



# Princesses with beards: gender flexible identities in early childhood pedagogy.

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# Aims and history of my research focus on 'missing men' in ECE

- Fatherhood research
- Early Excellence Centre evaluation emphasising male preschool workers
- Recent visits to Sweden and formation of international network on '*Gender, teaching and care*' focused on the gender workforce in ECE, particularly the disproportionate numbers of male and female teachers/carers

# A global pattern

The pattern of low numbers of men within the ECE workforce is an almost universal phenomenon (Drudy, 2005:154).

The general pattern is for less than 3% (Brody, 2013).

It is a specific policy concern in the UK, Australia, Canada, United States and New Zealand (McCormack and Brownhill, 2014)

# % men in preschool in the Nordic countries - famed for gender equality

Norway: 9 % (Statistics Norway, 2014)

Iceland: 7 % (Statistics Iceland, 2014)

Sweden: 4 % (Statistics Sweden, 2014)

Denmark: 8% (in 2007)\*

Finland: less than 2% (in 2008)\*

England: 2% in Early Years Foundation Stage (Brownhill, 2008)

\*Denmark and Finland do not publish stats on workforce gender so figures are from Baagøe Nielsen, 2011,

# So what is the problem?

Surely ECE is an employment arena where women can excel?  
Surely there are more urgent priorities for gender and education?

BUT

**Backlash.** A re-gendering rather than a de-gendering of society (Martino, 2008)

e.g.

The '**recuperative masculinity politics**' underlying the male role model debate and generating '**father hunger**' and initiatives such as '**Troops to Teachers**'

# Unwanted outcome of the 'missing men' debate

Throwing the baby out with the bathwater!



# SO - Aim of this research is to:

- recognise the gender transformative potential of male preschool teachers (public roles) as a way of **undoing gender**;
- provide a contribution to a growing body of empirically led descriptions of how gender is being transgressed (or not) so we can move away from a theoretical assumption that masculinity is necessarily aligned with men and femininity with women (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2012);
- rescue the baby! (Address ECE 'missing men' as a policy goal)

# Theoretical perspectives

**Poststructuralist** – emphasises the fluidity of gender across time, place and socio cultural context

**Queer theory** - seeks to untether sex from gender. By cutting masculinity and femininity loose from physiology it is possible to envisage more fluid manifestations of masculinities and femininities

**Butler** - destabilizes the distinctions between gender and sex believing that even our sex is socially constructed and therefore emphasizes the **performance** of gender. Gender is not fixed, but rather it is fluid and flexible. An individual's gender performance depends on what options are available to them: "a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the **binary** of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field .. forecloses that thinkability of its disruption"(2004 p43)

**Connell** - presents the concept of hegemonic masculinity

**Feminist 'ethic of care'** (Noddings, Tronto)

**Pedagogy** – a term to be preferred to 'teaching and learning' (Moss)

# Data

This presentation draws on:

- interviews with Swedish male preschool teachers;
- consultative work with Swedish teacher educators about recruitment to ECE teaching

# Swedish preschool



# The 5 preschool teachers

Per. Late 40s. In leafy, suburban preschool since the 1980s. One other school before this one. A father with two grown up daughters.

Linus. Early 30s. Chose preschool as 'unarmed' military service. Then upholsterer. Trained as Montessori teacher, Au pair (London). Head of nursery. Studying for ITT qualification

Jonas. Early 20s. Forklift truck driver. Unemployment. Placed by mentor in Montessori school. Now part time assistant. Untrained.

Karl. Early 40s. Training as kindergarten teacher after a long search (construction worker, janitor, photographer, IT specialist, metal worker) for the 'right' job . Has young child.

Geir. Unarmed military service in Oslo preschool for 2 years. Factory work. Persuaded back into large preschool (10 men and 30 women staff). Then teaching qualification and PG study. Now a teacher educator.

# Re-gendering or de-gendering?

## What did I find?

Gender consciousness

Gender playfulness and flexibility

Intersecting use of male/female binary together with child/adult and work/play

BUT also

Gender essentialism

# Awareness of Swedish curriculum gender goals

All indicated knowledge that *'The preschool should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles'* ([Skolverket, 2011, p. 4](#)) e.g.:

*The Swedish preschool curriculum requires active work against gender* (Karl)

*We are expected to teach gender in preschool* (Geir)

*Although this is in the curriculum – nobody checks up. But you have to check up on yourself* (Jonas)

# Accounts of gender flexible practices

The men told me of their performances of non-traditional, gender flexible practices in front of their audience of children.

*They see me laying the table and doing everything that women teachers do (Linus)*

*They see me changing diapers ( Karl)*

# Swedish gender sensitivity or a product of the method?

## **Mutual positioning on gender:**

Jo: ...rough and tumble play. Do you do that?

Linus. I'm not very rough. Quite tender as well ...

Jo: Do women teachers tease? (ref back to early topic)

Linus: Not so much I think

Jo: I don't want to put ideas in your head!

Linus: Of course they do as well but (embarrassed laugh)  
Difficult questions!

Jo: Do you think there are things that women bring to the job that men don't?

Linus: No. (Empathically) (More laughs. I join in)

Jo: I think I'm playing devil's advocate here

# Long hair, beards, and ear rings

## **Gender consciousness re appearance.**

Karl challenged the children's stereotypical perceptions about gender through his own physical appearance.

A preschool boy had told him "Boys don't have long hair" to which he had had been pleased to respond "Well I DO ", indicating his own long hair (which almost reached his shoulders).

He explained that he believed his combination of long hair, ear rings and beard disrupted traditional gender stereotypes

# The tiara and the lilac shirt

Jonas discussed the ways he challenged gender stereotypes in the classroom for example by putting on a princess tiara and pretending to be a princess but he also told me he would not go as far as putting on a princess dress.

Linus adopted a similarly cautious approach in explaining his preference for pale purple shirts which, he believed, show a degree of femininity but which do not make such a strong gender reversal statement as dressing in pink.

# Playfulness/seriousness

Men's appropriation of the playmate role and popularity

' Popular. Like a pop star swooping in' (Per)

It's easy to be a man –because 'oooh', the kids like you  
(Linus)

I like to play with them. I'm a fun guy....children can feel  
I'm a playful person. I'm not a strict person (Jonas)

I more often see men playing. I more often see female  
teachers saying 'have you washed your hands?' (Geir)

# Child/adult

Karl: Everyone I told this to [preschool job] said 'That's you. You've found it. You finally found the right thing

Jo: Why did they say that?

Karl: Cos I'm a kid (Laugh) I believe in order to be an adult you have to have an inner child. I'm 40 years old and I still climb a tree. That's why it's me.

Jonas: I'm very shy in my personality and in one way I refuse to grow up

# Gender consciousness but underlying gender essentialism - in Karl's account

Karl was himself studying gender and education as a postgraduate (alongside his teaching) He was highly conscious of gender as a social construction e.g.

“I believe I have many classical masculine qualities but this is what I have **learned**”.

He linked this understanding to another – about his “changing identities” which he described as moving between “being a child, an adult, a male, female, a teacher, a student”. Yet he was ambivalent about the possibilities for gender transgression. This tension was shown in his response to questions about doll play:

JW. Do you ever demonstrate doll play to the children?

K. Yes. I do. (Karl then described his own childhood play with the soft toys and dolls that his mother made ) but I prefer to play adventure games with them rather than play ‘house’ . It doesn't come **naturally** to me to play with dolls but if someone is playing with a doll then I can join in. I can do this.

# Conclusion

If teachers want to challenge traditional and rigid gender discourse whilst **expanding** children's idea of gender, teachers must first provide children with various alternatives, presented through their own practices and alongside the resources and learning experiences they provide.

In order to create such alternatives they must themselves be highly attuned to gender issues, and alert to the subtle and often invisible ways that traditional gender norms can persist within the power plays of the school. Gender flexible teaching can only be practiced by **teachers who are gender aware** rather than gender blind.

# Recommendations

- To develop a **‘gender flexible pedagogy’** with the potential to ‘undo’ the establishment of traditional gender performances and practices through an explicit focus on the creation of gender consciousness and gender activism.
- A ‘gender flexible pedagogy’ involves the concurrent operation of preschool staffing policies, the recruitment of male preschool teachers, teaching practices, relationships with children, and the provision of resources. At a national level it could also implicate the embedding of a gender focus within national curricula for early childhood education .

# Recruitment planning at University West, Sweden

Stimulated by Norwegian recruitment ads

Er du var nye mann (Are you our new man?)

Menn I barnehagen (Men in the nursery)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRsLEAIK8Wc>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiAITAdvDUk>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITni4zOISaQ>

Visits to secondary schools with lectures inspiring preschool work – for boys and girls

Secondary school students shadowing preschool staff

# Relevant papers and chapters

Warin, J and Adriany, V. (under review) 'Gender Flexible Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education', (*Early Years: An International Research Journal*)

Warin, J. (2015 forthcoming) Pioneers, Professionals, Playmates, Protectors, 'Poofs' and 'Paedos': Swedish male preschool teachers' construction of their identities. In Brownhill, S. ,Warin, J and Wernersson ,I (eds) *Men, Masculinities and Teaching in Early Childhood Education; International perspectives*, London: Routledge.

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Thanks for listening!

