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Abstract

This study aims to understand different types of physical touch in the interplay between male teachers and children through a pedagogical perspective. Previous research shows touch has been subject to surveillance due to a discourse on children's protection and their rights to bodily integrity (Piper et al., 2013). Men, as a minority group working in Swedish ECEC, even in other countries, express that they are extra careful when involved in touch situations with children (Brody et al., 2020). There is, though, a lack of observational studies focusing on touch interactions between men and children in ECEC. The study draws upon pragmatism by examining touch as a "transaction" between teachers, children, and their environment (Dewey and Bentley, 1949/1991). Fieldwork with participant observation has been conducted in three preschool groups in Sweden, with 45 children and three male teachers. Field notes and video recordings were used for data collection, which was analyzed using a qualitative abductive approach. Ethical principles such as anonymity, confidentiality, and informed and negotiated consent, were followed continuously during the research process. The findings show five types of touch as pedagogical actions: focus-oriented action, guiding action, assisting action, affectionate action, and playful action. Touch can be short or long-term and is used in different forms, such as patching, holding, and other light-touch forms. These findings suggest that touch, as a pedagogical action, can support children's learning and caring relations with their teachers during several situations. Touch, understood as a pedagogical action, also contributes to strengthening male teachers' professional practice in ECEC.

Keywords

male teachers, children, pedagogical action, touch, ECEC

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Touch as a pedagogical action for male teachers and children in ECEC

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Introduction and Background

This study examines physical touch as a pedagogical action within the interplay between male teachers and children in ECEC in Sweden. It focuses on different types of touch and the contextual conditions in which touch is employed. Previous research shows that ECEC practitioners, regardless of gender, consider touch to be an essential resource for supporting children's learning and care. However, men, as a minority working in female-dominated ECEC settings, report being particularly cautious during touch situations with children to avoid any suspicions.

Methods

The theoretical framework draws on John Dewey's pragmatism within a transactional perspective. Fieldwork involved participant observation at three Swedish ECEC settings, including 45 children and three male teachers.

Findings

Five types of physical touch have been identified as pedagogical actions. Touch is also influenced by contextual conditions, including pedagogical situations, unforeseen events, initiatives undertaken by male teachers and children, children's communication needs, and children's age.



3. Physical touch as an assisting action is used to provide emotional, social and physical support.



4. Physical touch as an affectionate action is used to strengthen caring relationships.



5. Physical touch as a playful action is used as an integrated part of play situations.



1. Physical touch as a focus-oriented action is used to help direct attention towards ongoing activities.



2. Physical touch as a guiding action is used to instruct or demonstrate how to carry out activities.

Conclusions

These findings indicate that touch plays a significant role in children's meaning-making, participation, and nurturing relationships with their teachers. Viewing touch as a pedagogical action also enhances the professional practice of male teachers.

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