



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper published in *Education Inquiry*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Hjelmér, C. (2020)

Free play, free choices?: Influence and construction of gender in preschools in different local contexts

Education Inquiry, 11(2): 144-158

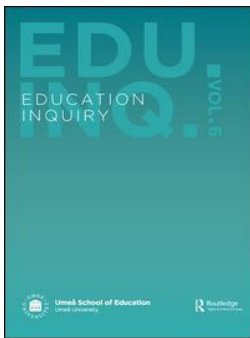
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1724585>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-168461>



Free play, free choices? – Influence and construction of gender in preschools in different local contexts

Carina Hjelmér

To cite this article: Carina Hjelmér (2020) Free play, free choices? – Influence and construction of gender in preschools in different local contexts, *Education Inquiry*, 11:2, 144-158, DOI: [10.1080/20004508.2020.1724585](https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1724585)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1724585>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 21 Feb 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 227



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Free play, free choices? – Influence and construction of gender in preschools in different local contexts

Carina Hjelmér 

Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to acquire knowledge regarding children's influence and the construction of gender during free play situations in preschools in different local contexts. Attention is focused on both children's choices and pedagogical practices in which free play takes place. The research draws on ethnographic studies based on participant observation and group interviews of teachers and children in different contexts (high-income, immigrant, rural). Following deep immersion in the data, interpreted through the lens of Basil Bernstein's conceptualisation of power and control, in combination with gender theories, the research finds that play choices are strongly affected by norms and by what is "on offer" in the different preschool contexts. The analysis shows two dominant patterns of play that are salient; gender-stereotyped choices primarily divided into "girl and boy groups", and mixed choices with no clear gender-based division. The article argues that free play provides good opportunities to resolve the tensions between gender equality and steering of teachers, especially when clear pedagogical ideas guide the play offer in preschools. In such cases, gender equality and teacher influence can work in synergy in order to allow children's influence on free play to emerge without contradicting gender equality ideas.

KEYWORDS

Free play; preschool; children's influence; gender; social class and ethnicity perspectives; ethnography

Introduction

In Sweden, preschool is the first important step for many children in their training to become democratic citizens, and children's own influence and gender equality are emphasised. In these matters, it is interesting to study daily activities concerned with what is known as free play. Free play activities have been, and still are, highly valued in Sweden (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006), as well as in many other countries (Lynch, 2014). Play is also what teachers and children experience as the area most influenced by children in preschool (e.g. Einarsdottir, 2005; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). At the same time, other studies call attention to free play as being among the most gender-stereotyped situations (e.g. MacNaughton, 2006). Free play was also addressed in a recent evaluation report on gender equality in preschools published by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2017), recognised as a set of complicated situations imbued by gender norms. It appears that there are tensions between work of teachers with children's influence in the form of free choices and their work with gender equality during free play that need to be analysed together, and this constitutes the main contribution of this study.

CONTACT Carina Hjelmér  carina.hjelm@umu.se

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The aim of this article is to present research results regarding children's influence and the construction of gender during free play situations in preschools in different local contexts. The research study was guided by two core questions: a) How, and with what material and toys, are free play sessions organised? b) What choices do children make during free play (of play friends and of materials), and what are teachers' attitudes towards these choices? Attention is focused on both the children's choices and the pedagogical contexts and practices within which these choices take place. Combining the analyses of pedagogic contexts with children's attempts to influence is highlighted as important for research and for theories that deal with democracy and equality in educational settings (e.g. Bernstein, 2000), however, this combination is rarely carried out in preschool studies.

In comparison with many other countries, welfare policies in Sweden and the other Nordic countries have a strong tradition of including aims for the promotion of democracy and equality in preschools (Moss, 2007). All children have the right to a place at a preschool of high and equal quality all over the country, and most children do enrol (84 percent aged one to five, and 95 percent aged three to five in 2018). Curriculum goals are ambitious when it comes to values. All children will, for example, not only learn about democracy and citizenship but will also enjoy the same opportunities to exercise real influence over working methods and content of preschool activities without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). At the same time, the Swedish curriculum is rather thin in content or direction, stating only the goals to which the preschool should aspire – how this should be carried out is left to the teachers. Some studies show differences in equivalence between preschools in Sweden, and the Swedish Research Council (2015) called for studies that consider children's different growing up environments. This makes Swedish preschool practice an interesting example to study as concerns issues of democracy and equality in different localities and social contexts, as is implemented in this study.

Children's perspectives and free play

This article contributes to research about democracy and equality in preschool that usually relates to different fields; namely teaching and teacher attitudes and children and their perspectives. Most studies tend to focus on teachers' attitudes and pedagogic practice rather than children's attempts to influence, where research is generally sparse.

In most research about democracy and children's influence, the dominant argument is that child participation stands in relation to teachers' abilities to assume the *children's perspective* (Emilson & Johansson, 2018). The adults must try to understand and consider children's own experiences, understandings and perceptions, and regard children as subjects in their own world. In contrast, taking a *child perspective* is something else that does not necessarily focus on the children's own experiences, and will always represent the adult views on any particular issue (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2013). Several studies show that teachers who follow children's initiatives, and show emotional presence and playfulness are fundamental for creating opportunities for children's influence (e.g. Bae, 2009; Emilson & Johansson, 2018). Bae (2009) suggests play situations as important "moments of democracy" in preschools. In interviews with children, play is also what children want to do most, as

well as the thing they think they can influence at preschool (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

During free play, approaches that allow children to choose freely the objects and partners of play, are often understood as the opposite of receiving guidance from adults, for example concerning gender equality (Emilson, Folkesson, & Moqvist Lindberg, 2016). Research on free play often show girls and boys playing with gender stereotypical toys together with children of their own sex (e.g. MacNaughton, 2006). Some studies also report girls and boys in some situations playing together (e.g. Chapman, 2016), and sometimes challenging gender-stereotyped roles (Wohlwend, 2011). Teacher attitudes to and perceptions of gender are factors that influence the children's choices (Chapman, 2016). According to MacNaughton (2006), children simply play with what they find pleasurable, which is what they understand as "normal" and attempt to get things right in the time and culture in which they live. Studies that highlight the natural environment as a source of play, report on how unfinished toys made with experimental material, often from nature, support play for children of both genders (e.g. Änggård, 2011). Francis (2010) argues that toys and play possibilities offered to children are not a harmless or neutral issue; rather they can influence learning but also identify formation in the present and future.

Theoretical framework

Basil Bernstein's (2000) theories concern the realisation of social power and control in communication in daily activities and, in this study, form the framework of the analysis, combined with gender theories. Bernstein's key concepts are *classification*, referring to the regulation of power between categories (e.g. boys/girls, preschool/home, we/the others), and *framing*, referring to the order and regulation of control in the daily knowledge transfer and acquisition processes involved in teacher-child interaction, for example during free play. In an education context, a key issue about framing with a focus on democracy is to examine if the emphasis is on collective decision-making processes and interaction between children or between children and teachers, or on the rights and choices of the individual (e.g. Moss, 2007). According to Bernstein (2000), differences in framing principles from preschool do not merely provide children with different experiences but shape how these experiences contribute to what it is possible for them to think and do in preschool. Based on Bernstein's theories, Arnot and Reay (2007) suggest that some of the potential for change lies in whether teachers are capable of analysing what different children say in relation to pedagogical practice's content and form, and of accounting for children's different opportunities to make themselves heard in preschool.

Bernstein (2000) distinguishes between two systems of rules regulated by framing: *regulative discourse* covering expectations regarding conduct, behaviour and morals; and *instructional discourse* covering selection (e.g. material and toys that are prioritised), pacing (e.g. tempo, how time is used) and knowledge criteria (what is offered to the children to learn). The regulative discourse is always superior to the instructional, which is embedded in the regulative, but this often occurs unconsciously for teachers. This means that teacher perceptions and expectations of children in the different local contexts, and how these expectations affect instruction during free play, are analysed.

How diversity is understood and what is valued highly in different preschools are of importance, for example, whether girls and boys are perceived as different on account of their sex, or as children in processes where different masculinities and femininities are constructed (e.g. Davies, 2003).

The position of this study is that categorisation and positioning related to gender need to be analysed as socially and culturally constructed power relations. Gender is, however, a social dimension that can be more fruitfully analysed in its intersection with socio-economic background and ethnicity (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Therefore, even though the primary analytical focus is on gender, the study aims to examine its construction in three different contexts that are variable with regard to socio-economic and ethnicity dimensions. The intention was to explore the (possible) different manifestations of gender and play when these other social categories are present.

Methodology and settings

The six preschools of the research were all municipal and selected to cover a range of localities and contexts in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic circumstances. Two preschools are located in rural areas, four operate in big cities, respectively two in districts with a large number of immigrant families and two in districts with a large number of families with high incomes. Methodologically the study was inspired by Stake's (2006) multiple case study approach that gives opportunities to include different local contexts. The purpose is not to define and compare local contexts of equal merit, rather to make nuanced analyses where the different contexts are of importance for, in this study, how gender equality is constructed and manifested through children's free play at the preschools studied.

In the *rural* areas the preschools (named *Raven*, *Rabbit*) were small, with only one or two internal units, often with children of mixed ages in the group. The parents' socio-economic status differed, but it was very common to find mothers working in home-help services and fathers employed in the local sawmill or as drivers for freight companies. Almost all parents were born in Sweden, many of them in the immediate surroundings. In the districts in major cities with many *immigrant* families (preschools named *Impala*, *Ibis*), more than 90% of the parents were born in other countries, while most of the children were born in Sweden. These preschools comprised approximately four units each and the children were divided into same-age groups. The staff represented different home languages. Many parents were studying Swedish, some were unemployed and some were in employment (mostly fathers). In the preschools located in urban districts (*Horse*, *Hawk*) with many *high-income* parents, they were mostly born in Sweden, had high income and high levels of cultural and social capital. In these preschools there were three and four units respectively and the children were divided in same-age groups.

The study followed a critical ethnographic approach, and was conducted over a period of one year, 2015–2016. The empirical material that was selected for this article consists of field notes from participant observations, and formal group interviews, at three preschool units for a period of two months (*Raven*, *Impala*, *Ibis*). The interviews were carried out at the end of the observation periods with the teams of teachers and several groups of children aged 4–6. Moreover, only interviews were

carried out with teams of teachers at three other preschools in the same kind of areas (*Rabbit, Horse, Hawk*) (see [table 1](#) for more detailed information).

Table 1. Distribution of observations and interviews in the preschools studied.

Local area	Preschool/age children	Observations, all*/free play	Group interviews, children**	Group interviews, teachers***
Rural	<i>Raven</i> /1–6	80 hours/~45 hours	2 (1b+1g; 3g)	1 (3 teachers)
	<i>Rabbit</i> /1–3 + 4–5			1 (2 teachers)
Immigrant	<i>Impala</i> /4–5	70 h/~40 hours	8 (4x2g; 2b; 2x1b+1g; 2b+1g)	1 (3 teachers)
	<i>Ibis</i> /1–3			1 (3 teachers)
High-income	<i>Horse</i> /1–3 + 4–5	70 h/~30 hours		1 (3 teachers)
	<i>Hawk</i> /5			1 (2 teachers)
Total		220 hours/~115 hours	10 group interviews	6 group interviews

*Includes everything that happens during a day (from 9:00 am to 15:00 pm), e.g. meals, free play, theme work, circle time, formal situations.

**b = boy, g = girl. The number and gender of children in the different interviews are shown in brackets.

*** All teachers interviewed were female.

Field notes from observations were carried out by recording brief “scratch notes” with a pen and paper in the preschool settings, followed by more detailed notes as quickly as possible (e.g. during break). I often sat down close to where children and teachers were involved in activities and took the role of “observer-participant”, which means I acted primarily as observer and participated when children invited me to take part (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). At the end of each day, a full text was established in a computer file based on the handwritten notes. At the same time on the same dates, “diary notes” were written in computer files including methodological and theoretical reflections. The latter were important, together with the full text field notes, for ongoing analyses throughout the study and the interplay between theory and data (Beach, 1997).

The observations focussed on what children were invited to and tried to influence, material and toys that they were offered, local and family cultures involvement, and gender construction during play situations. The interviews covered both general questions, and specific events that had been observed at each preschool. All interviews were taped and fully transcribed afterwards. In the extracts in this article, sometimes a word is altered or omitted to improve readability without changing meaning (marked [...]), and sometimes larger passages are excluded to highlight the relevant parts (marked [-]).

Analysis

The collected data (observation notes, diary notes and interview data) were examined in relation to descriptions of free play: its form, properties, context, and participants. In the different preschools, there were certain very different possibilities and opportunities for “locally defined” play that provided rich material for further analysis. Play was then re-examined under the lenses of children’s influence and choices, teacher’s steering and play offers, as well as gender constructions (by the children themselves and by the teachers). Finally, a search was made for what seems to be in common and what differed in analogous incidents and across cases. Two main themes were generated from the first level of analysis; gendered choices more or less separated into groups of girls and boys and mixed choices with no clear gender division. When the themes were

examined in relation to the characteristics of the different preschools, it became clear that these provided frameworks of cultural expectations and norms that to a large extent shaped the opportunities for free play as well as children's choices.

As the field notes from participant observations only derive from *Raven*, *Impala* and *Ibis* and the interviews with children from *Raven* and *Impala*, the data material is more comprehensive from these settings, especially the part concerning children's choices. Consequently, some sections that follow are presented at greater length. For the sake of simplicity, and as this is not the focus in this study, I will call all staff "teachers", even though there are different occupations in Swedish preschools (preschool teachers with three and a half year of studies at university level work together with nursery nurses, who have an upper secondary education, and untrained staff). Following the analysis and interpretation of data, the findings are organised and presented below in two main sections. One focuses on the nature of play and what material children were offered in the different localities, and a second focuses on children's choices and teachers' responses.

Free play and local contexts

Free play took place every day in all the preschools studied, often and at different times during the day. In different proportions, all the schools provided material and toys which could be classified as material frequently used in preschools in Sweden such as dolls, toys for cooking, cars and animal-figures, Lego, drawing material, jigsaw puzzles, bicycles, slides and sand toys. However, beyond these generic preschool play materials and opportunities there were some striking differences in the different settings, corresponding quite closely to the nature of locality and the background of the families the preschools cater for.

Local and family cultures

At *Impala*, *Raven* and *Rabbit* preschools, materials and toys were chosen with the rather vague aim of "being fun and interesting". This was foremost organised from the teacher perspectives on what is nice for children (cf. Sommer et al., 2013) and not driven by particular pedagogical rationales or what children may learn by playing with different things (cf. Hedges, 2014). For example, at *Raven* the teachers thought it was important for children to be outdoors, so they improved the playground. At *Impala* activities using materials for dancing and dressing up (scarfs, music, face-painting) were selected by the teachers and seen by them as "fun" for the children. Sometimes children would drive the choice of materials, when for instance they decided to have colour-in pages in *Rabbit*, even when the teachers questioned the pedagogical benefits of such activities (also popular at *Impala*). The reasons they gave for "allowing" this practice was that "some girls really liked them (the drawings), probably because they will look better of course, than when they try themselves" (interview with teachers in *Rabbit*). Several similar examples suggest that teachers' expectations from girls and boys (and their reasons for acting in particular ways) regulated choices of materials and activities even when at times the teachers were themselves critical of such choices (cf. Bernstein, 2000).

Local character and family occupations were very influential at *Raven*, seen through the presence of hunting and motoring tools and imagery (e.g. a child-size elk tower and a four-wheeler in the playground, magazines to cut and use in collages about hunting, vehicles and lorries). Parents and staff had contributed the material, which was motivated as “it is a part of our society and the children’s culture and their life-world so to speak, or life style” (interview with teachers in *Raven*). The popularity of these items in this area was made clear on the first day of observation at *Raven* when a three-year-old boy asked me “How many four-wheelers do you have?”. A strong regulative discourse around the “normal country lifestyle” assumes children (foremost boys), have an interest in all things related to driving certain vehicles, hunting and outdoors living, and can powerful exclusionary mechanisms for children (and families) that do not fit:

Each autumn the preschool runs a small project on elk hunting with an organised ‘elk hunting game’ involving binoculars made at preschool and toy rifles brought from home. Today (a project day), one boy comes late. The teacher tells me his parents are vegans and ‘I think it’s totally okay for them to do this as they don’t want him to shoot animals’. (Field notes *Raven*).

In this example, the potentially tense situation of the boy being present in activities that are not consistent with the family lifestyle, is resolved when the child is withdrawn from the activities of the elk-hunting project, and the “problem” is individualised. There is no attempt at an instructional discourse (Bernstein, 2000) that would critically discuss hunting through a wider educational project.

At *Impala*, materials and toys of an international and multicultural character took a prominent position instead. For example, the dolls had many different skin colours and the music played during dance activities came from all over the world. On the walls, there were different alphabets, a map of the world and material from a project about different countries, with letters and photos from a make-believe friend called Albert. The countries on the walls and the depictions of cultural activities were chosen to represent the children’s countries and traditions. However, the good intentions of a cosmopolitan discourse and attempt to intercultural inclusivity can have adverse consequences. Since most of the children at *Impala* were born in Sweden, questions of belonging and identity were much more complex and at times raised issues that proved to be sensitive for the children (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2011), as this discussion during a mealtime shows:

Tamara (teacher): Which is your country Jacinda?

Jacinda: Turkey.

Tamara: Louise, which country do you come from?

Louise sits quietly and

Tamara continues: Is it Iran? I know you speak Farsi.

Louise: I come from here, I am here.

Tamara says she is also born in Sweden, but her mother and father come from Turkey.

Therefore, certainly you are born here, Louise. (Field notes *Impala*).

Some of the parents were invited to contribute material, write letters from Albert and inform the teachers about “everything really – things that are popular in their countries” (interview with teachers in *Impala*). However, what was depicted by the teachers as “popular” concerned principally things and activities very different from “living in

Sweden” (e.g. eating insects in China). The ethnicity classifications were strong in these examples, with a clear division of “us-Swedes” and the others who are exotic and different (cf. Bernstein, 2000). Many children could not (or did not want to) identify with such non-Swedish materials and discourses, and the teachers were occasionally in tension between their desire to be inclusive of other cultures and treat children as individuals that may not identify with such cultures at all. The teachers expected the children to have the interests of their family (see the case of *Raven*), or the interests the teachers assume that the family have (case of *Impala*). In all these cases, these classifications and framings had a significant impact on how teachers organised free play, the learning environment and the materials available to the children.

Play, experimentation and creativity

Moving beyond tightly constructed play situations, *Ibis*, *Horse* and *Hawk* were above all characterised by play settings aimed to encourage children to create, construct and investigate freely with their entire bodies and not in a pre-assumed manner. This was a part of a deliberate and designed pedagogical approach (cf. Hedges, 2014), and is in line with findings about important factors for a meaningful environment for preschool children (Nordtømme, 2012). At *Ibis* there were, for example, water-play material, wheels and pipes, a light-box and a technical board. Moreover, the projects often included experimental and investigating parts such as a wheel project and a water project. Here are other examples from *Horse*:

Erna: ... it should be creative and it should be very free, like scrap material that is free to use. Not so tiny and small [...] but wow, so exciting! What did you think? [-] we have almost never used colouring in sheets to draw. That is not how we work. We worked with modelling clay, material from nature, wood [...] painted big.

Ylva: Then it is not so that things must be small and, tiny with perfect letters of just the right size but more about the joy in the creative, the free creative. (Interview with teachers in *Horse*)

In comparison with *Rabbit*, the expectation is that children want to be creative and active, and the teaching material must support that, so even though the play situations are fairly open they are also designed to a high degree and with a strong framing about the rules of engagement as well as the regulation of discourses around play. The kinds of material described in the quotes above also show similarities with those interpreted as non-gender-coded in previous studies, such as material from nature that could be used in different ways and with no pre-specified meanings (Änggård, 2011). However, we should note that only the teachers at *Horse* expressed such a clearly articulated position of gender-neutral play settings and materials (cf. Chapman, 2016).

These three settings were also characterised by being open for children’s perspectives in the environment, but driven or instigated by the teachers (cf. Sommer et al., 2013). For example, at *Ibis* and *Hawk* as in *Impala* there was material with an international character, such as toys for travelling to other countries (e.g. suitcases, passports, aeroplanes). At *Hawk*, in contrast to *Impala*, teachers together with children searched for facts in books and on the internet in a project about different countries, as well as asking relatives with connections to the country concerned. On certain occasions, the

teachers described highly creative sequences of activities that resulted from such initially free explorations:

Anita: We read that they have 18 active volcanoes (in Colombia)

Linnea: Well!

Anita: And it became very exciting, and then everything was about that. They made their own volcanoes, built them out in the room, carried out experiments, drew volcanoes and a great deal came out of it. (Interview with teachers in *Hawk*)

Teachers and children learned about, made experiments with, and built volcanoes. These constructions then became a part of the material that children could choose to play with, and did so, for a long period afterwards. After the interview with the teachers at *Hawk*, I met a boy who asked me if I was a researcher. He told me about his and his friend's studies of different countries and invited me to look at their findings. The highly-valued scientific attitude to knowledge at this preschool made it easy for these children to picture themselves as scientists, as several of them did, giving clear expression to Bernstein's (2000) "normalisation" process within the context of framing instructional discourses.

Overall, there was the ambition to be flexible about the environment and material from the children's perspectives as long as this fitted well with the pedagogical approach the teachers favoured (cf. Hedges, 2014). For example, when many children were interested in building with Lego, one teacher at *Hawk* told me in the interview: "We have kept it (the building), now it is the fifth week [...] and then we rearranged the furniture, and now it even has its own room". Interacting teachers who pay attention to, and can change from, the children's perspectives are reported as important when opening up for children's influence (e.g. Bae, 2009). The framing in the examples above is strong regarding what content, material and methods to use. Clearly, in both *Hawk* and *Horse* preschools the teachers were responding to and encouraging the high cultural capital expectations of children coming from homes where some parents were themselves researchers.

Children's choices and teachers' responses

In all the settings, free play situations were discussed as important for children (cf. Lynch, 2014). However, there were some striking differences about what, and with whom, children wanted to play, as well as the teachers' responses and attitudes to these choices.

Gendered choices and strong divisions

At *Impala*, *Raven* and *Rabbit* the teacher focus was primarily driven by social objectives, for children to have fun and be friends. At *Raven* the staff often observed the children from a distance, while at *Impala* and *Rabbit* the teachers systematically adopted a physically close position. Mostly, they let the children make choices and play more or less by themselves as long as there were no loud-voiced conflicts (cf. Emilson et al., 2016). Play was taken for granted as being positive for children's development (Hedges, 2014), and hence, it was often characterised by weak framing and regulation.

At *Impala*, *Raven*, and *Rabbit* girls and boys often chose rather different things to do during free play. In the interviews, girls said they wanted to draw, write, do a jigsaw puzzle, read or play mother-father-child, while the boys wanted to play football, play with cars or dinosaurs, construct with Lego, build a cabin and run around (group interviews 4–6 year old children, *Impala*, *Raven*). These kinds of choices were also observed at *Impala* and *Raven*, and discussed in teacher interviews at all three pre-schools and are in line with results in previous studies showing gender stereotypes in the children's own selections of activities (e.g. MacNaughton, 2006). The extract below shows a typical free play situation at *Impala*:

Lena, Mona and Karin sit at the big table and are writing and drawing. Mona colours in a colouring page of a girl dressed as Santa Claus [...]. Lena and Karin colour other colouring sheets depicting a sea horse. [-] In another room, Nora is lying down on a child-sized sofa. I ask her if she is ill. She answers she is going to have make up. [...] Meralda takes a rather thick paintbrush and pretend to paint around on Nora's cheeks, eyelids etc. Two boys play with the wild animals in yet another room, and pretend to be in Africa. [...] Conny, Fergus and Alexander play and construct with Lego in the room next door. (Field notes *Impala*)

As in the extract above, the division into girls and boys also meant they often played at different places at *Impala*. Material that was popular for girls or boys were placed in different rooms or parts of rooms. The binary gendered choices seemed to be natural and unspoken and not because of any noticeable conflicts between the groups. They adopted diverse masculinities and femininities (Davies, 2003), even when girls and boys at *Raven* and *Rabbit* sometimes played with the same kind of material sitting next to each other, as in this Lego construction example:

Vera and Siri have each built a house equipped with horses, girls and many things for their homes. [-] Niklas wants to change to winter tyres on a wheelbarrow he found, and he says his father has done that at home. (Field notes *Raven*).

The older boys at *Raven* often referred to their fathers as people who can “fix everything and repair all kinds of machines”, unlike their mothers who “can cook food” (field notes *Raven*). In line with previous research, children's different play choices are related to what they understand as a “normal” way of acting as a man/boy and woman/girl at this certain place, culture and time, which means what they find pleasurable (MacNaughton, 2006). Moreover, the examples above, also illustrate how gender stereotyped choices ran the risk of positioning males as active, technological and creative and females as caring, attracting others (cf. Francis, 2010), and to some extent creative in the children's play.

In interviews with teachers, some factors were emphasised when discussing gendered choices during free play. Firstly, the free choices approach seem to make it difficult for these teachers to work with gender equality: “If we make a boy and a girl do something together, [...] then they do it together, but they only do it because they feel forced to” (interview with teachers in *Impala*). Secondly, and even though several teachers also talked about gender as a social construction, they distinguish boys and girls as opposite groups in examples from practice (cf. Emilson et al., 2016).

Katarina: ... there are perhaps some of them who are strongly influenced from home, this business with gender, but most of them just seem to be themselves. They are only pursuing their interests [-]

Ulla: Because, when you think and focus on this, then you can see that some things are still genetic. (Interview with teachers in *Rabbit*)

What these explanations have in common is something that falls outside the remit of educational work at preschool, and is instead a matter for the home or even seen to be genetically programmed into the children (cf. Chapman, 2016). There seems to be a weak distinction between the responsibility and goals of preschool education versus those of the home (Bernstein, 2000). The discussion at *Raven* about the role of the teachers is also in line with this; “It depends who you are, and that is reflected everywhere [...] so you cannot change your personality because you are working”. These teachers understood their own way of acting as driven by inherent personal characteristics, rather than competence and knowledge they could acquire or develop.

There were also variations in the children’s choices during free play (cf. Chapman, 2016), as shown in the excerpt below. Earlier the same day at *Impala* there had been an organised dance activity for the whole group in the great hall, led by teachers. When I approached the room where some girls often chose to dance, one teacher said: “Here we have gender! Aron dances with the girls”.

Four children are dancing by themselves to music when I enter the room. Nora, Jacinda and Mona sway their hips in time with the music. Aron jumps and spins like hip-hop on the floor, also in time with the music. [-] Jacinda has a sheer transparent scarf tied in her hair, and Nora and Mona have scarves tied around their hips. Aron asks the others: Shall we dance like we did in the great hall? No one answers; they continue dancing and clapping their hands in time to the music that is now moving faster and faster. Aron also moves to the music, scampers about, clapping his hands. He puts a see-through scarf over his head. [-] Aron takes more rings with bands on. He shows Jacinda: Look how many I got! She looks at him, smiles, and continues dancing without saying a word. He lays down the rings on the floor, and goes out of the room and says to the teacher ‘I don’t want to dance anymore’. (Field notes *Impala*)

It seems as if dancing during free play was valued as something normal for girls to do, and the attributes were foremost used in a feminine coded way with scarves around swaying hips and pretty coiffures with help of scarves (cf. Davies, 2003). This way of using the attributes were encouraged by teachers, who also often helped the girls to arrange the scarves. The dance activity earlier that day that Aron refers to could be interpreted as more gender-neutral (about trees and weather), involving all the children of the same age and led by an adult (Änggård, 2011). As Davies (2003) argues, doing femininity and masculinity in different ways is not easy on your own and diverse ways will be more easily accepted if you have friends (or adults) who share your way of acting (cf. Wohlwend, 2011). Aron’s opportunities to choose freely in the dance example appears to be curtailed by prevailing norms.

The four examples above are characterised by strong classification dividing boys and girls into different groups. The framing is instead weak with respect to children left to choose what to do on their own. However, this is not automatically the same as all the children also have real influence over what they do. Following the arguments from Bernstein (2000) about framing giving not only experiences, but also influencing what is possible to think and understand, these children seem to be trained that boys and girls do different things in an unspoken manner.

Mixed and blended choices

At *Ibis*, *Horse* and *Hawk* there was a mix of children playing and making choices, and teachers sometimes being a part of these activities in different ways. Free play situations were often characterised by collective processes and interaction between children, and between children and teachers. Here is one example from *Ibis* (1–3 years old).

Adam takes a ball in his hand and places himself by the door to the big playroom. Kabira (teacher) opens the door and Adam and some other children run out into the playroom. [...] Kabira takes out a box of balls on the floor. Some children throw, kick, run with the balls. Larin throws a ball and runs and gets it back, several times. Eva (teacher) puts out three low, big boxes on the floor. Christian sits down in one of them. He looks around seemingly happy. Other children also sit down in boxes. Louise and Adam lie down in a low box, and Kabira put another one over them so it is like a lid. Kabira asks: Where are Louise and Adam? They lift the lid and laugh. Eva: Is there room for me in that box, do you think? Eva rolls herself up in a box, and Kabira puts a lid over it. It covers her almost, not entirely. They all laugh out loud, and Eva says: There was too little space for me. Kabira: Eva's legs are too long! (Field notes *Ibis*)

The teachers above show an attitude of playfulness and try to follow up on children's initiatives in interaction with them, which is in line with findings about factors opening up for children's influence (e.g. Bae, 2009). This means teachers using a combination of support and challenge (Sommer et al., 2013). The classification was often weak between the genders with no clear division between what, and with whom, girls and boys choose to play at *Ibis* and *Horse*. They sometimes played with cars and dolls, investigated things at the technical board, built with Lego, played football, created with different material or travelled to other places. These boys and girls seem to be interested in, and could learn about, care as well as construction, technology, sports and arts during free play (cf. Francis, 2010). As there are no participant observations from *Horse*, the mixed choices may perhaps only be in the teacher's imagination. However, pleased parents who have previously had their child at another preschool observed "at that other preschool it was really girls and boys separately, [...] and now, God, she's really playing with the boys here, and it's really mixed here" (interview with teachers in *Horse*).

At *Horse* the teachers also stated a pronounced ambition to introduce all the children in gender-mixed small groups to many kinds of creative material, "so, you can feel that you have a good grasp of various materials [...] so you have the control over how to handle several materials" (interview teachers *Horse*). The aim was to be inclusive for children of both sexes, and is based on teacher attitudes to children's choices being more or less gender-stereotyped depending on "our way of thinking, how we offer them, our attitudes". It was also important to "serve as good role models, [-] that we interact with them (the children) in all kind of activities" (interview with teacher in *Horse*). The framing is strong in these examples and is based on an understanding of democracy as collective, emphasising that all the children should have the same opportunity to gain knowledge about various materials in order to be able to make choices (cf. Moss, 2007). Following Bernstein's (2000) arguments about framing impacting what is possible to think and understand, these children seem to be educated with a broader repertoire of what to choose and do.

Conclusions

In this article, children's influence and the construction of gender during free play have been analysed in preschools in different local contexts. Overall, two dominant patterns appeared: a) gender-stereotyped choices primarily divided into girl and boy groups, and b) mixed choices with no clear division due to gender. Characteristic for the former is strong classifications with clear differences between cultures and genders (for example drawing on biological explanations), but weak between the local area/home and pedagogical practices in preschool. The modality of framing here is primarily weak concerning the selection of material and knowledge criteria, and free play is more or less taken for granted as developmental for children. Characteristic for the "mixed choices" responses is instead a weak classification between genders and cultures (relational explanations), but stronger between the preschool practice and home. The modality of framing is strong in the selection of material and knowledge criteria, with clear pedagogical ideas about the teaching (Bernstein, 2000). The awareness of pedagogical content and material during play, which does not mean children should never play by themselves but more that teachers are responsible, has in previous studies been important for children's learning (Hedges, 2014). In this study, it means children's learning about influence and gender equality.

At preschools with the more "gender-stereotyped choices", teaching in relation to children's influence and gender equality were often described as the opposite of each other, which is in line with results in previous studies (cf. Emilson et al., 2016). Children's own individual choices were valued highly, preferably without involvement from adults. This arises from an approach to democracy as freedom to choose for individuals who can make rational choices of their own (Moss, 2007). This also meant it was up to children to transgress the norms (gender, culture) dominating in the local area or at preschool if they wanted to do so. However, the results show how norms appear to show self-evident strength and are not easy to transform for an individual (see Davies, 2003). In practice this means a lot of responsibility lies on very young children in complicated situations, and it could be questioned exactly how free these children's choices really were.

In the preschools with the "mixed gendered choices", children's influence and gender equality instead seem to go hand in hand. The approaches to democracy were here rather as collective processes where children's choices were related to the context in which they take place (Moss, 2007). The teachers followed up on children's initiatives in interaction with them and acted playfully, which is in line with results showing what is fundamental for children's influence (e.g. Bae, 2009). Supporting and paying attention to children's perspectives, as well as challenging them, was important (cf. Sommer et al., 2013). The material and toys at these preschools should be possible to use in different ways, being open for transformation and in order to stimulate curiosity and investigation. This kind of material is interpreted as non-gender-coded in previous research (Änggård, 2011), but in this study only one preschool teachers explicitly considered gender perspectives. Consequently, the same kind of attitudes to children's perspectives, teacher's roles and material offered as described above seems to be of importance for children's influence as well as for gender equality (cf. Laevers & Verboven, 2000).

The factors that played a prominent part in the local area had implications for the pedagogical practice and for the children at the preschools studied. The nature of locality and the background of the families for each preschool provided frameworks of cultural expectations and norms that to a large extent shaped the opportunities for free play and the children's choices. In some areas, for example, children depicted themselves as lorry-drivers and learned a rather narrow picture of the world, while in others they depicted themselves as researchers and learned how to search for knowledge about their own, as well as other, countries. I argue, in accordance with Bernstein (2000), that the framing children meet at preschool not only provides them with experiences, but also influences what is possible for them to think and do. Preschool as a place for all children to have equal opportunities to exercise influence, learn and develop seems to be at risk.

Findings in this study illustrate that it is not sufficient to include aims concerning democracy and gender equality in curriculum texts in order to even out inequalities in pedagogical practice. This is a good start, and Bae's (2009) findings that play situations have the potential to be important pedagogical sites for fostering democracy in preschool is in accordance with the observed reality. However, according to Bernstein (2000), power relations are symbolic and not clearly visible. This means it is not an easy task for teachers to manage these issues; it needs to be prioritised in planning, evaluations and critical discussions. In line with Arnot and Reay (2007), I argue the potential for change in these matters in the daily life of preschools lies in the capability of teachers to analyse what different children say in relation to the pedagogical practice content and form, and the power relations that are at play. This is important if hidden inequalities and stereotypes are not to be built into the daily life of the preschool system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Carina Hjelmér is an Associate Professor at the Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University. Her main research interest is in the field of sociology of education, with a special interest in power relations such as gender, class and ethnicity.

ORCID

Carina Hjelmér  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3910-0319>

References

- Änggård, E. (2011). Children's gendered and non-gendered play in natural spaces. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 21(2), 5–33.
- Arnot, M., & Reay, D. (2007). A sociology of pedagogic voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics Education*, 28(3), 311–325.

- Bae, B. (2009). Children's right to participate – Challenges in everyday interactions. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 17(3), 391–406.
- Beach, D. (1997). *Symbolic control and power relay: Learning in higher professional education*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique* (Revised ed.). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chapman, R. (2016). A case study of gendered play in preschools: How early childhood educators' perceptions of gender influence children's play. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186(8), 1271–1284.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Frogs and snails and feminist tales – Preschool children and gender* (Revised ed.). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Einarsdóttir, J. (2005). We can decide what to play. Children's perception of quality in an Icelandic preschool. *Early Education & Development*, 16(4), 469–488.
- Emilson, A., Folkesson, A.-M., & Moqvist Lindberg, I. (2016). Gender beliefs and embedded gendered values in preschool. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 48(2), 225–240.
- Emilson, A., & Johansson, E. (2018). Values in nordic early childhood education: Democracy and the child's perspective. In M. Fleer & B. van Oers (Eds.), *International handbook of early childhood education* (pp. 929–954). Amsterdam: Springer.
- Francis, B. (2010). Gender, toys and learning. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36(3), 325–344.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hedges, H. (2014). Children's content learning in play provision: Competing tensions and future possibilities. In L. Brooker, M. Blaise, & S. Edwards (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 192–203). London, UK: Sage.
- Laevers, F., & Verboven, L. (2000). Gender related role patterns in preschool settings. Can 'experiential education' make a difference? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 8(1), 25–42.
- Löfdahl, A., & Hägglund, S. (2006). Power and participation: Social representations among children in preschool. *Social Psychology of Education*, 9, 179–194.
- Lynch, M. (2014). Guys and dolls: A qualitative study of teacher's views of gendered play in kindergarten. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(5), 679–693.
- MacNaughton, G. (2006). Constructing gender in early-years education. In C. Skelton, B. Francis, & L. Smulyan (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of gender and education* (pp. 127–138). London: SAGE Publications.
- Moss, P. (2007). Bringing politics into the nursery: Early childhood education as a democratic practice. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15(1), 5–20.
- Nordtømme, S. (2012). Place, space and materiality for pedagogy in a kindergarten. *Education Inquiry*, 3(3), 317–333.
- Sheridan, S., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2001). Children's conceptions of participation and influence in preschool: A perspective on pedagogical quality. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 2(2), 169–194.
- Sommer, D., Pramling Samuelsson, I., & Hundeide, K. (2013). Early childhood care and education: A child perspective paradigm. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(4), 459–475.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Swedish National Agency for Education. (2018). *Curriculum for the preschool Lpfö 18*. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Swedish Schools Inspectorate. (2017). *Förskolans arbete med jämställdhet* [Preschools' work with gender equality]. Stockholm: Skolinspektionen.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). 'Are you guys girls?': Boys, identity texts, and Disney princess play. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12(1), 3–23.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. London: Sage Publications.