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The significance of the personal in constructing gender equity practises in kindergartens

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The Kindergarten shall be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.

The Kindergarten shall promote democracy and equality and counteract all forms of discrimination.

From the purpose, §1, in the Norwegian Kindergarten Act

To realise the ambitious objectives of the Norwegian Kindergarten Act is a challenge for all workers in Early Childhood Teacher Education. This is not only in relation to equality, gender equity and democracy, but in respect to the assumptions we have to confront within this legislation. This paper explores the concept and phenomenon of gender equity based on personal engagement. Progress and change in this field is dependent on self-insight and personal knowledge gained through explorations of lived experience that can enhance our understanding and develop a pedagogy of equity (Askland & Rossholt 2009; Marshall 2010). I wish to explore the core concepts of gender equity pedagogy and, second, examine practice that exercises gender sensitive ways of being in relation to children and colleagues. In addition, I will report on a 'micro project approach', which was developed in several kindergartens in Akershus, Norway, as part of a project into this area of research.

What sense do we make of a child being a girl or a boy?

According to Butler (as cited in Jegerstedt, 2008), gender is neither what you are or what you have; it is something you 'do' and construct through actions, practices and the way you talk about it. During childhood—the most formative phase in a person's life—it is people other than the child who make many of the choices. In the first years, the closest persons are the ones that decide what the child will have access to, which toys, clothes, experiences, etcetera. Of course, the child's preferences and temperament may influence the adults' choices and, thereby, strengthen some dispositions. We are shaped by the gazes of others,



of our genetic heritage and of our own understanding of what is possible in our surrounding culture.

Gender equity is a product of the values that are present in contemporary society, connected to values primarily rooted in our own western culture, yet how we understand gender equity is changing all the time. On top of that, these values are easier to talk about than to practice. This is the core of the challenge to kindergarten workers, as well as other educators, when developing a gender equity pedagogy.

Gender equity is more than rights

On the level of social systems, equity is connected to equal rights for care, education, work and pay. However, in the educational setting, gender is about more than formal education and politics, and incorporates questions that require individual and interpersonal engagement (Bundgaard, 2010). In Norway, it is the responsibility of the early childhood teacher education provider to introduce gender equity (Ministry of Education, 2008); however, the responsibility remains with the individual pedagogue for implementation. The following passages are meant to inspire among students, kindergarten workers, and kindergarten teacher educators when engaging with the topic of gender equity.

Working with gender equity is about democracy

The Norwegian Kindergarten Act (2010/2013) holds employees responsible for realising a society where citizens have their rights respected. Democracy is seen both as a system and as a community that respects difference. As Enge (2007, p. 1) observes: "Norway is a defender of democracy and equality. We have a strong tradition to 'respect' and value critical voices and equality and the value of active civilians." Equity between sexes, ethnic belonging and class means we must find ways that open our eyes to see and realise difference. When made visible, we can tell whether the difference underpins discrimination or oppression (Vike, Lidén & Lien, 2001).

Equality, according to the law in Norway, seems to be well established in peoples' sense of what is right (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2010). Many Norwegian laws regulate relations between citizens individuals and the state. Particular acts, for instance, the Act of children and parents and the Act of gender equity, describe commitments, responsibilities and rights. They aim at equal treatment, regardless of sex, sexual preferences, ethnicity and class. However, when we explore who is actually affected by the laws, we see there are reasons to think that equality and equity is about something more than mere Acts. One has to ask questions that critically look at who is making the laws and who is executing them, when: mostly boys are referred to special education; the elderly in Oslo need help predominantly from the East End; and most men in the jails are from ethnic minorities. This reflects discrimination on the basis of social class and prosperity and, most importantly, reflects the everyday relations between people that underpin our understanding of equality and equity.



Gender equity in the kindergarten

The Kindergarten Framework (2006/2011) expects documentation from each institution concerning pedagogy and the development of staff competence regarding equity:

Kindergartens must strive to promote gender equality in their educational practice. Kindergartens are to bring up the children to encounter and create a society of equal rights. The activities in the kindergartens must be based on the principle of gender equality. Boys and girls must have equal opportunities to be seen and heard, and encouraged to join in together in all the activities that go on in the kindergarten. The personnel must actively reflect on their own attitudes as well society's expectations towards boys and girls. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011, p. 10)

Gender equity in Norwegian kindergartens is both about equality between girls and boys and between women and men. The equity practice can be articulated in a common ideal: no one should have to meet expectations or limitations dependent on their sex. All persons in the kindergarten are supposed to have equal access to play and learning, regardless of sex and age.

Gender pedagogy: An area of many comprehensions and contrasts

When constructing a gender equity pedagogy, the relationships between adults is the first issue to be addressed. When a dialogue about gender equity is initiated, staff will quite soon discover that there are many ways to understand equity (Askland & Rossholt, 2009). Contrasting perspectives are often forwarded by members of the group and they find themselves contradicting one another. In my own experience, I have found myself stating that "I perceive the child, not what sex she or he is!", only to contradict myself a few moments later when I claim "...come on, the fact is actually that there is a difference between women and men!" I am not alone in expressing such contradictions. It is, indeed, quite common and may, in some respect, be seen as an example of how we have all misunderstood gender (Askland & Rossholt 2009). There is a lot of research showing how kindergarten staff may react differently to similar situations, dependent on whether the participants are male or female (Andresen, 1996; Eidevald, 2009; Kleppe, 2009). It is then important to articulate the differences in understandings of gender equity that exist amongst staff in order to ensure children receive equal access to play and learning, regardless of their sex. The goal in this study is not to gain consensus but to know where each member of staff positions themselves.

Disagreement and differences can be a source for exiting work with the children. The idea of equity can easily be connected to what we do when it comes to children's participation. To articulate diversity in how we understand equity can also be an inspiration as to how we may cooperate with parents. Parents attitudes on the question of gender equity, we may find, are more diverse than those of staff. When opening up the debate, clarity in communication is important to gain high quality parent cooperation in this matter (Askland & Rossholt, 2009).



Another challenge related to equity is that most kindergartens face unequal representation of male and female educators. How can there be equality when only one of the two genders is present? Most kindergartens have staff consisting of 100 per cent women. In Norway, approximately 9 per cent of kindergarten staff are men. This gender bias calls for discussion about how gender equity can be approached with children. When there is an all female group of staff, the homogeneity may lead to a uniform and unarticulated understanding of how the world 'is' and how to do professional work. Such an understanding may, however, be experienced by some as limiting professional development. Staff cultures that, to a small degree, explore these 'truths' are very poorly equipped to meet such challenges within the mandate of the kindergarten (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010).

Talking about the same thing

Nordberg (2005) puts up three basic discourses from where we can discuss gender equity: the discourse of similarity; the discourse of power; and the discourse of positive gender characteristics. She uses these discourses to discuss the historic development of gender equity from the 1960's. *The discourse of similarity* refers to 'what women can do, men can as well' – and vice versa. No one is born to care for children or elderly or for washing dishes or changing the wheels on the car. *The discourse of power* is that equity concerns gender representations in power positions in society, politics and industry. This discourse examines what patterns of gender domination are current in different social groups. The last discourse is *the discourse of the genders' positive characteristics*. Within this discourse, I describe myself; my sex is not the most important issue. My interests, likings and dislikings, abilities and competencies might be traits I want to put forward to a greater degree (Maalouf, 2000). Some men have characteristics that make them prefer certain interests, as some women also do. This discourse does not describe the sexes in a dichotomy, but regards the individual as possessing unique possibilities that do not need to be 'gendered'. We should be able to complement each other just as much to be like each other. This approach to equity might be suitable for kindergartens where the representation of sex varies from institution to institution. This discourse relates critically to concepts that claim to be global or definite, for instance, the concept of 'identity'. In this discourse, one talks about identities, and that each individual constructs various perceptions of self, depending on relations and contexts. My own perception of being a man can differ and is dependent on time, place, mood, etcetera.

Constructing a gender equity pedagogy

Despite very clearly expressed wishes from the Norwegian government concerning gender equity, kindergartens have changed to a very minor degree (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010). Kindergarten practices have no automatic connection to policy and research. What we *do* is not necessarily a product of what we *know* (Paalerud, 2013). Our individual understanding is constantly interacting with any formal or authorized set of beliefs, in society and the kindergarten.

An interesting perspective in gender equity is what sense we make of the differences we experience amongst the children. Are some activities receiving



more space than others, and is this connected to gender and the teacher? Some might claim that men working in kindergartens tolerate more noise than women; if so, how does this influence the girls and boys? Does it impact differently on 'quiet' children than 'noisy' children? Moving ourselves to the adult world, what does it tell us about the values that women have after three years of early childhood teacher education, leading a kindergarten with up to 50 employees, receiving less pay than men with three years of engineering education, leading a staff of five? These examples are connected. Our early experiences are influential when we consider what is 'natural' or 'fair'. This dimension in gender equity is central when constructing a gender equity pedagogy for one's own kindergarten. Girls, boys, women and men are not alike, but they have the right to equal opportunities.

Even though the Kindergarten Act and the framework plan gives gender equity a compulsory status only a few kindergartens have integrated the theme into their practice (Askland & Rossholt 2009; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010). The first step for any kindergarten is, therefore, to put gender equity on the agenda. This is the responsibility of the leadership. Gender equity has perspectives that are quite basic and integrate into other areas that are 'compulsory' as well. It should, therefore, not be difficult to implement: gender equity between all those involved in the kindergarten; gender equity as a natural part of the perspectives, equality, participation, democracy and sustainable environment; gender equity as a perspective that follows work in subjects, themes and is always present in everyday life activities. The kindergarten has a responsibility to make a plan for their own gender equity work, to follow the framework plan from the government. The strategy presented here, however, is a way to start work that challenges each member of the staff and gives her or him the possibility to make individual steps to meet the responsibility to develop one's own practice (Askland & Rossholt, 2009).

Micro projects: Interaction between the individual and the organisation

In the following, a report is presented of work that is designed to result in the articulation of a common understanding of gender pedagogy for an institution. This process is dependent on leadership following up to maintain enthusiasm for work undertaken. The content of each step is critically examined in a cooperative spirit, through internal staff development programs and in basic early childhood teacher education. I start by presenting an exercise that each partner can do on her/his own initiative to evoke introspection for one's own reflection.

'Self diagnosis': Work with gender equity starts with the individual

When self-development is on the agenda of equality and equity, you have to know what your own position is on the topic. The questions in the next passage are examples of how you can make a diagnosis of where you are at on the question of equity. Working with these questions (and others that you figure out yourself), you might be able to identify your position and also how your position and responses to the questions relate to other influences, such as your own gender, sexual preference, education, occupation, cultural background and ethnic belonging. Through such analysis or 'self-diagnosis' you can construct the kindergarten's work in gender equity through an individual approach and identify



the different conditions that form the life in the kindergarten according to the ideals of equality.

Linger over the following questions, and reflect: Have you experienced being ignored during the last week? Have you experienced someone assuming they had the right to advance at your cost? Has someone made you feel less worthy than others? And, contrary: Have you, in the last week, felt that you had the right to advance at other people's cost? How many times have you passed someone that needed your help without stopping? When do you feel harmed or angry because you have seen others being treated badly? How do you practice justice in your everyday life? Have you experienced prejudice—by yourself or others—due to your gender, age, sexual orientation or race?

After having observed yourself, move the lens outward and take a look at the girls and boys, your colleagues and your family, and reflect upon what you see. Walking the streets, queuing up at the pay station or sitting on the bus, what do you see when you observe the people around you? Do you experience what you see as examples of fairness and equal opportunities in life? Do you see children being beaten by their parents or being laughed at because they do not understand the adult language code? Do you see children or adults discriminated against because of how they are dressed? You might witness that some people are expelled from the shop you are in because of their dress. You may observe women and girls dressed in fashionable clothes, moving in particular ways and wearing special artefacts to make themselves interesting or attractive to the opposite sex. In the same way, you may observe boys and men dressing, acting and moving in ways that intend to show what sex they are. You may also observe that there are various ways one can 'do' gender in public; from the very clear and specific acting out of gender described above, to more moderate, perhaps even neutral or invisible ways.

This exercise is connected to existential reflections many people engage themselves in daily. Though this kind of self-observation might go on in the very private, personal room, it furthers personal development to make them subject to reflections among friends and colleagues. The next step in the micro project is to present one's own practice to the public, primarily to colleagues.

Micro projects

In the earlier discussion, it was argued that what really influences children's comprehension of being girls or boys lies in their relation to others. In the kindergarten, this reflects, primarily, the relation to the adults working there. Within these relations lie cultural apprehensions of sex, gender opportunities and limitations. The intertwined nature of individual and cultural perceptions and codes makes it useful to engage with ways that further gender sensitive ways of being. Gender equity cannot be governed by laws and plans alone; it must be internalised within each individual. As democratic practice, gender equity must be experienced and recognised in one's own deeds. This is what the 'micro project' is aiming at. This strategy was developed during a project in two kindergartens (Askland & Rossholt, 2009). Through a series of circumstances in one of the participating kindergartens in 2006 – 2008, we had to leave the institutional level and focus on each individual. This change was successful in order to raise the awareness of gender equity in this institution. This strategy



has now been used in several kindergartens working with themes connected to democracy, gender and participation.

Projects connected with equality must have different designs, dependent on whether they aim at changes on the level of the organisation, the system, the content, the relations or the individual. Micro projects address the latter, that is, individual ways of being, which are personal and strongly connected to each person's private experiences, upbringing, education and practice. Micro projects can be a tool for:

- personal and individual reflection;
- inspiration and contribution to discussions and mentoring between colleagues;
- lifting up the individual experiences in the staff to develop their gender equity discussions and development of strategies.

The first point is the most important in this strategy; to foster individual reflection and understanding of self.

The aim for the strategy is to support each person's process to:

- recognise when gender is making a difference in the children's play activities and relations to other children and adults;
- discover and articulate attitudes and values and make them subject to change;
- describe the close, everyday relations and analyse them in terms of gender and equity;
- develop ways of approaching gender equity perspectives in a *learning organisation*.

Through the micro projects, one tries to discover the more subtle and unconscious patterns of attitudes in the ways one relates to girls and boys. The micro projects lighten the practices of each colleague and form how each person understands what is relevant for gender equity in practice. The micro projects might challenge the understanding of being and values as they are expressed through language, body language and non-reflected choices of practice.

The micro projects are carried out on areas and at times that each one decides for her/himself. The work can go on, regardless of other activities in the group. The owner of the project is the one who inspects her/his practice. This curiosity is a condition for the strategy to work. Through her/his (further, I will call she/he 'researcher') examinations, their own universe can be challenged and can be visible for others. Although I present an individual approach here, I think that the ideal way to implement the micro projects' goals is to make this a part of the common plan for subject development in each institution.

The project starts by choosing a small and limited area for observation of one's own work. This might be: What is the first thing I say to the children when they arrive in the morning? What children are asking me for help during the meals? What children have to wait for help, what children are assisted directly? In how many ways can I give 'Mary' positive attention, and what happens when I do so? When and whom of the children do I attend to using their name or an indefinite pronoun? The researcher is equipped with a little book for notices, a pad of



yellow labels or just a piece of paper. Before he/she starts, the researcher decides for how long the examinations shall last and how one thinks the data should be processed; alone or together with a colleague.

The researcher will process the data asking these questions:

1. What did I intend to do?
2. What did I do?
3. What happened?
4. What do I think of what happened?

Assessing what one has done is most useful when done together with others, in a meeting, in colleague mentoring or in other forums the kindergarten has established for development of staff competencies. Gradually, this strategy might develop into more common understandings of ways to meet children's gender sensitively. The strategy is quite informal, and develops as oneself and the staff practise this way of handling their practice.

Conclusions

To get near the goals of the Kindergarten Act, it is not enough to copy them into our own plans. Each member of staff must experience the necessity to realise and give the big concepts a personal meaning, human dignity, freedom of spirit, charity, equality, and solidarity. The concept of gender equity is filled with all of this. The work with gender equity is about making the staff able to meet the children equally, and, consequently, each one must carry on and enforce the personal trajectory that fosters one's understanding of the ways one meets other people.

As stated at the beginning, gender equity is a topic that is connected to values primarily rooted in our own western culture, yet how we understand gender equity is changing all the time. On top of that, these values are easier to talk about than to practice. This is the core of the challenge to kindergarten workers, as well as other educators, when developing their gender equity pedagogy.

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