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### **Research**

## **Troubling Gender in Preschool: From Compensatory Towards Complicating Pedagogy**

***Klara Dolk, Department of Education, Stockholm University***

### **Abstract**

Albeit not uncontroversial, it is fairly common in Swedish preschools to use single-gender settings as part of a gender-conscious pedagogy known in the Nordic countries as ‘compensatory pedagogy.’ Compensatory pedagogy has been used in numerous preschools as a way to challenge dominant assumptions about gender.

Despite many undeniable achievements of this approach, I intend in this paper to pose a theoretical challenge to some of the assumptions underlying compensatory pedagogy. In order to do this, I will take a look at some of the most central ideas of compensatory pedagogy as expressed in two of the most widely read books in the field of gender and education in Sweden. Drawing inspiration from feminist poststructuralist and queer theory, my aim is to formulate a shift from a compensatory towards a complicating pedagogy and from simplified notions of gender equity towards gender diversity.

## Introduction and Background

In order to work with gender issues in the classroom, educational projects in many countries have introduced single-gender settings (Salminen-Karlsson, 2009). Albeit not uncontroversial, single-gender settings have been used with great success in Swedish preschools. Minna Salminen-Karlsson (2009), and many with her, stress that as long as teachers aim to provide *both* girls and boys with better possibilities for developing a wider spectrum of gendered behaviours, single-gender settings can be a good method to reach more equal relations.

In Sweden, there is an interesting example of two preschools, Björntomten and Tittmyran, where single-gender settings were used as a part of the teachers' gender-conscious pedagogy. When Björntomten and Tittmyran started their work on gender, the teachers thought that they already treated girls and boys in the same way. After many observations, however, they noticed that they treated girls and boys differently in several ways (Svaleryd, 2002; Wahlström, 2003). Subsequently, they decided to employ what in the Nordic countries had become known as 'compensatory pedagogy' (Svaleryd, 2002; Wahlström, 2003). The idea within compensatory pedagogy is to 'compensate' in single-gender settings for what girls and boys are often unable to develop in mixed-gender settings, due to the different expectations and conditions they often meet in preschools (as well as in society as a whole). Björntomten and Tittmyran have received a lot of positive attention in Sweden, and have inspired teachers all over the country to work with gender in their classrooms. Research shows that compensatory pedagogy is used by almost all preschools in Sweden

that work with gender equity (Bodén, 2009; Swedish Government Official Report, 2006).

Compensatory pedagogy was a big inspiration for my own work with gender equity in preschools, both as a teacher and a lecturer. A few years ago I led an evening workshop about how to enhance gender equity in preschool in a 'progressive' parents' co-operative in Stockholm. Both parents and teachers claimed they had not worked actively with gender before, but it was soon evident that they were very aware of both gender and queer issues, and some of them reacted strongly to the strategies for working with gender that I suggested. The objection was that such strategies focussed too much on differences in girls' and boys' behaviours. Mainly, the following question was raised: How is focussing on stereotypic differences between girls and boys going to help us promote gender equity? I left that evening with a lot of questions, and I came to think that maybe compensatory pedagogy was not the answer after all. Instead I started to search for more complex ways of understanding gender issues in order to re-think gender.

Despite the many undeniable achievements of compensatory pedagogy (cf. Svaleryd, 2002; Wahlström, 2003; Gens, 2001), I would argue that from queer and poststructuralist perspectives, the assumptions made about gender in compensatory pedagogy need to be critically examined. It still rests, to a large extent, on a rather traditional image of 'two (different) genders,' no matter whether they are seen as biologically determined or socially constructed. At the same time, what is sometimes referred to as the 'third wave' in feminist thought

highlights diversity, change, contradictions and complexities within gendered relations (cf. Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1990; Lather, 1991).

Drawing inspiration from feminist poststructuralist and queer theory, my aim in this paper is to unsettle some of the assumptions underlying compensatory pedagogy. In order to do this I will take a look at the ideas of compensatory pedagogy expressed within two of the most widely read books in what has become known as 'gender pedagogy' in Sweden. I will thereby try to formulate a theoretical challenge to the dominant discourses behind this pedagogy and outline an alternative way of thinking about gender that I hope allows us to overcome binary gender divisions and limitations in education. Furthermore, I hope this will help us move in the direction of gender diversity rather than somewhat simplified notions of 'gender equity.' Instead of a pedagogy that compensates gender I would like to see a pedagogy that complicates gender.

### **Gender Pedagogy in the Nordic Countries**

Since the Nordic European countries share many features, also in education and approaches to gender equity, the developments in Swedish gender pedagogy can best be understood in the context of relevant developments in other Nordic countries. Two approaches ought to be mentioned in particular.

In the 1980s, Anne Mette Kruse introduced the term 'compensatory pedagogy' in Danish schools. The term describes a pedagogical concept that divides girls and boys at times into separate groups in order to compensate for behaviour usually not developed within

mixed gender settings. The idea is to create environments in which all children will be able to develop abilities that allow them to become autonomous and independent as much as social and caring (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006).

Similarly to Kruse, Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir has worked with compensatory pedagogy in the preschool Hjalli in Iceland since 1989. In what has become known as the 'Hjalli pedagogy,' girls and boys are separated most of the time and only meet for activities in which their skill levels are considered equal by their teachers. While separated, the girls' and boys' groups often occupy themselves with the same tasks, but with different emphases, since the goal is to alter gender stereotypic behaviours. Boys are, amongst other things, taught to co-operate and to be caring while girls are encouraged to engage in a wider variety of activities and to take more space (Skarby, 1999). Ólafsdóttir's aim was to create more equal social relations between the genders. She did not challenge the idea that differences between girls and boys were biologically determined. Instead, the very purpose of the separated girls' and boys' groups seemed to compensate through education for what each gender was 'naturally' lacking (Skarby, 1999). After early resistance, the Hjalli pedagogy became highly popular in Iceland (Gens, 2001).

### **Pioneering Gender Equity Work in Swedish Preschools**

In 1998, the Swedish government released the first preschool curriculum, calling on all preschools to promote gender equity. An increasing number of Swedish preschools have tried to

implement an appropriate pedagogical praxis since. In general, very little academic research on gender pedagogy has been conducted in Sweden and only a few practice-based projects have received any significant attention (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006). However, in 1996, the pivotal practice-based gender equity project, involving the preschools Björntomten and Tittmyran (who both had the same head teacher), started in the region of Gävleborg. The project's initiator was convinced that in order to reach gender equity in society, gender-conscious work with children had to begin as early as possible (Gens, 2001). After the teachers had come to the conclusion that girls and boys mainly developed stereotypic gender abilities in mixed-gender groups, they embraced Ólafsdóttir's approach to offset this by introducing single-gender settings. Girls and boys were now separated during parts of the day – both for routines like meals and for play.

The Gävleborg project received significant media attention and has become the best-known example of compensatory pedagogy in Sweden (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006). As recently as 2002 and 2003 two books describing the project were released: *Genuspedagogik [Gender Pedagogy]* by Kajsa Svaleryd, a former teacher at Björntomten/Tittmyran, and *Flickor, pojkar och pedagoger [Girls, Boys and Practitioners]* by Kajsa Wahlström, the former head teacher at Björntomten/Tittmyran. Today, both books count amongst the most widely read and influential books within Swedish gender pedagogy. I will therefore use them as a reference point for the following observations on compensatory pedagogy.

### **Discourses of Gender Equity**

Inspired by feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, there are two assumptions I want to challenge in this paper: the notions of 'separate and different worlds' within compensatory pedagogy, and the idea of compensatory pedagogy itself. Instead of 'separate and different worlds' I would like to see many worlds. And rather than adopting a compensatory pedagogy, I would like to call for a 'complicating pedagogy' as a way of supporting and strengthening concepts of gender diversity. Some thoughts on the challenges and possibilities of such a pedagogy, i.e. of gender diversity in education will conclude the paper.

### **'Separate and Different Worlds'**

Svaleryd and Wahlström both state that they were 'gender-blind' before their project started. They did not see that gender and gender norms had an impact on both children and adults in their school (cf. Mac Naughton, 2000). When they began observing the actual social dynamics in school, another reality was revealed to them. Wahlström claims that even though girls and boys play physically close to each other, "[a]n invisible wall is separating them" (p. 14-15), raising the question of whether it is "possible to build bridges between their different worlds" (pp. 24).

After studying numerous video-recordings, Wahlström and Svaleryd claim that they and their colleagues began to see very clear patterns, no matter where or which activities they were looking at. Svaleryd describes these thus:

Boys often socialize in bigger groups. In these, hierarchies are strong. Leadership, physical presence, self-focus, initiative, independence, courage and

strength are being encouraged. The way that boys play often emphasizes bodily activity and competition. ... Girls are taught how to enter and leave relationships, one after the other, and how to avoid to be alone. They are too afraid to lose their relationships to express discomfort with them. A fear of conflict follows. Girls even have difficulties to make decisions or voice opinions (pp. 17-20).

To emphasize these differences, Wahlström often uses phrases like “separate worlds” (p. 14) or “girls’ and boys’ worlds” (p. 36), while Svaleryd occasionally employs expressions like “different realities” (p. 33) or “two worlds” (p. 16). Wahlström describes the different roles adopted by girls and boys in the chapter “The harsh truth” (p. 82). Here are some of her summary comments:

#### **Girls**

- play close to adults, and are constantly made dependent on them
- play in pairs and do not build bigger groups
- are taught to adapt and be cautious
- form identities based on intimacy and close relationships
- avoid conflict, take mishaps personally and develop bad conscience
- show passivity and obedience instead of taking initiative

#### **Boys**

- play at a distance from adults, show independence
- play in large groups
- take and are being given the role of leaders

- form identities based on the (negative) attention they receive and on rejecting everything seen as female
- are competitive, goal-oriented, stretch rules and boundaries, and solve conflicts directly and physically (pp. 82-83)

#### **Compensatory pedagogy**

If the differences between girls and boys are as big as Wahlström and Svaleryd suggest, and if the curriculum requests all teachers to “counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006), then compensatory pedagogy could be seen as a logical pedagogical ‘response.’ Both Wahlström and Svaleryd state that it was impossible to give girls and boys the same possibilities in gender-mixed groups. In Wahlström’s words: “Every time we tried to strengthen one gender, we weakened the other. ... Which goals do we as teachers have to set ourselves? We are facing two seemingly contradictory tasks: girls’ needs for stronger self-esteem and leadership, and boys’ needs to receive positive reinforcement instead of reprimands” (p. 95-96). Single-gender settings seemed to be the answer. Svaleryd writes:

In single-gender groups, boys can identify with other boys while at the same time recognizing the differences between them. Girls have the possibility to identify with other girls and hence realize the range of possibilities that being a girl implies. This allows to work against stereotypes. It is not about ‘improving’ boys or girls, but about liberating them from the current everyday expectations associated with their respective genders (p. 63).

Wahlström and Svaleryd developed one pedagogical approach for girls and one for boys in single-gender settings, with different purposes and goals. According to Wahlström single-gender settings allow girls, amongst other things, to:

- be treated and appreciated as an individual
- discover joy, humour and mischief
- develop better skills in athletics and ball games
- become more daring
- see the other gender positively

Boys will, amongst other things, benefit in the following ways:

- be treated and appreciated as members of a group
- learn how to follow rules
- show consideration, see the consequences of one's actions and become more empathic
- experience bodily contact
- see the other gender positively (pp. 138-141)

Wahlström claims that the work in gender-segregated groups did allow them to focus on the development of both boys and girls and to avoid the confusions and resistances that had often seemed unavoidable in mixed-gender settings. She explains, for example, that it became easier for boys to be considerate and show empathy once they were amongst themselves because such behaviour was no longer instantly associated with girls.

My purpose is not to question the successes of the Gävleborg project. The project has been immensely important in pushing gender equity issues in preschool, and it has challenged many dominant assumptions that girls and boys are facing in the preschool setting. Separating girls and boys into different

groups for pedagogical purposes might also have its merits given the realities we live in. However, I believe that with all its important contributions to progressive gender education, the assumptions of 'separate and different worlds' as well as the concept of compensatory pedagogy itself still leave many questions unanswered and perpetuate rather reductionist views of gender that exclude many important aspects of gender-conscious educational practice. With inspiration from queer theory and feminist poststructuralism, it is possible to raise more complex questions about gender and concrete pedagogical practices in preschool.

### **Towards Gender Diversity**

In contemporary Western society, the use of binaries – or “unfair pairs” as Maggie MacLure (2003 p. 10) has called them, hinting at the hierarchies that exist within each pair – is a common way of dividing the world into different categories. While people and their experiences are diverse, “we tend to close down possibilities and castigate those who blur the lines we have drawn” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2007, p.65). Many researchers have tried to ‘trouble’ these lines and have shown that the division of human beings into dichotomies is a practice that hides a much more complex reality (e.g. Butler, 1990; Davies, 2003a; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; DePalma & Atkinson, 2007).

### **From ‘separate and different worlds’ towards many worlds**

Wahlström's and Svaleryd's claim that girls and boys live in 'separate and different worlds' relies on discourses of opposite genders and seems to curiously reproduce many stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Meanwhile, within feminist poststructuralism and queer

theory the complex, contradictory and contextual subject positions in which children find themselves are brought to the fore (cf. Blaise, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2000; Davies, 2003a). Based on such perspectives, one might ask whether Wahlström and Svaleryd describe the 'truth' of 'separate and different worlds' – or whether they take part in creating it? Barrie Thorne (1993), for example, found that most of her supposed evidence for differences between girls and boys came from observations of the most popular children in class. Both Mindy Blaise (2005) and Marie Nordberg (2005) emphasize, like Thorne, that teachers as well as researchers often look at gender differences and practices that confirm stereotypes. As a result, the actual diversity of subjectivities/identities never becomes visible. What needs to be done according to Thorne, is to “develop concepts that will help us to grasp the diversity, overlap, contradictions, and ambiguities in the larger cultural fields in which gender relations, and the dynamics of power, are constructed” (p. 108).

How would we see the relations between girls and boys if we focused on what they share? What would happen if we focused on the diversity within the respective groups? What if we focused on individual behaviours? What if we focused on how one's individual behaviours change, sometimes even within the course of a day? Arguably, the result would be a more complex image of how gender plays out in preschool.

Within feminist poststructuralism, the individual is endlessly reconstructed and reconfigured. This implies that both children and adults are positioned, and position themselves, in a variety of ways during one day, sometimes ending up

powerful and sometimes powerless (Davies, 2003a). Theories of multiple subject positions remind us to turn our attention away from (in one way or another) preconceived notions of 'girls' and 'boys' and towards the different forms of 'femininities' and 'masculinities' practiced by children (and adults) in preschool settings. In other words, they allow for a more fluid understanding of power that will not divide the social field into a dominating hierarchy of two (e.g. Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003a, 2003b; Mac Naughton, 2000).

A child's way of 'performing' femininity or masculinity is not static but rather varies from context to context: it is not the same amongst friends, within family or in school (e.g. Thorne, 1993). The fact that some boys are 'troublemakers' and act tough in preschool does not, for example, mean that they do not talk about feelings or take care of their baby siblings at home. That some girls play calm and quiet games in school does not mean that they do not climb trees and jump off rocks later in the day. That girls and boys to a large degree play in single-gender groups in school does not mean that they do so at the neighbourhood playground. Children often play with siblings regardless of their gender, and there are girls and boys who are best friends but choose not to play together in school, or even pretend not to know each other, to avoid teasing from their peers (Thorne, 1993).

Of course it is not irrelevant what girls and boys do in preschool. Likewise, different social positions certainly imply unequal distributions of power. What seems important, however, is that children's respective positions are a) not necessarily an expression of their abilities (or lack thereof), and that b) not merely an

expression of their gender ‘identities.’ Preschools – as schools generally – are often more gender-segregated than other places (cf. Thorne, 1993). If this is not taken into account, our whole analysis of gender relations might be flawed. To recognize the fluidity in gendered relations and behaviours hence serves as a key for approaching gender differently in the pedagogical context (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003a; Renold, 2006). If we perceive preschools as an arena where individuals display many kinds of behaviour, influenced not only by discourses on gender but also on sexuality, race, class, etc., we would probably also perceive individual girls and boys in much more complex ways. In fact, that might help us to cease perceiving children merely – or at least predominantly – as ‘girls’ and ‘boys.’ Two worlds could give way to many worlds.

### **From Compensatory Towards Complicating Pedagogy**

Compensatory pedagogy presumes that it is much easier to challenge common assumptions and behaviours, especially amongst boys, in single-gender settings. The reason is that certain behaviours cease to be exclusively associated with girls. However, if boys are not afraid to show certain forms of behaviour in an all-boys setting because it is no longer immediately associated with feminine behaviour, does this really challenge common perceptions of femininity? Or does it just ‘solve’ the problem by avoiding points of reference?

Svaleryd writes that compensatory pedagogy “is not about ‘improving’ boys or girls, but about liberating them from the current everyday expectations associated with their respective genders.” It seems hard, though, not to raise the question of

what role the children themselves play in this pedagogical approach. Many advocates of compensatory pedagogy have a tendency to portray children as passive recipients of “new behaviours” presented to them by adults with the agenda to “liberate” them. In poststructuralism and queer theory, children’s (and adults’) agency becomes the focus of attention, which in turn makes it possible to view children as active participants in the construction and contestation of gender (cf. Davies, 2003a; Blaise, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2000). Children affect adults as much as they are affected by them.

Seen from a poststructuralist and queer perspective, compensatory pedagogy neither challenges the binary gender structure nor does it encourage children to actively create subjectivities they feel comfortable with. It appears that what we might need instead of a pedagogy that compensates is a pedagogy that complicates.

In a ‘complicating pedagogy’ the children’s agency and active participation in the construction of gender would be at the core of our attention. A complicating pedagogy would also challenge us to reflect on all discourses – gender and otherwise – prevalent in preschools with the aim of understanding the power dynamics at play and the possibilities for children (and adults) to resist and subvert dominant/dominating discourses.

To focus on the development of children as supposedly autonomous subjects is as much a part of preschool pedagogy as it is a part of mainstream pedagogical practice, no matter what specific pedagogical approach is employed. The notion has been taken for granted for so

long that it seems difficult to do things differently (Cannella, 1997; Jones & Barron, 2007; Blaise, 2005). However, there seem to be more promising ways to understand and enhance gender equity in education. In a preschool context, this implies the need to turn away from the child as an 'autonomous individual' and instead pay close attention to the way it is positioned within the social – and environmental – contexts framing its existence.

Once we have accepted this challenge, it may be easier to create spaces where children can actively engage in shaping these contexts as they are no longer hidden. If children develop an understanding for the discourses and storylines constituting subjectivity – including gender subjectivity – and see themselves as producers of discourse and subjectivity, interference with and dismantling of dominant/dominating discourses becomes possible. Since children actively 'do' gender, they can also participate – and get a better chance to participate – in the creation of new discourses with new possibilities (Davies, 2003b).

I do not want to suggest that all children are just waiting to start 'gender bending'. Children, just like adults, have often invested a great deal in how they 'do' their gender. Since not all ways of "doing girl" (Renold, 2006 p. 496) or of "doing boy" are valued equally – both in society at large and in peer groups – some children are also likely to 'set things straight' (cf. Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003a). Nonetheless, in order for us as teachers (and adults) to create the opportunity for children to engage in social transformation, we constantly need to challenge ourselves and our own

preconceptions (e.g. Mac Naughton, 2000; Blaise, 2005; Cannella, 1997; Davies, 2003a, 2003b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2007; Jones & Barron, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2006; Nordberg, 2005; Thorne, 1993). We have to permanently investigate our own biases, and continually ask ourselves whose knowledges, ideas and life experiences are missing in the classroom (e.g. Mac Naughton, 2000; Blaise, 2005).

Social justice implies equal opportunity to influence the power dynamics shaping our social relations. It requires that all forms of dominant knowledge are questioned and deconstructed, and that we can create avenues where multiple forms of knowledge can be heard (Cannella, 1997). As teachers and adults we need to destabilize our daily interactions with children, as well as the interactions between children themselves. To permanently try to deconstruct our own pedagogical practice and to become aware of unjustified assumptions on our own behalf is a condition for keeping the doors for transformation open.

### **Complicating Pedagogy – Challenges and Promises**

One of the most common feminist concerns regarding concepts of gender diversity is that these concepts neglect the real-life differences between women and men and render us gender-blind once again. This, so the argument continues, will inevitably reinforce the social privileges that exist, namely those of boys and men.

This concern cannot be taken lightly and probably poses one of the biggest challenges for a complicating pedagogy. It is true that without proper knowledge about the gender discourses dominating

our societies, we simply will not be able to transform them. In compensatory pedagogy, the structural relations between girls and boys in preschool are brought to light. However, I do not think that the analyses compensatory pedagogy rests on allow more insight into dominant gender patterns, or that concepts of gender diversity make an analysis of the gender discourses that constitute the binary gender structure impossible. On the contrary, I believe that once we deem a radical change of conventional gender notions necessary, and once we view gender as diverse, contextual and changing, we will acquire more rather than less knowledge about current gendering discourses and power relations. This vision will increase rather than decrease our responsibility to pay close attention to our own role in these discourses and relations, in a pre-school context as much as anywhere else. Self-examining our roles as teachers will be necessary and we need to continuously ask ourselves whose interests are served by our traditional biases (cf. Lather, 1991).

Another important concern regarding a complicating pedagogy is one relevant for any new pedagogical attempt: How do we avoid establishing new sets of norms, rules and expectations that children have to fit into? In the context of this paper, the main danger seems to lie in perceiving 'traditional' gender behaviour as 'suspicious,' every girl who likes Barbie as a 'problem,' and every boy playing hockey as a 'threat.' I think Karin Hultman, who works on her Ph.D. at Stockholm University, summed this up convincingly: If Pippi Longstocking, as an active, independent and entertaining girl, becomes the norm in gender pedagogy, where does that leave Annika, who, quiet

and cautious, is by many considered a 'typical' girl? Would we have 'to queer' her (cf. Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001)?

Maybe we would. But not in the authoritarian sense of 'changing' her (as in: 'making her queer'). Much rather by changing our own views and norms, allowing for other 'readings' of her. I think this is where notions of "queering up early childhood education" and "calling into question 'the regime of the normal,'" as suggested by Joe Tobin, become particularly compelling (Tobin, 1997 quoted in Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001 p. 12).

If we want to challenge and change gendered relations we of course need to carefully analyse inequalities and structural relations. Compensatory pedagogy highlights this. At the same time, we must avoid 'locking' gendered relations into established 'blueprints' for our analysis of power production. In other words, we need to simultaneously believe and unbelieve (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009) what we see and experience in order to challenge normativity and unequal relations, while preventing the formation of a new set of norms for how to be(come).

The problem of fighting norms lies within ourselves, our expectations, and our abilities to overcome simplified categories that we are taught to divide the world into. The success of any pedagogy committed to breaking new ground for gender diversity will depend on living up to this challenge.

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