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Genette, Christophe, Pirard, Florence & Maulet, Nathalie (2023). **Fathers in childcare services and play groups: An intercultural perspective.** Paper presented on the 31th EECERA Annual Conference, Estoril/Portugal, 31.8.2023.

In French-speaking Belgium, two research projects seek to improve the understanding of relationships between parents and professionals, specifically places given to fathers in early childhood services, and to identify strategies to enhance these relationships. While literature shows the importance of strengthening collaboration between families and professionals, field practitioners express difficulties in managing their relationship with parents (Sharmahd & Pirard, 2018), especially fathers. These difficulties can be explained by historical and sociocultural factors related to fatherhood, as well as characteristics of services mainly staffed by women practitioners and focused on a maternal approach (Peeters, 2022). Collaborative interdisciplinary research (Jacob et al., 2021), conducted within a constructivist approach to gender and culture (Bereni et al. 2020), was carried out. With the support of researchers, practitioners from childcare services and playgroups produced documentation on their daily practices. All data were analyzed collectively by practitioners and researchers from different disciplines, before self-regulating participatory assessment initiated by Cresas and IEDPE (EADAP, 2011; Pirard et al., 2021). From 2022, these results have been supplemented with an interdisciplinary collective and participative analysis of contextualized narratives. Research was approved by the ethics committees of ONE and University of Liege. Ethics were ensured through participants' informed consent and reflexivity of the collaborative process. Results underline importance of the research process and highlight levers entrusting fathers a diversity of places, validated by field experiences. The collaborative research stream exploring gender interaction in childhood services and promotes self-implemented context specific change, hence reinforcing field practitioners' agency.

Keywords

gender, interaction, fathers, early childhood field practitioners, collaborative action research

Presenters:

Christophe Genette, University of Liège, Belgium

Florence Pirard, University of Liège, Belgium

Non-presenting Co-Author:

Nathalie Maulet, Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance, Belgium

Fathers in childcare services and play groups : an intercultural perspective

EECERA Conference, Lisbon, 2023

Christophe GENETTE, Université de Liège, Belgium

Florence PIRARD, PhD, Université de Liège, Belgium

Nathalie MAULET, PhD, Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance, Belgium

Two collaborative, interdisciplinary and interinstitutional research projects in French-speaking Belgium, funded by **ONE ACADEMY**

A first research project focused on the support of fathers in early childhood services (2018 - 2020).

Research report (Pirard et al., 2021a) available : <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/265499>



A second research project analysing any gender issues in the intercultural context of early childhood services (2022 - 2024).



Gender issues are becoming a growing concern in ECEC at the political and professional levels ...

BUT

Literature

- shows that collaboration between families and practitioners remains complicated (Sharmahd & Pirard, 2018)
- underlines the importance of interactional competences between practitioners and parents in childcare services (Garcia, 2020; Garcia & Filliettaz, 2020)
- focuses mainly on obstacles, particularly with regards to collaboration and relations with fathers (Long, 2008; Martin et al., 2017 ; Neyrand, 2014, 2019 ; Peeters, 2022)

A deficit or negative thinking of fathers in a prevailing mother-centered approach

Fathers are considered **second(-class) parents**, **substitute parents** (Blöss & Odena, 2005), or **transmitters of information** (« Will you please tell your wife » - Peeters, 2022),...

Fathers' presence and role are regularly questioned by practitioners (Peeters, 2022; Fusulier et al., 2022; de Montigny et al., 2020).



First lever : professional development

Supporting practitioners to challenge their negative perceptions and preconceived ideas about fathers as well as to step back from their one-sided conception of parenthood (de Montigny et al., 2020).



Initial and continuing training

A current obstacle...

Gender issues receive little or no attention in initial training, particularly when it comes to working with fathers. (Fusulier et al., 2022)

and a potential lever ?

- to reflect on beliefs, assumptions and expectations governing professional practices towards parents and parents' behaviors (*professional ethos* - Fusulier et al., 2022).
- to support practitioners in becoming both “critically reflective emotional professionals” (Osgood, 2011) and sensitive on gender issues.
- to develop reflexive competencies beyond reflective ones (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011)

Second lever : mixed-gender workforce

Mixed-gender workforce as potential lever to facilitate relations with fathers and their involvement (Devineau, 2022 ; Peeters et al., 2015; Rohrmann, 2019),

but still far from reality in Belgium :

- Services are still predominantly composed by female practitioners (2,4% of men in the Flemish Community, no official data in French-speaking Belgium (Pirard et al., 2015; Pirard et al., forthcoming))
- In gender-mixed teams, the effects of this mixed composition are not discussed (Pirard et al., 2021a)



Research aims

- ✓ Improving understanding of practitioners' and parents' relationships, specifically the places given to fathers in early childhood services in French-speaking Belgium
- ✓ Identifying professional strategies to enhance practitioners' and parents' relationships in childcare services and play groups
- ✓ Producing tools to support professional reflection on gender issues

→ Both research projects are based on a **gender constructivist approach** (Bereni et al., 2020)

Research questions



1. How do practitioners recognize and understand (or not) gender issues in their practices and their encounters with families ?
2. What obstacles and levers are meaningful in practitioners' local contexts ?
3. What tensions and dilemmas do practitioners face ?

→ Beyond the usual guaranteed ethical criteria, **three ethical criteria** for early childhood education research are applied: **prudence**, the **virtue of dialogism** and **reflexivity** (Garnier & Rayna, 2021)

First research project (2018-2020) – Sample

	Geographical area	Socio-cultural environment	Socio-economic environment	Structure's status	Staff composition	Capacity (children)
Childcare service 1	rural	native population	mixed population	private	6 women 1 man	29
Childcare service 2	semi rural	native population	privileged population	private	15 women 1 man	60
Childcare service 3	urban	mixed population	mixed population	public	26 women 1 man	79
Play group 1	urban	mixed population	mainly disadvantaged population	private	14 women 2 men	5-10
Play group 2	urban	majority of immigrant origin	disadvantaged population	private	4 women 1 man	1- 15
Play group 3	urban	mixed population	mixed population	private	2 women 1 man	6-12

First research project (2018-2020)

Action-research process:

1. Data collection by practitioners on their daily interactions and practices with parents (with a focus on fathers).
 - inventory of presence, absence and participation of each parents, based on the tool developed by VBJK (Peeters, 2006).
 - development of a specific team project to strengthen/enhance fathers' participation (diary extracts, written observations, photos, films, etc.).
2. Collective analysis by practitioners and the interdisciplinary research team, followed by a self-regulating participatory assessment as developed by Cresas and IEDPE (EADAP, 2011; Pirard, 2007 ; Pirard et al., 2021c).
3. Continued collaboration including during the drafting of research results and tools (Pirard et al., 2021a ; Pirard et al, 2021b)

Second research project (2022-2024)

Collaborative process based on a **situational approach** (Jacob et al., 2021 ; Morrissette, 2013).

Research frame :

“Interculturality”: a broad, non-predefined acceptance of interculturality, which favors the notion of "intercultural encounter" over that of "culture shock", considering every encounter as potentially intercultural.

Second research project (2022-2024) – Sample

	Geographical area	Structure's status	Staff composition	Capacity
Childcare service 1	rural	private, associative	exclusively women	21
Childcare service 2	rural	public	exclusively women	21
Childcare service 3	semi rural	private, associative	exclusively women	25
Childcare service 4	urban	private, associative	exclusively women	24
Play group 1	rural	private, associative	exclusively women	n.d.
Play group 2	urban	private, associative	gender mixed	n.d.
Play group 3	semi rural	public	exclusively women	n.d.

Second research project (2022-2024)

1. On-line process to collect real-life situations (problematic or positive) perceived by practitioners as related to gender issues within an intercultural context
2. Selection of one situation by participants structures (criteria: diversified and complementary themes, emblematic and ordinary situations, complexity, geographic coverage)
3. Analyse of each situation with the professional team that experienced it
4. Collective analysis of all situations in a seminar bringing together practitioners and the interdisciplinary research team (work in progress)



- Convergent anthropological approach in 14 other childcare services and play groups (work in progress)
- Complementary focus groups with parents (work in progress)

Beyond general interest for fathers, paying attention to them in daily practices ?

Although they volunteered to participate in a research on fathers' involvement, the practitioners from our first research did not consider working with fathers as a central object of collective concern (cherry on top).

Participating in the research helped them become aware of these fathers related issues in ECEC services.

Practitioners involved in the second research project not specifically focused on fathers, frequently relate situations where fathers play a **key role**, but very often a **problematic** or **questioning** one.



Illustration credit : T. Rusanova - iStock

Latent process of invisibilization of fathers

WELCOMING PARENTS

« It makes no difference to us whether it's Mum or Dad. We feel that we address both parents in the same way. We don't feel we act differently depending on the gender of the person we're talking to. » (childcare manager, female)

Welcoming **parents** ?

The challenge is not so much to have more fathers than :

- to increase fathers' visibility by paying attention to them in all aspects of daily practices (interactions, space organisation, written communications, etc.)
- to acknowledge the places taken by fathers in their interactions with children, mothers, and practitioners
- to analyse the effects of fathers' physical or symbolic places in early childhood services

Towards a « **father-friendly** » approach.



Illustration : A. Barman.
Extract from the « Guide d'observation du 2^{ème} Observatoire ».

A significant exception...

A social worker organises initial interview with both mother and father, addressing each parent in a specific way (gesture, attitude, vocabulary).

« We've had very good feedback from several fathers about the distinction made between father and mother during their interview with the social worker. Fathers felt fully included in the whole thing by the fact that we spoke to them individually, to mum individually and then the two of them together. »

(male social worker, 10/22/19)

→ This team notes that a large number of fathers attend the “familiarization” process. In contrast, other teams who tend “not to differentiate between fathers and mothers in their communication”, observe the participation of a majority of mothers, which they associated with mothers still being on maternity leave.

As practitioners say... a “classical” situation ?

“At the end of the day, a father comes to collect his two-year-old son, Martin, from the creche. He sees him pushing a buggy and tells him sharply, "What are you doing? Playing with dolls? That's for girls! Come on!".

The speechless childcare worker turned to her manager. She questioned the father : “Really? Why shouldn't boys play with dolls? Does it bother you that he plays with them?”

The father replied: "I don't want him to turn gay!"

The following day, the child's mother arrived at the childcare service smiling. She told the manager: "Well, it seems that yesterday, when Dad arrived, he (Martin) was playing with dolls...". She laughed and seemed amused by the whole situation: “he was playing with dolls, that's nice...”

Manager: “ - Well, yes, ... and what was it like at home. How was Dad doing? Wasn't he too upset by my comment?”

Mum : - Well, no, but he's got his own ideas!

Manager : - Well, I hope it'll at least change his mind a bit and make him see things a little differently.

The mother added laughingly: "Well, if you can change his mind!"

(Narrative written by a childcare manager, February 2023.)

“Catch-22” situations

Every day, practitioners face complex situations generating **tensions** and **dilemma** :



How to **listen to fathers' concerns** while **reaffirming the values of the educational project** on gender equality through the use of non-gender specific toys or any objects ?

How to **play a supportive role** in parenting **without disqualifying** one of the parents ?

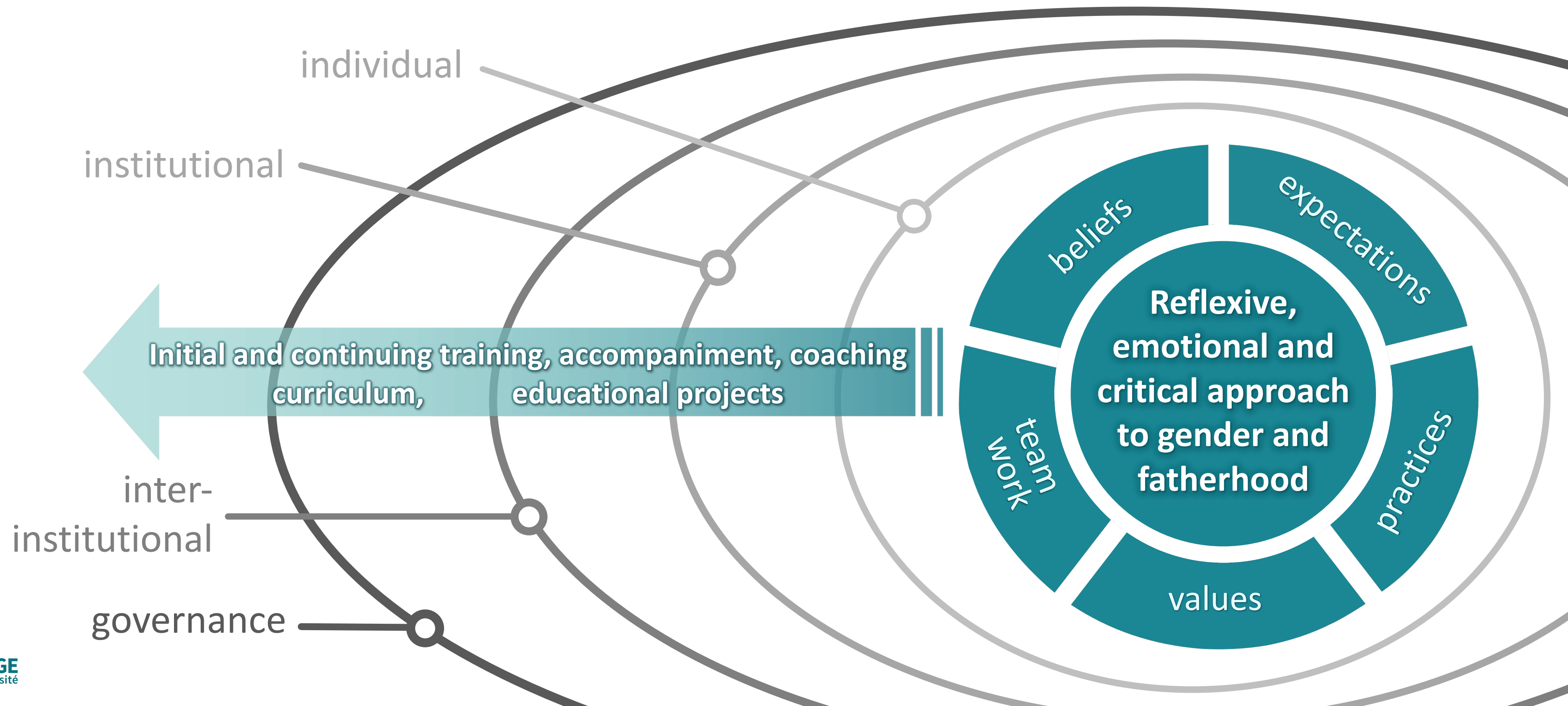
How to **conciliate a parental support role** with a **coeducational approach** ?

How to **include fathers** within “**natural**” **alliances** among female practitioners and mothers?

How to guarantee mutual respect while **questioning individuals' or services' representations, norms and values** ?

→ Towards an **intercultural encounter**

Beyond management of local situations, addressing the systemic challenges (Urban et al., 2012)



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