noting that the period after the 1970s was marked by a change in the tasks provided for children in the work-schools. Initially, the work-schools' main objective was to make the children familiar with the "nations most important industries". By the 1970s the work in the work-schools was restricted to work in public gardens and the instruction regarding other industries was to a larger extent restricted to visits in companies and day-trips to the countryside. Work continued to be an important part of children's lives but was now in an increasing way segregated from the work of the adult population.

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