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Professional role and identity of Icelandic preschool teachers: effects of stakeholders' views

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In this article, we explore the reality of Icelandic preschool teachers who are, as in most other countries, predominantly female. The gendered nature of the role and the current identity adopted by preschool teachers appear to impact on their perceived status and professionalism. In this process, stakeholders in early childhood education (ECE), as well as the preschool teachers themselves, play important parts. The question that underlies the paper is: 'How do the views of preschool teachers and stakeholders in ECE affect the preschool teachers' professional identity?' The data used to answer the question are from focus group research carried out with preschool teachers and stakeholders in ECE in one community in Iceland. These stakeholders, besides preschool teachers and staff within the preschools, were parents, professionals at the municipal preschool office and politicians. The theoretical perspective informing the methodology of the research was 'symbolic interactionism' and the concept of 'democratic professionalism' was used as an aspirational framework to analyse the data. The findings reveal connections between the ideology relating to the preschool teachers' educational role, their limited leadership and the gendered views of stakeholders. At the end of the paper, implications and recommendations for preschool teachers are suggested.

Keywords: professional role; democratic professionalism; leadership; identity; early childhood education; gender; Iceland; Nordic

Introduction

In Iceland, as in most other countries, preschool teachers¹ are mainly female. This has been the case in Iceland since the start of formal early-years education when the Women's Alliance opened the first full-time day care centre for children in the 1920s. The profession is thus highly feminised. The stereotypical gendered perception and discourse in society means that working with the youngest children is considered women's work and is therefore subordinated. This view makes it harder for preschool teachers' professionalism to be acknowledged, and for preschool teachers to be seen as professionals as it may be taken for granted that anyone, but especially women, can 'take care' of children. This perception is reinforced when the view is based on the ideas of 'traditional professionalism' where professions develop skills based on theoretical knowledge, education and training, and where those skills are certified by examination, a code of professional conduct is oriented towards the

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public good, and a powerful professional organisation is established (Millerson 1964). Thus, a distinction is made between professions with fully fledged professional status, like doctors and lawyers, and ‘semi-professions’, which tend to be female-dominated occupational fields such as those of teaching, nursing and social work, where this status is claimed but is ‘neither fully established nor fully desired’ (Etzioni 1969, v).

In this paper, we will discuss how preschool teachers in Iceland see their professional identity and roles, including their leadership role, and how these are perceived by other stakeholders. The main research question is: ‘How do the views of preschool teachers and stakeholders in early childhood education (ECE) affect the preschool teachers’ professional identity?’ The definition of ‘professional identity’ used in the paper is based on Castells (1997), as ‘sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through the process of individuation’ (1997, 6). Therefore, ‘identities organise the meaning whereas roles organise the functions’ (Castells 1997, 7). Importantly, teacher identity is neither fixed nor imposed, but negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience (Sachs 2003).

The concept of ‘democratic professionalism’ (Oberhuemer 2005; Whitty 2008) is particularly relevant, since it focuses on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge among stakeholders. It thus represents a development of the traditional concept of professionalism, and is in keeping with the educating and caring aspect of early-years education. Connections will be made between gender, the ideology embedded in the professional role of preschool teachers, their understanding of leadership (a concept strongly identified with the male) (Schein 2007) and the construction of professional identities. Further, we argue that preschool teachers may need to become more politically conscious and act as leaders and agents of change if they are to be valued as important professionals.

Professional roles of preschool teachers

The professional role of preschool teachers is very much defined by what are seen as their functions. According to Vandenbroeck, Coussée, and Bradt (2010), ECE fulfils several functions in societies: the *educational* function, where beliefs of what educational outcomes need to be pursued may vary among professionals as well as parents; the *economic* function, which enables parents to reconcile their parental responsibilities with participation in the labour market; and the function related to *social justice*, or how ECE may diminish obvious inequalities or unjust situations. According to Vandenbroeck et al. (2010), these three functions are inevitably in tension with each other and they argue that ‘harmonious compromises between them are probably never to be achieved’ (2010, 149).

In the following section, we discuss these three functions and some of the issues related to each of them in the Icelandic context, and how they appear to influence the professional role and identities of preschool teachers.

Educational function

When focusing on the *educational* function of ECE, the preferred ideology varies. As Kristjánsson (2006) argues, the Nordic countries’ public child-centredness bears witness to a positive appraisal of childhood in its own right (2006, 22), and Nordic

people proudly lay claim to a distinctive, shared ideology about children and childhood 'including such cherished cornerstones as egalitarianism, emancipation, democracy, compromise, solidarity, and the concept of the good childhood' (Wagner and Einarsdóttir 2006, 2).

Research findings within Icelandic preschools reveal that the so-called social pedagogy approach is favoured (Einarsdóttir 2006), and that is similar to other Nordic countries. Rather than focusing on academic skills and preparing children for the next school level, education is seen as broad preparation for life (Bennett 2003, 2005; OECD 2006). Further, Icelandic preschool teachers think that the child's happiness and well-being (Einarsdóttir and Karlsdóttir 2005; Hreinsdóttir 2009), social skills and satisfying interpersonal relationships are very important. These findings underline the ideology of the 'good childhood'. However, recent research within the Nordic countries reveals a conflict between the social pedagogy approach and a policy focus on more formal learning or 'schoolification' (Thoresen 2009; Jensen, Broström, and Hansen 2010; Pramling Samuelson and Sheridan 2010).

Icelandic preschool teachers appear to be somewhat insecure about whether they should emphasise the caring or the teaching aspect of their role. According to Einarsdóttir (2006, 2008), preschool teachers seem to be divided into several camps regarding the proper *educational* role of the preschool. One camp, the most traditional, emphasises the role of preschool as providing care, emotional and social support, and the preschool years as the golden age of free play and development. The second camp emphasises preschool as the first level of formal education, where adults are teachers (not caregivers), whose job is to ensure that children learn what they need to learn even at this age. The third camp argues that caregiving and teaching within a play-based learning environment are mutually inclusive concepts, where both are seen as necessary to ensure high-quality experiences and outcomes for Icelandic children prior to their entrance into formal schooling at age six (Einarsdóttir 2006, 2008). In the third camp, the ideology of the professional role of preschool teachers seems to be developing, integrating education and care, as is favoured in the social pedagogy approach.

Icelandic educational policy appears to endorse the idea of preschool education as being more formal, since in 2008, it became compulsory for teachers and head teachers at all school levels, including early years, to complete an MEd degree (Act on the Education and Recruitment of Teachers and Head Teachers in Pre-School, Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School no. 87/2008). In the same law, there is a new stipulation for authorisation to use the occupational title *Preschool teacher*. With this clause, all traditional requirements of 'a fully-fledged profession' have at last been met (see e.g. Etzioni 1969). However, despite this, the emphasis of the Icelandic preschool teachers on the social pedagogy approach, the 'good childhood' and 'educare' (OECD 2006) seems to be confirming rather than decreasing the relationship between care, femininity and women's work.

Economic function

The length of children's day in preschools and the adult-child ratios in preschool are contextual factors that can be related to the economic function of preschools. Both these factors can also be connected to neoliberalism and to the policy-making of government and municipalities.

The deep financial crisis in Iceland, starting with the collapse of the banks in 2008, and the resulting negative economic situation have affected the working hours of men and women in Iceland. Icelandic males have always worked a long day, but since the recession, their working day has become shorter and the unemployment rate is higher. At the same time, the number of full-time working mothers has increased from 51.6% in 1991 to 65% in 2012 (Statistics Iceland 2013a), and the percentage of one- and two-year olds in preschools has steadily risen. In the year 2000, the percentage of one-year-old children attending preschools was 10% but by 2012, it had increased to 32%, while the percentage of two-year-old children had risen from 55 to 94% (Statistics Iceland 2013b). At the same time, the daily attendance of all age groups continues to increase as can be seen in Table 1 (Statistics Iceland 2012).

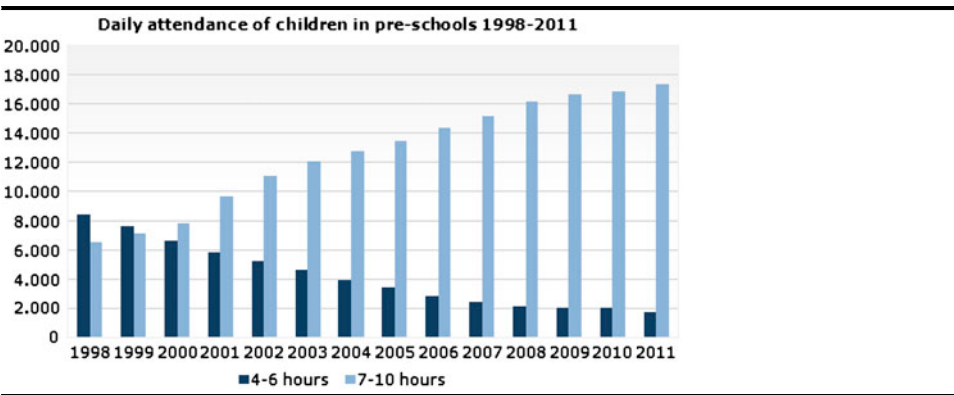
Some research findings (e.g. Gullöv 2006; Hreinsdóttir 2009; Johansen 2009) show that Nordic preschool teachers are concerned about the length of children's day in preschools caused by their parents' long working hours. They argue that children are really exhausted at the end of the day and should be spending more time with their parents. Norwegian preschool teachers' arguments relating to the families tend to be somewhat moralistic and, according to Johansen (2009), their views can be understood in connection with attachment theories and the developmental psychology perspective which focuses on the individual child. Further, they are also connected to ideas of the 'good childhood' where the image of the home is characterised by tranquillity and peace, and generally seen as a *haven in a heartless world* (Midjo 1994; Gullestad 2006).

In two wage contracts in recent years, the Preschool Teachers' Union has agreed to increase the adult-child ratios within the preschools. It is possible that these changes in the adult-child ratios accompanied by the relative shortage of preschool teachers and high turnover rate of staff until recently, have contributed to challenging the professionalism, professional roles and identities of the preschool teachers.

Social justice function

According to Vandenbroeck (2009), social justice in preschools is related to ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, family composition, class or social backgrounds, the inclusion of children labelled as having special needs, and all other forms of

Table 1. Daily attendance of children in preschools in Iceland, 1998–2011.



diversity. Social justice is thus not only about the enrolment of children from all social groups into preschools but also about how staff work with children from these groups within the preschools in inclusive ways, countering any prejudice that might be endemic in society. Further Vandembroeck (2009) states that ‘we cannot ignore that the educational system, including ECE, is one of the pathways in the (re)production of social inequality’ (Vandembroeck 2009, 167) and that we cannot focus just on the ‘average’ child anymore. Despite the focus on the ideology of the ‘good childhood’ within the Nordic countries, some researchers have pointed out that the ideology is not sufficient when it concerns newcomer immigrant children, socially endangered children and children at risk (Wagner 2006; Jensen 2009).

In this respect, ‘democratic professionalism’ has been seen as relevant (Vandembroeck 2009) to a more open and diverse society.

Democratic professionalism

It has been argued that professionalism needs reconceptualisation, and that traditional professionalism does not embrace all the necessary dimensions of teachers’ work (Gopinathan et al. 2008, 38). Whitty (2008) argues that collaboration with students, parents, other stakeholders and the community is necessary to develop successful education. This type of professionalism is termed as ‘democratic’, with a view to building a more democratic education system and ultimately a more open community (Whitty 2008, 44). Further, Oberhuemer (2005) defines four levels of activity related to the practice of ‘democratic professionalism’ in preschools: *interacting with children; partnership with parents; the professional knowledge base; and centre management and leadership*. These definitions expand and develop the concept of professionalism compared to the definition of ‘traditional’ professionalism given earlier.

In *interacting with children*, Oberhuemer (2005) emphasises that it is acknowledged that children are social agents with rights, participating in constructing and influencing their own life, based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff 2003). Langford (2010) argues that learning in the preschool as a forum or democratic space ‘is understood as a process where children, peers, teachers and families are actively, authentically and meaningfully engaged in relational co-construction of knowledge and skills’ (Langford 2010, 121). This understanding foregrounds the skill of sustained shared thinking, between adult and child and between children, which is a nexus for effective learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) and also foregrounds partnership with parents. Moss’s (2006) understanding of the pedagogue or preschool teacher as a *researcher* adds to this concept of co-constructive, reflective, critical, democratic and community-based knowledge. The preschool teacher is seen as ‘a reflective practitioner who seeks to deepen her understanding of what is going on and how children learn, through documentation, dialogue, critical reflection and deconstruction’ (Dahlberg et al. 2007, 82).

In the *knowledge base* of democratic professionalism, Oberhuemer (2005) emphasises especially the ethical part of the preschool teachers’ role and assumes that knowledge is in fact contestable. It is also seen as important to discuss sensitively the pedagogical and ethical viewpoints related to increasing cultural, social and economic diversity and to recognise and examine both personal and publicly endorsed assumptions, to acknowledge that there are ‘multiple ways of knowing’ (Oberhuemer 2005, 14). There Oberhuemer seems to be referring to common

prejudices related to minority groups such as homosexuals, different ethnicities and those who are socially disadvantaged. Additionally, Langford (2010) argues it is necessary to make gender and the intersection of gender, race and class the centre of pedagogy within the democratic forum. The connection to Vandenbroeck et al.'s (2010) definition of the function of social justice is obvious.

Further, Oberhuemer (2005) recommends *distributed leadership* which 'reflects a participatory culture of peer learning and of managing and evaluating organisational change' (Oberhuemer 2005, 13). According to Harris (2008), a distributed leadership perspective recognises that there are multiple leaders and leadership activities which are widely shared within and between organisations. It also acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice whether they are designated as formal leaders or not. Distributed leadership thus emphasises learning, change and the leadership of the many instead of the few, developing leadership capacity (Lambert 2006).

Gender and professional identity

In trying to make sense of their professional role, teachers may construct *multiple identities* to meet competing demands and expectations, and this can lead to a sense of instability and uncertainty (Woods and Jeffrey 2002, 105). Forde et al. (2006) argue that the complexities inherent in defining identity are obvious in many professions, particularly those which have only recently sought professional status (such as nurses and teachers). They have to form their professional identities within stressful working environments, and have to deal with management and policy emphases on standards, performance and outcomes. Stronach et al. (2002) speak of teacher and nurse identities as being 'in flux' (109). Although preschool teachers can now be seen as 'fully-fledged' professionals (Etzioni 1969, v), there are still stereotypical gendered prejudices connected to preschool teachers' work, as people seem to identify it with the domestic rather than the public sphere, thus calling on the 'caring script' that is 'a set of expectations that mimics women's traditional work in the home' (Acker 1999, 277). This may have induced resistance to recognising the profession's knowledge and competences. Coleman's (2002) findings among female and male secondary head teachers revealed that gendered stereotypes are now less overtly applied than earlier, but as Coleman (2002) argues: '[T]he evidence of the continuing application of the stereotypes against women can only be traced to the deep rooted, patriarchal prejudice of society' (2002, 95).

Additionally, Langford (2010) connects the status of early childhood teachers to the focus of child-centred pedagogy:

When I was a kindergarten teacher, a manual advised me that my classroom should be so centred on the children that a visitor would not be able to identify who I was. Rendering me invisible struck me as poignantly counter to attempts to raise the respect and status of early childhood educators and to include the teacher as an important member of the classroom community. Later, I encouraged my students in a teacher preparation programme to embrace child-centred pedagogy. Yet as we discussed the role of the teacher in child-centredness as a 'facilitator', and 'stage manager', I felt uneasy about placing a group of predominantly young women struggling with the low status accorded their professional choice 'behind the scenes' of an ECE setting. (Langford 2010, 113)

Steedman (1987, in Langford 2010) argues that the prescribed psychological dimensions of modern good mothering were forged by nurses, nannies and primary school teachers who represent the ideal mother who spends the entire day in one room with children, watching and nurturing them. Similarly, Moss (2006) refers to a gendered image of the preschool teacher as ‘substitute mother’, where ‘care work’ and ‘attachment pedagogy’ are emphasised and little or no education is needed to undertake the work. Einarsdóttir’s (2006, 2008) definition of the first and most traditional camp of Icelandic preschool teachers seems similar to that description and to some extent it can be related to Nordic child-centredness and the ‘good childhood’.

An element which can diminish preschool teachers’ sense of professionalism and affect their construction of professional identity is that preschool teachers are a group of professionals working in a field dominated by laypersons (Steinnes 2007), specifically a low-paid, relatively unqualified female workforce, and this also contributes to the gender dimension of the role. In Steinnes’ (2007) findings, Norwegian preschool teachers claimed that they had developed specialist knowledge during their education but because of limited pedagogical discussions within the preschools, their knowledge was soon ignored or situated ‘behind the scenes’ (see Nørregård-Nielsen 2006; Langford 2010). Further, Steinnes (2007) argues that if the preschool teachers themselves are not aware of, or do not value, their own competences, they can have difficulties telling others about them. Thus, they can have difficulties in differentiating themselves from the laypersons working by their side (see also Nørregård-Nielsen 2006; Kuisma and Sandberg 2008; Olsen 2011).

These difficulties can be related to preschool teachers’ view on leadership. Preschool teachers in Iceland are supposed to be leading professionals within preschools (Preschool Act 90/2008) but as research findings have shown (Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003; Rodd 2006; Hard 2008), preschool teachers see themselves primarily as teachers or carers of children but not as leaders working with adults. Woodrow (2008) argues that research findings from Australia (e.g. Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003; Hard 2004) reveal a strong lack of identification with the concept of ‘leadership’ amongst early childhood individuals and she advocates for more *robust* identities of preschool teachers, characterised by leadership and agency. Woodrow (2008) refers to the Robust Hope project (Sawyer et al. 2007, in Woodrow 2008), where resilience and democratic possibilities become visible as potential resources for building professional identities characterised by alliance building and activism, collegiality and community, instead of self-interested individualism and hierarchical relationships.

Theoretical perspective and methodology of the study

The theoretical perspective, or philosophical stance, informing the methodology of this study is interpretive, based on ‘symbolic interactionism’, which stems from the pragmatist philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934), and the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969). The central and critical idea of ‘symbolic interactionism’ is the notion of meaning and its influence on social behaviour. The individuals who are the focus of this research are group (class) leaders within preschools. Data were gathered by interviewing focus groups of these preschool teachers and relevant stakeholders from three preschools in one municipality in Iceland. Focus groups seemed appropriate for exploring how the stakeholders’ points of view are constructed and expressed (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). The focus groups were

five in total: preschool head teachers and assistant head teachers, group leaders and preschool teachers, assistants, parents and professionals at the municipal preschool office. Most often, there were six members in each group, and they were organised as is shown in Table 2. Further, two local politicians from the relevant early childhood committee were interviewed individually about their policy and emphases. These stakeholders were chosen as they all affect the learning and welfare of the preschool children in the community. The data used in the article are explored in more detail in Jónsdóttir (2012).

In analysing the data, typology analysis (Grbich 2007, 46; Ryan and Lobman 2007) was used, in order to group information of particular relevance to the research, collating all data relating to particular issues, identifying variations, layers and dimensions and classifying into types or subgroups.

In the research, Lichtman's (2006) 'absolute stance' (58) was practised, emphasising four central ethical issues: protection from physical or psychological harm; prevention of deception; protection of privacy and informed consent. The research which informs this discussion is qualitative, focusing on views of preschool teachers and some stakeholders in one community in Iceland. The findings are thus not necessarily generalisable. However, the community is amongst the biggest in Iceland, with more than 10 preschools, and can in many ways be seen as typical of the ways that preschools are run. Purposeful sampling was used within the community since the three preschools chosen had a higher percentage of preschool teachers working in them than the average preschool in the country. Thus, they related specifically to the research questions on professionalism and professional identity, and the aim was to get views of preschool teachers, staff, parents and politicians on how preschool activities are performed first and foremost by leading professionals rather than assistants.

Findings

Findings from the interviews will be discussed in relation to three emerging themes: first, the preschool teachers' views on whether the main function of preschool is educational or economic; second, views on the importance of the qualifications and expertise of preschool teachers; and finally, the extent to which the teachers themselves and the other stakeholders see the teachers in leadership roles.

Table 2. Focus group interviews.

Group 1 Preschool head and assistant head teachers	Group 2 Preschool teachers	Group 3 Other staff	Group 4 Professionals at the preschool office	Group 5 Parents
One head teacher and one assistant head teacher from each of the three preschools	One group leader and one preschool teacher from each preschool	Two other staff members from each preschool	Directors and pedagogical consultants from the preschool office, five in total	Two parents from the parent board of each preschool

Preschool teachers' role and the functions of ECE

The first thing that was apparent when analysing the findings was the influence of the functions of ECE as defined by Vandenbroeck et al. (2010). There appeared to be tension, especially between the *educational* and the *economic* functions, which the professionals within the preschools labelled as 'service to parents'. The preschool teachers focused strongly on the *educational* dimension of their role where they saw themselves as professionals and experts. All elements strengthening that dimension were perceived as 'positive'. They were especially satisfied where the preschool head teacher was a strong professional leader and they felt themselves to be part of the professional team.

On the other hand, the preschool teachers saw the *economic* dimension of their role, specifically the number of children within groups, accompanied by long days in preschool for children, as a 'negative' factor. Both the numbers of children and the hours they spend in preschool are factors determined by state and municipality policy. These policies greatly affected the preschool teachers' educational and leadership role, as they meant that they needed to structure the day more and tighten the schedule, and this downgraded their sense of their status as professionals.

The preschool teachers hardly mentioned the function of *social justice*, except as it related to special needs teaching. Otherwise, the 'average' child was their focus (see Vandenbroeck 2009).

The educational *ideology* espoused by the preschool teachers can be related to Einarsdóttir's (2006, 2008) third camp, integrating caregiving and teaching, favouring the social pedagogy approach, the good childhood and Nordic child-centredness. Additionally, the preschool teachers' beliefs touched upon the sociocultural approach and the notion of the teacher as a researcher (Moss 2006). Their emphasis was on teaching the children but they did not want to change their daily work towards more 'schoolification' or 'academization'. The preschool teachers perceived that their role towards the parents had changed enormously in recent years. They argued that their marketing of education had made the educational function of the preschool more visible and the parents more aware of the preschools' importance and educational emphasis. One of the preschool teachers said:

I think that one of the reasons is that preschool teachers have been fighting and making the activity more visible ... that the demands from the parents can be connected to our actions ... we have made the importance of preschool education more apparent and from there a circle has developed.

In describing their actions they sounded like activists and agents of change (Woodrow 2008), although they did not seem to have activated the parents as participative partners, as is emphasised in democratic professionalism.

The qualifications and expertise of preschool teachers

In some ways the preschool teachers themselves undervalued their own expertise at work, for example, they allowed the preschools to hire temporary contract professionals to 'teach' subjects such as music, dance and philosophy, which they could easily provide themselves. Although the professionals at the preschool office thought that the preschool teachers were more secure in their educational role now than some years ago, they considered that they tended to exhibit an 'inferiority complex'

being too eager to hire other specialists in the preschools, and thus downgrading their own expertise.

In addition, the preschool teachers did not seem to identify the impact on their professional role of having so many relatively unqualified assistant teachers operating alongside them. They actually felt that the experienced ones were ‘as precious as the preschool teachers’ on the job. The unqualified or assistant teachers also felt that their position and the position of preschool teachers, as the lowest groups in the hierarchy, was almost equal (see Olsen 2011) and there seemed to be similar reactions from other stakeholders. For example, the professionals at the preschool office tended to talk about the preschool teachers (those who were not group or class leaders) and the assistant teachers lowest in the hierarchy as one joint group, which does not encourage the perception of preschool teachers as leading and visible professionals in the preschools (Langford 2010) or in the field.

However, the preschool head teachers and assistant head teachers talked about the preschool teachers as strong professionals, emphasising the leading role of the group or class leader.

The parents’ views were mixed in relation to the professional status of preschool teachers, as some saw them as in charge of the planning and ‘formal’ teaching so that it did not matter who was ‘sitting with the child when cutting with scissors or watching the children play’. They believed for instance that ‘assistant teachers were necessary because they brought in different perspectives’, and ‘the education of the staff was not a big deal if the individual loves to be with children and likes to see their success and achievement’. This view that education of the workforce does not matter can be connected to the gendered image of the worker as *substitute mother* (Moss 2006). As one parent said:

... it is not necessary that everyone is a preschool teacher; they should take care of the planning of the work, teach and be professionally responsible ... You do not necessarily need preschool teachers for example during the lunchtime or in the free play outside. I do not quite understand the role of the assistant teachers ... they need to have full licence to work in the preschools and not to be frightened about preschool teachers are taking over their job, they should be allowed to take courses and be respected as such.

Only one parent underlined the necessity that all practitioners should be educated.

In that respect, it seems that the preschool teachers have not managed to inform the parents clearly about what is inherent in their professional role and expertise, and the ideology and emphasis of the Nordic child-centredness and ‘good childhood’.

The politicians did not appear to appreciate the expertise of the preschool teachers within the preschools and did not encourage any action to increase their number. On the contrary, the politicians liked to see other groups of people in the preschools, such as other professionals, assistant teachers, ‘ordinary people’, ‘experienced mothers’ and ‘grandmothers’ and hiring all kind of people and professionals was seen as a potential strength, not a weakness. Similarly, Nørregård-Nielsen’s (2006) findings revealed that the preschool teachers sensed more educational demands from parents and politicians but at the same time, there was not much talk about the necessity of increasing their number.

Somehow, there seemed to be a gap between how the preschool teachers see themselves, as experts and professionals, and how the other stakeholders,

particularly parents and politicians, see them. It is noticeable from the findings that these stakeholders did not recognise the expertise of the preschool teachers in the educational work with children. In fact, it seemed to be openly acknowledged that assistant teachers are capable of performing the preschool teachers' educational role with the children if they are supervised, and little importance is placed on the expertise, qualifications and professional role of the preschool teacher. It can thus be argued that these stakeholders' views present preschool teachers' identity as 'layperson' oriented and implicitly gendered.

Leadership of preschool teachers

The preschool teachers appeared to see leadership vested in the person of the head teacher and even those who were group or class leaders did not see themselves as powerful leading professionals within the preschools. Thus, they did not seem to have a robust leadership identity (Woodrow 2008) or practise leadership as is expected in democratic professionalism (Oberhuemer 2005). As Jónsdóttir's (2009) former research on leadership in preschools reveals, those who are working with the children seem to emphasise different leadership styles from those higher in the hierarchy, and this applied to group/class leaders, preschool teachers and assistant teachers. As the preschool teachers and assistant teachers described the leadership within the groups, it was much more participative and collaborative than hierarchical, and thus more in the spirit of distributed leadership (Harris 2008) and akin to more 'feminine' leadership styles (Schein 2007).

Jónsdóttir's previous research findings (2009) indicated the existence of a strong stereotypical 'masculine' hierarchical authority structure within preschools, which exacerbates conflicts and irritations as it clashes with the more stereotypically 'feminine' horizontal and collaborative structure which is generally practised at classroom level. In the case of such a clash, the group/class leaders function as middle leaders, or 'piggies in the middle', with formal demands from the leaders 'above' and micro-political demands from the assistant teachers 'below'. It is argued here that since most stakeholders see the preschool teachers and assistant teachers as lowest in the hierarchy, virtually as one joint group, it makes the expertise of preschool teachers even more 'invisible'.

The gendered world of preschool teachers

As mentioned above, the preschool teachers perceived all elements strengthening the *educational* dimension of their role as 'positive' but they saw the *economic* dimension of their role as 'negative'. To cope with these two different worlds and to survive, the preschool teachers thus seemed to have developed at least twofold identities, the 'positive' and the 'negative' one (Stronach et al. 2002; Woods and Jeffrey 2002; Sachs 2003; Forde et al. 2006), and are trying desperately to hold on to the 'positive' one.

Thus, they focused on and constructed their identities in relation to the children, staff, parents and leaders within the preschools, strengthening their educational role and their 'positive' identity. In doing so, they were avoiding and attempting to shut out the negative forces, such as the demands of parents for longer opening hours, and the gendered views of stakeholders, who equated the work of preschool teachers with that of unqualified women. As the preschool teachers chose to focus on the

collaboration and meaning making within the preschools, there appeared echoes of the gendered image of the teacher who represents the ideal mother and spends the entire day in one room with children, watching and nurturing them (Langford 2010, quoting Steedman 1985). There is a risk that these similarities with the role of the mother in the home create barriers which impede the recognition of the profession's knowledge and competences (Acker 1999). Simultaneously, the preschool teachers are making themselves 'invisible', situating themselves 'behind the scenes' (Langford 2010). Further, they do not identify themselves with the concept of robust leadership (Woodrow 2008), which would enhance their professional status, nor do the stakeholders perceive them as such.

It is interesting to see the similarities between, on the one hand, the findings identified here with Langford's (2010) connection of the ideology of child-centredness and stereotypical gendered views, and on the other, the 'invisibility' of the preschool teacher's professionalism and expertise. As Nordic child-centredness is one characteristic of the 'good childhood', this invisibility may actually be part of the cultural heritage within Icelandic preschools. Thus, it might be argued that if the Icelandic preschool teachers want to change their leadership identity, they may simultaneously have to change their educational one, favouring a more 'visible' educational role in the community.

By focusing on the stakeholders' rhetoric, especially that of some parents and politicians, it appears that there are underlying views which are gendered and detrimental to the status of preschool teachers supporting their 'layperson oriented identity', 'invisibility' and lack of status. Preschool teachers' identity is deeply affected by the presence of such views, but they could themselves be more robust about exercising and exhibiting their expertise and leadership, thus developing their professional identity (Stronach et al. 2002; Sachs 2003).

Conclusions and implications

In this paper, the aim was to trace the connections between preschool teachers' professional role, their educational ideology, their leadership image, the views of other stakeholders and the gender dimension. Our conclusions relate both to the gendered views of parents and politicians as well as to the agency and views of the preschool teachers themselves.

It is obvious that the views of stakeholders who make up the role set of the preschool teachers will affect their professional role, leadership and identity, but so too does the stance of the preschool teachers themselves. On one hand, it seems that very important stakeholders, such as parents and politicians, still send stereotypical gendered messages to the preschool teachers and the wider constituency, which can be traced to the deep-rooted, patriarchal prejudice of society (Coleman 2002, 95), and works to downgrade their professionalism, expertise, leadership and social status.

On the other hand, the preschool teachers could develop a more robust leadership identity which is first and foremost shaped by them (Woodrow 2008). The concept of 'democratic professionalism' (Oberhuemer 2005) is relevant with its emphasis on co-constructing knowledge with parents and other stakeholders potentially shifting the role of the preschool teachers away from pure child-centredness. As Langford (2010) argues, the preschool teachers have to be more visible, having authority, agency, social position, status and significance central within a new democratic space or forum. In such a preschool, a distributed or reshaped form of

leadership would be more likely to flourish than a more hierarchical style which does not emphasise the knowledge and expertise of all preschool teachers, particularly those at the lower levels. Despite the high academic standards expected of preschool teachers and the educational and economic significance of their work, their role is generally seen more as that of a caregiver than as that of an expert having specialist knowledge of ECE. This view is stereotypically gendered and the consequence is the undervaluing of the profession. In this context, it is most important for the preschool teachers to be fully conscious of their own professional identity and to communicate this, with all its implications, to stakeholders in early childhood education. Thus, they may work towards their growth as democratic professionals, bringing attendant benefits to their profession and to the education and care of the youngest members of society.

Note

1. We will be using the concepts *preschool* and *preschool teacher* as is done in the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture's translation of the Icelandic Preschool Act (no. 90/2008). Although the direct translation of the Icelandic concept *leikskóli* is *playschool*, the playschools, or preschools, are for children until they turn six years old and start the compulsory school.

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