

Principle or dialogue: Preschool directors speak about how they handle parents' suspicions towards men

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pae**Maria Hedlin**Department of Education and Teachers' Practice, Linnaeus
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Abstract

Caring for children and teaching the youngest students have a strong historical connection to women and femininity. The few men working within early childhood education and care occupy an ambivalent position. On the one hand, they often receive a positive reception in preschools; on the other, they are also met with mistrust and suspicion. The suspicion often comes from parents, and their views have come to bear increasing importance. Preschool directors who have men on their staff thus have a dilemma to manage: they must listen to parents' views at the same time as they have a personnel responsibility towards all their employees. The purpose of the present study is to describe and analyse how preschool directors reason about the parental suspicion and concern that male educators can encounter because they are men. The empirical material consists of interviews with 10 preschool directors (five women and five men). The study shows that preschool directors experience that parents want male personnel to refrain from performing certain tasks in the preschool. Some of the directors take a principle-based approach and emphasise that men and women should carry out the same work duties. Other directors maintain a dialogue-based approach, focusing on conducting a dialogue with concerned parents.

Keywords

Preschool, preschool directors, gender, male educators

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Introduction

An issue that comes up nearly every time you talk about men in preschools is the fear of abuse and paedophiles. (Mattsson, 2015: 22)

This quotation comes from the report *More men in preschool: An anthology of broadened recruitment*, published by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The report states that preschools will face a large recruitment need in the coming years and, in light of this, it is desirable for both men and women to see the preschool as a possible workplace. Only 4% of Swedish preschool educators were men in 2014, and the hope is thus for this proportion to increase (Skolverket, 2017). But as the quotation demonstrates, the thought of men in early childhood education and care may trigger negative associations. In many Anglo-Saxon countries, male educators have been associated with sexual abuse for some decades. In this context, Pruitt (2015) talks about a ‘discourse of suspicion’ affecting men negatively. That male teachers in early childhood education and care are linked to abuse and paedophilia, however, is a relatively new phenomenon for Scandinavian countries (Cameron, 2001). However, now the ‘discourse of suspicion’ seems to be established in Scandinavia and, as the opening quotation highlights, today also men in Swedish preschools risk being associated with abuse. Often the mistrust is expressed by parents (Eidevald, 2013). Preschool directors who have male employees, or who want to employ men, have to handle parents’ suspicions towards male staff. This study is directed towards how preschool directors reason about this matter.

Women and men in preschool

Caring for children and teaching the youngest students have a strong historical connection to femininity and motherhood (Oram, 2007; Tallberg Broman, 1991). A consequence of care and children being associated with women and femininity is that men who are preschool teachers do not naturally blend in with early childhood education and care teaching staff. Within the Swedish preschool, a paradoxical situation for male staff has been described. On the one hand, men are often emphasised as particularly important; on the other, they risk being met with parents’ suspicion and scepticism. Particularly in regard to younger children, parents can express that they do not want any male educators to change their child’s nappy (Eidevald, 2013). Also, Havung (2000), who studied Swedish male preschool teachers and their work, reports that men have a special position involving both advantages and disadvantages. Men often receive a positive reception in preschool. At the same time, there is a risk that their choice of profession is questioned. Men also describe how they are judged in a negative way (see also Nordberg, 2005). This ambivalence also appears in Smedley’s (2007) study from the UK. The investigation describes how a man who educates himself to become a teacher of younger students is forced to navigate between a masculinity discourse, where he appears as exemplary in his child-oriented role, and an opposing discourse, in which he is treated as dangerous and a threat to children. Furthermore, research has investigated the consequences of preschool staff risking being wrongly suspected of sexual assault of children. Studies describe how mainly men are forced to relate to this threat and, for many, demonstrating that you are a dependable person who cannot be suspected of doing anything wrong becomes a daily activity (Munk et al., 2013; Nentwich et al., 2013). In order to

describe the feeling of being suspected, the British researchers Foster and Newman (2005) use the concept of 'identity bruising'. This concept refers to male educators experiencing a 'blow' to their own identity when their work choice is criticised and the surroundings express that it is unsuitable for men to work with children.

The Swedish context

When the Swedish preschool was expanded during the 1970s, the thinking was that it was desirable not to recruit just women; the hope was that men would also work as educators in preschool. Special courses for men only or where half the places were assigned to men were organised (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1972). Over the decade, men who applied to the preschool teacher education programme were given priority through a kind of quota system. Many campaigns and marketing efforts were also undertaken with the purpose of increasing the proportion of men among preschool personnel (Flising, 1997; Granbom and Wernersson, 2012; Havung and Karlsudd, 1992; Wernersson and Lander, 1979). However, neither the quotas nor the campaigns led to more than a temporary increase in the proportion of men in preschool, and the close connection between the preschool teacher profession and femininity remains.

Since the 1990s, the Swedish preschool has had its own curriculum and has been part of the Swedish school system. According to the curriculum, parents should have an influence over preschool activity (Skolverket, 2016), and parents' confidence in the preschool is measured and published regularly (Svenskt Kvalitetsindex, 2015). Parents' views on preschool have thereby come to have great importance. The suspicion directed towards male educators only because they are men often comes from parents. Given this context, there is reason to highlight the mistrust towards male educators. When the Swedish National Agency for Education commissioned two researchers to interview 40 men who were either studying to be preschool teachers or worked as preschool educators, it emerged that all the men were forced to deal with the risk that parents would suspect that they were paedophiles (Heikkilä, 2015). Preschool directors who have men on their staff thereby risk facing a dilemma. They must take heed of parents' views of the preschool at the same time as having a responsibility towards all their personnel. Saying that men may not change nappies or subjecting them to other restrictions would be discrimination, and this is not allowed under Swedish law (Svensk Författningssamling, 2008).

The present study

The present study uses a gender-theoretical basis. The theoretical framework, purpose and methodology of the study are presented below.

Theoretical framework

Many characteristics, qualifications and jobs are *gendered* – they are classified as female or male. The preschool teacher profession is classified as female (Connell, 2009). It is not just professions, qualifications and characteristics that are gendered, but also such things as, for example, items of clothing, bodily gestures, leisure activities and places. In addition, 'female' and 'male' are often interpreted as opposite terms. 'Male' is linked to being active and 'female' with being passive. And while female teachers are associated with care, male teachers are linked to discipline and leadership. Expectations of being understanding and showing

care are thus more directed towards women, while expectations of maintaining order and getting promoted are directed to a greater extent towards men. Connell (2009) uses the term 'gender' to describe all these ideas and expectations connected to women and men. Furthermore, Connell (2009) emphasises the emotional character and anchoring of gender ideas. These conceptions contained within dominant gender patterns often 'feel' right and thus have a normative effect. However, there have always been women and men who have breached gender norms. Such things as a person's status and the specific situation influence the possibilities available when we relate to gendered notions. A man who chooses the preschool teacher profession and a woman who chooses to be a mining engineer choose 'wrong' according to dominant gender norms, and they risk facing mistrust, which may lead to the 'identity bruising' that Foster and Newman (2005) talk about.

Connell (2009) denotes the overall pattern resulting from all these gender notions, which characterises a country, as 'gender order'. The gender order is inherited from previous generations, meaning that it is forced on us, but at the same time it is possible to behave in different ways. Even very dominant gender norms are in motion; they are reinterpreted and renegotiated. Davies and Harré (2003) explain that we are *positioned* and we *position* ourselves according to the expectations present in a certain situation. To be positioned in a conversation is to be ascribed a 'role' that entails specific expectations. These expectations presuppose a shared cultural understanding and common notions. When we position ourselves, we claim positions and we use the discourses that are relevant to those positions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse how preschool directors reason about the parental suspicion and concern male educators can encounter because they are men. The research question guiding the study is: How do preschool directors relate to any suspicion and concern coming from parents regarding male educators?

Methodology

The empirical material in the present study consists of interviews with 10 preschool directors. Qualitative interviews were chosen because they are conducive to obtaining in-depth knowledge of how informants view a certain phenomenon. According to Bryman (2008), a major advantage of qualitative interviews is that they are open to flexibility and, by allowing the interviews to move in different directions, depending on what the different informants take up and relate, the researcher acquires knowledge of what the interviewees perceive as relevant and important.

The selection of the preschool directors participating in the study was done strategically (Bryman, 2008) so as to investigate representatives from small, medium and large municipalities. It was also desirable to have preschool directors with extensive experience in preschool. In addition, an even gender distribution was sought. The informants received both written and oral information about the content and purpose of the project. They were further informed that their participation was voluntary and that the material would be anonymised. The informants have been given fictitious names in this study. The study participants are five women and five men. They work in different municipalities in southern and central Sweden. They were born between 1953 and 1984; half of them were born during the 1950s. The preschool directors are all qualified preschool teachers and graduated as

preschool teachers between 1973 and 2010; the majority of them graduated in the 1980s. Most of the informants have extensive experience in preschool, first as preschool teachers and then as preschool directors. All of them have or have had male educators on their staff.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen since they allow for adapting the interview to both the informants and the specific interview situation (Bryman, 2008). An interview guide formed the basis for the interview, but since a conversation-like approach rather than an interrogation was sought, the different questions were not always formulated exactly according to the guide. The questions were also followed up with subsequent queries, which naturally could vary. The analysis is based on the interview material as a whole, but the question in the interview guide which most directly frames the focus of the study is: Have you experienced, or have you heard about, parents having views about the touching between preschool teachers and children? All of the preschool directors with the exception of one had their office located within the preschool facility, which meant that they were in close proximity to the children, personnel and activity. Thus, they were also easily available to parents. Most of the preschool directors, however, were the director of several units, which meant that they were seldom as easily available to all parents. All of the interviews except one were conducted in the preschool directors' workplace. For practical reasons, one interview was conducted in a local municipal building. Most of the interviews lasted 1.5 hours or longer. The interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone with the informants' consent, and the recordings were transcribed shortly thereafter. When the interview transcriptions were complete, they were sent to the informants to ensure that everything was correctly understood. None of the informants had any remarks.

A qualitative thematic analysis of the empirical material was carried out (Bryman, 2008; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The data was processed by repeatedly reading through the interviews with the study's research question in focus. The parts of the transcriptions found to be relevant to the research question were marked. The focus was on how the informants related to parents' suspicion and concern regarding male educators. The marked sections were studied and compared for similarities and differences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In the material, expression of the parents' suspicion and concern about male educators could be detected in the form of specific questions and views on the part of the informants, such as parents not wanting male staff to perform certain tasks. That certain work duties are particularly sensitive in relation to male staff is something that earlier research has also reported (Eidevald, 2013). Here, two different approaches to these kinds of views crystallised. Parents could, for example, say that they did not want men to do something specific – a request that some preschool directors dealt with by rejecting it, while others instead dealt with it by listening. The preschool directors who rejected these wishes placed emphasis on the principle that male educators should not be treated any differently from their female co-workers. Those who responded by listening stressed the importance of having a dialogue. These informants expressed a willingness to meet concerned parents and take their worries seriously. Nevertheless, it can be said that not all of the preschool directors clearly adhered to just one of these arguments. One of the preschool directors communicated a certain ambivalence, where both ways of reasoning were expressed. In this case, the most prominent view is reported.

Preschool directors talk about parents' suspicions

Reported below are the two different ways preschool directors reason about parents' suspicions and worries concerning male educators.

Principle-based approach

Suspicion and concern regarding male teachers were often expressed by parents voicing their desire that men should not perform certain tasks. When mistrust towards men is conveyed in this way, five of the preschool directors (four men and one woman) express what can be called a principle-based approach. These directors say that they are clear and consistent in their stance. Men and women should carry out the same work tasks. Those parents who cannot accept this may choose another preschool for their children.

Several of these directors say that they have a policy stating that neither new substitute teachers nor other persons who do not know the children well may change nappies or be left alone with the children. This policy is gender-neutral. But it still happens that parents express suspicion towards men. When there are male personnel at the preschool, parents may say that they do not want these men to change their children's nappies. They may even request that there be an entirely female staff. Dan comments:

I have experienced several times when parents express themselves like this, even parents saying they do not want their children in a department where there are men. And then I have to say, then I am with the very clear preschool directors who say, this is how our preschool is run and these are the people who work here and we have a shared responsibility. If you as a parent do not want this, then you have to apply to another preschool.

Anders speaks along the same lines. He says that, sometimes, it is a matter of parents who come from other countries where they see nappy-changing as a task not to be performed by men. But male personnel not performing all tasks is no alternative, according to Anders: 'We say plainly and clearly that, in the public preschools, both men and women change children's nappies'. Rolf conveys similar reasoning. This is not just his own stance, but all preschool directors in the municipality have decided that male staff are not to be treated differently from female staff when it comes to nappy-changing and other things that parents may have views about.

Erik explains that he receives many questions from parents who regard male educators with suspicion. He speaks about media reports affecting parents. When Erik is asked how he handles parents' questions, he says he has an answer:

Erik: Then I say, it does not make any difference if you are a man or a woman; the main thing is that you do a good job. And at this workplace, we work with diversity, I usually say. We have men and women and people with different ethnic backgrounds and so on, both young and old. So, I usually take it from a perspective of diversity and then I do something more, which I think is nice [*laughs*]. I say, like this, if we would only have women working here, then we would only choose the best out of half of the population, but since we also have men here, then we can choose the best out of the whole population when we hire. That usually hits home ...

Interviewer: But has it happened that parents have not accepted your argument?

Erik: Yes. That has certainly happened, but I do not think I have ever said that we should do anything differently. Instead, those particular parents have moved their children. It happens now and then. It has happened a few times.

While Erik has arguments he presents to parents, Anne reasons in another way. She says that she does not see any reason to enter into a discussion with parents. She has received

phone calls from parents who are considering placing their child in her preschool; the parents have expressed concern over there being a male educator in one of the young children groups. 'I have no reason to defend this', says Anne. To the parents, she says: 'He is competent; he is qualified. You are welcome to apply if you want'.

In summary, it can be stated that the preschool directors who take a principle-based approach maintain that men and women in preschools should carry out the same work duties. They do not express the intention to negotiate on this issue.

Dialogue-based approach

While the informants above emphasise the importance of men and women being treated equally and more or less reject parents' concerns about male educators, other informants instead deal with parents' suspicion by being attentive and listening. Four women and one man express a willingness to meet with worried parents and take their views seriously. They describe a pronounced dialogue-based approach towards parents who express suspicion of male educators.

These directors describe what parents ask about and in which situations these questions arise. The questions that recur are about whether men change nappies and if they are alone with the children. Even if the directors take care to listen to parents' concerns, it does not mean that they take lightly the offence of being subjected to parents' suspicions. A couple of the preschool directors recount that they work with the issue of suspicion towards men through lectures and films on the theme during staff development days. The staff put a lot of time into discussing and highlighting the problem. Several of the preschool directors also describe how they have worked with examining and questioning gender norms and other norms that affect expectations and reactions in everyday situations.

Further, the informants stress the need for dialogue and confidence in contact with parents. 'Dialogue with the parents is really important', Jenny states. Elisabeth speaks about the importance of trust – both that parents have confidence in the preschool staff and that her staff have confidence in her and her actions when parents come to her with concerns and suspicions. She says: 'You have to work at it and balance a lot'. These directors are inclined to find a solution that all parties can be satisfied with. Marie talks about listening to parents:

I think you must listen to what makes someone have that request and what someone is worried about. You have to try to find a solution together, through conversation. I do not think the solution is to force anyone, either one way or the other.

Roland has several men on his staff and says it has happened that parents say men may not change their children's nappies. He emphasises that this is not common, but it does happen. 'It is too bad because nappy-changing is a worthwhile time and opportunity for the teacher to have nice contact with the child', he says. At the same time, it is important to listen to parents' views. Roland clarifies that, at his preschools, they do not have a standard plan for dealing with the problem. They take it one case at a time, but usually one of the female staff can take care of the nappy-changing. Roland refers to the preschool teacher profession as a service profession: 'Sometimes we are a kind of service industry, too. You want the customer to be satisfied, especially the children'.

Above all, Roland and the other preschool directors adopting the dialogue-oriented approach hope that confidence-building conversations will calm worried parents. It is important for them to explain how they work and to ask the concerned parents how they think the situation should be resolved. Elisabeth recounts when a man on her staff heard that a mother did not want him to change her daughter's nappy. Elisabeth says she understands that it must hurt to hear something like that: 'That is like saying "You are a paedophile". You have to be able to stand there and say "Okay. She is worried, she is anxious; don't make a big deal out of it"'.

When there are male substitutes – for example, when someone is sick – that is another situation that can trigger parents' concerns. Parents mainly turn to the teachers working in the departments with their questions about the male substitutes. Ruth says the questions are about nap time and nappy-changing. The teachers answer the questions and also say that the parents are welcome to contact the preschool director if they want to know more, but at Ruth's preschool all the parents have been satisfied with talking to the teachers working in the departments.

Parents also ask the preschool directors questions directly. Elisabeth says that parents come to her with their concerns. For her, it is important to meet the parents, listen to their questions and answer them directly:

Elisabeth: ... I have had those conversations. And someone has asked about nap time: 'I think it is very uncomfortable with nap time. How do you do the nap time? Are substitutes in there alone during nap time?' Then I explain.

Interviewer: They ask and hear how it works.

Elisabeth: Yes. That is how it is and it is very important; it is really important. As a parent, you must be able to feel that you can influence in some way.

In summary, the preschool directors with a dialogue-based approach show much care for the parents. As Elisabeth says in the quotation above, the parents' questions are considered to be very important.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse how preschool directors reason about the parental suspicion and concern that male educators can encounter because they are men. The above report shows how some preschool directors express what the study has termed a 'principle-based approach', while other preschool directors describe what we have called a 'dialogue-based approach'. In the principle-based approach to reasoning, the emphasis is that parents should be given a clear message: male and female staff perform the same work duties and are treated in the same way. In this way, the directors can be said to show confidence in their male staff. In the dialogue-based approach, the focus instead lies on the parents' confidence in the preschool. Although the amount of underlying material is small and conclusions must be drawn carefully, these approaches will now be discussed and related to the gender-theoretical reasoning constituting the study's framework.

The principle-based approach is held by four men and one woman. Thus, the majority of the male directors adopt this standpoint. Since they are men, they have long experience of being a gender minority in the preschool, which could mean that they are particularly empathetic towards the men's situation and the 'identity bruising' (Foster and Newman,

2005) that parents' suspicions can bring. At the same time, the dialogue-based approach held by four women and one man can be seen as less categorical. This approach clearly shows greater understanding that parents may be worried, even if their concern is considered to be unfounded.

Although most of the female directors in the study express a dialogue-based approach, based on a gender perspective this is not about women having more understanding than men by 'nature'. Based on a gender-theoretical interpretation, however, the environment poses different expectations on women and men in the leadership position. Given that leadership and authority are associated with men and masculinity, while women and femininity are more likely associated with being compassionate and showing understanding for one another (Connell, 2009; see also Martino, 2008), the preschool children's parents may expect to receive more sympathy from the female directors. Similarly, rejection of a request may be expected and accepted to a larger extent when a man is in the leadership position. The connection between women and care can also mean that parents are more likely to appeal to female directors to express their worries and anxiety. However, even if women are expected to show understanding and men, to a greater extent, are linked with going by the rules, there is the possibility for individual persons to behave differently depending on other factors, such as their earlier experiences and the specific situation. Based on Davies and Harré's (2003) positioning concept, the interpretation can be made that the principle-based directors position themselves before parents as clear, determined and principled leaders – that is, in accordance with dominant masculinity norms – while the dialogue-based preschool directors position themselves as empathetic, listening and accommodating staff – that is, in agreement with the norms of femininity.

Furthermore, the reported results show the possibility of positioning oneself in different ways. One of the interviewed women expresses the masculine principle-based stance, and one of the men represents the more feminine dialogue-based approach. Thus, they demonstrate the possibility to relate to gender norms in various ways, as Connell (2009) describes. The gender order refers to a larger social pattern but, within this pattern, there are deviations and variations. Neither men nor women are homogenous groups. Within each group, there are large variations with regard to experiences and other aspects such as social class, ethnicity, sexuality and age (Connell, 2009). Even if many act in line with gender norms, there is the possibility to stretch norms and break with them. As Davies and Harré (2003) highlight, the outcome cannot be taken for granted. Men need not necessarily position themselves in line with masculine ideals and, in the same way, women can position themselves in opposition to feminine ideals.

It should be emphasised that this investigation covered how preschool directors reason about the parental suspicion that male educators experience because they are men. In the few cases that the suspicions have been more concrete, there are clear routines for how to proceed and investigate, involving both the authorities and the police. However, this is beyond the scope of this study.

Even if the concerns and suspicions that parents may have towards men working in preschool are not justified, the worry is a reality that cannot be overlooked. Preschool directors have a difficult task when they have to navigate between parents' concerns and their responsibilities towards their staff. We have shown the two different ways preschool directors reason when there is suspicion towards male personnel: a principle-based approach and a dialogue-based approach. In this study, the two approaches have appeared as more or less incompatible – that is, directors seem to opt for either one or the other approach.

Although the sample is too small to draw far-reaching conclusions, we find it interesting that the informants did not seem to attempt to reconcile the two approaches. Recently, the Swedish government announced that a new curriculum for Swedish preschools will take effect on 1 July 2019, replacing the curriculum of 1998. While the old curriculum did not express concern that children could be abused by adults, the new curriculum addresses this possibility much more clearly. It states that preschools must secure children's bodily integrity and teach children of their rights concerning issues of bodily and personal integrity (Skolverket, 2018). In light of these changes, with the increased emphasis on 'the best for the child' as expressed by the Swedish National Agency for Education, we suggest there be further research on how preschool directors handle the demands from parents to protect their children.

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