



Innovative Approaches to Research on Gender and ECEC

– Notes from the conference –

8th SIG gender balance research conference – online!

Tuesday, 8th September 2020, 9.00-13.00 UTC / GMT

"Bringing men into ECEC jobs is increasingly recognized as having the potential to improve process quality and child development and learning, particularly in the development of attitudes towards gender roles" (OECD 2019, p. 27).

2010 a group of researchers engaged in the field of gender equality and men and women in ECEC founded the EECERA SIG gender balance. Since 2012, the SIG conference has developed to be a place for exchanging research ideas, strategies, and results in the field of gender balance and gender flexibility in ECEC. The purpose of the conference is to allow for mutual debate among participants, and working with different methods in small groups and in plenary sessions.

Due to the cancellation of the Annual EECERA conference, the SIG conference was conducted online. 35 researchers from 15 countries registered for the conference (Australia, Belgium, China, Cyprus, Egypt, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Norway, Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom, USA). However, not all registered persons could finally take part, so the actual number of participants was 25, and not all countries were presented. The group brought together experienced researchers, junior researchers about to finish their PhD studies, and a few students and ECEC practitioners/ activists. In contrast to other meetings, this year participants from the United Kingdom were overrepresented, maybe due to the activities of the GenderEYE project (see below).

Introduction round and overview

The Corona pandemic has slowed down many projects and initiatives in ECEC, including those for gender balance and diversity. The following summary mentions only a few countries, because little is known about current developments in many other countries.

At the moment, the *United Kingdom* seems to be the country with the most activities regarding issues of men and gender diversity in the Early years. The GenderEYE project has received nationwide attention and presented their final results in October 2020. By bringing together researchers, providers, and activists, the project aimed at developing "a new body of knowledge about practices, perspectives and rationales relating to the gender diversification of the ECE workforce". Find out more on <https://gendereye.org/>.

In *Norway*, activities are continued on national level via annual conferences and the website <http://www.mennibarnehagen.no/>, as well as on regional level with several active networks.

In *Germany*, most funded projects for gender/men in ECEC have expired. The National coordination centre for men in ECEC closed its doors after ten years of activities. A few regional initiatives are continued, but without substantial funding. However, workings groups for men in ECEC are still active in many places, and a national network of coordinators and leaders of men's working groups continues to work and conducts annual meetings.

Several researchers present at the conference had been part of the international research project *Men's career trajectories in – and out of – ECEC*. The project ended in 2020 and published its results in 2021.

Some participants mentioned interesting connections between research on fathers/fatherhood and on men/gender in ECEC. For example, a research project in *Belgium* investigates perspectives of ECEC practitioners on father's participation in parent-children-playgroups, overcoming traditional notions of fathers and mothers. The role of the gender of the practitioners is also reflected. A focus lies on cultural differences regarding attitudes towards men in raising, caring for, and educating children.

A number of other small-scale research projects were conducted or are under way in several other countries – see the recent list of publications on <https://www.eecera.org/sigs/gender-balance/>. There are also several local activities regarding men and gender balance in some countries. However, as far as we know, there are no bigger or nationwide projects focusing on the topic of men's participation, and/or gender diversity in the field of ECEC.

Children's perspectives in gender research in ECEC

Helen Perkins and *Tracey Edwards* presented research results on children's perspectives on men and women in ECEC from a research project conducted at the University of Wolverhampton together with LEYF, the *London Early Years Foundation*. The presentation* (see sources at the end of these notes) was followed by debates in two discussion groups, and a plenary round.

The participants agreed that children's voices are seldom heard in research. However, researching children's voices is indeed difficult and raises complex questions. It was stated that research with children should be practitioner research, because a close relation to children may help to receive information from them. At the same time, it is important for practitioners to listen to children's voice, so it is also a step to better interaction quality. This approach is a good starting point for developing gender awareness, reflection, teaching, and "educating the setting".

However, due to the complex problems with interpreting children's utterances, it is necessary to triangulate research on individual voices of children with other approaches to gender development and gendered behaviors of children. A "layered approach" takes children's lived experience and their active role in constructing and de-constructing gender into account.

It is also necessary to compare different settings and social backgrounds of children. The featured provider (LEYF) is a unique provider and has had a focus on issues of gender and diversity for a long time. This was debated in the context of one example in the presentation, a female ECEC teacher who was NOT afraid of spiders. This led to the question if research presents "typical" or "non-typical" examples for dealing with gender issues in practice, and in what way this is relevant for the interpretation of research results.

Another strand of the debate focused around curriculum issues. Gender perspectives are relevant in the whole ECEC curriculum, and it is also necessary to reflect interactions between gender and age. Children's voices on gender and diversity can be an important source for curriculum development.

Challenging gender binaries was another topic in the debate, including the need for including LGBT perspectives.

To sum up, there are three dimensions in considering children's perspectives in ECEC research:

- *Ethics*: accept children's right to participate and to be heard in a democratic perspective, and the relevance of different cultural perspectives in a changing society;
- *Practice/praxis*: develop appropriate tools for research as well as for practitioners' training;
- *Science/research*: include children in multi-perspective approaches to research, especially when connecting research to policy and practice.

10 years SIG gender balance – time for a mission statement

In the second part of the online conference, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the SIG by opening a debate on a joint "mission statement" of the SIG group, discussing the following questions:

- Why is gender important for research – what should research in ECEC in general consider, regarding gender issues in the work force?
- Why is gender important for policy development – what should policy makers learn about gender issues in the work force?

Here is a summary of first statements and questions from the group:

- So much has been done with so little results...
- We need to have an *impact* with our activities.
- There has been some progress, but it is difficult to recognize it.
- However, time works for us...

- We still do not have solid research about why and how men *do* make a difference for children.
- There are still a lot of issues which are not researched yet.
- It is necessary to look more critical do different research approaches.
- Consciousness and self-consciousness plays an important role in research
- Research *has* to involve practitioners and children.
- How do we want to offer knowledge and tools to practitioners?

- What is the impact of gender on the next generation?
- There is *more* "pink and blue" than one or two decades ago.
- Despite many projects, career choices of young people still follow traditional patterns.
- LGBT perspectives bring a new diversity and fluidity into the debates.
- How can fathers get involved in ECEC, and as possible ECEC workers?

Finally, the topic of the SIG name, "Gender balance", came up again. Should it be changed to "Gender diversification of the ECEC work force"? Or to "Gender balance and diversity"?

There are different understandings of "gender", "balance" and "diversity" in the group, and these understandings should be clarified. It is necessary to understand if and how gender identity is important for professional identity, and how gender is relevant in ECEC and in issues of the work force.

Final round and original plans

In the final round, the participants gave a positive feedback to the conference. They agreed that it was good to meet and to continue the joint debates, even when the circumstances during the Corona pandemic make it difficult to continue research work and practical initiatives.

A second half day online conference was announced for spring 2021, featuring the following topics:

- What's quality got to do with it? Involvement of men from perspectives of ECEC quality.
- Performative ethnography – Introduction and practical work.

Finally, participants were looking forward to meet face-to-face again on the next EECERA conference in autumn 2021.

Epilogue and further perspectives

Here the notes from the conference end, and the recorder continues...

Although the conference ended with a positive perspective regarding further collaboration, the consequences of the Corona pandemic in our everyday life and work situations made it difficult to continue the planned activities.

The SIG team did not have enough resources to plan and conduct the second online conference. EECERA conducted an online event called 'convocation' on *International Narratives about Covid-19 and Early Childhood*, in October 2020. After that, we didn't hear much from EECERA for several months. In March 2021, EECERA announced that the Annual conference planned for September 2021 will be replaced by an online conference again.

We had already discussed in the SIG team that a live event in Zagreb might be difficult for many interested colleagues, and intend to plan another online event for September. The date for this event has to be coordinated with the planned activities of EECERA, and we will inform you as soon as possible.

Moreover, we hope that many of you will take contribute to the EECERA online conference, as we had three SIG self organized symposia planned for the conference in Zagreb 2020. All proposals had been accepted, and are still accepted, for the planned online event.

Finally, we will continue our joint work by starting a quarterly SIG newsletter by mail. As a new SIG team member, Vicky Sullivan from Australia will support this project. You are welcome to send information to our new mail address: info@siggender.eu, so we can forward it to our mailing list. Please let us know about your new publications on gender balance and diversity issues, so we can include them in the upcoming publication lists.

Report and presentation on children's perspectives in gender research in ECEC

Research report (2019):

<https://leyf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Men-in-Childcare-stage-2-Final-v7-JO-HP-TE-compressed.pdf>

EECERA Conference presentation (2019):

http://www.siggender.eu/forschung/SIG_GB/2019_annualconf/Perkins%20Edwards%20et%20al%20EECERA%202019.pdf