

30th

EECERA annual conference
24th – 26th August 2022



Emilsen, Kari; Ljunggren, Elin Birgitte & Lilleng, Siv Ellen (2022). **Gender play: co-creating gender research methods with practitioners and children.** Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Glasgow/Scotland, 25.8.2022.

The study aims to explore the co-construction of a gender sensitive research method with children and practitioners. It describes the incremental and participatory-based development process of the research method. The research builds on the well-established research field of participatory oriented methodology that enables children a voice by using the mosaic approach, theorized by Clark (2017). It is important to facilitate for, and enable children's voices to co-construct meaning (Clark 2017). An extended methodological toolbox is needed (Brown and Perkins 2019), to grasp how children experience ECEC teachers in terms of gender. This requires innovative methods (Brown and Perkins 2019), and notions from user-based innovation inspire the development process. An international gender study with a standardized protocol frames the study. The dataset is from the project "Young Children's Perspectives on their Male and Female Teachers". The development process became a step-wise process where one practitioner, two researchers and 19 children actively developed the research method - using interview/dialogue about images. The children used different languages, and play became central in the method aiming to grasp young children's voices in studying gender. Adhered ethical codes are approved consent, opportunity to withdraw, and pseudonyms. The important role of staff and children in the co-construction process is highlighted and analysed. The interaction between children and researchers in collecting data and producing knowledge and "truth" about teacher's genders through the applied and developed method is discussed. Impact will be an improved gender-reflective understanding of children's and practitioner's voices as co-creators of research methods.

Keywords

Innovative research, Childrens voice, Co-construction, Interaction between children and researchers, Gender-reflective understanding

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Gender play: co-creating gender research methods with practitioners and children

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Main focus today

1) This study aims to **explore the co-construction of a gender sensitive research method with children and practitioners**. It describes the incremental and participatory-based development process of the research method.

2) We want to discuss this development process of the method in light of epistemological questions regarding truth, research and children`s participation when doing research aiming at gender issues.

The results are preliminary and just give a taste of our research .

CPT-project as frame for development process

An international gender study with a standardized protocol frames this study, The dataset is from the project "**Young Children's Perspectives on their Male and Female Teachers**". (CTP)

The key goal of the research:

To understand children's perspectives of their *teachers in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) through a gender lens.*

"We seek to create a space where young children's perspectives about their lived experiences are respected and are used to inform our understanding of their worlds" (CPT – protocol David Brody et.al)

Case study: using different methods: Visual methodology, interview with children, staff and parents. Observation. In 9 different countries. Each case study is based on one or two sites, (where both men and women work).

- The project aims at children aged 3-5 years.
- Different cultural context makes it complex.
- How we see and recognize gender and how children's voices are heard, differs.

Theoretical underpinnings - research with young children

The CPT-project and our work with the method –development process is highly inspired by the mosaic approach and ideas about children`s participation. It is important to facilitate for, and enable children`s voices to co-construct meaning (Clark, 2017).

We worked with 3 year old children.

Although very young children have traditionally been considered to be less “reliable” informants than older children, **young children can and do express their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences when given opportunity** (Cooke, et al., 2020).

An extended methodological toolbox is needed to (Brown and Perkins 2019), to grasp how children experience ECEC teachers in terms of gender. This requires **innovative methods** (Brown and Perkins, 2019), and ideas from user- based innovation inspired the development process.

Try, evaluate, try again, evaluate etc

Doing gender research (and method development) with practitioners and children- an unexpected journey!

The narrative/reconstruction of this journey is based on our: field notes, research diaries, meeting agendas, meeting minutes, recordings of some interviews with the children and our common reconstruction of the process and the considerations done in insight.

Research question:

What can this narrative tell us about: Co-construction and interaction between children, practitioners and researchers in method development, in production of gender-reflective understanding, and the role of children's voice.

We experienced that the research situation led us into a development process together with children and practitioners

We base our reflections on 8 taped sessions (15-20 min)

- Children in pairs
- 1 practitioner (Siv Ellen) (and a bachelor student)
- 2 researchers (Birgitte and Kari)

The Norwegian context

Gender equality enshrined in legislation and the framework plan for the ECECs. 10 % men in ECEC settings

The organizational context – The ECEC we worked with:

Experience with research cooperation and gender equality project

- Director as gatekeeper
 - Dedicated to gender equality issues in ECEC
 - On different levels (staff and gender sensitive pedagogy)
 - Assessing organisational capacity
 - Low rate of sick leave
 - Stable staff situation
 - Assessing staff competence and interest
 - Match maker
 - Very spacy and well organised outdoor play ground

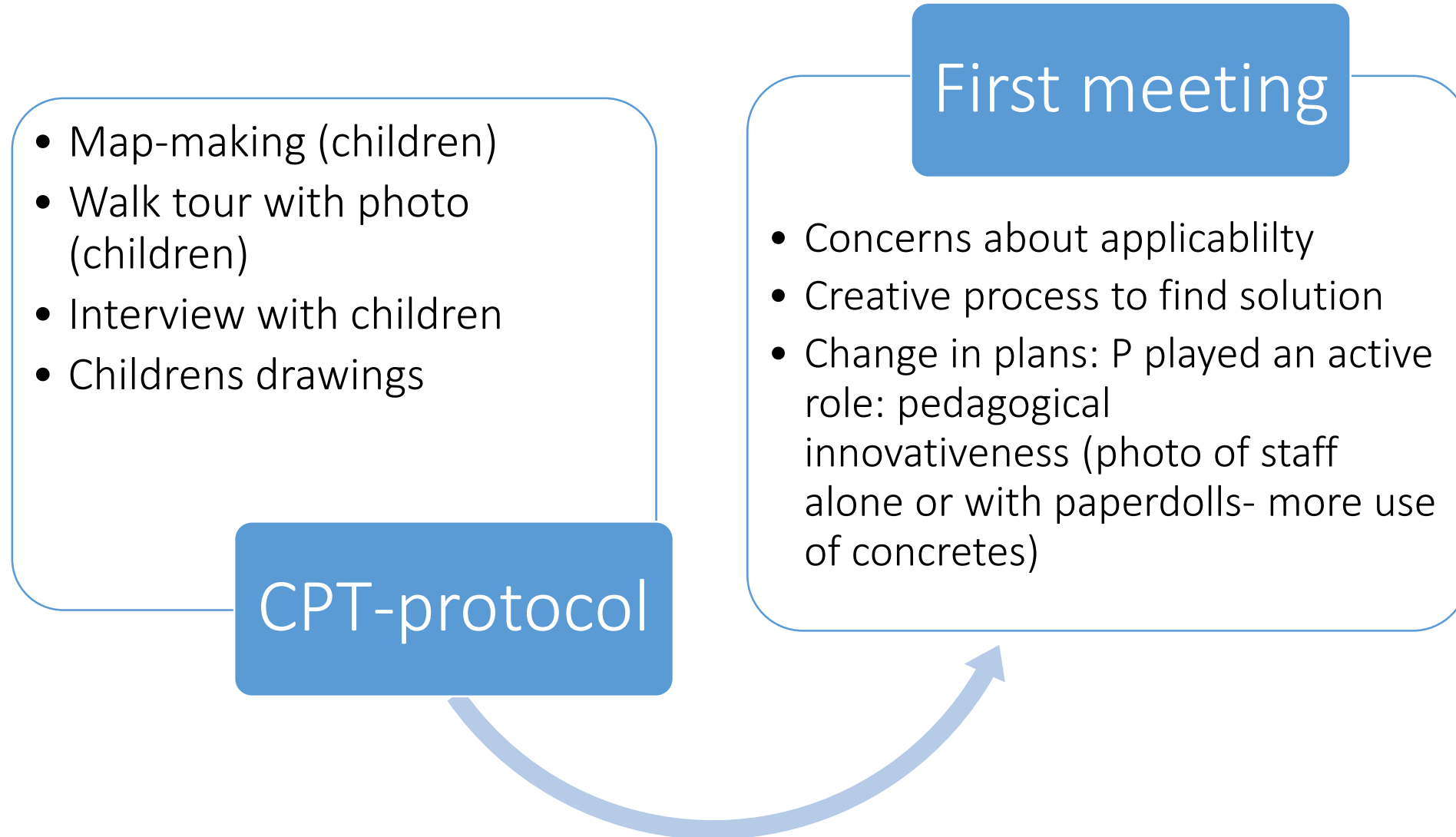
Etical considerations:

- It was self-recruitment – and voluntary
- Consent forms were presented and signed by all involved. The children and staff had to verbally agree that they wanted to talk to us.
- We paid attention to the children's body language and paid attention to whether they were uncomfortable. And if they wanted to stop.

The method development process

Mapping the outdoor area

Pre-collection process: staff and researchers



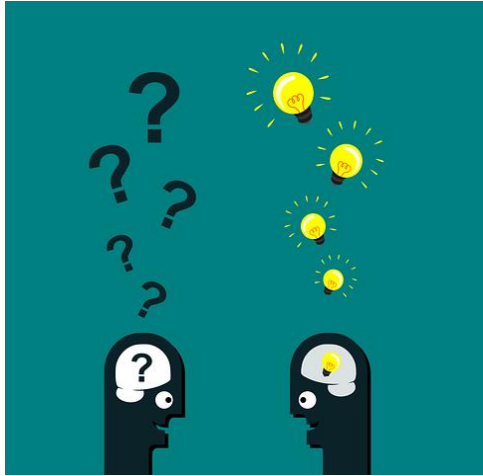
The revised design for datacollection

Day one:

- Observation and relations building.
- Walking around with children taking photos of what they are interested in. Not all children participated on this session- (9)

Day two:

- Interviews/dialog with the children using a map of outside area. We introduced new dolls (headfootings) and the photo-map
 - First session with children that participated in the photo-walk and second session with those who did not participapate day one.





Day one of datacollection

- Observation
- Building relations to children and staff
- Get to know the site and routines

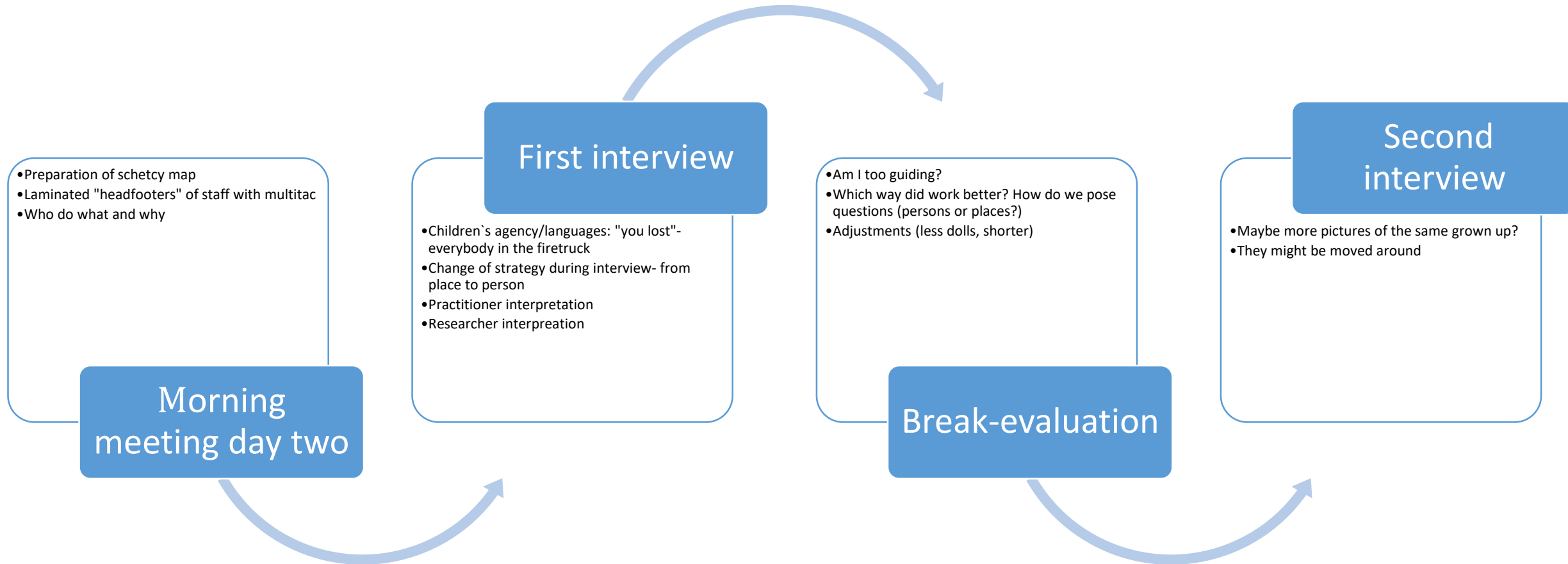
Breakfast with children outside

Photo-walk with children

- Children decided were to go
- Practitioner took photo
- Observation
- Fieldnotes
- 9 children



Day two of datacollection – the outdoor area



The setting – create a "safe space"



Leaving the map

- After the final interview day 2
 - Discussions of the map
 - Do the children understand the map- or are they focused on the pictures
 - Let us try without map, but with pictures tomorrow





Co-construction of the method

The researcher`s agency

Practical level in the interview setting:

- Follow research protocol
- Validate suggestions
- Create a good space for childrens voices
- Interpret and adjust - as we went

In the interview- session – children`s agency

- **Practical level in the interview setting:**
 - Body language of children: unsecure, tired, fun
 - Verbal language : "it is a bit tiresome now, this"
 - Children`s play with the map/headfootings- the flexibility of the headfootings are underscored

Co-construction of method

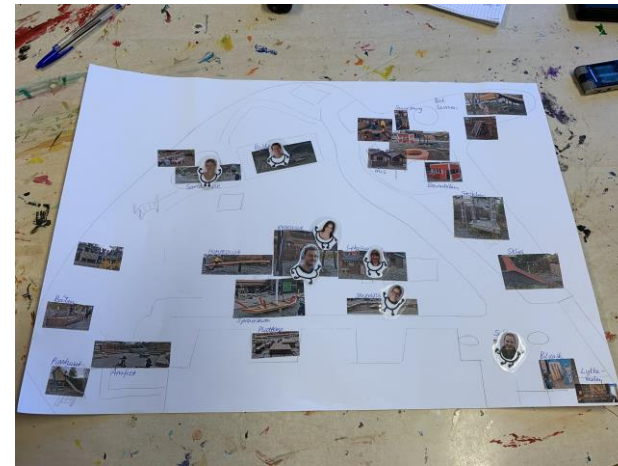
The participating staff - Siv Ellen and Marcus (bachelor student)

- **Practical level in the interview setting and in evaluation**
 - Do we start with the places or the persons/headfootings?
 - Do we start with one or all persons/headfootings
 - Shall we try without headfootings at all for the most verbal children?
 - We might try without a map all together
 - Participating in asking questions to the children
 - Reading each child`s body language

Epistemological level: is this the truth?

What kind of questions concerning "truth" about children`s perspectives on their teachers *through a gender lens* do this method rise?

- Is this the truth about where staff is present and play?
 - Did this happen this morning or long time ago?
 - Did they understand the questions?
 - Has it taken place at all? Do they comprehend a map at all?
 - The truth as here and now- volatile and yet solid
- The line between play/game and method
- We adapted the method as we went - map was changed



Some final reflections

Experiencing the messy and fun process of co-constructing a method for doing research on young children on their perspectives on their teachers:

- In terms of children`s agency- did it make space for children to participate on their own terms? (Palaiologou, 2019)- yes and no (ethical considerations)
 - Adult initiated
 - Adult led- child-adapted?
 - Research logic/"gender logic"- did we actually listen to children`s voices?
 - More towards play later in process

Some reflections

Challenging since the method clearly opens for game/play - challenging our understanding of truth

- Truth finding itself on different levels that merge when applying this method
 - Here and now and previous experiences
 - May dreams/wishes and reality mix?
 - Seeking the rules of this game and trying to make them at the same time
 - Are the children interested in the teacher`s gender at all? (adult)

Litterature

Brody, D, et.al (2021): Research protocol CPT- project

Brown, & Perkins, H (red.)(2019). Using Innovative Methods in Early Years Research. Beyond the Conventional. Rutledge

Clark, & Moss, P. (2017). *Listening to young children: a guide to understanding and using the mosaic approach* Jessica Kingsley Publishers