

Thórdardóttir, Thórdís (2019). **Snapshot of three Icelandic male – preschool-teachers: The gender paradox in practice.** Paper presented on the 29th EECERA Annual Conference, 22.8.2019, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Abstract

In this paper the focus is on essential gendered role models linked to the OECD (2018) avocation for more tolerance for diversity and inclusion in ECEC. The focus is on the stories of three Icelandic participants of a current comparative study in 13 countries, aiming at understand factors that either keep men inside or outside ECEC. The research question is: What patterns appear in the participants' description of staying or leaving ECEC? Men's experience of staying or leaving preschools is explored in relation to Warin's (2018) findings of men challenging gender stereotypes in ECEC; Rohrmann's (2016) concerns with males' self-perceptions in "female world of ECEC;" and Brody's, (2015) argument for a holistic understanding of males' conditions in preschools. The framework is established in theories of multiple masculinities which must be embedded in gender research (Messerschmidt, 2018). In person' interviews, with career story-line, highlighting critical moments in participants' career path where made. Interviews were recorded, translated into English and transcribed. All participants signed an informed consent form, and participated voluntarily. They have pseudonym names and surroundings are carefully changed. Participants started ECEC career by coincidence. Sickness and shortage of opportunities were the main reasons for leaving ECEC, but flexibility and opportunities to increase salary for staying were primary reasons for remaining in the profession. The findings indicate the importance of increased attention to status of men in ECEC and their effects on diversity and increasing tolerance, which could retain and attract more men to ECEC.

Keywords

gender, masculinity, ECEC, trajectories, diversity

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Snapshot of three Icelandic male preschool-teachers: The gender paradox in practice

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Gendered preschools in the Eldorado of gender equality

- According to the World Economic Forum (2013-2018) annual report on the status of the global gender gap in 136 countries, **Iceland is the country with the narrowest gender gap in the world**
- In 2013 the Welfare Ministry published *Men and Equality: Report and proposal of increased participation of men in equality*, emphasizing public equality campaign to **increase men in care** and investigate ways to **work against prejudices against men working in the care domain**
- The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools
 - Equality is an umbrella concept that involves a number of factors. The following are some of these factors: age, class, culture, descent, **GENDER**, disability, language, nationality, outlook on life, race, religion, residence, sexual orientation. **At every school level, education for equality should address how these factors can establish discrimination and privileges for people** (the Ministry of Culture and Education, 2011, p.20).
- We don't have to worry or do we?



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The male situations in Icelandic preschools

- Males working in Icelandic preschools are total 5.9% of the staff
- Educated males (B. Ed or M. Ed) are only 1% (the remaining, 4.9% are assistants)
- Attempts have been made to increase men in ECEC
 - 2017 three males received a grant (7.300 euros) to study ECEC
 - Male preschool teachers have introduced their ECEC work as attractive for males in social media for some years
 - The Preschool teacher's Union has tried to attract males with presentations and advertisements
 - Numerous bachelor theses have been written about males' status in ECEC
- Females and males face gendered attitudes and expectations towards women and men working in Icelandic preschools. Essentialism characterized the participants' discussion where preconceived notions regarding the different gender roles for men and women were dominant. (Axelsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2014)



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Focus, question and method

- The focus is on stories of three Icelandic participants of a current comparative study in 12 countries (37 interviews), aiming to understand factors that either keep men inside or outside of ECEC in Iceland
- **Research question:**
- What patterns appear in the three participants' description of their staying or leaving ECEC?
- **Method:**
- Participants were found through the Facebook site "ECEC chat". They were recommended by colleagues and principals, I knew most of the recommended males, but finally I got three whom I didn't know beforehand
- In person interviews were conducted, using career story-line, to highlight critical moments in participants' career paths. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English. A grounded theory approach and critical discourse analysis were used to organize and classify the data
- Feminist poststructuralist and intersectional theoretical approaches were used



The background of the participants

- **Paul:** Comes from a family running it's own business in fishing vessels. His father didn't support him to become ECEC teacher. Started to work in preschool because his friend, who had been working there and was changing job, asked him to try it and recommended ECEC work
- **Kevin:** Comes from a farming family with rather old parents. Got a great support from his family. Started to work in preschool after his sister talked about that it might suit him
- **Albert:** Comes from a small village. He got good support from his family. He was school weary and went abroad, when he came back because of family matters he had never thought of working in preschool but started because he needed a job



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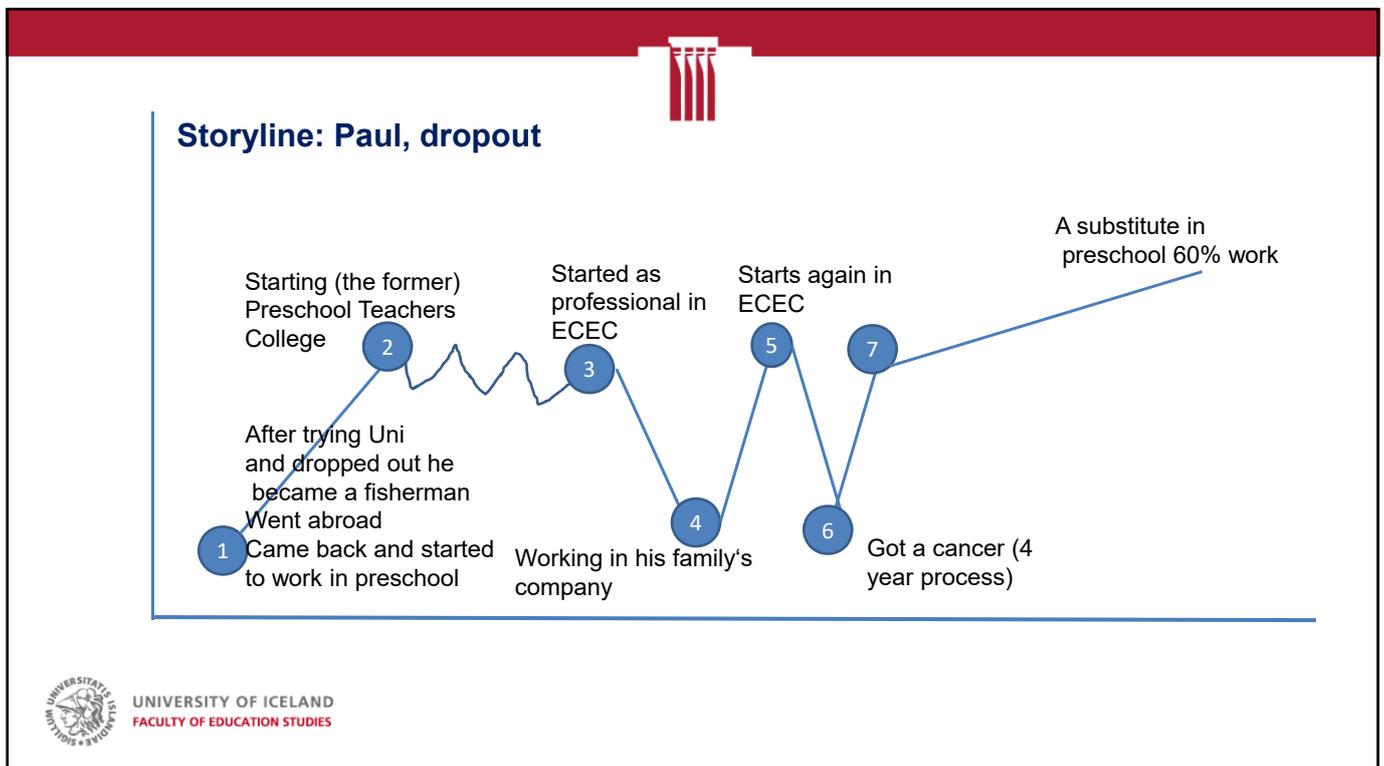
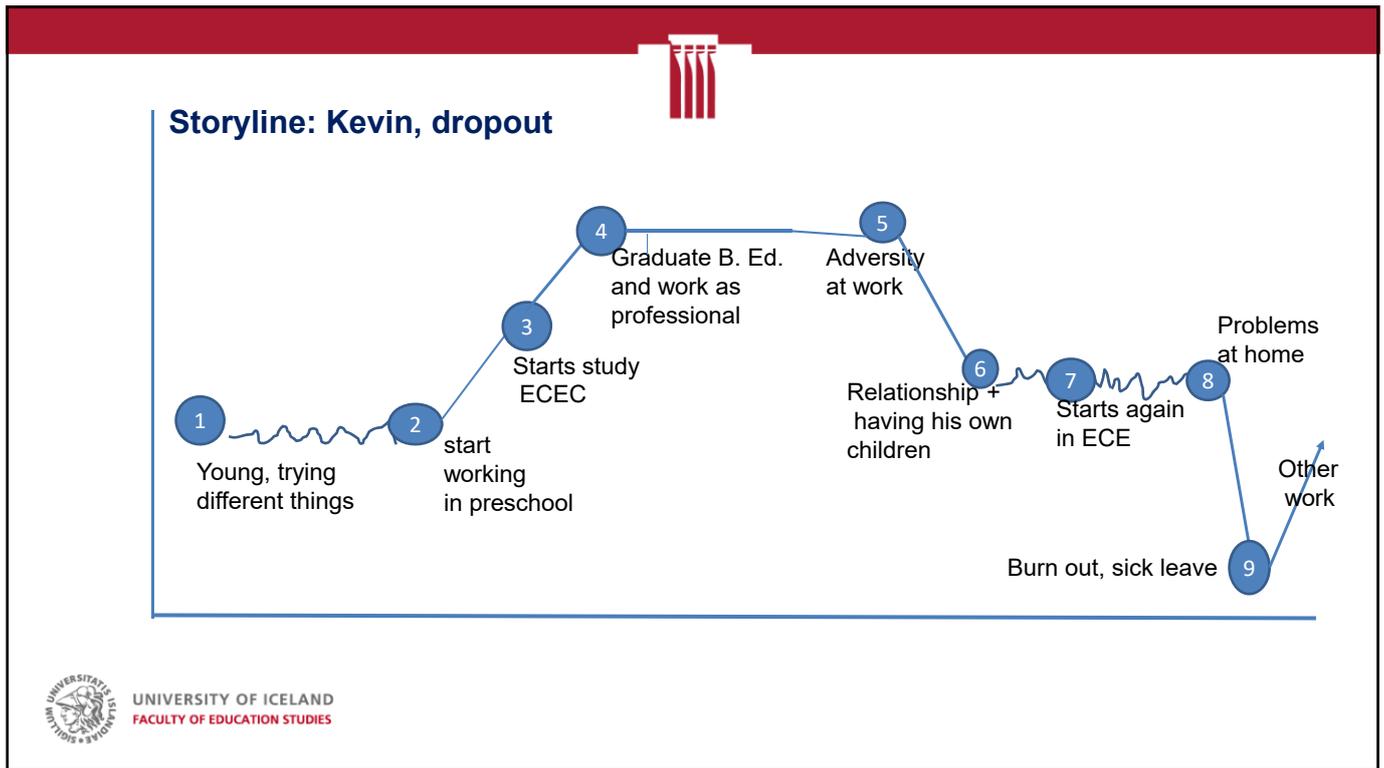
The participants' main reason for working in ECEC

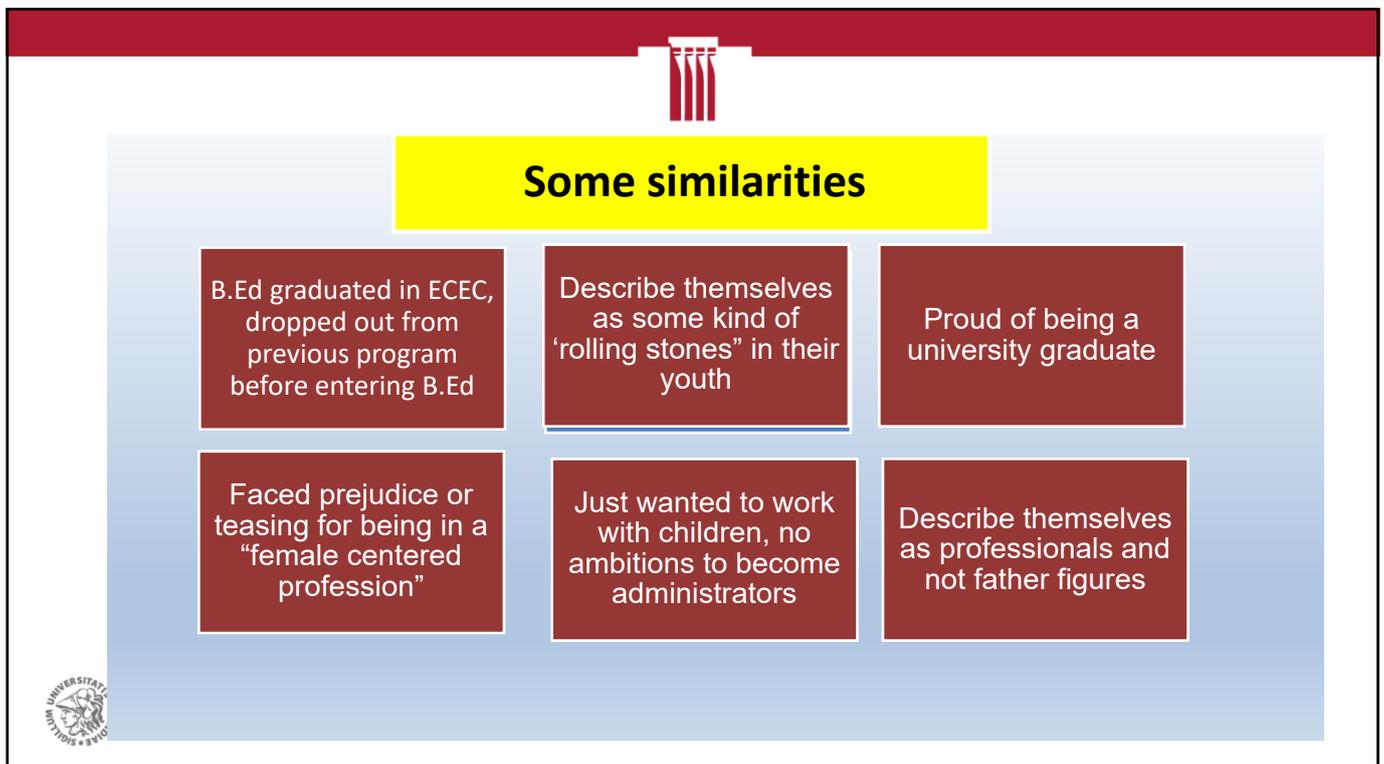
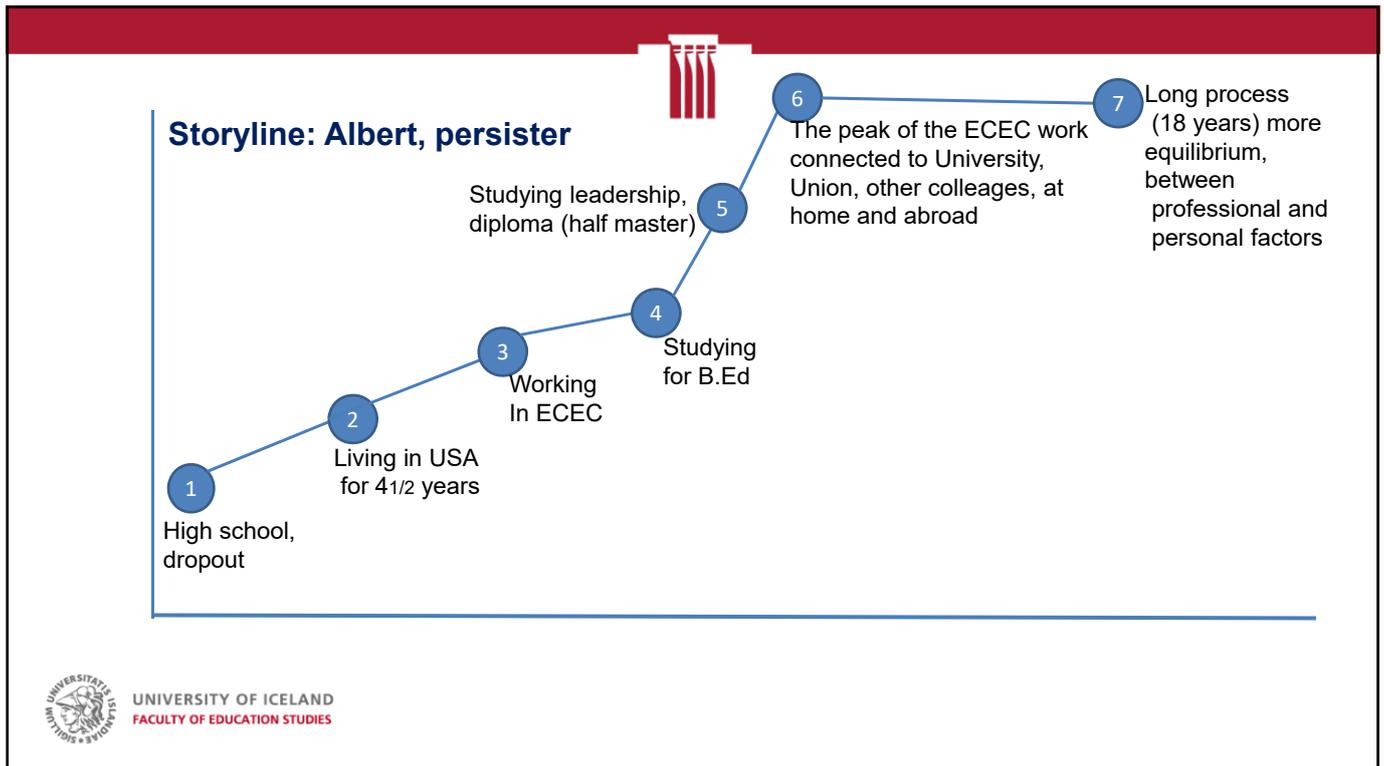
- **Kevin:** I function best ... where I was engaging in direct interactions with the children and could make all kinds of observations. ... I felt energized around the kids and I gave them energy so it was interaction that I sought ... and right after I was, like the division manager for a short period, it was ... it wasn't bad but it wasn't what I wanted to be doing.
- **Paul:** It was of course the children that ... made sure that I stayed as long as I did you know, because the social aspect in this job is unlike any other... In fact I've never been interested you know ... in that kind of career [management] but ... it might have had some impact but it wasn't the deciding factor [for leaving preschool] I would say.
- **Albert:** I think,... I was just so involved and enthusiastic in my professionalism, related to the profession, the university, the union and diverse preschools cooperation, both in Iceland and abroad. But it was mainly the work, the work on the floor, which I still like very much. You know what I mean.



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Some differences

Albert, persister	Kevin, dropout	Paul, dropout
Unhappy with the teacher training, but thought it was very important Completed diploma in leadership after B. Ed. (half master) Can't see the differences in working together with females or males, no conflicts Got opportunity to raise his wages by overtime, lives alone and that's why his salary is enough	Didn't like the writing assignments in the study, but liked the teacher training very much Had difficulties with female assistants Always had a side job as heavy rock band player, Couldn't have survived on the ECEC salary, with a family	Worked abroad for four years in the sectors of elderly, disabled and drug addicted before his ECEC education Satisfied with the teacher training and very interested in theories. Dropped out to gain sufficient income for family and suffered from cancer for 4 years suffering Needed to drop out to earn higher wages to provide his family

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Gender awareness - masculinities

Paul: "I must have been too bearded or too masculine I'm not sure".

Kevin describes himself as "scary for sore eyes" and said "not that I mean this in any sexist way but I am ... a man"

Paul and Kevin also experienced gendered culture and professional conflicts with their female colleagues and problems with low salary and heavy workload

Albert describes, international, and national cooperation with diverse institutions, flexibility and opportunities for overtime. He says he only have experienced benign prejudice related to low wages

For these three guys, the conclusion is that the two dropouts had gendered problems, while the persister can't remember any problems, neither with coworkers, family nor friends (gender blindness?)

None of them seem to have internalized gender awareness, rather they support the essential gender binary just in a different ways

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Findings: The gendered paradox

Findings reveal that the participants use contradictory gender-blind and gender-binary scripts when they describe their work in ECEC (negative stereotypes)

Preschools culture, children parents view of gender, and general lack of gender awareness, appear to contribute to the fact that few men work in ECEC

Kevin and Paul claim that gossip and squabble is typical communication for women, which reflect their conflicts with females and downgrading of women. Both think female assistants workstyles are passive and unrealistic attempts to avoid accidents. (meaning, over projection with lack of children's' opportunities to develop their skills)

Albert who claims that for him there is no differences working with females or males, he received more professional opportunities inside and outside the settings and possibilities to gain higher salary by overtime



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Discussion

- Brody, (2015) argued for a holistic understanding of males' conditions in ECEC, which is important for general gender policy in ECEC
- Warin's (2018) findings of men challenging gender stereotypes in ECEC encourage stronger focus on more males in ECEC (only Paul seem to make an attempt)
- Rohrmann's (2016) concern with males' self-perceptions in "female world of ECEC" are relevant in relation to Kevin's and Paul's situation
- Both Kevin and Paul had conflicts with female colleagues and downgraded women's way of professionalism in ECEC
- Kevin also thought that there are natural differences between girls and boys learning styles (essential binary stereotypes)
- Paul tried to lessen cultural gender norms by dressing like a princess for "Ash Wednesday"
- Albert said, he experienced almost no problems with gender binaries, just some benign teasing related to the low salary (gender blindness?)



The Icelandic concerns

- There seem to be several reasons for a lack of focus on gender issues in teacher education in Iceland:
 - Curriculum overload, gender issues are sensitive and politicized, and it is not acknowledged that this is about scientific knowledge on gender issues
 - Theories on gender and different kinds of masculinity and femininity are considered complicated and contradict traditional essentialist views on gender differences
 - Also there is a tendency to marginalize emphasis on equality in neoliberal times, and a more general equality concept is gaining support (Guðbjörnsdóttir & Thordardóttir, 2016)
- The binary gender division is maintained in preschool teacher-training and study (Guðbjörnsdóttir & Thordardóttir, 2016)
- Gender stereotypes, and how male preschool teachers are given superiority over their female colleagues seem to play an important role in staff's communication (Laufey Axelsdóttir & Gyða Pétursdóttir, 2014)

Implications, both in study and work

- Gendered stereotypes seem to be a big obstacle for gender equality in ECEC teachers work setting
- Gender norms, social collectivities and individuals impact each other (intersectionality) therefore these concepts must be considered seriously in the ECEC teacher training and study programs
- Change could occur through dialogue in each work setting and in ECEC teacher education, by focusing on reflexivity and raising gender awareness
 - Opening up discussion of men's vulnerability and women's strength
 - Reflect on the social construction of femininity and masculinity
 - Reflect on how men and women who actively work in the ECEC sector define the term 'role model'
 - Define how gendered role models are shaped by context and situation in ECEC and the possibilities of focusing more on the professional knowledge of ECEC
 - Males and females in ECEC have to work together to avoid gendered stigma

