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Birgitte Ljunggren & Christian Eidevald

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Men's career choices in early childhood education and care – an embodied intersectionality perspective

Birgitte Ljunggren ^a and Christian Eidevald ^b

^aQueen Maud University College, DMMH, Trondheim, Norway; ^bUniversity of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The workforce in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is highly gender-segregated with a majority of women. Gender-sensitive professionalization is regarded a way to recruit more men, but there is a call for more empirical research into perspectives that combines bodily aspects of gender, professionalization and men's career choices. Applying the notion of *embodied intersectionality*, this article analyses narrative data from Nordic men with varying experience with formal ECEC education and work. It explores how embodied and intersectional experiences of ECEC work and professionalism emerge in the narratives and how embodied and intersectional experiences link to the men's choices of entering, staying, or leaving ECEC. Such experiences appear in the narratives related to entry to and exit from formal ECEC education to parental cooperation and to professional play practices. The findings are discussed in relation to the professionalization of ECEC, professional exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms and debates about ECEC professionalization.

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Introduction

The workforce in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is highly gendered, with 90–96 percent women (Rohrmann, Brody, and Plaisir 2021). Teaching and caring for children are traditionally regarded as being low-paid 'women's work', closely related to motherhood (Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt 2015; Vincent and Braun 2011). Gender and social status explain the lack of men in the sector (Van Laere et al. 2014). The low proportion of men has become subject to growing policy and research attention. It is argued that gender balance will raise ECEC quality (Brody et al. 2021; Rohrmann 2020). A gender sensitive professionalization of ECEC work would help recruit and retain men (Cameron 2006; Peeters 2013). Gender sensitivity, in non-binary ways, can challenge traditional understandings toward gender diversification and thereby affect men's career choices (Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen 2015; Wilkinson and Warin 2021). Van Laere et al. (2014) and Warin (2017) suggest a stronger attention to gendered norms of the body and bodily experiences of professional work, to better understand the gender

CONTACT Birgitte Ljunggren  ebl@dmmh.no  Queen Maud University College, DMMH, Thrond Nergaards veg 7, N-7044 Trondheim, Norway

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composition and the 'genderedness' of the ECEC profession. Still, there is scarce research on the relationship between men's career choices and professionalization that applies perspectives on embodied experiences. To explore this relationship, the article analyses how embodied experiences are made relevant for career choices and professional development and practice from life-story narratives of Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic men.

Gender and social status are interconnected and point in the direction of power relations at work in ECEC. Intersectionality conceptualize the co-working of different inequality-producing social processes, such as class, gender and nationality (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015). Despite a long-standing research field of intersectional studies related to gender-segregated labour markets and organizations, there has been limited research conducted into intersectional perspectives applied to men's career choices and professionalism in ECEC. Bhopal (2020) calls for more intersectionality studies in the sociology of education. There are studies from ECEC on different social categories such as masculinity, gender, class connected to professionalization (Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt 2015; Andrew 2015; Vincent and Braun 2011), but none of these studies applies an intersectionality perspective.

In intersectional studies, discussion turns towards embodied experiences, where professions and intersectionality are understood as incorporated in the body through the term *embodied intersectionality* (Jensen and Elg 2010). This concept describes how intersections become interwoven in embodied professional practice (Mirza 2013; Adamson and Johansson 2016). It aids analysis of how intersectional categories mutually constitute each other and are expressed in men's (professional) embodied experiences in ECEC. A focus on embodied intersectionality corresponds to the call for new understanding of gender conscious professionalism. We, therefore, explore these research questions:

- How do embodied and intersectional *experiences* of ECEC work and professionalism emerge in Nordic men's narratives?
- How do embodied and intersectional *experiences* relate to the men's career choices of entering, staying in, or leaving the ECEC?

We close by discussing the result related to professionalism, inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms and professionalization of ECEC work.

Intersectionality and professions

Widely debated as a theoretical tool, *intersectionality* is applied to analyse how structural patterns, or social categories, such as gender, class, age and ethnicity, reciprocally co-construct each other, rather than simply adding to each other (Collins 2015; Phenix and Pattynama 2006). It questions how intersections relate to individual lives, subjectivities, social relations and individual experiences (Collins 1998; Phenix and Pattynama 2006). For example, outdoor life is valued and rooted in a Nordic culture (Sandsæter and Lysklett 2017) and it can reciprocally co-construct Nordic forms of masculinities as tightly connected to outdoor life (Brandth and Kvande 2018) which in turn becomes a masculine domain (Kennedy and Russell 2021). Intersections have effects on inclusion, social differentiation and power relations (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015). Research on men in ECEC have positioned them as both the wanted and the unwanted 'other' in the professional field of ECEC (Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt 2015).

Professional theory discusses mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. A profession sets apart from an occupation by its abstract knowledge system for example found in Medicine. An exclusive occupational group applies this abstract knowledge to particular cases. To hold this professional research-based knowledge becomes key to access work in the field (Abbot 1988, 8–9). Individuals might develop their professional practice by acquiring the monopolized knowledgebase and skills through formal education (Havnes 2018). Professionalism refers to individual dispositions that is possible to acquire and practice aligned with ideals in the professional field (Creasy 2015) and the possibility practice them autonomously (Vincent and Braun 2011). Acquiring formal education form part of exclusionary mechanisms that traditionally has been practiced of those who hold power in the professions – often white middle-class men (Witz 1992). This points to professions as intersectional phenomena.

Profession, professionalism and professionalization is discussed in ECEC (Vincent and Braun 2011). ECEC competence is hard to distinguish from private caring and parenting (Traunter 2017; Vincent and Braun 2011). ECEC professionalism demands relational, emotional and empathic skills in addition to research-based knowledge (Andrew 2015). In a Nordic context developing an ECEC professionalism relates to values such as egalitarianism, democracy and emancipation (Ringsmose and Brogaard-Clausen 2017). Professionalism can also develop informally within the professional ECEC setting (Havnes 2018). Vincent and Braun (2011) problematize this as female-connoted skills and the object of socially constructed gendered norms (see Davies 2000). Access caring for children as temporary workers or assistants in Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic ECEC does not presuppose having a university degree and traditionally it is low paid. The work is socially constructed as classed and of low social status (Andrew 2015). This is reinforced by stronger state regulations and demands that reduces professional autonomy (Vincent and Braun 2011). The border between professional ECEC work and merely ECEC work is hard to establish.

These constituting dimensions of ECEC professionalism link to individual personality traits, as well as intersections of Nordic, classed and gendered expectations and norms. A professional self is negotiated at the intersection of these and other possible social dimensions (Rumens and Keerfoot 2009; Adamson and Johansson 2016). Exclusionary/inclusionary mechanisms in the professional field of ECEC can therefore follow other patterns than those described in conventional professionalization studies, and this might frame career choices. It is relevant to explore in which professional situations and at which intersections men experience inclusion or exclusion and how they act upon these experiences in terms of career choice.

Embodied intersectional professionalism

The concept of *embodiment* links the socially constructed world and the body. It addresses analytical and theoretical entanglements in the concept of *intersectionality* such as how to understand mutually constitutive categories on different ontological levels and calls for a high consciousness of the analytical level of analysis (Yuval-Davis 2006; Christensen and Jensen 2012). One solution is to analytically, depart from the body through a phenomenological stance that highlights experiences. Jensen and Elg (2010, 3) use the concept of embodiment to conceptualize the processes through which the social is incarnated in human beings. This is rooted in the phenomenologist

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of human experience as corporeal; experiences cannot exist without the body (Mirza 2013; Adamson and Johansson 2016). Experiences in Jensen and Elg's (2010, 32) definition are shaped by social power-relations: '[A]s we reach out and act in the physical world [in the body] we are also being exposed to and shaped by social differentiations and power structures'. Thus, the social categories interact with the body and shape meaning given the embodied experiences. However, phenomenology of the body opens for bodily pre-reflexive experiences as 'embodied beyond cognitive and discursive production of meaning' (Jensen and Elg 2010, 33). This corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body schema, where it is through the body, in terms of its sensory, its motor and its affective operations that the world appears for us, not first to a subject of consciousness, 'like the pilot of a ship' (Whitney 2018, 492). Gallagher (1986, 542) describes the body schema as the nonconscious performance of the body, which is the most common way to be in the world. He argues that pre-reflectively, the body is engaged in the world and that we are not conscious of our body until we are voluntarily or forced to reflect on it.

Professionalism, understood within this frame, becomes not solely a matter of individual dispositions, competence or subjectivity; it is understood in terms of *embodiment*. Professionalism becomes 'real' *through* the body (Rumens and Keerfoot 2009, 779). Vincent and Braun (2011, 782) found that formal ECEC training produced certain ideals for embodied practices amongst ECEC students. Social structures in the form of ideals of the 'good' childcare imprinted on their bodies. Norms were highly gendered such as to dress and act respectably and to be 'stripped of any dangerous or negative inferences' (779). The ECEC students were also expected to be 'warm, "bubbly", and responsive' (779). In line with Adamson and Johansson (2016), we argue that the intersecting power relations producing ECEC professionalization is played out and lived within the male body in how to act, to guide one's body, to dress, and to speak as an ECEC professional. Different and intersecting power relations become part of the bodily experience and are 'written on and lived within the body' (Mirza 2013, 7). However, as argued by Gallagher (1986), the body is pushed into the field of consciousness in limit-situations (pain, pleasure etc.) and then becomes the object of self-reflection. We explore how embodied intersectionality relates to professionalization and to career choices.

Method

To explore the research questions within the theoretical frame, we apply a narrative method. Christensen and Jensen (2012) argue for the advantage of this method in intersectional analysis: the intersecting power relations will be accessible in person's narratives because they draw on different categories in the construction of their narratives and thereby on their sense of self and coherence in life. It is the 'I' that is constructed in narratives. When applying a body phenomenological lens, this 'I' can be understood as a corporeal experience that can be both pre-reflexive and reflexive. Antich (2018) argues that narratives enable us to go from the lived embodied experience (body schema) to the told experience, thus from a pre-narrative to a narrative level of experience where one's existence becomes the object for oneself. Being asked to tell your life story therefore resembles Gallagher's (1986) notion of a limit-situation that brings the body to self-reflective consciousness.

The data is collected as part of an international project on men's career trajectories and career choices in the ECEC sector (MCT-project) (Brody et al. 2021; Xu et al. 2021). For this article, data collected from nine white cisgender men in Norway, Iceland and Sweden are re-analysed by applying an embodied intersectionality perspective. The interviewed men range in age from 26 to 55 years, with working experience of between 0 and 38 years (see Table 1). To be able to shed light on the research question, the men are selected because they all have *experiences* with ECEC work and ECEC profession as ECEC teacher students and/or practitioners. They have made career choices to stay or leave ECEC. To better understand the low number of men in ECEC related to men's embodied and intersectional experiences with ECEC work and professionalism, the perspective of the 'drop outs', regardless of where in their career as professionals they leave, are as interesting as the perspective of the 'persisters'.

The Nordic context, in this article represented by Island, Norway and Sweden, is interesting as backdrop to explore relationships between experiences of the ECEC profession and career choices. It shows shared governmental efforts to professionalize the sector, exemplified by the reforms in preschool teacher training that has lifted formal training to bachelor's level. The three countries have a common staff structure, which combine skilled and unskilled workers, with preschool teachers as a minority (Boström, Einarsdottir, and Samuelsson 2018). They share a social pedagogical tradition that values freedom to play and attentive relationships between children and staff (Kragh-Müller 2017). Outdoor play is particularly welcomed and rooted in a Nordic valuation of the nature an arena for re-creation and well-being (Sandsæter and Lysklett 2017). Despite ranking high on gender equality indexes, men are in minority in ECEC (Rohrmann, Brody, and Plaisir 2021).

The study applies three different ways of collecting narrative data. In the first *narrative part*, the men are asked to tell their life stories related to their ECEC career, without interruption. The life stories give examples of how the men entered ECEC, their experience working in ECEC and (in some cases) their leaving ECEC. *The semi-structured part* consists of in-depth questions, explanations and clarifications of the narrative on themes such as their work experience, their relationships with parents, colleagues, and children and their views on gender in general and in ECEC. To conclude, each man was asked to draw a *storyline*, with a focus on critical moments in the qualification studies or experience in ECEC (Rounsevell and Metzger 2010). Each interview took approximately two hours.

Table 1. Information on the participants' ages, years in studies/ECEC and ECEC career.

Country	Participant	Age	Years of working experiences/studies	
			in ECEC	ECEC career
Norway	Nils	38	8	Dropped out of work as a teacher or leader after BA
	Norbert	45	19	Persisting
	Nicolai	26	0	Dropped out during or after BA
Iceland	Ingmar	39	6	Dropped out during or after BA
	Ivar	50	5	Dropped out during or after BA
	Ingar	42	13	Persisting
Sweden	Stefan	37	10	Dropped out of work as assistant with no qualifications
	Sven	28	0	Dropped out during or after BA
	Steve	55	38	Persisting

The life stories, interviews and storylines were transcribed and read. During the reading, we noticed that the body appeared as a theme in different situations in the life stories and in the interviews. We saw traces of it in the storylines (e.g. written as 'burn-out', when describing critical moments in one's career). Embodied experiences were a theme appearing from the men and were often given weight and importance by them, thus catching our interest. We then proceeded using theme-based categories in our analysis (Kvale and Brinkman 2009), exploring categories and themes related to bodily experiences in the material aided by the theoretical perspective. Each interview was analysed and coded individually by the researchers and were then jointly compared, categorized and coded through discussions, validating the coding and interpretations in a hermeneutic and abductive process (Charmaz 2014). We oscillated between surprising findings in the material and theory/previous research on embodied intersectionality, theory of the phenomenology of the body and theory of professions. The results describe how the body is experienced and given meaning as part the formal professionalization process, and professional practice and related to career choices.

The project has been ethically assessed and approved by different authorities. The MCT project has passed the ethical approval by the Research Ethic Committee of Efrata College of Education, Jerusalem, Israel, where the principal investigator for the MCT project is based. The project has been assessed and approved following national and institutional standards. The Swedish part passed the institutional ethical board at the University of Stockholm, the Norwegian part of the project was assessed and approved by the Norwegian centre for Research Data (no 57332). The Icelandic part of the project was reported to the Icelandic Data Protection Authority and confirmed without comments. It is registered at the University of Iceland (no 1472740). Participation is based on informed consent (written) and all data have been anonymized and respectfully handled.

Intersectional embodied experiences, formal professionalization and career choices

When professionalism becomes 'real' through embodied experiences (Rumens and Keerfoot 2009, 779), bodily feelings will be central. Several of the men in this study value working in ECEC because it differs from 'inactive' office work. Particularly in the Norwegian men's narratives, the body and an expressed need for being in motion appear when explaining the career choice of embarking on a formal ECEC education. In Norbert's narrative, the issue of education and gendered classed expectations connects to bodily movement and career choices. He faced strong expectations from his father – who himself had obtained a university degree – for taking up higher education. Norbert started to study Economics, but the prospect of a future sitting behind a desk made him drop out. The ECEC teacher university education became a way to handle a need to be in motion *and* to meet the social expectations for higher education, even though not in a high-status profession:

My father is educated in Law. I think he planned for me to go down the same path, so I too tried it. But, no. I felt that it didn't suit me. I must ... I am dependent on being able to move, to be in motion.

For Norbert, the decision to embark on a formalized ECEC professionalization process emerges as an embodied and intersectional phenomenon (Jensen and Elg 2010). Norbert expresses a strong bodily experience of wanting to be in motion. It is a corporeal existence in a social world, where he meets classed and gendered social expectations. His choice diverges from gendered expectations across generations, since ECEC traditionally has been a female-dominated profession associated with female-connoted activities, such as caring (Davies 2000; Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt 2015). He faces expectations that some professions are suited for men and represent appropriate social status. Norbert describes his father as 'belonging to another generation', where 'caring is not so common among men'. Ivar, from Iceland, gives similar examples of expectations, in line with (higher) middle class and masculine norms:

It was a shock to my father when I entered the College for Preschool Teachers. He had envisioned me as a doctor or something similar you know, something more proper.

To choose formal ECEC education appears as a process where classed/gender expectations need to be handled within a corporeal experience marked by a pre-reflexive sense of need for motion or restlessness, which can be understood as the body schema (Whitney 2018). This pre-reflexive state becomes the object of self-reflection when narrating the educational choice. By doing so, body, generation, class, and gender and their intersections (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991) become visible as constitutive of the meaning given to the formal professionalization processes. It becomes a class-gender-generation phenomenon, negotiated with bodily sensations.

Nils' choice of entering formal ECEC education relate to his corporeal experience of a need for motional work that fits a body already inscribed by gender and class. He previously worked as a construction machine operator, but long-term overwork resulted in health issues. A strong work ethic is discussed as a working-class phenomenon, where hard work is regarded as a moral disposition (Lehmann 2009). Thus, class and gender were inscribed in his body and forced him to leave this work. He entered formal ECEC teacher training with a classed and gendered body that needed to be in motion:

Then I had to figure out what I should do. Something which corresponded with bodily movement. I thought about becoming an engineer, but it was too much sitting still. I had to do something where I could use my body.

Nils highlighted physical activity, not theoretical knowledge or relational aspects of ECEC work. A university education, for him, meant a class journey, however he searched for a profession which suited his embodied experience of a need to be in motion. His choice landed on an education in ECEC with an outdoor pedagogy specialization, in line with his strong interest in skiing and outdoor life. In this way, Nils was able to create a corporeal room for existence, within a feminine-coded profession, that matched norms of masculinity. This corresponds with pedagogical activities that are seen as masculine in a Nordic context, such as taking the children outdoor on trips, teaching them to ski and how to make a fire (Brandth and Kvande 2018). The professionalization process met an individual need for movement that supported his sense of masculinity. Nils later left the ECEC sector, due to a combination of overwork and too low professional autonomy.

Nicolay too, underscored a need for bodily movement as central for his career choice of dropping out of formal ECEC training to become a mason. However, he felt that working professionally in ECEC demanded of him another type of masculinity and ways to move than he identified with:

Men who are more, like, pedagogical and more, like [sigh], a bit more 'tøffel' [laughter].

To be a 'tøffel' (a slipper) is a Norwegian expression describing a man that is henpecked. In other words, it suggests someone who is 'unmanly' (i.e. feminine), soft, passive and submissive. This is in line with the structures described as imprinted on ECEC student's bodies by Vincent and Braun (2011). Nicolay described a decisive situation in his teacher practicum where he had to play guitar and sing for the children, where he felt very uncomfortable. He described the embodied practices, expected from him in ECEC, as alienating. In combination with the academic study, he stated: 'I wasn't being true to myself'. Thus, being the moving ECEC teacher body was not the right kind of moving body for him.

The role of embodied experience in these men's sensemaking of career choices is related to formal ECEC professionalization. On the one hand, intersectional embodiment appears in social power relations and become 'written and lived within the body' (Mirza 2013, 7). It forms the reflections on which the participants construct their 'I' in the narratives. On the other hand, the corporeal experience of a need to move might appear as a facet of the pre-reflexive embodied experience, where the body schema (Gallagher 1986; Whitney 2018) became the object for self-reflection through the narratives. The experience of formal professionalization seems to be simultaneously embodied beyond the discursive/social and highly shaped by – and entangled with – social power-relations. The intersectional and embodied experience related to the formal ECEC professionalization process reveals both inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms along the dimension of experienced and embodied sense of alienation/meaningfulness.

Intersectional embodied experience, the work setting and career choices

Being the diverging and dangerous body

Practicing the ECEC profession includes collaborating with parents. When describing this cooperation, experiences of being a normative diverging body appears. The men's narratives present examples of positive as well as negative responses to their presence. Ivar from Iceland experienced being welcomed as a 'different body', but he also faced social expectations related to sexuality as a man working with children:

I had parents saying to me 'it's great that you're here', to have a bearded and stalwart man taking care of the kids is fantastic. I think it has to do with who I am. I have never been asked directly, like it happened to [name of male colleague], 'Are you gay?' But I have felt it and I have been perceived as being strange, you know. I have ignored it. I don't care.

In Ivar's narrative, the structures sexuality intersects with gender in his embodied experience of being the wrong body in ECEC. This explanation shows that parental expectations of bodies working within ECEC are not 'bearded and stalwart', but rather female or potential homosexual. This corresponds with the descriptions of Vincent and Braun (2011), Nentwich et al. (2013) and Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt (2015) of men struggling with not fitting in discursive constructs of the normal, heterosexual, male worker. Ivar's

experience of being a bodily 'matter out of place' show how his body acts and reaches out and thereby becomes exposed to intersecting gendered and sexualized power structures (Jensen and Elg 2010). While facing social power structures, the body becomes the object of consciousness for him. Such meetings can become limit-situations (Gallagher 1986) and act as push-factors in career choices.

At the same time, the feeling of joy and being energized and cared for through working with children is found in several narratives and it explains how the interviewed men carry on as ECEC professionals. This is embodied feelings of strong joy and well-being, as Norbert puts it:

I get to be together with the youngest children who loves me for the person I am. And it is fantastic to be met with cuddles every day!

The experience of embodying not only a diverging but also a potentially dangerous body is present in the Swedish and Icelandic material. Ingmar, an Icelandic dropout, exemplifies how his male bodily presence diverges from the expected professional female body as 'stripped of any dangerous and negative inferences' (Vincent and Braun 2011, 782). Ingmar is tall, dresses and guides himself inspired by the hip-hop sub-culture:

I realized it might seem suspicious that I was there, and that it is not the same as being a girl, 165 cm tall and looking a bit cute. I am much bigger. Parents may feel a bigger threat when a tall guy is there.

He is a body that stands out from the norm in terms of both gender and style. He is self-conscious about his appearance and describes experiencing joy in the surprise element of looking 'dangerous' but being basically kind and professional. He describes dressing as a hip-hopper as associated with practices not in line with expectations of a professional ECEC worker, such as:

[...] drug use. And that's why I kind of enjoyed it and saw it as a challenge to disprove it like, 'Sorry, I'm a pretty decent guy'.

He explains his professional success with children as partly being brought about by his sub-culture inspired lifestyle. He often uses his style in pedagogical conversations and in his teaching and the experience of being a hip-hopper intersects with gender (Collins 1998; Phenix and Pattynama 2006). It becomes a pedagogical resource in a professional, bodily self-consciousness.

In particularly the Swedish narratives, experiences of embodying the dangerous body relates to suspicions of sexual abuse. The centre manager encouraged Sven to be extra careful and inform the parents of his presence. He describes how his body is socially associated with danger in ECEC (Nentwich et al. 2013), and how this affects the embodiment of ECEC professionalism. He guides his body in such ways that he appears harmless, or through conversations with parents tries to reduce their scepticism:

I thought I would take it easy and show them that I am not dangerous. I'm not a paedophile [laughter]. It went well, and I got a good reputation, even amongst the parents who had doubted me in the first meetings.

Despite his good reputation, it was fear of accusations of child abuse that eventually made Sven to choose to leave ECEC. Stefan, another dropout from Sweden who had

no formal ECEC education, describes similar experiences. He left the ECEC due to the working conditions and low salary, but three of his male friends dropped out ECEC because the risk of accusation was too high:

One friend left because he was too worried about being suspected of child sexual abuse. Two others were accused of sexual abuse. Both left. It was horrible. Trial and all ... I can understand the feeling of suddenly not daring to pick up a child that has tripped. 'You can hold my hand, but I dare not lift you up in my arms'. It doesn't work. [...] You must sometimes hold children when you take care of them.

The fear of accusations of sexual abuse affects some of the men's bodily professional performance (Nentwich et al. 2013). Bodily closeness and meeting the children's need for care potentially form a risky conjunction. Still, it must be part of the professional practices. Sven and Stefan gave examples of strategies to conduct themselves bodily in relation to children to avoid suspicion. They responded by embodying a professionalism that did not awake any suspicion of abuse. However, this position might hinder them from meeting the children's physical needs on occasion. This power structure inscribed on their bodies as feelings of stress and anxiety and through a self-conscious, self-monitoring of their own movements and appearance. Their embodied experiences shed light on how such experiences may push male practitioners to leave ECEC. Exclusionary mechanisms become highly embodied.

Embodying the valued playful body – intersections of gender, class, and age

The interviewed men expressed how their male bodies *allow* them to act professionally in ways they feel valued and different from their female colleagues. They tell about being a body that can be *playful* in its *intersectional, professional practice*. Many examples in the narratives highlight the value of active play as part of attentive relationships as important for professional practice, in line with a Nordic pedagogical tradition (Kragh-Müller 2017), but also in line with norms of masculinity. Aspects of bodily movement in play becomes related to class and gender in the narratives. The professional 'I' is constructed as the negated 'I' (who I am not) in stories about reluctance of colleagues to take part in, and allow, activity and play. Nils problematized and regarded embodied passivity towards children and play as a token of non-professionalism and lack of formal education. Non-professional practice is constructed in his narrative as bodily passivity that is convenient for the staff. To stand still 'with your hands in your pockets' in outdoor play is an example of bodily passivity that Nils partly links to female colleagues and partly to non-educated temporary workers: 'They don't have any education; it's mostly them'.

Female bodily passiveness and 'calm activities' are linked to lack of pedagogical innovation such as making the same pinecone-decoration every Christmas. In line with this, Ivar told a story about uneducated female colleagues that brought their housewifery activities to work: 'They just moved their knitting gear from their homes to work'.

Bodily passivity indirectly becomes a gendered class token since it links lack of education and precarious (feminine) work-life participation. Still, bodily passiveness in pedagogical practice is not solely a class-gender phenomenon related to women. Steve told:

I worked at a preschool with two other men, but they were laid back and not pedagogically interested. It wasn't fun working with them. I prefer to work with an interested and motivated woman than with a half-interested man.

Lack of professionalism in such terms among colleagues were a source of frustration, and had for some contributed to job-shifts within the sector or dropping out of the sector.

In the narratives of Nils, Norbert and Ingar, the valued bodily movement in play is made relevant in the intersection of gender and age. They describe young male students as good professionals, through their bodily activeness and attentive presence. In Nils' words:

[...] male students climb trees, make big sandcastles and are entirely together with the kids. They may increase the sound level a bit but they're active, they participate and become the most popular ones.

The men also relate bodily sensations of energy to age and professional practice and the level of experience. Ingar describes that his energy level has decreased with age. He no longer takes part in professional networking collaborations outside the centre but focuses his energy on being together with the children. Norbert expresses that his sense of bodily energy in play has changed with age. He talks about his playfulness as a bodily sensation connected to a sense of bodily energy and health. Play has come to represent a more toned-down role for him as a teacher:

I feel that I was more playful before, but I still have much playfulness within me. It has turned more into observation instead of play [...], even if I feel in very good physical shape. The energy I had before has maybe changed to a different kind, which I act out in a different manner.

This section show how Nordic pedagogical values of active play and attentive relationships between children and staff (Kragh-Müller 2017) not necessarily are 'neutral' phenomena. Rather, they appear as embodied and intersectional aspects of professional practice as corporeal. The men construct and reproduce intersections that might become power structures other bodies face in professional practice as colleagues. The contours of the ideal playful body as educated, male and young appear in some of the narratives. This relates to potential exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms in the ECEC profession going beyond gender.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This article asks how embodied and intersectional experiences of ECEC work and professionalism emerge in men's narratives from Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and how they relate to choices of entering, staying, or leaving ECEC. We have applied a narrative approach to grasp the participants embodied experiences through self-reflection (Antich 2018).

Intersectional embodied experiences of formal professionalization relate to career choices, because men face them as lived bodies inscribed by intersectional power structures. The findings suggest that the pre-reflexive experiences of the body (Whitney 2018) frames choices. It becomes important for some of the men in this study to choose a career fitting the lived body. Being playful, attentive and energetic in a motional sense become interpreted as bodily sensations and ways of being in the world in terms of bodily schema (Gallagher 1986). As such, the Nordic ECEC sector that values active play and outdoor play (Sandsæter and Lysklett 2017) fits the men's lived bodily experience. Thus, a Nordic ECEC professional tradition functions as inclusionary mechanism for those being a body in need to move and play. This reveals how professional inclusionary and exclusionary

mechanisms work on embodied levels of experience. Intersectional embodiment (Jensen and Elg 2010) becomes crucial for understanding career choices and push and pull factors at work. Men enter, leave and live in the world of formal education and in early education centres as embodied bodies.

The participant's bodies reach out in the social world of professional ECEC work and face intersecting power relations that inscribe in their bodies (Jensen and Elg 2010) and shape embodied professional practices (Rumens and Keerfoot 2009). The professional norms that appear stand partly in contrast to a professionalism related to traditional masculinity, privileges and formal education (Witz 1992) and partly as a way masculinity is re-defined. Due to the intersecting power relations at work (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015), one might ask whether men potentially stand in limit-situations (Gallagher 1986) more often than women – rendering their bodies an involuntary object to themselves. The feeling of being the unwanted other (Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt 2015) is particularly evident in the men's experiences of suspicion of sexual abuse (Nentwich et al. 2013). This works as an exclusionary mechanism where parents play a central role. On the other hand, the men express how the body and the embodied feeling of playfulness as an affective operation becomes a resource in professional practice with children which is understood as related to masculinity, education and age. This might retain some of them in the sector. They assess the embodied practices of others (women) and understand the aging body with a 'gaze' that represents and reproduces intersecting power structures (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015), particularly in relation to play. They experience stress and anxiety but also a strong sense of playfulness, joy and well-being; affective operations that might shape career choices.

Rohrman (2020) argues that the issue of the skewed gender balance in ECEC must be related to larger, societally gendered patterns. Some (Van Laere et al. 2014; Peeters, Rohrman, and Emilsen 2015; Warin 2017) call for a professionalism that includes perspectives of the body. Wilkinson and Warin (2021) suggest perspectives going beyond the gender binary. Our findings support such views and a broadening by using the lens of embodied intersectionality. It becomes clear that the border between professional practice and society's power structures are highly permeable in such a way that it becomes hard to imagine 'pure' professional ECEC practice. Rather, the applied perspective enables us to analyse professional practice in the everyday life of the ECEC as a 'melting pot'¹, conditioned by intersecting power relations and how these are made real through working bodies. It is difficult to imagine a 'pure' ECEC body; the ECEC is populated by embodied bodies marked by professionalization as a power structure intersecting with other power structures. ECEC practice is embodied. The working bodies inhabiting the sector are in a constant process of being marked by power structures and taking part in the marking of others' bodies. As such, this article questions the argument of professionalization of the ECEC sector from within as posed, for example, by Havnes (2018), because the border between inside and outside the profession becomes hard to detect when analysing professionalism using the notion of intersectional embodiedness. Embodied intersectionality informs an ongoing debate about ECEC professionalism that criticizes the use of conventional perspectives on professionalism and its knowledge base (Vincent and Braun 2011; Traunter 2017; Havnes 2018). A traditional understanding of professionalism is not compatible with an ECEC context, where relational, emotional and empathic skills play a significant part (Andrew 2015). Our findings shed light on the embodiedness of this

competence and that it relates to the body schema and reflexive and embodied experiences of ECEC professionals.

The results show the potential in narrative writing in bringing pre-reflexive and pre-narrated experiences into reflexive consciousness (Antich 2018). In terms of formal professionalization, the analysis raises questions of how formal training represents limit-situations pushing students to become conscious and reflexive of their bodies and their embodied professional selves (Rumens and Keerfoot 2009; Adamson and Johansson 2016). This can be used by applying and reflecting over written narratives that open the way for constructing a meaningful and coherent professional 'I' and at the same time reflecting on how power structures permeate the same narratives. We encourage further research on the relation between body schema and ECEC professionalization, career choices and ECEC practice. For instance, in the case of pre-reflexive bodily habits at work – how can we address them/change, and what are the ethical sides of this?

We conclude that recruiting and retaining men is not solely a question of gender sensitivity beyond the gender binary, but of power-body-sensitivity that are incorporated in the body and find itself in the continuum between the body schema and the self-reflexive. This insight sheds new light on professional inclusionary/exclusionary mechanisms and shows the embodiedness of these mechanisms as felt and lived through the issue of recruitment of men and ECEC professionalism. Without that insight, there is a risk that men within ECEC will not only be difficult to recruit, but also difficult to retain in the profession over time. The results show the relevance of widening the scope in terms of different power categories *and* bodily experiences when discussing men's career choices and ECEC professionalization. Future studies should therefore include a more diverse group of participants, for example in terms of cultural background or/and sexual orientation. Race as a social dimension should also be incorporated in future research. It will correspond with a diverse and complex Nordic context. A formal education and professional practice that enables non-alienating and rewarding embodied experiences such as joy and well-being seem vital for career choices. This highlights the need for addressing intersectional embodiment in education and practice, and related to professional exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms.

Note

1. The notion of a *melting pot* is inspired by Gullestad's notion of everyday life as a melting pot [Gullestad, Marianne (1989) *Kultur og hverdagsliv: På sporet av det moderne Norge* [Culture and everyday life: On the track of modern Norway] (Oslo: Oslo University Press)]

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Notes on contributors

Birgitte Ljunggren is Associate Professor at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Trondheim, Norway. Her research focuses on gender studies, leadership, management and governance in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). She has published in journals and books on these subjects.

Christian Eidevald is Associate Professor at the University of Gothenburg. He was Chair of the Early Childhood Teacher Education program at Stockholm University and is presently Director of Research for the city of Gothenburg's approximately 400 preschools. His research focuses on gender, documentation, and organization within ECEC.

ORCID

Birgitte Ljunggren  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7735-7276>

Christian Eidevald  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0884-7030>

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