

# Towards a reflective care in Education

## The ambivalence of professional caring masculinities in a Swedish Edu-care context

Anette Hellman<sup>1</sup>

Department of education, communication and learning. University of Gothenburg

**Abstract:** In the past decade, dominant global discourses about individuality and competence have become evident in pedagogy policy and practice [1]. Although traditional ways in Sweden of understanding ‘Educare’ (A holistic model of education and care) may still exist, Sweden, as several other western countries, have seen a shift towards a more performative culture where the concept of education tends to be related to traditional school subjects – such as the learning of language or mathematics [2,3]. Research has problematized the way care has become blurred and marginalized in relation to learning in educational settings and policy documents. It has also been argued that we need to analyze care as a reflective practice and learn more about how theories of care could be implemented [4]. The purpose of this paper is to explore notions about care and gender in contemporary Sweden and the concept I in this paper suggest for this discussion is reflective educational care [4].

Keywords: Care, reflection, early childhood education, Sweden, gender

## Introduction

Discourers about gender equality are strong in Sweden. Notions on equality are manifested in policy documents and laws, such as 18 months parental leave available to both parents and obligations for teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to counteract gender stereotypes. In recent years, particularly in middle class families, there has been a shift from seeing the ideal man in families as a ‘breadwinner’ towards being a ‘active, present and competent father’ who share parental leave and spend more time with their children [5]. The national curriculum for preschool [6] imposes a multifaceted gender equality assignment to preschools, in which one of the preschools’ roles is to break down stereotypical gender notions regarding what girls and boys do, how they do things and when they do them. The Government mandate of the Swedish National Agency for Education states that it is ‘important even at preschool to show girls and boys that gender will not determine their choice of occupation’. This can be interpreted as an endeavor to also change gender roles regarding in what ways and by whom preschool teaching is done and former traditional gender-coded associations need to be critically analysed. However, idealized norms about caring masculinities within the family sphere, still don’t seem to correspond with men’s professional work with care in ECE. Sweden still has quite low numbers of men working in professional care for young children (about 4-5%) and several male preschool teachers describe how they have to negotiate quite stereotype understandings of gender in ECE.<sup>2</sup> Hence, un-reflected notions about care seem to make caring for young children ambivalent for men as *professional caregivers*. At the same time, other actions become naturalized for men in ECE, such as teaching, playfulness, leadership and caring for older children.

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<sup>1</sup> [anette.hellman@ped.gu.se](mailto:anette.hellman@ped.gu.se)

<sup>2</sup> Brody [7] point out that the general pattern in the world as a whole is that less than 3% of preschool teachers are male. Brody also states that the proportion of male workers is low even in countries such as Norway which has had some very explicit strategies for increasing male workers, but where only 10% of the staff is male in ECE.

To be a professional preschool teacher in Sweden means to work according to the national curriculum. A central model underpinning the curriculum is the concept of Edu-care. Warin [8] describe how the concept of ‘educare’ (education and care), derived particularly from Nordic approaches to pedagogy and curricula design and has the potential to describe holistic educational purposes where education and care are seen as equally important and inseparable. However, in the past decade, dominant global discourses about individuality and competence have become evident in pedagogy policy and practice [1]. Although traditional ways in Sweden of understanding ‘educare’ may still exist, Sweden, as several other western countries, have seen a shift towards a more performative culture where the concept of education tends to be related to traditional school subjects – such as the learning of language or mathematics [2,3]. While education is seen as reflected upon and discussed ‘on its own’ as well as together with care, care is defined in policy documents and in practice more vaguely or in ‘combination’ with learning. Buiding on Fielding and Moss [9], Warin [8] describes this process as holistic values being obliterated through neo-liberal educational policies to the extent that schooling has become a ‘techno-managerial exercise in control and normalization.

In response to these discourses researchers have stressed the need to pay far more attention to practices of care and to the way the concept of care operates in early childhood settings. Haldén [10] are concerned about the way a one sided focus on education/learning and on the individual and competent child, may make children’s need of care in the preschool setting invisible. Noddings [2] argues that education should be focused on themes of care rather than traditional subject disciplines. Each participant plays, according to Noddings, an important role in this process. The carer can be seen as attentive and receptive, allowing him or her to understand the feelings the cared-for is trying to express without passing judgments based on a pre-conceived notion. When the behaviour of the carer is centered on the needs of the cared-for, Noddings calls it motivational displacement. She also discusses how motive energy flows towards the needs and wants of the cared-for. However, this does not mean that the carer will always approve of what the other wants and might indeed try to guide the person towards a different set of values, while taking into account the feelings and desires that are there and responding as positively as his or her values and capacities allow. According to Noddings, a caring relationship is one where both the cared-for and the carer contribute. This relationship in the case of the youngest students could be seen to extend to the parents, therefore highlighting the importance of good communication and cooperation between home and preschool settings. It also has greater societal implications because: “To care means to respond to needs, and needs do not stop (or start) at the schoolroom door”. . According to her (11), the ethic of caring can create a more effective learning environment and this caring-centered approach to learning allows for active participation and empowerment of all members of the preschool community [12]. This is what Noddings refers to as genuine education: “... we believe that students should be given opportunity to learn how to care for themselves, for other human beings, for the natural and human-made worlds and for the world of ideas. This learning to care requires significant knowledge; it defines genuine education.” Also Wrigley et al. [13] discuss ethics of care as a set of values that lie at the heart of intellectually demanding and equitable pedagogies: ‘Deep care is central to socially just pedagogies, which understand the need to scaffold from where students are at, in respectful ways’ (p. 196). Fielding and Moss [9] have a radical rethink of education based on the concept of ‘education in its broadest sense’ (EBS) (p. 46) to focus a vision for a more socially just, caring, and relational form of education to draw attention to the increasing androcentrism of Western educational influences alongside a downgrading of caring educational practices. This shift in an understanding of care places care at the centre of education, both as a way of describing teaching and way of conceptualising a key set of values that could be taught. However, as discussed by several gender researchers, discourses about care and children’s needs – even though often discussed as gender neutral concepts – is highly affected by gender stereotypes. Children’s needs is hereby often unreflectively understood as boys having particular needs as boys and girls having specific other needs as girls [14, 15]. Therefore, we need to reflect and critically analyze care in relation to norms about gender.

Earlier research shows how male teachers negotiate masculinities when being in and entering a predominantly feminine work area, such as early childhood education [7]. This negotiation can be seen as needed due to gendered ideas of who is seen as suited for which kind of work, which calls for men to find strategies to negotiate masculinities, in order to keep up with a normative locally constructed view on masculinity and care as well as find ways to be an individual and professional teacher. Researchers have also problematized the way un-reflected practices of care might become gender blind at the same time as stereotype norms about gender operates in educational environments [16, 4]. One example of this discussed in this paper, is how the ideal professional position as a preschool teacher is viewed as gender-neutral at the same time as practices of care becomes linked to idealized femininity, naturalized for women and hereby made ambivalent for men (and boys) to perform. These challenges relate to the conflict between how to display norms about Edu-care as a professional Swedish preschool teacher at the same time as care – as a profession - is made ambivalent to perform as a man, a theme further explored in the following section.

## The ambivalence of professional caring masculinities

I will in this section present some examples concerning male pre-school teachers and the care of young children by exploring ideas about being professional in relation to conventions about the male pre-school teacher. The data builds on two interview studies with 22 male trainers respectively 8 male preschool teachers and 8 female preschool teachers in Sweden. A common way for all teachers and trainers interviewed was to describe the importance of behaving as a professional and defined this as a 'gender-neutral' position. At the same time, male teachers described themselves as very visible as a minority. Some referred to this as being positioned as 'the other' in a context supposed to be neutral. As described by Warin [17], to teach often means to put oneself in front of the gaze of different audiences, such as parents, children or colleagues. The way individuals' bodies and actions are exposed to gaze, manifest in different ways depending on context. The male students and preschool teachers discuss that, even if they always where 'visible', particular situations and actions could mean risk of gazing and marginalization. These were often linked to men's performance of care. Johan, a male trainer, discuss this in the following:

It was when I was working in a group of younger 1-3 years old children. I was then advised by my female colleague, to leave the 'caring parts' of the job to her, like helping children to get dressed. She was my supervisor and she had just had a conversation with one of the parents who thought that it was a little bit strange with men taking care of young children. My supervisor told the parents that all teachers have an obligation to fulfil the goals of the curriculum. Care is a central part of our obligation and something both men and women are supposed to perform and teach. But afterwards, she also told me to play it cool and leave caring activities among the children to female teachers, since some parents had opinions about me as a man doing them. It was not that the parent accused me of sexual activities with the children; it was just that some parents thought that care was an odd thing to do as a man.

Most men interviewed had made an active choice to become a preschool teacher, a choice that might have contributed to the way professionalism, rather than gender, was put in the forefront. Several male and female teachers in the study also describe how they negotiate parents and colleagues gender stereotype expectations through notions in the Swedish curriculum about gender equality. One example is the call for male role models<sup>3</sup>. Underpinning the call for male role models is the influence of sex role theory. The feminine dominance within preschools, together with the moral panic about absent fathers, still serves to support the call for male role models of hegemonic masculinities for boys rather than girls [18, 19]. Care, female teachers, girls and certain spaces labelled as 'feminine' are tied together in this preschool discourse. Care is linked to the institution, female teachers, the building's architecture as well as the design, and informal situations such as meals that operate as a hidden curriculum. Researchers [20] have pointed out the importance of 'loosening the ties' between care, girls, girlishness, women and femininity, and create possibilities to also analyse care in relation to boys, boyishness, men and masculinity. Loosening this tie might also have implications on how jobs that are characterized as caring can open up for men too and how more men are beginning to see their future in such workplaces.

A common theme among men studying to become preschool teachers as well as men working as preschool teachers, was to describe their role as 'breaking' against gender order. As pointed out by Wernersson [22], shifting from a traditional masculine occupation to a traditional feminine one, means breaking the gender order 'downhill' with a potential loss of value, status and salary as well as the risk of becoming 'reduced' in different ways. One example of this in the study, was when traditional norms about men as 'hard working breadwinners providing for their families' clashed with men's choice to become preschool teachers. Some of them – in contrast to the female students in the study - had for instance been labelled as 'lazy' with 'no ambitions'. Tom discusses these norms in the following:

I get very disturbed by these stereotypes! To work as a preschool teacher is for the first a very important job, I mean, we take care of the future generation! It's also really hard work and we have a university degree! I've been discussing the way this job becomes ridiculed in

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<sup>3</sup> This discourse about children's needs and role models may still be found in Swedish preschools, particularly in relation to single mothers. Researchers have showed how common assumptions about 'boys' needs' for male role models and 'girls' needs' for female role models rest on ideas about biological differences between the sexes [18,19,20, 21].

several ways with my friends here at the university and I think it's because working as a preschool teacher sometimes is seen as just 'taking care of children'. Something anybody could do without thinking. That's why we have to educate parents and society about what we do in preschool! Maybe it's also because it's seen as women's job and obviously it don't seems to be disturbing people if a woman chooses 'a lazy care job'...maybe she is expected to be provided for by her husband.... Ah, I'm so sick of these norms!

In private spaces such as in the family, men in Sweden are expected through discourses of gender-equality and modern fatherhood, to perform care for young children [5]. However At the same time that professionalism as well as care in national and local policy documents often is understood as 'neutral', practices of professional care becomes ambivalent for men to perform in a public space, particularly in relation to choice of profession. Traditional gendered norms about men as providers and breadwinners becomes visible in the quotation above from Tom, labelling men – but more seldom women - as 'lazy' or without ambitions. The way Tom challenge these norms might be interpreted as breaking with 'old' ideas of gender and a more fluid and flexible way of presenting oneself as male [23]. This can be compared with Jones's [24 ] study of male teachers which pointed out that conflicting discourses of masculinity operate in early years education settings making different masculinities appear simultaneously. At the same time, working with care and young children as a man and breaking the gender order "downhill [22] means that there is a real risk to be ridiculed in different ways, as discussed earlier. Some male trainers and teachers talked about the possibility of a sexual gaze on their caring actions, a gaze not directed towards their female colleagues. In the following, a male teacher, Nils, and a female teacher, Anna, discuss these issues:

Nils: The worst thing that could happen is if I take care of a child, say take a child on my knee, and then are accused of sexual harassments by a parent who thinks that caring for children is unnatural for men to do, like, I must have some other intentions... It's so horrible even to think about that, so I must admit that I sometimes keep a certain distance towards children in order to be more safe or at least I make sure that my colleagues is close to me with some 'extra eyes' of safety to protect me from possible accusations so to speak.

Anna: Yeah, that's so sad; I never have to think like that as a female teacher. I do these things all the time without thinking about it, that is how it should be for all teachers, I mean children need us to care for them despite our gender. If anything we need a man who shows girls as well as boys that care is just as natural for men to do as for women.

Professionalism is thus labelled 'gender neutral' while gender becomes clearly visible in relation to norms about gender, bodies and the gender division of labour. In the heart of this process lays the problem of un-reflected practices of care. In Sweden, one of the most gender equal countries in the world, discourses also manifested in the curriculum for preschool, where teachers have an obligation to counteract gender stereotypes (Skolverket, 2016), men's caring actions could in practice be ambivalent. I have in this paper discussed that while men are expected to perform care as fathers in the private sphere of the family, men choosing to work with professional care as preschool teachers, are at risk of being labelled as lazy, without ambitions and even as pedophiles. How can this be understood? The Educare model may still be important, but while there have been a shift towards a more performative culture at risk of favoring education and traditional school subjects also in preschool, the concept of care in national and local policy documents, have become even more blurred and unclear. If care becomes an un-theorized and un-reflected practice, teachers actions in caring practices might pass without critical analyze. As I have shown in this paper, care is hereby at risk of being understood through gender stereotype norms about gender, rather than in line with teachers' gender equal obligations.

In order to promote equality and socially just preschool spaces we need to pay more attention to care. As I have shown, care is in the heart of gender construction and the solution to become aware of how gender operates through care is not to view care and professionalism as gender-neutral, but rather to reflect on and analyze care in order to achieve more knowledge and awareness about the way gender and care manifest locally in preschool settings. A focus on reflective educational care is important in terms of promoting inclusive and socially just preschool spaces for all, adults as well as children. Reflection and critical analyses on care is keywords in order to achieve knowledge and awareness on norms such as gender. But awareness is not enough – we also need action, so let's start working for change by deconstructing naturalized norms about men as providers and women in need of protection as well as naturalized norms linking care to idealized femininity.

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