

More Men in Preschool

AN ANTHOLOGY ON BROADER RECRUITMENT



Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions

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Foreword

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR, is both an employers' organisation and an organisation that represents and advocates for local government in Sweden. All of Sweden's municipalities, county councils and regions are our members. We represent and act on their initiative.

One challenge for our members is skills provision in the school and health-care sectors. The population is growing, and with it the need for personnel to provide welfare services, for both children and the elderly. Meanwhile, many employees will reach retirement age in the next few years.

Preschool, which is the responsibility of the municipalities, is one of the services affected. Never before have so many children attended Swedish preschool. In 1980, 36 percent of all children aged between 1 and 6 attended what were known as day care and child care centres. Today approximately 84 percent of all children aged between 1 and 5 attend preschool.¹

One strategy when it comes to skills provision is to broaden the recruitment process. In this context, it is important for both men and women to see preschool as a potential workplace. Currently, the proportion of men working in preschools is unreasonably low. Men and women are both needed in preschools. That is the topic of this anthology. While the anthology is mainly aimed at employers, it should also be of interest to anyone working with developing the preschool system. We hope that the texts will offer you both knowledge and inspiration.

Stockholm, December 2016

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Note. 1. Statistics taken from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014.

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Introduction

More men in preschool – a matter of broader recruitment

In order to maintain the standard of service we provide in Swedish preschool and develop it further, we need to recruit approximately 50,000 preschool teachers and child carers up to the year 2023.² At the same time, the Swedish preschool is a workplace with an unusually uneven gender distribution whereby only four percent of the employees are men.

The challenges facing recruitment at local level can vary: the geographical location of a municipality may have a bearing on the labour force available, and the methods of working in the different services and the makeup of staff can differ. What preschools throughout the country have in common, however, is the low proportion of men. Here we can see the potential for future recruitment.

Therefore, in order to be able to meet the requirements of today and tomorrow for skilled staff, it is essential to seek out potential employees in the entire population, regardless of gender.

Gender should not be an obstacle to working in preschool

Girls and young men in Sweden aged 15-24 could to much the same extent consider a career in preschool.³ Gender-aware study and careers guidance that provides compulsory school and upper secondary school pupils with a good grounding based on factual information may be decisive in making carefully considered choices. Especially so in the case of young men who are curious about working in preschool but do not know how to go about it at present.

Note. 2. Så löser vi rekryteringsutmaningarna, SALAR 2014.

Note. 3. Jobb som gör skillnad, SALAR 2013.

Norms regarding gender and occupation are factors that influence both adults and children. A couple of occupations with which many children are familiar from the very start are indeed those of preschool teacher and child carer. Here is an opportunity to show that these occupations are suited to men as well as women. However, men should not be attracted to preschool to carry out a specifically “male” role. Having more men in preschool is not the answer to achieving equal status in preschool. It could instead be one of several ways in which to highlight the issue of equality in the workplace and to fulfil the aim of Swedish preschool to counter traditional gender patterns.⁴ Children in preschool should understand that you can try out, choose and do what interests you regardless of whether you identify yourself as a boy or a girl. The same conditions should of course apply to those children who identify themselves as neither a boy nor a girl.

All employees in preschool should be able to carry out their work without having to deal with stereotypical impressions regarding gender. Highlighting preschool as a professional workplace and defining and highlighting the professional roles of child carer and preschool teacher may be one way of drawing attention to and actively addressing the norms surrounding preschool and its employees.

More career paths are needed in preschool

Many men working in preschool or undergoing preschool teacher training say that in their case it was crucial that they had experience of teaching young children before making their choice of study or profession. This highlights the need to present a picture of several aspects of the profession and to develop further opportunities for trying these out. We also need to make opportunities available for changing career in midlife and identify points of intersection between professions and types of training. This requires knowledge of which further skills are required for working in preschool.

Another challenge is to reach those who have the appropriate training but have left the profession for different reasons, and to encourage them to return to preschool. One way to succeed in this might be to hear their views about their professional role and to build on their experiences.

In order to explore and successfully create more career paths in preschool, different actors at both local and national level need to make contact with each other and work together. School heads, trade union representatives, higher education institutions and public authorities should all be involved in this task.

Note. 4. Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 98 Revised 2010.

Skilled employees make for the best preschool in the world

There is every reason to be proud of our preschool, which is an important feature of our welfare society and provides the foundation of a child's lifelong learning. Nine out of ten parents are satisfied with preschool in Sweden, and we believe that this is thanks to the high proportion of skilled staff which defines Swedish preschool. 49 percent of all full-time employees in municipal preschool have a degree in education or in preschool education; 22 percent have taken a three year upper secondary school programme in working with children; and a further eight percent of full-time employees have had some teacher training.⁵

In order to appeal successfully to skilled and suitable employees, preschool needs to present itself as an attractive and worthwhile workplace. And for many people this is already the case. Preschool staff are in demand, and throughout the country those with the right skills are being offered employment in a sector with good future prospects.

Allow yourself to be inspired!

Efforts to broaden recruitment and bring more men into preschool is not about changing the role of preschool or its employees; it is about seeing and putting one's finger on why Swedish preschool is so important for our children and their learning and development. We must provide a more nuanced picture of the workplace and who is suited to working there. We need to describe the worthwhile work being done there every day. That is why we must at all times provide attractive conditions for all those working in preschool, regardless of gender.

The chapters in this anthology address the issue of men in preschool from both a practical and theoretical viewpoint. The authors have provided different perspectives and are responsible for the content of their written contributions. We hope you will be inspired by both the challenges faced and learning by example!

Note. 5. Statistics taken from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015.



The importance of equality in the Swedish preschool system

Gender equal participation in the labour market and child care of the highest quality – conceptions of paid employment, children’s well-being, parenthood and household work all coalesce around the idea of the Swedish preschool.

In August 2014, elements of the Swedish media reported live from Princess Estelle’s first day at the Äventyret preschool. The media stated that Crown Princess Victoria wanted her daughter to have as “normal” a time at preschool as possible.⁶ Although the event aroused an unusually large amount of media interest, it nevertheless illustrates an important general point – in Sweden, virtually all children go to preschool. Swedish parents are also very pleased with their children’s preschools. As many as 95 per cent declared themselves to be satisfied in a large-scale national survey.⁷ The Swedish preschool system is open to all children as soon as they turn one year old, if their parents work or study. From the autumn of the year in which they turn three, all children are entitled to attend preschool, regardless of whether or not their parents work. According to statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education from 2014, 82.8 per cent of all children aged one to five attend preschool. Among children aged four to five, as many as 93.1 per cent attend preschool.⁸

Note. 6. See for example Dagens Nyheter, 25/8 2014.

Note. 7. The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013.

Note. 8. The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014.

The statistics show that it is very common for children to attend preschool rather than parents organising child care in some other way. This holds true for children in all social groups.

Shared responsibility for the home and financial support

In order to place the Swedish preschool system in the context of equality policy, two important aspects need to be pointed out. Firstly, Swedish preschools are highly regarded among Swedish parents. Secondly, it is generally held to be desirable, in families with two adults, for both adults to be in paid employment. In addition to both adults sharing responsibility for financial support, it is also regarded as desirable for them to share responsibility for the home and child care. The Swedish model of gender equality has, therefore, been described as a model in which both adults are responsible for both financial provision and for the home and child care duties. This has been referred to as “the dual earner/dual carer model” in English, while the Swedish term translates literally as “the dual earner model”. However, the term in Swedish, unlike the English term, does not reflect the idea that parents should be equally active in child care. An express goal of Swedish family policy is “to increase gender equality without risk to the child’s well-being”.⁹

The Nordic countries are often described as role models when it comes to issues of gender equality. They often feature at or near the top in various international comparisons. Some common explanations for why Sweden ranks so high include the fact that both parents have equal access to parental insurance, individual taxation and good access to child care.¹⁰ Another important aspect is the norm of joint custody if parents separate.¹¹ There are many similarities between the family policies of the various Nordic countries, but there are also differences. One particular characteristic of Sweden (and Iceland) is the desire for a gender-neutral family policy.¹² Swedish gender equality policy has been described as a largely cross-party desire for “the patterns of life of men and women to be more alike”.¹³ At the same time, there has been, and still is, a political debate on the best way to achieve this goal.

The Swedish model of gender equality

Historically, the Swedish model of gender equality emerged in the wake of women increasingly taking up paid employment towards the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s. During this period, a different view of the woman started to form.

Note. 9. Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013, p. 11.

Note. 10. Bergqvist, 2001.

Note. 11. Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013.

Note. 12. Duvander, 2014, p. 418.

Note. 13. Stensöta, 2004, p. 11.

She changed from someone whose place was in the home to someone who ought rather to be engaged in paid work.¹⁴ During the 1970s, there were three important changes that are usually brought up when discussing how Sweden became a country where both parents are expected to contribute to the family income. These changes were the introduction of individual taxation, the change from “maternal leave” to “parental leave” and the expansion of the public child care sector.¹⁵

1971 saw a significant reform that involved a major change from joint taxation of married couples to individual taxation of income. One of the consequences of this tax reform was that it became more profitable for families to have both adults in work, rather than one working and one staying at home with the children.¹⁶ This reform came at a time when “the proportion of women in paid employment passed 50 per cent”.¹⁷

In the mid-1970s, the maternal insurance scheme was changed to a parental insurance scheme. In 1974, Sweden became the first country in the world where you were legally entitled to be at home from work with financial compensation.¹⁸ This may be viewed as state legitimisation of the “feminist idea that not only mothers, but also fathers, can and should be responsible for the care of infants”.¹⁹ Although parental leave, neither then nor now, is shared equally between the sexes, the decision sent an important signal and made it possible for parents to share parental responsibility more equally.²⁰ If the abolition of joint taxation and the increased access to good child care in particular facilitated more equal opportunities in working life, then the change in parental insurance was a policy for more equal responsibility in the home.²¹

However, the number of men taking parental leave has increased slowly. In the first few years (1974-75), around two and a half per cent of all parental leave was taken by men.²² By the mid-1980s, that number had increased to six per cent, and in 2014, 25 per cent was being taken by men.²³ An important reform came in 1995, when the so-called “daddy month” was introduced. In brief, this reform was based on one month of parental leave being reserved for each parent, and that portion of the parental benefit could not be transferred to the other parent. In 2002, the number of reserved days was increased to 60. From 2015/16, this proportion was increased to 90 out of a total of 480 days.

Note. 14. Tollin, 2011.

Note. 15. Bergqvist, 2001; Duvander, 2014.

Note. 16. Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013.

Note. 17. Boschini et al., 2005, p. 59.

Note. 18. Klinth, 2002.

Note. 19. Bergqvist, 2001; Klinth, 2002.

Note. 20. Bergqvist, 2001.

Note. 21. Ibid.

Note. 22. Klinth, 2002.

Note. 23. Statistics Sweden, 2014.



The growth of the Swedish preschool system

The importance of efficient child care to allow family life and work life to be combined cannot be stressed enough, and it is an important part of the Swedish welfare model.²⁴ Good child care is regarded as important not only because it allows both sexes to undertake a broad range of careers, but also because it provides good child care for children.

Sweden's first preschool legislation was passed in 1973 and has been described as a response to the need to allow parents to undertake paid employment or study²⁵. Preschool provision was justified by both the need to give parents equal opportunities to work and, in turn, the necessity to guarantee continued economic growth.²⁶ These underlying reasons also justified offering preschool full-time and in a way that could be adapted to meet the needs of parents.

Since the 1970s, the Swedish preschool system has developed in both a pedagogical direction (preschools are subject to a national curriculum) and a more general direction.²⁷ The Swedish preschool has gradually become more and more general. During the 1980s, it was decided that all children of working parents would be entitled to a place at preschool. During the first few years of the 2000s, it was decided that children of unemployed parents

Note. 24. Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011.

Note. 25. Ibid.

Note. 26. Ibid.

Note. 27. Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013.

or parents on parental leave would be given the right to attend preschool for a few hours a week, known as “allmän förskola” (universal preschool). Universal preschool applied to all four and five year olds from 2003, with the right being extended from 2010 to include all children from the autumn term of the year in which they turn three. The fact that the number of hours at preschool is limited for children whose parents do not work also reveals that the right to preschool is above all designed and aimed at parents who work or study.²⁸

In 1998, preschools got their own curriculum. “The curriculum was received by an enthusiastic workforce. Finally, preschool had been given the much longed-for status of an educational institution, and it applied throughout the preschool to children from the age of one until they start preschool class – unique from an international perspective.”²⁹ In addition to preschools following a curriculum, a maximum charge system was introduced, an income-based fee system with an upper limit – a key reform. The maximum charge was introduced in most municipalities in 2002, but was in force in all from 2003. Overall, these reforms led to child care becoming a “deeply entrenched part of the general welfare system”.³⁰

The Swedish preschool system in a European context

The growth of the Swedish preschool system can be viewed as a consequence of the efforts to implement a specific gender equality policy, but it can also be said to have had an impact on the relationships between “the state and families, between parents and children, and between men and women”.³¹ The Swedish preschool system has been described as unique, seen from an international perspective. Its special characteristics are said to include the fact that it is well organised, accessible and that, to some extent, it is aimed at all children – not just children whose parents are in paid work or studying.³²

The Swedish preschool system shares many similarities with the preschool systems in the other Nordic countries. Typical characteristics of the Nordic model are the focus on both care and education, and the fact that the preschools are part of the public sector. The double focus of the model means, for instance, that preschool opening times are adapted to the child care needs of working or studying adults. Compared with other countries, the opening times of Swedish preschools are generous and are intended to allow parents to work or study full-time. Another important difference to how preschools

Note. 28. Martinek, 2015.

Note. 29. Martin Korpi, 2015, p. 68.

Note. 30. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Note. 31. Tallberg Broman, 2009, p. 61.

Note. 32. *Ibid.*

are normally organised on the European continent is that preschools in Sweden are not just aimed at older children, but have been expanded to include children between the ages of one and two.³³

Gender equality in the Swedish preschool system

A state report from 2006 states that, from a European perspective, there are “no fewer than 136 different forms of service within the EU that come under the concept of child care”.³⁴ The report states that this makes a uniform view of gender equality within preschools difficult. The report also states that gender equality work in Europe in relation to preschools, where it exists at all, amounts to no more than the desire for more equal representation of men and women working in the preschool sector. The reasoning in Sweden is similar, although there is also a notion that gender equality work in and at preschools should be more extensive.³⁵ Around the turn of the millennium, the efforts made started presenting preschool activities as an important part of overall gender equality work. Preschool then not only became a piece of the puzzle in terms of efforts to build a working life based on gender equality, but also acquired an important place in its own right, as “gender equality work became a pedagogical issue”.³⁶

The curriculums of Swedish preschools “can be described as progressive in their wording in terms of gender equality”.³⁷ Sweden rates highly in both Nordic and international comparisons in making references to the importance of gender equality. However, how things look in terms of the practical work is more debatable.³⁸ The latest version of the curriculum for Swedish preschools states as early as in the introduction: The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders, as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the preschool should actively promote in its work with children.³⁹

The curriculum also states that preschools have an important function in forming a view about gender and gender roles. It also states that the role of preschool is to “counteract traditional gender roles” and encourage children to develop in different and individual directions.⁴⁰

Note. 33. Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011.

Note. 34. SOU 2006:75, p. 49-50.

Note. 35. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Note. 36. Dolk, 2013, p. 17.

Note. 37. Odenbring, 2014, p. 10.

Note. 38. *Ibid.*

Note. 39. The Curriculum for the Preschool, 2010, p. 4.

Note. 40. *Ibid.*

Development in the past few years and future challenges

Although Sweden, from an international perspective, has a relatively high proportion of women participating in the labour market, there is also a weak upward trend in terms of men's participation in child care and domestic work.⁴¹ There are ongoing discussions as to how to keep encouraging this trend.

One reform described above is the reserving of 90 days of parental leave for each carer, the so-called “daddy months”. Another reform introduced in 2008 was a gender equality bonus which is paid to parents who share their parental leave. The bonus is designed to give parents a financial incentive to share parental leave equally, with the largest bonus being paid to parents who split the 450 days completely equally.⁴²

In 2008, as an alternative to Swedish preschool and general child care, child care allowance (“cash-for-care”) was introduced. This involved, in brief, one parent being able to stay at home with their child after parental leave and receiving a care allowance of up to SEK 3,000 per month. One justification for the child care allowance was the argument that it would increase the options available to families. Around four per cent of the parents living in a municipality that had introduced the child care allowance did indeed take out the allowance in one form or another.⁴³ In November 2015, the Swedish Parliament decided to abolish the child care allowance from 1 February 2016.

Only time will tell what challenges gender equality policy will face in the future. Sociologist and masculinity researcher Ingólfur V. Gíslason believes that the gender equality trend of the last few years has passed and that we cannot “push forward on the gender equality front without focusing more on men and their role” – the focus should be on ensuring that men take on more of the domestic work and responsibility for children.⁴⁴ In other words, it is not enough simply to implement measures that allow families to have two breadwinners; increased work is required to ensure the unpaid work is also shared. If women have been quick so far to adapt to new requirements and opportunities for paid work, it is now time for men to do their fair share. The Swedish gender equality policy measures implemented so far are good, but should be neither taken for granted nor viewed as self-evident or everlasting. Future gender equality policy measures should both justify previous gains and criticise and build on them.

Note. 41. Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013.

Note. 42. Försäkringskassan.

Note. 43. Heggeman, 2014.

Note. 44. Gíslason 2011, p. 13.

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This is how we work in Arjeplog and Malmö

It is difficult to find two Swedish municipalities which differ more in terms of geographical location and size. This means that the conditions under which each preschool operates differ too. However, both municipalities are seeking the goal of attracting more male employees in preschool.

“The first time we met you told me how many of you there are working in preschool in the City of Malmö, and I thought, ‘Wow, that’s more than the number of residents we have in our entire municipality,” says Malin Westling, and laughs.

She works as Head of Education and is in charge of preschool up to adult education in Arjeplog, and the person she is talking to is Inga Sandström, an HR specialist in Malmö. They are both in Stockholm to discuss efforts to attract more men to preschool.

This is because despite there being clear and great differences between them in terms of remit, the conversation we have soon picks up on the fact that they are facing much the same situation at work. They are both finding it difficult to increase the proportion of men in preschool. The ambition is there, as are the determined efforts being made – but we have yet to see the results.

Eight per cent of employees in preschool in the City of Malmö are men, and this is an increase since 2008 when the proportion was five per cent. Most male employees in education in Arjeplog work in its independent schools, where the proportion is nine per cent.

FACTS CITY OF MALMÖ

- › **Inhabitants:** approx 317,000 individuals.
- › **Number of preschools:** 313, including parents' cooperatives and independent preschools.
- › **Number of employees in preschool:** approx 4,300.

FACTS ARJEPLOG MUNICIPALITY

- › **Inhabitants:** approx 3,100 individuals.
- › **Number of preschools:** Three – two municipal and one parents' cooperative.
- › **Number of employees in preschool:** 25.

“We’ve had a few men working with us. But it seems they don’t stay in the profession that long, especially not if they are single men working in preschool,” says Malin Westling.

“Many also abandon preschool here in favour of school. That still seems to have higher status than does preschool,” says Inga Sandström.

The situation they describe is not at all unique to Malmö or Arjeplog, nor is it new. Preschools with a low proportion of men are found throughout Sweden, and it is also an issue that has been raised time and again to differing degrees of intensity since the 1970s.

Not just any men

There is, however, a constant theme in this discussion on men in preschool – and one that has lasted for some time. It is the insight that, actually, this is not about gender. Nor is it about attracting men in particular to preschool in order to do certain things. Instead, Inga and Malin look at terms such as competence and recruitment. They thus broaden the issue so that it covers something more than it has done before.

“It’s important that we see the problems that exist here. Men in preschool should not be a gender issue; rather this is about broadening the recruitment base, this is about diversity and competence. We want to have competent men in preschool, not just any old men”, says Inga Sandström.



Malin Westling.

“Preschool should also mirror society; that is set out in our steering documents. So in one way this is about diversity. Even though it has until now actually been more difficult to talk about diversity in terms of gender than about that in terms of culture,” says Malin Westling.

“What is more, we can’t continue just recruiting from half the population; that won’t work now we’re facing such a shortage of preschool teachers,” says Inga Sandström.

One way of making it clear that the issue of attracting more men to preschool is not just about staff composition in individual preschools but also about the provision of skills generally is to carry out forecasting and monitoring.

The work being done in Malmö has been largely devoted to this very end. They have monitored both future staff needs and the population. They now see clearly how many new teachers will be needed.

“Everything is based on forecasting population trends. And up to 2020 we’ll be in great need of recruitment. We’ll need to employ more than 500 employees in preschool every year,” says Inga Sandström.

She believes that when people like her have statistics they can show, it also makes it easier to explain to politicians and civil servants that this is a big and important issue which is in the long run about far more than just preschool. In order for a municipality to be attractive to live in, it must also have well-functioning preschools – and it cannot have these without having skilled employees.

“We also want to increase the proportion of qualified preschool teachers. We’ve got 45 per cent now, but are aiming for 65 per cent by 2020.

Preschool – what is the vision we’re putting across?

That we bring male employees into preschool on the basis of skills and recruitment requirements; not just to show that it’s part of the work being done on gender equality and other value systems. However, one of the problems is that this approach has probably not been made known to everyone.

Especially not those who lack insight into what preschool involves – for example, there are many men of different ages who would be really well suited to the role of preschool teacher or child carer. It is still the case to some extent that many believe the issue of attracting more men to preschool is based on the perception that men do other things to those that the women already there do.

“You’d think that this view would have died out. But I just need to refer to my son, who stepped in as a supply teacher in the summer: he said he was really fed up that he was expected to be the rough-and-tumble kind and to like building dens. ‘Why would I be like that? When I don’t even find it fun?’ he asked me,” says Malin Westling.

Another aspect which has made them think in a self-critical way is the clearly defined remit and development of preschool and the extent to which these are in fact sufficiently well known. Both are agreed that one reason why this issue has arisen is that many still have the outdated notion that preschool is a daycare centre. For the purpose of, say, child care. The kind of activity that does not actually require much more of the employee other than that he or she is good with children.

“Preschool teacher training is now a higher education course which covers seven terms. It means too that the salary structure has changed and that the content of preschool teaching has changed. Yes, of course, it’s still about child care, but it’s also very much about training and teaching,” says Inga Sandström.

“I sometimes think that we who represent preschool have not succeeded in getting the message across properly about this change. It’s self-evident to us, but I don’t think everyone really knows about it,” says Malin Westling.

Vehicle testing preferred to preschool

Several factors need to be looked at other than staff requirements and population trends. Malin Westling explains that recruitment in Arjeplog is very much influenced by the way the Municipality’s inhabitants view the connection between men and preschool.

That is why she believes it is important that everyone working on this issue should be aware of the local norms that exist in their particular area. What is the view on masculinity and femininity in our own municipality? What is seen as OK as a line of work if you are a man? These issues and how to address them is something that she and her colleagues often discuss.

As regards Arjeplog, she believes that the municipality has its work cut out in the long-term.

“It’s so deeply ingrained, this idea about what men should do by way of work. But we’re starting to make headway; we now talk about gender in an entirely different way to that ten years ago. And actually, it’s not the youngsters who are the most sceptical; it’s society around us.”

“At the same time we’re making slow progress. Our preschools are competing for staff with the international vehicle testing which takes place every winter in Arjeplog. I can imagine that many men would rather take the chance to get in there despite the tough working conditions.”

Influencing the young

Surveys on the attitudes of lower secondary school pupils toward choosing a future occupation show that many young men find it hard to imagine considering an occupation that is traditionally seen as a female one. What your friends think is seen as important, and it is difficult being the one who breaks the mould.

That is why both Malin Westling and Inga Sandström very much believe in starting to influence these young men at an early stage. They feel it is too late to start trying to attract them to preschool at the time they are about to make their choice regarding further education and university.

“I think it’s important to work in conjunction with study advisors and careers officers as early as at lower secondary school in order to stimulate interest in preschool. That is where it starts,” says Inga Sandström.

Can you give an example of how you work in conjunction with study advisors and careers officers today?

“Our collaboration with them has just got going, and we are meeting up soon. That is when we’ll be planning our work together. I hope we’ll be able to meet pupils in year nine before they choose their line of study in upper secondary school, and also meet pupils already in upper secondary school to talk about higher education so we make them aware of teaching in preschool. We would like both male and female preschool teachers and child carers to accompany us on these visits,” says Inga Sandström.



Inga Sandström.

Both Inga Sandström and Malin Westling believe in actively encouraging young men to come into preschool and also in supporting them once they are there. Arjeplog Municipality has therefore decided to offer mentoring to those young men who come to do temporary work.

“We’ve decided to improve the way we receive the young men we get in at preschool. That is why the head of education personally mentors them. They are unqualified of course, but the dream is that they go on to further study, and that’s why this support could be a good thing,” says Malin Westling.

“And we have been collaborating with Malmö University in relation to sixteen young men who had placements in health and welfare services last summer. Six of their placement days were spent at the University, and the idea is that we encourage them to pursue further study in one of these areas,” Inga Sandström explains.

Have the initiatives taken by your municipalities produced any long-term results?

“To a certain extent. Some of the young men who had these placements last year have returned and stepped in to do temporary teaching. And we have probably never had as many young men as we do now,” says Malin Westling.

“We don’t really know yet. We’ve not been very good at following up these young men, but it’s something we are planning to do. I believe it’s important. Whatever the case, we’ll be continuing working along these lines next summer too,” says Inga Sandström.



The importance of introduction

One item on the list of things to be addressed in order to succeed in recruiting more men is how preschool can bring in new staff and in the long run retain them.

“I think it is very important that we talk about and establish the way to work together with new colleagues, and naturally this does not apply to men alone. But I think it is perhaps especially important that they are given a good introduction: you’re not here so you can kick a ball or do woodworking; instead you are here on the basis of your skills,” says Inga Sandström, and goes on:

Spreading out the men is a good idea, but in our experience it doesn’t work that well,” says Malin Westling.

The views held in Malmö about aspects such as the status of the profession has resulted in the creation of a completely new professional title in the preschools there. Anyone earning a minimum of 120 higher education credits where the course content meets the requirements of the profession and where teaching is involved may now call themselves an instructor. This position has been created so as to broaden the skills base and increase the proportion of preschool employees who have higher education qualifications.

“We feel it is important that we have a broad skill set in preschool and that as many employees as possible have higher education qualifications,” says Inga Sandström.

Advice and ideas

Our conversation is beginning to draw to a close, and the last question put to Malin Westling and Inga Sandström is about any advice they can give. Which advice and ideas can they give others holding similar positions and wanting to start doing more to attract men to preschool?

“I think you need to start with what has been achieved: think about why this issue is important. I’ve had to explore my own feelings before working out what my views are now. If we’re not clear as to why we should bring in more men, then there will be no long-term measures taken in that direction,” says Malin Westling, and she goes on to emphasise the following points:

The importance of exchanging ideas and discussion:

“For my part, it has been invaluable to hear the arguments of those municipalities who have come further than we have. How networking functions and how they deliberately seek to retain men in preschool.

‘Since we’re such a small municipality, it is difficult in a way for me to say how preschool should work in the municipality as a whole, but in our case it has quite naturally been important that this initiative has had political sanction. This is not something that a head of preschool education can fix or resolve personally; it won’t work without support from political quarters.’

Inga Sandström also emphasises the importance of garnering support outside the immediate sphere of preschool. And she also draws attention to the action plan that has been produced.

“Our skills maintenance plan is probably my most important working tool; it is of huge benefit to me. I’m now following up how well we’ve done over the past year, and can see that we’ve achieved a great deal. Follow-ups are good to do because they give us a less fragmented picture; we can see how it’s possible to join the different parts together.

‘I also think we should try to create inroads between those working in administration and those in colleges and universities, if there are any in the local area. Take the example of those students doing a placement. We’re trying to fit an organisational structure around them so we can encourage some of them to stay with us.

Some ideas about how municipalities can attract more men to preschool:

- › Set out an argument as to why having more men in preschool is important for the municipality.
- › Involve the entire municipality in a strategic approach to achieve broader recruitment which is long-term and capable of being followed up.

- Make a determined effort to avoid gender-stereotypical expectations of the men and women working or doing a placement in preschool.
- Advertise preschool as a workplace at an early stage – an important target group are boys and young men in compulsory school and upper secondary school.
- Use holiday jobs for teenagers to take as an opportunity to take a strategic and gender-aware approach to ensuring skills maintenance in preschool.
- Think about putting across the picture of preschool as an educational activity for children’s learning and development.
- Work together with other actors in the municipality or region, such as higher education institutes.



CHAPTER 3

The new recruit, the veteran and the returning employee

Opinions from three people who have differing degrees of experience of working in preschool, having come into it by different routes and sometimes for the same reasons for choosing to work in child education and development. It may be that this particular approach of having one's ear to the ground and asking questions of those who work in preschool will provide us with the most important answers as to how we can encourage more men to choose preschool.

The new recruit

Maybe there is one influential group that ought to be used more in the efforts to attract men to preschool? A group that would seem to have been completely overlooked up to now. That is to say, older siblings who are studying to become preschool teachers.

Because in Ahmet Erzurum's case, without his big sister it's pretty doubtful whether he would ever have seriously considered his choice of career.

"She helped me overcome my prejudices," he says and laughs at the memory.

What kinds of prejudices were those?

“It was probably the notion that men don’t work in preschool, that changing nappies and child care are a female occupation. Those were probably the prejudices I had. But since I’ve always really liked children it ended up being an obvious choice for me once my sister had helped me overcome them.”

He is now studying at Mälardalen University in Eskilstuna, and to begin with there were five men in his class. One has since dropped out and another passed away during his studies, so now there are three left. Three men and far, far more women.

“It’s great that there are a few more men, but it’s not been the case that we’ve stuck together in any particular way. Instead the students have been divided into different groups, and in that way the men have ended up in different ones.”

What sort of reaction did you get during your studies?

“This idea of men and women has become something of an inside joke in class. Every course and the textbooks too place a lot of focus on women teachers. Whenever one talks about teachers, one means women. Yet at the same time I do understand it, because over 90 per cent of people in this profession are women. It probably isn’t deliberate on the part of teachers in higher education, so it’s not been a big problem.”

You don’t need to talk to Ahmet Erzurum for that long to realise that he is passionate about his profession. The idea that working in preschool mostly consists of runny noses and filled nappies is far from his mind. These days he talks a great deal instead about the considerable freedom that exists in the profession. A freedom which means that he looks forward to not having someone else telling him what to do the whole time, while not always knowing what will happen the next day.

“Combining planning one’s own activities with working as part of a group with its own work team gives you a lot of independence. Preschool is an environment that throws up a great variety of everyday situations. Every day is a new challenge, and no day is the same. And at the same time I can be part of that and determine the way forward by planning.

Another aspect that appeals to me is child development. Being able to be there and see how children learn things, how they can take giant leaps between one day and the next in terms of abilities and skills – and what a fantastic journey it is to be a part of that.

“The more children develop, the more you see it with a clear eye. It’s probably that which I’ve learned during my placement. I’ve only been there a few short weeks, but when you see that the children have learned something it gives you a really warm and happy glow inside.”

At the time of this interview, Ahmet Erzurum has only two months left of



Ahmet Erzurum.

his training. The degree project he is writing is on the language development of multilingual children. He himself speaks Turkish as well as English and Swedish, and thinks it will be exciting to study in greater depth a subject that lies close to his heart.

“I’ve just begun writing it. I feel a bit nervous, but am confident I can do it so I think it will go well.”

We talk more about the fact that many people not only have a partly out-moded view of preschool but also, when they find out that Ahmet Erzurum is a man who is training to be a preschool teacher, react differently to the way they would have done had he been called Alexandra.

“Women are usually pleased and say, ‘Oh, how sweet!’ Words like that, and they say it’s ‘really great’. The reaction I get from younger men is probably much the same as the kind I gave at their age; they have the same prejudices that I had. They chuckle and wonder whether I’m going to be changing nappies all day. Men who are a bit older are probably the ones who give the coolest reaction. They act in a completely normal way and say, ‘Oh really?’, and are perhaps curious as to why I chose this profession.

What does it feel like to have your choice of career described as sweet?

“At first it was quite weird, but you get used to it. As a man you are in such demand in this profession and so welcome that you can understand why people react.

There have been many men over the years who have testified that they were expected to do and to know certain things when they started work in

preschool. But maybe reactions of that kind will soon be a thing of the past, because Ahmet Erzurum thinks he has seen no evidence of that at all while doing his placement, which is part of preschool teacher training.

“My colleagues could not have been better. I don’t think anyone has even turned a hair about me being a man; instead they have all made me welcome and I’ve felt that they are behind me. Although some have said that they notice that children do tend to be drawn to me – maybe because I represent something new and exciting.”

The reaction from the children has mostly been positive. The vast majority of them have been fine about it, but a number have been a bit more guarded.

‘Some of the older girls have in fact reacted as though they’re a bit embarrassed in my company; they’ve seemed shy during the first and second week. But after that there’s been no problem, although they probably find it unusual to have a 24-year old guy teaching them.’

And the parents?

“Many have said things like, ‘At last, a guy working in preschool’, and they’ve been positive. But when I’ve been in the infant classes I notice that some of them do wonder about the care side of things. ‘Can he really change nappies?’ and ‘Can he help them to eat their food properly?’ seem to be what some of them are thinking.”

That said, he has not come across any distrust or discussion regarding men working in preschool or any suspicions regarding assault. That sort of thinking has been voiced more by friends and family.

“There are some who have asked me if I don’t find it worrying that the parents will have their suspicions about me. But I say that as long as I am clear and transparent about who I am there is no problem. I try to foster a good degree of cooperation and give the parents a sense of security. And when I show how all my actions are based on our curriculum I hope and trust they’ll feel that I don’t pose a threat.”

Ahmet Erzurum already has a job waiting for him, and he will start there quite soon after completing his training. He is looking forward to converting what he’s learned into everyday practice at preschool among children and colleagues.

“I really enjoy doing this type of job. My future plans most likely involve my becoming a specialist teacher, but if so that will be in the longer term. First I want to gain a good degree of experience working with groups of children.”

He finishes our conversation by offering two pieces of advice. The first of these is intended for preschool staff, managers and others who would really like to see more men in preschool.

“This might sound a bit funny, but my best advice is not to think about gender at all. Treat male colleagues as you would any other colleague. Don’t focus too much on the fact that we are men; that shouldn’t matter.”

And as for those young men who have not yet decided what they want to do by way of a job, Ahmet Erzurum says that they should consider in all seriousness a future in preschool.

“I think it’s time for them to overcome their prejudices and take a look at the profession itself and the professional role of the preschool teacher. They should see how enjoyable it is. Being a preschool teacher is not just about cleaning and helping out; the teaching element is also really important.”

The veteran

The Mistral department at the Fyrklövern preschool on Södermalm in Stockholm is where Patrik Gustafsson works. Fyrklövern is on the ground floor of a seven-storey building, and Mistral is where you also find the oldest children who are doing their final year in preschool. There is a fairly strong likelihood that there is some project on the go when the children and Patrik Gustafsson are focused on something together. A project that often results in a film.

Over the years he and the children have produced stories about space ships, dangerous cakes and other fantasy creations. And that’s maybe not so strange, because it was drama, film and acting which in a sense brought him into the world of preschool over 20 years ago.

“I studied drama at upper secondary school and then did script-writing and that sort of thing. It went poorly, so my aunt suggested I start doing supply teaching at preschool in the form of a regular job.

Supply teaching proved much more enjoyable than he had initially thought, so after a while he began evening studies to become a child carer. However, going on the next step of training to become a preschool teacher is something he has never done.

“I’ve thought about it many times, especially before I began working properly and just did some supply teaching. But once I’d got a permanent position, I wanted to have a bit of security. I was living on my own around that time, so it felt good to start studying.

‘But probably the main reason I’ve not done the training is that my job is such terrific fun right now that I don’t feel the need for it.

There is a tendency for men coming into preschool not to stay that long.” Patrik Gustafsson has seen many of them come and go over the years.

One explanation for this, he believes, is the reason one has for entering the profession in the first place. Have you already decided from the outset that preschool is where you want to work, or do you end up there rather by chance the way he himself did?

“It’s likely that many stumble into this profession, and that could mean it’s easy to stumble out of it again.”



Patrik Gustafsson. Photo: My Hellsten.

How is it that you have stayed so long?

“I think much depends on what sort of colleagues you have and on having the sort of work that requires forward-thinking at all times. Those of us working here at Fyrklövern don’t do the same things all the time; rather, colleagues and managers alike are always seeking to progress and do new things. It’s still such great fun working here that there’s no reason for me to change jobs.”

Since Patrik Gustafsson began working in preschool at the beginning of the 1990s an awful lot has happened. Preschool has got its own curriculum, preschool teacher training has been redesigned – both this way and that – and the view of why we have preschool at all has also changed.

He also feels that the perception of men working in preschool is not the same now as it was then.

“We now set greater store by the teaching being provided rather than by the idea that it’s great that men teachers are men.”

So what’s it like with things such as ball games and wrestling; are you expected to do more of that sort of thing?

“No, I think that was more common before. The expectation in those days was that you’d do particular things like woodworking, playing bandy and so on. A lot has changed.”

So how do you avoid ending up doing those things?

“You have to work at it yourself, I think, to ensure you don’t suddenly find yourself doing typical male activities. I don’t need to be the person doing those things. And if I were to stumble into that, I’ve got level-headed colleagues who ensure that we share the tasks.”

At present there are three men working at Fyrklövern, but at times Patrik Gustafsson has been the only man there. He has never actually considered this a problem, but thinks it’s good that there are now more male colleagues.

“I was the only man for quite a long time, and there were at most five of us. When there were more of us, I found that actually it was quite enjoyable. And this was perhaps mostly because it’s good if you get a mix of people. It’s not that we had particularly male things to talk about; it was just that we developed a good dynamic.”

Is there any difference between the men coming into preschool today and the situation when you started?

“They sport more tattoos today, haha! But seriously, it feels as though the ones in my generation and those who are 25 today are quite similar to each other. I found my year group to be creative and artistic, and all my friends of my own age see this business of equality as being a given. And it seems as though those who are aged around 25 share quite a similar view to ours on things. That’s something I find interesting.”

When Patrik Gustafsson tells people that he works in preschool, he gets different reactions. Some are surprised, others pleased. But one thing he has discovered is that there are many more people than you would think – including men – who feel some sort of connection to preschool.

“What you often find is that many have worked in preschool, that they’ve done a stint there at some point. And then there are many who remember what great fun it was working with other people and the fact that there are so many different ways of working in preschool.”

Just having contact with other people and the great freedom that is offered by the profession are aspects he thinks should be emphasised more in attracting staff to preschool. He sees this as one of the very strongest advantages, and believes that these aspects are at times overlooked.

“Sometimes it can feel a bit forced talking about why we like working here. The idea that the profession is also so creative and fun can get lost at times. It offers so many amazing opportunities for working in a place where no one day is the same. No matter how many years you spend in this job, there are always new things happening.

Many municipalities try to attract young men to preschool by encouraging them while they are still at school, such as by offering a placement or a summer job.

Fyrklövern takes many year eight pupils, and both Patrik Gustafsson and the others have noticed that the men who come to work there really like that. He also thinks it is a good way to plant the idea in their minds about returning to work there.

“A few terms back we had four lads from year eight all at the same time. It was a bit awkward to begin with; we thought they’d bring the place down and we wondered what we’d let ourselves in for. They were like four hysterical play leaders, but in the end they calmed down and it was great to see how much they enjoyed helping the youngest children and being with them. So I believe in starting early.

A number of the PRAO (practical work experience) pupils had attended Fyrklövern themselves and had Patrik Gustafsson as their teacher. That sort of reunion has made him really see what an important job that he and the others do.

“When they come back you see that they’re the same people they were when they attended the preschool. The time spent at preschool is really important; I probably didn’t cotton on to this at the beginning, but now I really see how important these years are.

The returning employee

There are many ways of entering work in preschool. Some make a conscious effort to get in. Others end up there by chance and stay put. And there are also those who do what Viktor Bergsten did: they come back.

After ten years of teaching in schools he is now thinking of working in preschool after his paternity leave ends.

“I’ve realised more and more how much I miss it. So I’m now leaving school teaching and starting to work in preschool again.”

So what has he been missing? During our conversation he draws up a list of five reasons. Reasons that say a lot about what it is like working in preschool and why he thinks more men should be applying to get in.

The first reason is being able to witness on a day-to-day basis the children’s joy of discovery and to see how they develop.

“The joy of discovery doesn’t always have to be something that comes from them to begin with, but show anything that looks exciting to a preschool child and they almost never shy away from it. It is these small things in everyday life that you can pick up on and that end up filling an entire day. They are so naturally inquisitive and their questions about why and how never dry up.”



Viktor Bergsten.

Do you have any concrete examples of this sort of thing?

“There was one day when the children felt more like doing painting than going out. No doubt they felt it was a bit too chilly. So we took bottles of paint out with us and painted in the snow. But the snow melted on coming into contact with the water, and so we began talking about why that was. It ended with us taking snow indoors and seeing it melt. We tested different methods and also talked about how much rubbish was found in the snow.”

His second reason for returning to preschool is something that is so simple but still important, and that is laughter and joy. When he compares everyday life at school with that at preschool, he sees that there is more laughter going on in preschool. And even if laughter per se might be considered banal, he points out that it both releases endorphins and confirms a sense of togetherness.

“It probably has a lot to do with the fact that we spend more time together and get closer to each other. Sometimes it might just take a certain look or approach, and you think ‘I know you so well that I’m confident you’ll like this.’ The child then reacts immediately and sees that I have understood what he or she likes to hear.”

That said, Viktor Bergsten emphasises that getting close not only to the children but also to one’s colleagues is really important. This is his third reason for wanting to return. He feels that the close collaboration between colleagues in the work team is something that needs to be experienced by others.

He feels that the close contact with colleagues not only is important from a social perspective but also means a lot for one’s own professional develop-

ment. For his part, he remembers how much he learned from two older colleagues – a man and a woman – who had worked in preschool since the 1970s.

“The contact we had with each other in the department was fantastic. There was an adult dialogue going on the entire day. Even though it was fragmented and interrupted at times, we had the time to sit and discuss things. It was enriching.”

What was the most important area of progress that took place during your time in preschool in terms of your role as teacher?

“The skill that I learned to near perfection there and that has served me really well in school is the ability to capture the children’s attention and keep it. The idea that you can gather all the children about you in a ring and look at a leaf, say, and find that really exciting – even if it actually isn’t. That is something you must be able to do as a preschool teacher, otherwise you lose the children’s attention straight away.”

Viktor Bergsten’s fourth reason for hankering back to preschool is to do with those who are not actually there but still play a crucial role: the parents. He has missed the frequent and informal contact with them that he had in his role as a preschool teacher.

“It’s that hallway routine, where you can find out how things are going. Even if the parent is stressed you manage to exchange a few words and get a better understanding about the child. It can be anything from “Grandad has just died” to “Things are a bit chaotic at home just now”, and that gives me extra information for when I see the child.

The final reason for wanting to return to preschool is something as simple – but still important – as being outdoors and having fresh air. Just these two factors were in fact crucial reasons for his becoming a preschool teacher at the outset. He was out cycling and went past a preschool where children and their teachers were enjoying one of the first sunny days of spring that year.

“The children had thrown off their jackets and were basking in as much sunshine as they could. It looked wonderful! I thought that looked like much more fun than fitting cables in industrial premises.”

After talking a while to Viktor Bergsten, it is almost impossible not to feel at least a little tempted by the thought of applying to preschool. There are many elements of the work there that are valued highly today: it offers freedom, is evolving, and offers great variety. The question is, then, why doesn’t it attract more men than it does today?

“I am totally convinced that this is a gender issue. People can’t see the wood for the trees. They think that working at preschool mostly involves changing nappies and that sort of thing, and they don’t see what the job really involves.”

So what is your best piece of advice for attracting more men to preschool?

“Study advisers and careers officers have a good opportunity just to plant the idea. I think most of them have the impression that it’s poorly paid and involves runny noses and smelly nappies. That’s probably because preschool or people who could play a critical role have failed to make it clear how enjoyable and multifaceted this work is.

Also the labour market looks amazingly good for preschool teachers, which is a factor concerning young people these days.”

Which ways should not be used then for reaching these young men?

“I think that showing men doing traditional male things in preschool is definitely not the way to go. Those are not the men we want to bring in, and they are presumably not a bit interested either.”

What do you think the situation will look like in ten years’ time?

“I think the labour market could play into the hands of the preschools in terms of their vision to bring in more men. It is a happy, dynamic and secure workplace. If this message is successfully put across, there is every reason to expect the proportion of men to increase.”



“Male” role models in preschool – what is meant by this?

Any discussion of male teachers and child carers in preschool includes a term that keeps cropping up: role model. But what is meant by role model; what might being a “male role model” involve, and is it a practical term to use if we wish to attract more men to preschool?

In “Tio små förskolebarn” (Ten Small Preschool Children), a story by Ulf Nilsson and Lisen Adbåge, two teachers, Maria and Fredrik, are taking their preschool children on a winter outing. We see a picture of toboggans, hats, helmets and gloves. Fredrik and Maria are together with the children, both seem to work in the same way with the children, and they also seem to be teachers in the same department, who are familiar with the children, and the children seem to be familiar with them.

It is precisely this that is highlighted in a number of studies (Sargent 2005, Martino 2008); namely, the idea that men who are entering preschool or already working in preschool want to work there on the same terms as do women. They want to contribute to the development and quality of the preschool as professional colleagues rather than be in preschool primarily on the basis of their sex.

The term “male role model” is often used as meaning something that children in preschool need. Sometimes those who say that men should serve as role models in preschool are thinking – perhaps unconsciously – of a very

specific type of man with specific qualities. Maybe what they have in mind is that these men should in some way stand for greater discipline and be an example to the children, especially the boys, of how a man should be, and should perhaps introduce more rough-and-tumble and physical movement in preschool. But the question that remains hanging in the air after voicing such thoughts and expectations is: Isn't this already happening? And if not, what is the point of men in particular serving this role?

Does that improve the boys' behaviour?

The issue of male role models is closely connected to the notion that these can have a direct influence on the behaviour of children (often boys). Behaviour and gender identification are conceivable explanations as to why men might be needed as role models. The desired result that men are expected to help bring about is more positive gender socialisation; that is, the ability of boys to identify with their own gender and a positive influence on the process of becoming a girl or a boy.

However, the researcher Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen believes that gender socialisation is an outmoded and far too narrow-minded way of explaining how girls and boys indeed become girls and boys (in Bredesen 2003). She believes that gender socialisation is no longer about only being in company of adults of the same gender but also about the way in which these adults reinforce the kinds of behaviour and verbal expression of girls and boys.

Current research shows that children spend far more time working out the significance of different social categories and the freedoms and constraints these provide in the children's everyday lives than we have previously believed. Today children are no longer expected to be passive recipients of life around them. Studies from the child perspective show instead how children interpret and negotiate the meaning of the impressions they receive. This has a bearing too on the question of the significance of having more men in preschool. The role model thinking is that men should be there for the sake of the children and their gender identification – something which according to the Swedish curriculum is not a task of preschool.

Many Anglo-Saxon countries have reformulated the problem of bringing more men into preschool (or often into school generally) at policy level, and have felt that having more men in preschool would successfully address the boys' lack of commitment to learning and the subsequent drop in their falling school grades because the men would serve as good role models (Skelton,

2002, 2003; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004). The thinking here is that there must be a direct link between a child having a teacher of the same sex and that child then automatically learning more and making greater progress.

The thinking above takes no account of personality, individuality or “personal chemistry”, and all that remains is the notion of gender sameness. According to this notion of sameness, all those who are of the “same” gender are the same, think the same, like each other, get on well with each other, identify with and look up to each other. This interaction never crosses gender boundaries; rather, one’s role models are by definition of the same sex as oneself.

This notion of likeness is a drastically simplified view. That is not to say that gender identification does not take place, but it may not affect everyone in the same way and it may not be based on the fact that everyone needs gender identification for their learning and development.





Illustration: Lisen Adbåge. From the book "Stora boken om ABC och 123".

Does the gender of the teacher matter to learning?

There is research that shows that gender does not have a direct link between the potential for learning and development (Helbig, 2011). On the contrary, one example of this is provided by Lahelma (2000), who shows that the pupils themselves regard the skills the teacher has as far more important for their learning than is his or her gender. Similar conclusions have been drawn by other researchers to whom reference is made in McGrath and Sinclair (2013).

A teacher in preschool would consider their skills to be the ability to listen to children, respect them, see the work they do from the children's perspective and challenge the children's learning and development at an appropriate level. Lahelma (2000) bases her argument on who it is that sees the lack of men as a problem: the other teachers or the children/pupils? Lahelma takes the view that it is the other teachers who consider this a problem rather than

the pupils. She shows examples of how the teachers would prefer to see more men working as teachers, since they think this would have an impact on wage development and discussion in the teachers' room/staffroom.

What is the most tangible problem associated with the notion of male role models?

Making the assumption that the men coming into preschool should act as male role models for boys specifically also means creating the perception that only certain men can live up to the idea of these role models. Such an assumption poses a strong risk that some men will exclude themselves or will be excluded by others. There are also several examples of men exaggerating their masculine behaviour on occasion to live up to that kind of male norm in preschool (Williams, 1993) – a norm which, to make matters more complicated, is not given expression. Men are expected instead to understand this norm on a subtle, implicit level.

This is what Smith (2005) has written in McGrath and Sinclair (2013):

“The notion of being a role model places unrealistic and confusing expectations on men, as they deal with the contradictory idea of modelling masculinity while doing a job commonly regarded as women’s work.”

Role models are not the answer for Sweden

What is interesting in this context is that the predominant arguments heard in Sweden just now are not at all rooted in this idea that men should enter preschool so as to be male role models. The patterns we are familiar with from Swedish studies go against some of the international research on men in preschool. In Cushman’s opinion (2010), this is because these men live in Sweden and not in England or New Zealand as do the men she has studied.

Her results indicate that there are national differences between the ways in which men in preschool perceive themselves because there are differences in what she calls a “national consciousness”: She writes: “In Sweden every teacher considered the strong emphasis placed by their society on gender equity, and their approach and practice demonstrated a high degree of knowledge and awareness of gender aspects” (my transl.) (Cushman, 2010, p. 1217–1218).

Sumsion’ study (2000) presents the arguments made by men working in preschool about their having the same role in relation to children as do women in preschool. This can be compared to the study by Anliak and Beyazkurk

(2008) which indicates a trend where men feel they are there to supplement the women and give the children and especially boys the tools for the future.

These results when taken together point to the fact that both arguments for a national discourse on why men should work in preschool and on an openness and understanding of gender-related issues in the national/local context, in which men in preschool play a part, are important to the way the issue is perceived and pursued and takes root. Kimmel (2010) also feels that a discussion at national level is extremely important for the way in which gender and masculinity are constructed and for which limitations are set by such construction.

What do men in preschool want to do?

The idea that men play a special part as role models in preschool originates in many cases from various policy documents. Policies which are often put forward without the backing of research and what men in preschool have themselves to say on the matter.

Sumsion (2000) shows that the men in her study would like to make a difference by demonstrating how one can be a man in other ways and thus distance themselves from the stereotypical male. The students presented in her study also reflected on the fact they work in a so-called feminine occupation.

In the story "Tio små förskolebarn" (Ten Small Preschool Children) by Ulf Nilsson and Lisen Adbåge, Fredrik is a teacher in the eyes of the children and of the other teacher, Maria. He has no particularly masculine role to play during the outing but simply does what a teacher is expected to do. The picture shows how some children are at play, some are asleep and some are about to go to sleep, and Fredrik would appear to be in charge of this. This is not about idealising men's place in preschool but about normalising it: men are employees, women are employees.

Taking the view that men should be role models could mean that not all men would be welcome in preschool. And should we then single out particular men? Could we in that case also start singling out particular women who should work in preschool? Or would different perspectives apply in that case?

The problem with the idea that men in preschool should be male role models is that it both says that men should be a certain kind of men and says that the women in preschool today do not have the particular qualities that we expect of the men. This idea therefore encompasses both a criticism of the women already in preschool and the work they do and a view that distinguishes between men and women in relation to the children. The idea also encompasses a criticism of the men already in preschool and not living up to the often hidden expectations of the "real" men who should serve as role models.

It is very easy to end up with a paradox which states that “women have these qualities” and “men have other qualities”.

What is also happening is that the meaning attached to the term “role model” has consequences for the methods we use to bring more men into preschool and for the expectations we have of the work of preschool and staff.

The fundamental question is and remains: Who is a role model, and who is not? Who knows who would be a role model for somebody? Which are the masculine norms that male role models are intended to present and communicate? Why are these so desirable? If we feel that men should be role models, is every man invited to be one? Or, to put it another way, could the notion of a male role model be purely counterproductive to the aim of encouraging more men to apply for work in preschool?

Could it be that a number of men exclude themselves because they don't regard themselves as being “real” men as defined by the norm, given that few men in reality match up to the ideal of the prevailing norms on masculinity?



Illustration: Lisen Adbåge. From the book "Stora boken om ABC och 123".

How can theories of masculinity be of help in understanding the dilemma regarding "male role models"?

Critical studies of masculinity belong to a field of research that has evolved from feminist studies but where the focus lies on understanding male social gender and the way men's patterns of social behaviour are influenced precisely by the fact that they are men. Critical studies of masculinity see society in the same way as does feminist research; they see a structured balance of power giving men and women different privileges and differing degrees of resistance in different contexts (Connell, Hearn & Kimmel, 2005).

In the course of his research, Michael Kimmel (2008, 2010) has drawn up a "list" of ten aspects of what it means to be a man. Kimmel (2008) believes that every man can relate in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, to the points in this list. The list points to the qualities referred to by different advocates who speak of the need for men to be role models in preschool (and school). One example is the results of a study by Cushman (2008) of head teachers, which is an attempt to formulate their understanding of role models in line with this list.

Kimmel's list of "real" men:

1. "Boys don't cry"
2. "It's better to be mad than sad"
3. "Don't get mad – get even!"
4. "Take it like a man"
5. "He who has the most toys when he dies, wins"
6. "Just do it!"
7. "Size matters"
8. "I don't stop to ask for directions"
9. "Nice guys finish last"
10. "It's all good"

Kimmel (2008) believes that the underlying text connected to each point contains aspects of the importance of not showing feelings or admitting any weakness, and of the idea that "winning is the most important of all".

Connell (1995/2008) addresses in her book *Masculinities* the notion of a "hegemonic masculinity"; that is, she explores the question of whether one can say there is a kind of normative masculinity or whether that sort of claim cannot be made. An approximate definition of hegemonic masculinity is that there is a predominant notion of what masculinity is and that is easy to believe to be true.

Connell concludes that so-called “hegemonic masculinity” of this kind has been changing through history and time, and believes that no one universal model exists to describe masculinity. Instead, she regards the essence of masculinity as being an object of empirical study, and feels that we need to open our eyes to the fact that men too carry with them a social gender that both imposes restrictions and grants privileges, in the same way as was achieved by research in women’s studies on women and the conditions in life faced by women. Connell believes that not all men have power over all women, and that a model that states that all men have power over all women should be challenged.

Men who have trained as preschool teachers and work in preschool need to be able to relate to the male norm but do not need to live up to it. Nevertheless, the notion that men should be role models above all could risk reinforcing this norm. The notion of being a role model often has the implicit and unstated meaning that men should show proof of their male qualities in practice. It is seldom clear what male role models should demonstrate and which qualities should be brought to the fore, but if we regard the list as a kind of benchmark for normative masculinity we can also assume that men are meant to show boys and girls how they exemplify the qualities given in the list of what “real” men are like.



In my opinion, the idea that men should be role models reinforces a hegemonic male norm and also the stereotypical perceptions of men and women as having different qualities. Such a notion of the role model could therefore mean that not all men will feel welcome as colleagues in preschool. A starting point such as this on why men work in preschool will also make it much more difficult to achieve the curriculum goals of combating the stereotypical gender roles between girls and boys. Wording of this kind is seldom contained in steering documents in Anglo-Saxon countries, which is why it is easier for the notion of the role model to take root there.

There is a way forward if we are to have the notion of the role model, and this is something I choose to call the ability of men to act as "equal role models"; that is to say, that men can show another side to the image of normative masculinity. As Smith (2005) has shown, there is an inherent contradiction between demonstrating these aspects of normative masculinity while at the same time working in a profession coded as being feminine, such as that of a preschool teacher or child carer.

Being a role model on equal terms might then mean representing a broader and more flexible way of being a man than the normative – something which the men in preschool today already do in a sense, in that they work in a profession that is coded as feminine. They might be role models by breaching a male norm that places certain expectations on them on the basis of a fairly well established kind of masculinity, and thus demonstrate other ways in which one can be a man.

Conclusion

I have tried in this chapter to address the problems inherent in the idea that male role models are needed for the sake of the boys in preschool and school. I have also tried to show the dilemmas that can result from that way of thinking. Men risk feeling the pressure of expectations that are implicit and hard to reconcile with being a man and a human being, and women risk being criticised for not being able to provide that kind of gender identification to boys. The notion of gender identification is called into question, and its significance for learning and development is not entirely clear-cut.

I believe that the notion of men serving as role models in preschool discourages other men from choosing to enter it. It places men in a narrow pigeonhole and risks reinforcing traditional views of how men should be. A better reason for wanting to have more men in preschool is that this would improve the chances men would have of breaching traditional gender norms in practice, and thus help to normalise new gender patterns.

I would like to end with a final image from the story “Tio små förskolebarn” (Ten Small Preschool Children) (Nilsson & Adbåge, 2012), where Fredrik – in my eyes at least – is able to be present and work in preschool on his own terms and in his own way as a man. And hopefully he also finds fulfilment as a man and a human being, and all that that entails in terms of opportunities and challenges in his work, but this applies just as much to a teacher who is a woman and a human being. Not that they should be the same.

Both men and women display patterns of thought and behaviour that we know we might not choose for ourselves, and at the same time we challenge these patterns and find alternative ways of creating a life for ourselves that is our own as far as possible. We will continue to set examples of this kind to the children where we all act as role models on gender equal terms.



Illustration: Lisen Adbåge. From the book “Stora boken om ABC och 123”.

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CHAPTER 5

More men in preschool in Norway than in Sweden

Why is the proportion of male employees in preschool higher in Norway than in Sweden? What are the different factors that have contributed to the greater proportion of men in Norwegian preschool at local and national level? How can we compare the Norwegian and Swedish perspectives on gender equality in preschool?

As regards the recruitment of men, Norway is described as a success story: the best in Europe given that 8.7 per cent (in 2013) of all employees in Norwegian preschool were men. The corresponding figure for Sweden was 3 per cent. Extensive efforts have been made in Norway to recruit men to 'barnehage', the Norwegian preschool. In 2001 the Norwegian government set a target of a 20% proportion of male employees in preschool by the year 2007. Although this target was not achieved – the proportion of men in preschool reached 10.3 per cent by 2007 – efforts are continuing to achieve the 20 per cent target of men in preschool. The proportion of preschools that had at least one male employee was 45 per cent in 2010.

A policy overview carried out by the Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK) of Nordic policy on gender equality as regards men in particular analysed the measures taken to attract more men to preschool. The Institute stated that the Norwegian project stands out in terms of its having a long history and targets set at national level and presented in the government's action plans. Furthermore, the programme has coordinated the efforts of many actors at national, regional, county and municipal level. There has been political

unanimity among various groupings of government representatives in Norway on the need for men in preschool. One example of the emphasis being placed on this issue by the Norwegian state is its sanctioning of positive discrimination towards men. Unlike Sweden, the Norwegian government has for over a decade emphasised the importance of the efforts to attract more men to preschool, and has directed these efforts in the form of setting out targets in its action plans, disseminating information, and implementing support measures for the recruitment of men.

The “Men in Preschool” network (MiB) has been made available on the Internet on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research as an arena for the exchange of experiences for all those seeking to attract more men into Norwegian preschool. As a support to the recruitment process itself, the Resource Centre for Men (Reform) has developed a guide on the basis of these regulations that suggests reasonable quotas and ways to prevent men leaving.

In Norway the setting of reasonable gender quotas for positions in preschool has been encouraged so as to increase the proportion of men, which means that a man might be chosen over a woman where the two have the same or roughly the same skills. The Norwegian legislation governing the positive discrimination of men stipulates, for example, that an employer may state in a job advert that they encourage men to apply. The guide also stipulates that “radical gender quotas”, whereby a person belonging to the under-represented sex is employed despite having poorer merits, is not permitted in Norway.

Quotas are not permitted in Sweden either. That said, the Swedish Discrimination Act does permit positive discrimination in certain cases and under certain conditions. One reason for this is to increase the representation of the under-represented sex in the workplace.

Find the men!

Norway has invested a lot of effort in providing information and marketing with the aim of changing attitudes as to who may work in preschool. Apart from MiB and Reform there are, for example, “themed booklets” available on the Ministry of Education and Research website containing information and advice on what preschool heads can do to encourage men to apply to preschool and then keep them there; i.e. prevent them leaving. The challenge is “not to expect that men will come to you – you go and find them!”

The advice given in guides and themed booklets is very concrete and detailed and encourages measures such as advertising for male trainees, having a male mentor/teaching instructor for a male trainee/student, wording job adverts that will appeal to men, calling all male applicants to a job interview, and ideally making sure that the men working in preschool have a visible profile in the local press.



The booklet entitled “Temahefte om menn i barnehagen, om å rekruttere og beholde menn i barnehage” (Men in preschool and recruiting and retaining men in preschool) (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006) looks at the reasons why more men should be recruited and why preschool does not attract men, the obstacles faced by men, what happens on starting work in preschool, and suggestions for an action plan to employ and retain men in preschool. The content looks at the ins and outs of why so few men choose to work in preschool, and also looks at the problems associated with preschool culture which is defined as being female and is assumed to be an area men do not find appealing or feel uncomfortable about working in.

The booklet sets out the argument that the prevailing norms and culture in preschool, such as its decor, activities and names/choice of words should

be changed so as not be associated solely with the home and femininity – a change assumed to attract more men who can then make their own (new) mark on the profession. The booklet describes the expectations placed on men introducing an element into the female-dominated preschool of today that does not yet exist. At the same time the authors warn that stereotypical expectations of men and masculinity risk driving men away. They maintain too that there are also women who have the skills and interests often ascribed to men.

A lower level of skills is one explanation

Another important explanation for the difference between Norway and Sweden is most likely that the skills requirements are lower in Norway. The statistical category covering “employees in preschool” includes preschool teachers, those who hold different teaching qualifications, those who have followed the Curriculum for Child Care and Youth Work (the equivalent of the study programme at Swedish upper secondary school), and assistants and other staff (such as caretakers).

The staff category covering “assistants” constitutes approximately two thirds of all those working in Norwegian preschool, and is thus the largest group working directly with children. Approximately one fourth of the assistants are qualified to work in preschool (such as those who followed the Curriculum for Child Care and Youth Work or undertook another form of teacher training). Approximately half of all men in Norwegian preschool are employed as assistants, the rest being either at managerial level or educational leaders or else belonging to “other groups of employees”, with most belonging to this latter group.

An educational leader as defined in terms of professional category is someone who is on the management team of a preschool and heads a preschool department, and has overall responsibility for educational planning, implementation and documentation. According to the law, all educational leaders in preschool must be qualified preschool teachers, but it is possible to apply for dispensation.

Encouraging young men to work as assistants in preschool is a strategy used in the hope that more of them will study to become preschool teachers, and this strategy is seen in a number of projects throughout Norway. For example, during the autumn of 2014 the seven municipalities making up Sogn og Fjordane County were invited by its County Governor to take part in a recruitment project for boys. Boys aged 14-15 years were invited to take on paid work at a preschool as a “play resource” after school hours or during the

school holidays. The municipal preschools were offered financial remuneration for taking on these boys and, where possible, offered a male mentor. The aim was to increase the proportion of men working in preschool in the County from the prevailing level at that time of 8.7 per cent.

Offering work to only one of the sexes, which in Sweden would probably be incompatible with the Discrimination Act, would thus seem to be no obstacle in Norway.

Preschools which have been successful are given national publicity

Sørlandet together with Vest-Agder and Aust-Agder Counties run Fritt valg (free choice), a ten-year project which was started in 2008 with the overriding aim of helping to achieve an even gender balance in professional life. There is a preschool called Hokus Pokus in Kristiansand which in 2008 was designated a “showroom preschool” by the government thanks to its successful efforts to achieve greater gender equality. The government awarded the name of showroom preschool to 12 preschools which had achieved a minimum proportion of 20 per cent of men on their staff. The aim was to show success stories and to broadcast the experiences of these by providing financial support.



The two heads and an educational leader were interviewed in the report entitled “Measures for achieving sustainable gender equality in preschools and schools in the Nordic Region” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2013), where they explained how they had developed their measures to achieve gender equality as of the time they started out in 2001. At first their efforts were entirely focused on employing more men. In connection with a period of new construction whose architecture and interior design were intended to break down “the feel of a domestic environment”, fresh recruitment took place which increased the proportion of men in preschool to 30 per cent by 2004.

In that same year the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs in Norway issued an Action Plan for Equality 2004–2007, which, as well as having the quantitative goal of 20 per cent of male employees, also had a target relating to educational equality: “Equal status and equal worth shall form the basis of all activities and teaching in preschool.” According to the national action plan, having a greater proportion of men is key to bringing about greater gender equality in preschool. At the same time emphasis is placed on the importance of being aware that male members of staff can also help reproduce traditional gender roles, such as the notion that it is men who kick balls and women who string beads. This is also exactly what the heads of Hokus Pokus were aware of.



More men – but what happened to gender equality?

The Preschool Head, Sigrid Nyhus, explains: “It was early winter in 2004 when it became clear to me that we needed to regard gender equality as an area of educational development. We were making efforts to recruit, but what were the roles we were to give to the men? Naturally we didn’t want to reinforce old gender roles!” Sigrid says that as the number of men increased a gender-traditional division of labour became apparent between the male and female employees at Hokus Pokus, a tendency that has also been highlighted by research.

The reason why Norway has been encouraging more men to enter preschool has primarily been to break down gender divisions in the labour market. If children see both men and women working in preschool, the hope is that more boys will choose to work in preschool in the future, which will in turn result in professional and social life being based on greater gender equality. “Gender-traditional choices of education and occupation are among the most important determining factors for the systematic differences that exist between men and women in professional and social life. This we need to try and change,” Bård Vegar Solheil, Minister of Education, stated in a press release at the launch of a new action plan for greater gender equality in schools and preschools in 2008.

The two main targets given priority in the new action plan were for the learning environment in preschool and compulsory school to promote gender equality and for the gender balance seen in the choices of studies/profession made by employees in preschool and compulsory school to be rectified. (In the case of compulsory school, the government target is for men to constitute at least 40 per cent of the employees.) Preschool and compulsory school are therefore seen as having significance in the long-term efforts to achieve a gender balance in professional life.

This long-term approach also applies to the work being done at Hokus Pokus, according to Sigrid Nyhus: “We think, hope and pray that by 2022 at any rate 50% of our employees will be men. That men will find working in preschool even more attractive than they do now. That preschool teacher training is capable of attracting more men. Because this is a hugely important profession. I’m also thinking about those children who are at my preschool today, that when they are at school and about to go off on a placement they will look back to the time when they themselves were at preschool and think, ‘I’d like to work in preschool because it was great having both men and women there.’”



Put gender equality into practice

At the same time there is growing emphasis on the importance of employees in preschool to reflect on their own expectations of girls and boys: “Equality between the sexes should be reflected in the teaching of the preschool.” Preschool should educate children to seek and create a society of equals ... The staff need to reflect on their own attitudes to girls and boys and society’s expectations of them” (Framework Plan for 2006).

Even before the new curriculum came out in 2006, the management team at Hokus Pokus had introduced gender equality as an area of educational priority. During 2004-2005 the staff made intensive efforts to raise awareness of the way girls and boys were treated and of the expectations made of them, and the management team felt that they received strong support for their work when the new government plan came out in 2006.

“It was when we were working on this very issue that the action plan from the Ministry landed on our door mat! It was just a case of snatching it up and saying YES! This work is being done at national level! It was absolutely great. We had their support. We had decided on this before the action plan came out – and that’s when everyone thought that what we were doing was a good idea.”

The employees are careful not to repeat traditional gender patterns in their teaching. The focus placed on male and female representation has been extended to include the tasks to be done and employee expectations of children on the basis of gender. When asked whether the staff thought of themselves as being good role models, the educational leader Thor Åmli at Hokus Pokus said: “Yes, absolutely ... for instance, when something needs repairing a man and a woman should do it – but first and foremost a woman should.”

Thor Åmli also says that the staff are aware of their own actions and the language they use so as not to reinforce expectations of the children being, looking or acting in a certain way on the basis of their being a girl or a boy. He also gives examples of how he and his colleagues can shape free choice and break down stereotypical expectations. Using one’s own biological gender in a symbolic way to represent the values to live by is effective, and is probably more effective than just declaring that “everyone may choose the colour they like”.

The symbolic approach and representational role in promoting gender equality that has been developed at Hokus Pokus is something that its Head, Sigrid Nyhus, also feels is important for achieving gender equality: “I don’t mean that we should all be just the same. But if you work with children you have the task of showing them the possibilities that exist. When the boys were talking about colours for girls and colours for boys, two of the men went out and bought pink hats. Then one of the children said, ‘You’ve got a girl’s hat on!’ The teacher said, ‘No, I’ve got a hat on.’ So no more was said on that subject. You show by your actions that you’re breaking away from something.”

At the time of the interview at Hokus Pokus it had been 11 years since the management team had initiated measures to achieve gender equality that had developed from gender representation among the staff to a symbolic division of tasks and teaching content. The measures taken by Hokus Pokus to develop a more gender and norm-aware approach to its teaching would, however, seem to be a particularly good example. The experiences gained at Hokus Pokus showed that focusing on quantitative gender equality in the workplace does not automatically result in teaching content that combats traditional gender patterns and gender roles.

This is also an issue that researchers in Norway have raised and where they have identified problems: “The idea that recruiting men will ensure greater gender equality should in our opinion be revised. There is not necessarily a connection between having more men in preschool and achieving gender

equality, unless this is incorporated in the teaching and the division of labour between men and women in preschool” (Kasin & Vaagan, 2011).

The Ministry of Education and Research also highlights in its Action Plan for Gender Equality (2014) the fact that surveys have shown there is little awareness of equality and gender roles on the part of employees, and it states that any knowledge about practical measures for introducing greater gender equality in preschool would seem to be lacking.

Norway and Sweden – different routes

The focus on achieving greater gender equality in Swedish preschools has not primarily been on even gender representation among employees. Rather, Sweden has been focused on removing the barriers that prevent children being shaped by the perceptions of femininity and masculinity on the part of those around them/their teachers.

The Swedish preschool curriculum states: “The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, and the demands and expectations placed on them, help to shape their perceptions of what is male and female.” “Girls and boys in preschool should have the same opportunities to test and develop their abilities and interests without the restraints of stereotypical gender roles.” The Swedish approach has therefore been more reserved in terms of seeing the efforts made to recruit men to preschool as being a step towards greater gender equality there. Instead of gender affiliation, it is professional competence that has been emphasised – and above all gender awareness, since “gender equality in preschool” is linked to content and not primarily to the labour market.

The Swedish Delegation for Equality in Preschool states in its final report (2006) the importance of complying with efforts at Nordic level to attract more men into preschool, but warns that “stereotypical gender patterns are reinforced if the focus lies on men being needed just to bring to preschool a gender-related dynamic”. So while Norway has focused on recruiting men with the aim of children coming into contact with both male and female employees in preschool, Sweden has focused on treating children in a way that does not restrict them on the basis of gender affiliation. However, the one does not need to exclude the other. For example, in 2013 the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research justified measures for bringing men into Swedish preschool by saying: “It is important that children in preschool are able to come into contact with a variety of different members of staff – in terms of both gender and other factors.” This is therefore about both even gender distribution and gender awareness in order to achieve greater gender equality in teaching.



The purpose of my writing this article has been to highlight reasons for Norway having a greater proportion of male employees in preschool than Sweden. In summary it can be said that Norway has deliberately sought to achieve the 20 per cent target of male employees. Norway practises positive discrimination in a more active way than does Sweden, and it also has a broader recruitment base than does Sweden given its lower skills requirements. Both Sweden and Norway view gender equality as a political goal, and this is formulated in the steering documents for preschool in both countries. Sweden has not had such a strong focus on representation; that is to say, the idea that girls and boys see men and women in all kinds of professions so as to counter stereotypical gender patterns in their choice of education and occupation. Sweden has instead focused on raising awareness in order to fulfil the requirements set out in the curriculum for breaking down traditional gender patterns and gender roles among children.

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Skills are more important than gender in Umeå

Does a gender-sensitive preschool need to have as many female as male employees? No, the important thing is that the knowledge and skills of each member of staff complement one another. So says Maria Viksten, a preschool head in Umeå.

Despite being situated in Central Umeå, the rooms at Hedlunda Preschool are filled with fir cones, needles and branches. The children are able to follow step by step the transformation of an apple from a fruit to mould under a plate of glass. Knowledge and inquisitiveness are important elements in their work.

The teaching at Hedlunda is inspired by Reggio Emilia and is based on the eagerness of the children to explore, learn and develop in interaction with each other. According to the Preschool's operational plan, "children are co-creators of their own knowledge and the shared knowledge of those around them". This plan is very much in line with the task of the Preschool to both embrace equality and be financially, ecologically and socially sustainable.

Strongest focus on gender

Despite the different tasks carried out by Preschool, public and media focus has mostly been on gender. The idea that an extensive recruitment process should result in a staff of ten women and two men has been hard to understand for some. And the debate in the social media has not been slow in coming.

“If you’re going to start up a gender-sensitive preschool, you **MUST** have as many men as women, and children **MUST** be treated as girls and boys on an **INDIVIDUAL BASIS!**” was one example given in a comments field.

But not everyone agrees.

A little further down in the same field a person who signs himself “Anton” writes:

“Gender is not about eradicating gender but about treating everyone equally. I feel there are far too many people who haven’t understood this, which also seems to be borne out by the comments shown here.”

Plenty of time for planning and reflection

Preschool Head Maria Viksten and Assistant Director of Education Lennart Jonsson were not particularly surprised at the debate. However, they were surprised by the tone of the criticism.

“I have never doubted that we have recruited the right people, and I am most happy to explain our reasoning,” says Maria Viksten, who has chosen not to read all the comments made online.

In her opinion, the suitability of the staff has been primarily based on their ability to reflect on gender and equality and thus live up to the aim of the operational plan for “children to be treated as fellow human beings, like and unlike other people”.

She began working as Preschool Head part-time in August 2012 – two years before the Preschool opened – and has had plenty of time for planning and reflection. Together with the then School Area Manager Gun Stolt and the researcher Anna Olausson, one move she made was to take the course in Gender, Power and Society at Umeå University.

“During the course we gained an insight into current research, a knowledge of gender-sensitive teaching and learning, and the opportunity for reflection,” she says.

The special task of in-depth learning

Apart from the task of putting gender and equality into practice, Hedlunda Preschool has the political task of promoting more in-depth learning in these issues. According to Lennart Jonsson, the primary goal is to spread awareness within the Municipality.

“Hosting study visits and meeting people from different backgrounds and occupations is good further training for the staff,” he says.



In the long run the plan is that the Preschool will also accommodate a skills centre for teaching, learning and gender issues. At present Anna Olausson from the Department of Applied Educational Science at Umeå University is attached here on a part-time basis.

Shortly after being appointed, Maria Viksten was joined by Malin Lövgren, an educationalist who is Head of Teaching. Together they produced the operational plan which formed the basis for the job profile used in recruitment.

The actual recruitment took place during the spring of 2014. Since Maria Viksten's task was to challenge norms, she insisted on "stepping outside the box" and wrote her own advert which included an emphasis on the advantages of there being differences.

All employees working at Hedlunda Preschool are called teachers regardless of whether they are child carers or preschool teachers, and in Maria Viksten's view it was important for the adverts for child carers and preschool teachers to be the same from a "non-hierarchical" perspective.

In order still to be able to show the differences between the tasks of child carers and preschool teachers from the perspective of the steering document, she chose to add to one job advert the sentence: "In your capacity as child carer, you will carry out your work on the basis of the responsibility you are given and all the tasks that this entails as set out in the preschool curriculum".

The adverts were published as usual in the *Västerbotten-Kuriren* and *Folkbladet* newspapers, and attracted 88 preschool teachers and 134 child carers. This was more than had ever been attracted in the past, and in addition to this the applicants included people who had done teacher training or different kinds of gender studies and people who entirely lacked qualifications.

A good working team important for recruitment

Maria Viksten selected all the child carers and preschool teachers, and read the applications with a view to creating a good working team on the basis of the skills and differences of the applicants. She admits with hindsight that it was difficult not to look more favourably on applications from men or from people with an ethnic background other than Swedish. When she was doubtful she sought support from the Municipality's recruitment consultants, who pointed out the absurdity of "summoning to an interview those lacking the right skills just because they are men".

"Being a man is not of course a skill," Lennart Jonsson chimes in – he has himself been a preschool teacher in the past.

Maria Viksten remembers too how she had to remind herself that not everyone can or needs to be good at everything. Another way of reckoning shows that it is also possible to claim that men are in fact over-represented on the staff, since the group of applicants consisted of 194 women and 28 men.

Many different skills and experiences

The many applications submitted meant that the recruitment took time. Many ideas and methods were raised, discussed and rejected. One method that was decided against was all kinds of group interviews, since these tend to favour people with certain qualities at the same time that people with qualities that are different but still desirable draw the short straw.

In order to assess the concept of gender awareness, the applicants had to answer certain questions on gender and equality. One such example was: What does equality mean to you, and why should this be addressed in preschool?

"If we had just looked at their education history and credits, we would have automatically excluded most of the child carers," says Maria Viksten.

The recruitment eventually resulted in a team of staff representing many different skills and experiences. Out of nine preschool teachers and three child carers, one has only just qualified while others have worked in the profession for over 25 years. One of them has experience in dance, others in music or art. The staff also come from different ethnic backgrounds and have several different mother tongues between them.



Maria Viksten.

Easy to slip into jargon

How, then, do you see gender awareness put into practice in everyday working life?

The atelierista Rakel Neves Utterström is Head of Art, and she thinks for a moment while tidying up the common ground-floor studio after the morning's activities.

“I try to think of each child as an individual so I can keep track of what is going on around the child. It is easy to slip into a kind of jargon or unconscious behaviour,” she says, and mentions the difference between saying “fire fighters” and “firemen”. Another everyday example is that the squirrel in the nursery rhyme who sits in the fir tree and peels conifer cones is a ‘he’. Why is that? Must it be a he?

Before Hedlunda Preschool opened its doors to children and their parents, the newly appointed staff members underwent the same training. The first two weeks involved further training in theory at Idéan, the centre for teaching development in the Municipality. The final week was when everyone worked together on the Preschool premises. During the entire period of training it was only Maria Viksten and Malin Lövgren who knew what the work team was intended to look like.

“We wanted to keep all our options open, but our plan for the work team turned out to be an out and out success,” says Maria Viksten.

Templates for adverts make things easier for everyone

Linda Eberhardsson is a recruitment consultant in Umeå Municipality, and in her opinion it is difficult to repeat Hedlunda's recruitment process each time a preschool is looking for staff.

“Since recruitment is often needed in a hurry, we have analysed our adverts and drawn up new templates which we hope will attract a greater number and variety of applicants in the long run.”

One example of the wording included for encouraging greater diversity is: “We are seeking to create an organisation which is characterised by diversity and reflects the structure of our society. We know that differences are enriching, and we welcome everyone to apply for a job with us.” The Municipality's recruitment consultants also offer training to managers and trade union representatives several times a year.

Policy and action are going hand in hand towards the same goals

The initiative behind the gender profile at Hedlunda Preschool came originally from political quarters. Moa Brydsten is Chairman of the Municipality's Preschool and Compulsory School Committee, and she believes that many schools and preschools are already working in this spirit.

“What is so great in the case of Hedlunda Preschool is that it had a clear profile right from the start and that this is reflected in all that the Preschool does – from the recruitment of staff to the everyday work with the children.

In order to support this work, the Committee has set out clearly its wishes in a mission plan for preschool and educational care in the entire Municipality for 2013–2015. This includes the statement that “the efforts to achieve gender equality should actively discourage gender roles and gender-stereotypical choices. A gender budgeting analysis should be done of the allocation of resources for children with special rights (needs)”.

Everything is based on science

For Moa Brydsten, Hedlunda Preschool's success is proof that its measures and policy “go hand in hand”. In order to get there, it has also been important to devote extra time and resources to developing the work of the Preschool from the ground up and recruiting the right staff. Our hope is that with time we'll have a skills centre attached to the Preschool which will be able to share the knowledge and experiences it gathers with other organisations.

“Everything we do and all the methods we use at Hedlunda are to have a scientific basis,” she says.



Moa Brydsten.

High demands made of the staff

As regards the debate on having as many women as men on the staff, Moa Brydsten refers to the exacting requirements stated in the job profile before recruitment.

“Naturally it is more important that staff are able to live up to the Pre-school’s requirements than that they belong to a particular sex,” she says, while at the same time expressing pleasure that two of the 28 male applicants met the criteria.

SUCCESS FACTORS

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The authors

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More Men in Preschool

An Anthology on Broader Recruitment

A strategy when it comes to skills provision in preschool is to broaden the recruitment process. Currently, the proportion of men working in Swedish preschools is unreasonably low. In this context, it is important for both men and women to see preschool as a potential workplace. That is the topic of this anthology.

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