



Compare – Contextualize – Connect

12th SIG gender balance research Conference

University of Brighton, United Kingdom, 3rd September 2024, 9.00-16.30

Edward Street building, Room 304, 154 Edward Street, BN2 0JG

Notes (Tim Rohrmann)

20 researchers and ECEC experts from 15 countries from all continents took part in the 12th SIG gender balance research conference in Brighton, England. In the context of this year's EECERA theme of "Developing sustainable early childhood education systems", we focus on three topics: (1) strategies and policies for gender equality in ECEC and the challenges of bringing this into practice, (2) the role of researchers' own gender for research strategies and results, and (3) children's perspectives on gender issues in the work force. The meeting was the Annual meeting of the EECERA Special Interest Group Gender Balance and was organized by the SIG team: David Brody (Israel) · Zhuoran Chen (China/United Kingdom) · Halah Elkarif (Egypt/Germany) · Ricardo Goncalves (Brazil/Sweden) · Charlotte Jones (United Kingdom) · Joanne McHale (Ireland) · Tim Rohrmann (Germany).

In a first round, participants introduced themselves and their current research interests. Several participants were in different stages on their PhD projects on gender issues in ECEC, often in the context of cultural diversities and different cultural backgrounds, e.g. children from Chinese migrant families in the UK, or male migrants from Middle East and North African countries working in ECEC settings in Germany. Other PhD projects focused on gender stereotypes and gendered interactions in ECEC settings. Current research interest of some participants included gender in STEAM, language, and digital education; gender diverse/queer children; and also other topics less related to gender.

Gender equality in ECEC: From policy to practice

This session, prepared by Charlotte Jones (United Kingdom), who could unfortunately not be present at the conference, and Tim Rohrmann (Germany), intended to discuss how policy comes into practice and what we can learn from each other in international exchange. Based on participants' knowledge on policies for gender equality in ECEC in their respective countries, this session focused on the following questions:

- (1) Is gender equality and/or gender sensitive education included in ECEC policies, frameworks, and curricula?
- (2) Are there or have there been strategies for a better gender balance and/or more men in the ECEC work force? What is the current situation?
- (3) To what extent are these topics connected in the policy documents? What do you think about this?

The questions were discussed in small groups and summarized in plenary rounds.

(1) Some countries include gender equality and gender sensitive education in national frameworks and curricula, e.g. Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the state of New York. In Germany and in the USA the situation varies between (Federal) States who are responsible for the field of education. In other countries, gender is merely mentioned in a general way as one aspect of inclusion, e.g. in the United Kingdom or some German Federal states. In Brazil, China, Egypt, and Israel, policies and frameworks don't mention gender equality and/or sensitive education at all.

However, even if gender is included in frameworks and curricula, this does not mean that such goals are implemented in practice, due to several reasons: (1) because gender issues are not included in the qualification of practitioners, (2) in practice, other issues are seen as more important, and (3) practitioners do not have time to engage in reflecting the topic due to lack of work force and other problems.

(2) Although there have been strategies and measures for more men and a more gender-mixed work force, there are currently no projects on national level in the participating countries. A few countries mention the aim of more men in national policies for ECEC, e.g. Sweden and Switzerland, but this is not put into practice. Only some regional projects receive constant state-funded support (e.g. in Germany, the city of Hannover). Even effective projects conducted in the last decade were not continued and/or permanently installed. Sometimes, new projects do not recognize the work that had already been done for many years, maybe because only research from the past few years is taken into consideration.

Numbers and proportions of male ECEC workers are nevertheless continuously rising in some countries, whereas in other countries, the proportion of male workers remains constant and often very low. Norway (10%), Germany (8%) and Denmark are the countries with currently the highest proportion of male workers in ECEC. In other countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand, proportions of men in ECEC remain low although attitudes towards male practitioners are in general positive. In some countries, like China and Brazil, there is still much distrust against men working in the field, at least from more conservative groups in society.

(3) The discussion showed (again) how complex issues of gender in ECEC and in the ECEC work force are. Norway seems to be the only country in which strategies for gender equality and for more men in ECEC have been strongly connected. In contrast, Sweden has policies for both issues, but they are not connected, as a gender inclusive curriculum only focuses on children, not on issues of the work force. Because of non-binary gender diversity policies, is not "allowed" to talk about men in ECEC. Spain also has well-developed policies and supports projects in the field of gender equality in ECEC, but does not recognize the topic of a gender-mixed workforce at all.

Participants finally agreed that it is important to connect strategies for men in the work force with measures for gender consciousness and sensitivity. It was also concluded that researchers need to transfer knowledge to relevant stakeholders in the field and especially to engage with policy makers on regional level to promote changes. As there is little public interest in promoting gender equality in ECEC at the moment, the SIG research network is an important place to keep our commitment alive, and to retain, develop and transfer knowledge on related issues.

Researchers' views on, and experiences with, their own 'gender' as an intersectional factor while investigating gendered issues in ECEC

Exploring gender issues in the ECEC field prompts us to consider how we navigate the complexities of our gender identity as researchers. Halah Elkarif, (Egypt/Germany), Zhuoran Chen (China/United Kingdom) and Ricardo Goncalves (Brazil/Sweden) presented a theoretical background and practical results on researcher's reflexivity in regard to gender. The authors discussed the terms reflection and reflexivity, and introduced different types of researcher reflexivity. The presentation is attached. Following examples from the presenters, all participants shared experiences in regard to the role of their gender for their own research in small groups. Finally, a short training session on researcher gender reflexivity was conducted, using a short interview extract from a research project. The participant gained interesting insights in their responses to data on gender and sexuality, reflected their own gendered roles as researchers, and considered how such reflections might contribute to a deeper understanding of research results.

The participants highlighted the need to reflect on interactions of gender and culture, and that exchange with others is crucial for reflecting research. It was also mentioned that it is sometimes necessary to accept to "feeling uncomfortable", and to dive deeper into such feelings, as these may point to important issues for the research.

Including children's perspectives in gender research

Building up on a short introduction on methods used in the project "Children's perspectives of their teachers" (CPT) by David Brody (Israel), the group discussed strategies, methods and aims of research with children. The CPT project collected case studies from 9 countries worldwide. Some results were presented in a symposium on the Annual conference. A book with the outcomes will be published next year. Cathy Kilburn shared some information from her PhD project about methods used in research on gender and gender stereotypes in ECEC.

The session focused on how can we capture the voices of children, and what are the issues we want to look at in gender research. With the Mosaic approach as a framework, methods include e.g.

- Direct responses of children in interactions
- Children producing material that can be analyzed
- Observation of child-adult interactions with a focus on children's behavior
- Focus on small groups of children and interactions among them
- Observation of children's play, followed by talks with children about the play

It is definitely important to take children's view into consideration. However, children may not have the cognitive and linguistic abilities to express their view on gender issues in a differentiated way. Moreover, in the age between 3 and 6 many children learn about gender stereotypes and often develop strong stereotyped opinions. Children's utterances on gender issues have to be reflected in the context of gender development. On the other hand, it was reported that children do not relate to gendered terms at all when they talk about e.g. their drawings or play. Thus, it is also important to recognize the limits of data collection with children.

Finally, some general challenges and barriers for research with children were discussed, including the role of gatekeepers (teachers/practitioners and parents), an unwillingness of settings to engage in research in general, and problems of getting ethical approval from children without influencing the results of the research.

Future SIG organization

Tim Rohrmann gave a short overview on the SIG organization within EECERA.

- A Special Interest Group within EECERA is formed by EECERA members and has at least two convenors. The SIG also allows nonn-EECERA members to join the SIG; however, SIG convenors have to be members.
- A SIG team collaborates in supporting the convenors in keeping the SIG going, e.g. to organize conferences. Anybody who wants to support this work is welcome to join the team.
- The SIG provides
 - Regular meetings and conferences
 - Self organized symposia on EECERA conferences
 - More or less regular newsletters
 - Annual overviews on new publications on gender issues in the ECEC work force
 - Documentations of notes and presentations from previous conferences
- The SIG has an Early Career researcher's group which meets regularly.
- SIG activities are presented on the EECERA SIG website, and a SIG website for topics not presented by EECERA (a relaunch is under way).

The discussion about the future development of the SIG started with a participant's statement "***The SIG has absolutely to continue!***". Gender is ubiquitous, and this needs a place within EECERA. Debates on gender have expanded during the past years, and several participants suggested to broaden the range of issues tackled in the SIG from the specific focus on the work force to gender in general. SIG members have always been aware of the strong connection between a gender-mixed work force and other aspects of gender in ECEC, e.g. gender stereotypes, gendered interactions between children and adults, connections between gender and culture and more. Subsequently, SIG research conferences and symposia have dealt with many aspects of gender in ECEC beyond issues of the work force. It is nevertheless good for a research network to have a clear focus, whereas it might be too broad to cover all aspects of gender.

There had been debates in the SIG about the term *gender balance* before. The term might be misunderstood as aiming at a proportion of 50/50 men/women in the work force (which does not seem to be achievable). The concept was also criticized as binary, ignoring gender diversities beyond the male/female. On the other hand, the term *diversity* is very broad and can also lead to misunderstandings. Debates on *gender diversity* are currently very polarized, and the SIG does not intend to be a forum for ideologic controversies and fights. Some colleagues like the term *gender balance* because it expresses that gender has to be balanced in many ways in every aspect of ECEC.

However, there is no other gender SIG within EECERA. Finally the group agreed to change the name to **SIG Gender** (and omit the word balance), while keeping a main focus on issues of gender equity/equality, reflexivity and diversity in a gender-mixed work force.

Regarding SIG formats, participants highlighted that the SIG “is a safe space in which we can explore ideas”. For this, the whole group agreed that there will be a full-day SIG conference again next year.

While Kari Emilsen stepped back as the SIG’s co-convenor, Tim Rohrmann is willing to continue in this position. A second co-convenor will be nominated on the next SIG team meeting in November 2024 (date to be announced). In regard to EECERA requirements, the convenors might ask participants to report that they are EECERA members in 2025.

The next steps – a special issue and plans for future collaboration

Based on the ongoing scientific exchange in the network and the preceding discussions, the SIG plans ***a proposal for a special issue***, following the EECERJ special issue 2015 and the Early Years special issue 2020. The issue will focus on current issues and research on gender balance and diversity, global and regional perspectives, and children’s views. The team shall include experienced as well as early career researchers. A group of co-editors will work together in pre-reviewing the papers and ensuring good quality of contributions. Several colleagues showed interest in collaborating and being editors. As there is also interest in the topic in non-English speaking countries, Ricardo Goncalves suggested to publish some papers also in Portuguese by cooperating with a Brazilian ECE journal. Tim Rohrmann will invite to a meeting in November to discuss the next steps.

On the next SIG team meeting, we will discuss ideas for the next SIG Online Think Tank, probably in March 2025, as well as the theme of the next SIG research conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, in August 2025.

Ongoing and future collaborations in the SIG context include a project on mentoring for men in ECEC, and an international research collaboration about a children’s picture book on intersexuality. For more info, contact Tim Rohrmann.

Final round

Thanks to all who contributed, the SIG conference went very well. Several colleagues highlighted that the SIG is a “safe space” to discuss sensitive topics and reflect on their research and their roles as researchers. Participants also welcomed that different academic generations join the SIG and work together. The sessions, some of them too short, inspired further thinking on gender in different cultural contexts, and the inclusion of children’s perspectives. In addition to the scientific content, participants also mentioned the social aspect of a supportive scientific community. Participants finally underlined that research should be disseminated not only to practitioners, but as well to parents and policymakers. This could be a topic in future SIG debates.