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Equality in Icelandic preschools

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to outline equality pedagogy in Icelandic preschools. In Iceland, equality has been put forward in the national curriculum since 2011 for all school levels. Therefore it might be useful to develop critical perspectives in doing social justice in early childhood education (Robinson and Diaz, 2006:4-5). This research is connected to the works of The Centre for Research on Equality, Gender and Education, University of Iceland and focus upon student's experience of gender from their childhood. The theoretical framework draws upon Paechter's (2007) work on communities of femininities and masculinities in early years classrooms. The focus is on how young children are influenced by the values and perceptions of the adults in preschools. A case study of 126 teacher students' first memories of self-identifying as girls and boys was conducted. They wrote 300-400 words of their first memories of gender after being prompted by 40 minute lecture regarding the fundamental concepts in gender studies. The anecdotes involved memories 22 (17,5%) memories from preschools schools. The data was coded and critically revised to develop themes, threads, and concepts resonated in the data for further interpretation. In order to ensure that students identities remained anonymous their names were changed and the citations chosen carefully. Three themes developed in the context of gender discrimination: appearance, organisation and practice, and gendered play and toys. It is discussed how students memories from preschools years can promote preschool-teachers understanding of intersectional discrimination and equality.

Keywords

preschool, gender, equality, teacher students, childhood memories

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Equality in Icelandic preschools

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Aims, background and theoretical framework

- The aim of this study is to outline equality pedagogy in Icelandic preschools where equality are forward at all school levels in The national curriculum since 2011
- Looking at how social justice is practiced in early childhood education (Robinson and Diaz, 2006:4-5) it was focused on the preschool children's communities of boy- and girlhood (Paechter, 2007)
- The data consists of teacher students' first memories of being girls and boys (22 out of 126 memories described preschool experience) and memories from preschools are in focus in this paper





Equality and discrimination are evident in preschools

- First: Equality is a complicated concept, involving multiculturalism, classism, sexism, ableism etc.
- Second: External factors as uneven distribution of preschool teachers between Icelandic preschools and lack of educated teachers in the field are relevant.
- Third: This leads to consideration of how external and internal preschools discourses of equality are related to historical, social and cultural factors, both inside and outside settings, and how diverse discourses affects the personnel's understanding of equality and discrimination.

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Some External Discriminable Factors

- 33,6% of the personnel working with children in Icelandic preschools have stipulated education (while 67% are stipulated by the preschool act, 2008)
- In Reykjavik, in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of immigrants less than 33% of preschool personnel is educated teachers, while in more wealthy neighbourhoods it is above 60%. How does this affect the children's right for early childhood education?
- This debate (external factors) is silenced in Iceland meanwhile internal equality programs rely on contradictory ideas of how social justice in diverse settings should be put into practice.

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Paechters use of Lave and Wengers communities of practice

- Paechter (2007) describes how newcomers in preschools assimilate dominating values and customs. It involves essential ideas of gender, ethnicity, ableism etc.
- Because preschool communities, like other institutions and societies, are affected by ideas of ‘us and the others’, young children spend lot of energy learning how to become an appropriate preschool child (Paechter 2007; Thordardottir, 2012).
- Furthermore Connolly’s findings (2006) indicate how young children’s experience of culture and hegemonic customs in primary schools affect how they learn to distinguish between included and excluded peers in their peer groups.

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Embodying and negotiating cultural messages

Cultural pressure, learning gendered behaviour in the narratives

	Preschool memories	Elementary and upper secondary memories
Boycott opposed gender images (BOTH GENDER)	93% (16)	93%
Wearing dresses (girls)	32% (5)	29%
Long hair (girls)	32% (5)	25%
Short hair boys	20% (3)	10%
Practising make up and dressing nicely	20% (3)	10%
Avoid dresses and femininity (boys)	20% (3)	7%

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Cultural messages become embodied

- Paechter (2007) says that young children's ideas of gender depend on gendered dresses, hairdressing and behaviour which are historically and culturally determined. Gender cues, from agents at all levels of society, help them to interpret what they see and hear and to develop personal standards for behaviour (Martin and Ruble, 2004).
- The kids in preschool knew exactly the differences between boys and girls. The boys had short hair and were dressed in blue or green with a cap on their head. The girls had long hair, dressed in bright colours, like pink, yellow and light violet. They had either pigtails or braids, relying on what day it was.

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Organisation and practice

- 94% of the students experienced gender discrimination in their childhood related to school organisation.
- In my preschool the children were divided into gendered groups where girls and boys participated in different activities. Waiting in a line before walking into the classroom, we the girls, were told to stand ladylike with our hands on our hips and the boys to stand like guys with their hands in their pockets. We the girls were told to behave like a girl when games became noisy and exciting, because we didn't behave like expected, because of our gender. The boys on the other hand were expected to play exciting games, because they were and will be boys.

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Gendered plays and toys

- I invented gender discrimination in preschool. There the boys played noisy games, chasing each other and sometimes playing with guns. We the girls were not allowed to participate in these games and were told that chasing games and gun plays were only for boys, besides girls couldn't run as fast as boys. So we the girls gathered in the playgrounds hut and made sand cakes which we gave to the boys if they came to us after their long lasting heroic cops and gangsters games
- Gendered play and toys appear often in the student's memories, e.g. the following example from Gudlaug:
- My first memories stem from preschool: The boys always played castle and boygames, especially in outdoor plays. On the other hand I can't remember what the girls were doing...

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Working against discrimination in the student's memories from preschools

- Three students (out of 22) remember equality from their preschool years. Hildigunnur's memories are descriptive for their experience:
- I remember that in my preschool there was a conscious emphasis upon equality and no discrimination. Girls and boys played in an open space and all of us used the same toy. Every day all of us gathered for singing class where the songs appealed to all of us. We often went to the cockloft where we could find all kind of non gendered customs i.e. clowns or elves customs. In the preschool we also had access to Lego blocks, a castle with all kinds of figures and teddy bears. Everybody could play and none was excluded.

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Implications

- The teacher student's memories create an opportunity for open discussions of what has changed in equality education from the time these students attended preschool until how it is practised today.
- Hilidgunnur's memories could be used to channel how diverse children's groups can be directed into mutual play and minimise so-called "boys" and "girls" toys
- These memories also lead to the assumption that memories from preschools could shed a light on other forms of cultural discrimination i.e. of ethnicity, ableism, classism etc.
- However it is quiet clear that equality doesn't develop on its own, rather it must be worked on it.

