

Nina Johannesen

Likestillingscenteret, Hamar, Norway

<http://www.kvu.hm.no/>

Status of Gender equality work in Norwegian Kindergartens – New kindergartens in old tracks

Presentation on the XXVI. OMEP world congress, 13. 8. 2010, Göteborg/Sweden.

Introduction

In 2008 the Ministry of Education and Research adopted the Action Plan for Gender Equality in kindergartens. The Action Plan is now at its end and a study of how kindergartens follow up their responsibility for gender equality has been carried out. The Center for Equality, in cooperation with the Eastern Norway Research Institute, was engaged by the Ministry to accomplish the study. The main objective in this session is to present the main findings from the analysis.

The main research question in the evaluation was: “To what extent do kindergartens work systematically with gender equality?”

The research question includes seeking knowledge about an awareness of gender equality among the staff, what kind of practical work regarding equality that takes place, which actions to increase the number of men are implemented, and if there is increased gender equality awareness in kindergartens with a high percentage of men.

In order to provide an integral picture of gender equality in kindergartens, as equality is a complex work field embracing both structural work and individual awareness, the research design included:

- document analysis of 144 annual reports
- qualitative interviews with managers and pre-school teachers
- and a quantitative survey among 2000 kindergartens with a response rate of 40 percent

Before I tell you about the findings, I will give you a brief orientation about the current situation in Norway.

The current situation

As you can see from the first table, the proportion of men working in kindergartens (the percentage does not include janitors and cleaning personnel) is about 8 percent. There has been a slightly increase since 2004, which can be seen as somewhat strange as there has been a strong political focus on increasing the proportion of men. However, there has at the same time been a massive development of the sector to reach the political goal of full coverage.

Per cent men	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Norway	6,2	7,0	6,9	7,5	7,6
Norway (- Oslo)	5,7	6,4	6,2	6,9	6,8

From table two you can see that the total number of men has increased with 65 percent from 2003. Hence, the rather small increase in the proportion of men overall can be viewed as positive. On the other side, statistics is a bit tricky. Because there are so few men in kindergartens, the percentage increase of the number of male employees is higher than for women!

Increase in the number of employees	% increase since 2007	% increase since 2006	% increase since 2003
Total	7,0	16,9	39,4
Men	8,3	22,5	64,9
Women	6,9	16,4	37,2

I will now move on to tell you about the main findings. The findings are grouped in four sections according to the research questions.

Findings I: What happens in kindergartens in practical and concrete terms? Which measures are implemented for the staff?

The material gives the impression that there is little practical gender equality work in Norwegian kindergartens. The majority of the surveyed says that equality is implemented in local plans and annual reports. However, document analysis of annual reports shows that a low percentage of the reports have enshrined gender equality. Only 26 percent of the annual reports mention gender equality work.

At the same time, the material indicates that gender equality is an area of awareness amongst child care practitioners and managers. For example, the survey shows that gender to a great extent is taken into consideration in the choice of toys and learning material. This can be understood as a counterweight to the commercialization of toys. Moreover, the awareness is related to a structural level of thinking and to lived experiences. However, the qualitative interviews refer to a fracture in the gender equality consciousness between a structural and a practical level. In stories of everyday life in the kindergartens it appears signs that suggest an absence of gender awareness. In other words, what they do are not always what they think they are doing, and this is reflected through the everyday practice. It can be read as a lack of knowledge of how to do practical gender equality work. The area is complex with many levels requiring more knowledge.

Finding from the document analysis show that a large proportion of the annual reports mention that the staff is to be aware of gender. However, few have specified how this competence is to be achieved and how the target is to be reached. Some actions mentioned are gender discussions in staff meetings, parental calls and appraisals, and course participation. Other actions are not pointed out.

Findings II: Recruitment of men – which actions take place? What is the function of men?

Regarding men in kindergartens, the quantitative survey shows that a majority of the kindergartens has carried through actions to increase the number of men. The most widely used measure is advertisements encouraging men to apply. Moreover, the use of own network to recruit men, the use of ads appealing to men, recruitment among students and apprentices, cooperation with the municipality, use of moderate quota, positive action and use of civilian workers. Other measures listed by the kindergartens themselves include leasing of cars, men's network, cooperation with educational institutions, media coverage, trainees/internship and cooperation with The Norwegian Labor and Welfare administration.

Statistics show that the largest proportion of men is employed as assistants. Ten percent is managers and 20 percent pre-school teachers.

Role	2006	2007	2008
Managers	11,2	9,8	10,0
Men	9,4	9,0	9,2
Women			
Pre- school teachers	18,8	19,9	20,2
Men	25,4	26,0	27,0
Women			
Assistents	59,7	60,2	60,0
Men	55,2	55,2	54,2
Women			
Bilingual assistants	2,1	2,0	1,6
Men	1,4	1,5	1,3
Women			
Other	8,2	8,1	8,2
Men	8,6	8,3	8,3
Women			

The qualitative material provides a detailed understanding and knowledge of how men are perceived in the kindergarten. First of all, there is expressed a positive attitude towards an increased proportion of men in the qualitative interviews. However, it is important to notice that the interviews do not produce generalized knowledge, rather they give an indication of which discourses about gender that circulate. The positive attitude addresses kids and work environment. First of all, men are viewed upon as role models for the kids. The stories are characterized by a dichotomist thinking regarding the ideas about men and women. Men as role models are thought of as role models for boys, which indicate a quite narrow understanding of a role model based on gendered sameness.

Moreover, men in kindergartens appear as positive in relation to the working environment. The material emphasizes a not nuanced female culture, where men's role is to 'soften' the culture. Such an approach and description of the female culture can be read as a critique towards their own culture, and that this is a good enough reason to bring more men in.

Findings III: To what extent is the staff aware of gender and gender equality? What is the understanding of gender and gender equality?

The survey material refers to an overall awareness in relation to gender equality, both regarding plans, main priorities, staff and learning material. To what extent the awareness is evident in practical work and everyday life in the kindergarten is an interesting area for further observations.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the interviews also refer to a structural gender consciousness amongst the interviewed. At the same time, there is a fracture in the gender equality consciousness between a structural and a practical level. The fracture indicates that the awareness is not integrated to the extent that it impacts on the daily interaction with the children. Stories from everyday life in the kindergartens refer to an absence of gender awareness. As is the case in stories about pedagogical objectives. There exists a basic thinking about seeing the unique child, which proves difficult when it comes to the practical level. This point out that equality in practice is a complex and challenging area that requires effort and much work.

The understandings of gender and equality apparent in the material are coherent with three recognized discourses in the Nordic countries and with three levels of gender equality work in kindergartens.

The first discourse addresses gender equality in terms of sameness. The discourse was dominant in the 1970s. Sameness is in center and it is expected that women and men enter each other's areas. Traditional gender roles are to be replaced by new patterns where men and women do the same and where women and men are not complementary categories. Gender categories are not to determine what men and women can, would and should do. The Action Plan for Gender Equality is located in this discussion as it focuses on equal opportunities for boys and girls. The Norwegian gender equality work is overall located in a thinking of sameness and liberal feminism referring to equal rights and possibilities.

The second discourse refers to equalization of power differences. It is linked to changes in gender quality politics where male dominance is challenged. Female nature is highlighted, not as biology, but as a cultural subordination related to male dominance. Gender equality is seen as a feminist issue referring to something common between women. Men are regarded as an obstacle for equality. Caring, traditionally associated with femininity and women, is considered as valuable and can be recognized amongst both girls and boys. Caring then becomes an ethical practice.

The third discourse is mainly located in the 1990s and refers to a positive view on nature where the gender categories have the same status. What is defined as man and women is equal in value. Gender equality more or less praises difference across sexes. It is a focus on the individual character, traits and nature through discourses of diversity and differences are considered as positive. At the same time the diversity is reduced to opposite gender categories that are expected to be complementary. There is a concern that gender categories are going to be dissolved so that individuals become too similar.

The document analysis refers to a discourse of sameness where the gender category is irrelevant for what women and men can do. The analysis of annual reports reveals a thinking of gender equality as equal possibilities for the children. At the same time, there exists a marginal discourse of difference. Two of the annual reports it emerges that equality work is based on a understanding of boys and girls as different with dissimilar assumptions. However, the two reports also express a thinking of sameness. This underlies the nature of discourses. They do not exist in a vacuum.

The same is apparent in the qualitative interviews, however in a reverse formula. The main apparent discourse is the one of difference where men in kindergarten represent something 'different' which is viewed upon as important for the children, boys in particular, and the working environment. There appears a gendered picture telling us that men provide an expanded room for appearance and possibilities because they are different from women. At the same time there appears a discourse of sameness which tells that men are as different from other men as men are from women. Such, discourses exist side by side.

Findings IV: Do a higher number of men indicate or increase gender awareness?

There are no studies in a Norwegian context that can be linked to such a hypothesis, nor can this study say anything about if a higher proportion of men lead to increased gender awareness. Moreover, there are few studies addressing the gender of the staff and its affect on children's gender construction.

The document analysis shows that it is easier to recruit men in kindergartens where it already works men, especially if the men are preschool teachers. About half of the men in the study work in kindergartens with three or more men. In kindergartens where the manager is male, there is three times as many men as the average proportion in the study (6,5%). This indicates that it can be easier to recruit men if the kindergarten has already employed male pre-school teachers/managers.

The qualitative survey shows correlations between the proportion men in the kindergarten and the manager's assessment of the gender equality work in the kindergarten. A higher proportion of men increase the probability of a positive assessment of efforts put into gender equality work (assessment of the influence of the framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens, gender awareness when buying teaching aids, seminars about equality, actions to increase the number of men etc). The casual relationship however, is uncertain. Does increased gender awareness result in a larger proportion of men? Or do a larger proportion of men lead to increased gender awareness? Other factors than the proportion of men, such as size, public/private and age has to be taken into consideration.

As a final point I will just like to comment that age as a variable on the gender awareness. Findings show that the older the manager is the higher probability for a positive assessment of gender equality work. The same trend is seen in the qualitative interviews where informants pointed out that the younger staff was less aware of, and concerned about, gender. Overall it looks like the gender equality work and the effort put into recruit men depends on persons, and that it is important to have a manager with gender awareness.

Conclusion

There are not possible to give a characterization of kindergartens that have a conscious awareness of gender related issues. The document analysis shows no common traits among the rappers having enshrined gender equality. However, findings indicate that it is easier to recruit men in kindergartens that already have employed men. Where the manager is male there are three times as many men employed. The survey shows that if the manager is male the probability to answer that gender equality is enshrined in annual reports increases. Age was found to be an important variable in relation to gender equality awareness. The older the manager was the greater possibility for a positive assessment of the Action Plan.

Furthermore, it is more likely that an elderly manager consider it so that gender equality is enshrined in annual reports and that staff behavior in relation to boys and girls is a theme in formal and informal arenas. This indicates that gender equality work is person dependent. Having a manager concerned with gender related issues and gender equality is of great importance.