MASCULINITY, EDUCATION AND HEALTH

The negotiation of masculinity in Nordic education

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For much of the 20th century, the Nordic countries led the way in the policies of the welfare state and of educational reform. After the Second World War the governments of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland opted for a shared educational reform in response to the wars they had suffered and to foster social inclusion. The aim was to educate in democratic values to contribute gradually to the construction of a new society in which governments pursued interventionist policies to create centralised educational structures to ensure inclusion of pupils and avoid situations of discrimination and social exclusion. In short, schools were mandated to struggle for equality and democracy in order to break down social frontiers between pupils [1].

In this way education took on greater importance, becoming considered as a crucial factor in economic growth, so that the commitment to social cohesion was one of the keys to these societies' strength over several decades. Despite this, around the 1990s, as a result of liberal policies, the decentralisation of Nordic education systems caused cracks to appear in the edifice. The increasing focus on individualism, both in education and in society in general, weakened collective action. Education is seen as a private service that serves as the key to develop each individual's innate potential rather than as a public service aiming at social renewal. Iceland, Denmark and Finland are steering a new course towards education policies dictated by the logic of the market, while Norway and Sweden are trying

to keep a balance by adapting to liberal policies but maintaining the essence of social renewal and cohesion in their education policies.

The link between education and democratic values still exists to a greater or lesser extent in all the Nordic countries, and proof of this is Sweden. Swedish school curricula at different levels, as well as its education legislation, still stress the duty to educate through democratic methodologies, and about democratic methods [2]. Democracy is related to a work culture that is visible in classroom methodologies and comes to life in everyday discussion at all levels. This approach helps children to acquire experience and knowledge of democratic principles and lays the basis for a growing interest and responsibility in participating in society and sustainable development in economic, social and environmental terms.

> The way we see knowledge is affected by the democratic approach to education: democracy is the political project behind the way we perceive the interactions that take place in nursery and primary school

While democratic principles have shaped education policy for the last seventy years, the system is not perfect and there are still cracks that reveal a conflict between a democratic or progressive vision and a more conservative, traditional view. The democratic view of education poses a triple challenge in the way we understand teaching: the role of the teacher, the role of the pupil and even the role of knowledge are all affected and take a form different from the traditional one. Teachers often have to step back and forgo traditional pedagogical control to foster pupil empowerment. Children are the centre of activities, the drivers of pedagogical projects and learn, with teachers' support, to deal with, think about and discuss everyday situations that affect them directly. Finally, the way we see knowledge is also affected by the democratic approach to education. Knowledge is not something that is confined to teachers and non-transferable. Knowledge is constructed together, through interactions between the participants in pedagogical practice. Democracy is the political project behind the way the perception of the interactions that take place in nursery and primary school [3].

Educational equality projects: gender neutrality and compensatory strategies

The democratic perspective as an umbrella for education systems has led to different currents of pedagogical renewal over the years. The two strategies that have had the greatest influence in the second half of the 20th century are gender-neutral pedagogy and compensatory strategies. Gender-neutral pedagogy means rejecting differences in task distribution for boys and girls. This gender-neutral discourse began to predominate in nursery schools from the mid-20th century onwards as a consequence of policies to update

teaching linked to democracy, which established the basis for schools not to make distinctions in their approach to boys and girls, but treat them all as unique children. This perspective justifies the design of neutral educational spaces for boys and girls. The problem with this kind of strategy is that there is a risk of “blinding” teachers so that they do not see different treatment of boys and girls. Underlining that gender must not be involved can hide the fact that gender does in fact have an impact in nursery schools. This gender-blindness can even have the opposite effect to that sought by this teaching strategy, and end up deepening the division between boys and girls [4].

Educational spaces are also affected by this kind of neutral perspective. From this point of view, spaces traditionally seen as female, like the dolls’ corner or the play kitchen, change their name and become the apartment or house, while corners with cars or construction toys, traditionally seen as male, keep the same name. This underlines the *normality* of the masculine, a terrain in which girls can and must gain ground, while neutral connotations are attached to what used to be the feminine so as not interfere with the construction of boys’ masculinity [5].

Another of the educational models common in the second half of the 20th century was that of compensatory teaching strategies. This type of model, which was created in Denmark and is still in place at Hjalli schools in Iceland, sets out to give both boys and girls the chance to develop all their facets. The focus is placed on encouraging autonomy and emotional intelligence, arguing that boys and girls inevitably take on gender roles in mixed groups, which justifies segregation by sexes. Like this, each separate group becomes an arena in which to train the set of different capacities that would otherwise be conditioned by the presence of the other group. Denmark and Iceland are not the only countries where this model was put into practice. Sweden also opted for the compensation model in a generalised way. However, while for many years this model was seen as the right way to work towards gender equality, today it is largely restricted to the Hjalli schools, where it remains in use.

Compensatory pedagogy not only opts for segregating the sexes so that girls can develop autonomy—and boys, for example, can experience and learn emotional intelligence—but also underlines the importance of how teachers use language in a differentiated way with each group. It is based on the theory that social relations are the starting point for boys and girls to construct themselves in differentiated, opposed groups, so that compensating for capacities between sexes aims to help both groups to end up converging and so achieve greater social equality [6].

Compensatory pedagogy has become problematic from many points of view, but one of the main questions raised is the assumption that all boys need training in emotional intelligence and all girls need to train aspects of autonomy and self-confidence. This perspective says what each group needs to develop to approach a more egalitarian social model, supposing that there are capacities that are already assured and therefore assumed to be innate in each sex. According to this perspective it is not believed necessary to talk to girls about their emotions, because it is something they have already learnt as a consequence of growing up in traditional environments, and it is not necessary for boys to work on

autonomy or self-confidence because these aspects are taken for granted [7].

Norm-critical pedagogy

While gender-neutral pedagogies and compensatory strategies were widely implemented in the last century, in the 21st century *norm-critical* pedagogy has questioned contradictory aspects of the previous strategies and gained ground in Swedish nursery schools. According to the norm-critical view, working for equality cannot focus solely on gender issues, as this would be a simplistic reduction of social realities and behaviours, as well as ignoring the different social conditions children might have in the group. For example, factors like age, skin colour, social class, functional diversity, sexual inclination or expression, religion and ethnic identity are all interwoven with gender and lead to varying status within the group.

This gives rise to complicated power dynamics, in which gender plays an important but not necessarily crucial role, and which in practice lead to situations of inclusion or, in the worst cases, of discrimination or exclusion. Not concentrating on gender might be seen from a feminist point of view as something harmful, as it could be interpreted as ignoring gender inequality in favour of other factors like ethic background, skin colour, functional diversity and so on. However, it can also be seen as reinforcing the debate on equality under the umbrella of diversity [8]. Social interactions give rise to complicated power dynamics in which both women and men acquire different social positions, and it is crucial to give visibility to these dynamics, which affect our work, interpersonal and classroom relations, in order to see beyond them.

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This intersectional perspective confronts the still-dominant Heteronormativity we have interiorised socially and which presupposes a *correct*, static version of maleness and femaleness. Its intention is to question hierarchical power relations between people under which one group is always considered superior to another, regardless of whether they are men or women. Precisely for this reason, the norm-critical perspective opens up the possibility for each individual to be valued even if they do not conform to the standard for men or women. In other words, the focus is no longer on gender, but centres on what we have learnt or what we understand as being normal or divergent, the habits acquired over time which we assume to be facts. Our identities are not trapped in a single, static category, but take on different forms over time or depending on the context in which we find ourselves, that is to say, we are constantly reconsidering and redefining ourselves.

Negotiation, expectations and thoughts about masculinity

The construction of gender, both male and female, is subject to constant negotiation and takes place in social interactions. Tones of voice, styles of dressing, movements, the characteristics or activities associated with each of the people around us, all help to construct gender-related norms. The frameworks of femininity and masculinity act as predefined broad structures designed to determine clearly polarised categories, but it is through play, in conversation, waiting in line, in comments or in looks that children negotiate these norms, test them, try them, reconsider them and redefine them according to the expectations instilled in them by adults. Of course, gender norms are not only restrictive for girls, but are also extremely constricting for boys.

Traditional education offers each boy a very limited framework of possibilities within which to construct his masculinity. He must be big, strong and fast. He must wear baggy clothing with skull or dinosaur patterns and be *cool*. Gender-neutral pedagogy assumes that traditional masculinity is right and desirable for both boys and girls. This means that the baggage of masculinity remains similar to that in traditional education, but is re purposed as a *neutral* baggage and therefore not rethought critically. Moreover, compensatory pedagogy assumes traditional masculinity to be something inevitable in each and every boy and takes it for granted that autonomy and self-confidence are traits to be expected in any boy. Even though its aim is to work on traits associated with femininity to achieve social equality, the excessive assumption of differences that standardise both girls and boys as groups might work against the goal of these educational equality policies.

Accepting that there are two such clearly differentiated groups ignores the fact that the reality is more complex and not all boys or girls fit into these two categories. Norm-critical pedagogy supposes a wider range of possibilities, with differences between boys within which the youngest pupils can construct their own individual masculinity. Boys learn to understand the world around them with the aid of adults who take up and make visible different positions and form part of a new normality and a new balance. Like this, every boy has the chance to construct a more complex masculinity, in turn enriching the set of collective masculinities available and working towards a more egalitarian social model.

You aren’t a baby anymore!

When specific attention is paid to boys in the Swedish education system, this often highlights the poor performance and widespread academic problems of male pupils as shown in statistics, issues that are increasingly evident [9]. In relation to this, the thoughts of Anette Hellman regarding the use of the word baby in nursery school are important and revealing. Hellman mentioned the educational projects under way that set out to help boys to verbalise their feelings and resolve conflicts, focusing on how often teachers use expressions like “Stop whining, you aren’t a baby anymore!” when boys do not display physical endurance (for example, if they are shivering in the playground instead of playing with their friends, or if they appear tired when they are on an outing). Hellman described how teachers use expressions of this kind unconsciously and without any kind of relation to

the above-mentioned work on emotional intelligence. What Hellman describes is not an isolated case. During my career in different Swedish nursery schools I have heard similar expressions and comments made and repeated on a routine basis, without anybody paying any attention to them.

Calling a boy a *baby* has a twin function. Firstly, it is a call to attention for behaviour that is not appropriate to the age, maturity or knowledge expected by the adult. Secondly, it serves to highlight that the boy in question has crossed the invisible line in gender norms, in this case the norms of masculinity. This becomes clear when we consider in which contexts teachers use calls to attention of this kind. As mentioned above, boys risk being described like this when they do not display physical endurance, while girls are called babies when, for example, they are not willing to help with tasks like tidying the classroom [10].

The children themselves use the word baby as a gender marker, for example in play situations. It is important for them to be big because this means being grown-up and being grown-up means having a higher status, meaning more power of decision and possibilities of influence within the group. Words like baby, big and strong are often used to negotiate positions of power in play situations and serve to include or exclude the rest and so establish the group hierarchy. The symbolic game of distributing roles and the use of markers of this kind are part of the process of creating norms and conventions. Being a baby not only means being little or less grown-up than expected, but is also a term that is not gender-differentiated. For males, hearing that one is a big boy means rising in social category terms, because it is accompanied by a gender marker. Expressions of this kind imply that the child in question has learnt to adapt to a complementary social model, and learnt to identify what is expected of them depending on their gender according to this social model. Language is not neutral and its unconscious use is a problem, according to Hellman, as it limits children’s chances to experience a wider diversity of positions than those previously stereotyped by gender [11].

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Seventy years of an education system with a democratic perspective have not been enough to avoid comments of this kind, but the basis has been laid for education to continue to be assessed constantly and for situations like this to be questioned critically. Those working in nursery education have begun to understand the issues created by power structures and how these structures affect children’s self-image. It is a matter of continuing to work to stop asymmetries of power based on categories like class, occupation, age, gender or ethnicity from bracketing children (and ourselves) in limited static categories.

Pedagogical resources and some final remarks

The long experience of working under the umbrella of democracy together with the development of a pedagogy critical of gender norms have helped to devise educational projects attentive to the standard forms of masculinity and the problems these cause for boys, The aim is to help boys to develop more empathy, to talk about their feelings, to listen to the person in front of them in the event of conflicts; in short, to use words to understand themselves and to respect the integrity of others. This work on emotional intelligence is intended to create spaces in which boys can construct masculinities that are broader and different from the traditional one and is consciously implemented by teachers in Swedish education, discussed in meetings with the rest of the staff and assessed just like other academic areas.

As discussed above, the use of language is a fundamental tool in egalitarian education policies, but the challenge still before us is the unconscious use we continue to make of language, slips, calls to attention or the expectations we have and put into words that create a discourse that might contradict the work on emotional intelligence described above. We have teachers aware of the need to work for boys too to grow up with equality, to learn and to escape from the straitjacket of traditional masculinity, but who at the same time continue to promote traditional gender norms in everyday conversation. This places boys in a position of receiving contradictory messages. On the one hand is the official pedagogical discourse and on the other the concealed one, the message between the lines that teachers allow to slip out in occasional phrases. These are everyday conversations, slips or calls to attention that help to construct each boy (or girl)’s network of thoughts, ideas, perceptions and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, and consequently their own identity.

When society in general approaches boys or young men, it often does so using short phrases, simple instructions and few opportunities for dialogue or reflection. They often receive more calls for attention that girls, though they tend to be treated with more permissiveness and tolerance when they do not follow the rules. This type of language and attitude in relation to boys not only contributes to constructing children’s masculinity, but lays the basis for an unequal system of rights. What are we indicating with this kind of treatment and what consequences might it have? In traditional environments boys miss out on the chance to think, question and argue with adults in everyday situations, as well as realising that no change of attitude can be expected when they do not conform to the norms. Like this adults contribute to boys constructing their identity with labels like, for example, naughty or messy.

This use of language and this differentiated treatment perpetuates a version of masculinity that leads to boys taking on a limited role which is the complete opposite of that constructed by girls. Adults’ expectations for boys only envisage one version of the spectrum of possibilities, so that boys miss out on the chance to develop aspects seen as closer to femininity.

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Possible educational resources include the conscious use of children's literature that is accessible to younger audiences. It is important to analyse what the characters in stories mean, what qualities they possess and what adventures they have. Boys have to find mirrors in children's literature in which to look and see themselves reflected, but also windows on realities other than their own, to contribute to a broader view of society. Children's literature is a tool that certainly has a knock-on effect in play in free time, on the relations children forge and the interests they pursue. Play materials are also important. Lego or Playmobil figures often help to contribute to imaginative play possibilities, and this gives them a key role, with the power to perpetuate traditional models or to reinvent stories and roles. It is not a question of changing boys, but of offering them a rich range of possibilities so that they can construct their own identity.

Nursery school is an educational and cultural meeting place in which heterosexual families, families with two mothers or two fathers, with a transsexual parent or one-parent families, including adults with different lifestyles or different beliefs, can meet and share their children's everyday life. The hierarchical norms and structures we find in our adult life are recreated at school and help to shape the networks of thought and values that children acquire during their nursery education. Nursery school has great potential for social change and can be the setting for new social norms and dynamics in which children acquire not just academic knowledge but also an education in values that contributes to their development and success in constructing a society in which both men and women can be freer.

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