

## **A touch of touch: Preschool teacher education students' reflections about physical touch**

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International research has shown that several countries have adopted a cautious attitude towards physical touch between educators and children. Physical touch in preschool is a sensitive and difficult issue that requires preschool teacher education to address the question in a considerate and thoughtful manner. Nevertheless, the question of how students are prepared for the touch that is part of an educational environment with children has only been investigated to a limited extent. The aim of the present study is therefore to study how students perceive that the question of touch is handled in Swedish preschool teacher education. Data was collected through surveys (N = 204) and through semi-structured interviews with students and graduates in preschool teacher education. The results show that the informants felt that their interests and needs were not met. Instead, they were forced to take their own responsibility for raising the issue. To the extent that discussions about physical contact were addressed in education, it was primarily negative aspects that were raised. The results are discussed, for instance from a gender perspective. The men in the program are more affected by the lack of a clear place for touch in the program.

### **Introduction**

Physical contact between educators and children is part of everyday activities within preschool. Children's need of physical touch to develop and feel good is well documented (Andersen, 2008; Barnett, 2005; Johansson, 2013; Underdown, Barlow & Brown, 2010). For example, studies have shown that touch reduces stress, benefits physical health and has a positive impact on our well-being. Massage activities have shown good health-promoting results in Swedish schools (Kostenius, 2013). However, physically touching children in educational situations is also a sensitive and difficult subject that requires respect for the child's body and integrity (Öhman, 2016). Repeated criticism of teacher education generally maintains that the students are not prepared enough for the profession. Researchers talk about "practice shock" or "reality shock", referring to many teachers' negative experience of the first job because the program did not equip them for the tasks involved (Veenman, 1984). There are therefore good reasons for preparing students in their education for touch between educators and children as part of their future profession. The purpose of the present study is thus to investigate how students perceive the way the question of touch is handled in Swedish preschool teacher education.

### **Literature review**

The literature on the effects of touch is extensive, including a great many studies showing that touch is positive and increases our well-being (Field, 2002). Research about the

importance of touch started more than six decades ago when Spitz' (1945, 1946, 1951) and Harlow's (e.g., 1959, 1963) studies showed the importance of touch and physical proximity for a healthy physical, mental and social development. Research with institutionalised infants and younger children who received minimal physical touch from nurses showed delayed cognitive (MacLean, 2003) and neurological (Chugani et al., 2001; Field 2010; MacLean, 2003; Nelson, 2007) development. Further studies have shown that body contact plays a decisive role in the child's physical development and socio-emotional well-being (e.g., Field, 2001; Underdown, Barlow & Brown, 2010). Generally speaking, the dominant 20th-century assumption is that what is most harmful to children is not too much, but too little touch (Piper, Taylor & Garratt, 2012).

In preschool activities, physical contact between teachers and children is part of the daily care. Physical touch helps to create and maintain trustworthy relationships allowing children to feel safe and giving them an opportunity to become independent (Hansen, 2007). In Sweden, preschool maintains a strong position, and parents have a high level of confidence in the organisation (Svenskt Kvalitetsindex, 2015). Children aged 1 to 5 may attend, and by 2015, 83% of all Swedish children in this age range were enrolled in preschool (Skolverket 2017). Of these, just over half were 1-3 years old (Skolverket, 2016). Since its inception, the activities of the Swedish preschool have been characterised by double roles for more than 150 years: 1) the educational role of supporting and stimulating children's development, and 2) the caring role of providing supervision and nursing for the children when the parents are working. Both the teaching and caring of younger children have been regarded as female tasks (Tallberg-Broman, 1991). However, which of these roles has been considered the most important has shifted under the influence of the structure of society and the views of children and their needs. Today, a holistic view of the child is emphasised, by which care and learning are not separated (Ekström, 2007; Swedish National Agency for Education 2011).

International studies of touch in preschool have shown that most educators are convinced that touch is positive for children. At the same time, there are studies showing that educators may refrain from touch in their professional work. One reason offered by the educators themselves is the fear of being accused of inappropriate touch (Owen & Gillentine, 2011). In this context, the fact that the job is associated with women and femininity plays an important role. Gender studies in the area have shown how the gender coding of teaching young children can result in looking upon men in early childhood education and care (ECEC) with distrust (Foster & Newman, 2005; Sargent, 2005). The perceived distrust and discussion of risky touch has also led a great number of men to consider leaving the profession due to feeling particularly vulnerable to suspicions of abuse and pedophilia (Munk, Larsen, Leander & Soerensen, 2013). Even women working as teachers have experienced suspicion and insufficient trust (Piper et al., 2012; Piper & Smith, 2003; Tait, 2001; Tobin, 1997). According to Andrzejewski and Davis (2008), teachers who have used physical touch in their desire to be caring and creating safety automatically risk being considered unreliable. This is especially evident in some educational situations like working in the toddler department with physical activities and in special educational contexts, i.e., in situations where touch is often used as an effective educational work tool.

In general, physical touch forms a fundamental part of care and a way of communicating attention, sympathy, closeness and encouragement (Pedrazza, Minuzzo, Berlanda & Trifiletti, 2015; Routasalo, 1999). Preschool teachers are expected to touch the bodies of children, but the knowledge of how preschool students learn about touch is an overlooked research area. Touching in preschool and school is not an unproblematic subject. It is an issue that raises both positive and negative thoughts and feelings, not least as to who may touch the children, and when and how it should take place (McWilliam & Jones, 2005; Piper & Smith, 2003). Especially men working within ECEC may face challenges due to cultural beliefs about what men and women should do. Pruit (2015) describes an association chain where a man who has chosen to work within ECEC does not match the conception of what men are expected to do. This gives rise to the notion that he is unmanly, which in turn leads to questioning his sexuality and intentions. Similarly, Connell (1995) uses the concept of *gender vertigo* to describe, for example, the puzzlement that may emerge when a man chooses the preschool teacher profession. The preschool cultural and social associations of women and femininity clash with the man's career choice, which brings confusion. Viewed from this perspective, it appears that there are urgent questions that need to be raised in preschool programs regarding the relationship between teachers and children in preschool activities.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

The empirical material of the study is part of a larger research project. The project is titled *Touch in Preschool - Care or Risk?* and is funded by The Swedish Research Council. The study is based on empirical material that examines experiences of how preschool teacher education addresses touch between educators and children. Preschool teacher education in Sweden is a university education (3.5 years) and is both workplace-based and university-based. All participants were in their final semester in the program or had completed their education within the last 6 months. This study includes questionnaire responses from a total of 204 preschool student teachers as well as semi-structured interviews with 20 of them.

Of the survey participants, 182 were women and 16 were men, while six participants did not indicate gender. The participants came from two university colleges and two universities in Sweden, where the difference between university colleges and universities is the entitlement to award a postgraduate qualification. The four institutes were selected with the aim to have a wide geographical coverage across the country. Also, institutes which did not offer preschool teacher education with class room teaching during the time period of the data collection, and the authors affiliated universities, were excluded. The survey participants ranged in age between 22 and 48 years (mean=28.0; standard deviation=6.18). In order to increase the proportion of responses from male preschool student teachers, active contact was taken with additional university programs. In this way, another five male participants were reached. The surveys were distributed to the students in class by the researcher. The students were fully informed about the purpose of the research and how their responses would be handled. The questionnaire was given and

answered in Swedish as this is the primary language used in their education. It required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Of the interviewees, 14 were women and six men. They studied at or had recently completed their studies at six different universities. The average age of the informants was 29.4 years. Three of the interviews were conducted by telephone and one was done via *Skype*, because of the geographical distance. All of these were male informants. The remaining interviews were conducted at a place agreed on by the informant and the interviewer, usually in the informant's home. The interviews were individual and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and 25 minutes.

The participants were informed in writing as well as orally about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation, which could be withdrawn at any time. They were further informed that their involvement was confidential (allowing them to provide contact information or to be anonymous), that the collected material would be used for scientific purposes only, and that all material would be anonymised. The project in its entirety has been ethically reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethics Examination Board in Linköping, Sweden. The survey material was collected in 2015 and 2016. The interviews were conducted in 2016.

### **Instrument**

Studies of how students are prepared during their education for touch in preschool are hard to find, both in Sweden and internationally. Therefore, a questionnaire was developed with questions of both a wide and a more specific nature. These were about experiences of and reflections on touch in preschool and how touch was handled in the education program. A panel of experts were asked to review the items for validity. A pilot study was also conducted before the data-collection. The questions about preschool teacher education consisted of eight items answered on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 corresponded to "Not at all", and 5 corresponded to "To a great extent"). After this followed four open questions that addressed the knowledge about touch the students had received during their education, and what the teaching methods related to this were like.

The interview guide was developed to capture the students' experience of how touch was addressed during the program and their thoughts about touch between themselves and the children in preschool. In addition to background information, the interview guide also included questions about physical interaction with children in relation to university studies and placement. Initially, the students were given the opportunity to define their own concerns, as we were interested to see how they reasoned about the concept of touch. As the interviews were semi-structured, the questions could be reformulated and arranged in a different order to the different informants and also adapted to the varying situations. The respondents' answers were followed up by questions where the informants were asked, for example, to clarify their answer or provide an illustrative example.

## Data analysis

Data was collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews. To process data from the surveys, the *SPSS 22.0* software program was used. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. All informants were offered an opportunity to read their printed interview. None of the informants objected to the transcription. The interviews were subsequently analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Tuckett, 2005). This was made by transcribing the interviews verbatim and reading the interview several times afterwards. For the purpose of the study, relevant parts of the transcript were highlighted to distinguish important topics in the material. These themes were compared and then retested against the material before they were definitely determined. Both surveys and interviews were carried out in Swedish. For this article, excerpts have been translated into English and pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

## Results

The aim of the present study is to explore how students perceive the way the issue of touch is handled in Swedish preschool teacher education. The results of the study are presented below in two steps. The results section begins with a summary of the questionnaire questions. This gives an overview of how the students perceive questions about touch in the program. After that follows an in-depth result section based on what emerged from the interviews and the themes that could be identified in the material.

A high percentage of the preschool student teachers who participated in the questionnaire study ( $N = 204$ ) state that touch had not been addressed at all during the education period. Only 1.0% agree in a great extent with the statement: "Physical touch has been addressed during the education period". A large number of respondents indicate that they had no theoretical knowledge (27.0% giving the "Not at all" response) or practical knowledge (20.3% giving the "Not at all" response) (see Table 1). Nevertheless, more than every tenth student felt well prepared for the touch that may occur between preschool teachers and children (with 12.7% choosing the response option "To a great extent"). Conversely, a great many students agree that it is valuable to discuss touch (34.3% responding "To a great extent"). In summary, a majority of students in the study express a wish to gain more knowledge of touch during the education period (30.9% answering "To a great extent").

In the open questions, preschool student teachers clearly expressed how they perceive the way touch is addressed within their education:

Female (university): It has not been discussed at all in principle.

Female (university): It is a sensitive topic that is not discussed.

The answers to the open questions also revealed that it is primarily the students themselves who bring up the topic for discussion, usually during a seminar:

Table 1: Questions about preschool teacher education. Response rates in percent.

| Survey question   | Not at all<br>(1) | (2)  | (3)  | (4)  | To a great extent<br>(5) |
|---|-------------------|------|------|------|--------------------------|
| Physical touch has been addressed during the education period.  | 18.1              | 52.0 | 24.0 | 4.4  | 1.0                      |
| I think I gained theoretical knowledge regarding the relationship between preschool teachers and children.                      | 27.0              | 43.6 | 23.0 | 5.4  | -                        |
| I believe that the education I get gives me practical knowledge about the relationship between preschool teachers and children. | 20.3              | 50.5 | 19.6 | 8.3  | .5                       |
| We have raised the value of touch between preschool teachers and children.  | 22.5              | 40.2 | 25.0 | 8.8  | 2.5                      |
| We have discussed the risk of touch between preschool teachers and children.  | 22.1              | 34.8 | 23.0 | 17.2 | 2.5                      |
| I feel well prepared for any touch that may occur between me as a preschool teacher and the children.                           | 1.5               | 13.2 | 37.3 | 34.3 | 12.7                     |
| I wish to acquire more knowledge of touch in preschool during my education.   | 3.4               | 6.4  | 25.0 | 33.8 | 30.9                     |
| It is valuable to discuss touching in education.  | .5                | 2.0  | 22.1 | 40.2 | 34.3                     |

*Note.* With attrition constituting a percentage category, the total does not amount to 100%.

Female (university): It has been brought up by other students at the seminars.

Female (university college): Mostly during placements or at student-led workshops, where the subject has been brought up by ourselves. An important topic!

Students expressed a need for acquiring more knowledge of touch and for discussing this topic with each other and with their teachers. A student (male, university college) talked about his insecurity:

I'm unsure about what others will think if I as a man take up children in my arms. I think I will assume a different behaviour based on others' views of men in preschool.

There are also examples of even stronger expressions for what is appropriate touch. Another male person (university) wrote:

This particular thing of being wrongly accused of pedophilia, that's my biggest fear. Because even though I would NEVER do anything like that, a false accusation could ruin my life.

The survey ended with an open question about whether the student had any requests for matters that should be addressed in their education regarding touch in preschool. Although some students responded that they do not want more knowledge or discussion of the subject, most of the respondents expressed their lack of knowledge about it. In

summary, they responded that they wanted more knowledge of the following aspects: approaches and guidelines, touches and violations, gender-related concerns, acting-out children, how touch could be perceived, how to use touch to promote relationships, notification requirements, and boundary setting for children's physical approaches such as kisses.

## Results from interviews

The results of the semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth picture of what emerged in the survey. In total, the interviews showed four important aspects that correspond to the aim of the study, i.e., how the informants perceive that the issue of touch is handled in preschool teacher education. These themes are: 1) the lack of clear support; 2) student responsibility; 3) being each other's best resources; and 4) exposed position – being a male in the program. Below follows a review of each theme.

### 1. Lack of clear support

All informants except one expressed that touch has received a low priority in the program. Regardless whether the informant was studying at a university college or university, there was no module available that clearly addresses this field, according to the students. There are no lecture series, nor is there any reading list addressing the topic in general or preparing students for daily physical contacts between preschool teachers and children. Instead, the students emphasised that the program is more theoretical and research-based. Very little is mentioned about how to relate to each other and to different situations. One informant expressed the following concerns with regard to the program:

Mikaela: I don't feel that there is much talk about the contact between children and adults, about children sitting on my lap or things like that. There is not much talk about that particular aspect of the profession. That we are both physical beings and that my body will be close to their bodies.

Where and when the issue of touch is addressed varied greatly. One informant claimed that the subject of touch had arisen in connection with a lecture on law. Still, the question was really just 'a touch of touch' while the lecture mainly concerned the Swedish legal system and legal rights.

A couple of informants argued that the subject of touch had been addressed in special education classes. Touch was then brought up when talking about children with different neuropsychiatric diagnoses. One of the students related that some discussions mentioned a little about attitudes and how to physically touch the children in handling with them, and that this was especially true for children with disabilities. Another student mentioned that touch was brought up in connection with a course in developmental psychology, without being able to give a clear example of the context or how it was dealt with. Several of the informants referred to a single seminar, a single lecture or a single workshop in which the issue of physical touch was discussed. In most cases, however, the issue was addressed

because students had expressed a wish to talk about it and not because it had been part of the curriculum. One informant described the treatment of touch as follows:

Helen: I don't remember any particular example, but it might have been when we studied developmental psychology ... so it was more on a theoretical level, what touch means for a child. But ... no, I can't remember that we spoke explicitly about it.

Another informant mentioned a drama module when touch was once discussed but added that it was about playing games involving nursery rhymes. Another student refers to a lecture in ethics. Several of the students suggested other modules and elements in their program when touch was talked about, such as lectures on conflict management and sex education. Malin gives an illustrative answer to how she experienced that touch had been addressed in the program and in what contexts:

Malin: Well, it's almost nothing. It was in the ethics module with the heavy stuff when touch is not OK and how to think about it. But regarding everyday life we have hardly talked about it at all. In special education we talked about using signs as support and then we got into conflict management and whether it's OK to put a hand on the child or not, if it can be abusive or if you are very upset, should you then back out and so on. But more in terms of negative touch than positive touch.

Overall, the results suggest that touch may be part of different modules in preschool teacher education, but that there were major differences in where and in what context touch was addressed during the program. It is also common that the subject of touch is neither treated recurrently nor follows any planned progression.

## **2. Student responsibility**

According to the students, they discussed the subject primarily among themselves. Several of the informants stated that there were few opportunities within the program to discuss the experiences they had received from their placements. Students concluded that their experiences and questions did not fit into the program; nor were they given any time or opportunity to discuss these issues. Instead, the focus was on the tasks - often of a more theoretical nature - that the students bring to their placements. Still, there were descriptions of the many thoughts and questions arising about the subject of touch during the placements, but when the students returned to the university after practice, new modules started. This left no time to stop and discuss everything that the students needed to ventilate. Students requested more lectures, literature, and teacher-led group discussions and seminars. They expressed the need to ventilate their anxieties, problems and experiences related to the concerns they brought along from their placement, including those experienced before going there. One informant gave her version of how the students in her group enforced a space in the program to actually talk about what they had experienced in connection with a placement period instead of what the teachers had prepared.

Mikaela: And then during seminars, we went from talking about what was planned to talking about the placements instead, because we needed it. The teachers had to hang on.



Interviewer: You simply took over that space?

Mikaela: Exactly. And I think you might need some sort of joint seminar after the placements that gives you the opportunity to raise such questions, for example: "How did I feel about this?" or "I had a situation where I had to force a child to be dressed", which may feel like an act of violence and you need to talk about it: "How would you have done it, and what could we have done differently, or should I let the child be alone, or how should I do it?"

The results from the interviews showed that the students considered the subject of touch as an important topic for prospective preschool teachers. This is notable, not least through the answers to the question of who initiates the subject in the education, i.e., the students themselves.

### **3. Being each other's best resources**

The students expressed in various ways that the subject of touch in preschool teacher education is important to discuss and that they missed discussions about much of what they have encountered during their placement. This applies to students from both university colleges and universities. They discussed a great deal within the classroom groups about different situations they had experienced during the placement periods, emphasising the importance of this interaction for exchanging experiences and thoughts about touch. The students perceived that the subject of touch is something that university colleges and university regard as natural and obvious, even though for them it is not.

On the question of what has been most important with regard to their knowledge of touch, the students answered that it is primarily the students themselves who discussed the subject and only occasionally together with teachers. One student gave a representative response:

Thomas: Fellow students. With a dose of teacher.

Questions that the students indicated as necessary to ventilate with each other included, for example, abusive touch, touch with children who act out, "clinging children" (children who often and intensively seek adult body contact) or touch in connection with intimate situations such as nappy changes. The informants also requested discussions about the more everyday affirmative touch and spontaneous touch, as well as what characterises positive touch and what characterises negative touch. The informants emphasised that this is an important topic to talk about. It also seems that the issues brought up in the questionnaire and during the interviews raised questions from the participants in the study. Several of them pointed out that they gained new insights and thoughts about a topic that they may not have thought so much of in the past.

### **4. Exposed position: Being a male in the program**

For the men in the program, physical touch is a particularly important subject to talk about. The theme "Exposed position: Being a male in the program" includes the male students' need to discuss sensitive issues, especially with other men in the program. They

experienced their situation as special, since there are few of them in the program. One of them expressed how, as a man, he viewed touch as part of the preschool teacher profession.

Thomas: ... about this matter of being careful about touching the children. And that we as guys are singled out especially. Of course you get scared about it.

The male informants in the study who had other men in their study group to discuss with were grateful for this support, while those who were the only ones in their group missed other men to talk to. They wanted the program to address the men's perspective more and to provide support in sensitive issues and topics. A student described how some male students joined together to form a network for men. One purpose of the group was to create a meeting place where they could discuss issues related to gender, for example in connection with experiences from the placements. One student described it as follows:

Martin: Then we created a network for male preschool teachers, a *Facebook* group with meetings once a month or every two months and then there were a few lectures we had the chance to go to with support from the university. Well, because sometimes there was a question, something that came up in the placement or something else when your thoughts were just spinning, you could post the *Facebook* group and get their opinions about it.

The men who did not belong to a male network declared that they often had missed a discussion forum where they could exchange thoughts and experiences with other men. It may concern, for instance, experiences from placements or parental suspicion. The men in the study experienced that the universities leave them out in this respect:

William: But it feels a bit like a taboo subject, something one would rather not talk about. I think the university feels that it drives away guys from wanting to apply for the profession if you talk about this.

The men's clear expression of their sense of being abandoned by the university is striking and shows how important and sensitive the subject is. As prospective preschool teachers, the men felt more susceptible to suspicion and therefore asked for more knowledge, dialogue and support in this respect for their future profession.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to explore how students perceive that the question of touch is handled in Swedish preschool teacher education. A large proportion of the students who answered the survey stated that the subject of touch had not been highlighted during the program. Even the interviewed students' descriptions indicate that the issue of touch between preschool teachers and children had received low priority in the program. However, the subject may arise occasionally in different courses or course modules. The scarce space allotted to physical touch can be interpreted as a consequence of the overcrowded curriculum within teacher education (Högskoleverket, 2008; Qvarsell, 2008) and perhaps also of the subject being an element in the preschool teacher profession that

tends to be taken for granted, as confirmed by the informants. In addition, both interview answers and survey comments indicated that touch is a sensitive issue. The interviewed students requested that more space should be given in the program to their questions and experiences like touch. The placements, in particular, gave rise to thoughts and questions that were not always picked up during follow-ups and seminars. According to the students, they were largely left to rely on each other. The men are particularly vulnerable because their touch is likely to arouse suspicions, which illustrates the association chain referred to by Pruitt (2015). The mere presence of men runs the risk of launching a chain of associations that lead to men and their intentions being questioned. The interviewed men in this study talked about being singled out for being male, about spinning thoughts, and about touch appearing to be an educational taboo subject.

A frequent criticism from new teachers is that they are not sufficiently prepared when concluding their education. For example, there has been talk for a long time about a practice shock affecting teachers in their first job (Veenman, 1984). Conflict management, a factor that may include physical touch, is a special field that has occupied an insignificant space in teacher education (Lundström, 2008; Veenman, 1984). For teacher education to provide students with all the knowledge and experience they need as professionals within ECEC is hardly possible. The preschool teacher program can offer a basis, but not everything. However, we believe that it should definitely make room for issues concerning physical touch. This should include the mistrust that men, in particular, are likely to face. It is a delicate task to address abuse in connection with touch, but there already exist among the students thoughts and concerns that they will be left alone with, unless the topic is highlighted and discussed.

Preschool teachers, both women and men, need to know how far the danger of actual abuse can be identified and prevented. They also need to learn from gender studies how gender norms form social patterns. It seems particularly important for students to be given a chance to understand how the gendering of work with young children (Connell, 2009) risks raising confused thoughts when the preschool teacher is a male person. One useful tool could be Pruitt's (2015) description of the association chain that leads to men in ECEC and their intentions being questioned. Pruitt's study and reasoning could serve as a starting point for understanding and analysing social processes that reproduce gender norms and gender patterns. Students would then also have the opportunity to understand and question why a man who chooses to work with children attracts other ideas and thoughts than if a woman chooses the same profession.

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