Too much, too little: preschool teachers’ perceptions of the boundaries of adequate touching

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ABSTRACT
In the present study we focus on physical touch that is judged to be just outside what is considered to be ‘normal’. We explore how preschool teachers describe and explain situations where educators give children too much or too little touching. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 30 qualified preschool teachers working in Swedish preschools. When the informants talk about situations where educators give children too much touching, the descriptions involve a behaviour that does not lie within the preschool mission, teachers who do not set boundaries, and actions that have disadvantages for the children. On the other hand, situations where educators give children too little touching are described solely with reference to the teacher and that person’s fear or cold personality. The results have been interpreted in relation to the discourse of preschool professionalisation and Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour.

KEYWORDS
Care; physical touch; emotional labour; feeling rules; preschool; preschool teachers

Introduction

Some colleagues can be too physical when it comes to kissing and hugging. I try to keep it at a level where children get a hug if they need it and show that they need it. But no hugs just for the sake of hugging.

In this excerpt from a research interview, the Swedish preschool teacher, John, talks about a topic that can be sensitive in preschools: teachers’ physical interaction with children. By comparing himself to his colleagues, the quote from John points to the fact that touching practices in preschools are surrounded by norms and regulations. John argues that some of his colleagues touch ‘too much’ while he deems his own touching practices more appropriate. Such judgments rest on an individual’s socially and culturally-formed experiences, which are put in play situationally and momentarily (Hargreaves 2000). While common sense tells us that touching practices such as violence between children or between abusive adults are outside the norm, everyday touching practices such as a soft pat on the shoulder or a gentle hug can be more difficult to interpret. As work in preschools is characterized by plentiful situations where such everyday touching can occur, this article aims to explore preschool teachers’ notions

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of touching that is found to be just outside ‘normal’, such as John’s ideas expressed in the quote above.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Swedish preschool teachers describe and explain situations where educators give children too much or too little touching. By touching we mean the physical contact that is part of the care provided in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Researchers have noted that care has received less space in many nations’ policy documents covering educators’ work (Halldén 2007; Drudy 2008; Taggart 2011). Policy documents have been the subject of many studies (Karila 2012; Skourdoumbis 2016). However, less interest has been paid to how educators and student-teachers themselves look upon care and physical touch as part of their work.

Below we first engage in a review of relevant literature. Then we outline the Swedish context. In the section that follows we describe the method of the current study and then present the findings. Finally, we discuss the results.

Background

Historically there have been strong links connecting care, children and femininity (Acker 1995). Ideas about the care of younger children have been associated with mothering and women’s natures, which have then been used to justify little or no salary. Care has thus been historically constructed as the opposite of paid employment, education and professionalism (Grumet 1988; Vogt 2002). Attitudes still exist that link care with mothering. In a British study of preschool student-teachers’ perceptions of the attitudes required to work within ECEC, the students discuss hugs as something to avoid since hugs are considered to be too ‘mothering’ (Campell-Barr 2017, 51). The researcher interpreted this as a consequence of the professionalisation of the work within ECEC having been ‘more technocratic than emotional’ (51).

In contrast to this result, there is a British study showing that affective traits are highly valued. The study investigated professionalism within ECEC and how educators describe their subjective ideas about professional work. The study shows that the most frequently reported traits lay within the affective area. Caring/loving/compassionate and non-judgemental/fair had the highest frequency in the study (Osgood 2010). The affective dimension and loving care in the profession were also emphasised in a study involving Hungarian students of early childhood education and the ways they thought about their future occupation (Campbell-Barr, Georgeson, and Nagy Varga 2015). Research has, however, shown the risk if care is considered in a simpliﬁed way. In a study of how US preservice elementary teachers looked at the relationship between learning and care, the researchers found that surprisingly many of the students thought that both caring and teaching are essential skills that some people are born with. Although the students regarded care as an important part of their future profession, they expressed an idealistic, romantic and superficial view of the relationship between caring and teaching, according to the researchers. For example, the students said their upcoming teaching should be characterised by devotion, endless patience and lots of love for the pupils (Goldstein and Lake 2000). A more complex and varied picture of how teachers perceive their profession and the care encompassed by it appears in Vogt’s (2002) study of primary school teachers in England and Switzerland. For example, one group of teachers
thought that care is about being engaged in instruction or showing interest in the pupils as persons. Another attitude was that they linked the physical aspects of care with mothering. Caring was associated with ‘mothering and motherly love’ (261). Of the teachers who held this view, some emphasised that younger pupils might particularly sometimes need a hug or other physical contact. According to them, being a mother figure is part of teaching young children. There were also teachers who, in contrast, distanced themselves from the idea that care is part of the teaching profession because of the connection caring has to mothering. For them caring and mothering were not consistent with being a professional teacher.

To sum up: physical aspects of care, such as hugs and other physical contact, may be associated with motherhood, which in turn can be regarded as opposed to being a professional teacher. There is therefore a risk that educators might withhold physical contact.

Another dilemma that affects the use of touch is that physical interaction between educators and children has come to be considered a risky situation. Campell-Barr’s (2017) British study reported that preschool student-teachers limited their physical responses to children in order to reduce the risk of being accused of inappropriate touching. In this context, Campell-Barr speaks about a ‘fear culture’ (50). Other researchers talk about a media-driven, moral panic regarding touching between educators and children (Piper and Smith 2003; Fletcher 2013; Scott 2013). Particularly male, but also female, educators, risk being subjected to distrust and suspicion (Tait 2001; cf. McWilliam and Jones 2005). According to research from New Zealand, educators must show physical distance to the children in the group in order not to be perceived as unprofessional. The children’s wishes for physical contact can thus also be seen as risky (Farquhar 2001; Jones 2004; Cushman 2009).

The fear of being accused of inappropriate touching as described above refers primarily to Anglo-Saxon countries. For instance, concerns about being accused of inappropriate touch have been reported to be strong in New Zealand, starting after a case of sexual abuse at a childcare centre that received great media attention in the early 1990’s (Burke and Duncan 2016), but also from countries such as Australia (McWilliam and Jones 2005), the UK (Piper and Stronach 2008), Canada (Gananathan 2011) and the United States (Owen and Gillentine 2011) where similar experiences have been reported.

In other countries, teachers are spared worry and fear in connection with physical contact. In Japan, for example, close physical contact is regarded as an important means of embodying the group experience in the early childhood setting (Burke 2013; Burke and Duncan 2016). A study of touching between preschool teachers and children in Greek preschools shows how touching is an aspect of care given within ECEC. The touching is used also to promote a good learning climate. The teachers touch mostly the children’s hands, the head and the back or shoulders (Stamatis and Kontakos 2008). Furthermore, studies from Swedish preschools show how the educators use physical contact such as hugs and endearment as natural elements in daily routines (Månsson 2000; Hellman 2010).

Many researchers highlight the professional aspects of both care and physical interaction (Page and Elfer 2013; Öhman and Quennerstedt 2017; Page 2017). Page (2013, 2017) for instance, talks about ethical care where physical contact has an obvious place,
and with the concept of professional love she describes care when the needs of children are met in an early-years setting. Professional love includes showing affection and being physically close in ways that are beneficial for children and their social and emotional development. Consequently, touching and physical contact require sensitivity to the other’s reactions. Sensitivity to the children’s needs has been highlighted for some time as an important characteristic that preschool student-teachers must either have or develop within their preschool teacher education (Tellgren 2008). Gill (2013) speaks about emotional availability, which presupposes that the teacher is attentive to the children’s needs and signals.

The work carried out in ECEC corresponds to what Hochschild (2012) calls emotional labour. In this context Hochschild uses the terms feeling rules, surface acting and deep acting. Feeling rules refer to the norms that indicate what we are expected to feel in different situations and professional roles. Surface acting and deep acting are strategies used to manage the feeling rules. Surface acting can be likened to pretending consciously to feel something. The staff member assesses that the situation requires a show of a certain emotion, and therefore uses her face and body to try to convey that expected emotion. An example would be a preschool teacher who is actually tired and disappointed but who makes an effort to appear energised and happy when the parents come to pick up their children. By smiling and standing tall the educator consciously communicates other emotions than those she really feels. Deep acting, by contrast, involves an effort resulting in the desired emotions being perceived as one’s own and genuine. Deep acting is about adapting to the feeling rules in a spontaneous way, evoking the expected emotion or suppressing an undesired emotion within oneself.

Hochschild’s reasoning is relevant for the present study which focuses on the touching between educators and children that falls just outside the border of what is considered normal and adequate touching. The sensitivity to the children required by ‘normal’ and adequate touching, means that teachers must be able to handle the feeling rules of the preschool teaching profession. We depart from Hochschild (2012) however, in that we do not provide an ethnographical account of the particular preschools that our informants’ narratives revolve around in the interviews. Our research question is limited to preschool teachers’ reasoning on touch, i.e. the feeling rules we identify are not objective facts but present themselves discursively through the informants’ narratives and our interpretation of them.

Taggart (2011) states the importance of being aware that the emotional labour required by the work within ECEC, can be easily exploited. Therefore, it is critical to challenge the traditional connections of emotional labour to women’s personal qualities and the private sphere. There is a risk that staff within care professions do not get their emotional labour recognized as work despite the fact that it can be a very demanding part of their job (Hochschild 2012). Furthermore, Elfer (2015) has found, in an overview of research, that the emotional labour carried out within ECEC has scarcely been investigated.

**The Swedish context**

The way that preschool teachers look on touching between educators and children involves many factors, including: how the preschool role is perceived, how preschool teachers see their profession and how children are being viewed.
When preschools began to take hold in Sweden, the aim for many of them was to support mothers with their mothering. The children were given stimulating activity for a few hours and their mothers were instructed in childcare; in this way, the bond between mother and child was to be strengthened (Tallberg Broman 1991). As early as the 1930s, however, the preschool teacher education programmes in Stockholm began to have other foundations. These education programmes were based on the science of education and psychology, and the purpose was to complement the upbringing in the home (Tellgren 2008). The preschool was established as a full-time institution in the 1970s and at that time was considered both as a resource for the children and a prerequisite for the mothers’ gainful employment. It was decided in the 1980s that all children in Sweden from the age of 18 months old would be offered a place in preschool. Not only would the preschool have the task of taking care of the children while their parents were working, but also it would be regarded as a right for the children themselves (Gunnarsson, Korpi, and Nordenstam 1999; Halldén 2007).

In 1996 the preschool became included in the Swedish school system, and in 1998 it received its own curriculum (Halldén 2007; Tellgren 2008). Preschool teacher education and the preschool teacher’s professional role have changed accordingly. Tellgren (2008) describes the change in terms of an alteration from a mother of society to a teacher of younger children to be qualified for a research tradition. It is not only the preschool and the preschool teacher’s role that have changed; the view of children too has changed. Earlier there was the tendency not to take into account children’s experiences and preferences. Childhood was seen as a stretch of road on the way to adulthood. Now there is an emphasis on children as individuals whose experiences and intentions must be taken seriously (Halldén 2007).

In Sweden there is no division made between care and learning in preschool. The Swedish ECEC is not split (Jönsson, Sandell, and Tallberg-Broman 2012), quite unlike countries where there is a division between childcare centers for the youngest children and kindergartens included in the school system for the children aged four-to-five years old (Harwood and Tukonic 2016). The term ‘educare’ is used to refer to the facilities where learning and care are bound together. Swedish preschool teachers themselves emphasize that care is a major part of their work (Jönsson, Sandell, and Tallberg-Broman 2012). The curriculum states that: ‘Activities should be based on a holistic view of the child and his or her needs and be designed so that care, socialisation and learning together form a coherent whole’ (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011, 4). This means that care is an obvious part of the day-to-day activities and physical touch is included as a natural part of the care. What Page (2013; 2017) refers to as professional love can be said to be part of the preschool teacher profession.

In the preschool curriculum, however, children’s learning has been stressed. Some areas in the policy text are clarified and highlighted as particularly important for the children: language and communication development, mathematical development, and science and technology. According to Halldén (2007) the emphasis of the policy documents on learning and the child’s competence, conceals the child’s need for care, which is typical of our individualistic society where the individual’s autonomy is central (cf. Taggart 2011). Halldén addresses three possible reasons why the concept of care may receive a subordinate position. One reason might be that care is simply considered as obvious and therefore is not mentioned. Another possible explanation
is that care is linked with a passive child, which goes against today’s idea of children as being above all a social group capable of social agency, although children are naturally dependent on adults to understand and meet their needs. A third reason might be that the connection to mothering is seen as a problem given the ambitions in recent decades to professionalise the preschool teacher occupation. Hallidén (2007) speaks about a professionalisation discourse that has grown stronger with the implementation of the curriculum. Central to the professionalisation discourse is that the preschool staff should be educators with a focus on learning. This contrasts with the more commonplace view, which is still valid, in which the preschool teachers’ work is synonymous with ‘mother’s love’ (Gillberg 2011). It is not only the curriculum that contributes to the professionalisation discourse. According to Berntsson (2006) the preschool teachers’ trade union in Sweden has campaigned hard to raise the status of the profession and to strengthen the view of the preschool teacher as a professionally qualified employee. In these efforts, it has been important to emphasise the preschool teachers’ relatively long, scientifically-based university education, which according to Berntsson, has at the same time risked contributing to overshadowing the care task.

According to the above-mentioned background, physical touching is a daily part of preschool teachers’ work that can be understood in many different, sometimes tension-laden, ways depending on how one sees care, the preschool teacher professional role and the preschool’s mission. We are therefore interested in the boundaries of touching. The research question is:

*How do preschool teachers describe and explain situations where educators give children too much or too little touching?*

**Method**

The present study is part of the project *Touch in Preschool Care or Risk?* funded by the Swedish Research Council. The overall aim of the project is to investigate how Swedish preschool, and preschool teacher education, address and manage touching between educators and children.

The literature survey shows that the national differences concerning touch between educators and children can be significant. At the same time, studies from Sweden are scarce in this respect. For these reasons, this Swedish project took an exploratory approach and started with a questionnaire survey with the intention of getting a broad and general picture of how preschool teachers relate to physical contact as part of their work.

The surveys were distributed at large conferences [fortbildningskonferenser/continuing education or in-service training] for preschool staff. The surveys contained information about the research project and stated that participation was fully voluntary. Those who took part in the survey were offered the opportunity to participate in a subsequent interview investigation. Those who were interested in this were asked to provide contact information; the others took part anonymously. Those who expressed their wish to participate in the interview study were contacted 6–12 months later. Some additional participants were recruited through strategic selection. With the invitation to participate in the study, the informants also received information about the project design and...
purpose. It was emphasised that their participation was voluntary. Further, it was explained that the data would be anonymized.

The present study is based upon semi-structured interviews with 30 qualified preschool teachers working in Swedish preschools. Semi-structured interviews can be used in research to either test hypotheses or to address open-ended exploratory questions (Blandford 2013). We opted for an open-ended approach as there are few studies on touch conducted in a Swedish context, a fact that made it important for us not to project our own thoughts on touch to the informants. For these reasons, both the overall project surveys and the interview guides were designed primarily to cover topics, rather than precise questions (cf. Arthur and Nazroo 2014).

Arthur and Nazroo (2014) suggest that interview studies of professional practice benefit from using cases or examples to ensure that the information gathered is not too general or idealized. While we encouraged informants to provide real-world examples in their narratives, we have not done this to be able to detect actual behavior, which is what Arthur and Nazroo (2014) argues is the aim for such approaches. For us, cases and examples have been important points of inquiry, but only to gain a deeper understanding of informants’ reasoning, not to gain a more ‘true’ account. Since our interest lies in the discursive constructions of touch, we have not made any analytical distinction between real-world and hypothetical cases.

The basic principles governing the selection of informants were that we wanted a broad mix of informants, both with regard to geographical location, work experience, and gender. Although such superficial demographic characteristics do not necessarily mean a greater richness in data, based on previous research we anticipated that especially work experience and gender in particular could be important (Nordberg 2005). The informants came from southern and central Sweden. Of the informants, 11 were men and 19 were women; 20 of them worked as preschool teachers with groups of children and 10 of them worked as preschool heads. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the informant’s workplace. For practical reasons, however, five interviews were conducted at a public location easily accessible for both interviewer and informant and where the interview could be carried out without interruption. An interview guide was used, but since a conversational format was sought, the questions were not asked in the same way in all the interviews. Nor were the questions always in the same order. The questions were aimed at being explorative and giving a wide approach to the topic. Examples of questions were: Can you describe situations where physical contact between educators and children is part of the work? In some preschools there is a lot of physical contact between educators and children, in others there is less. How come? What affects this? However, matters concerning too much or too little touch could arise in connection with widely different questions. The whole data set has therefore provided the basis for the analysis.

The interviews were recorded using a recorder and lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours. Each recording was transcribed, and then the transcript was sent to the informant to ensure that nothing had been misunderstood. All the interviews were conducted in Swedish. Afterwards excerpts were translated into English. Detailed information that risked revealing the participants’ identity was omitted or changed, and all informants were assigned pseudonyms.
A thematic analysis has been conducted, which means that patterns in the data have been highlighted. As Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend, the material was transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews were completed, so that the interviews were ‘re-lived’ and ideas could be written down. Then all the transcripts were read through carefully in order to get a picture of the whole. In the next step the material was studied with the research question in focus, and the parts relevant to the research question were marked to be coded. This step was guided by the theoretical perspectives outlined above, i.e. Hochschild’s (2012) reasoning about feeling rules, and the professionalisation discourse (Berntsson 2006; Tellgren 2008; Campbell-Barr 2017). More specifically this meant that we paid attention to the sentences, phrases and paragraphs where the informant spoke about touching that he or she perceived to be outside ‘normal’ boundaries. The coding involved the excerpts being assigned a heading that summarised the contents. Then the codes were analysed with regard to similarities and differences. All the codes were compared, and a preliminary grouping was made. Similar and close codes were put together under the same theme. After further comparisons and some re-structuring, the themes were determined (Braun and Clarke 2006; Bryman 2008) and these are presented below. However, it should be noted that the reasoning presented below sometimes could be attributed to more than one theme, but in the presentation below the excerpts illustrate only the theme under whose heading it is being presented.

**Boundaries of adequate touching**

The majority of the informants’ statements about too much or too little touching are about co-workers who have too much physical contact with the children. Having a lot of physical contact by having the children in your arms and in your lap may be perceived as ‘too much’. Kissing and cuddling in a way that is either categorized as belonging to the relationship between parents and children, or described as singling out one or a few children and giving them special affectionate treatment, may also be perceived as ‘too much’. Only with exception did the informants talk about co-workers who touched the children notably little. Below we present first how preschool teachers described and explained situations where educators gave children too much touching and then the situations where educators gave children too little touching.

**Too much touching**

In this section we present the preschool teachers’ perceptions of co-workers who were too physical and gave the children, or some select children, too much touching. This section is divided into three sub-topics: the first (Focus on the preschool mission) presents examples where the preschool teachers said the ‘excessive’ touching was not part of the preschool mission. The second sub-topic (Focus on the educator) presents statements where a co-worker’s excessive touching of children was explained with reference to the co-worker’s lack of professionalism. In the third sub-topic (Focus on the children) the preschool teachers emphasised that the children were disadvantaged because of a co-worker’s excessive or selective touching practices.
Focus on the preschool mission

One way to look at what is happening when educators are perceived as giving children too much physical touching is to refer to the preschool mission. In this context, it was stressed that the preschool should focus on learning and development. To be substitute parents was not the task of the preschool teachers. The focus, however, was not on the educator who had an overly physical approach. Instead the mission of the preschool, which nowadays works more with teaching than it did earlier, was highlighted.

Roger explained that he had a co-worker who crossed the limit for what he considered to be adequate touching. He spoke about lifelong learning, the curriculum and school law. Having a lot of physical contact by carrying the children and having them on your lap, are not part of the preschool’s primary mission, he stated. However, such behaviour can be appreciated by parents. Roger described a clash between the preschool mission and the parents’ wishes:

Roger: […] if you ask me for my opinion, I think that parents would gladly see that they can leave their child – they leave their most valuable thing they have and it is a huge responsibility for us – and so we say, ‘No, we are not going to be any substitute parents; that’s not what we are. Now the lifelong learning starts, and we focus on learning and development.’ But that’s not what the parents want. They want to have an extra mama or an extra papa, so there is a collision there. There is in my view in any case, because I look more at learning and development. That is our main task. I read the curriculum and I read the school law.

When the preschool teacher Roger, (above) spoke about a female co-worker who had a particularly physical approach, carrying children and having them on her lap, she was perceived as taking on the role of substitute parent instead of focusing on learning and development which, he believed, should be the main mission. In this way, he implied that his co-worker was not acting as a professional preschool teacher.

As many researchers have mentioned, the term ‘parent’ is not always as gender-neutral as it sounds. ‘Parent’ often means ‘mother’ (Eichler 1991; Landeros 2011; Jezierski and Wall 2017). However, as Vogt (2002) highlights, care-giving is not the same thing as being a substitute parent (mother). In addition, care with physical contact included is part of the Swedish preschool broadened learning concept and is expressed in the term ‘educare’. The division into two parts that the preschool teacher above does by describing learning as something different from care, goes against how the Swedish preschool teachers usually see their task, according to research studies (Halldén 2007; Jönsson, Sandell, and Tallberg-Broman 2012). The binary division made can be interpreted as a difficulty in discussing care without associations being made to mothering. Furthermore, mothering and women’s care have been historically constructed as the opposite of paid employment (Grumet 1988). Thereby women’s care has been marked in a way that can be perceived as a burden, even today (Vogt 2002; Halldén 2007; Campell-Barr 2017).

Focus on the educator

A way to describe and explain what is happening when educators are perceived as giving children too much physical touching, is to highlight the educator as unprofessional and not setting boundaries. This can also be about inexperienced, perhaps young, educators who have not yet learned the ‘right’ approach.
When the preschool teachers stated that touching should be professional, they were drawing a line marking off the private hugging and cuddling that belongs at home with the family between parents and their children. According to the informants, however, this line was not obvious to all staff. They described co-workers who seemed unaware of this line separating professional from private touching. Those co-workers were described as being ‘without boundaries’ [gränslösa].

One preschool teacher said that physical touching between educators and children was very significant; it is a way of communicating. For that reason, it is so important for educators to have a professional approach. Other preschool teachers reasoned in a similar way. They explained that they have worked with co-workers who did not stay within professional limits. According to Mary, it might be that someone has personal feelings for a particular child which is expressed in an excessive way, but: ‘We are not their parents. We are here as staff,’ she said. Likewise, Mary described a co-worker who ‘cuddled a bit too much’ with some children. According to her, the co-worker over-stepped her professional role. She crossed a boundary and went over to a manner that was more private than professional. Others on the staff also reacted felt it was ‘too much’. Mary described how the co-worker acted:

Mary: There was a boundary line that she went over. She almost always had a child in her arms.

Interviewer: What do you think about that? Why did she do that?

Mary: She clearly longed for her own children. She had none of her own, I know.

Interviewer: Mm.

Mary: […] It got to be too much. It hindered her also because she sat out there with children in her arms for a while and she was not participating in the surrounding activity. If anyone was sitting it was her, and always with a child in her arms. It was also often the same children, a sibling pair. She crossed the professional boundary, into her own.

The link between care and mothering is explicit when Mary spoke about the former co-worker who often sat with a child on her lap. Mary interpreted this behaviour as about the co-worker’s personal longing to have children and be a mother herself. This underscored that the established feeling rules exclude expressions that are considered to lie too close to mothering and femininity (cf. Vogt 2002). Further, the co-worker described as someone ‘without boundaries’ was said to be occupied in a cuddling and snuggling that was about the co-worker’s own needs. According to this description the co-worker was not showing the emotional availability that is expected of an educator in preschool (Gill 2013).

The initiative and involvement do not always come from the educator when the boundary for appropriate touching is crossed. Anne talked about young inexperienced teachers: the children become fond of them and will not let go. When that happens, it can be hard for an inexperienced teacher to distance herself. In this case it is the children who initiate the touching, and the educator does not manage to say ‘stop’ before it goes too far. Anne said:

Anne: I know these young girls who come into this group, substitutes and so on. The children are very … they nearly trap them and can think they are sweet young girls,
and it’s like they fall in love. And then it can get a bit difficult. It can go too far. ‘I want to hold your hand!’ ‘And I want to hold your hand!’ and they hug. It can be a bit hard until you learn and can say, ‘Now it’s enough – it’s fine just like this.’

Focus on the children

The informants also described and explained what was happening when educators were seen to give too much physical touching by making an argument for the children. These discussions regard the educators’ actions as not being for the benefit of the children; the children were being limited or they were being treated differently.

The informants described educators who were too close to some preschoolers, often the very youngest children. The children did not get the opportunity to get to know either their peers or the rest of the staff; they were treated as more or less helpless, according to the informants. Since every child needs to get to know other children and adults in the preschool, excessive physical closeness can become a limitation that does not benefit the child. Elisabeth, a preschool head with much experience, talked about children who were hampered: ‘Unfortunately it becomes like closing the children in if you do too much with them’.

Another objection to when the children receive too much closeness and physical touching is when a teacher differentiates among the children, so that some favorite children get special treatment. Having favorites among the preschoolers and showing it openly is not very fair to the rest of the children who may wonder why they are not chosen. According to the informants, there are examples of teachers who are consistently occupied with a few chosen children.

Gunilla said that she had worked with a co-worker who ‘lavished’ one child with kisses and hugs. That was ‘not particularly professional’, she said. The co-worker became fond of a particular child, and instead of treating all the children the same, this one particular child received special treatment:

Gunilla: There I have experienced that it was like this, there were certain children. ‘Oh, it’s only he, he is so cute and what cute little cheeks he has!’ They are like they just want to eat the children up. But not all the children are met the same way. You mix in your own personal feelings for this particular child and then you treat the children differently.

The informants did not only talk about educators who overstepped the boundary for what is appropriate physical touching through giving the children too much touching. The opposite situation was also taken up: giving too little touching.

Too little touching

The majority of the informants’ statements about touching that was borderline for being normal, were about co-workers who had too much physical contact with children. Only with exception did the preschool teachers tell about a co-worker who touches the children notably little. The difference between ‘too much’ and ‘too little’ touching is analytically interesting, and we return to this in the concluding discussion. First, we present the two types of ‘too little’ touching that the informants
described. The two types are related in that, in both cases, the informants focused on the educator.

**Focus on the educator**

When the focus was on the educator, one variation was that the description addressed the educator’s uncertainty about, or fear of touching. In the other type of description, it was the educator’s personality; the educator was said to be ‘cold’ as a person.

John, who had just talked about a co-worker who was too physical and huggy toward the children, was asked if he had seen the opposite situation, namely, someone who had been too reserved with regard to closeness. He answered that he was like that when he was new to the profession. It was he himself who kept a distance from the children. His co-workers addressed this and advised him to be closer with the children and hug them more. John felt like he had been attacked when it happened, ‘because I am absolutely not cold,’ he said. But when he thought about it, he decided to take his co-workers’ advice as constructive criticism that he could use to develop in his work. He understood that he had to get closer to the children. So, in retrospect, he thought it was about uncertainty and fear. He was afraid of the physical contact with the children:

*Interviewer:* […] One can also react when a co-worker is maybe a little cold with the children. ‘Doesn’t that person see that there is a child who needs a hug?’ Have you seen that?

*John:* Yes, actually, I was like that when I started. I was so afraid of all the physical contact so I was perceived as cold.

*Interviewer:* OK.

*John:* And when you do not have that physical contact, you become unreachable for the children; the interaction between me and the children is not as good. So you have to work on that fear of physical contact.

*Interviewer:* Was there someone who pointed that out or was that something you noticed yourself?

*John:* There were co-workers who pointed out that ‘you are unreachable for the children; you are on a completely different level than they are. Go down to the children; hug the children more. Then they will listen more to you. They will be more interested, and you will be a human for them, not just someone high up there.’ And I took that in.

While in the quotation above, John described himself and explained that others perceived him as cold when instead it was about his uncertainty as a beginner and a fear of touching, Peter spoke about educators who were cold in their disposition; they neither gave nor received much closeness or physical contact. He talked about this as a personality-type that others cannot influence. He explained:

*Peter:* It is usually a matter of disposition. It is about very cold people in general; it is a personality orientation.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean? It is not possible to…

*Peter:* I see in my department, if I take it as an example. I have a co-worker; she never gets a kiss. I get at least kisses on the hand in any case. She does not get a hug and she does not show she wants one either. The children
obviously do not go to her in the same way; she is very cold as a person. You never get close to her when we sit and discuss and chat at breaks. She is really cold. It is a disposition thing.

Interviewer: And then is there anything you can try…?
Peter: No. You obviously cannot screw in a person’s brain unfortunately. They can only change themselves; I cannot change them.

In the quotation above, educators whose engagement provides too little physical touching are described as cold. It is said to be a matter of disposition. That someone is cold as a person sounds like a relatively static condition. That someone is a certain way as a person is based on a view that difficulties and problems lie with the individual, and people’s characteristics are assumed to be more or less unchangeable. This categoric perspective stands in contrast to a relational perspective where focus is on the interaction between the individual and the environment (Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001). At the same time, the quotation says that the cold educators can change themselves, implying that change is still possible. However, it is a change that the individual might achieve by herself. It is nothing that co-workers or the workplace can influence.

Discussion
In this study we have explored the ways in which preschool teachers describe and explain situations where educators give children too much or too little touching. As previously mentioned, the clear separations where arguments concerning the preschool mission, educators and children have been assigned to different themes, have been made for analytical purposes. In the informants’ reasoning, these matters were often intertwined. We should also note that we cannot determine how well the informants’ statements agree with how things actually happened in the situations described. While a more in-depth ethnographical account would have provided a more complex understanding of questions of touch, this has not been possible for us, nor was it our aim in this study. For us it was interesting instead to look more closely at how the informants chose to discuss too much or too little touching. Though the scale of our study was small, building only on the narratives of 30 informants, we believe that the results can provide a platform for further investigations and workplace discussions.

Below we interpret the results based on Hochschild’s (2012) reasoning about feeling rules and in relation to professionalisation discourses highlighted by several researchers (Berntsson 2006; Tellgren 2008; Campell-Barr 2017). Then we conclude with the implications of this study, discussed with regard to preschool teachers’ emotional labour.

Most of the situations that were described were about too much touching. The informants talked about actions that did not lie within the preschool mission, educators ‘without boundaries’ or experience, and a behaviour that brought disadvantages for children.

In the cases where the informants presented situations where the children were given too much touching and the focus was on the educator who did not keep within bounds, the presentation can be seen as an illustration of limitations in the emotional labour as described by Hochschild (2012). Whether the described educators really have these
shortcomings or not, we cannot assess from our material, but the statements made by the informants can be related to Hochschild’s concept. For teachers, emotional labour means adapting themselves to the applicable feeling rules by surface acting or deep acting, namely, holding back emotions, exaggerating, neutralising or changing them in some way for the purpose of obtaining a specific educational goal. Based on Hochschild’s reasoning, it may seem natural that inexperienced educators have not yet fully mastered the feeling rules valid for the work. On the other hand, the so-called educators without boundaries, such as they were portrayed, can be seen as examples of people who break the feeling rules or who do not know them though they should be aware of them. The informants described educators who, instead of regulating their own emotions, and for example, restraining their own longing for children and their own needs to give and receive closeness, allowed these emotions an outlet at work. In the informants’ statements, the preschool’s educational goals became overshadowed when the co-workers were not capable of regulating their own feelings.

Several researchers have found that the preschool has increasingly come under a professionalisation discourse in which care becomes obscured by an exaggerated focus on learning (Berntsson 2006; Halldén 2007). Given this context, it is possible to understand why many informants spoke about situations where educators gave children too much touching, while accounts of educators giving too little touching were sparse. When the professional preschool teacher was described as a person who had left the role of ‘a mother of society’ and instead taken on the role of academically-schooled educator focused on teaching, as is the case in Sweden (Tellgren 2008), co-workers perceived as remaining in an old-fashioned role may appear to be a burden for the profession’s status and professionalisation efforts.

Against this background (of the feeling rules and the professionalisation discourse described above), it can be understood why the majority of the informants’ accounts were about criticism of co-workers who are perceived as touching the children too much, rather than too little. However, as previous research has shown (Månsson 2000; Hellman 2010), physical contact such as hugs and endearment, are part of daily routines. And as the material shows, there are also exceptions where preschool teachers were criticised for being ‘emotionally cold’. In contrast to the situations where the teachers gave children too much touching, which in the informants’ accounts were explained with reference to different factors, the situations where the educator gave the children too little touching were only considered in relation to the educator. The preschool teacher, who described his own actions, said that he was new to the profession and therefore uncertain. Maybe he was not yet prepared for the balancing involved in the feeling rules: definitely do not touch too much, but also not too little. He illustrated a position where he had difficulty using the right strategies to adapt to the feeling rules. This preschool teacher emphasised that he was not a cold person; it was rather the situation that made him act insecurely and he was perceived as cold. It was also a behaviour that he could change. This can be interpreted as his being made aware of the problem: he understood the importance of showing emotions other than those the co-workers perceived as cold. This illustrates how the strategy surface acting can be put to use as a way to adapt oneself better to the working conditions. In another example, co-workers were described who applied too little touching, they were portrayed as having cold personalities and being more difficult to change.
As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) maintain, there may be curricula and guidelines for preschool teachers’ work, but the educators also create their own norms in determining their conduct. According to the informants’ descriptions, they see shortcomings with both educators who are perceived to give too much and too little physical closeness in balancing emotional availability, that is, the competence that early childhood educators are expected to exercise in their profession (cf. Tellgren 2008; Gill 2013). With Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist (2001) terminology, we can see this from a categorical perspective or a relational perspective. Viewing the behaviour from a categorical perspective, means the situation and the personal shortcomings are difficult to change. If instead the basis is a relational perspective, the behaviour can be understood based on a larger picture where the context and interaction with the environment are taken into account (Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001). The latter interpretation means that responsibility for change also involves co-workers. In order for preschool teachers to be able to develop their emotional labour, a relational perspective is required that refrains from stigmatising ‘character flaws’. Rather such a perspective should aim at making visible, discussing and also challenging the collectively established and often taken for granted, feeling rules of the preschool.

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