

21st

EECERA annual conference

Education from birth : research, practices
and educational policy.

Geneva, Switzerland, 14th -17th September 2011

Tim Rohrmann

Gender segregation in pre-school:

Do boys and girls live in “separate worlds”?

Presentation on the 21st EECERA annual conference, 15.9.2011, Geneva/Switzerland

Abstract

Do boys and girls live in gender-segregated “separate worlds”? What impact has the dominance of women in early childhood institutions on the development of children? And how should early childhood education deal with gender differences?

The research presented started with an extensive review of international empirical research concerning gender interactions during early childhood. Origination, manifold forms and context conditions of gender-related behavior were submitted to a careful examination. Several studies points out that gendered peer interactions play an important role for social and cognitive development of boys and girls already in early childhood (Fabes et al., 2004). Some authors even suggest that boys and girls grow up in “separate worlds” (Maccoby, 1998, 2002). But, in the review it becomes apparent that gender-segregation during childhood is not a constitutional phenomenon, but is in many ways influenced by external conditions and therefore modifiable.

In a qualitative empirical study, the current state of research was put up for discussion to leading experts from gender research and elementary pedagogy. Group discussions allowed for dialogues between research, education and practice. Building up on a content analysis of the transcriptions, discourse analysis was applied to extract patterns of collective orientation of the involved experts.

The results of the study lead to new approaches for scientific research as well as for the educational work with both genders. Concerning the structure of elementary and primary education, the analysis indicates that gender-segregation can play an important role for children's orientation in educational settings. But, as the author points out, although gender homogenous peer groups have major impact on children's development, gender separation is much more visible in the gender unbalance of the ECE work force than in the interactions of boys and girls.

The author concludes that

1. Professionals need gender competence for an appropriate understanding of children's development, especially social and cognitive behavior in peer groups;
2. Research has to focus not only on gender segregation in childrens' peer groups, but also in gender segregation in the professional work force of ECE institutions.
3. With diversity as a basic approach to ECE, strategies for formation, education and pedagogical practice have to include and develop a gender-sensitive pedagogy.

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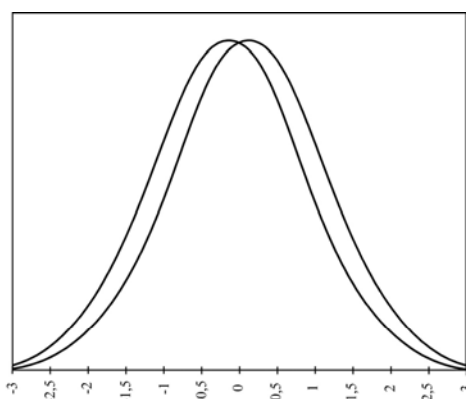
GENDER SEGREGATION IN PRE-SCHOOL

Do boys and girls live
in „separate worlds“?



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The two sexes: not much difference, but...



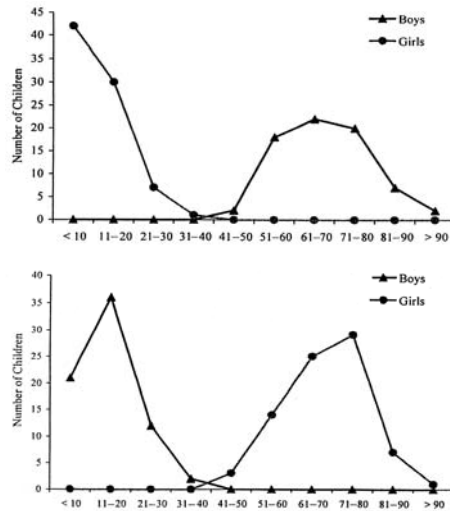
Average gender differences on a (theoretical) scale of psychological measures.
(see Maccoby, 2000, S. 105).

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... growing up apart?



Percentage of time in which children were observed in play with boys (above) resp. girls (below).
 n = 72 boys , 80 girls,
 Age average 5 years
 (data: Martin & Fabes, 2001;
 diagram: Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 2004, S. 263).

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Impact on children's development

If boys and girls grow up in „separate worlds“, this has important impact on children's development, particularly in regard of

- gender development
- social behavior and learning
- cognitive development

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Main research questions

- Does recent research support the „two worlds“-hypothesis?
- How do children's peer groups influence development of boys and girls?
- Which role has the institutional context for gender development?
- How do experts interpret research results?

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Methodology (1)

Meta analysis (2005-2006)

- Quantitative research
- Qualitative research
- Statistical data

Institutions

- Early childhood centers and preschools
- Primary schools

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Methodology (2)

- Quantitative data about gender separation
 - Observational studies (N=13)
 - Interviews with children (N=11)
- Phenomenology
 - Quantitative studies (same as above)
 - Ethnographic observations (N=7)
- Theories and explanations
- Consequences for pedagogy

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Problems

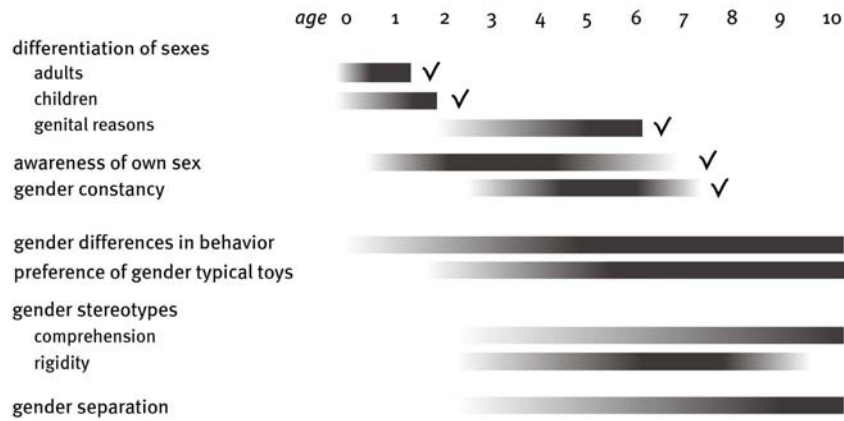
- Differences between disciplines and theoretical approaches ;
different understanding of major concepts
(e.g. gender, identity)
- Gap between mainstream in educational sciences and gender theory and research
- Few research on gender in ECE
- Gap between theory and practice

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Stages of gender development

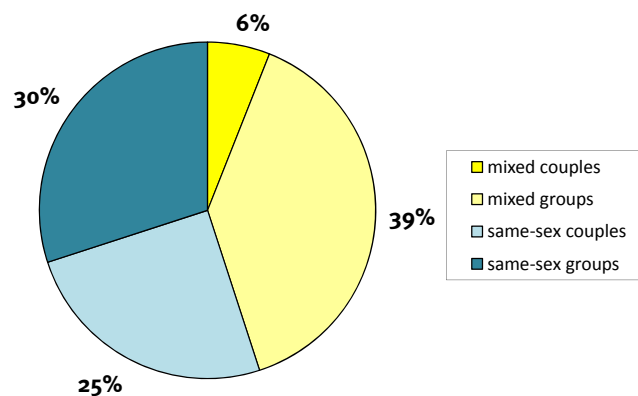


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Results: „Partagéons l'égalité“



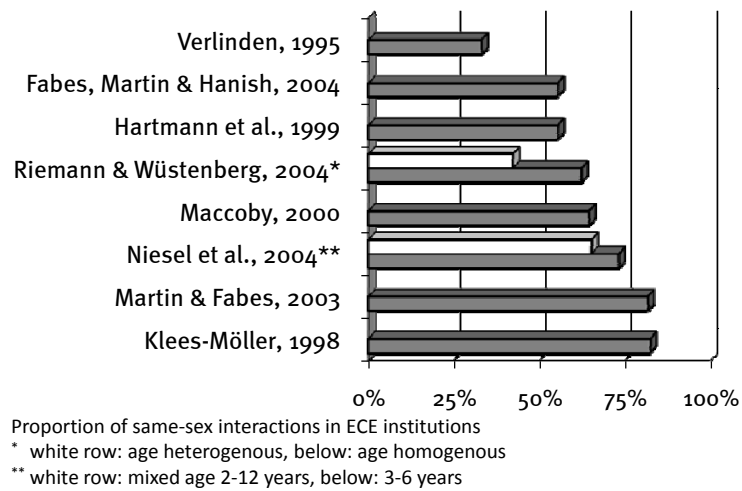
Social interactions in pre-schools in Luxembourg
 Project „Partagéons l'égalité – Gleichheit teilen“ (1997-2000)

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Results: Observational studies



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Results: Interviews with children

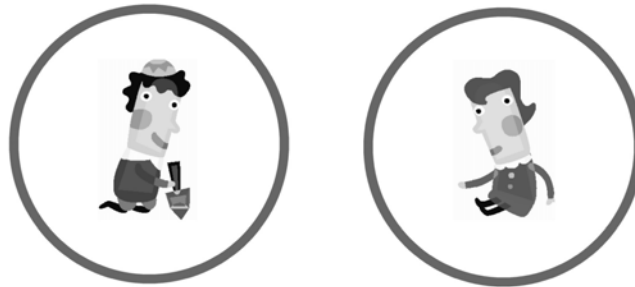


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Gender separation exists...

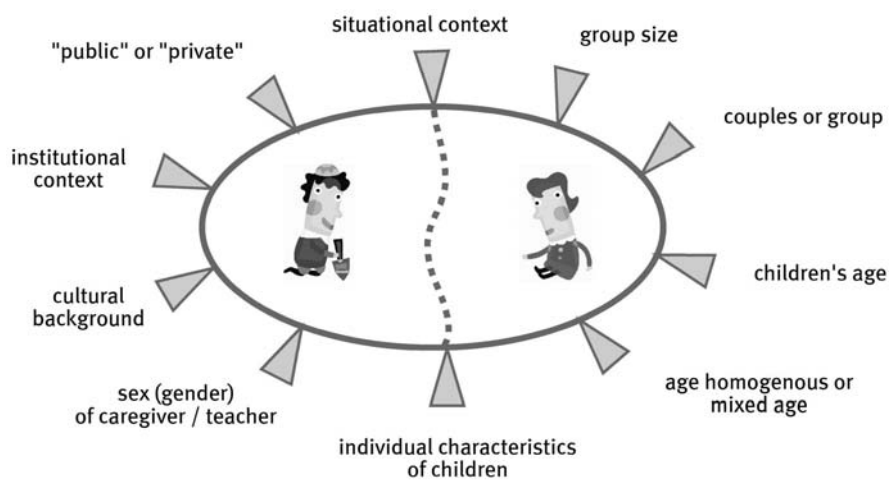


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... but it depends...

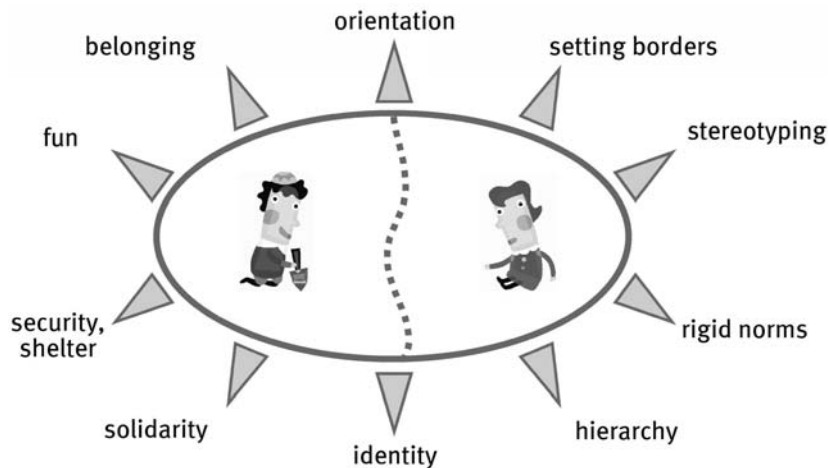


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Functions of gender separation



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Functions of gender separation

- Orientation in new situations
- Security and „shelter“ in same-sex group, especially important for boys in female-dominated fields
- Possibilities for undisturbed development



Gender homogeneous peer groups are important
„room“ for gender identity development

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Functions of gender separation

- Classification („in-group“ and „out-group“)
- Different styles of playing, learning, communication and conflict solving
- Rigid norms and group pressure



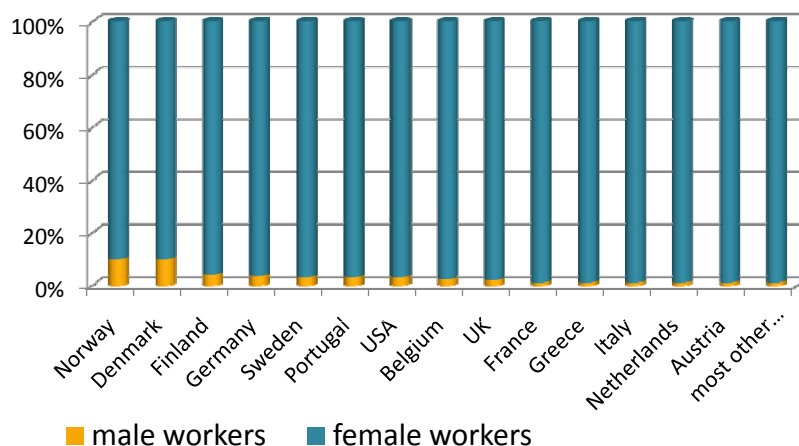
Gender homogeneous peer groups promote and reinforce gender stereotype orientations and power relations / hierarchies

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Gender separation in ECE work force



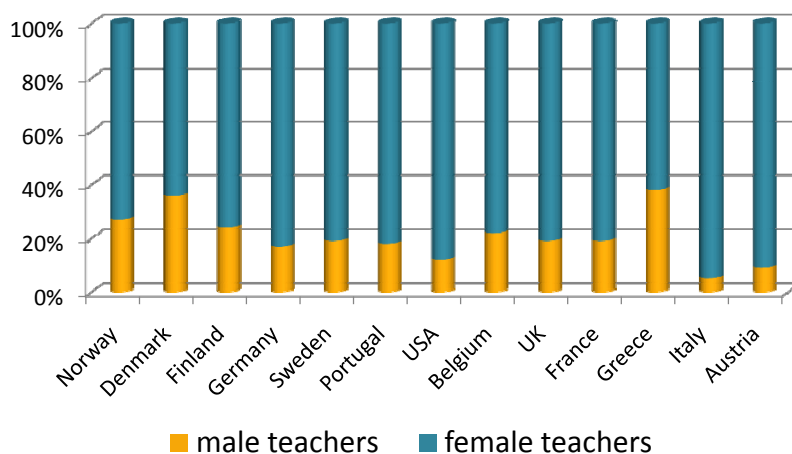
Sources: OECD (2006), Oberhuemer & Schreyer (2010), own research

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... and in primary schools



Source: UN (2007)

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Research: What do experts think?

Group discussions with experts (2006-2007)

■ 5 group discussions with 21 experts

- researchers
- university & high school teachers
- experts & trainers working with practitioners
- 10 female, 11 male

■ Content analysis

■ Analysis of group discourse processes

■ Analysis of collective orientations (Bohnsack)

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„You see what you expect to see“

*Does the material support the
„separate worlds“-hypothesis?*

- „They exist, of course!“
- „This separate-world-thesis is disproved.“
- „In my observations in practice
the two worlds clearly exist.“
- „It is convincing that the context is very
important. I can't imagine that one can take
another position; extreme positions can't be
maintained.“

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Collective orientations (1)

- „You will always find contradictive results!“
- „We as scientific researchers need to have
it complicated and differentiated...“
- „... our whole work would be put into
question!“ (gender trainers)
- „I cannot only observe... as pedagogue I am
responsible for the outcome of my work.“
- „The aim is initiating dialogue.“

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Collective orientations (2)

Differences derive from different

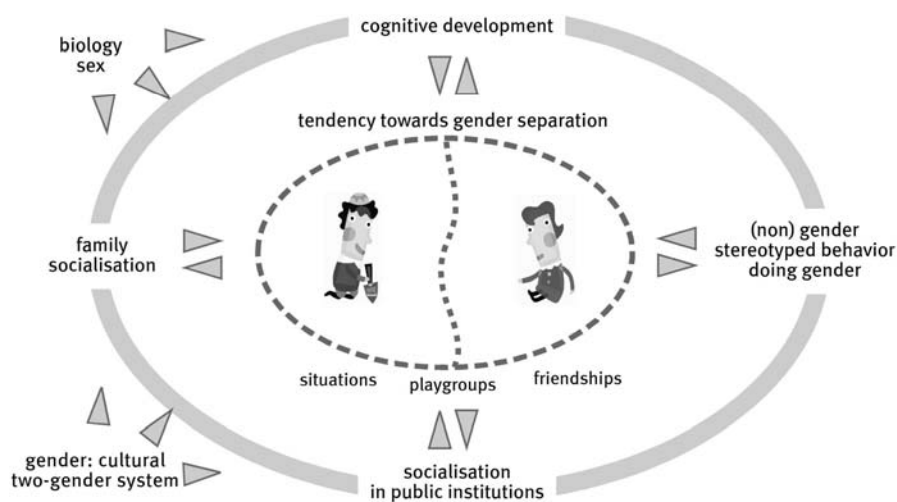
- biographical backgrounds and experiences
 - scientific disciplines and theoretical orientations
 - background in research or practice
 - institutional fields and milieus
- but ... all agree:**
- self reflection and gender competence are basic.

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Gender segregation as a focal point of gender development



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Consequences: gender play

- Develop gender competence;
- undramatize gender;
- foster mutual play of girls and boys;
- accept boys' and girls' wish to separate;
- work with and not against children's (gendered) peer groups;
- include gender separated programs in gender-sensitive pedagogy;
- weave „alternative threads“ in children's storylines.

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