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Heikkilä, Mia* & Hellman, Anette (2015)

New preschool teacher students? – forming an alternative masculinity

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This study's focus is on how to understand the slowly increasing number of men in early childhood education in Sweden, combined with descriptions of how men studying to become preschool teachers view how they came to become preschool teachers and how they discuss their coming everyday life as preschool teachers. An interview study of 38 men in three different Swedish universities was done and is the material for this study. The material is understood within critical studies of masculinities using Kimmel (2008) and Connell (2005) as theoretical background by discussing the material as showing how men studying to become preschool teachers re-negotiate masculinity in several ways. Several outcomes of this study will be presented. It is concluded that the men form an 'alternative' masculinity as a reaction towards a hegemonic masculinity where men are seen as amongst other things strong, competitive and not emotional. These men are discussing ways of being a real man, and a preschool teacher. An issue to discuss is how masculinities are negotiated among men that have done a non-stereotypical vocational choice.

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*Male preschool teacher students
showing gender awareness and
“caring masculinities”?
– an interview study with men who are studying to
become preschool teachers*

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Aim and interest

Our overall interest is to understand how men who study preschool teaching look at their position as becoming ‘male preschool teachers’ and what implications their experiences have for coming efforts in order to increase the number of men in preschools.

Specifically, our aim is to explore the challenges male preschool teacher students express concerning their future profession.

Theoretical perspectives

(Connell 2008; Renolds 2004; Nordberg *et al.* 2010)

- Critical masculinity as a basis
- Minority position - Normalization

The Government mandate of the Swedish National Agency for Education (U2013/5044/S, U2012/7365/S)

state that it is "important as early as in preschool to reveal to girls and boys that gender shall not be decisive in their choice of occupation".

This can be interpreted as a strive to change also a gender role for who and in what ways preschool teaching is done, whereas any former traditional gender coded associations needs to be critically analyzed.

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Method

- 38 male students in three universities in Sweden were interviewed
- The interviews were 30 to 60 minutes long.
- The questions the interviews revolved around were:
 - *What was your path into preschool teacher training?*
 - *What is your perception of the program?*
 - *How do you see your future as a preschool teacher?*

Analysis

- carefully read through the interview transcripts several times in order to discover patterns in the text.
- These readings were conducted based on the aim of the study, with the theoretical models we have used acting as a filter to give the reading additional dimensions.
- We marked and coded the statements that were similar
- gathered these statements into themes and shared patterns and themes

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Main results in three themes

- Experiencing care and learning
- Have experience from working at a preschool before studying
- Gender awareness

'Caring masculinities'

My mother worked at a preschool and as a nanny while I was growing up, but in recent years she's been working in a preschool. They needed a substitute there for two weeks or something, so she got me the job and I was a substitute for two weeks. And I thought it was a lot of fun. I don't know, maybe it was the perfect timing because I have just been working at a gas station and I thought that was, you know, it felt so meaningless. Then when you switch to something there, first of all, you are almost always met by happy people and you feel needed and feel that you are there for a reason.

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'Gender awareness'

Johan: Sure, the male norm is really crude, you know, in that way, or has been, or still is=

Mia: And exercising power and putting people down etc.

Johan: Yeah, putting each other down, all the time, pouncing on weakness. Yeah, I think about that, well, a lot, it... I mean, just talking to a five-year-old about power, you know what I mean, it would be cool, I want to do that, for sure... But also to, what should I say, really ... try to call things into question, cause the kids often have, well, you know at the age of around four or so they kind of absorb it, from the outside or whatever, this is a girl, this is a guy, to... to call that into question, to set a thought process in motion in their heads, what is this, why is this like it is?

Going against hegemonic ideas of masculinity

So then I moved to Norway and started working at a preschool as a substitute, then as a permanent substitute, and worked there for a year. And that was probably the most fun job I'd ever had ... and I was really well thought of there, I was the only man and really noticed that I had ... And ... well, when I finished that job, I cried like a baby, you know what I mean ... like this ((laughs)) ... and then I just felt that if I'm having this reaction to leaving – I've finished other jobs and cried with happiness, you know, but never like this – if I react like that to leaving this job, then that's what I should be doing, you know. So I decided to do it, when I finished traveling I would study to become a preschool teacher.

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Conclusions

- Wanting to be normalized in the context
- Having to handle being visible and invisible at the same time – minority dilemma
- Clash between how men are expected to perform hegemonic masculinity as well as a care taking and care showing preschool teacher; 'Gender awareness' and 'Caring masculinity' is a strategy
- These men express their position as a minority group and the expectations that it brings with it at the same time as we see them 'breaking' certain male norms or ideas how to be 'real' men