



Hrefna is in the administration team in Vesturbæjarskóli and has over 30 years of experience in teaching and administration of the team of headmasters. She takes care of the support team of the school.

Hrefna Birna graduated with her teaching degree in biology and mathematics as the main subject. Later she studied Montessori pedagogy in Amsterdam and Reading Science at the master's level in Iceland. She is very interested in education and the concept of feedback. Hrefna Birna has given numerous lectures and courses on writing, feedback, Icelandic as a second language, and Montessori mathematics. Similarly, she has written educational material for primary schools. Since the beginning of her professional life, she has been looking for ways that children can learn spontaneously, not be afraid of mistakes, and seek new and creative ways of learning to build up their confidence, curiosity, and interest in learning. Hrefna Birna considers her very fortunate to have been working at Vesturbæjarskóli because it has been open to developing new ideas from the beginning and emphasis on the child's well-being. Hrefna Birna loves to travel, hike the mountains with friends and visit new countries, and last but not least, the arts. Hrefna Birna is a student for life.

What is your role in Vesturbæjarskóli?

I am part of the administration team where we make and discuss all decisions, both professional and day-to-day planning. In addition, I have an overview and manage the work in the school's support services. Daily, I am also taking care of individual students if something comes up and I am part of the school's solution team.

When you say Vesturbæjarskóli - what images come to your mind? What differentiates your school from other schools in Reykjavik? Is there anything unique?

Having worked in Vesturbæjarskóli for over 30 years, my heart beats there. We meet our students with warmth and understanding. We have never used grades. We believe that everyone is good at something, and we need to find their strengths. It is unique that such an old school has such a long tradition of group work, project-based learning, and a „heimakrúkur“ a circle in the classroom where everyone meets several times a day. Attitude toward students is respect.

From your bio I see that you have 30 years' of teaching experience.

What it takes to be a good teacher ?

You must be a good listener and take the time to get to know the students. You have to show them respect. Be interested in and enjoy the work, it infects the students. Catch when students take the initiative, show interest in something, and take it further with them. Don't be afraid to drop books and work in a variety of ways with students.

You studied Montessori pedagogy in Amsterdam. What elements of this method have you implemented in your teaching career?

I have mainly implemented respect for both children and the environment in which the children work. The environment should be beautiful and offer curiosity, initiative, and independence. The teacher is a guide in a process and not a person who knows everything. I also keep in mind that it is important to let go of books and let children work with their hands, and there is no need to fear mistakes. They are part of the learning process.

You value feedback as an essential element of a learning process. How do you teach students in Iceland to accept and give feedback?

Focus on the how and use of the sandwich method. That is start with positive, and then with constructive and finish with positive feedback. Don't make it personal, it is all about the process and actions. It is also good to ask for permission to give some feedback. The student feels then more in control and that empowers them.

Our project showed that "a mistake" is just a step in a learning process and that Icelandic teachers and students treat it rather in a positive way. What methods have you used in your teaching career to empower your students?

I used many ways. One is e.g., discussions. A child who is learning to walk and falls. It does not decide it has failed and stops trying. Scientists are working on discoveries. Most of their attempts fail before discovery succeeds. Mistakes are just as important as succeeding. But it can be challenging to get students to dare to fail. As role models, we need to not be afraid to talk about our own mistakes.

What do you appreciate most in the Icelandic education system?

The authorities trust us to work on the main curriculum professionally and give us the freedom to do so according to the philosophy decided by the schools.

Do you like to be a teacher? What is the most pleasant and most difficult thing about it? How do you improve your qualifications?

I love working in school. There is imagination and power in the children that constantly surprise. No day is the same. Challenges arise when a child is in trouble, and we as school staff would want to be able to take better care of a child and the system around the family to react quickly when the situation is bad.

There are good opportunities for continuing education in Iceland. We can get grants both to study more at universities or visit schools abroad.

Do you visit schools abroad? Are there any good practices that you would like to implement in your school?

I have traveled widely and visited schools. It is in my opinion very important to widen the horizon. Although the schools are different and some have come a short way with teaching methods as we would like to have in our school, there is always something that you take back with you and work with in one way or another. Meeting colleagues from other countries is rewarding.