abstract


In the current article, we explore educational practices in terms of the transition from pre-primary education to compulsory schooling. Our cross-cultural analysis is based on two ethnographic studies conducted in three educational institutions providing pre-primary education: two in Finland and one in Sweden. The analysis is guided by feminist theories intertwined with contextualised, ethnographic perspectives. In pre-primary education, children’s actions and ways of being were continuously evaluated in terms of their future as ‘professional pupils’. These data reveal particular evaluations on children in terms of their ways of acting and being constructed as ‘ideal’. These evaluations are often based on expectations of essential differences between boys and girls, even in Sweden, where the curriculum encourages educational staff to deconstruct gender divisions and provides guidelines for promoting gender equality.

Keywords: gender · ethnography · pre-primary education · cross-cultural analysis

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Ylva Odenbring, PhD
Department of Education, Communication and Learning
University of Gothenburg
E-mail: ylva.odenbring@gu.se

Sirpa Lappalainen
Institute of Behavioural Sciences
Unit of Cultural and Feminist Studies in Education
E-mail: sirpa-lappalainen@helsinki.fi

In ‘the Educational Twilight Zone’

Gendered Pedagogy and Constructions of the Ideal pupil in the Transition from Pre-Primary Education to Compulsory Schooling in Finland and Sweden. ¹

YlvA OdenbrInG AND Sirpa Lappalainen

Introduction

Today, most children in the Nordic countries become part of the educational system at a very early stage in life. The Committee of the Right of the Child states that all education should be based on democratic values and that all children should be treated as equal regardless of social background, ethnicity, or gender (UNICEF, 2009). This statement concerning children’s rights is one of the central starting-points of national curricula in the Nordic Countries. On the other hand, compulsory schooling represents children’s first encounter with civil duties (Lappalainen, 2008). How children experience this might, however, differ.

We use the metaphor of ‘twilight zone’ to refer to the preschool class as a preparatory educational institution, in which children are initiated into the requirements of compulsory schooling. In this article, focus will be on pre-primary education provided for Finnish preschool children and Swedish preschool class children, i.e. children aged six or children...
about to turn six. The aim of the article is to investigate how children are fostered to conform and become an 'ideal school child' in the educational twilight zone, i.e. the last year before primary schooling. Moreover, we will elaborate on how the ideal school child is constructed in terms of how gender is manifested in the investigated educational settings. However, in order to contextualise our analysis, we will explore the two national curricula in terms of gender. Educational policy documents, such as curriculum documents, reflect the current political agenda (Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen & Lahelma, 2012). Therefore, we consider curriculum texts as cultural practises, which construct the object of reflection and action and, moreover, define what is counted as true and false (Popkewitz, 2004). They define what is desirable and, in addition, frame the vision of the ideal citizen able to exercise duties and rights in acceptable ways (Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2000; Goodson, 1994).

Thomas Popkewitz (2001, 2003) has introduced the concept of the 'cosmopolitan child' to analyse how principles of universal progress construct particular children as empowered agents, while constructing 'others' as objects that do not embody the characteristics required to belong. According to Lindblad and Popkewitz (2003), children are categorised on the basis of personal traits, dispositions, and social and cognitive competencies that are thought of as necessary for the future (p. 20). This categorisation functions as a system of reasoning that fabricates particular kinds of children as falling within and outside the 'normal' and the 'ideal' (ibid., p 15). Therefore 'ideal' can be considered an age-specific, gendered, and embodied construction in the everyday practises of educational institutions.

**Pre-primary education in Sweden and Finland**

Compulsory education begins the year the child reaches the age of seven in both Sweden and Finland. The year prior to this, the child has the right to participate in pre-primary education that is free of charge. In both countries, municipalities are obliged to provide pre-primary education for all six-year-olds. Although participation is voluntary, almost full enrolment (99.4% in Finland and 95.8% in Sweden) is recorded in pre-primary education for children aged 6-7 years (Finnish National Board of Education FNBE, 2012; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011).

On a general level the systems in the two countries are quite similar, though organisational and terminological differences exist. In Sweden the term preschool refers to the educational group activity for children aged one to five years (SNAE, 2011), whereas the term preschool class refers to a separate and voluntary educational configuration provided for six-year-olds the year before they begin their compulsory schooling. Although preschool class education is optional, every municipality in Sweden must offer all six-year-olds preschool class education (SFS 2010, p. 800). The preschool class was introduced in the Swedish educational system in 1998 and is regulated in the *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Preschool Class and Leisure-Time Centre* (Skolverket, 1994).

In Finland, the official, administrative term referring to the education of six-year-old children is pre-primary education, which is provided by local authorities - mainly in kindergartens or schools. In colloquial language this educational activity is referred to as preschool. All municipalities in Finland were legally required to organise a preschool system for six-year-old children in 2001. Unlike in Sweden, in Finland pre-primary education...
has its own separate national curriculum (FNBE, 2000; 2010).

In both countries the political intentions behind the preschool – respectively the pre-school class – was that they were going to work as a transition class and a bridge between pre-primary education and compulsory schooling. In Sweden, political inquiries (Skolverket, 2000) show that the pre-school class has become more like school in its organisation than was originally intended. In Finland, when the pre-primary education was introduced free of charge in 2001, the Ministry of Education also set up a working group to explore the possibilities of lowering the compulsory school age from seven to six years until 2003.5 Ambitions to reach younger children as targets of systematic education and more intensive evaluation are self-evident in both countries, which can be interpreted as a symptom of New Neo Right liberal policies (Lappalainen, 2008).

In terms of gender, there are crucial differences on how the gender is addressed in the curricula. The first Finnish preschool curriculum (2000) stated that preschool education should also take the special needs of girls and boys into account (FNBE, 2000, p. 7). The statement indicates a dichotomous idea of gender, where gender is divided in two: males and females; boys and girls with their own specific needs, based on their essential differences (e.g. Davies, 1989, 2003). The sentence remained the same after the reno-vation of the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in 2010. However, two other references to gender were included. One was the reference to the constitution of Finland: In the constitution of Finland it is stated that no one shall, without an acceptable reason, be treated differently from other persons on the ground of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability, or other reasons that concern his or her person (FNBE, 2010, p. 6). The other one was in the section where pupil rights of a safe learning environment was stated. Gender was mentioned in a context where bullying and harassment were defined.

Compared with the Swedish curriculum the Finnish curriculum is still sparse. Fundamental values and tasks are defined in the first chapter of the Swedish document. Equality between women and men is explicitly mentioned as one of those values. In addition the Swedish national curriculum provides guidelines for school staff. According to these guidelines, schools are obliged to actively challenge conventional gender patterns. It was stated in the Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Pre-school Class and Leisure-Time Centre (Lpo 94) that: The school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men (Skolverket, 1994, p. 4). Furthermore, it is stated that the school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide opportunities for pupils to explore and develop their abilities and interests independently, despite gender. This does not necessarily mean that Swedish pre-primary education is more equal than Finnish pre-primary education from the children’s point of view. However, it legitimates equality work, which might otherwise be seen as redundant within an educational context.

Methodology

The article draws on data produced in two separate ethnographic studies in Finland and Sweden. Although fieldwork was organised in exactly the same way, both studies follow a Nordic tradition of ethnographic research, with its critical focus for analysing educational processes in pre-primary, educational institutions (Beach 2010, p. 56). In addition, they share a methodological commitment to feminist ethnography’s ideas of reflexivity, gender awareness and fragmentation (Skeggs
2001, p. 429). This was considered a fruitful starting point for collaborative, cross-cultural analyses, in which analogical incidents in various cultural contexts are explored in order to increase theoretical understanding (Lahelma & Gordon, 2010). We have conducted analyses through discussion (Gordon, 2006; Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2000; Lahelma, Lappalainen & Mietola, forthcoming); we have read through our ethnographic data and picked up extracts in which children’s being or acting is evaluated in gendered terms. Further, we have discussed these sets of data jointly, analysing the ways that understandings of the ideal schoolchild is being made (Davies, 2004) in educational practises of pre-primary education.

Social practises are on-going practises, which means that gender relations vary depending on the context and change over time. This means that gender can be expressed in multiple ways, i.e. there are multiple forms of masculinities and femininities (cf. Connell, 1995, 2003, 2009; Thorne, 2005). Stable or recurrent gender relations in society construct what is theoretically defined as social structures (Connell, 2003). Connell (2003) suggests that the organisation of gender at the local level in, for instance, pre-primary education is referred to as the gender regime.

More specifically, this article draws on the theoretical understanding that gender is embodied through the daily practises by human beings (cf. Connell, 2003). This means that gender can be expressed in multiple ways, i.e. there are multiple forms of masculinities and femininities (cf. Connell, 1995, 2003, 2009; Thorne, 2005). These gender relations create different kinds of social hierarchies. Raewyn Connell (2003) suggests that the organisation of gender at the institutional level in, for instance, pre-primary education is referred to as the gender regime. In the daily educational practise this is expressed by different expectations for girls and boys. Nordic studies and studies elsewhere (cf. Davies, 1989; Lappalainen, 2008; Odenbring, 2010, 2012b) show that girls, to a greater extent, are expected to keep things organised and to be quiet. These kinds of expectations are connected to the general idea that girls are more mature than boys and more apt to handle these kinds of situations. General ideas about boys, on the other hand, are often based on expectations that they are noisy and disorganised. Moreover, boys’ failures in school are often excused by claiming that they are immature and noisy. Boys are sometimes even considered charming when they behave in this way (Walkerdine, 1998; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Barrie Thorne (2005) argues that these expectations not only maintain gender dichotomies, they might also have an impact on boys and girls’ respective understanding of gender.

Taking this theoretical understanding as our point of departure, when analysing the transition to compulsory schooling in terms of gender, we regard aspects of gender as constructed at the level of social structure, through cultural distinction and everyday practises. Additionally, they are socially constructed at the level of subjectivity, through complex social and cultural processes, by which we acquire gendered identities as learners (Davies, 1989; Jackson, 2001; Lappalainen, Mietola & Lahelma, 2012).

Odenbring (2010) conducted her study in a preschool class named Octopus, located in metropolitan Gothenburg, Sweden, during the autumn of 2007. The Octopus preschool class is located in an inner-city area. The educational level in the neighbourhood is among the highest in the city and the proportion of inhabitants born outside Sweden is below the city average (Gothenburg City Registry, 2012). Lappalainen (2006) carried out her fieldwork in two Finnish preschools, named Reed and Birch Park during the
school year 2000–2001. Both preschools were located in an expanding urban district, which was characterised by a large proportion of families with children and a large number of immigrant families. Average incomes and educational levels were lower than the city average. However, parents’ educational and professional backgrounds varied in both preschools: some had graduated and worked as professionals, others had left school after compulsory schooling and were more or less permanently out of the labour market.

Both studies are mainly based on observations, but interviews and informal discussions were also made during the fieldwork. One of the main aims in ethnographic fieldwork is to study and analyse the investigated educational setting’s daily activities for a longer period of time (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1990). In order to capture the dynamics of the context and to get an overview of daily routines, our fieldwork started with an intensive fieldwork period. After this ‘compressed time mode’ (cf. Jeffery & Troman, 2004), data generation continued with a more selective approach. According to Bob Jeffery and Geoff Troman (2004) this type of ethnography is, for example, suitable for research that investigates gender relations, which is the case in the present study.

One aim of pre-primary education is to guarantee equal opportunities for learning and starting compulsory schooling (Skolverket, 1994, 2011; FNBE, 2001, 2010). In the investigated preschools and preschool class, children’s actions and ways of being are continuously under evaluation in terms of their future as ‘professional pupils’ and citizens (Lahelma & Gordon, 1997; Lappalainen, 2008). Although the aim is to promote equality, due to these evaluations, particular kinds of children are constructed as ‘ideal pupils’. Hence they are agents and empowered, while at the same time some of them are construed as objects, as not embodying the characteristics required to belong to a certain group (see Popkewitz, 2001, 2003). Moreover, evaluations are far from gender neutral and often based on expectations of essential differences between boys and girls.

**Gendered expectations in assessment practises**

Preparations for school were expressed in various ways within the investigated educational settings. In both investigated preschools in Finland, one preparatory practice for creating a smooth transition to school was by producing children’s portfolios or self-assessment forms, through which children were made to reflect on their skills and competences. The portfolios were made for each child in order to relay information about the children in the transition from preschool to primary school. The following excerpt describes a preschool teacher meeting, in which skills and competences were discussed in terms of school transition. The agenda of the meeting was to develop assessment practises and to promote collaboration between school and pre-primary education. Present at this meeting were Meri and Sole, both preschool teachers working at Reed preschool; Katri, preschool teacher from another preschool, and Tiina, who was a representative from the local primary school.

During the meeting the preschool teachers emphasised different matters considered important in the transition from preschool to school. One of the things discussed was children’s skills and competences. At the meeting, preschool and primary school representatives seemed to have different understandings of what is considered as relevant aspects in the transition from pre-primary education to primary education. Tiina, the primary school representative, emphasised that information about difficulties with perceptual
skills was considered important information for school. The preschool teachers, on the other hand, pointed out children’s social skills as particularly important. According to the school representative, information about social skills might be considered a difficult matter; she argued that this kind of information could sometimes be considered quite delicate. She also argued for keeping the assessment form as short as possible so that the preschool teacher could read them quickly. However, the discussion continued concerning cognitive and fine motoric skills.

One thing discussed during the meeting was the planning of the self-assessment test. The starting point of the planning was the previously used self-assessment test called ‘assessment ship’. It consisted of a sketch representing a pirate ship with three spars, holes for cannons, and a pirate flag with skull and crossbones. Assessment and gender were discussed in the following way:

Katri was one of the preschool teachers that commented on this test and she explained: ‘Not too difficult, I have 15 boys in my group and there are boys who are lousy at drawing’. The preschool teachers planned the test. Meri also suggests that for the girls the drawing could include a princess with a necklace. [...] Later in the meeting previous experiences were discussed. Meri mentions that using ‘the assessment ship’ was distressing. Tiina nods in recognition and says that the test took time, at least one and a half hours for each child to finish. Meri continues and says that learning realism in self-assessment is something that needs to be practiced as early as possible. (Field notes in Reed preschool, 29 September 2000)

The preschool teachers expressed that the drawing test was particularly good, but at the same time it was quite difficult for the children to manage. Neither representatives of the preschool nor the elementary school questioned the necessity of continuous (self)-assessment for preschool children. Meri, although she considered assessment practice as being stressful, emphasised the importance of continuous self-assessment several times, in order to educate children to become realistic in their self-evaluations. The concept of realism was obviously based on the assessment systems of the educational institution (Kasanen, Räty & Snellman, 2003). Gendered expectations of boys and girls emerge in the teacher’s descriptions. Planning was carried out by anticipating especially boys’ interests. The pirate ship was expected to please boys. Meri noted that one should take girls into account by suggesting a princess and a necklace. Katri expressed her worry about how boys are going to manage. The girls’ ability to manage was not discussed. This can be interpreted as a reflection on the travelling discourse on boys’ underachievement, which has framed Finnish public debate on gender, since the 1980s (Labelma, 1992; Arnesen et al., 2008; Brunila & Edström, this Special Issue). In the extract above, the aim to promote gender equality is clearly visible. However, it is based on a dichotomous idea of gender, in which particular features, such as fascination with jewels for girls or the lack of fine-motoric skills for boys are seen as essentials for girls or boys (Davies, 1989). We can argue that preschool teachers, when aiming to treat children equally, turn out to be maintaining conventional gender patterns instead of deconstructing them. But, we need to note that their reflections on gender correspond well with the Finnish National preschool curriculum, which requires preschool education to take the special needs of girls and boys into account (FNBE, 2000, p. 7).

**Constructions of the ideal school child**

Compared to the Finnish curriculum documents, the Swedish documents can arguably...
be viewed as more progressive in the sense that they take multiplicity into account in formations of gender, and provide clear guidelines for educational staff. However, our analysis of classroom practises illustrates that the progressive policy has a limited effect on everyday life in pre-primary schooling. In the following part, we analyse a classroom activity called ‘circle time’, which is a common practice for pre-primary education in both countries (cf. Haglund, 2004; Odenbring, 2010; Simeonsdotter-Svensson, 2009; Paju, 2012). All the children assemble during the circle times and it is always one of the preschool teachers who is in charge of the circle times. Different kinds of topics are discussed during these sessions.

In Octopus preschool class in Sweden, preparation for school was also expressed in terms of cognitive skills. In the extract below, for instance, the children in the preschool class practise Swedish during a circle time. There are routines connected to order and discipline during the circle times that are held every morning. The schedule-like organisation of circle time is in many ways similar to the organisation of school. Furthermore, the children are trained to be quiet and to speak one at a time and follow the given instructions. The preschool teachers immediately reprimand children who do not follow this requirement. The children sit on the floor creating a semicircle. Some of the girls are placed next to boys to calm them down, whereas some of the girls are allowed to sit together. This particular morning the preschool teacher Helena is in charge of the circle time:

Helena introduces this part of the circle time by asking the children who has the letter R in their names. She does this while taking attendance. / .../. She continues to ask the children whether the letter R is a vowel or consonant. Albin replies that it is a consonant and he is then told to write the letter R on the white board. Several of the children are asked to write ‘r-words’ on the white board. The children can choose whatever word they like, as far as it has the letter R in it. The children are told to choose an r-word properly before they write it on the white board. To reach this board the children have to climb on chairs and stand on a table. After this exercise Helena teaches the children how to create sentences. She gives examples like: Maria is pretty, Sven sits still, Niklas has short hair, and Fanny has curly hair. Helena then picks out a box decorated with letters that she refers to as the ‘fun, fun, box’. In the box there are small laminated cards on which she has written different words. Helena continues to talk about how human beings are able to create words. Alexander answers that human beings do this with their vocal cords. Helena replies with a joyful voice: Alexander; you are a real professor! Alexander replies: Mum and dad think so, too. Helena takes out more cards from the box and puts them on the floor. She creates sentences with the cards. She gives the children examples of sentences again: Mum is pretty and Dad is nice. / .../. Helena continues to practice sentences with the children and the children count how many words there are in every sentence. (Field notes in Octopus preschool class, 18 October 2007)

During this specific circle time the children were practising the letter R together with preschool teacher Helena. She instructed the children what to do and how to perform. The children were asked not to rush things and to work seriously. Practising the alphabet and sentences the way they do it in Octopus has many similarities with routines and practises in school (cf. Karlsson, Melander, Pérez Prieto & Sahlström, 2006). Fritjof Sahlström (2006), for instance, has recognised similar patterns in his research carried out in the Swedish preschool context. For example, in one of the preschools investigated by Sahlström, the children drew the outlines of
a foot on a piece of paper, then the children were told to write their shoe sizes and names on a sheet of paper. This emphasis on letters and numbers is an example of how carrying out preschool pedagogy is based on supposed expectations of school.

Boys’ academic skills are also encouraged in Octopus’s preschool class. In the extract above Alexander’s performance is recognised in a very specific way. He is referred to as a professor. The categorisation “professor” refers to a profession with high status, but also to general expectations connected to gender and professions based on the idea that a professor is a man (Ulfsdotter-Eriksson, 2006). In Octopus there are also other occasions when boys’ skills are appreciated through similar gendered categorisations as mentioned above. Girls’ success in similar tasks was considered more or less the ‘normal order of things’ and was not recognised in the same way.

During this exercise, preschool teacher Helena also comments on children’s looks and behaviour when creating sentences. Sven receives the comment that he should sit still, which might be a way for preschool teacher Helena to encourage desired behaviour in the preschool class, but it might also be an expression of school preparation and the construction of the ideal school child, regardless of gender. During this particular circle time there are also children whose looks are commented upon. Maria is told that she is pretty; someone remarks that Niklas has short hair and Fanny is addressed about her curly hair. Although both boys and girls receive comments about their hair, gendered differences are singled out by preschool-teacher Helena. Niklas’ hair is described in a traditional masculine way, since Helena comments that he has short hair. Fanny, on the other hand, is told that her hair is curly. This is not the only time Fanny is addressed about her hair and looks. During another circle time, Fanny’s hair is described as angel’s hair (Odenbring, 2010). The way Fanny’s hair is described connects to traditional gendered expectations of girls and femininity, where girls are expected to care about their looks, to have long hair and to be pretty (cf. Davies, 2003).

There are also other children in Octopus preschool class that experience similar comments on their physical appearance. Erik is one of these children. On one occasion when the children are visiting the city park and are playing in a playground, Helena describes Erik in terms of being a ‘muscular’ when he is climbing and hanging in a climbing frame. Here Erik’s physical body and strength is pointed out, which connects to traditional expectations of boys as physically strong. Thorne (2005) argues that when adults use different categorisations in addressing children, the children get different gendered messages (cf. Odenbring, 2012a, 2012b). For example, by describing girls in terms of being pretty and boys as physically strong, the concepts of desirable expectations on femininities and masculinities are constructed and also reproduced in the Octopus preschool class.

In preparation practises gender is also expressed through the way the children are seated. As shown earlier, some of the girls were asked to sit next to a couple of boys before the circle time is about to begin in Octopus preschool class. This practise is a recurrent pattern of creating and keeping order and discipline in the preschool class and is defined as a shock-absorber tactic in the study. To keep things calm, it was always one of the girls (sometimes one of the preschool teachers) who was asked to sit next to one of the chatty boys during circle times, meal, or reading sessions. The excerpt below shows how one of the girls, named Leila, has to act as a shock absorber during a reading session after finishing lunch:
The reading session is about to begin, but it is pretty noisy in the Big room [the biggest room in Octopus]. Several of the children sit on the red sofa. Marie and Carina [a temporary teacher] are sitting at a table in the middle of the room and talk. The children are told to calm down and sit on the sofa. To make things calmer at the sofa, Leila is told to sit between Christian and Olle, because Marie thinks it is too noisy. (Field notes in Octopus preschool class, 17 September 2007).

When girls are given this kind of responsibility, girls are not only expected to handle these kinds of situations, but are also expected to be mature enough to do so (cf. Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). It is also worth mentioning that no one explicitly asks the girls whether they accept this duty or not. Since it is always the girls that are given this kind of responsibility, the children in the long run will become aware that there are different gendered worlds for boys and girls in situations like these and might also behave according to these expectations (cf. Thorne, 2005). Nevertheless, during the interviews with the preschool teachers, they claimed that gender did not matter to them and that they focused on the children as individuals. As the interviews progressed, two of the preschool teachers, Helena and Monica, separately realised, that they actually gave the girls the responsibility of calming chatty boys down by the way they were seated. They had simply not reflected on this before the interviews (Odenbring, 2010).

Constructions of ‘the ideal school child’ have also been recognised in a Finnish preschool context. One of the girls, named Anna, frequently positioned herself as ‘the ideal school child’, by constantly being in the right place at the right time and always bringing the right equipment (Lappalainen, 2008). Anna’s self-identification was based on the continuous feedback she received from educational staff. This was also the case in the extract below, in which preschool children in Birch park are having breakfast:

Breakfast takes place by candlelight. Antti fills his bowl with cornflakes and sits down close to Viivi. He looks at Viivi’s and Miriam’s bowls with sleepy eyes. Miriam hums quietly by herself. Antti eats his cornflakes slowly. After a while he walks away from the table to butter a sandwich and after that he returns to the table with slow steps. Suddenly there is a clear voice coming from the next room saying: Good morning. Anna saunters into the room with great posture. She has a contact book in her hand that she gives to preschool teacher Karin, who expresses in a joyful voice: Now there is a brisk girl. (Field notes in Birch park preschool, 30 November 2000).

When Karin commented on Anna’s entrance, she positioned Anna as the ‘ideal school child’. We argue that this was a message not only for Anna, but also for all the other children, and especially for girls. Here, Anna was indicated as an example of the right kind of girliness. However, sometimes gender seems to be of secondary importance in terms of gender and school preparations. This is the case in the Swedish preschool class where the so-called sub-teacher duty has been recognised (Odenbring, 2010). In the study, the sub-teachers are defined as children who, for example, are responsible for assisting the preschool teachers in different situations or in clearing tables and in tidying up. Compared to how previous research discusses this duty (cf. Hägglund & Öhrn, 1992; Hellman, 2010; Karlsson, 2003; Walkerdine, 1998), both boys and girls in Octopus were told to act as sub-teachers by the preschool teachers. This duty was clearly part of the daily practice and it was also a duty that was encouraged by the preschool teachers. Sometimes the children were given this kind of responsibility when they had behaved in the right way. In these
kinds of situations, the sub-teacher duty more or less becomes an honorary task connected to status. With this in mind, maybe it is not such a big surprise that the children also act as sub-teachers on their own volition. In previous research, Harriet Strandell (2001) argues that children who do this on their own volition not only feel that they are important but also feel that they are part of the practice. This might also be the explanation why most of the children in Octopus preschool class acted as sub-teachers on their own volition. We argue that this is one of the practises where the ideal school child as competent and responsible is embodied. Compared with previous research, which shows that this duty is almost exclusively given to girls, the results in the present article show that, although teaching practices are still often framed by the gender specific expectations, some change in the Swedish context has happened and in particular, previously strongly gendered chores, such as acting as a sub-teacher, are now more or less gender neutral, provided equally for both boys and girls.

In the educational twilight zone

In this article, we have elaborated on how gender is constructed in the educational ‘twilight zone’, i.e. the transition from pre-primary education to compulsory schooling in Finland and Sweden. Two preschools in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Reed and Birch Park preschool and Octopus preschool class in Gothenburg metropolitan area have been under investigation. Previous research (Ackesjö & Persson, 2010; Karlsson et al., 2006; Sahlström, 2006) shows that the organisation of the last year of preschool and the organisation of preschool class has many similarities with routines in school. This has also been recognised in the present article, however we take a different approach compared to previous studies since we analyse this critically by using gender theories. The aim in our article has been to further explore how the ideal school child is constructed in terms of gender.

The analysis shows that there are strong connections between children’s school preparations, discipline, and gender. Depending on the context, in some situations the messages to the children are explicitly expressed, but in other situations the messages are subtler in character. Gender was expressed in various ways, but reproducing gender dichotomies was common in all three investigated educational settings (cf. Connell, 1995, 2003, 2009; Davies, 1989).

School preparations were, for example, expressed by the drawing assessment test in Reed preschool and by practising certain academic skills in Octopus preschool class. In Reed preschool and Octopus preschool class the preschool teachers created gender dichotomies either by the way they talked about the children or by the way the children were addressed and encouraged. In Reed preschool the preschool teachers discussed boys’ lack of precise motor skills by claiming that the boys were bad at drawing. It was also suggested by the preschool teachers that the drawing assessment test itself should be different for boys and girls, respectively. The preschool teachers suggested that the boys should draw a pirate ship whereas drawing a princess with a necklace would be a good assessment drawing test for girls. Essentially, we argue that the preschool teachers in Reed preschool construct an understanding of gender based on gender differences in the children’s interests, where the boys are expected to be interested in traditional masculine artefacts, whereas the girls are expected to be interested in traditional feminine artefacts. The way the Finnish preschool teachers discussed the drawing test corresponds well with the general idea about
gender as a dichotomy in the way, which it is stated in the Finnish curriculum.

In Octopus preschool class in Sweden, the preschool teachers created gender dichotomy by specifically encouraging boys’ literacy competence and raised them onto a pedestal by using certain gendered categorisations when addressing them. There are no similar notes where the preschool teachers encouraged girls’ literacy skills in a similar way. These results have similarities with Walker-dine’s (1998) work. She found that boys to a greater extent were described as clever, even if they had not performed very well. Girls who performed well in school were, on the other hand, described as hard working girls. In other words, we argue that children’s performances and skills are treated differently depending on gender at a very early stage in life. This will most likely influence boys’ and girls’ experiences of school and might in the end also have an impact on their later educational choices (cf. Beach & Dovemark, 2009, Lappalainen, Mietola & Lahelma, 2012).

Furthermore, school preparations were also expressed by encouraging the children towards ‘right’ behaviour and by following the given routines. In Octopus preschool class the shock absorber duty was clearly part of the local gender regime (see Connell, 2003). The shock-absorber tactic had one main function: to calm the chatty boys down. This recurrent duty was clearly gendered since it was only the girls who were asked to do this. One can be critical of the fact that this corresponds poorly with the part in the Swedish national curriculum that states that all children should be given the same opportunities to develop their skills and interests in preschool class. Constructions of ‘the ideal school child’, in terms of being the well-behaved girl, have also been recognised in the results from Birch Park preschool in Finland. Here one of the girls, Anna, was positioned as ‘the ideal school child’ by the way she presented herself as neat and careful, extroverted but not too noisy, exactly the right kind of girl. Essentially, a finding which surprised us was that the pressures to act according to traditional expectations seemed to be even stronger in the Swedish educational context, although the Swedish curriculum is more explicit, encouraging educational staff to deconstruct gender divisions, compared with the Finnish one.

Overall, the results show that expectations of academic or cognitive skills, the way the children were addressed or expected to behave were often expressed differently depending on gender (cf. Odenbring, 2010, 2012b; Walker-dine, 1998). By constructing gender dichotomies we, in line with Thorne (2005), argue that these children might experience different gendered worlds in the daily practice of pre-primary education. The results also show that there are situations when gender turned out to be less relevant than it used to be in terms of fostering the ideal school child. This view was expressed by the sub-teacher duty in Octopus, where both boys and girls were asked to assist the preschool teachers. What we might see here is the possible changes in preschool teachers’ gender awareness, when it comes to expectations for boys and girls in this specific duty. In other words, gender might appear in various ways within the same educational setting.

**Concluding remarks**

Although the Nordic countries are often considered ‘models’ of gender equality (Lahelma & Öhrn 2003), the gendered constructions of the ‘ideal pupil’ frame children’s everyday life in the early childhood educational institutions on both sides of the Baltic Sea. Compared to what is stated in the national curricula these findings are quite re-
markable. The Swedish national curriculum (Skolverket, 1994; see also Skolverket, 2011) has a clearer description of gender equality work in education compared to what is stated in the national Finnish curriculum (FNBE, 2000, 2010). The starting point in the Finnish curriculum is the essential gender difference with the result that boys and girls are expected to have gender specific needs. However, gender equality is stated as one of the corner stones in the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 1994; see also Skolverket, 1994). In the curriculum it is explicitly stated that democratic values, like gender and human equality, should permeate the entire educational system. Moreover, it is stated that it is the teacher’s duty to challenge traditional understandings of gender and provide opportunities for all children, regardless gender, to explore and develop their abilities. In a previous Swedish study, Edström (2009) argues that gender equality in the Swedish curriculum is based on the idea that boys and girls should be treated equally and that differences between the sexes should be abolished. Despite the political intentions in Sweden to make the educational system more equal, the results in the present study show that dichotomous-thinking still has a great impact on the daily practise in the preschool class. To conclude, based on results presented in this article and considering the present political debate about gender equality in education in both Finland and Sweden (cf. Brunila & Edström, 2013), we argue for a more critical and holistic discussion about gender in education. We would also like to point out the importance of cross-cultural research in the future.

Noter

1 Currently authors work at the Nordic Centre of Excellence (Justice through Education 2013–2018).

2 (Lahelma & Gordon 1997)

3 Preschool is referred to as förskola in Swedish and preschool class is referred to as förskoleklass in Swedish.

4 In 1998 the preschool class was regulated in the Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Preschool Class and Leisure-Time Centre also called Lpo 94 (Skolverket, 1994). Since 2011 the preschool class is regulated in the Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Preschool Class and the Leisure-Time Centre, Lgr 11, (Skolverket, 2011). The equality work is still the same, but in the new curriculum some parts of the equality work have been clarified.

5 However, a working group did not suggest lowering the compulsory school age, mainly because the reform was evaluated as being too expensive to carry out.

6 All the names are pseudonyms.

7 A small notebook for changing information between the preschool and home.

References


