

Matthias Matthiasson: We are not turning boys into girls

[Sigrid Kõiv](#), Postimees

Teacher Matthias Matthiasson from Iceland told Sigrid Kõiv that he fails to see the point of gender neutral nursery schools. However, if you have boys and girls in different groups, they both see the other gender in a much friendlier light.

Have you heard about the Nicolaingarden nursery school in Stockholm, which practices gender neutrality down to the last detail? They have stopped using pronouns that refer to the person's gender and the children are called friends rather than boys and girls.

I have actually visited the school and I met the teachers who are taking part in the project. We are very interested in ways of teaching children that genders – and all people in general – are equal. But this is not an approach I would choose.

I do understand their goals in principle when they want children to use gender neutral pronouns, but I don't think this is the way it works.

For example, I noticed that the children in that school play with ordinary toys. There are no toys in our nursery school - we give children different materials, which they can use to make their own toys. We don't have Barbie dolls, as they have a certain meaning. There is also very little a child can do with a car. We want children to create their own toys, e.g. using modelling clay. They can make a car, a person, an animal - the child's imagination is the only limit. When I visited that Swedish nursery school I noticed that despite everything, children were still playing gender-specific games – girls were playing with dolls and boys with cars, because these were the toys they had.

When we have a broken window in the school, we have a woman repair it, so that children see that women can also do jobs like this. When the classroom floor needs washing, then I do it, so that the children again understand that a man can do it, too.

Boys may suddenly want to have their nails painted, because it is exciting and funny. For the same reason, boys may want to wear a dress. I think that this kind of experimenting should be encouraged, as it teaches children to try new things. However, boys don't generally want to wear dresses and they should not be put in a situation where they feel pressured to.

I heard about a boy who was a bit smaller and more fragile than his peers. He likes playing with girls and he wants to be with girls. Apparently, he was told in the nursery school that he has to wear a dress if he wanted to be with the girls. The pedagogical approach of your school is to separate the boys and the girls. Which group should this boy be in in your school?

This is the reason we started our project in the first place: we want children of both genders to have equal opportunities.

The reason why some boys want to play with girls is in the sub-culture of the boys' group. Our goal is to keep boys like him with the boys, so they can learn to cope among other boys and stronger boys can learn to be considerate of weaker ones.

It works when you put boys and girls into separate groups. In really simple terms, if the girls are not there, then being weak no longer means 'being a girl'. We want boys to learn behaviours other than force and competition, and we want them to find these behaviours themselves. They have to know that you can be friends, you can help each other, you can say good things to each other.

Both boys and girls need individuality as well as the ability to work in a group. The first thing we teach our children is discipline, which is always a very important subject in the boys' group. Girls are not important for them at that age. The other boys are important, which is why they are so competitive.

Girls, on the other hand, form small groups of friends, and this weaker boy has no access to these groups, because the girls know that he is not a girl. This boy could hang around the girls in a mixed group, but he couldn't really be with them.

We try to picture gender behaviour in a straight line. To the right of the centre is positive masculine behaviour: self-confident, performance-oriented; on the right edge is negative masculine behaviour: fighting, noisiness, disobedience. To the left of the centre is positive feminine behaviour: helpfulness, teamwork; on the left edge is negative feminine behaviour: use of emotions to achieve one's goals. The tactics boys and girls use when bullying others are also different: when boys bully someone, it usually means physical violence or threats of violence, whereas girls bully others by ignoring and excluding them, like the cheerleaders in American teen comedies.

When we separate the boys and the girls, both groups move closer to the centre with their behaviour – both adopt the positive traits of each gender's behaviour: girls become more confident and boys start helping each other.

This does not mean that they never meet at all. They play in the yard together and they spend an hour playing together indoors. They plan a positive activity for that hour they spend together, e.g. play board games, or the boys make pancakes for the girls and the girls put on a show for the boys. This makes them see each other in a positive light.

We must respect the beliefs of children. There is a day in Icelandic schools when children dress up when they come in for the day. It is a Nordic tradition, not Halloween. Boys usually dress up as cowboys or pirates, Batman or Superman. And we don't stop them. They bring their weapons and swords, and we don't take these away from them, because it would be the same as taking the crown from a princess. We don't turn boys into girls – we make them better boys.

But how do you follow democratic principles and nurture the spirit of community in a collective of children? Can children say that they don't want to study numbers, for example?

They all study numbers and letters. Democracy doesn't give them the option to not study.

For example, the children in our school generally wear team clothes, like everyone on a football team wears the same kit. There are no gender differences between the clothes of boys and girls, but they are nice and comfortable everyday clothes. The kind their parents would buy them anyway.

But children do have a say in what the clothes should be like. In one of our basic schools they wanted to wear hooded anoraks, so that's what they got. And wearing these clothes is optional – children who don't want to wear them don't have to do it.

Our approach is this: we advise, but we don't force. For example, we advise our children to eat the meals served in school. It's not common in Iceland. Parents usually prepare lunch boxes for their children that they take to school, and these boxes are very different. Some children have lots of good things, others don't.

We believe that children should eat the food served in school, as eating together is also a form of socialising. But again, it's optional. If a child or a parent doesn't like the food served in school, we don't force them to go with it.

I had to stand in the corner as punishment when I was in nursery school. Children are not made to stand in the corner any more, but they have to sit on a chair and calm down. How do you cope with discipline problems in your schools if nobody is ever made to do anything?

We don't use the 'time out' approach either. When a child behaves badly, one of the teachers takes the child with them rather than sending them away. So it's not time out, it's time together. When a child has a really bad day, the teacher talks to them and the child can stay with the teacher when the teacher tidies up the classroom, etc. It is important not to leave the child alone with their negative emotions. We don't use carrots or sticks; a child must be disciplined naturally, even organically.

Our first rule is that the individuality of a child must be respected. There is no automatic group solution that can be used on one child. Of course the child has to be in the group, work with the group, but if the child has problems, then we have to deal with that child separately.

You teach children positively in school, but they go home and the mother yells: "What did I tell you? Stop whining!" Children mirror what goes on in their homes. Doesn't that make your efforts in school futile?

It's not as complicated as it may seem. We do distinguish clearly between school and home. School is not home and we are not parents. If a child is confused, we help them work it out.

When a child says, 'but my mum said so', we tell them that their mum is right and that this is how things are done at home, but it's different in school. We advise parents to do the same – they must make their children understand that things in school and at home are different, and that there is no conflict between them. The school doesn't offer, doesn't even try to offer the kind of emotional bond a child has with their parents.

The project has lasted for 12 years. Are you already seeing results?

Yes, we are. Ten years ago we carried out a survey to see whether our children liked being in school, how they cope there, etc. We didn't find any major differences compared to other schoolchildren of the same age.

However, there was once significant difference, and it concerned their attitude towards the other gender. Girls in our schools clearly liked boys more than other girls of their age, and our boys liked girls more than their peers in other schools.

It's possible that our system creates friendship between genders. We even have a theory about this: when boys and girls are together in the same class, they may start regarding each other as enemies.

[The original article in Estonian can be found here.](#)