Walking the Rainbow
Using the environment as a catalyst for the dissolution of gender norms in the preschool

Att följa regnbågen
Att använda miljön som katalysator för att luckra upp könsnormer i förskolan

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Date for the Opposition Seminar: 2 June 2016

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my wonderful children who never cease to amaze me with their openness and willingness to embrace life in all its colours. This thanks extends also to my husband who continues to travel the world with me, meeting others who inspire critical thought and make us question that which we take for granted. It is these meetings that have mapped the journey towards this research study.

My supervisor, Camilla Löf, has been fantastic at giving constructive feedback, as well as being a wonderfully approachable person who is always willing and eager to help, despite no doubt having mountains of other work to attend to. Thanks must also be given to all those who participated in the research. They took their time to talk to me about the work of the preschool and gave me the freedom to explore the setting they had created. This study would not have been possible without their willingness to welcome an outsider into their space.

I gratefully acknowledge the funding provided by Lärarförbundet for travel expenses associated with the research. This gave me the opportunity to choose a setting that would best meet the requirements of the study, looking beyond participants based in my own province, Skåne.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents who raised a child who could be dressed head to toe in pink, doing ballet on Saturdays, before changing into a jiu-jitsu gi for martial arts on Sundays. I always chose to believe that anything is possible.
Abstract

Studier har visat att barn påverkas av den miljö de befinner sig i. Den fysiska världen talar ett språk som berättar om samhällets krav, förväntningar och värderingar på individen, inklusive förväntningar angående kön/genus. Könsnormer har visat sig vara inbäddade i hur rum utformas och därför kan det sägas att rum har möjlighet att påverka skapandet av kön.


Nyckelord: Barn, det pedagogiska rummet, förskola, genus, jämställdhet, kön, könsroller, språk

Keywords: Gender, gender equality, language, learning environment, preschool education, sex roles, social norms
Life planned out before my birth, nothing could I say. Had no chance to see myself, molded day by day.

Hetfield, Ulrich & Hammett (1986)

### Table of Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................................................... 1

**ABSTRACT** ........................................................................................................................................................... 1

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ......................................................................................................................................... 1

**PROLOGUE** ......................................................................................................................................................... 1

**1. INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................................................... 1

1.1 **AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS** .................................................................................................................. 3

1.2 **STRUCTURE OF STUDY** ................................................................................................................................... 4

1.3 **A NOTE ON LANGUAGE** .................................................................................................................................. 4

**2. BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH** ................................................................................................. 5

2.1 **CHILDREN’S PLACES** ................................................................................................................................... 5

2.2 **NORMATIVE PLACES** ..................................................................................................................................... 6

2.3 **USING SPACE AND MATERIALITY TO GENDER THE BODY** ............................................................................. 7

2.4 **THE COLOUR OF GENDERED OBJECTS** ........................................................................................................... 9

2.5 **THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE** ....................................................................................... 10

2.6 **THE LANGUAGE OF VISUAL AND CULTURAL ARTEFACTS** .............................................................................. 12

2.7 **SUMMARY** ..................................................................................................................................................... 13

**3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS** .............................................................................................. 14

3.1 **SEX AND GENDER** ........................................................................................................................................ 14

3.1.1 **Gender performativity** ................................................................................................................................. 15

3.1.2 **Interpellation** ............................................................................................................................................. 16

3.2 **HIRDMAN’S GENDER SYSTEM** ...................................................................................................................... 17

3.3 **THE HEGEMONIC HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX** .................................................................................................. 18

3.4 **INTERSECTIONALITY** ....................................................................................................................................... 19

3.5 **BEYOND THE BINARY** ................................................................................................................................... 20

3.6 **SUMMARY** ..................................................................................................................................................... 21

**4. METHOD AND MATERIALS** ............................................................................................................................. 22
5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 PEROILOUS PINK AND OTHER MEANINGFUL COLOURS ................................................................. 32
  5.1.1 Perilous Pink .................................................................................................................................. 32
  5.1.2 The Symbolic Rainbow .................................................................................................................... 35
  5.1.3 What is Black, White, Yellow, Red? .................................................................................................... 36
  5.1.4 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 38
5.2 THE COMMUNICATIVE POWER OF THE ARTEFACT ........................................................................... 38
  5.2.1 Super-soft Heroes and Super Strong Princesses .................................................................................... 39
  5.2.2 Dolls and the Dollhouse .................................................................................................................... 41
  5.2.3 Variety and Exclusion ......................................................................................................................... 43
  5.2.4 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 44
5.3 TOWARDS A GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE OF SPACE ..................................................................... 44
  5.3.1 Where Cars Meet the Dollhouse ......................................................................................................... 45
  5.3.2 Gender-neutral Bodies ....................................................................................................................... 47
  5.3.3 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 49
5.4 CULTURAL ARTEFACTS THAT LOOK BEYOND THE BINARY ............................................................. 50
  5.4.1 Emotions, Families, and Stereotypes .................................................................................................. 50
  5.4.2 Messages on the Walls ......................................................................................................................... 53
  5.4.3 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 55
5.5 FREEING BODIES THROUGH THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT ......................................................... 56
  5.5.1 Beyond She and He to a Welcoming of Ze ........................................................................................... 56
  5.5.2 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 60
5.6 THE ENVIRONMENT’S SILENT NORM ................................................................................................. 61
  5.6.1 Dissolving the Consumption Hierarchy .............................................................................................. 61
  5.6.2 Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 63

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................... 64
'Listen Petronius, when I was young I had a lot of grandiose dreams too, about what I was going to be… You’ll have to stop reading all those adventure stories about the exploits of seawim and stick to books for boys instead. Then your dreams will be more realistic…'

- Gerd Brantenberg, Egalia’s Daughters (2004)

Prologue

It is 5 o’clock in the evening and the hotel lobby bar is springing to life. Women and men mingle, meeting each other in the same space and time. And yet the fact that I identify each individual as woman or man shows that whilst there is commonality in the space that is occupied, there is also difference. The ties, polished flats and designer stubble serve to mark that which belongs to the “masculine” side, whilst the dresses, make-up and high-heeled shoes are representative of the “other” sex.

The space soon becomes divided as bodies gradually manoeuvre and position themselves into the shapes that are acceptable for the category to which they belong. Men slouch over the bar whilst women sit at tables, legs crossed, and arms folded. With the categories divided, differences within the groups suddenly become visible. It is not all who abide by the stereotypes, even if there is little crossing with regards to style; certain fashions find no representation within the “other” group. But not all the women are wearing dresses, just as not all the men are wearing ties. There is colour, shade, and nuance. What is witnessed is not two groups consisting of clones.

I sit and read Egalia’s Daughters, a satire of the sexes. The gendered world is turned on its head and the female is now the one who holds status in the gender hierarchy. A matriarchy has come to be. It is not a book about freedom or equality, but rather one that opens for a new perspective, highlighting that which is so easily taken as natural. Biological differences remain the same, but society’s culture has new plans for how these different bodies, female and male, should look, and what they are capable of.
Tomorrow I will visit a preschool that claims to be a free zone from cultural gender stereotypes and roles; a gender-neutral place where the child’s identity is not predetermined by their biology. There has been a lot of international interest in Sweden’s gender-neutral preschools, and a lot of controversy. Is it brainwashing? Is it a utopia? Is it freedom for all or is it a microcosm where the gendered norms of the wider society are merely reversed; girls wear the trousers and boys wear the skirts? As yet, I cannot provide an answer.

I go back to the hotel room and unpack my suitcase containing the clothes I will wear tomorrow. Jeans. Practical when being around children, but I could just as easily have chosen a dress or a skirt. Does my husband have that option when he wakes and dresses for work tomorrow? If not, why not?

I have no preconceptions of how a gender-neutral preschool will look. Thoughts, yes, but no concrete ideas. How is a gender-neutral environment prepared? What will I see when I cross the threshold? Will there be light on the other side or will there be mourning for that which is perceived as “normal”? It’s time to open the door and find out.
1. Introduction

“Is it a girl or a boy”? This is one of the first questions asked upon hearing that an individual is expecting or has recently had a baby. The sex of the child provides information about the social category to which they are expected to belong. As a result, it is not only sex that is assigned at birth, but also gender, and the child will be expected to dress and act in accordance with that gender. As illustrated in the prologue, dresses belong to the category “female”, ties belong to the “male”. Genitals are used to shape expectations (Wharton 2012).

That not all follow the normative path laid out before them at birth has long been recognised in Sweden. In 1950, the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL) was founded, beginning one of the world’s first gay rights movements, giving voice to those who are often marginalised and discriminated against in society. RFSL’s goal is that LGBTQ people shall have the same rights and opportunities as those who adhere closer to society’s gender norms1 (RFSL 2016). The organisation works locally, nationally and internationally and has currently 38 branches spread throughout Sweden. RFSL runs a variety of activities and projects, including a certifying unit. This unit allows organisations such as schools, health centres and swimming pools to receive LGBTQ (Sw. HBTQ) certification, which identifies the organisation as an inclusive workplace/community. In 2011, Nicolaigården and Egalia in Stockholm became Sweden’s first LGBTQ certified preschools. Today, 2016, there are 10 preschools throughout Sweden that have received this certification, promoting themselves as inclusive and diverse educational institutions where normative identity constructions are challenged.

It is not only LGBTQ certified preschools that are bound to work towards gender equality and challenge normative gender constructs. One of the core values of the Swedish preschool curriculum is gender equality (Skolverket 2010). All preschools are obligated to counteract traditional gender patterns and roles so that no child is subjected to discrimination or limitations due to their gender (Skolverket 2010; Sverige 2010, kap 6). However, no concrete guidelines are provided in the preschool curriculum as to how this should be done.

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1 Butler (2004, p. 41) describes a norm as a standard that operates within social practices as “the implicit standard of normalization”. Norms may be explicit, but are most often implicit. They often only become visible when they are challenged or broken.
One of the areas of the educational institution that is often overlooked when it comes to gender equality and the challenging of norms is the physical environment. The majority of previous studies on gender equality in the preschool focus on interactions between children and their teachers, or within peer groups (see Dolk 2013; Eidevald 2009; Svaleryd 2003; Thorne 1993). RFSL, however, emphasises the importance of the physical environment and preschool materials in creating a norm-critical, inclusive setting (RFSL 2013). It is, after all, within a physical space that children develop a sense of self, learning to position themselves within the multiple discursive practices\(^2\) of society.

Hultman (2011) says that she has little memory of the preschool teachers from her childhood, but what she does remember is the environment; the rooms, the rugs, and the various materials on the shelves that lined the walls. Interactions within the preschool are situated in a physical space, a space that embodies cultural values and expectations (Lawson 2001; Nordin-Hultman 2004; Nordtømme 2012). Massey (1994) describes space, as well as the individual’s sense of space, as being “gendered through and through”. Space has a language and a meaning that speaks to those who occupy it (Lawson 2001; Rasmussen 2004; Rinaldi 1998, 2004). Within the preschool, the language of space has the ability to influence the child’s identity formation as it provides information regarding teachers’ and society’s expectations of how the child should be in the present, and who, or what, they are expected to become in the future (Nordin-Hultman 2004). Gender is a fundamental aspect of identity.

Hultman (2011) believes that by putting so much emphasis on social relations and interactions, people have become blind to the relationship between the human and non-human world. Society’s discourses are materialised in the physical, material world, as well as in practice (Nordin-Hultman 2004). The preschool environment is the embodiment of choices made with regards to the needs of the child. The children are the architects’ “invisible clients” who rarely have a say as to how their environment is designed (Nicholson 2005). Once the exterior and interior walls have been put in place the role of architect passes to the teachers, and the preschool becomes the embodiment of choices made by those teachers. The

\(^2\) Foucault (2002, p. 131) describes discursive practice as "a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period". It is the process through which society’s view of reality comes into being. Discourses, on the other hand, are bodies of statements that govern the way individuals perceive and speak about a specific topic or subject at particular historical moments (Foucault 2002). Davies (2000, p. 55) says, "We can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses".
child’s identity develops within a space that is traditionally created and designed by adults and thus it is adults who have the power to decrease the salience of gender and gender norms within the preschool environment (Koralek & Mitchell 2005).

Edwards (2005) describes the classroom as a “microcosm of the world”. The physical space of the room becomes a container for life’s offerings and thus the child’s life expectancies are framed by this space. The environment can be more or less gendered, either confirming gender stereotypes or opening for possibilities. It can also become more or less gendered as the spatial environment is malleable rather than a fixed entity (see Lawson 2001; Nordtømme 2012). The language of space can change depending on how the space is used and what is done with it (Grosz 2001; Lawson 2001). It can therefore be an avenue for the transformation and reinterpretation of gender norms. The only limitation is the imagination.

Martin and Ruble (2004) describe children as “gender detectives” searching for clues about what is appropriate or inappropriate to their own gender as well as to the gender of their peers. By the age of five, children are said to be well versed in the norms and stereotypes associated with gender. Between the ages of five and seven, these norms are rigidly defined (Martin & Ruble 2004). What messages are children learning about sex and gender from the physical environment of the preschool in which they spend many hours each day?

As yet, no studies have examined gender salience within the environment of LGBTQ certified preschools where gender issues, norm criticism and equality are explicitly said to be at the heart of the preschool’s ethos. Is there room in the LGBTQ preschool environment for exploration and acceptance beyond the stereotyped binary narrative of gender identity?

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how the environment of an LGBTQ (Sw. HBTQ) certified preschool has been designed to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality; to provide all children with opportunities that lie beyond limitations imposed by sex/gender categorisation. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How has the space and materiality of the environment been designed to decrease the salience of gender and gender norms in the preschool?
2. How do teachers use language to assist in the creation of a low gender salient environment? What language is used in reference to the physical world?
3. What do teachers regard as being important for decreasing the salience of gender and gender norms in the preschool setting?

1.2 Structure of Study

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, which provides a background and introduction to the field of study, the remaining six chapters are structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides a review of related literature and research studies. This literature spans a range of disciplines, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of social studies. Chapter 3 introduces the conceptual framework guiding the research. The focus is on post-structural feminist theory and queer theory, with particular emphasis on the works of Judith Butler. Chapter 4 outlines the study’s method and materials, including information on design, data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations involved in the research. Chapter 5 is divided into six main sections, presenting a thematic analysis of the results under the themes of colour, play materials, space, language, literature and visual text, and food. Chapter 6 comprises a discussion of the results and analysis. Practical implications are also discussed, as well as the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

1.3 A Note on Language

Although the terms gender and sex will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3, I feel it is important to briefly outline here how the terms will be used throughout this study. Sex (Sw. kön) is often defined as referring to biology, whereas gender is cultural and therefore socially constructed (Stanley 2002; Wharton 2012). The APA (American Psychological Association 2010) guidelines note that the word “sex” can be confused with “sexual behaviour” and therefore it is recommended to utilise the term “gender” in order to keep meaning unambiguous. Also, it is gender that is outwardly visible to others. Thus, the word “gender” will be predominantly used throughout the study, with the exception of when it is necessary to refer to biology. However, I will emphasise here that gender equality should be taken to mean the principle of equality with regards to both gender and sex.

With regards to the gendered pronouns “she” and “he”, they will be avoided as much as possible. Instead, the singular “they” will be used as a gender-neutral alternative (see Nicholson et al. 2016).
2. Background and Previous Research

The creation of identity is contextual and situational (Nordin-Hultman 2004), and one of the contexts in which the child develops their identity is within the context of the preschool. Professor of education Lars Løvlie (2007) emphasises that “All teaching requires a setting and all learning is bound to situations, the places where experiences come into being and leave their traces”. Traces of experience are left within both the mind and body of the child, allowing their identity to be influenced by experiences of place (Harju 2013).

In this chapter, I will discuss previous literature and research pertaining to the physical environment of the preschool in relation to gender. The focus is not so much on the architectural walls of the designed space, but rather on the materiality and organisation of the space; the aspects that teachers themselves can adapt and control in order to potentially reduce the salience of gender and gender norms in the preschool. As research on LGBTQ preschool environments is currently lacking, the studies presented here are from non-LGBTQ certified preschools, both in Sweden and internationally.

2.1 Children’s Places

Whereas space refers to physical configurations and elements of the environment, place is a part of space that holds specific meaning. Rasmussen (2004) describes the preschool as a “place for children”. It is an institutionalised setting that is designed by adults to be a place where children can experience and learn about the world. Adults’ ideas about children and their needs are reflected within the preschool setting through toys, literature, furnishings and other materials. The early education environment is a reflection of society’s views on children and childhood (Rasmussen 2004). Children’s identities are shaped by interactions with the environment as the language of space provides the children with messages about themselves and how they are viewed by others (Lawson 2001; Nicholson 2005).

According to Rasmussen (2004), it is only children themselves who can identity and talk about “children’s places”, places that they develop meaningful relationships to and connect with physically. Design researcher Marilyn Read (2007) emphasises that a sense of place can provide children with a feeling of stability and belonging and is thus fundamental to the development of identity. When a sense of place is lacking, it is possible for the inhabitant of
the space to feel “out-of-place” (Cresswell 1996, 2004). The expectations that the language of the space communicates do not match the individual’s practices, resulting in a place that excludes rather than includes. Feeling “out-of-place” can be related to, for example, a person’s gender, age, sexuality or disability (Cresswell 1996, 2004).

2.2 Normative Places

As previously mentioned, spaces provide information about how they are to be used and how the occupant of the space is expected to behave (Edwards 2005; Lawson 2001; Nicholson 2005). Places can be constructed as a container for society’s norms (Cresswell 2004; Grosz 2001; Urbach 2000). One such normative place, as mentioned by cultural geographer Cresswell (2004), is the idea of “home”. The home is a heteronormative concept, a place for the “traditional” family comprised of a mother, a father, and their children. Alternative family constellations or lifestyles can be seen as “out-of-place” in the home.

Feeling out-of-place can lead to the creation of new, separate places where there is acceptance for that which is not regarded as being the “norm” (Cresswell 2004). The Castro district, for example, in San Francisco has become a place for the gay community; a place where there is open expression, representation and acceptance of gay identities (Grosz 2001). The Castro challenges society’s heteronormativity (see Butler 2006). However, feeling out-of-place can also result in the creation of smaller, more concealed places, such as the metaphorical closet that philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2001) refers to as “the heterocentric containment of gayness”. A closet is placed within a room and therefore has a connection with the external space and its inhabitants. At the same time, what is hidden within that closet must remain disassociated with the places that lie beyond the threshold of the door. Anything that may sully the norms of social order are to be concealed, not displayed (Urbach 2000).

The preschool is also a normative environment where children learn what is expected of them, both within the preschool setting as well as within the wider world (Nicholson 2005; Nordin-Hultman 2004). The materiality of the preschool spaces, together with the teachers’ expectations as to how the materials and spaces are to be used, provide children with information regarding what is “normal” and what is “abnormal” (Hultman 2011; Nordin-Hultman 2004). Spaces are both discursive and material (Hudson 2005; Nordin-Hultman 2004). They contain the power to influence identity formation through the communication
of society’s expectations. Foucault (1980, p. 149) says, “A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers”.

2.3 Using Space and Materiality to Gender the Body

Lång (2010) says that gender structures are embedded in the physical environment. According to Grosz (2001), this is partially to do with the fact that architecture is a male dominated discipline (see Grosz 2001). Gender structures are also a result of how spaces within the architectural walls of the building are organised and used after their construction, as well as what materials are made available within those spaces (see Karsten 2003; Nordin-Hultman 2004). Space, and the materials within the space, are transmitters of culture, and culture is gendered (Bennett 2004; Griffin 2006).

Professor of education Mindy Blaise (2005) used the lens of feminist poststructuralism to examine how children in preschool construct themselves as gendered beings. One of the ways in which children were seen to construct femininity and masculinity was through the materiality of clothing. Clothes are gender-coded, enabling children to physically present themselves as the “right” gender (see Davies 2003). Violations of gender norms, especially boys wearing “girls’” clothing, are judged negatively (Blakemore 2003). Bodily adornment and clothing also have the ability to affect freedom of movement. Blaise (2005) comments on the restrictive nature of dresses, which limit girls’ physicality as climbing a tree or sitting with knees apart may result in underwear being revealed. However, physical restrictions are not only due to the dress itself, but also a result of the knowledge about how an individual is expected to behave whilst wearing a dress. There is a language associated with the material and form of the item of clothing, which dictates the behaviours that are acceptable whilst wearing it (Davis 1992; Lurie 1992). The boys’ clothing in Blaise’s study (2005) resulted in no restrictions as to how they could sit or which activities they could participate in.

Gender differences in bodily movement are reflected in children’s toys. Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen (2002) discuss the movement capabilities of Barbie in comparison with Action Man. Action dolls, designed and advertised for boys3, have a number of moveable joints, allowing for much bodily freedom, whereas dolls designed and advertised for girls

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3For more information on differences in how toys are designed for and marketed to girls and boys, see Feminist Frequency (2010).
are restricted in their movement due to a limited number of joints. There is also a difference with regards to the ability to stand unassisted; Barbie is incapable of standing without support. Philosopher Iris Marion Young (2005) describes women as moving in a constricted space in comparison to men who are much freer with their bodies. Men’s domination of space is reflected in language, with the word “manspreading” being added to the online Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. Manspreading (2015) is defined as “The practice whereby a man, especially one travelling on public transport, adopts a sitting position with his legs wide apart, in such a way as to encroach on an adjacent seat or seats”. It seems to be expected that different genders should occupy different amounts of space and this may be influenced by the materiality and spatial organisation of the environments people inhabit.

Nordin-Hultman (2004) used photography, video, sketches and notes to document the materials and spaces in the early years environments of a number of Swedish and English preschools. A substantial difference in size was found between the doll corner and the space given to building and construction in Swedish preschools. The doll corner occupied the smallest amount of space, whereas the room containing building materials such as Lego, Duplo and Brio blocks, which are traditionally coded as masculine, was considerably larger (see Bodén 2011; Trawick-Smith et al. 2015; Walter 2010). Even Nordin-Hultman’s (2004, p. 69) language in her description of the doll corner reflects its size, as she comments on the “little window” and “little door” that may lead into the designated space. Once again the message may be communicated that boys are expected to be freer in their movements and occupy more space with their bodies, whilst girls are expected to occupy less space. The doll corner, an area traditionally associated with girls and femininity, is just that, a corner.

Allocating smaller spaces to traditionally “feminine” coded materials, such as the dollhouse, may also convey the message that these artefacts have less value than those which are traditionally coded as masculine, such as building blocks; that activities which are traditionally associated with boys have greater worth (see Fagrell 2000; Månsson 2000; Wahlström 2003; Wedin 2014). This serves in maintaining society’s gender order (Hirdman 2001), which places women and femininity below men and masculinity. The gender order is also visible in Blaise’s (2005) aforementioned study of how children “do” gender in preschool. Through observations and video data, Blaise (2005) discovered that there were few girls in the preschool who chose to play with Lego. One of the girls who was particularly interested in playing with Lego wondered why there was a lack of female Lego characters
in the classroom. The teachers decided to purchase more female Lego characters, but soon discovered that each Lego set only contains one female. The child had noticed that her gender was not represented amongst the Lego available and thus called into question the male norm (see Hirdman 2001). The male norm and gender order will be discussed further in chapter 3.

2.4 The Colour of Gendered Objects

In the previous section, I made reference to toys, such as dollhouses, dolls and building blocks, that are regarded as being gender-coded (Bodén 2011; Walter 2010). In preschool, toys that are coded as “feminine” and those that are coded “masculine” have been shown to be placed in separate rooms (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2006:75). Both teachers and children claim that it is not possible to play with toys that have been coded as belonging to the other gender (MacNaughton 2006; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2006:75). Inanimate objects are gender-coded in a number of ways. They are gendered through the user that they are traditionally or stereotypically associated with - dolls are regarded as being feminine and cars as masculine - and they are gendered through their colour, texture and form (Kirkham & Attfield 1996). With regards to colour, British feminist writer and activist Natasha Walter (2010) says that the pink girls’ world and blue boys’ world is becoming even more exaggerated, with pink taking over every aspect of girls’ lives. However, unlike blue, pink is not just viewed as a colour associated with a particular gender. The colour pink awakens a host of reactions and other associations.

Social anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson (2011) wrote an entire book on the topic of pink, the “dangerous” colour. From a gender perspective, this colour is loaded with meaning (Ambjörnsson 2011; Walter 2010). Until around 1920, pink was predominantly a colour for boys. As Koller (2008) describes, pink was a lighter version of the “masculine” colour of blood and war; red. Blue, on the other hand, was the most appropriate colour for girls as it was the colour of the Virgin Mary. That this colour coding has now been reversed reveals the arbitrariness of gendering colour. Pink and blue are used to maintain gender binarism without any apparent biological basis. That being said, recent studies by neuroscientists have claimed to show that there is a biological base for colour preference (see Hurlbert & Ling 2007). However, as Walter (2010) points out, it is not possible to confirm a correlation between biology and colour preference. Colour preferences may be a result of encouragement from cultural influences.
Regardless of the reasons why pink is regarded as a colour for girls, it is hard to deny that it is culturally associated with exaggerated femininity (Walter 2010). It is a colour that girls are expected to love, and boys are expected to hate and avoid. Being associated with the colour pink can have dire consequences for boys (Ambjörnsson 2011). In 2011, Svenska Dagbladet (Chaaban 2011) reported that a six-year-old boy had been stabbed in the neck in a preschool in Jönköping. One of the reported reasons for the stabbing was that the boy liked the colour pink. In Switzerland, it was suggested that parking places reserved for women drivers should be painted pink in an attempt to deter men from using them (“Will pink parking deter men?” 2007). It was hoped that men would be too “embarrassed” to use pink parking spaces. Pink is associated with masculine gayness and is therefore a risky colour for men (Koller 2008). Gay male prisoners of Nazi concentration camps were forced to wear pink triangles as they were assumed to be feminine; they were not “real” men (Koller 2008).

As a result of its connection with exaggerated femininity, many gender aware parents choose to avoid buying pink clothing or toys for their children (Ambjörnsson 2011; Ohrlander 2011). Koller’s (2008) studies on attitudes towards pink reveal that the colour is often associated with vulgarity, naivety, cheapness, stupidity and the lower class. Pink, with its associations with femininity, is devalued, unlike blue.

2.5 The Influence of Gender-specific Language

Objects are not only gendered through their colour, form and user, but also through the language with which they are associated. Swedish, like English, is a “natural gender language”, unlike languages such as French and German that have a grammatical gender system whereby all nouns are either feminine or masculine, or even neuter (Sczesny et al. 2016). Boroditsky et al. (2003) question if grammatical gender is meaningful and can affect how people think. Boroditsky et al. (2003) suggest that since many grammatical distinctions reflect visible differences in the world, children who are learning a language may hypothesise that grammatical gender distinctions are also representative of essential differences between objects. The results from a series of studies conducted by Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) to investigate a link between grammatical gender and how objects are perceived suggest that the grammatical gender assigned to an object can influence people’s perceptions of similarities between objects and people. How an individual thinks about an object is affected by the pronoun with which it is associated.
In the 1960s, linguist Rolf Dunås sought to find an alternative to the generic Swedish pronoun, “han” (Eng. he), with its strong associations to the gender order (Hirdman 2001) where man is seen as humanity’s norm (Ledin & Lyngfelt 2013; Milles 2013). At the start of the twentieth century, the Swedish word “hen” (Eng. ze⁴) started to gain popularity within the LGBTQ communities as a means of referring to individuals who didn’t wish to define themselves within binary gender categories (Milles 2013). In 2015 the word was added to The Swedish Academy Dictionary (Svenska akademien 2015). The Swedish pronoun “hen” became a word that challenged categorisation and the dichotomy and hierarchy of the gender system (Hirdman 2001). According to Milles (2013), the use of the pronoun “hen” is regarded as “feminist language planning”, a conscious decision to change language and draw attention to how language structures are connected with the gender hierarchy (see also Ledin & Lyngfelt 2013). UNESCO’s (2011, p. 4) guidelines for gender-fair language emphasise:

Language does not merely reflect the way we think: it also shapes our thinking. If words and expressions that imply that women are inferior to men are constantly used, that assumption of inferiority tends to become part of our mindset; hence the need to adjust our language when our ideas evolve.

Barad (2003) argues that language has been given too much power in discussions concerning cultural representation. It has been suggested that the power and influence of materiality has been overlooked in attempts to understand identity formation and the creation of the subject (Hultman 2011; Sicart 2014). As previously indicated, the material, physical world has a language that speaks to people, providing information about society’s expectations with regards to, for example, gender. However, people in turn have a language that they use in reference to the physical world, gendering the material world, whether it be through the use of pronouns or in referring to objects as, for example a “girl’s toy” or a “boy’s toy”. Therefore, it is impossible to separate language from the physical world, hence the fact that this present study does not focus on space and materiality alone.

Hilliard and Liben (2010) investigated the effects of high gender salient and low gender salient preschool classrooms on children’s gender attitudes and intergroup bias. Gender salience can be increased or decreased through language, material artefacts and the organisation of space and time (see Nordin-Hultman 2004). When gender classifications are

⁴ Nicholson et al. (2016) refer to “ze/zir” as an alternative to the binary “she/her” and “he/him”. “Ze”, like the Swedish pronoun “hen”, is a gender-neutral pronoun that allows the individual in question to be freed from positioning themselves in the traditional binary gender system.
used to organise the preschool setting, emphasise gender differences, or mark which category a child belongs to, for example by saying “Good girl”, gender salience is said to be high. Low gender salience exists when gendered language and organisation is avoided. The results from Hilliard and Liben’s (2010) study showed that high gender salient classrooms increase gender stereotypes and decrease play with other-sex peers. The results also showed that children in the high gender salient classrooms rated their other-sex peers less positively at posttest than they had at pretest. Hilliard and Liben (2010) say:

A clear implication of the findings already in hand is that schools should make it as unacceptable to use gender-specific language and divisions (e.g., “Good morning boys and girls”) as it is to use race-specific language and divisions (e.g., “Good morning Black children and White children”).

2.6 The Language of Visual and Cultural Artefacts

Books are visual and cultural artefacts that serve an important function in early years education (see Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005a, 2005b). Literature is a material part of society’s cultural environment and is of assistance in helping children orient themselves in the gendered social world (Dominković et al. 2006; Sørensen 2001). hooks (2000, p. 23) describes children’s literature as “one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness”. Literature can help children orient themselves in the world as it provides information on the attitudes, behaviours and values of the society in which the child is being raised (Davies 2003; Fox 1993; Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005c; Lynch 2016; Uttley & Roberts 2011; Wedin 2014). Poet Jericho Brown (2012) says, “Literature is a compass that points to humankind’s true north”. Literature shows children possibilities, revealing who and how the child is expected to be in the present, and who and how they are expected to be in the future (see Dyson 1997; Fox 1993; Lynch 2016). Hamilton et al. (2006), for example, suggest that occupational stereotyping in literature may limit children’s career aspirations. In Hamilton et al.’s study of award-winning children’s literature, women were most often shown occupying nurturing roles, such as being teachers, maids, nannies and nurses. Women were also portrayed in a narrower range of occupations than were men; a 2.7:1 ratio.

Professor Hilary Janks (2010) emphasises that visuals are as important as words in the construction of reality. Children are constantly surrounded by images, for example, in books, on the preschool walls, and on the television. Engaging with visual imagery can be viewed
as meeting a continuous stream of advertisements that tell the individual how they should be, what they should like, and what they should do (Janks 2010). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2013) emphasises that images produce knowledge about the world, and the “truths” that are seen to be represented by these images have real effects on the real world. The process through which the image came to be is hidden and thus images seem to be representative of an indisputable reality. Cultural stereotypes may be learned through the messages conveyed through the language of visual artefacts and so they are an important and influential element of the physical environment surrounding the child (Hall 2013).

2.7 Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to shed some light on previous research and literature regarding gender and the language of space and material artefacts (for example, clothing, personal adornments, toys, and architecture). There is a relationship between gender and the material world, as mediated through the physical environment. Gender norms, stereotypes and expectations are embedded in the design and organisation of spaces, as well as in the artefacts found within those spaces. The language used to speak about the physical world may also have an effect on how the occupant or inhabitant of a particular setting views the environment and feels whilst present in the space; a sense of belonging or feeling out-of-place. This language, as well as the language communicated by the space itself, has the ability to emphasise or neutralise a gender divide and hierarchy.

The research presented in this chapter is by no means exhaustive, but provides an introduction to, and overview of, the communicative power of space and language. With my own study, I wish to add to the current literature on the preschool environment and gender, focusing on the LGBTQ preschool setting that has yet to find a place within existing research studies. Much of the discussed literature focuses on one or two particular aspects of the environment in relation to gender, but this present study seeks to provide a broader picture and understanding of how the various elements of the preschool environment can work together to decrease the salience of gender and gender norms in the setting. The preschool is therefore seen in its entirety rather than employing a narrower focus that directs attention to one or two elements at a time. Whilst this may result in limitations with regards to providing a deeper analysis of every individual aspect of the environment, this approach allows for gender to be seen and discussed in a wider context within the preschool setting.
3. Theoretical Framework and Definitions

In this chapter the theoretical framework of the study and definition of terms are described. This framework draws on concepts from post-structural feminist theory and queer theory. Underpinning the choice of theoretical lens through which to analyse the empirical data is the belief that girls and boys are not essentially different, but rather become different through interactions with their surrounding environment, be it animate or inanimate. To quote de Beauvoir (2011, p. 283), “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”.

Davies (2003 p. xiii) describes poststructuralist theory as “a radical discourse because it allows us to think beyond the male-female dualism as inevitable”. The social world is viewed as having a material force that assists in the shaping of the individual and their identity. There is, however, no final product or goal. A person’s identity is constantly changing and developing as they learn the discursive practices of their society and how to position themselves within those practices. Individual identities are thus viewed as being plural and fluid, with greater complexity than language allows (Butler 2006; Davies 2003).

3.1 Sex and gender

Gender is a central term in this thesis. It is therefore deemed important to provide a more in-depth explanation of this concept before proceeding to discuss the remaining terms and theoretical concepts upon which the research is based. As mentioned in the introduction, sex may be defined as referring to an individual’s physical/biological attributes, whereas gender may be defined as the socially constructed sex (Stanley 2002; Wharton 2012). Based upon the genitalia a child is born with, the individual is declared to be female or male and is expected to develop and express themselves in accordance with the societal norms based upon the assigned sex (Connell 2005; Connell & Pearse 2015; Davies 2003). The child is therefore not only born with sex, but also gender; bodies and social, cultural practices are interconnected (see Butler 2004, 2006; Salih 2002).

Society views sex as dichotomous. The individual belongs to only one of two categories – female or male (Butler 2004, 2006; Connell 2005; Connell & Pearson 2015; Davies 2003). If a child is born with ambiguous genitalia or intersex conditions, attempts are most often made to assign the individual to a sex category and construct genitalia that are compatible
with that category (Butler 2004, 2006; Connell 2005). Gender is also viewed as a binary concept, a concept that is challenged by queer theorists (see Butler 2006; Martin 1994). Gender theorist Judith Butler (2004, p. 31) says that when questioning the gender binary, she is not wanting to produce a future filled with genders that do not as yet exist, but rather acknowledge that a multitude of genders exists in the present, genders that “have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality”. The dichotomous nature of gender doesn’t leave room for the complexity of human identities and experiences (Davies 2003).

Whereas biological essentialists believe that both bodily differences and perceived social differences between the sexes have their root in biology (see Baron-Cohen 2004), Butler (1993, 2004, 2006) theorises that both sex and gender are social constructions. In questioning where the biological boundary lies between the female and male body, Butler (1993, p. 1) questions if sex is merely a construct of scientific discourse, “an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time”. As a result, the definition of sex as biological and gender as socially and culturally constructed becomes obsolete.

As previously indicated, in order to distinguish between the biological body, which is mostly hidden beneath clothing, and the body that is presented to the world, this study shall use the term sex when it is necessary to refer to genitalia. The term gender will be used in all other cases and should be understood, following Butler, as a set of repeated, normative behaviours.

3.1.1 Gender performativity

Butler (1988, 2006) views gender as performative. The individual becomes female or male through the acts, gestures and desires that are articulated through the body. It is through the repetition of these articulations and acts that gender is materialised; there is no pre-existing reality. The repetitive performances simply give the illusion of an unrevisable, “natural” gender (Alsop et al. 2002; Butler 1988, 2006; Davies 1997, 2003).

Butler (2006) emphasises that there is a difference between “performance” and “performativity”. Performance assumes the presence of a subject, whereas performativity makes no assumption of a fixed agent or subject preceding the performance. The subject is formed through the performance; a performance that can change over time (Alsop et al. 2002). When gender is performed incorrectly there are consequences for the performer (Davies 2003; Thorne 1993). Individuals are constrained to perform gender in accordance
with society’s expectations. There are discursive scripts that must be followed and failing to do so can result in category-maintenance-work (Davies 2003). Gender performances are tied to power (Butler 2006). They are dictated by the dominant culture and policed by society. Deviants are forced to conform to social norms through, for example, the use of threat, bullying, exclusion, or even surgical correction (Butler 2004; Davis 2003). Category-maintenance-work is performed both by children and adults as a means of ensuring that individuals do gender correctly, thus maintaining social order (Connell 2005; Davies 2003; Thorne 1993). Gender becomes an “accomplishment” (West & Zimmerman 2002).

Geographers have drawn on Butler’s language of performativity to understand the situatedness of the subject (see Aitken 2009). At the same time as children are “doing” gender, they are also “doing space”, transforming space through their activity (Nordtømme 2012). Thus, Butler’s theory of performativity may also relate to space, opening for the possibility of speaking of the performativity of space (see Aitken 2009). Lucas and Wright (2013) describe space as performative when “it appears as an active actor in the construct of meaning”. In this study I argue that space is performative in the construct of gender as space influences how children “do” gender.

If gender was not perceived as being performative, but rather bound in biology, there would be no reason to attempt to adapt the environment so as to free the individual from the normative gender binary; that would be fighting against “nature”. Butler's concept of performativity is crucial for understanding how discourses of gender are rendered “real” through persistent repetition. In this study, the theory of gender performativity will be used to assist in understanding how the environment can be used to contest normative gender narratives, rather than confirming them through repetition.

3.1.2 Interpellation

One of the questions guiding this research concerns the use of language in creating a low gender salient preschool environment. The concept of interpellation can assist in answering this question, explaining how the gendered subject is formed through language.

According to Davies (1997), the post-structural subject only exists as a process that is constantly being revised and (re)presented through various features of language. The philosopher Louis Althusser used the term interpellation to explain how the subject is
constructed through ideologies that are communicated through societal structures and cultural ideas (Salih 2002). As soon as the sex of the unborn or newborn child is known, the process of “girling” or “boying” begins. Based on the child’s physical/biological appearance, the individual is placed in a metaphorical, categorical box filled with norms. “It’s a girl” may appear to be a neutral statement providing descriptive information about the body, but Butler (1993, p. 68) argues that the statement is performative as the body is constituted by language: “Language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified”. People create language, but through interpellation, language creates the individual/subject.

Language serves to reconstitute the female/male binary. Despite the plurality of ways of being, language is restricted to bipolar words: she/he, female/male, girl/boy. As Davies (2003, p. 9) comments, “The words are bipolar, the people are not”. These bipolar words may restrict the ability to think about concepts that lie outside the dichotomies of both gender and sex (Phillips and Boroditsky 2003).

### 3.2 Hirdman’s gender system

In 1988, historian Yvonne Hirdman introduced the concept “genus” (Eng. gender) in Sweden. In her work, Hirdman highlights not only the gender dichotomy, but also the hierarchical nature of gender. According to Hirdman (2001), the woman is always viewed in relation to the dominant man, resulting in a gender system that allocates different roles and positions to women and men. There are two laws to the gender system, one being segregation and the other the principle of man as norm. As a result of this gender system, women and femininity are devalued by society. This issue has recently awakened much discussion in the media due to an advertisement from *Always* entitled “Like a Girl” (Always 2014). To say that someone, for example, throws “like a girl” is an insult, implying that the action was performed poorly (see also Connell 2005; Young 2005). The gender hierarchy is embedded in language. The phrase “Throw like a girl” only has negative connotations due to “girl” meaning lower status in accordance with the gender system (Hirdman 2001). On occasion, throughout this chapter, reference will be made to research studies, as well as the media, in order to illustrate that social theory and social reality are “causally interdependent” (Bhaskar 2011, p 4). Theories are not developed in a vacuum, but are influenced by the nature of society. Society, in turn, is then influenced by theory (Bhaskar 2011). I therefore feel that it is important to illustrate that theories are not confined within the walls of academia, but rather are representative and reflective of reality as experienced outside scholarly institutions.
the other hand, the use of the generic *he*, which is often used in speech and writing when gender is irrelevant, reveals the higher status of the male subject in the gender hierarchy, as well as the assumption of the male norm (Sczesny et al. 2016).

Hirdman proposes three formulae for understanding the relational nature of gender. The basic formula is A – non A. The woman is a “non-man”, a person without form who doesn’t exist. The second formula, A – a, describes woman as a lesser variant of man; she is incomplete as something is missing. The third and final formula proposed by Hirdman (2001) is the “normative” formula, A – B, which is built on a dichotomy. Women and men are viewed as opposites; to be a man is to *not* be a woman (Hirdman 2001). Hirdman describes the A (man) in the final formula as a “nervous” category. The formula clearly divides women from men, a divide that must not be crossed. The fragility of gender is exposed and therefore efforts must be made to ensure that the individual’s category affiliation is not called into question.

Knowledge of the gender system is essential when examining preschool environments from the perspective of gender equality and norm-criticism. It is not just the dichotomy of gender that is problematic from the view of equality, but also its hierarchical nature.

### 3.3 The hegemonic heterosexual matrix

Sociologist Raewyn Connell’s concepts of “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasised femininity” are viewed as “blueprints” for the “ideal woman and man” (see Connell 1987, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity enforces compulsory heterosexuality (Connell 2005); the “proper” woman and the “proper” man are heterosexual (Alsop et al. 2002). Butler (2006) claims that the policing of gender can be used for securing normative heterosexuality. “Intelligible” genders rely on continuity with regards to sexual practice and therefore certain identities, such as gay and lesbian, cannot be seen to exist. Here, it is possible to return to the metaphor of the closet (Grosz 2001, Urbach 2000). That which challenges social order and categorisation must be concealed behind closed doors.

According to Butler (2006), gender is constructed discursively within a heterosexual matrix of power. Constructing normative sexualities essentialises sex and gender difference, allowing sexual inequalities to be sustained (Butler 2006; Renold 2006). Heterosexuality is “naturalised” in the dominant forms of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity,
which seek to regulate sexual practices (Connell 2005). Gay masculinities are, according to Connell (2005), at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men.

Renold (2006) speaks of the visibility of “(hetero)familial” discourses such as marriage and babies within early years education, whilst other (non-hetero) sexualities remain undiscussed and undisclosed (see also Robinson 2005). Heterosexuality is taken as the norm, and thus girls and boys are expected to grow up to desire the other sex (Renold 2006). Maintenance work goes into ensuring compliance with hegemonic heterosexual performances; straying from the norm has negative consequences (Blaise 2005; Renold 2006). Rather than providing an opportunity to question, challenge and expose the fragility and instability of the heterosexual matrix, transgressors are made to fall back in line (Boldt 1996).

In this study, the concept of the hegemonic heterosexual matrix is used to assist in examining how femininity and masculinity are portrayed in the physical environment of the preschool. Does the preschool make room for diverse representations of gender and sexuality?

### 3.4 Intersectionality

Butler (2006) argues that the categories “woman” and “man” are “normative” and “exclusionary”, concealing the multiple dimensions of diversity; women and men are not two homogenous groups (Crenshaw 1991). Without a perspective that takes into consideration other categories of difference, besides gender, the risk is that “woman” and “man” become normative categories for the White, middle class, able-bodied woman, and the White, middle class, able-bodied man (Hedlin 2010). The norm of the White female and White male is a norm that affects the everyday life of many people yet often goes unseen and unquestioned by those who belong to the category of privilege. Bandages, for example, have typically been designed to match the skin tone of White people (see Leonardo 2004), and a Facebook group, Black Vogue, has been created to discuss make-up options for Black women who are often overlooked by the cosmetics industry (Black Vogue n.d.). Being White comes with the privilege of knowing that one’s skin colour is represented in society (Leonardo 2004). The application of an intersectional perspective assists in dissolving the dominant issues associated with normative whiteness in order to see beyond this norm and thus draw attention to the experiences of those who do not fit this category (Choo & Ferree 2010; Crenshaw 1991; Jackson & Scott 2002).
The term “intersectionality” was coined by American lawyer and professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw criticised the ways in which the law responded to and dealt with issues where both gender and race discrimination were involved (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Criticism was also directed towards the mainstream feminist movement, which Crenshaw claimed overlooked the role of race and experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argued that there is continual interplay between identities so that gender is always interrelated with other forms of oppression. As a result, it is possible to be “multiply-marginalized” (Choo & Ferree 2010; Connell & Pearse 2015; Taefi 2009).

The application of an intersectional perspective is of particular importance in this current study that examines how the preschool setting can be designed to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality. Although the focus of the study is on gender equality, without an intersectional perspective it is possible to fall into the trap of viewing women and men as two homogenous groups, thus overlooking the needs of, for example the Black girl or the boy who has two mummies. Is the preschool promoting equality for all individuals?

3.5 Beyond the binary

Binary categorisations contradict the plurality of identities and experiences found in reality as the individual is constrained to the boxes of either/or. Transgressions of gender expose the vulnerability of the duality of stereotypes and norms, giving rise to a need to reframe societal constructions (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Queer theory exposes the instability and fragility of sexed and gendered identities (Butler 1993). Transgressions from the norm are celebrated rather than sanctioned as the transgression assists in destabilising dominant discourses of sex and gender (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon 2002). As Butler (2004, p. 217) emphasises, “The body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose the realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation”. Transgressions reveal possibilities.

The word “queer” has for many years been used as an abusive term, but has been reclaimed both by activists and academics in order to challenge the notion of binary gender identities, allowing for the idea of identity as potentially fluid (Butler 1993). RFSL includes “queer” in the acronym LGBTQ (Sw. HBTQ), an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people. “L”, “G” and “B” refer specifically to sexual orientation, whereas the “T”
concerns gender identity and expression. “Q”, queer, refers to the challenging of existing norms and discourses and thus relates to a variety of practices and identities, including, but not limited to, sexual orientation, gender identity and relationships (RFSL 2004).

Surtees and Gunn (2010) speak of early years education’s investment in silence in order to “protect” children from sexualities that are perceived as being “dangerous” and “risky”. As a result, Janmohamed (2010) calls for a “queering” of early childhood studies so as to include and acknowledge the existence of queer families in preschool settings. Janmohamed (2010) says that it is time to move queer from its current position of “other” to one that is more apparent. A queer pedagogy would, according to Robinson (2005), enable educators to critically examine that which is often perceived as natural and thus taken for granted. Atkinson (2002) states that allowing dominant heterosexual discourses to manifest without challenge “masks the possibility of anything else”.

Gender relies on a rigid, normative binary, and thus the salience of gender may be decreased by challenging and moving beyond this binarism. Therefore, it is necessary to apply a queer perspective when examining the preschool environment in order to see what possibilities and positionings are presented, as well as any that may be hidden from view.

3.6 Summary

The theories presented in this chapter are the conceptual tools that have guided the research in this current study and that will be used to analyse the empirical data. Perhaps that which is most apparent in the discussed theories is the restrictive nature of bipolar language and the enforcement of binary identity categories. Individuals are constrained to one of two “gender boxes” and those who fall in the spaces in between risk being forced to enter the box that is deemed to be “appropriate”, or risk exclusion. There is a gender hierarchy with man being the dominant norm, but there are also hierarchies found within hierarchies so that not all women and not all men are viewed as being equal. Hence the need for an intersectional perspective in research pertaining to gender.

In focusing on the space and materiality of the preschool environment I hope to find possibilities for movement beyond dichotomies and hierarchies so that no individual is made to feel out-of-place or with limited opportunities to explore the spaces beyond categorical boxes.
4. Method and Materials

The research uses a multiple methods approach, drawing on photography, semi-structured interviews, field-notes, observations, documents and literature to gain an insight into how the space and materials within the preschool may be designed and organised so as to decrease the salience of gender and gender norms within the setting. Despite the importance placed today on research that focuses on the agency of the child in the construction of their identity (Corsaro 2005; Dolk 2013; James 2007; James et al. 1998; O’Kane 2008), as previously mentioned, it is predominantly adults who are responsible for the organisation and design of the preschool (Koralek & Mitchell 2005). If the language of space can, as previous research suggests, influence the construction of gender then it is worth turning attention to the material world in order to bring awareness to the norms that may be embedded in the physical preschool environment, as well as in language.

4.1 The HBTQ Preschool

In order to approach an understanding of how the preschool environment can be designed to decrease gender salience, the research has been conducted at an LGBTQ (Sw. HBTQ) certified preschool where gender issues, norm criticism and equality lie at the heart of the preschool’s work. Preschools can receive LGBTQ certification through the aforementioned organisation, RFSL. In order for a preschool to receive LGBTQ certification, teachers must participate in a number of sessions where they learn about gender issues and gain the tools necessary for the creation of a more inclusive preschool organisation and environment. It takes approximately six to eight months to complete the certification process whereby the preschool is allocated LGBTQ certification for two years. After this time, the certification must be renewed.

The preschool that participated in the present study specialises in gender equal pedagogy. The goal is to provide every child with opportunities within the whole life spectrum rather than being limited due to categorisation. Therefore, despite the preschool’s work being based on gender equality, the vision is that all norms will be examined and questioned. On approximately three occasions during each term, a representative from the regional anti-discrimination agency visits the preschool to engage the teachers in discussions about
discrimination and other behaviours designed to cause offense. Every employee is also informed, both orally and in writing, of the preschool’s gender policy, and there is a gender crib sheet that can be used for quick reference to the school’s policies.

The preschool is situated in a large city in central Sweden and occupies two floors of an apartment block (both floors can be accessed from ground level). The lower floor houses the department for the youngest children who are between the ages of one and three. Twenty children currently occupy this space, which is comprised of five separate rooms. The upper floor houses the department for the older children who are between the ages of three and six. Thirty-five children occupy the upper floor comprised of nine different rooms.

### 4.2 Data Collection Procedures

As previously mentioned, the study adopts a multiple methods approach, which enabled me to view the research from a variety of different perspectives. McKendrick (1996, p. 5) states that “Greater confidence is instilled in the research findings where confirmatory support is provided independently from different sources”. Using different sources of data collection may enhance the validity of the research, allowing the development of converging lines of enquiry (Yin et al. 1985).

Data collection began in September 2015 during a pilot test of the methodology. The preschool had recently relocated to a new building and there were many new employees, thus the environment was still in the process of being organised when I arrived. I spent a full day at the preschool (9 a.m. – 5 p.m.) taking photographs and field notes, interviewing and talking with staff members, as well as listening to the language used by the teachers. Upon analysis of the data collected, the methods were reviewed and adapted in accordance with any issues that arose. This will be discussed further when describing the individual methods.

The second stage of data collection took place in January 2016. Two full days were spent at the preschool (9 a.m. – 4 p.m.) collecting data. The new teachers had now completed their orientation, involving learning about LGBTQ issues and gender equality, and the preschool environment had been reorganised and room layouts altered. Below is an in-depth description of the various methods involved in the data collection.
4.2.1 Photography

With regards to the visual material, photography, inspiration was drawn from Pink’s (2013) writings on visual ethnography. One of the many advantages of photography from a research point of view is that, with restricted access to the preschool, it is possible to return to the setting through the images that have been produced (Pink 2013; Tinkler 2013). New insights may even be gained upon closer investigation of the images.

Pink (2013, p. 81) says that it is possible to understand photography as a “mobile ethnographic method, a process of making images as we go through the world”. Indeed, the initial collection of photographic material combined walking and photographing; meandering through the preschool and taking photographs as I walked in order to document what I saw as I moved throughout the space. A second and third “walk-through” were performed during the visits to the preschool in January. These walk-throughs were carried out from two different perspectives; one from the height of an adult, and one from the height of the child. After analysing the photographs from the first visit I noticed that the majority of photos had been taken from my own height, when what is of prime importance in the research is the child’s line of sight. Many researchers involve the research participants in the production of photographs (see Millar 2006; Pink 2013; Tinkler 2013), for example, the children themselves take photographs of their environment. However, as this study isn’t addressing the child’s perception of the preschool, this approach was not considered to be relevant. Therefore, all photographs were taken by myself.

In order to avoid being influenced by preconceived ideas of how a gender-neutral preschool setting “should” look, I avoided doing much preparation before the initial visit in September. This follows Eriksson’s (2004) thoughts on being present in the moment rather than risking being directed and potentially disrupted by earlier thought and analysis. I knew little about the preschool beyond that it was an LGBTQ certified preschool with gender equal pedagogy at its heart. I myself recognised a clear difference between the first and second visit to the preschool. Having gathered a significant amount of information about the preschool and its environment after completing the first visit, the production of photographs during the second visit was more directed. Ideas regarding the themes that would form the analysis were already in mind, even if I tried to limit their influence on where the camera lens was directed.
Having performed the various walk-throughs, focus was then directed towards each individual space within the setting. Arriving early and staying for an extended amount of time allowed me the opportunity to spend time alone within each space and therefore photograph freely. During this time, I photographed the toys, learning materials, furniture, pictures on the walls and the general spaces that contained the material artefacts. Photographs were also taken whilst the children were present in the room, revealing the flow of the materials throughout and within the preschool spaces.

A total of 539 images were taken for analysis. The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) QDA Miner Lite was used in the initial analysis of the photographic material, but soon proved to be a little cumbersome. I therefore decided to organise the photos manually, arranging the material into themes. These themes were not predetermined, but rather arose during the analysis process. A number of photos contained information that was relevant to more than one theme and were therefore included in the analysis of several categories.

It should be noted that a photograph does not represent an objective reality (Pink 2013). There is an intention behind every photograph taken and it is the person behind the camera who chooses the image that will be captured through the lens (MacDougall 2006). The resulting image is open to interpretation. As Pink (2013, p. 75) emphasises, photographs are “contingent” and “subjective”. The meaning of a photograph is dependent on who is looking at it, when they are looking at it, and the context within which the photograph is being viewed (Tinkler 2013). The meaning of photographs also changes throughout the research process as new thoughts and questions arise; there is no “single meaning” that can be attributed to an image (Pink 2013). Despite, however, the inability of photographs to present an objective reality, they do serve the purpose of providing a “perspective” on a specific place at a specific time. A reflexive approach acknowledges the relationship between the researcher and the photographic process and analysis, whilst still allowing for claims to be made that the visual imagery represents and documents a moment that has occurred (Pink 2013).

It should be noted that no furniture or materials were moved by myself during the photographic process. No photographs were staged, but rather spaces and materials were photographed in the position and condition in which they were found.
4.2.2 Field notes

One problem that arose when photographing the environment was how to achieve as accurate a representation as possible. Therefore, in addition to photography, field notes were also employed to support the photographic material. Tinkler (2013) emphasises that visual accounts are always partial and therefore it is important to supplement the visual material with verbal or written records of the research. Also, unless the researcher is a skilled photographer, it may be difficult to capture the essence of a place through photography alone. Words can perhaps convey more effectively the feel and texture of the observed environment, and it is words that are ultimately used at the end of the research process when photographic meaning is analysed through text (see Bryman 2016; Pink 2013; Tinkler 2013).

The first step in creating a written account of the preschool environment was to sketch a plan of the setting, identifying where the various rooms were located, as well as their approximate size. I then went from room to room making notes about the layout of each space and the materials that were accessible to the children within them. Materials that were out of reach or out of sight of the children were not documented. Notes were also made about the pictures and visual information displayed on the walls, as well as the furnishings in each room.

4.2.3 Literature

Whilst documenting the materials in each room, a note was also made of the literature accessible to the children. The titles of the various books were recorded either visually, using photography, or in writing, whereby the title and author of the book was noted. Tsao (2008) describes literature as one of the “homes” of gender stereotypes and therefore the examination of children's literature is important when working towards gender equality and challenging normative gender constructs.

A total of 109 books were recorded. On returning from the fieldwork, I borrowed these books from the library and made notes about the themes that were taken up in each book, for example feelings, friendship and exclusion, as well as notes about how different genders were portrayed in the illustrations. An intersectional perspective was also applied to this analysis. Are women and men portrayed as two homogenous groups or are there a variety of, for example, ethnicities and/or family constellations? Since the preschool actively works towards gender equality and neutralising categorical language, it is not certain that the
children themselves label the characters within the books as female and male. However, analysing the literature can provide an insight into the books that the teachers regard as being important to include for assisting in decreasing the salience of gender in the preschool.

4.2.4 Observation

I have previously referred to the importance placed on language in post-structural feminist theory. The question can be asked, “Is it possible to create a gender-neutral environment when the language that is used remains bipolar?” Language and the material word are viewed as being intertwined and impossible to separate from one another. Therefore, I regarded it as being an important part of the research to observe, or listen to, the language that the teachers use in reference to the physical world.

The observations that were carried out were not structured in any form, but rather occurred as I moved throughout the different rooms. Whilst making notes about the materials in the various spaces, I also made notes about what was heard in the rooms; the pronouns and nouns that the teachers were using. I also observed two circle times that included the singing of songs, as well as discussions about the day’s activities. I did not participate in these circle times, but rather sat in the background taking notes. The children were aware that I was there to observe their preschool and the work of the teachers so my presence did not seem to disrupt their activity. I was, for the most part, a passive observer unless a child asked for my participation in an activity. All observations regarding the language used by the teachers were noted in writing, focusing predominantly, as previously mentioned, on the use of pronouns and nouns. These observations were then compared with the information provided in the preschool’s documents outlining the guidelines for the teachers’ work.

4.2.5 Documents

Three documents that are central to the work of the preschool were analysed, focusing on information pertaining to how the preschool environment should be organised and prepared in working towards gender equality. These particular documents were selected in consultation with the preschool teachers. The teachers emphasised that alongside the Swedish preschool curriculum, these documents were most essential to their work, showing the guidelines for the operation of the preschool as well as the values that pervade the work of the entire setting. The information from the documents was used alongside the empirical
data to assist in forming the themes that would structure the write-up of the results. The three documents that were analysed were the preschool’s Plan for Equal Rights and Opportunities, Operations Plan and Checklist for new employees and substitute teachers.

Every preschool is obligated to write a yearly plan for equal rights and opportunities. This plan is to contain information regarding how the preschool will work towards the promotion of equality and the prevention of discrimination and exclusion. An example from the plan that was analysed from the preschool involved in this study is that the preschool teachers shall take away any material that is regarded as being racist.

The operations plan covers five preschools that belong to the same district. This plan provides guidelines as to the operations of the preschools, for example, subjects that should be covered, how the preschool environment should be organised and information on the food that is to be served. Information is also provided on how the work of the preschool is to be monitored, as well as the steps that should be taken to further develop this work.

The third document, a checklist, can be seen as an overview of the more in-depth guidelines provided in the operations plan and the plan for equal rights and opportunities. This checklist contains information about the language that teachers are expected to use when referring to the children, for example, using the child’s name instead of “she” or “he”, and referring to the children as “friends” instead of “girls” and “boys”. Information is also provided about the preschool’s daily routine. When analysing the documents, I focused solely on the sections related to the preschool environment; the physical space and materiality, as well as the language to be used in describing the physical world. This information was then coded into themes to be compared with the themes that emerged in analysing the other materials.

Additional written information that is included in the study are the preschool’s menus, which outline the food that is to be served to the children for lunch and snack times. The preschool menus from week 5 to week 14 (2016) were analysed, looking for patterns in the type of food being served, for example, vegetarian versus non-vegetarian. Food is part of the materiality of the preschool and a part of culture (Kim 2015). Since food is part of the materiality of the preschool and has also been shown to be gender-coded (Adams 2010, 2015; Gelfer 2013; MacInnis & Hodson 2015; Nath 2011; Rogers 2008; Rothgerber 2013), it was important not to disregard its possible importance in the creation of a gender-neutral, norm-critical environment.
4.2.6 Interviews

Pink (2013) mentions that the relationship between researcher and participants is often one of inequality. A power relation arises as it is the researcher who chooses the focus of the research, how it is interpreted and what is written about the participants (Eriksson 2004; Pink 2013). Since this research concerns the preschool setting as prepared by the teachers, I felt it important to give voice to those involved in its creation, rather than relying on my own subjectivity with regards to the interpretation and analysis of the photographic material and field notes. This assists in providing greater insight into the question of why the environment has been organised as it has.

The majority of interviews could perhaps better be described as research conversations, unstructured interviews that are based upon a particular topic or issue (Bryman 2016). These conversations were informal and occurred sporadically throughout the course of the research, lasting between approximately five and thirty minutes. The teachers directed the conversations, which centred primarily around the subjects of gender and norm criticism, and I posed questions when it was felt that more information on a particular issue could be relevant. The use of unstructured interviews allowed for a lot of freedom with regard to the topics covered, and issues were discussed that perhaps wouldn’t have been taken up if a more structured approach had been employed. No notes were taken during the course of the conversations, but were made immediately after the completion of the “interview”. These notes were then used as guidelines for the formation of two semi-structured interviews.

The semi-structured interviews, involving two different preschool teachers, were carried out at the end of the first and third visits. A series of open questions based on the observations within the setting, as well as previous conversations with other teachers, formed a framework for the interviews. The order in which the questions were posed was variable and there was room for follow-up questions based on the response of the interviewee (see Alvehus 2013; Bryman 2016). Again, this allowed for a great deal of flexibility in the interviews, making room for the unexpected. The first interview, which occurred at the end of the first visit, lasted 40 minutes. Notes were taken throughout the interview and then written up subsequently. The second interview, occurring at the end of the third visit, also lasted 40 minutes. On this occasion I recorded the interview. No notes were made during this final interview, thus enabling me to focus solely on the interview process (see Alvehus 2013;
Bryman 2016). This interview was then transcribed in full for use in the analysis. Extracts from the interview material that are included in Chapter 5 have been translated from Swedish to English by myself.

All interviewees/conversation partners are referred to as teachers or preschool teachers in the analysis. Due to the nature of the study I feel that it is unnecessary to provide more information about their backgrounds. I also feel that this is more respectful to the participants as what is important is their words, not the categories to which they may be associated.

4.3 Analysis of the Material

The process of analysis began with open coding (Bryman 2016). The material gathered from each method was examined individually, looking for emerging themes and patterns. Thus each set of materials was first regarded in its own right. The coding process was carried out throughout the research study, enabling interplay between data collection and interpretation and theorising. Data collection ceased when no new themes were seen to emerge, thus having reached empirical “saturation” (Creswell & Miller 2000; Miles et al. 2014).

Once the materials had been coded, the process of triangulation began (see Bryman 2016; Creswell & Miller 2000; Miles et al. 2014; Yin 2014). In this study, methodological triangulation was applied through the use of multiple sources of data collection. Interviews were triangulated with each other, as well as with the photographic material, field notes, observations, literature and the preschool documents in order to establish converging themes and detect any divergence in the data. Based on the triangulation of the data, six converging themes were identified; colour, play/learning materials, space, language, literature and visual text, and food. Each theme emerged from at least three data sources (see Yin 2014).

The aforementioned concepts from post-structural feminist theory have guided all aspects of the analysis, and a gender, norm-critical and intersectional perspective has been applied in interpreting the data. These perspectives are essential from a poststructuralist feminist viewpoint in order to avoid essentialising and/or homogenising women and men as groups.
4.4 Ethical Considerations

This research is in compliance with the ethical standards as set forth by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council 2010). The informed consent was obtained from all research participants. Participants were provided with written information regarding the nature of the research, including the purpose of the study, methodology and research questions. Information was also provided as to how the research material would be used. It was emphasised that participation in the study was voluntary and could be terminated at any time without need for explanation.

With regards to confidentiality, no information is included in the text that could reveal the identity of the preschool or the participants. Research records are kept in a locked cupboard and electronic folders are protected with passwords (see MacNaughton & Hughes 2009). Pseudonyms have been used in the electronically stored documentation of the interview material, and details that could make participants identifiable have been altered. No alteration has been made, however, that changes the meaning of participants’ words.

When discussing gender, it is necessary to be accommodating to different perspectives and opinions. Therefore, it was important when interviewing to be respectful towards the varying, often personal, opinions held by the teachers. This is of particular importance when conducting research, due to the previously discussed power relation that exists between researcher and research participants (see Pink 2013).

A reoccurring word used throughout the research is “interpretation”. Although steps have been taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the results, the research is still shaped by and interpreted through the theoretical lens that I have chosen to employ, that is, poststructural feminist theory. Blaise (2005) points to the problematic nature of validity within poststructuralism’s anti-essentialism that denies the existence of essential truths. Self-reflexivity is therefore demanded in order to obtain “trustworthy data” (Blaise 2005; Hertz 1997). Hertz (1997, p. vii) suggests that this can be achieved “through detachment, internal dialogue and constant (and intensive) scrutiny” of the research process and analysis of the empirical data. During the research process it was important to address my own subjectivity and “location of self” (Hertz 1997), continually reflecting on how my own perspectives and position may influence the interpretation of the data. As the analyst, I find myself as much a part of the research as the participants (see Stokoe & Smithson 2001).
5. Results and Analysis

In the following chapter, the results are discussed and analysed using the theoretical concepts outlined in chapter 3. This chapter is divided into six sections based on the themes that emerged when coding the empirical data. The six themes represent six different factors that are regarded by this particular (LGBTQ) preschool as being important in creating a norm-critical, equal environment where gender matters less. It should be noted that some materials are mentioned under more than one theme. This is reflective of the problems that arise when attempting to create neat categories.

5.1 Perilous Pink and Other Meaningful Colours

Colours are embedded with meaning (Ambjörnsson 2011; Ohrlander 2011; Walter 2010). They can be gendered, political, affect moods and be used in communication. This section, which focuses on the colours present in the preschool environment will be further divided into three subsections; the issues of “perilous pink”, rainbow colours, and skin colour.

5.1.1 Perilous Pink

The preschool teachers spoke of the importance of ensuring that all children have access to the full colour spectrum. As one of the teachers pointed out, it is accepted that children will have likes and dislikes with regards to colour, but no colour is to be avoided on the premise that it is associated with a particular:

Of course they will have their preferred colours, but their preferences shouldn’t be limited based on their gender. Girls are expected to like pink, but that doesn’t mean they have to avoid blue. However, boys are expected to like blue and to avoid pink. Pink is associated with girls and therefore boys can be teased if they like pink… Pink should be a colour just like yellow and green. It shouldn’t be dangerous.

The teacher comments that girls have permission to like “feminine” pink and “masculine” blue, whereas boys are only allowed access to blue for fear of the consequences that may arise if they become associated with a colour that is regarded as being “for girls”. Both the teacher in the above quotation, as well as Ambjörnsson (2011), regard pink as a “dangerous” colour. This may be regarded as being a rather extreme word to use in association with a colour, but as previously indicated there is evidence to suggest that being associated with
the colour pink can have dire consequences for boys (Ambjörnsson 2011; Chaaban 2011). As another teacher mentioned, a boy’s sexuality may be called into question if he likes pink. Pink is associated with masculine gayness and is therefore a risky colour if the hegemonic heterosexual matrix is to be upheld (Ambjörnsson 2011; Koller 2008). Men must also avoid pink and other symbols of femininity if they are to maintain their position in the gender hierarchy (see Ambjörnsson 2011; Connell 2005; Hirdman 2001).

Pink was certainly not a dominant colour within the preschool environment, but its presence was noticeable. The majority of the curtains round the windows were pink, there were pink cushions, lampshades, mats, toys and books, and all the visibility vests that the children must wear when they are outside were pink. In contrast to pink being a “dangerous” colour, it had now become a colour of “safety”. All children had access to the colour pink and all children were expected to wear the colour. It can become problematic to question a boy’s decision to wear pink clothing when there is a time each day when everyone wears pink.

Pink was used norm critically in a number of subtle ways within the preschool setting. Blocks, for example, which are traditionally associated with boys’ play (see Trawick-Smith et al. 2015) came in a variety of colours, including pink. The blocks were organised according to colour, highlighting pink as a colour in its own right (Figure 1); the pink blocks were not hidden or subtly mixed in with the other colours. It was beyond the scope of this study to observe if the organisation of the blocks according to colour led to the pink blocks being avoided in boys’ play, but the environment was at least communicating that blocks can also be pink; that colours traditionally associated with femininity need not be excluded from objects that are often associated with boys and their play, and vice versa.

![Figure 1: Blocks organised according to colour.](image)

Cultural associations with pink were also challenged through visual imagery. In the building and construction room, a picture on the wall showed a toy robot doing ballet whilst wearing
a pink skirt. Once again, objects and colours associated with femininity merged with those associated with masculinity, thus eliminating the notion of a hierarchy. Even Darth Vader from Star Wars was wearing pink in a picture on the wall in the children’s toilet area, and Superman was wearing a pink dress in a different picture in one of the art rooms (Figure 2).

![Image](image.png)

Figure 2: Snow White dressed in Superman’s costume and Superman dressed in a pink version of Snow White’s dress. The speech bubble says, “Read when you go home”.

Pink was just as much a colour associated with men as it was a colour associated with women (women were also pictured on occasion wearing pink). Within the environment, pink was losing its gender association. It was not a colour to be associated with any hierarchy or dichotomy, but rather a colour that could be, and was expected to be, embraced by everyone.

That pink was worn by a robot, Superman and Darth Vader conflicted with any notion of pink being associated with male gayness. The robot, a toy, has no sexuality, and Darth Vader and Superman are both heterosexual. There was nothing to suggest that this had changed due to their colour choices. The association of “too much pink” with lower class was also challenged. Darth Vader and Superman were dressed almost entirely in pink, as was the “upper class” princess in a picture on the wall taken from Per Gustavsson’s (2006) book, *Så gör prinsessor* [That’s what princesses do]. The princess, dressed head to toe in pink, was holding a sword and driving away robbers. If anything, pink was given associations with power, strength and status through its use in the environment. In the preschool setting, pink was a colour among colours; an equal. As one of the teachers emphasised:

> Colours shouldn’t have different statuses. We shouldn’t only give half the colour spectrum to girls and half to boys, and we shouldn’t divide colours according to class or any other categories. Nature doesn’t do that …, it’s people and culture who do it.

*Interview: 27.01.2016*
5.1.2 The Symbolic Rainbow

Rather than a single colour dominating the preschool environment, it was a combination of colours that was most visible; the six colours of the rainbow pride flag\(^6\). The colours of the rainbow pride flag were included in every room of the preschool, including the entrance hall, staff rooms and staff toilets. Several pride flags hung on the walls and even the sticky tape made use of the rainbow colours (Figures 2 & 3).

![Figures 3 & 4: The rainbow pride flag and sticky tape in rainbow colours.](image)

A picture on the wall showed each teacher photographed standing in front of the pride flag, and every child and teacher had their storage spaces marked by their name printed on a label with the colours of the rainbow in the background. Rainbow, or multi-coloured bunting was also included in the majority of rooms, and the children had even created a rainbow banner that lined one of the walls of the department on the lower floor.

In the building and construction rooms, the organisation of the multi-coloured blocks into separate boxes according to colour added to the rainbow effect. On the wall was also a picture of cupcakes iced with different coloured icing and arranged to form a rainbow flag, and signs on the walls used text printed in rainbow colours (Figures 5 & 6). Even the preschool’s plan for equal rights and opportunities included a rainbow on the title page. One of the teachers emphasised:

> We make an effort to show that we welcome everyone here. The rainbow colours and pride flag speak loudly without us having to say anything. We let the flag speak. We have to think about what the environment is saying. It should be inclusive...

Interview: 28.01.2016

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\(^6\) The first pride flag was created in 1978 in San Francisco by Gilbert Baker. The colours of this flag, which are today red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet, have emotional significance, showing both acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity (Rosenbaum 2005; Sawer 2007).
The teacher emphasised the importance of letting the environment speak. The teachers did not need to explicitly say that the school was a welcoming, safe space for identities outside the norm, as the symbolism of the rainbow flag and rainbow colours conveyed this message for them, as long as the message was understood by the receiver.

Figures 5 & 6: A photograph of cupcakes arranged according to the colours of the rainbow and a sign printed in rainbow colours. The sign reads, “Security, Happiness, Desire to learn”.

Whereas stereotypical associations with pink were subtly challenged, there was nothing subtle about the preschool’s inclusion of the rainbow flag. It was impossible to miss, sending a clear signal to parents, staff and any other guests to the preschool that this was an environment of inclusion. There was no questioning the importance placed on this symbolism within the preschool setting. The rainbow was there for a purpose.

One of the teacher’s expressed that an important goal of the preschool was that “Everyone should be able to feel that there is room to be who they are”. The rainbow flag is representative of this goal. It acknowledges the existence of identities beyond the heterosexual norm and therefore calls into question the gender binary that is reliant on the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (see Butler 2006). The inclusion of the pride colours throughout the preschool setting sends a message to all who enter the space. How this message is understood is dependent on the individual, but what I observed was a setting that had been designed to make a definite statement. It wasn’t an accident that the rainbow colours and pride flag were so visible; there was purpose in their placement and visibility.

5.1.3 What is Black, White, Yellow, Red?

During my second visit to the preschool, a teacher was busy preparing materials in one of the art rooms on the upper floor. Two large sheets of paper lay on a table, filled with pictures
of numerous people, all with different skin tones. The materials that the teacher was preparing were based on the Humanæ project by Angélica Dass (Dass 2016). Dass (2016) says that many people cannot find themselves reflected in the labels used by society; the labels of Black, White, Yellow, Red. In order to solve this problem, Dass developed, and continues to develop, a guide (PANTONE Color identification) that can be used to catalogue differences in skin colour more accurately instead of forcing individuals into boxes and categories that do not adequately or accurately represent their identity. This can be seen as an extension of the criticism directed at arbitrary gender boxes, which people rarely fit neatly into (see Butler 1993, 2004). The photographs highlighted the subtle continuity of skin tones, showing that although there are subtle differences between individuals, there is more “equality than difference” (Castellote n.d.).

According to the teacher who was preparing the materials, the photographs were to be displayed on the preschool walls and used as a guide for painting and/or drawing. There was a norm-critical and gender aspect behind the teacher’s decision to use the material. The aim was to visually show that it is impossible to speak of a single colour that is “skin colour” and that there are no clear boundaries that exist between the categories of Black, White, Yellow and Red; even the normative category of whiteness comes in various shades and nuances:

It’s important for children to see that we are all different, even if we are also all the same… Hopefully these photographs will help children recognise their similarities and differences. No two people are completely alike, even if they are both categorised as Black or are both girls. That’s why categories are problematic. It’s not only gender categories that lead to problems and stereotypes, but also other categories, such as race. What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be White? Where is the boundary?

Interview: 27.01.2016

Once again, the problematic nature of categories was raised by the teacher in the above quote. Somewhere there is an invisible line drawn that allows some people to be included in a particular category whilst others are excluded, but the arbitrary nature of this line means that categorical divisions and boundaries are open to questioning. Individuals don’t fit neatly into these divisions as each individual is unique. The uniqueness of the individual was evident in the photographs. No two photographs were alike, thus challenging categorical boxes. According to Dass (2016), it is “a kind of game to question our codes”. The rainbow of humanity was visible through the photographs, which failed to classify or organise people according to gender, sexuality, nationality, age, race or ethnicity. The teacher preparing the materials emphasised, “We want Maja to be seen as Maja, not as a category”.

37
5.1.4 Summary

The language of colour was used in a variety of norm-critical ways within the preschool environment, both subtly and explicitly. The norms of femininity and class that are stereotypically associated with pink were subtly called into question by the merging together of traditional feminine and masculine elements and through the imagery of, for example, a princess with high status and class dressed entirely in pink. Pink was no longer confined to femininity, but had the freedom to cross gender boundaries, passing into traditionally “male” territory. It therefore avoided being drawn into any gender hierarchy or dichotomy. Colour was used to give a different perspective to portrayals of stereotyped gender “ideals”.

The rainbow colours represent acceptance and acknowledgement of identities outside the hegemonic heterosexual matrix and gender binary (Butler 2006; Renold 2005). The children were surrounded by the symbolism of the pride movement that today represents more than simply the gay movement. It is a symbol for the LGBTQ community where queer identities that don’t conform to arbitrary boxes may find acceptance. The arbitrariness of categories was also highlighted in the photographs that were displayed on the table in the art room, revealing that the use of only four categories is not sufficient to represent the variety of skin tones that are present in the world. People are more complex than simple categories allow.

Colour within the preschool environment was used to show inclusion and acceptance, as well as to challenge norms and categorisation. There was purpose behind the choices made with regards to colour, and the full colour spectrum was indeed available to all.

5.2 The Communicative Power of the Artefact

This section deals specifically with the materiality of the preschool setting; the artefacts that provide information about society and culture, including society’s stereotypes and norms (Nordin-Hultman 2004; Nordtømme 2012; Sicart 2014). In section 5.3 I will discuss how the materials are organised in relation to each other and the preschool space, but for now I will focus solely on the materials found within the space without regard to their location.

Language is an essential issue in post-structural research, which, according to Hultman (2011), can lead to poststructuralists overlooking the relationship between humans and inanimate objects. However, poststructuralist theory also emphasises that identity is
contextual and therefore I argue that through conscious decisions with explicit purposes in mind, it is possible to use the materiality of the preschool to decrease the salience of gender norms and stereotypes. By reducing the salience of gender through the preschool artefacts it may be possible to create a new context in which the child can explore their identity and opportunities. Sicart (2014, p. 36) states that “A toy is a gate to the world”. Perhaps toys can be used as a gate to a less gender-stereotyped world.

5.2.1 Super-soft Heroes and Super Strong Princesses

Amongst the materials in the preschool art rooms were many colouring pictures of Disney princesses and superheroes who offered a norm-critical alternative to their screen image, challenging the ideals of emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity (see Connell 2005). In one picture, for example, Superman was seen kneeling on the ground with a tiny kitten in his hand, held against his cheek (Figure 7). Beside him stood a girl, also dressed in a superhero costume, holding a larger cat. It was the girl who was looking directly out of the picture, standing strong with her legs apart. Superman, on the other hand, had made himself smaller, assuming a less dominating stance, thus challenging any notion of manspreading or a gender hierarchy. Superman challenged hegemonic masculinity by revealing a softer, caring side to superheroes’ personalities. The “ideal” man was now seen to be a nurturer, a role usually reserved for female characters (see Hamilton et al. 2006).

![Figure 7: Superman challenging hegemonic masculinity.](image)

In another picture, which had been coloured in by one of the children, Disney’s Esmeralda and Pocahontas were seen protesting the destruction of “Mother Earth”. Again, they were facing straight forward as though looking directly down the lens of a camera, and they were standing with their legs wide apart despite both wearing dresses. The message that I received was that “feminine” clothing was not going to stand in their way; their bodies were not going to be restricted by a dress (Figure 8). Femininity did not mean lack of power.
Figure 8: Super strong princesses who don’t let stereotypical femininity define them. Note: As I did not receive permission from the child in the preschool to use the photograph I took of their picture that they had coloured in, the picture here is taken from the artist’s website (Johansson 2015a).

These norm-critical pictures were taken from two colouring books, *Super-soft superheroes* and *Super strong princesses*, by cartoonist Linnéa Johansson (2015a, 2015b). As seen in the aforementioned examples, the pictures in these two books aim to challenge traditional notions of femininity and masculinity as portrayed in popular culture. The presence of these pictures in the preschool was evident. There were pictures that had yet to be coloured, as well as those that had already been completed, both by the teachers, as well as by the children. The image of Superman wearing a pink dress that was mentioned in section 5.1.1 was part of this collection. Often when considering gender and preschool materials, it is the dollhouse and building materials that stand in focus (see Bodén 2011), but it should not be forgotten that other artefacts can also be “more gendered” or “less gendered”, norm critical or stereotyped. *All* materials communicate with the user (Barad 2003; Hultman 2011).

The preschool’s colouring pictures challenged gender stereotypes and norms, revealing gentler, more family oriented superheroes, and stronger, more independent princesses. An intersectional perspective was also evident in the materials; different family constellations were shown and Spiderman was pictured in a wheelchair. The life spectrum of princesses and superheroes was widened, allowing neither clothing, feelings, body positions, sexuality or activities to be dictated by the category to which the particular character belonged, that is princess or superhero. One of the teacher’s emphasised the importance of creating an
environment that invites creativity and curiosity when designing a space that decreases the salience of gender and gender norms:

We want to create an environment that invites creativity and curiosity. The colouring pictures assist in creating this environment as they force the children to think. They conflict with “the norm” and they show the children that there is more than one way to be a princess or a superhero. One’s gender shouldn’t mean that one is forced into a particular role or can’t take on a new role.

Interview: 28.01.2016

The colouring pictures made use of artistic creativity to open for a multitude of possibilities and ways of being beyond those dictated by Marvel, DC and Disney. Once again, gender stereotypes were being challenged and dissolved, thus revealing their performativity.

5.2.2 Dolls and the Dollhouse

Like the colour pink, dolls and dollhouses are often regarded as being problematic with regards to the creation of a gender-neutral environment (Walter 2010). They are strongly associated with femininity and are therefore valued less than materials, such as building blocks, that are traditionally associated with boys (Bodén 2011). It is therefore more common for girls to be encouraged to play with building and construction materials than it is for boys to be encouraged to play in the doll corner (Bodén 2011). To play with dolls, which are associated with femininity, is to take a step down in the gender hierarchy, whereas playing with Lego and blocks represents increased status (see Hirdman 2001).

The dolls in the preschool were not associated with any of the popular brand-name dolls that are commonly seen dominating toy store shelves. The majority of the dolls were small and wooden with a variety of different skin tones. From my point of view, many dolls were gender-neutral in that I found it impossible to place them in the categories of girl or boy, although there were also other dolls that had features predominantly associated with a particular gender, for example, two pirate dolls with beards (Figure 9). Clothing was also fairly neutral with seemingly no relation to the exaggerated femininity portrayed by Barbie (see Walter 2010). That there was no difference between the “types” or morphology of the dolls meant that there was no difference in the movement capabilities of each doll. The “gendered bodies” of the dolls discussed in Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen’s (2002) essay were not visible in these artefacts.
One of the preschool teachers said that it is important to think about what dolls represent:

…we have to think about what the materials are saying to the children. Materials that convey the wrong message need to be excluded so we don’t place restrictions on the children’s possibilities. For example, *Barbie*. There are dolls that show more realistic body shapes, for example, *Lammily* dolls or *MyIDolls*. I would like to have those dolls for the preschool, but I would never consider *Barbie*. Girls see those images everywhere and I don’t think it is healthy. It sends a message that forces girls to try to fit an “ideal” mould that someone else has decided.

*Interview: 27.01.2016*

*Barbie* was criticised by many teachers who emphasised that the *Barbie* doll perpetuates gender stereotypes, providing children with a distorted image of women. Indeed, research suggests that girls as young as six would prefer to be thinner than their current figure (Lowes & Tiggemann 2003). Whether there is a correlation between these findings and, for example, *Barbie* is open to debate, but the preschool teachers expressed the importance of avoiding dolls that represent unattainable body ideals.

The majority of the dolls were found placed within the preschool’s dollhouses. There were a total of three dollhouses; one small house and two larger versions. One criticism that could be made with regards to these houses was their lack of furniture and other materials.
As is seen in Figure 10, there was not a lot of variation with regards to the materials within the dollhouse. Some furniture was included, along with a few dolls, but in comparison to the amount of Lego and other building materials, the material for the dollhouses was rather sparse. This lack of variation with regards to materials associated with dollhouses was also commented on in Nordin-Hultman’s (2004) study on the space and materiality of (non-LGBTQ certified) Swedish preschools. There is a risk that this lack of variation of dollhouse materials in comparison with the variety of building materials communicates to the children that the dollhouse has less importance or value than other materials in the setting. However, it is also possible that it communicates that the space contained within the outer frame of the dollhouse is to be used freely; its use and decoration is not predetermined and so the internal space of the house can take many different forms. Once again, it comes down to interpretation and how the language of the materiality speaks to the individual. However, dolls and dollhouses were by no means excluded from the preschool space and, as will be discussed in section 5.3, their placement was often used to challenge the gender dichotomy.

One final element that I wish to draw attention to with regards to the dollhouse in Figure 10 is the choice of colours within the various rooms. Each room is painted in a different colour, but lighter tints, or pastel shades, of the colours are used rather than deeper shades. Pastel colours tend to be associated with femininity. Thus, it is possible to question if the children receive the message from this particular dollhouse that it is a “girl’s” toy. It may be interesting to observe if there is a difference between how the children, and which children, play with this dollhouse in comparison with the unpainted, wooden dollhouse in Figure 11 (Section 5.3.1). How do the children interpret the messages from these materials?

5.2.3 Variety and Exclusion

There was a lot of variety with regards to the preschool materials. There were toy kitchens, building blocks, Lego, jigsaws, paints, games, nature materials, train tracks, cars, cuddly toys and plastic animals. Some of these materials explicitly challenged gender norms, such as the aforementioned colouring pictures, whilst there were other subtle indications that efforts had been made to create an inclusive space. What was excluded from the environment communicated just as much as what was included.

Amongst the wide variety of materials available to the children, what was missing were toys and materials that are associated with popular culture, including within the dress-up area.
The colouring pictures were an exception, but the characters represented in these pictures had been reworked and redesigned to communicate a message that conflicted with the original representation of the characters. Since toys and characters in popular culture are created within the confines of the gendered world they too become easily gendered, thus confirming stereotypes rather than challenging them. By excluding these materials, hegemonic masculinity and emphasised, or exaggerated, femininity (see Walter 2010) became invisible in the toys and materials that the children had access to in their play.

According to one of the teachers, the preschool materials are discussed regularly in a weekly meeting. The teacher commented that evaluating the materials is essential as they can easily communicate messages to the children that conflict with the norm-critical work of the preschool. As another teacher emphasised:

The environment is constantly being altered depending on the needs of the children and what we observe in our work... We are all active in making recommendations and discussing new ideas.

Interview: 27.01.2016

By observing the children, the teachers are able to see how the children interpret the language of the environment that has been created in an attempt to challenge gender norms.

5.2.4 Summary

The materials chosen to be included in the preschool setting challenged gender stereotypes, thus assisting in lowering the salience of gender within the setting. Emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity found no representation within the materiality of the environment. Instead, images of popular characters that appear to be representative of these polar opposites were given a new identity. They were seen to challenge the notion of gendered bodies, thus revealing the performativity of femininity and masculinity and calling into question the illusion of an unrevisable “natural” gender.

5.3 Towards a Gender-neutral Language of Space

Whereas the previous section discussed the physical materials within the preschool space, I now turn attention to their location and placement within the environment. Nordtømme (2012) notes that children respond differently depending on how spaces are organised. Space and materiality are never neutral, but are rather indicators of the “doings” that may be
expected to occur in their presence (Aitken 2009; Lucas & Wright 2013; Thorne 1993). The form that these “doings” take may therefore be influenced by the organisation of the preschool as designed by the teachers and architects. Gender performativity is a contextual expression (Butler 2006).

5.3.1 Where Cars Meet the Dollhouse

In a report from the Delegation for gender equality in preschool (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2006:75), it was noted that during their work towards gender equality many preschools discovered that the materials that were most gender-coded were often placed in separate rooms. This served to emphasise gender divisions and segregation in the setting. In the preschool in this present study, no separation or segregation was observed between toys that are gender-coded as “feminine” and those that are regarded as being “masculine”; dollhouses, construction materials and cars occupied the same space. Indeed, in one room a road had been placed on the wall beside the dollhouse so that the children could send cars driving down the road towards the house (Figure 11).

Figure 11: The road meets the dollhouse.

The layout of the space around the dollhouse signalled that this was a space for everyone, regardless of the child’s preference with regards to cars or dolls. As one of the teachers emphasised, “The environment sends signals that ‘now you shall play with this in this space and you shall play with that in that space’”. Spaces provide messages with regards to who is permitted to play in a particular place and what that individual is expected to play with. In the space pictured in the photograph above, the individual can be expected to play with both dolls and cars. According to the arrangement of the environment, they belong together. That being said, I cannot say that this is how the children interpret the placement of the road
beside the dollhouse. The environment communicates that those who wish to play with cars and/or dolls are expected to occupy the same space, but this does not necessarily mean that the space will remain undivided. Does the side wall of the dollhouse represent a boundary between “doll play” and “car play” even if the materials are placed beside each other?

When I first visited the preschool, the dollhouse, that was later moved to the building and construction room (see Figure 10), was placed in another room, alongside a castle (Figures 12 & 13). The castle could be interpreted as the “masculine” version of the “feminine” dollhouse. Their location within the same room may communicate that “masculine” and “feminine” materials can occupy the same space and be used together by all, but the materials themselves may contradict this message, thus resulting in the creation of an invisible wall that forms a gender divide.

Figures 12 & 13: The dollhouse and the castle: occupying the same space, but will the language of the materials lead to mixed play or gender segregation?

However, with regards to spaces that were formed using tangible, physical walls, there was no segregation in the preschool space resulting from the placement of toys, that is, there was no “doll corner” and “car room”. Categorising rooms as “feminine” or “masculine” became impossible as stereotypical notions of where the materials “should” be placed were challenged. In the building and construction rooms, for example, there were dollhouses, building blocks, toy kitchens and dress-up clothes. As one of the preschool teachers remarked, the uses of the terms building and construction are often very limited:

When we think of building and construction we often think of blocks and Lego. We rarely think of the other things that we build and construct. Baking can also be seen as a form of construction. The ingredients are the blocks that are put together to form something new. We also construct our identities. Even families are built.

Interview: 28.01.2016
The teacher not only associated building and construction with Lego and blocks, but also with cooking and the building of families, hence the inclusion of a dollhouse in the building and construction room. Identity formation was also mentioned by the teacher as a form of construction. The message of performativity was conveyed by the decision to place dress-up clothes within the building and construction room; identity is done, performed, built and constructed, rather than essential, given and unchanging (see Butler 1988, 2004, 2006).

By arranging the environment so that gender-coded materials occupied the same space, the gender dichotomy was challenged. As such, it was interesting to explore the various rooms as it was almost impossible to predict what each box or basket would contain. That is not to say that the organisation of the materials was completely random, but rather that they were placed so as to open for new possibilities, as well as to encourage all children to make use of and occupy each space regardless of gender.

5.3.2 Gender-neutral Bodies

I have previously discussed the concept of gendered bodies; bodies that become female or male through clothing and bodily adornment, as well as through positioning and movement of the body (see Blaise 2005; Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen 2002). Girls are encouraged to occupy less space, whereas boys are encouraged to take up more space (Nordin-Hultman 2004). The physical space becomes dominated by boys, thus emphasising the gender hierarchy (Hirdman 2001).

In contrast to the findings in Nordin-Hultman’s (2004) study of (non-LGBTQ) preschool environments, in the LGBTQ preschool involved in this research, materials and activities traditionally associated with girls were given as much space as those traditionally associated with boys. The dollhouses were placed on the floor, facing large, open spaces, and kitchen areas were also placed in large, open rooms. Blocks and other building materials were stored in boxes on the floor or on shelves, again with the expectation that they would be used on the large floor space. An exception was the Lego, which was placed on a long table set against a wall and surrounded by a number of chairs (Figure 14).
Activities that are traditionally associated with girls were not confined to small, intimate spaces or tables, and activities traditionally associated with boys were not always found in large, open spaces on the floor. This may assist in limiting the gendering of the body as the child’s preferences with regards to activities and play cease to dictate the amount of space that the child’s body can freely and easily occupy. As one of the teachers remarked:

It is important that gender-coded activities are given equal space; that feminine coded objects are not placed in smaller rooms in comparison with masculine coded objects. It is also important that we don’t assume that an individual wishes to play on the floor or at a table simply because of their gender. There needs to be variety so that each child can find a space they feel comfortable in.

Interview: 28.01.2016

It should be noted that not all spaces in the preschool were large and open. Small, concealed spaces were also to be found within the environment. There were small tents, a little, hidden space under the stairs and even a small, concealed opening under a kitchen counter where the teachers had hung a curtain and placed a small rug (Figures 15 & 16).
As one of the teachers pointed out, many children, regardless of gender, like to have access to smaller spaces where they can have a chance to withdraw from the group:

Many children don’t like to be in large groups. They become insecure and need these smaller spaces. The preschool needs to communicate that this is allowed. We need to consider every child’s needs.

Interview: 28.01.2016

In the preschool, there was nothing “gender-coded” about these smaller, private spaces, thus communicating that they were available to all. There was no message that a particular behaviour is associated with a particular gender. As is emphasised in the preschool’s gender crib sheet, “We never assume that a child “is” a particular way, for example, calm, wild, mischievous or cautious, based on their sex”.

5.3.3 Summary

In this section I have provided an overview of how the teachers organised the artefacts within the preschool space in order to reduce the salience of gender norms and challenge the dichotomy and hierarchy associated with the gender system (Hirdman 2001). Traditionally gender-coded materials were not only provided equal space within the environment, but were also placed in close proximity to each other. This reduced the risk of a particular room being coded as “feminine” or “masculine”, thus communicating to the children that the places within the preschool were to be used by all. This message was also reflected in the availability of not only larger spaces, but also smaller, private spaces that revealed an expectation that children may wish to spend time alone or in a smaller space. Due to an absence of gender-coding within these hidden areas there was no expectation communicated by the language of the spaces as to the gender of the child who may wish to occupy them.

The broadening of the terms “building” and “construction” to include dress-up clothes, dollhouses and toy kitchens once again opened for the questioning of rigid categories. The environment did not communicate that the child needed to choose from the boxes of either/or, the doll corner or the car room, but could have access to the full range of materials and spaces. That being said, I mentioned that the message that the children receive from the preschool artefacts may conflict with the message that the teachers are attempting to communicate through their placement. This may result in the building of invisible walls that start to segregate the rooms, once again creating a doll corner and car room. Thus, careful
observation is required in order to find out how the children are interpreting the language of the environment.

5.4 Cultural Artefacts That Look Beyond the Binary

This section shall focus on the preschool’s literature and visual texts. Children’s books act as a socialising tool and are therefore an important element to take into consideration in reducing the salience of gender and gender stereotypes in the preschool classroom (Fox 1993; hooks 2000; Davies 2003; Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005c; Lynch 2016; Uttley & Roberts 2011; Wedin 2014). Visuals may be as important as words in the construction of reality (see Janks 2010) and so this section shall not only address written text, but also visual text, including visual imagery within the preschool literature, as well as on the preschool walls. It should be noted, however, that the information provided here is merely an overview of the preschool’s literature and visual texts. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a more thorough investigation into the literature. This would require a separate study.

5.4.1 Emotions, Families, and Stereotypes

There were a number of recurring themes within the preschool literature; emotions, families, and stereotype reversal. Here, I will discuss each theme in turn, referring to some of the books that are representative of these different themes.

*Emotions*

With regards to emotions, the preschool operations plan emphasises that all feelings are allowed to be expressed by every individual. One of the teachers echoed this statement, saying that every child should have access to all feelings regardless of gender;

> Feelings are important. All feelings are welcomed, although we also have to think about how these feelings are expressed. Aggression, for example, is not a good way to express anger. Literature can help children learn how to express their feelings, as well as showing that girls can be angry and boys can be upset. It’s not healthy to reject feelings.

Interview 27-01-2016

In Kåreland and Lindh-Munther’s (2005c) study of preschool literature, few books were found where boys felt fear or sadness. Author Mem Fox (1993) asks if children’s literature could be partly to blame for trapping males in a “frightful emotional prison”. The teacher in the above quote also mentioned that girls’ emotions may be limited, in particular with
regards to anger, an emotion that may be viewed as being “unfeminine” and “unattractive” (see Zuckerman 2014). Emotional expression may be limited due to feelings being gender-stereotyped (Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly 2002).

In the preschool, there were many books that had emotions as their central theme. These emotions covered everything from anger (Arg [Angry], Rubin Dranger & Cullberg 2004) to sorrow associated with death (Adjö, herr Muffin [Goodbye, Mr Muffin], Nilsson & Tidholm 2003). There were also books that explicitly stated the importance of having access to all feelings, for example Känn med hen [Feel with ze] by Skåhlberg and Dahlquist (2012). Känn med hen plays with the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun “hen” (Eng. ze) in introducing a variety of characters who are associated with different feelings. Despite, however, each individual character’s association with a particular feeling, every character also experiments with the other characters’ emotions. Thus the character “hen” (ze), who is associated with laughter, also experiments with being sad, angry, afraid and excited. No negativity is associated with any particular emotion in the book and the use of non-specific gender pronouns allows emotions to be freed from any gender stereotypes.

Another book in the preschool that emphasised the importance of freedom of emotional expression is Flickan som blev varg [The girl who became a wolf] by Hedman and Lucander (2014). The main character, Milda, is described as a kind child who is never angry or grumpy. However, everything changes one day when Milda becomes angry with a friend and finally dares to express the anger that she has been repressing. As the blurb on the back cover of the book states, the story is about having the confidence to express one’s feelings. The book not only shows that girls can, and are allowed to, feel and express anger, but also that there is relief and satisfaction felt when feelings are expressed rather than repressed. As one of the teachers pointed out, “It is important that girls feel that it is perfectly normal and acceptable for them to lose their temper, and boys have permission to cry”.

Families
Another important theme within the preschool literature was families, in particular variability in family constellations. As previously mentioned in discussing the rainbow pride flag, the preschool made no efforts to conceal the acceptance and acknowledgement of sexualities that challenge the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. The same can be said with regards to the literature that was accessible to the children within the setting. Books such as
Stjärnfamiljer [Star Families] (Paananen 2014), Min familj [My Family] (Tidholm 2009) and Daddy, Papa, and Me (Newman & Thompson 2009) presented a variety of family constellations, including families consisting of same-sex parents, single parents, adoptive parents and interracial parents, as well as the normative nuclear family. Fathers were also very visible within these books, showing men as affectionate nurturers in contrast to the image of “the invisible father” (see Anderson & Hamilton 2005).

Within the literature there was no sense that “other” sexualities were by any means “risky”. Same-sex parents were portrayed as being just as loving as any other parent. Lester (2014), however, is critical of queer literature that centres around families. Lester (2014) views these books as an attempt to emphasise how closely queer families resemble the normative nuclear family, that is, that the queer couple is just like the heterosexual couple and thus “safe”. According to Lester (2014), missing within children’s literature are queer people who are of color, non-binary gender identities and lower-class statuses, as well as those with disabilities and without children. A more thorough investigation into the literature within the preschool could provide more insight into the various queer identities within the literature, but from the books that I recorded from the preschool there was no doubt that efforts had been made to increase the visibility of sexualities and family constellations beyond heterofamilial discourses (see Renold 2006). Queer was no longer in a position of “other” (see Janmohamed 2010). This assisted in deemphasising the gender binary, thus reducing gender salience.

**Stereotype reversal**

The third and final theme that dominated the preschool literature concerned stereotype reversal. By this I mean that activities and features that are typically associated with girls were adopted by boys, and vice versa. Vad vill du bli när du blir stor? [What do you want to be when you are big?] by Sabljar (2008) is an example of a book within the preschool that showed a reversal of “traditional” gender roles. Isak is a gymnast, Carl-Viktor is a teacher, Mona is a carpenter, Lina is a brain surgeon and Alice is an astronaut. Girls are seen choosing roles that are traditionally associated with men, and vice versa. There is also no restriction with regards to the “types” of girls and boys that can work in these occupations; a girl in a wheelchair wishes to be a veterinarian and a Black boy dreams of being a nurse. If literature can indeed influence children’s career aspirations (see Hamilton et al. 2006) then this can be seen to be an important book for showing children that their career choices need not be restricted due to the categories to which they belong.
Other books that showed stereotype reversal were *Konrads klänning* [Konrad’s dress] (Mendel-Hartvig 2014) in which a boy wishes to have his friend’s new dress, *Så gör prinsessor* [That’s what princesses do] (Gustavsson 2006) in which it is the princess who fights the dragon and saves the prince, and *Vilken är din favoritsak?* [What is your favourite thing?] (Sabljari 2008) which shows boys liking to play with dolls and dress up as princesses, and girls playing with trains and dinosaurs and doing boxing.

In the plan for equal rights and opportunities, literature is emphasised as a key area for decreasing the salience of gender and gender stereotypes in the preschool. According to the plan, the teachers are expected to choose books where the protagonists don’t follow traditional gender roles. It is also expected that books will be bought that show different family constellations, as well as literature that reveals subjects other than those who are White or ethnic Swedish. As one of the teacher’s stated, “We don’t want to create norms. We don’t want to limit the child. We don’t want to create their identity. We want to create possibilities through questioning norms”. Just as there was a variety of toys, there was also a great variety of literature, showing categories beyond the White, heterosexual, male norm.

### 5.4.2 Messages on the Walls

Norm-critical pictures were displayed on the walls throughout the preschool. Two of the dominant themes within the preschool literature also dominated these images; families and stereotype reversal. Attached to the wall beside the large dollhouse in the building and construction room were a number of photographs showing different family constellations. There were images of single parents, the nuclear family and same-sex parents. Fathers were especially visible, in particular gay fathers from different racial backgrounds. A family was seen to take many forms. A large poster in the hall on the lower floor also showed a number of different family constellations, including a family comprised of a child with two mothers and two fathers. Each photograph and picture was different and therefore no family was seen to be the “norm”. Hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity, the heterosexual matrix, the gender binary and the gender hierarchy were all challenged by these images. The message was one of possibilities rather than adherence to restrictive gender norms and roles. Even if the children failed to understand the symbolism of the rainbow flag, the same message could perhaps be understood from the photographs and pictures on the preschool walls, as well as the illustrations within the norm-critical preschool literature.
Pictures showing stereotype reversal were also prevalent in the environment. A photograph of Iggy Pop wearing a dress was seen together with a quote that challenged the devaluing of femininity and the lower status of women in the gender hierarchy. The quote read, “I'm not ashamed to dress ‘like a woman’ because I don't think it's shameful to be a woman”. As previously mentioned, Superman was also pictured wearing a dress, and other images showed men with a variety of different hairstyles and fashion, for example pictures of the rock group New York Dolls, American make-up artist Jeffree Star and even Dame Edna. Meanwhile, women were shown playing football and dressed as superheroes and Santa Claus, and a picture showed two brides getting married. The Disney characters Merida from *Brave* and Elsa from *Frozen* were also featured on the preschool walls. Merida is a Disney princess who defies the stereotypes associated with the “traditional” Disney princesses, opting instead to focus on independence and female bonds rather than romance (Nash 2015). In one picture on the wall in the children’s toilet in the preschool, Merida was seen standing strong in the forest, holding her bow whilst wearing a long green dress blowing in the wind. She was neither confined to the home, nor accepting of a role of passivity (see Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005; Svaleryd 2003). At the same time, she did not cast aside all aspects of femininity, as seen in the clothing she was wearing.

As mentioned, Elsa from *Frozen* was also featured amongst the images on the walls, although her appearance amongst these images may be regarded as being a little more problematic from the point of view of gender. Like Merida, Elsa is also a character with strength, however, as Smith (2013) remarks in an article for the *Guardian*, “Both Elsa and Anna (Elsa’s sister) have the kind of proportions that would make Barbie look chunky: tiny nipped-in waists, no hips, long legs, skinny arms, pert breasts, small feet and eyes three times the size of the male characters’”. Elsa can thus be seen to be representative of an unattainable ideal. Merida, on the other hand, is a heroine with more realistic proportions. That being said, the majority of the images on the walls weren’t seen to perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards. The majority of photos and images were of “real” people with different cultural backgrounds, skin colours and body shapes. No one ideal was seen to dominate.

One final selection of images that I wish to draw attention to concern the pictures on the wall in one of the preschool’s reading rooms. Several studies have shown that children’s literature is dominated by male characters (Hamilton et al. 2006; Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005; Lynch 2016). Males are more often the subjects of stories, with females being relegated to a
supporting role as “Other” (Lynch 2016). The pictures on the wall in the preschool reading room conveyed a different story. In this room the pictures were dominated by females (Figure 10). Pictures of the characters Gittan from *Gittan och älgbrorsorna* [Gittan and the elk brothers] (Lindenbaum 2003) and Little My from the *Moomins* were on display, as well as a photograph of a female dancer performing a jump and a 20-crown note featuring Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

![Figure 10: Characters featured on the wall in the preschool reading room.](image)

Females took centre stage on the wall surrounding the two central book shelves and were therefore by no means relegated to a position of “Other”. Even if literature and media beyond the threshold of the preschool tell a different story, the message within the preschool was that women have, or at least should have, a voice and a place in society’s cultural products.

### 5.4.3 Summary

Great variety was seen within both the preschool literature and the pictures, images and photographs on the walls. With regards to literature, no recommendations are provided by the education authorities as to the books that should be read in the preschool (see Skolverket 2010). Teachers are therefore given the freedom to make their own decisions with regard to literature choices (see Kåreland & Lindh-Munther 2005c). In this particular preschool, the teachers’ decision to broaden the spectrum of possibilities for children was evident, as was the acknowledgement of the plurality of social reality. The plurality of identities was clearly visible, challenging any notion of the “real” girl or “real” boy who conforms to society’s gender stereotypes. Humanity’s heterogeneity was also visible on the walls, with images
challenging the hegemonic heterosexual matrix, gender binary, gender hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity. There was no presentation of an expected, normalised “ideal”.

As previously mentioned, children’s literature is regarded as an important element in helping children position themselves in the gendered social world (Dominković et al. 2006; Sørensen 2001). It therefore deserves a closer analysis than I can provide in this thesis, but the short overview of the preschool literature that is provided here serves to provide an insight into how teachers use this cultural artefact to challenge societal gender norms.

5.5 Freeing Bodies Through the Language Environment

According to Butler (1993, p. 68), “What is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified”. Language has the ability to constrain the body as that which is given name is forced to conform to the expectations associated with categorical membership (Butler 1993, 2006; Davies 2003; Janks 2010). This section examines the language that is used in the preschool, discussing how the teachers use verbal language to decrease the salience of gender and gender norms in order to free the body.

5.5.1 Beyond She and He to a Welcoming of Ze

Verbal language was regarded as being of essential importance in the reduction of gender salience in the preschool. The importance of this language was emphasised in each of the analysed preschool documents, as well as by the teachers. As one of the teacher’s remarked:

The Swedish language always seems to lie a step behind societal development, for example with gender-specific occupational titles and the lack of a gender-neutral pronoun. It is obviously difficult to work towards gender equality when the development of language is behind, but one thing that can be done is to replace pronouns with names or with more inclusive words such as “friend” (Sw. kompis).

Interview: 28.01.2016

The teacher’s words echo the information presented in the preschool documents. In the checklist it is written that teachers shall use the words “friends”, “children”, or the name of the preschool department when referring to the children as a group. When referring to the individual, the child’s name is to be used instead of categorical, or gender-specific terms such as “she” and “he” or “girl” and “boy”. According to the preschool’s checklist, language should be neutralised and gender-specific pronouns and nouns should be replaced with gender-neutral words such as “ze” (Sw. hen), “it”, “the person” or “the figure”.

56
In discussing the preschool artefacts (5.2.3), I mentioned that what was excluded from the environment communicated just as much as what was included. The same can be said with regards to language. At no point did I hear the words “she”, “he”, “girls” or “boys” being used by the teachers. Children were predominantly referred to using their first names, thus allowing them to be seen as individuals. One of the teachers commented, “Here we are all friends. Not girls and boys. We are individuals and should see each other as such”. Another teacher also stated:

We don’t gender the children. Society has defined how we should categorise ourselves and we want to give children freedom from these categorisations. Therefore “hen” (Eng. ze) is an important word.

Interview: 28.01.2016

The Swedish word “hen” (Eng. ze) was mentioned often by the teachers. I have quoted one teacher who said that Swedish lacks a gender-neutral pronoun, but, as previously indicated, the gender-neutral pronoun “hen” has in fact been in use in Sweden since at least the 1960s. In 2012, the Swedish pronoun “hen” was used for the first time in a children’s book titled *Kivi och monsterhund* [Kivi and the monster dog] (Lundqvist & Johansson 2012). *Kivi och monsterhund* (Lundqvist & Johansson 2012) was one of the books found within the preschool in this present study. Throughout the book, no gender-specific pronouns are used, adopting instead the gender-neutral pronoun “hen” (Eng. ze). The teachers said that they try to avoid the use of “she” and “he” when reading literature and so they were very positive towards the language used in *Kivi och monsterhund* as it was seen to facilitate their work in breaking away from the gender binary. The fact that gender-neutral pronouns are not used to a greater extent in children’s literature was regarded as being a hinder to gender-neutral language. As one teacher pointed out:

It would be easier if we could Tippex out “she” and “he” in all the books, but that’s time consuming. It is easy to make mistakes when reading quickly and thus accidentally say “she” or “he”. It’s hard with new staff. It takes time to change habits and ensure that we don’t say “she” or “he”, but rather “hen” (Eng. ze), friends, or the child’s name.

Interview: 27.01.2016

Many staff members highlighted the difficulties associated with adopting gender-neutral language in the preschool as they themselves don’t always employ the same language outside the preschool. As a result, it is easy to revert back to binary language. Another problem that was highlighted concerned replacements for gender-coded words, such as snowman (Sw. snögubbe). Gender-neutral alternatives to “snowman” were discussed during one of the
interviews. Suggested alternatives were “snowperson” (Sw. snöperson) or “snowfigure” (Sw. snöfigur), but they sounded awkward, emphasising the difficulties that arise when trying to change language. As the interviewed teacher remarked, “Language is so ingrained in us that it takes time for new words to be established so that their use becomes automatic”.

When talking to, and with the children, I never heard pronouns being used. It was when referring to human-like objects and images, such as dolls and pictures of people, as well as in the reading of literature and singing of songs that the use of the Swedish pronoun “hen” became visible, for example when one of the teachers asked a child about the name of the doll they were holding: “Vad heter hen?” [What is ze called?]. However, according to one of the teachers “she” and “he” are not completely excluded from the language environment of the preschool. The teacher commented, “I often use “she” when reading and singing with the children as girls are usually under-represented in literature and other media. I try to create balance with what the children may see and hear outside the preschool”.

I myself witnessed the use of the gender-specific nouns “mother”, “father”, “sister”, and “brother” being used, although their use was conscious and purposeful. In one of the observed circle times, a teacher sang a norm-critical version of Bä bä vita lamm [Baa baa white lamb, similar to the English nursery rhyme, Baa baa black sheep], offering this new alternative (the original text is shown in brackets):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional text</th>
<th>Alternative text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bä bää vita lamm</td>
<td>Baa baa white lamb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Har du någon ull?</td>
<td>Have you any wool?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ja, ja kära barn</td>
<td>Yes, yes, dear child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag har säcken full.</td>
<td>I have a sack full.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helgdags rock åt mor (far)</td>
<td>Holiday coat for mother (father)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Och söndags kjol åt far (mor)</td>
<td>And a Sunday skirt for father (mother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Och två par strumpor</td>
<td>And two pairs of socks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Åt systrarna och bror (Åt lille- lillebror).</td>
<td>For the sisters and brother (For little, little brother).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The traditional text of Bä bä vita lamm was altered in order to challenge the norms associated with clothing, as well as to provide a more equal gender balance; sisters are included alongside brothers, thus allowing for equal representation of women and men in the song. Tradition was not an excuse for leaving language unquestioned.
The teachers insisted that it is their responsibility to alter their language, not the children’s:

> It is up to us to change how we speak, not the children. The children sometimes use gender-specific words in reference to friends or themselves, but we don’t correct them or force them to use gender-neutral words instead. However, we might have a discussion about what it means to be a girl or a boy.

Interview: 27.01.2016

As the teacher comments, it is those surrounding the children that have to do the work in decreasing the salience of gender, rather than imposing a set of rules on the children and thus providing them with new limitations. The preschool setting is to open for exploration of what it means to be an individual and what it means to be gendered, as seen in the fact that the teacher views gender is an area of discussion that children are to be involved in. I asked if the use of gender-neutral pronouns was ever questioned by the children, and if the children were aware of the difference between “she” and “he”. The teacher replied:

> We have many children who are very used to it (the gender-neutral pronoun “hen”), that it doesn’t matter and… they don’t know what the difference is between he and she. Because they have grown up with “it” (Sw. den) or “ze” (Sw. hen). But certain children find it difficult; “No, I am a she”. It is very important for them…. It comes a lot from the home; that they have spoken about it and they identify as a “she” and therefore should be a “she”. And then others think it’s strange when we change the language. It is noticeable that it comes naturally for some when we are singing and then if anyone questions it they say, “It doesn’t matter. It can be a he (Sw. han) or a she (Sw. hon) or both”. But it’s harder for some… I think the biggest influence is the home.

Interview: 28.01.2016

The teacher’s comments once again emphasise the issues that may arise when applying gender-neutral language to the preschool setting. Society beyond the walls of the preschool uses a different language and this has an influence both on the teachers and the children. Beyond the threshold of the preschool door is a world that has yet to (or may never) adopt gender-fair language as the norm. However, the teachers were clearly very conscious of how they used language and they could express the purpose behind the choices they were making. In the teacher’s comments it is noted that some children are unaware of the difference between she and he. The issue of biological sex versus gender was addressed in an interview with a different teacher, who mentioned that it is an issue that is discussed with the children:

> We teach the children the difference between sex and gender. For example, a cow is a cow; she. A bull is a bull; he. We emphasise that sex is about biology whereas gender is due to societal norms. Society has defined how we should categorise ourselves.

Interview: 27.01.2016
Distinguishing between sex and gender is also recommended by Davies (2003) who says that children should learn that there are a variety of positionings, both “feminine” and “masculine”, that are available to them without the need to question their genital sex. However, as another teacher pointed out, the words “she” and “he” are embedded with meanings beyond biological sex and therefore when the terms are emphasised, the variety of positionings becomes divided into two separate compartments, thus limiting the child’s life spectrum. According to this teacher, “hen” was an essential word for eliminating this divide:

Gender-neutral language is essential. “She” and “he” don’t just mean biological sex. These words have so many other meanings associated with them that limit the individual. We can’t take away these associations without taking away the words. “Ze” (Sw. hen) needs to be used more. Many languages don’t use gendered pronouns.

Interview 27.01.2016

Swedish is regarded as being a natural gender language (see Sczesny et al. 2016). In order to shift from natural gender to genderless language, neutralisation is recommended whereby neither personal nouns nor pronouns are marked by gender (Sczesny et al. 2016). This is the strategy that was predominantly being employed at the preschool in this study. Language was being neutralised in order to decrease the salience of gender in the classroom (Hilliard & Liben 2010). The gender of characters in literature, objects such as dolls, and pictures and images of people on the walls were never assumed to be, or emphasised as being female or male. Gender was not being highlighted as an important category, thus allowing for attributes other than gender to be in focus.

5.5.2 Summary

The preschool could be regarded as attempting to free the body through language, that is, freeing the individual from interpellation by others. A free zone was created from bipolar language and categories, allowing space for identities beyond these narrative structures. In this preschool, the male-female binary was essentially eliminated within the environment that the teachers had control over. According to the teachers, certain children were on occasion determined to uphold binary language, but the language environment as created by the teachers contradicted the notion of binarism. The Swedish gender-neutral pronoun “hen” (Eng. ze) was an essential tool in this work, even if it was not used exclusively.

In discussing language, I included information pertaining to one of the nursery rhymes from an observed circle time, revealing how language can also be used in a rather subtle way to
question gender norms. The theme of stereotype reversal found in examining the preschool literature was echoed in this observation, showing that even the language of traditional nursery rhymes failed to escape questioning. Every word that sought to position an individual in a gender category, or associate them with a particular norm, was consciously and purposely challenged in order to reduce the importance placed on gender as a category.

5.6 The Environment’s Silent Norm

In this concluding section of the results and analysis, I turn attention to the food served within the preschool. I have titled this section “The Environment’s Silent Norm”, but it should be noted that the majority of dominant norms are in fact silent; they are to be accepted without question (Gålmark 2005; Kheel 2004). What “silent” refers to in this instance is the silence of those who suffer most due to norms associated with food, that is, the animals, in particular the female animals, who find themselves forced into an endless cycle of reproduction so as to maximise production. The gender system is evident in the animal industry through the domination of female bodies (see Adams 2015; Light 2014), as well as in the relationship that different genders have to the “products” that these female bodies produce (Adams 2015; Gålmark 2005; Kheel 2004; MacInnis & Hodson 2015; Nath 2011; Rogers 2008; Rothgerber 2013; Wright 2015). Animal products form part of the materiality of the preschool, a material that becomes part of the body and at the same time is viewed as gendering that body. Is there evidence of an “undoing” of gender in the food choices within the preschool?

5.6.1 Dissolving the Consumption Hierarchy

In the preschool’s operations plan it is written:

Menus shall consist of 1 fish, 1 meat, and 3 vegetarian meals per week. Show that meat, fish or poultry is not always needed in order to make a meal complete, and let vegetables be the main ingredients.

In analysing the weekly menus, I found that these guidelines were not rigidly followed, for example the occurrence of two vegetarian meals a week was more common that three, however, each week there were at least two vegetarian dishes presented as the main meal, with no meat alternative. On days when meat dishes were served, a vegetarian option was also available, however, this was never marked on the menu as an “alternative” dish, but rather was included alongside the meat dish, for example, “Meatballs and falafel with stewed
macaroni”. The menu highlighted no difference between those who would eat the meat dish and those who would choose the vegetarian meal. There was no marking of “Other”.

One of the teachers commented that there were many staff members and children at the preschool who were vegan or vegetarian, but that this was not the primary reason for incorporating so many vegetarian meals into the menu. The teacher said:

Food is associated with gender… Meat is masculine and veganism and vegetarianism are feminine. The image of the man grilling meat on the barbeque with a beer in hand is so common. Men are supposed to want and need meat. It’s part of their “masculinity”.

Interview: 28.09.2015

The teacher associated the eating of meat both with societal norms, as well as masculine normativity. Eating is a biological activity, but also a social and cultural activity associated with rules and norms. The tradition of the barbeque, for example, is steeped in norms, as mentioned by the teacher in the above quote (see Adams 2015; Nath 2011; Wright 2015). It is assumed that people eat meat, and traditions emphasise this assumption (Adams 2015). Adams (2015, p. 141) says, “As much as white people determine what is normative and important while ignoring the culture and experience of people of color, so have meat eaters of all races, sexes, and classes presumed the normativeness and centrality of their activity”.

By increasing the number of vegetarian meals within the preschool, the normativity of meat-eating is reduced. There is also a reduction in the likelihood of vegetarian food being associated with a particular gender. As indicated previously, on the days that meat was served, the vegetarian dish was not presented on the menu as an “alternative” or “Other”. Instead, it had the same status on the page as the meat dish, and in fact sometimes the vegetarian meal was even named before the meat dish, also eliminating any notion of a food hierarchy, for example “Pasta- and chicken salad with curry sauce” instead of “Chicken- and pasta salad with curry sauce”.

In addition to commenting on the normativity of meat-eating, the afore-quoted teacher also mentioned the connection between meat and masculinity. As another teacher remarked, “Men often want a large piece of meat. It seems to be assumed that they “need” it… that they need it in order to be “men””. The emphasis placed on vegetables within the preschool meals, as well as the “normalisation” of vegetarian food within the setting, may assist in reducing this association between masculinity and meat, and femininity and vegetables. Vegetarian food and vegetables become a staple for all, regardless of gender. This also assists
in reducing the risk of those who permanently adopt a vegetarian diet being labelled as “different”, “alternative”, or “Other”.

There are many other issues that arise with regards to gender and food, but they are too many to discuss in this study. However, I wish to emphasise that the relationship between gender and food, in particular meat, is even more complicated and nuanced than is able to be presented here. Racism, sexism, classism and speciesism are all associated with meat and its consumption (Adams 2015; Gålmark 2005; Harper 2011; Kheel 2004; Rogers 2008). With regards to the oppression of women, Hirdman’s basic formula A - non A works on the assumption that women are as important as animals, that is, not at all (Gålmark 2005; Hirdman 2001). The ecofeminist view is that “there can be no freedom from one form of oppression unless there is freedom from all of them” (Wright 2015, p. 17). Therefore, food is an important area to be addressed in the creation of a preschool that strives for gender equality and seeks to question society’s norms (Adams 2015; Gålmark 2005; Harper 2011).

5.6.2 Summary

The prevalence of vegetarian food within the preschool was seen to serve two purposes beyond its nutritional value: 1) to challenge and reduce the normativity of meat culture and 2) to reduce the association between masculinity and meat. All food was given the same status within the preschool, thus dissolving the gender and consumption hierarchy associated with different food types (Adams 2010, 2015).

I mentioned briefly that food is associated with a number of oppressions even if there is limited space in this thesis to discuss these issues in depth. That being said, I feel it would be interesting to know the school’s stance on speciesism, an issue that was not raised in any interviews or conversations with the preschool teachers. Throughout the other sections of this chapter, I have drawn attention to how the preschool actively works to eliminate categories such as class, gender and race, but the fact that meat and other animal products are still included within the preschool menu shows that the category of species has not been challenged to the same extent. The categories girl/boy have been dissolved, but not the category human/non-human. The oppression of the non-human animal is overlooked in favour of providing for the human animal and thus the hierarchy of species remains intact; a hierarchy that contributes to oppression (Adams 2015; Gålmark 2005; Wright 2015).
6 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how the LGBTQ preschool environment is designed to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality. In this concluding chapter, I will discuss the results in relation to this aim. The limitations of the study will also be investigated and presented, followed by implications for future research and practice.

6.1 Discussion

When I first set out to research how the salience of gender and gender norms could be reduced using messages in the language of the preschool environment, I had no concept of just how deeply embedded normative messages can be. As a result, the study grew as I realised that nothing can be overlooked when examining the language and messages of the world that surrounds us. Everything that is placed, arranged, designed and organised by people in the world carries with it meaning beyond its intended function. People have culture, and this culture is embedded in the artefacts and architectural spaces that they engage with, as well as in language. Messages may be conflicting if the preschool environment is not looked at in its entirety with regards to gender norms and equality. In the preschool in this study it was evident that there was an awareness of the language of space and materiality as from the pictures on the wall in the toilets, to the sticky tape in the art rooms, no area was overlooked with regards to the possibilities for challenging existing norms and discourses.

The six themes that emerged from the data - colour, play/learning materials, space, language, literature and visual text, and food - show the variety of elements that can, or need to be addressed when creating an environment that moves beyond categorical segregation and/or stereotyping. It was movement beyond categories that was most evident to my mind in analysing the data. Indeed, the rainbow flag and the words of the acronym LGBTQ (Sw. HBTQ) can be perceived as the introduction and acknowledgement of new categories beyond the “norm”, but finding a place within new categories did not appear to be the end goal of the preschool. Instead, categorical language was dissolving through neutralising any references to, for example, gender and sex (see Sczesny et al. 2016), as well as by showing an array of positionings without forming links between these positionings and a particular category. Looking at the pictures on the walls of the different family constellations, there
was no written text speaking of a “lesbian” family or an “interracial” couple. Variety lived within the broader category of “family”, a category that by its nature should not discriminate. I cannot comment on whether or not the exclusion of gender-specific language had an effect on the children’s gender stereotypes and play with other-sex peers as suggested in Hilliard and Liben’s study (2010), but it no doubt assisted in decreasing the salience of gender within the preschool as divisions according to this category failed to be emphasised. The teachers were communicating that gender was not an important defining aspect of a person’s identity.

The language of the preschool environment with its lack of categorical divisions made efforts to resist the interpellation of gender and narrow representation of what it means to “do” femininity or masculinity (see Butler 2006). The gender dichotomy was being dissolved, assisting in dismantling the gender hierarchy and the hegemonic heterosexual matrix that rely on the clear distinguishing of female and male roles and activities (Hirdman 2001). The preschool environment revealed acknowledgement, openness and acceptance of heterogeneity by creating a place for diverse representation, thus reducing the risk of an individual feeling “out-of-place” (Creswell 1996, 2004). There was no need for a closet to hide within, as whether it be on the walls, the symbolism of the rainbow, in the literature, the preschool artefacts, or in the layout of the room, the diversity of representation and spatial organisation made no assumptions as to the individual who should habit the preschool space.

In the preschool, identity categories were viewed as binds, limiting the individual’s ability to explore the full spectrum of life. If pink, for example, is regarded as being a colour that is only for girls, a “dangerous”, “low-status” colour, then boys may lose out on the opportunity to play or engage with toys where this colour dominates. If activities regarded as being “for boys” are given greatest floor space, then activities that are traditionally seen as “girls’” activities lead to restricted movement, gendering the body’s manoeuvrability. The preschool in this study was relieving the environment of categorical binds, allowing children freedom for exploration. The language of the environment had ceased to convey societal messages of normativity that distort the plurality of reality and was instead allowing children to discover life’s plurality on a micro scale. Whether it be through visual imagery of different family constellations, literature revealing life beyond normative whiteness and stereotyped feelings and activities, or variety with regards to food choices, the message was that there is no normative identity or normative behaviour that must be assumed. In order to enhance this message of freedom from normativity, spoken language too failed to position the individual
within a particular framework of female or male. Identity creation now lay in the hands of the children to choose the frameworks that gave them meaning, whilst also giving them the freedom to explore other frameworks. The dichotomous either/or became and.

Categories and norms with regards to race, ability, sexuality, eating habits and class were also losing their salience, revealing the presence of an intersectional perspective within the work of the preschool (see Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Literature and visual imagery in particular showed how varied humanity is without drawing attention to any individual as being “Other”. Books that included characters beyond the norm of the White, middle class, able-bodied woman and man (Hedlin 2010) didn’t focus on their “difference”, but rather it was the individual and their actions that stood in focus. As previously indicated, the ecofeminist view is that “there can be no freedom from one form of oppression unless there is freedom from all of them” (Wright 2015, p. 17), and this appeared to be an important message conveyed by the preschool setting. The organisation of the environment and the materials said that all individuals were to be seen equally, beyond the fictional categories of identities that are constituted through interpellation. As Butler (1988) expresses, “…we need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, express nothing”. It is necessary for gender to lose its grip on the physical world so that the complexity of this world may be acknowledged and understood without any need for category-maintenance-work (see Davies 2003).

Gender had great importance within the preschool, but only from the point of view of reducing its salience. The teachers were attempting to use the environment to fulfil Butler’s prescription for a view that constitutes the gender reality she believes there ought to be, that is, one in which materiality expresses nothing with regards to gender (Butler 1988). The teachers’ comments revealed a poststructuralist view of gender, which influenced their decisions with regards to the environment. Gender was seen as performative, culturally constituted and fictional, and was thus subject to change. The preschool environment was reflecting the goals of the Swedish preschool curriculum that state that the school has a duty to counteract traditional gender patterns and roles, expanding the child’s range of opportunities beyond those which are traditionally regarded as being “typically male” or “typically female” (Hedlin 2006; Odenbring 2014; Skolverket 2010; Wedin 2014). Perhaps a fear of this work could be that this results in the introduction of new norms that replace the old and can be just as restrictive. However, due the variety found within the preschool
environment, I find it hard to say that new norms were being created. Instead, I found new “normals”. What is seen by society as lying outside the norm was represented as simply being yet one more variation within humanity’s heterogeneity.

In the final subsection of Chapter 5, I discussed the relationship between food and gender, drawing attention to how the preschool even used the materiality of food to question normativity and gender norms. This remained the only area where a hierarchy was still evident within the physical environment as prepared by the teachers. If it really is impossible to be free from oppression before everyone is free from oppression, then the hierarchy of species must also be fully questioned. It is not only human animals who are gendered, oppressed and subject to a hierarchy; the oppression of female bodies is key to the meat industry (Adams 2015; Gålmark 2005; Kheel 2004; Nath 2011; Rogers 2008; Rothgerber 2013; Wright 2015). The historical and continued oppression of women has been linked to this industry (see Adams 2015; Light 2014) and so it may be wondered if an institution may claim gender freedom when this freedom is overlooked when it concerns those who are regarded as having lower status in a hierarchy that society has created and endorses.

This study has focused on the environment that the teachers can control in order to reduce gender salience in the preschool. According to the teachers in this particular preschool, there is no one element that can do the job of decreasing gender salience. All the environmental elements need to work together in order to move beyond the binary, beyond the bipolar ideals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, the hegemonic heterossexual matrix, gender system and interpellation of the subject. In the physical and language environments of the preschool, gender was losing its stance, being challenged, questioned and potentially toppled. The language of the spaces I walked was clear to me, saying that humanity comes in more shades than simply pink or blue.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

I concluded the previous subsection by saying that the language of the spaces I walked was clear to me, however I cannot comment on how the children themselves understood the language of the environment. The language of space is always open to interpretation, including interpretation based on new configurations (Løvlie 2007; Manzo 2003). The teachers have designed and prepared a particular environment that to them signals a deconstruction of norms, gender roles and categories, but the children themselves may hear
a different message. Children may also manipulate the environment during their play, creating new configurations that once again result in segregation and/or stereotyping. Another limitation of this study is that it encapsulates the preschool in a space that is devoid of outside influence; a space that is prepared for children who will react to, and interact within that space in accordance with the teachers’ expectations. However, children are part of a wider society that also influences their gender norms, and children themselves are active in the process of creating their own identities. That being said, the objective of this research was not to examine how the child interacts with the environment, but rather to show how the preschool setting can be designed with the goal of assisting in decreasing gender salience.

Future research may take into account how children understand the language of environments that have been purposely designed to decrease the salience of gender and explicitly show humanity’s heterogeneity. It may also be of interest to know what the effect is on the child’s own identity, especially upon moving to school where perhaps the reduction of gender salience is not a key issue. One of the teachers mentioned that some children are unaware of the difference between, for example, she and he. Does this cause problems, considering Swedish is not a genderless language (see Sczesny et al. 2016)?

This study can only comment on one example of a preschool that has gender neutrality at its heart. Even if every LGBTQ preschool receives certification through the same organisation, RFSL, it does not necessarily mean that they are all alike. It may be interesting to examine the environments of other LGBTQ preschools so as to potentially discover other factors that may assist in decreasing gender salience. A more in-depth analysis of each of the themes presented here may also be of interest in order to outline concrete guidelines for reducing gender salience in the preschool. Finally, a longitudinal study could provide insight into the long term effects of decreasing the importance placed on gender in early years education.

6.3 Practice Implications

The preschool is obligated to counteract traditional gender patterns and roles (Skolverket 2010). I argue that the environment should not be overlooked in this work. The teachers may convey one message in their interactions with the children, but this may conflict with what the physical setting, including the language environment, is saying to the children. Spaces and materiality are not merely to be viewed as silent and inanimate, as previous research has
shown their influence to be meaningful (Blaise 2005; Cresswell 2004; Lawson 2001; Nicholson 2005; Rasmussen 2004; Urbach 2000).

The Swedish preschool curriculum provides few guidelines on how the preschool environment should be designed, let alone how it can be used to assist with the goal of counteracting gender stereotypes (Skolverket 2010). The results of this study provide information about how the language of space can be used to decrease gender salience in the preschool, as well as in other environments designed for children. This does not require an architect, but simply adults who are open to listening to the messages that spaces and places within the external architectural walls transmit and are willing to adapt these spaces in order to provide children with possibilities beyond restrictions due to categorical identification. It should also be remembered that the language of space is not only important for the children, but also for their families. What message do two dads visiting the preschool with their child receive, for example, when the first thing they see upon entering is a rainbow flag?

It is not only through words that we communicate, even if I have emphasised the importance of words in this study due to the inability to separate words from materiality. The physical world also communicates, albeit non-verbally (Lawson 2001; Nordtømme 2012). Values and expectations are communicated through the environment that teachers have the ability to adapt to meet the needs of all individuals. In designing this environment, it is possible to look beyond the categories of she and he in order to rupture dichotomies and hierarchies.

6.4 Conclusion

In order to free the individual from gender categorisation, attention must be paid to the environment where the preschool child spends many hours each day. The child forms their identity within contexts, places that can open for possibilities or create closets where certain identities must be hidden for fear of the consequences. Impressions are left on the individual by the messages conveyed by the spaces through which they walk. Impressions are also left by the words the individual hears. If it is true that nothing is without meaning, then in order to rupture the gender system and reveal the performativity of gender, everything that is placed or said within the preschool needs to be done so with care. When the language that surrounds the child no longer seeks to position them in a particular box, but rather sets them free to find their own meanings, then out of closet and into the world emerges not a woman or a man, but an individual.
Epilogue

So what was on the other side of the door? One word. Colour. The first thing I saw when I opened the door was a rainbow, and I understood its symbolism. This was not a place where a parent may fear writing their partner’s name, revealing that their family isn’t the “norm”. This was not a place where a child would wonder if they could wear a dress and still be a superhero. The answer was clearly, “Yes”.

The world had been condensed into the spaces I walked. There was no sole human representing all of humanity. All were representative of this group. And yet I wondered where such diversity was the day before in the hotel lobby bar. The groups I saw had not been entirely homogenous, but their diversity was much more contained than the diversity found within the preschool walls. Were those who strayed too far from the norm to be found tucked away in society’s larger closets of the Castro bars where I once sat knowing that there I was the “odd one out”?

Whilst in the preschool I felt no mourning for that which I have been told is “normal”. There was only joy at seeing a place that may enable children to be more accepting of the diversity of the world, and may give these children the freedom to be more diverse with regards to their own identities so that they have no need to feel confined to a closet, no matter how large. And who wouldn’t have felt joy? I was surrounded by rainbows.
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