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Gender choreography and micro-structures – early childhood professionals’ understanding of gender roles and gender patterns in outdoor play and learning

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to illustrate how pre-school professionals understand the notion of gender-equity work in a Swedish context, in particular play and learning in the pre-school playground. The study draws on socio-cultural and gender theories. Of the four participating pre-schools, three of them have programs that focus especially on gender education. Video recording and focus group discussions are used as research methods. The findings show that outdoor play and learning are seldom problematised from a gender perspective. All pre-schools had a common rhetoric to counteract inequity in the pre-school program. The concepts of gender patterns and gender roles were very problematic, and the professionals had different understandings of the notions and how to put them into practice. Affordances and activities showed different types of gender constructions, in which both professionals and children were active.

RÉSUMÉ: L’objectif de cet article est d’illustrer la façon dont les professionnels du préscolaire comprennent la notion de travail sur l’équité entre genres dans le contexte suédois, et en particulier celui du jeu et des apprentissages dans les espaces extérieurs des pré-écoles. L’étude s’appuie sur les théories socio – culturelles et les théories sur le genre. Sur les quatre pré-écoles ayant participé à l’étude, trois d’entre elles ont des programmes spécialement centrés sur l’éducation relative au genre. Les méthodes utilisées sont l’enregistrement vidéo et les entretiens collectifs. Les résultats montrent que jeu et apprentissage en plein air sont peu problématisés du point de vue du genre. Toutes les pré-écoles ont dans leur programme une rhétorique commune de lutte contre les inégalités. Les concepts de pattern et de rôle en matière de genre sont très problématiques, et les professionnels ont différentes compréhensions des notions et de leur mise en pratique. Affordances et activités montrent différents types de constructions du genre, dans lesquelles professionnels et enfants sont actifs.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Beitrag soll illustrieren, wie innerhalb eines schwedischen Kontextes Fachkräfte in vorschulischen Einrichtungen den Anspruch von Gender-Gerechtigkeit verstehen, insbesondere in Hinsicht auf Spielen und Lernen im vor-schulischen Spielgelände. Die Studie bezieht sich auf soziokulturelle und auf Gender-Theorien. Von den vier beteiligten vorschulischen Einrichtungen haben drei Programme, die speziell auf Gender-Erziehung fokussieren. Videoaufzeichnungen und Diskussionen in Fokus-Gruppen wurden als Forschungsmethoden eingesetzt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Spielen und Lernen im Freien selten von einer Gender-Perspektive her problematisiert wurden. Alle vorschulischen Einrichtungen hatten eine gemeinsame Rhetorik in ihren Programmen, dass sie Ungleichheit entgegenwirken wollten. Die Konzepte von

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Gender-Mustern und Gender-Rollen waren sehr problematisch und die Fachkräfte hatten ein unterschiedliches Verständnis der Ansprüche und wie diese in die Praxis umgesetzt werden sollten. Aufforderungscharakter und Aktivitäten zeigten unterschiedliche Typen von Gender-Konstruktionen, innerhalb derer sowohl die Fachkräfte als auch die Kinder aktiv waren.

RESUMEN: El objetivo de este artículo es ilustrar como profesionales pre-escolares entienden la noción de trabajo con la igualdad de género en un contexto sueco, particularmente el juego y el aprendizaje en los patios escolares. El estudio se basa en teorías socio-culturales y de género. Tres de las cuatro pre-escuelas participantes tienen programas que focalizan especialmente la educación sobre género. Grabaciones de videos y entrevistas en grupo son usadas como métodos de estudio. Los hallazgos indican que el juego y el aprendizaje al aire libre raramente son problematizados desde una perspectiva del género. Todas las escuelas tienen una retórica común en sus programas para contrarestar las desigualdades de género. Los conceptos de patrones y roles genéricos son muy problematicos y los profesionales conciben esas nociones y su puesta en práctica en forma diferente. Los accesos y las actividades muestran diferentes tipos de construcción de género, en la que tanto los profesionales como los niños son activos.

Keywords: gender; pre-school curriculum; outdoor play; early childhood education

Introduction

The first National Curriculum for Pre-school in Sweden (1998/2006) states that all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with the fundamental values on which Swedish society is based. Two of these values are gender equity and the equal rights of all people. The goal of the pre-school is to work to counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles and make it possible for children to gain access to alternative ways of being girls and boys without gender limitations. This article presents a qualitative data analysis from four pre-schools and how they perceived and handled this task in the everyday practices in pre-school, especially from an outdoor play and learning perspective. In Swedish pre-school history, outdoor play has always been considered an important part of the pre-school program. Swedish pre-school children spend about one-and-a-half to three hours on the pre-school playground everyday and go weekly to forests in the neighbourhood.

In research on outdoor play and learning, gender in general has been absent since Thorne's study (1993) *Gender play – girls and boys in school*. But, hopefully, this is now starting to change. At the last European Early Education Research Association (EECERA) conference in Strasbourg in August 2009, four different presentations on gender and outdoor play and learning were presented in the Special Interest Group (SIG) Outdoor Play and Learning (Emilsen and Lysklett 2009; Melhuus 2009; Waller 2009; Årlemalm-Hagsér 2009). Childhood is often associated with outdoor play, and outdoor play is often connected with healthy child development. Outdoor play seems to be equated with freedom, and with just being a child without reflections about how different encounters and affordances influence his/her life (Årlemalm-Hagsér 2008).

This article is based on empirical research, and the research questions are as follows:

- How is the equity task in the Swedish National Curriculum interpreted and handled in the everyday practice in pre-schools, especially from an outdoor play and learning perspective?

- What ‘traditional gender roles and gender patterns’ are expressed in children’s play and learning from the practitioner’s perspective?
- How do the teachers work to counteract these traditions?

Swedish perspectives – equity: an overall agenda

In Sweden, the discussion on and legislation aimed at gender equity have historically had a prominent place in the political arena since the 1960s. In the pre-school guidelines from the end of the 1980s, equity was considered an important task in the pre-school program *The pre-school should work actively to promote equity* (National Board of Health and Welfare 1987:3, 39).

In the present National Curriculum, the work with gender equity is described in these words:

The ways in which adults respond to boys and girls, as well as the demands and requirements imposed on children contribute to their appreciation of gender differences. The pre-school should work to counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. Girls and boys in the pre-school should have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interest without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles. (Ministry of Education and Science 2006, 4)

At the end of the 1990s, the Swedish government received indications from both early childhood professionals and researchers that the work to promote equity in early childhood settings was difficult. Instead of challenging traditional notions of gender, the early childhood professionals contributed to them in many different ways. To support professionals in their work, in 2002 the government funded a gender-educational study program in cooperation with Umeå University and the University of Gothenburg (2003–2006). Furthermore, the government decided to set up a Delegation for Equity in Pre-school [Delegationen för jämställdhet i förskolan] in 2003. The task of the delegation was to give financial support to different equity projects in Swedish pre-schools. There was huge interest; 286 applications were submitted and, in all, 34 pre-school projects received funding during the years 2004–2005. While the delegation was working, the first national evaluation of the pre-school curriculum, *Pre-school in transition*, was carried out in 2004. It showed, as previously, that the work towards gender equity was barely described or mentioned among early childhood professionals and pre-school directors (Swedish National Agency for Education 2004). This started an official education debate, and in the *General guidelines and comments on quality in pre-school* by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2005), the need for a gender perspective was emphasised. In the government report from the Delegation for Equity in Pre-school (SOU 2006, 75), the overall observation was that pre-schools in Sweden were ‘gendered’. Girls and boys were still considered and treated as different categories, and the professionals had stereotyped roles and patterns and maintained the gender boundaries instead of improving gender equity. The knowledge acquired from the 34 different gender projects showed that the ‘project form’ was a high-quality method to improve gender equity, and the conclusions from the projects can be summarised as follows:

- Each professional needs to analyse her/his own understanding of gender from an early childhood education perspective.

- Different forms of pedagogical documentation with a gender perspective can increase the professionals' understanding of the daily pre-school practice.
- Each professional needs to develop knowledge about gender theories and connect these theories with the pre-school activities.
- They also need to reflect on this knowledge in a wider context, from historical, cultural, and global perspectives.

In spite of all the work to find new ways to counteract inequity, there are still some initial problems. Firstly, the concepts of gender role and gender pattern have not been clarified in the National Curriculum. Gender role is explained as 'a set of behaviour patterns, attitudes, and personality characteristics stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine within a culture' (Colman 2009). Finding an explanation on English or Swedish for gender pattern is problematic; the concept is not defined in dictionary references. The closest clarification of the concept is connected to doing gender:

The study of the interpersonal aspects of gender, focusing on the ways in which cognitive categories based on sex act as social cues that influence people's behaviour and elicit gender-specific patterns of interaction, thereby creating, maintaining, and reinforcing social inequalities. (Colman 2009)

Secondly, no discussions in research or in pre-school practices are clarifying what stereotyped traditional gender role and gender pattern that are going to be counteract.

Rethinking pedagogical practices

International studies on gender in early childhood education have problematised these difficulties in encouraging work towards gender equity. With regard to pre-school professionals and their attempt to develop non-gender stereotyped actions and programs (Eidevald 2009; Mac Naughton 1998, 2000, 2006; Yelland 1998), gender constructions and maintenance of stereotyped actions seem, nevertheless, to encompass the pre-school activities in several aspects.

Eidevald (2009) analysed from a post-structuralist theoretical perspective, Swedish pre-school teachers' encounters in communication and behavior towards the children in four often recurring situations in pre-school: free play, mealtime, assembly and getting dressed for outdoors. In these situations, girls and boys are defined and treated in stereotyped ways, on the basis of gender-based discourses and expectations that give children guidelines how to position as girls and boys. Working with equity in pre-schools seems to be a gender-blind practice as it is regarded as neutral (we don't treat children differently) or natural (girls and boys are different). However, the children themselves entered a wide range of positions in the analysed situations.

MacNaughton's (2006) experience from an Australian pre-school context shows the same problems, difficulties developing gender equality work in pre-school programs. MacNaughton points out that these failures derive from the fact that gendered power structures in pre-school are not challenged enough. Interventions are necessary in children's play and relationships, where the redrafting of opportunity and justice must be done in the everyday work. When everyday life is not perceived as safe for children, gender borders cannot be exceeded. She proposes the concepts of gender-fair and gender-safe to guide the work on gender equity in pre-school.

The present author and Pramling Samuelsson (Årlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson 2009) have analysed interaction sequences between early childhood

professionals and children and also between children. The key finding of that study was that different gender patterns appear at the same time in the everyday activities. These patterns can be presented in four themes: the first theme, making distinctions, masculinity as a superior position is realised in different ways in early childhood settings of everyday life. Boys, for example, receive more attention from early childhood professionals compared to girls. In the second theme, stability, stereotypical gender structures are strengthened in the interaction between professionals and children by the professionals' traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. The third theme, fellowship, highlights children caring for each other in the pre-school, showing great responsibility and helpfulness towards each other. In the fourth theme, crossing of boundaries, children's actions of resistance become visible, and stereotyped gender patterns are challenged and reformulated. The four themes illuminate different gender patterns, in which both children and early childhood professionals are active in different ways.

Thorne (1993) noticed in her ethnographic study, children's outdoor space seems to be gendered in different ways.

... on the playground, an area where adults exert minimal control and kids are relatively free to choose their own activities and companions, there is extensive separation by gender. Activities, spaces, and equipment are heavily gender-typed: playgrounds, in short, have a more fixed geography of gender. (Thorne 1993, 44)

With an equity task in focus, Swedish pre-school playgrounds ought to differ from the playgrounds in Thorne's description. The professionals are supposed to interact with the children and develop affordances (Gibson 1978) in place, space and equipment to create environments for play and learning that promote gender equity among the children.

Doing gender in a socio-cultural perspective

The perspective of the present study differs from the post-structuralist theoretical perspective that flourished in early childhood education research during the last decade (Browne 2004; Davis 2003; MacNaughton 1998, 2000, 2006; Yelland 1998). In theoretical terms, this study is based on a sociocultural perspective, which claims that the construction of early childhood education develops in a collective understanding of historical, social, and cultural structures. Together with others, children understand, develop, and act in this special context of social interactions and relationships within their own culture (Hundeide 2006; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 2005).

... people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in the light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change. (Rogoff 2003, 3–4)

To understand how children develop gender identities, gender schema theory and 'doing gender' are used in this study. In this theory, different 'cues', embedded in language and everyday life/actions, are given to the children. The child interprets these cues and develops an understanding of the possibilities for being a girl or a boy (Martin and Ruble 2004). The individual's (professionals and children) own actions have implications for the current situation, and his or her own activities are one of many components by which the place and activities are identified (Rogoff 2003; Thorne 1993).

Gender choreography and micro-structures

The concept of gender choreography comes from Thorne (1993), as she highlights gender as an intricate composition that varies in different contexts. Micro-structures are interpreted as an overall ongoing pedagogical practice where pedagogical philosophy, history, culture, language, affordance and actions are an intertwined whole at the pre-school (Rogoff 2003).

The overall aim of this study funded by the Swedish Research Council (2007) is to examine Swedish pre-school professionals' understanding of gender-equity work, in particular, children's play and learning in the pre-school playground.

Four pre-schools with children aged 1- to 5-years were analysed. The pre-schools were selected using purposive sampling for two reasons: first, there were voices of experience, i.e., pre-schools with experience of working with gender issues, and, second, there was a comparative pre-school with little experience of gender-related work. Video recordings of the pre-school playground (six hours) and focus group interviews, one for each pre-school, with groups of 5–12 professionals, were used as research methods together and separately. The participating professionals were of different age, with varying lengths of experience of early childhood practice. In two of the focus groups both women and men attended. The choice of focus group as the most suitable method is based on the striving to clarify the collective understanding of the topic (Cohen, Manion, and Morriison 2008). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, based on the research questions, about how the professionals interpret and handle the task of improving gender equity, especially from an outdoor play and learning perspective. Stimulated recall encompassed by outdoor play sequences from the video recordings was used in the focus group interviews to identify professional and child actions. The analysis was an ongoing triangulation process, at first in collaboration with the participants in the focus groups on the stimulated recall sequences. The purpose was to scrutinise how the participants themselves characterised and described those particular concepts and activities connected with the research questions. In the second part of the analysis different ways of understanding were identified from all collected data. The study complies with Swedish ethical research regulations, and all participants signed a consent form. In studies with children as well as adults ethical considerations need to be ongoing throughout the research process (Hill 2005). In this study especially, the video recordings were focused on both children and adults. The consent was handled with the possibility to withdraw at any time; if some of the children showed distress about the situation, the researcher stopped recording (it happened on two occasions). All four pre-schools were run by the local authority and they were located in different parts of Sweden, from suburbs in a big city (two) to smaller towns (two).

Findings

In the study, several interesting findings were revealed. First, the rhetoric about improving gender equity was common to all four pre-schools. Second, the outdoor environment was initially seen as a gender-neutral zone. Third, hidden cues were embedded in everyday practices. Fourth, the concepts of gender role and gender pattern were interpreted as unclear notions that are difficult to explain. Fifth, children clearly resisted the gender-stereotyped affordances. Finally, the pre-school practitioners were trying to rethink everyday pedagogical practices.

Common rhetoric about improving gender equity

The focus group discussions revealed a common rhetoric about improving gender equity in all four pre-schools. The professionals recognised discussing gender issues in relation to equity in early childhood education earlier. There is a huge gap between the curriculum task and the professionals' endeavour to operationalise the concept of gender equity in their work. The professionals thought the directives from the National Curriculum were difficult to understand, and everyone struggled with the question about what inequity was in a pre-school context and which stereotyped roles and patterns they were supposed to counteract in the everyday practices.

Outdoor environment: a gender-neutral zone... with hidden cues

At the beginning of the focus group sessions the participants referred to the outdoor environment as a gender-neutral zone, compared to the indoor environment. However, this was just at first glance; later on in the process hidden cues were revealed embedded within everyday practices. Very little discussion among the practitioners had been focused earlier on outdoor experience and gender. The question as to whether the outdoor space and equipment were gendered started a discussion about different material and places in the pre-school playground. First, the way the boys played was explored and the professionals detailed their experience of bikes, floorball (use of 'indoor' hockey sticks outside), and football, which were seen as gendered in a 'boyish' way in relation to girls' interests and choices.

We do have two beautiful bicycles. They have been here for many, many years, and it's like they attract the boys. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 4, spring 2008)

Well, just by looking when we play floorball, you can see who are participating. The boys grab the stick right away because they have learnt this from the very beginning, while many girls sort of look at the club thinking: What's this? They look at the club as something odd, but once they are allowed to play, they like it. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 2, spring 2008)

We play football... when we do that we try to get girls into it. It works for a while, but then they think it's boring, get tired and go away and then it's only boys again. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 1, spring 2008)

Sandpits were seen as places for infants, toddlers, and older girls.

I think that there are many infants and toddlers who sit in the sandpit and there is an obvious reason why. They cannot even walk and then, of course, they sit there with the adults. But if it is one of the bigger kids who is there and helps and sits next to them, then, it's an older girl, who sits there, helps them, takes care of them, puts a mitten or hat on them that has fallen off, shows them how to make a cake and how to dig. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 4, spring 2008)

The participants were initially unaware about the role of gender in outdoor play. In the discussions, one theme is the difference between girls' and boys' actions and choices. Boys' games were observed as stereotyped actions in which girls were seldom interested in taking part. Sandpits were seen as places where young children played, and were supported by the older girls nurturing and helping the younger children.

Gender role and gender pattern as unclear concepts

To identify how the early childhood professionals interpreted and dealt with the curriculum goals, one of the questions in the focus group discussions was about their understanding and integration of the concepts of gender patterns and gender roles. They were obviously trying to make sense of these problematic concepts, but they had different understandings of the notions. This is illustrated in the following excerpts from the focus group discussions.

There is no difference between these two notions; they both mean stereotyped behaviour. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 1, spring 2008)

The notion of gender roles describes the individual level, while gender patterns describe a group level. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 3, spring 2008)

... umm, gender roles, I'm sorry, it feels like nineteenth-century language, talking about male codes and female codes suits me better. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 4, spring 2008)

How to counteract stereotyped roles and patterns was even more problematic. In the interviews, the professionals talk more often about different affordances and how to broaden children's perspectives than about how to counteract stereotyped roles and patterns.

So we thought, of course, that we would challenge rather than consolidate what the children themselves choose to do. Now we instead try to strengthen each individual to stand up for whom they are and have the courage to test other ways to do things. In this way, we can influence some children, in that they may make a choice, and we give both boys and girls new opportunities and resources to broaden their everyday lives. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 4, spring 2008)

Children's resistance

In the video recordings, sometimes activities and affordances showed the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. This was, more or less, visible in all the early childhood settings. In these affordances, children sometimes challenge the professionals. In this video observation, a young, new boy (aged 1-years-old) is standing crying in the playground, missing his mum and dad. The affordance given to him by the teacher is:

Shall we go and play floorball?

Close to the boy, there is a pan. The boy walks up to the pan and picks it up. The teacher says: Oh, you have found a pan!

The boy leads the way to the sandpit and, together, they start a 'cooking' game. (Video recording from Pre-school 3, autumn 2007)

The child's resistance with which the teacher is confronted forces her to reconsider her suggestion, and she responded by following him and supporting his intentions.

Rethinking the pedagogical practices

In different ways, the professionals struggle to understand the goals of the National Curriculum, and, in all four pre-schools, they are trying to rethink their pedagogical

practices. One of the pre-schools had just started to examine these issues. At this point, gender differences in play and actions were the main question for the professionals and their understanding of the influence they had on the everyday lives of the children. Some of the professionals in the pre-schools who have worked with these issues for a long time nowadays consider gender an ever-present critical perspective that influences all thinking and all actions. In one of the early childhood settings, one practitioner talked about mindsets and attitudes.

I do not see the work with gender equity as a project that we are running. I think it is a mindset that we have... it feels like you think in a different way now, more like an attitude than a project, that's what I think. (Pre-school professional from Pre-school 1, spring 2008)

This quote shows how gender-equity work is developed to permeate everyday practices if the professionals consider it an established part of the pre-school program.

Discussion

This article draws attention to how a group of Swedish pre-school professionals understand and experience their work of creating gender equity in their programs. As gender equity have a prominent place in the Swedish political agenda and in the steering documents of the Swedish pre-school it is an important issue to develop understanding about. The findings highlight the complexity in finding new ways to counteract stereotyped gender roles and patterns in children's outdoor play and learning. Although the rhetoric about improving gender equity was common to all the participating practitioners, and they were all trying to rethink the everyday pedagogical practices, the following issues came to light: (i) the outdoor environment was seen as a gender-neutral zone; (ii) gender roles and gender patterns as concepts were interpreted as unclear and difficult to explain; (iii) the focus group discussions and the video observations revealed hidden cues embedded in the everyday practices in the form of affordances and language. Finally, (iv) children sometimes resisted and challenged the professionals.

Place, space and equipment

Outdoors as a place for freedom and just being a child is quite a troublesome concept and needs to be problematised from a gender perspective. In this study, outdoors was seen as gender-neutral place and, as in earlier gender research, professionals seem to be gender-blind in some of the frequently recurring situations in pre-school (Eidervald 2009). To understand gender roles and gender patterns, the teachers interpret girls' and boys' play from different stereotyped perspectives. Equipment such as bikes and floorball were seen as heavily gendered and also some space at the pre-school playground as sandpits. To counteract gender stereotypes was a problematic issue, and instead the teachers talk about different affordances and how to broaden children's perspectives. As shown in earlier research, teachers and children are 'doing gender' (Thorne 1993; Eidevald 2009; Martin and Ruble 2004; Årlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson 2009). In this gender choreography, children and professionals are intertwined in micro-structures of pedagogical philosophy, history, culture, language, affordance and actions as a whole at the pre-school (Rogoff 2003).

As several earlier studies showed, it was seen that early childhood professionals need to develop different theoretical and methodological competences to achieve greater equity in their work with children (MacNaughton 1998, 2006). And as Thorne (1993) states: 'Understanding that gender relations are not fixed and invariant but vary by context can help teachers and aides reflect on their practices and extend those that seem to promote equitable interactions' (160). In the present study, gender choreography and micro-structures supporting memories of gendered places, spaces and equipments and as 'cues' that live on, on the pre-school playground.

The implications of the findings are that shared knowledge and understanding about gendered structures from different perspectives are important when the early childhood professionals are attempting to construct a practice in which children are allowed to deviate from stereotyped gender norms. By critically reflecting on the 'cues' given to different individuals and in different places, spaces and with respect to different pieces of equipment, and in the pedagogical practice, processes can be started and children presented with more opportunities. Listening to children's own understandings of gender will shed light on hidden structures and stereotyped actions so far invisible to the early childhood professionals (Browne 2004; Hellman 2005; Årlemalm-Hagsér 2006; Årlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson 2009). More participatory action research on how to counteract gender stereotypes is needed and, of course, more theoretical perspectives that can challenge the professionals' common sense of how to organise their everyday practices in early childhood settings.

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