Pedagogues’ Constructions of Gender Equality in Selected Swedish Preschools: A qualitative study

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Abstract
This is a small-scale qualitative study of gender equality discourses as constructed and employed by pedagogues in three Swedish preschools. The aim of the study is to describe and analyse the preschool pedagogues’ constructions of work on children’s gender equality, while also examining local variations and the influence of societal discourses and structures on the more localised discourses used in the particular preschool settings. The goal is to highlight how the pedagogues, through statements and discussions in interviews and documents, construct and position themselves and the children in relation to different discourses and current norms. The study is based on interviews with nine pedagogues from three preschools and an analysis of documentation from these preschools. The pedagogues’ constructions of gender equality in interviews and documents mainly relate to preschool pedagogy, although there is also some consideration of the future labour market. The pedagogues position themselves as ‘lead characters’, and children as ‘recipients’ or as ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ who are to be treated either as unique individuals or as two uniform opposing groups. Gender-equal girls are positioned as strong(er), brave(r) and (more) independent, whilst gender-equal boys as (more) socially and linguistically competent. Although there are some differences between the preschools, in line with heteronormative masculinity the primary focus is on ‘redoing’ the girls, especially traditional ‘girly’ girls.

Keywords: Swedish preschool, gender equality, pedagogues, children, societal structures, discourses, norms

Introduction
The aim of the study is to describe and analyse preschool pedagogues’ constructions of work on children’s gender equality, while also examining local variations and the influence of societal discourses and structures on the more localised discourses used in the particular preschool settings. The goal is to highlight how the pedagogues†, through statements and discussions in interviews and documents, construct and position themselves and the children in relation to different discourses and current norms. The analysis is based on interviews with nine pedagogues from three Swedish preschools, plus supporting documentation.

Like the other Nordic countries, Sweden is often depicted as a global leader in gender equality. In recent decades, education has undergone dramatic changes. The

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†In the Swedish preschool context the term ‘pedagogue’ is used to refer both to preschool teachers and nursery assistants.

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global neoliberal trend that includes marketisation, decentralisation, deregulation and privatisation has increasingly affected the Nordic countries (Lundahl et al. 2013). More and more, education is viewed as a means to enhance global competition, and international comparisons of achievement and performativity have gained ground (Ball 2003). Traditionally considered to be strong Social Democratic welfare states with universal policies and extensive redistribution, in recent years the Nordic countries have moved closer to being liberal welfare states (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006). Indeed, preschools have increasingly been affected by neoliberal influences (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). The Swedish gender equality concept “jämställdhet”, which has been the official term since the 1970s, is strongly connected to the welfare state and to work within established political structures. The gender equality concept was developed to clarify equality within gender relations. It included women and men in the public as well as the private sphere. However, the main emphasis has been on improving women’s conditions in the labour market by making them more similar to men’s (Florin and Nilsson 2000). Although the focus has widened and currently concerns all political areas, attention to the labour market has been the dominant Swedish gender equality discourse over the years. Consequently, the official expansion of preschools has been one of the cornerstones of gender equality politics for women by increasing their opportunities to participate in the labour market. However, since the 1970s there have also been policies aimed at preschool pedagogues and children that mainly focus on increasing the similarities between girls and boys. The state’s focus on gender equality as a pedagogical concern has gained ground since the mid-1990s when preschool expansion was complete and matters relating to learning were brought to the fore (Edström 2005). In addition to focusing on greater similarities between girls and boys, which has also been a theme in wider education policy, perceived ‘gender neutrality’ has been emphasised in preschool policy. From the mid-1980s on a more “pluralistic gender code” (Vallberg Roth 1998) is apparent, although statements in the first national preschool curriculum (Skolverket 1998/2010a) concern treating girls and boys the same. This curriculum, in line with education more broadly, also emphasises the freedom and responsibility of independent, self-regulating and flexible individuals (Edström 2009). In addition, the importance of pedagogues in counteracting the “traditional” is underlined:

The ways in which adults respond to girls and boys, as well as the demands and expectations imposed on children contribute to their appreciation of gender differences. The preschool should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. Girls and boys in the preschool should have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interests without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles (Skolverket 1998/2010b, 4, my italics).

Although, as in the example above, education policy refers to both girls and boys there has overall been more emphasis on changing girls and their interests and
choices than on changing boys. This means that a theme, although much less visible in preschool policy than in policy relating to later schooling, has been to direct girls towards science and technology, areas historically dominated by men (Brunila and Edström 2013).

Preschool policy on gender equality, like education policy more widely, has chiefly concentrated on gender alone, with other issues rarely being discussed. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate a shift towards broadening the scope since gender is increasingly discussed as part of more general equal treatment. Issues concerning power relations and structures have also been somewhat absent in education policy in the past although recent developments have included some focus on these matters, as with the case in preschool policy (Edström 2010). Attention to matters concerning both intersections and power relations, for example, at the start of the 21st century when a possibly unprecedented state interest resulted in the establishment of a state delegation for gender equality in preschool (SOU 2006: 75). As a group consisting of a chair, nine delegates, three experts and three secretaries, this delegation was set up by the government and mainly worked during the period 2004–2006 to highlight, strengthen and develop gender equality in preschools. More specifically, the delegation’s work included, for example, investigating the status of gender equality in preschool teacher education and the distribution of funds to 39 gender equality projects. However, once the delegation had completed its work on gender equality, the subject once more faded into the background, although the current situation may be redressed by the strengthened state inspectorate (Edström 2012).

What about gender equality work in preschool practice? From an international, or Anglophone perspective, a plethora of “feminist pedagogies” is discussed within universities and in practice (Weiner 2006), although these are seemingly more visible in compulsory school than in preschool. Since the 1970s much practice-based gender equality work has been carried out in the Nordic countries; it has included both girls and boys but been primarily directed at girls (Brunila and Edström 2013). Again, more seems over the years to have been done in compulsory schools than in preschools although, from the 2000s onwards, there seems to have been an increase in activities in preschool. Probably the most well-known preschool practice-based gender equality work in a Nordic context involves the Icelandic Hjalli preschools. These are known for working with single-sex groups for most of the day. Although activities can be the same for both single-sex groups, the emphasis on what girls and boys ‘need’ to learn often varies since the ambition is to strengthen non-stereotypical interests and competencies (cf. Heikillä 2013).

Swedish gender equality work in preschools has been most notable since the mid-1990s when the Gävleborg preschools Björntomten and Tittmyran, influenced by Hjalli, began their renowned gender pedagogy that has received significant national media attention. Much of the focus in these two preschools, as in Swedish work more
widely, has been on increasing pedagogue awareness and changing the approach of pedagogues and the language directed at the children. Björntomten and Tittmyran have to some extent also worked in a compensatory manner to promote gender equality. This means they have built on the idea of dividing girls and boys into single-sex groups to counter perceived shortcomings by practising competencies that, they argue, regularly do not develop in co-educational contexts (Svaleryd 2003; Wahlström 2003). This may, for example, involve encouraging girls to be confident and speak out and boys to be more caring towards their peers. Both this compensatory strategy and a ‘gender neutrality’ strategy, where the aim is to treat girls and boys more ‘neutrally’ or similarly, seem to be commonly used in the gender equality work undertaken more widely in Swedish preschools. The last few years have also seen stronger attention to a more norm-critical perspective, adopting a broader stance than focusing on gender alone.

There is research concerning gender issues and gender equality work in Sweden as well as in the other Nordic countries (Lappalainen 2005; Askland and Rossholt 2009; Dyrfjord 2013; Kirk, Scott, Siemen and Wind 2010). Educational research relating to gender issues in the Swedish preschool has, on one hand, problematised the emphasis on the approach and language (rather than on children’s initiatives) of pedagogues in practical preschool gender equality work, and the preschools’ focus on girls and boys as homogeneous groups (Nordberg 2005; Tallberg Broman 2006; Dolk 2009; Edström 2010; Bodén 2011; Eidevald 2011; Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi 2011). On the other hand, research has been criticised for being more focused on theoretical matters than on practice (Clegg 2006; Weiner 2012). Thus, there seems to be a gap between theory and practice, although attempts have been made to bridge this (cf. Dolk 2009; Lenz Taguchi 2011).

This article provides further information about preschool pedagogues’ constructions of gender equality work with respect to the children, about local variations and about the influence of societal discourses and structures. The focus is on how pedagogues construct and position themselves and the children in relation to different discourses and current norms. The intention is to illustrate the complexities surrounding the gender equality work of pedagogues during a period when their work is, more than ever, in the spotlight.

The outline of the article is as follows: first the theoretical starting points, material and analysis are described. This is followed by the results, conclusions and a discussion.

Theoretical starting points

In this article, gender and gender equality are considered to be socially constructed: they are constantly being ‘done’ in continuous processes including power play. The gender concept is denied essential, universalising and unitary categories. Instead,
categories relating to gender, sexuality, social background and ethnicity, for example, are considered to be socially constructed, intersecting and fluid (de los Reyes, Molina and Mulinari 2003). The preschool pedagogues’ statements, reasoning and discussions in interviews and documents and the concepts and categories they use (and do not use) are seen as constructions including problem representations or diagnoses (Bacchi 2009). Their explicit or implicit diagnoses of the perceived gender equality problems are seen as being influenced by discourses, by specific meaning-making ways of talking about and understanding gender equality in preschool, including underlying delimitations.

My study focuses on the constructions, diagnoses and discourses in three preschools which are understood as gender regimes (Connell 2002); these represent delimited parts of the local system in which the relationship between the genders may coincide with the heteronormative gender order but where there may also be space for local variation. Gender order refers to the historically constructed pattern of gender relations at a societal level, where the group ‘women’ is generally subordinated to the group ‘men’, although there are also hierarchies and variations amongst groups of men and of women, as well as intersections between the two. A starting point is that pedagogues explicitly and implicitly construct their gender equality work in preschool and position (Davies and Harré 1990) themselves and the children in relation to available discourses and subject positions in their respective gender regimes. The discourses and subject positions may vary but are influenced by wider societal discourses and structures. Pedagogues are seen as the bearers of knowledge produced by discourses, but also as being capable of (some) choice. By drawing on different discourses and choosing different available subject positions in the three preschool gender regimes, different explicit or implicit diagnoses of the perceived gender equality ‘problems’ that ‘need’ to be solved are constructed (Bacchi 2009).

Analysis of the interplay between local variations and the influence of broader societal discourses and structures could include scrutinising the extent to which discourses coincide or compete (Bacchi 2009) as well as exploring “areas of silence” relating to what may be considered “missing” areas (Öhrn and Weiner 2009) from the perspective described above. Drawing on such theoretical reasoning, the analysis involves scrutinising the range of constructions of the preschool gender equality work with respect to the children and the impact of wider societal discourses, especially the impact of the dominant Swedish gender equality discourse in which gender equality has been primarily understood as a labour market issue. It also includes exploring the focus on variations and hierarchies (Connell 2002) within groups of girls and groups of boys, along with a consideration of the intersections (de los Reyes, Molina and Mulinari 2003) between gender and other socially constructed categories. In addition, I examine the extent to which the children are positioned as
active constructors in gender equality work, in line with educational research relating to gender (Davies 2003; Lenz Taguchi 2011) and theories of the sociology of childhood (Halldén 2007). Finally, analysing the influence of wider societal structures involves exploring the extent to which the constructions, based on the current heteronormative gender order, mainly concern changing the girls. Heteronormativity is seen as performative, as a repetition that achieves its effects through naturalisation in the context of bodies and culturally accepted norms (Butler 1997). The division into two heterosexual genders in the heteronormative gender order leads to notions about fundamental differences between girls and boys, women and men, where characteristics labelled as masculine are considered the most valuable (Brunila, Heikkinen and Hynninen 2005).

In this article heteronormative gender order is, in short, understood as a wider societal pattern, a structure to some extent influencing the pedagogues’ constructions. This structure includes heteronormativity, an understanding that what is labelled heterosexual and masculine is considered a ‘natural’ norm and the most valuable. In this article, the ideal in the heteronormative gender order is referred to as heteronormative masculinity.

**Material and analysis**

To deepen the understanding of gender equality issues in preschools, in particular with respect to local variations and the influence of societal discourses and structures, reworked material from my doctoral study (Edström 2010) is used. The material consists of semi-structured interviews with nine pedagogues from three work teams at three preschools – herein referred to as Central, North and South – plus complementary material in the form of documentation from the preschools. Although all Swedish preschools are obliged to promote gender equality, the extent to which this is actually done probably varies between settings. Since gender equality does not seem to be widely prioritised (SOU 2006: 75) it is not certain that preschools in general would have much to say on this matter. Therefore, three preschools that, at least during periods, had worked more actively with these matters were selected for the study. This may be described as a purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007) to catch a phenomenon assumed to be found on a limited scale.

The preschools share the same political, administrative and organisational contexts since they are situated in the same municipality, governed by the Social Democratic party, in middle-class areas and all, between 2004 and 2006, participated in the same gender equality project. A bigger proportion of children at Central have parents born outside Sweden compared to the other two preschools. Although the study is broadly influenced by an intersectional understanding of gender and the matter is addressed in the results, social background and ethnicity were not variables in the selection of preschools. Since this is a small-scale
qualitative study the results are not generalisable. They are instead to be considered examples of gender equality work in preschools that, at least during periods, have been more active. That the three preschools in the study share some contextual conditions made it especially interesting to scrutinise the similarities and differences between them.

All respondents, eight women and one man, have ten years or more experience of working in preschool. Both preschool pedagogues and nursery assistants were interviewed but, since there were no discernible patterns related to educational background, the term “pedagogue” is used hereafter to refer to all of them in the results. The team at Central works with children aged between one and three years. The North team works with one- to five-year-olds and the South team works in a department for three- to five-year-olds. For this article, I used material from the interviews’ and documents, in particular answers to interview questions concerning areas of influence in this work, thoughts and goals associated with the gender equality work, methods and material, and support from children and parents. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes and were carried out during the daytime at the preschools; they were subsequently transcribed. While the interviews constitute the richest material, teaching documents have been used as a complement. The documents studied were selected by the pedagogues and comprise an action plan for and evaluation of the gender equality work (Central and North) and a written presentation of one preschool’s gender equality work (South).

I have not differentiated between interviews and documents in my analysis of the material. The pedagogues’ statements and discussions in interviews as well as in documents have, in line with the theoretical starting points, been understood as constructions including diagnoses of perceived gender equality ‘problems’ (Bacchi 2009) and these diagnoses have been seen as being influenced by discourses. The transcripts and documents were read numerous times with attention paid to identifying discourses and the extent to which they coincide or contrast both between and within the three preschools. Drawing on the gender perspective, special attention in the analysis was placed on what may be considered visible or missing areas (Öhrn and Weiner 2009). This means that emphasis was placed on scrutinising the range of the constructions of the preschool gender equality work, the (in)visibility of variations, hierarchies and intersections and, finally, the (in)visibility of the heteronormative gender order.

I begin the results by presenting the range of constructions that I identified from the gender equality work with children; in this section, the impact of the dominant Swedish gender equality discourse is highlighted. Thereafter, I present constructions of ideal ‘gender-equal’ children in the three preschool gender regimes and the focus, or lack thereof, on variations and hierarchies. This includes an analysis of the influence of societal structures and heteronormative gender order. Next, I discuss gender equality methods and whether intersections are visible. The article ends with
conclusions and a discussion, with the latter focusing on the gap between practice and theory in relation to current curriculum and policy developments.

The gender equality work in the three preschools

The range of constructions of gender equality work for children

In general, the three work teams delimit the range of their constructions of gender equality work for the children as mainly concerning the situation within the preschool, mostly the indoor environment. In short, the pedagogues’ reasoning about their gender equality work concentrates on their own approach and language in relation to methods used indoors to promote more gender equality between girls and boys. To be more specific, some (not all) everyday preschool indoor activities, namely greeting the children in the hallway, dressing and undressing in the hallway, lunchtime situations and ‘free play’, are especially highlighted during the pedagogues’ discussions that centre around their own approach and use of language before the gender equality work began compared to the situation after this work was initiated. Below is one example where Stina at South explains how the pedagogues, at the beginning of their gender equality work, changed their approach towards the children when greeting them in the hallway by paying less attention to clothes and looks and more to children as individuals and the (positive) effects this had on their gender patterns.

Exactly this (approach) that one should think how. How do I really approach the children above all? What is it I pay attention to with the child? Is it the nice sweater Lisa wears or the cool sweater Peter wears or what? Well, then one instead tries to see the person instead of the clothes. And we have noticed a big difference because it was rather usual then before (the gender equality work began). We became aware that they came in, the girls, and showed their pink dresses with glitter and ‘Oh, how lovely you are’ (in a soft voice). So it spread like wildfire among the girls here. That they began dressing up all of them really. And there is really nothing wrong in that, however. And then when the boy came ‘OH’ (in a bass voice) with his Spiderman sweater or something ‘WOW, HOW COOL’. (...) This we have, at least we think so, toned down. And it is visible too. None of the children mention that they have nice clothes or anything (Stina, South, my additions and emphases).

In addition to emphasis on the pedagogues’ approach and language, especially in certain indoor activities, issues concerning single-sex groupings and gender-stereotyped toys are also touched upon in all settings. (This is illustrated in more detail in Table I). There seems to be a notion that it is especially important to promote gender equality for the children indoors and, in particular, during certain indoor activities, namely those described above. In contrast, the outdoor environment is almost absent from all discussions. Since the range of constructions primarily concerns pedagogical matters indoors it is situated within the borders of a pedagogical preschool discourse. However, there is a clear difference, partly related
to competing discourses, between the preschools with respect to the extent to which the pedagogues consider their gender equality work to be a wider societal issue. The Central pedagogues stressed most clearly that gender equality in preschool not only concerns preschool but is also part of a broader societal ‘problem’. They consider that (all) girls and (all) women generally have less space than boys and men within education and the labour market. Here, a much wider delimitation of the gender equality work for the preschool children is discernible since an ideological societal group discourse, mainly addressing the public sphere, where men traditionally have constituted the majority, is brought forward. Though most clearly visible at Central, this reasoning is also touched upon in the other two preschools. This diagnosis of gender equality as a future labour market ‘problem’ is in line with the dominant Swedish gender equality discourse, namely that it is mainly a labour market issue. The attention to gender equality in the future private sphere, in contrast, receives little attention so it could be described as an almost missing area. In all three preschools, the reasoning mostly concerns their positive influence on the future public sphere rather than a two-way interaction. However, at Central society’s influence on preschool is also part of the discussions:

We became very attentive there for a while. One discovered in society overall. One heard on the radio and on TV and then sort of remembered. This is the way it is. Well, approximately how much space do girls or women have in society if you do not counteract it? Do women get one-third of the attention compared to what men get, or space in media, in newspapers? (Cecilia, Central)

The reasoning in the above excerpt, especially about emancipating girls as a group, seems to be in line with 1970s’ second-wave feminist arguments about unequal hierarchical societal structures affecting women and men differently; the Central pedagogues also mention this as having influenced their work. Since the beginning of the 1990s, references to hierarchical societal structures and gender order have become part of Swedish gender equality politics (Edström 2005). The Central preschool gender regime differs from the two other preschools in the sense that these pedagogues explicitly embrace feminism. They mention that they have been influenced by feminist ideas since the 1970s and have discussed these issues a lot during their gender equality work. It is also clear, both from their explicit (such as in the above excerpt) and implicit reasoning that they, in the light of current societal structures, consider it to be a major issue that girls ‘need’ to be allowed to occupy more space.

Other sources of influence on the three preschools’ gender equality work are also mentioned. The project that all three preschools participated in between 2004 and 2006, particularly reading the books written by the two Gävleborg pedagogues Svaleryd (2003) and Wahlström (2003) and listening to lectures by these two authors, are unanimously described by the pedagogues as key sources of inspiration.
The influence of these books is also discernible during the interviews, partly in how the pedagogues reason about girls and boys, largely as two homogeneous groups, but most of all in the selection of methods. Moreover, personal experiences, such as having girls of their own, are described by individuals as being important for their current commitment; indeed, during the interviews a number of personal examples are brought forward. It is argued that parents of girls tend to have more experience of their own children being treated unfairly based on gender and, therefore, they are more enthusiastic about gender equality work professionally. Still, no clear pattern is discernible in the interviews. At South, the support of the work team in particular is highlighted as the most important source of influence for beginning and continuing the gender equality work. The South pedagogues also, although they do not fully agree on the future direction of the gender equality work in their preschool, seem to value greatly that there is agreement within the team about continuing with the work. This support is described as especially important in the light of the lack of parental interest.

In contrast to these explicit sources of influence, almost nothing is mentioned in the interviews about the influence of pedagogues pre-service or in-service education or about research. Since these are missing areas in the pedagogues’ discussions, they seem to have had little or no influence on the gender equality work of the three preschools. Thus, the gap between practice and theory is clear in this study.

**Constructions of ‘gender-equal’ children**

In all preschools many gender equality discussions by pedagogues revolve around their own approach and the more (or less) gender-equal children. Overall, the pedagogues, in line with socialisation and gender role theories (Nordberg 2005), position themselves as the ‘lead characters’ in gender equality work. They are positioned both as mainly responsible for previous gender inequalities, for having treated girls and boys differently, and for the current improvements in the situation. This diagnosis of the responsibility for the gender equality ‘problem’ is clear throughout all the material examined and is in line with findings presented in earlier research (cf. Eidevald 2011; Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi 2011). The children are positioned as being in the background, as ‘recipients’.

In all three preschools, underlying assumptions are discernible both about children as *individuals* and as *groups*. There seem to be partially competing discourses concerning whether children should primarily be considered as individuals, members of groups or possibly both. The emphasis on children as individuals is apparent in statements by all pedagogues at the three preschools through their quite unequivocal contentions that, before they began working with gender equality, they thought they treated the children simply as individuals, when in fact they had treated them differently according to their gender. Thus, an explicitly constructed ‘problem’ diagnosis in all three preschool gender regimes is that the pedagogues
treated the children differently based on gender and thus girls and boys became different. The differences are clearly considered problematic and an understanding of gender as (partly or wholly) socially influenced is discernible. One line of reasoning in the solutions they propose is simply to cease making these distinctions and to instead really see and treat children as individuals. This solution contains an underlying assumption, a discourse about the desirability of considering individuals. This individual discourse seems to be related to the traditionally strong hold of developmental psychology in Swedish preschool pedagogy, which emphasises an individual, standardised and decontextualised child (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001). In some constructions it is undoubtedly, as illustrated in the excerpt below, seen as desirable that preschool children are chiefly treated as individuals, irrespective of everything else:

I think everyone (within the work team) has the same basic view anyway … The needs of the individual child. Not if it is a girl or a boy (Nina, North).

At the same time as this individual discourse, which seems to suggest there is some kind of perceived ‘gender neutrality’, there is also a focus on girls and boys as groups. Although the pedagogues in all gender regimes explicitly acknowledge the importance of not ‘creating any differences’ and instead seeing the children as individuals, the main part of the discussions actually concerns ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ without mentioning any variations within these groups. This dualism is apparent throughout the material and is, in fact, more clearly discernible overall than any focus on children as individuals, although it is more implicit. The attention on the two groups seems in line with the wider dominant Swedish gender equality discourse.

Below, the constructions of girls and boys as groups, and differences between the three preschool gender regimes are described. Overall, there is an almost even-handed emphasis on girls and boys, but only almost. The constructions of the girls are clearer and more extensive. As mentioned previously, Central has the clearest focus on emancipating girls. In all three preschools, the children are constructed as two uniform, oppositional groups; this is in line with gender role theories. Irrespective of whether gender is mainly considered to be socially influenced, these constructions seem based on such deeply embedded assumptions about the differences between girls and boys that essentialism is clear (cf. Nordberg 2005). The gender-equal girls, as illustrated in the two excerpts below, are depicted as strong(er), brave(r), and (more) independent (than usually seen), and as girls who ‘occupy space’ both verbally and in physical activities. The first example is from a discussion about the outcomes of South’s equality work:

And the girls have also possibly become a little bit more independent. Well, dare to try a little bit more (Sara, South).
The second example is from a discussion about the direction of Central’s future gender equality work:

To challenge girls to be a bit braver, challenge them to do dangerous things. Let them do something a little bit dangerous (Cecilia, Central).

These constructions of the gender-equal girls seem to be largely in line with Nordic (Öhrn 2002) and Anglophone (Ringrose 2007) discussions about the ‘new girl’ who actively ‘takes space’ and makes her voice heard. They are also relatively similar to the tomboy construct and seem to be in line with heteronormative masculinity, a standard of helping oneself, which is sometimes found in preschool (Nordberg 2005) and in later schooling (Öhrn 2002; Lahelma and Öhrn 2003). The overall constructions of the gender-equal boys concern (more) socially and linguistically competent boys, but these arguments are less well developed by the pedagogues.

Although girls and boys in the three settings are primarily positioned as two uniform, oppositional groups, there are local differences between the preschools’ gender regimes regarding variations within the groups. The reasoning at Central and North about gender patterns in their own settings includes examples of variations within the groups of girls and boys and divergences compared to more general patterns (Öhrn 2002). The Central pedagogues, for example, point out that they have had ‘some girls’ (not all girls) who have been good at ‘taking space’ and boys who have been good at ‘expressing themselves’. Similarly, the North pedagogues argue that they had a ‘strong girl group’ (not all girls but the four-year-olds) who ‘needed’ to practice ‘listening to their peers and waiting for their turn’. This construction indicates that there are boundaries with respect to the gender-equal girls relating to how much and what kind of space they are permitted to take before it is considered problematic and not in line with current norms. This finding is in line with earlier studies (Arnesen 2003; Eidevald 2009; Lenz Taguchi 2011). Some members of the boys’ group (not all boys) at North are considered in ‘need’ of practice in taking space, as illustrated by this quote:

Our aim with this (dividing children into single-sex groupings) was that the boys would get the opportunity to practice being seen and heard and to practice social competence (North documentation).

That some boys ‘need’ increased social competence, as mentioned in the above excerpt, is a common theme in gender equality discussions as is language improvement (Hellman 2008; Francis and Skelton 2005), which is also mentioned at North. These themes have been accentuated by what has been referred to as the “boys’ underachievement crisis” (Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn 2008; Brunila and Edström 2013). Still, since the North pedagogues also argue that some boys in their
department ‘need’ to practise “being seen and heard”, which is what girls have often been considered to be in ‘need’ of, their constructions of the situation in their own gender regime are quite complex. In contrast, practically nothing is mentioned at South about variations within their groups of girls and boys. The gender patterns at the three preschools are described so differently it seems clear that three different gender regimes are in play. Since unique individuals, homogeneous oppositional groups and, in two settings, variations within groups are highlighted it is overall unclear exactly what is considered desirable instead, although differences are considered problematic. Whether children are mainly to be considered individuals or groups, or both, seem unresolved. Throughout the material there also seems to be a tension concerning how similar these individuals or groups should become.

What, then, can be said about hierarchies, societal structures and heteronormative gender order? One pedagogue from each preschool, although briefly, touches upon the idea that it may be considered more acceptable to work with gender equality for the girls than for the boys and, in an example given by one pedagogue at North, ‘homophobia’ is suggested as an explanation of why the latter may be more difficult. These discussions that, in my interpretation, concern heteronormativity were either taken up spontaneously during the interviews or as answers to interview questions concerning support and reactions from parents. The most extensive discussion concerning this matter was at Central where at the beginning of their gender equality work the pedagogues consciously avoided the following terms: “feminism”, “gender” and “gender equality”. Instead, they choose to tell parents that they would scrutinise ‘their own approach towards girls and boys’. These formulations were, as illustrated in the excerpt below, chosen by the pedagogues in order to steer clear of discussions with parents about changing their boys into girls:

We chose these formulations (...). And it was precisely because we did not want to scare anybody away by talking about gender and then they would think that (...): ‘Well, now group 8 (an influential Swedish feminist network during the 1970s) is on the march again’. Yes well, you understand, now they will begin. Now they will become militant the aunties here in preschool (laughter). Yes, we wanted to avoid such matters so that one never would end up in that debate, about redoing boys into girls because that is most often, this we have seen, this is most often what one maybe is afraid of (Cecilia, Central, my additions and emphases).

My interpretation is that, when carefully selecting certain terms (and not others) in their communication with parents, the pedagogues at Central consciously take precautions and position themselves and the gender equality work in line with the limits set by the heteronormative gender order to pose no threat to the limits they think would be acceptable to the parents of boys.

While hierarchies and norms are briefly touched upon in all preschool settings, there is a subtle distinction between counteracting the perception that girls are
allowed less space and trying to ‘reconstruct’ them according to heteronormative masculine expectations. To some extent, the pedagogues fall into this trap. The gender-equal girls are, consistent with heteronormative masculinity, constructed as tomboys and it is also quite clear how these girls should not be. Perceived undesirable shortcomings among girls with respect to passivity and caution are visible in all preschools. All of the preschools had more extensive discussions about girls’ clothing than about boys’ clothing and these include examples where dresses and skirts are considered too traditionally ‘girly’. The colour pink, a traditionally “girly” coded marker (Hellman 2010), is in some of the pedagogues’ interviews constructed as a symbol of gender inequality. This is exemplified below where a pedagogue discusses the lack of parental support for the gender equality work:

One does not have the support (for the gender equality work) from the parents somehow. Like (…) the other day there were ten girls outdoors and every one of them was dressed in pink (Sandra, South, my emphasis).

Although some possible shortcomings among boys are mentioned, they are largely framed in terms of a ‘need’ to talk a little less or more and, at North, to take a little more space. The pedagogues do not extend their discussions about what they consider ‘needs’ to be counteracted with the boys as much as when they discuss the girls. The boundaries for the acceptable, normal positions of gender-equal boys in the three preschools seem relatively narrow and it is clear from the material that they are not ‘girly’ boys. Instead, the gender-equal boys are basically boys who talk a little less or more and, according to the interviews at North, take a little more space. All in all, there are distinct indications that the pedagogues aim to change boys too, but less than girls. That girls ‘need’ to be changed more is in line with the dominant gender equality discourse in which more attention has been placed on changing girls and women than changing boys and men (Brunila and Edström 2013). Heteronormative masculinity seems, albeit relatively subtly, to be prevalent.

**The concrete methods: more than copying influential books?**

There are, overall, quite striking similarities between the three preschools’ choices of methods; these seem strongly influenced by the gender equality work at the Björntomten and Tittmyran preschools, methods also frequently used in gender equality work in other Swedish preschools. In all the settings, compensatory and gender neutralising methods are mixed (see Table I); as further developed in the section below, this may be considered theoretically contradictory (cf. Edström 2010; Eidevald 2011; Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi 2011).
Table I. Overview of the three preschools’ gender equalising methods

| Pedagogues’ Constructions of Gender Equality in Selected Swedish Preschools |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Table I. Overview of the three preschools’ gender equalising methods**³ |
| **Compensatory methods** | **Gender neutrality/similarity methods** |
| Changed pedagogue language | All preschools mention using words traditionally associated with girls to address boys and vice versa, for example emphasising when girls are ‘brave’ and boys are ‘helpful’. | All preschools mention using the same words and voice with girls and boys, especially when greeting them in the hall. |
| Inventories and changing toys, material, environment | All preschools have made inventories of items in the indoor environment. Central considered that its setting was already ‘gender neutral’. North and South have replaced toys and refurnished. No outdoor inventories. |  |
| Activities, free play | All preschools encourage girls and boys to practise different non-traditional activities to counteract perceived shortcomings. | All preschools encourage supporting all children to be allowed to play with everything and do the same things. |
| Observations of pedagogues’ approaches to girls and boys followed by single-sex groupings | All preschools have undertaken observations during meals. Central and North have also made observations in the hall. Single-sex groupings during meals have been implemented or are planned in all settings to compensate for different perceived shortcomings. |  |
| Changing literature, songs and rhymes | Central and North mention increasing the proportion of non-traditional girl lead characters that are ‘strong’ and ‘brave’ by changing books and changing gender in books. | Central and North mention increasing the proportion of girl lead characters by changing books and changing gender in books. |
| Pedagogue demands, acceptance and space | All preschools mention supporting girls and boys in countering their respective perceived shortcomings. | All preschools mention placing the same demands on children irrespective of gender, for example, when dressing themselves. At Central, methods have included preventing girls from having their reading space ‘invaded’ by boys. |

Of the compensatory methods shown in Table I, the issues that appear to be in play are: underlying assumptions, discourses about girls and boys as uniform groups, and the perception of essentially different oppositional groups. Consequently, one main
point that is highlighted is the ‘need’ to ‘repair’ the ‘shortcomings’ that all girls and all boys are expected to have. The clearest feature in the discussions of methods is, as also noted in the curriculum (Skolverket 1998/2010a), ‘counteracting the traditional’ by compensating and doing things differently. Here, the assumption seems to be that girls and boys have acquired different gendered characteristics: that all of them have become (essentially) different and ‘need’ to be ‘regendered’. At Central, in partial contrast to the other two preschools, the focus is not only on compensating but also on emancipating girls and redressing the spatial imbalance that they, as a group, are subject to in both preschool and society. This approach resonates with a societal group discourse. As illustrated in Table I, justifying the methods used involves reference to neutralising gender, for example, by replacing toys that are considered to be stereotyped, especially ‘dolls and cars’, with other more ‘neutral’ play material. There are also methods that involve treating girls and boys similarly, for example by greeting all children arriving at the preschool in exactly the same manner. Here, the assumption also seems to be that girls and boys, as separate groups, have been treated differently and, therefore, become (essentially) different. However, there does appear to be a notion that ‘degendering’ is desirable. As mentioned previously, a focus on perceived ‘gender neutrality’ is again discernible.

In all three preschools there is a clear discrepancy between the pedagogues’ more nuanced constructions about what they want to achieve and the less nuanced selection of methods. In all settings, underlying assumptions about children both as individuals and as groups are discernible and, at Central and North, discussions about variations within groups are also mentioned. Still, the methods generally seem to leave little or no room for individuals, variations within groups or intersections other than in the form of ‘exceptions’. One possible deviation from standard strategies and methods is that the Central pedagogues mention that, since they work with one- to three-year-olds, they have tried to integrate gender equality into the everyday activities and routines. Although this preschool’s choice of methods may differ slightly, the main finding is nevertheless that overall the methods employed vary little and there is little discussion of these in relation to the individual preschool setting.

The (in)visibility of intersections

In general, references to social background and ethnicity are missing from all of the discussions about gender equality in the three preschools. This may be related to the general discourse on gender equality which, since the concept was conceived in the 1970s, has been treated as an issue largely focused on gender relations (Florin and Nilsson 2000). Intersections between gender and age are, explicitly and implicitly, illuminated in the material from all preschools but especially at North. The North pedagogues argue that the individual, different groups of girls and of boys and variations in patterns depending on situations, space and age, maturity or developmental level (especially language level) ‘need’ to be taken into consideration in
gender equality work. This may be interpreted as an intersection between gender and age that is influenced by developmental psychology (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001). That these pedagogues provide the most nuanced picture, albeit not visible in their actual methods, is perhaps connected to their numerous observations and the fact that the children in their care have a wide age span ranging from one- to five-year-olds.

All of the preschools’ gender equality work is constructed as being something the pedagogues transfer to the ‘recipient’ children. A hierarchical relationship (Hallde ´n 2007) that appears to be connected to age and generation is constructed. It is barely mentioned that children can be considered to be active gender constructors, as illustrated in recent research (Davies 2003; Askland and Rossholt 2009; Dolk 2009; Eidevald 2009; Hellman 2010; Lenz Taguchi 2011). The importance of peer cultures is not mentioned at all in the interviews and documentation. These are two clearly missing areas. There are few examples of children’s reactions to gender equality work. The issue was not mentioned spontaneously during the interviews and information was only elicited from direct, targeted questions and follow-up questions. The pedagogues, irrespective of which age groups they work with, consider the children in their own department to be still relatively ‘unaware’ and ‘innocent’, a discernible pattern also reported in earlier research (Robinson and Diaz 2006). Children’s gender awareness and stereotyping are represented as things that ‘begin’ or ‘increase’ as children grow older, a point which the children in the preschool were considered not to have reached. The work team at South also notes that the pedagogues choose ‘not to make a big deal’ of this work, for example that toys had been removed, but they did not mention the gender equality issue to the children. They consider that the children learn anyway, ‘although they perhaps are not aware of it’. None of the work teams indicate they have thought about involving the children more in the shaping of the gender equality work, even though, as noted in earlier research, this may be connected to issues concerning influence and participation (Askland and Rossholt 2009). Thus, the pedagogues’ constructions indicate that children’s awareness and influence seem to be in the background rather than at the core of the gender equality work.

Conclusions and discussion

The discussions with the staff from the three preschools revealed a number of different, even contradictory, discourses relating to gender equality work for the children, but generally focused on the indoor environment and pedagogical issues. In brief, the tensions identified revolve around different discourses, underlying and sometimes interlinked assumptions about the extent to which the gender equality work mainly concerns:

- Preschool only/preschool and the wider society
- Children as individuals/oppositional groups/groups with variations
- Providing space for individuals/increasing similarities for groups
A pedagogical preschool discourse is discernible in the examined material. At the Central preschool in particular, the staff emphasised that their gender equality work focuses on addressing the perceived fact that girls, as a group, have less influence not only in preschool but also in wider society, including in education and in the labour market. Here, an ideologically influenced societal group discourse is discernible; this is in line with the dominant discourse in Swedish gender equality policy which concentrates on the labour market. Thus, the range of the constructions of the gender equality work varies. Although the interviews revealed a focus on the situation in the specific preschools, there seems to be a tension, partly because of the competing discourses, regarding the extent to which the gender equality work undertaken should be considered a wider societal issue.

One overall conclusion is that, throughout the material, there are competing discourses concerning whether ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ should primarily be considered as individuals or as groups, or possibly as both, in the gender equality work. The explicit discussions about gender equality ‘problems’ largely concern the importance of considering children as individuals and, especially at Central, of emancipating girls as a group. All in all, however, treating girls and boys as separate, identifiable groups has the greatest impact on the pedagogues’ constructions. When reasoning generally about gender equality for the children, as well as when discussing methods to ensure gender equality, the pedagogues consider the two groups – girls and boys – to be uniform opposites whose perceived shortcomings ‘need’ to be addressed. Although girls and boys are largely considered to represent opposites, the pedagogues’ descriptions of gender patterns in the three preschools’ gender regimes are clearly different. At Central and North, the discussions include examples of differences within the girl groups and within the boy groups and of divergences from more general gender patterns (Öhrn 2002). No such examples are brought forward by the pedagogues at South. The similarities in the methods used in the three preschools, the absence of discussions about methods in relation to the situations in their own settings and the discrepancy between the more nuanced thinking about what the pedagogues want to achieve compared to the actual methods employed are, all in all, quite striking. This raises questions about the choice of method.

The extent to which the pedagogues’ constructions of their gender equality work are connected to social structures and heteronormative gender order is a complicated issue. In addition to discussing preschools, it is mainly the future public sphere, education and labour market where men have traditionally constituted the majority, and not the private sphere, which are illuminated. The pedagogues’ constructions revolve slightly more around ‘redoing’ the girls: dresses, skirts and the colour pink are
considered, for example, to be too traditionally ‘girly’. Although hierarchies and current norms are briefly touched upon, the pedagogues consider the boys to be in ‘need’ of smaller changes. The work on gender equality undertaken in the preschools appears to be subtly framed by heteronormative masculinity within society. One conclusion is that there seems to be little, if any, room for traditional ‘girly’ girls in gender equality work.

Overall, little is mentioned in the preschools about social background and ethnicity; this suggests that these issues are made invisible in the gender equality work undertaken by the interviewees. North distinguishes itself from the two other preschools in the sense that intersections between gender and age are more clearly illuminated. The importance of gender, age and generation is visible in all preschools in terms of the pedagogues being positioned as the ‘lead characters’ responsible for ensuring gender equality in the children. In this scenario, the children are primarily positioned and treated as ‘recipients’ of gender equality work. The pedagogues believe that gender awareness and stereotypes are established or increase at a later point, when the children are older. This finding raises questions about children’s awareness of and influence on the work. One conclusion is that, even though taking space is a valued characteristic in the pedagogues’ constructions of the gender-equal children, there seems to be little space for these matters in the gender equality work that is being undertaken. It seems clear that this work is for rather than with the children.

The results raise many questions. One of these concerns the influence of the labour market, which has been the dominant Swedish gender equality discourse over the years. The interviews reveal some focus on this matter, especially on preschools’ positive influence on future education and the labour market. The attention on girls and boys as two groups, including the main emphasis on changing the former group, also appears to be in line with the dominant labour market discourse where the core focus has been on making women’s working conditions more similar to those of men. However, since gender equality in the interviews overall is generally constructed as a pedagogical concern and there are few signs of a clear labour market influence on the actual work carried out with the children, the impact of this discourse seems quite limited. A labour market influence is discernible but overall it is more in the background than at the fore. Still, although mainly in the background, this influence is noteworthy since it is ten years until the oldest preschool children will leave compulsory school, which in turn is usually followed by upper secondary school and possibly also by university studies before entering the labour market.

A second question concerns how preschool, as noted in the curriculum (Skolverket 1998/2010a), can work to counteract traditional patterns and roles. There seems to be a clear risk that, as in the three preschools in the study, this leads to attempts to ‘redo’ the girls, especially those who are traditionally ‘girly’, in order to force them to conform to a more heteronormative masculine ideal. Girls taking up
traditionally ‘girly’ positions seem to symbolise failure and gender inequality. Boys taking up these positions more than very temporarily would not conform to current norms since the perception of gender-equal boys is not that they are ‘girly’ and definitely not traditionally ‘girly’ – a position that appears to be generally considered unacceptable. One might ask: Are the curriculum formulations perhaps somewhat unfortunately written if interpreted literally? Rather than ‘counteracting’ perceived shortcomings, thus placing much attention on what the children do not do, it seems more constructive to concentrate on promoting plurality. Perhaps it would make a difference if, as suggested by Eidevald (2011), the formulation was instead that preschool “should promote many ways of being” (177) or “doing” gender. Although structural injustices cannot be deconstructed away (Connell, 2004) by changing formulations, encouraging diversity seems to offer additional space for traditionally ‘girly’ positions.

A third question concerns the choice of method. Competing discourses manifested as different underlying assumptions about gender equality in general and in relation to children in particular are visible throughout the results. These different, even contradictory, discourses may be understood in the light of countervailing social and cultural injunctions regarding gendered subject positions. It seems that the preschools in this study have taken the responsibility for preschool gender equality assignment seriously and, as the results illustrate, this involves lots of manoeuvring and positioning for pedagogues. Still, the description of what these pedagogues want to achieve, especially at North, is more nuanced than the methods applied. Since there are no questions or concerns about them, the current methods seem almost to be considered the single legitimate way (Foucault 1980) of ‘doing’ gender equality in preschool, even though there are hardly any blueprints (Weiner 2006). The uniformity in the selection of methods in these and other preschools is probably partly because there is an appeal in using methods that have received media attention and been used in other settings. Some of the current methods, possibly the use of single-sex groupings in particular, have been much discussed in research since they leave little room for variations within groups (Edström 2010). Still, rather than abandoning certain methods, the point I want to make here is that an overall wider set of methods, based even more on the individual preschool group and the children in the individual setting, may be beneficial for advancing future work. Although it may be considered theoretically contradictory, as in the three preschools and Swedish preschools more widely, to combine compensatory and gender neutralising methods, this may also represent two potential strategies. Drawing even more on the situation in the individual preschool may mean multiple legitimate methods and strategies. Such an approach will probably, since individuals and variations within groups are touched upon by some of the pedagogues in this study, also encourage the increased handling of complexities.
Although gender educational research has been criticised for having little connection to practice (Clegg 2006; Weiner 2012), theoretical tools may perhaps be of some assistance in widening future discussions about practical situations. Recent policy developments also indicate that gender equality is increasingly connected to wider work towards equal treatment so there are even greater demands on handling complexities, for example with respect to intersections, if gender is not to be side-lined. The results raise questions particularly about children’s space and influence in gender equality work; this is undoubtedly a special challenge because it concerns normative work and very young children. The national curriculum (Skolverket 1998/2010a) also provides relatively ambiguous guidance regarding children’s positions since, in general, they are constructed as responsible, independent and self-regulating individuals but the actual gender equality formulations emphasise the active positions of the pedagogues and not the children (Edström 2010). It seems reasonable that pedagogues, as in the three preschools in the study, take responsibility and lead positions. Still, future gender equality work may benefit from also paying increasing attention to children’s varying positions and their gender equal practices (cf. Dolk 2009; Lenz Taguchi 2011). Although such matters appear to have been discussed in theory more than actually applied in practice, and the former is probably easier than the latter, there may be benefits of trying to involve the children even more in the work, especially since gender equality can be seen as connected to issues concerning social justice and democracy. Placing more emphasis on children’s varying positions, including examples where they already cross gender boundaries, may also reduce attention on counteracting and compensating for perceived shortcomings. Such an approach where certain positions do not ‘need’ to be counteracted may perhaps also include some more space for girls and boys to take up traditional ‘girly’ positions. Highlighting examples of children’s actions and discussing gender boundaries among pedagogues and, having their age in mind, at least with the oldest preschool children, may also involve challenging norms. Such an approach may, because children and their actions become more visible in the work, include the potential to advance future gender equality work with children.

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Notes

1 The interviews were made with individuals at two preschools. At the third, Central, it was based on a group interview with the pedagogues, as they suggested.

2 The exception is possibly that in one example from North it is mentioned that “if a boy wants to become a ballet dancer he should be allowed to be that”.

3 This table is influenced by Eidevald’s (2011) table on page 41.

4 The Central pedagogues working with the youngest children, the one- to three-year-olds, state that awareness and stereotypical behaviour is much more visible among the oldest preschool children, the four- and five-year-olds. This provides a contrast to the work of the North and South pedagogues who have four- and five-year-olds among their children; they emphasise that the stereotype increases when children move on to compulsory schooling.
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