

**EECERA SIG Gender Balance
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Emilsen, Kari* (2015)

Taking gender issues a step further:

Gender equality and diversity in Norwegian kindergartens

Presentation on the 2nd SIG Gender Balance Research Conference, 7.9.2015, Barcelona/Spain

For educators, it is important to relate to scientific knowledge about children and gender in a reflective and critical way. For example, it is essential to reflect on whether gender is something you are, become or do? In what sense is the kindergarten a gendered arena, where both educators and children themselves contribute to the development of gendered behavior? Evaluations as well as experience from teaching and training show that although many practitioners support gender equality in general, they have a limited understanding of gender in the context of their work. It seems necessary to widen the scope for a broader view on gender beyond the question of gender stereotypes. An interesting question is therefore how educators can create room for being a boy and being a girl in various ways while providing room for a diversity of gender identities and gender expressions. How do we as researchers understand the concept of gender, and which role do we have in transferring differentiated perspectives on gender issues to policy and practice?

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Taking gender issues a step further ...

Gender equality and diversity in Norwegian ECEC

Some challenges and opportunities

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My agenda

Focus on gender sensitivity and equal rights in ECECs

- Which factors prevent gender equality and genders sensitivity?
- Which challenges can we find?
- Which opportunities can we see?



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Gender sensitivity in ECECs - Why ?

ECEC plays an important role in children's socialisation

- It is established that ECECs are important contributors to the goal of an egalitarian society (Askland and Rossholt 2009, Askland 2015, Emilsen 2015).
- The goal of gender equality is enshrined in laws, regulations and curricula. The government has decided that gender equality should be one of the platforms for learning and teaching in ECECs and primary education (Emilsen 2011).
- It is part of ECECs mandate to work with equality. It involves rights, power, liberating relationships, and questions of equality is therefore a question of democracy (Rossholt 2006).
- In Norway there is a consensus about the importance of men taking part in young children's lives (Emilsen 2011).



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Status

- Many practitioners support gender equality in general, but they have a limited understanding of gender and gender issues in the context of their work.
- Studies show that gender equality has limited attention in ECECs (Hoel et. al. 2010, Østrem et al. 2009).
- Instead of working to counter traditional gender patterns, ECECs often reinforce this pattern (Hoel et. al. 2010)

How come?



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Challenges and opportunities - societal level

- The discourse on gender and gender equality has changed. Diversity has become the new focus.
- Setback for gender research – in general
Research on gender has been "ridiculed" via TV production
- Biology versus social construction - polarized discourse
Is gender something you are, do or become?
- Market forces reinforce gender stereotypes



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Challenges and opportunities - societal level

- Our understanding of gender and gender impact changes
- Research-based knowledge on children and gender are in continuous development.

When different theories and perspectives stand against each other, knowledge is weighed against experience and practice, we improve our understanding. In such meetings there will be controversies and disagreements. (Stordal 2015) (my translation)



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Challenges and opportunities - societal level

- Gender diversity – more openness and acceptance.
- Transgender and lesbians, gays, bisexuals terms and rights are on the agenda.
- We have a new law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.
- *The purpose of the law is to promote equality regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Equality implies equal opportunities and rights, accessibility and facilitation (Emilsen 2015)*



Photo: Nils Pickert in Emilsen 2015



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Challenges and opportunities - structural level

Unclear objectives given from the authorities?

Gender equality is founded on human rights - and is enshrined in law - but what does it imply?
Formal equality?
Real equality?

How are gender equalities in ECECs understood?
A survey in ECECS show that equality not primarily are understood as gender, but to a greater extent as equality, democracy and diversity (Hole et al. 2010).

Does this undermine the significance of gender?



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Challenges and opportunities - structural level

- The intention of gender balance among the staff is not discussed, only instructed.
- The policymakers often argue that we need more equal representation of the gender in ECECs because men and women are different, and at the same time is argued to transcend gender divides, and rather accentuate individual differences across gender (Kasin and Vaagan Slåtten 2015).
- We lack research on the significance of gender balance among employees ECECs.



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Challenges and opportunities societal level

- A relevant question is: Does a higher Proportion of men lead to a greater focus on gender equality in ECECs?

Research shows:

- "Both men and women want a working environment with more gender balance than is often the case in today's ECEC " (Lysklett end Emilsen 2007)
- There is a clear perception that children in ECECs will benefit from interaction with adults of both sexes. (Lysklett and Emilsen 2007)
- Other studies show that there is a risk of gender stereotyping when men are employed in ECECS (Opheim 2014)



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The relationship between research and practice

- The relationship between theory and practice is often polarized - is that wise?
- Research must be linked to practices - *Research should discuss what goals pedagogy should have and how they should be formulated* (Kvernbekk 2012).
- Research together with the practitioners and the children is crucial and gives us more insight into relevant issues.



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