



How do orientations matter in early childhood education? Children, choices and gendering processes

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores children’s “own” choices in relation to gendering in ECE. Specifically, it problematizes what is often referred to as children’s “own” choices within child-centred pedagogies and emphasises how children’s choices are effects of entangled material-discursive processes, rather than expressions of pre-existing will or intention. To explore this, I re-turn (to) parts of the data and earlier analyses enacted within a research study on science and gender in preschool, together with Sarah Ahmed’s thoughts on orientations. To make re-turnings does not mean to reflecting on, or just going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning the data/earlier study over and over again to try to create something new or different. Through these re-turnings, a multifaceted understanding of children’s “own” choices is highlighted, that takes both gender norms, social relations, embodiment, historicity/time, materials and places, learning opportunities, as well as children’s development of capacities and skills into account. In this way, the paper adds to the existing body of research on gendering in relation to child-centred education and specifically contributes insights for practice (teachers and researchers) to consider when developing approaches, materials and strategies to support children’s influence within different choosing practices in ECE.

Keywords: *children’s choices, early childhood education, gender, orientations*

Introduction

Daily doings in a preschool in Sweden, latter half of 2010s. It's around 10'oclock and 25 five-year-old children have just made their choices of where to be and what to do until lunch time. At a drawing table, a number of children referred to as girls, by themselves, their peers and their teachers, are drawing – like they have done so many times this spring. Over and over again, they draw motives of hearts, birthday cakes and the optical phenomenon known as rainbows. Mutually in a construction room besides, a number of children referred to as boys, by themselves, their peers and teachers, are constructing – like they have done so many times this spring. Over and over again, they construct and rotate so called Beyblades¹. The girls iteratively praise each other's drawings by expressions like: 'Oh, your (drawing) is so pretty!' 'Is mine pretty?' 'Yours is cuter than mine!' The boys iteratively tell each other how good their own Beyblade is, by expressions like: 'Look at mine!' 'Mine is really fast!' 'Mine is going to win!' In both places, processes of doing gender and doing science are mutually going on. To be continued...

(Summary of daily doings, Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020)

This paper takes its point of departure in what is often referred to as children's "own" choices within child-centred pedagogies. Instead of assuming that choices are expressions of pre-existing will or intention, I explore how children's choices are effects of entangled material-discursive processes in preschools. To do this, I re-turn (to) (Barad, 2014) parts of the diffractive analyses enacted within a research study on science and gender in preschool (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020). The re-turnings take their point of departure together with the five-year-old children, the drawing table and the construction room above. To make re-turnings does not mean to reflecting on, or just going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning the data/earlier study over and over again to try to create something new or different (Barad, 2014). To do this, I am making the re-turnings together with feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's (2010) thoughts on orientations. While the focus of the earlier study was on if and how gendered explorations of emergent science took place together with the drawing table and the construction room, the aim of this paper is to further our knowledge on gendering in ECE by exploring (a) how and why the children iteratively ended up at the drawing table and construction room; (b) how and together with what the children oriented within these places; (c) how different orientations (human and nonhuman) can matter for gendered choices, relations and learning opportunities that children are part of within ECE.

¹ Beyblades are toys which you spin and compete with, which originally come from a Japanese anime.

Before I present my work with the re-turnings, I will introduce earlier findings concerning children's choices, orientations/navigation and gendering in ECE.

Children's "own" choices affected and regulated by different aspects

In many countries, like in the Nordic ones where this study is situated, there is a strong belief in child-centred education and the importance of children's influence (e.g. Børve & Børve, 2017; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022; Hjelmér, 2020; Nilsson et al., 2018a; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). Connected with child-centred education is an established discourse that underlines children's influence and abilities to make "own" choices and opportunities for "free play" (Wood, 2013). In the same time, much research has troubled this discourse and showed how children's influence and their attempts to navigate and make choices within ECE, are always affected by regulating aspects, but also how children try to, and sometimes manage to, resist these. Regulating aspects can for example be teachers' beliefs and approaches (e.g. Dolk, 2013), division of time, structure and the physical environment (e.g. Eriksson Bergström, 2013; Nordin-Hultman, 2004), policy frameworks and goal-oriented activities (e.g. Nilsson et al., 2018b), as well as social power dynamics among the children (e.g. Wood, 2013).

That it is common that adults (unconsciously) gender children within ECE and in that way influence children's choices, participation and learning opportunities have been well known and shown for decades. For example, that children often are perceived and treated differently and seen as two separate groups (i.e. girls and boys) by the teachers and that teachers gender children by using different linguistic expressions to girls and boys (Adriany, 2019; Andersson, 2012; Bhana, 2009; Burdelski & Mitsuhashi, 2010; Eidevald, 2009; Lappalainen & Odenbring, 2019; Månsson, 2000). In the same time, findings also point at the importance of teachers' engagement in children's play when it comes to traversing gender stereotypic play patterns and choices. For example, Hjelmér (2020) showed how teachers' gender aware engagement can help children to gain a broader repertoire of what to play and choose compared to children in preschools where teachers keep more of a distance to children's "own" play and choices.

Children choosing and navigating with and against gender norms

Also children engage in both correcting themselves and their peers in line with stereotypical gender norms in some situations and try to resist the same norms in other (e.g. Blaise, 2014; Davies, 1989; Heikkilä, 2023; Madrid & Kantor, 2009). Blaise (2005) explored how children navigated in relation to gender in a U.S. kindergarten. The findings showed how the children consulted each other concerning how to behave properly as a boy or girl, and that the children's play choices varied according to how they understood

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and/or tried to align with and resist heteronormativity. Similar findings were shown by Hellman (2010) in a Swedish preschool. This study focused on norms about boyishness and showed how the children adapted to and even corrected each other in line with them. In the same time, the children also negotiated around different roles and positions within their play. These negotiations did not foremost concern if a child (i.e. a boy or a girl) could join, but if this child used the appropriate signifiers, such as movements, specific haircuts, colours and toys, to join. This differs from Adriany (2018) who showed how a group of girls in an Indonesian kindergarten used stereotypical ideas about gender, related to a princess discourse, to gain power and exclude boys from their play. However, this princess discourse, which to a large extent included girls' play with barbie dolls, also excluded other girls, for example girls from families that couldn't afford a, or "the right", barbie doll. In another study, Adriany (2019) further showed how it was important for kindergarten boys to take a stand from playing with barbie dolls to avoid gender-based bullying and homophobia. Also more recent studies have highlighted that gender norms affect children's play choices in terms of girls more often "choosing" to play in the home corner or cubby house and boys more often with construction materials (e.g. Fler, 2021; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2023).

Matter co-creating children's choosing and navigating with and against gender norms

Findings also showed how materials and places within ECE can play a crucial role in gendering processes (e.g. Adriany 2018, 2019; Black Delfin, 2020; Børve & Børve, 2017; Chapman, 2021). One example is Børve and Børve (2017) who showed how the rooms and zones in a Norwegian kindergarten gave signals to the children concerning what should take place there, how the materials should be used and the user's gender. This resulted in girls and boys occupying different rooms and zones. Hence, the rooms and zones were not available to choose or enter for every child. It is also shown how the same material and/or place both can take part in gendering processes in stereotypical ways and in transgressing gender (e.g. Hodgins, 2014; Renold & Mellor, 2013). Two papers (Günther-Hanssen, 2018, 2020b), connected to the same field study as the present study being re-turned, showed how gendering took place also outdoors together with a swing and two boulders in a natural setting. In some situations, the swing and boulders – materials commonly thought of as "uncoded" or "neutral" – took part in gendering that narrowed two preschool girls' explorations and becomings, while they in other situations instead extended the same girls' explorations and becomings. Another example is

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Lyttleton-Smith's (2019) study made in a nursery in U.K., which showed how the children's play with dolls in the home corner – a place and a material/toy in ECE commonly seen as imbued with gender norms – both became gender stereotypic and gender traversing.

This literature review sets the stage to further discuss and explore gendering within child-centred education, specifically in relation to what is often referred to as children's "own" choices and how these might be co-created. To date, I have not found earlier research in ECE that have engaged in Ahmed's thoughts on orientations, neither in relation to gendering, nor choosing practices.

Re-turning – instead of returning to – gendering processes within ECE

Karen Barad (2014) explains the difference of returning and re-turning as connected with either the phenomenon of reflection or diffraction; *"While returning might have the association of reflection (how light returns from where it came once it hits the mirror), re-turning...is about diffracting"* (pp. 184–185). Thus, if returning implies going back to reflect upon something that was, re-turning means turning it over and over by creating new encounters, to create something new or different without leaving the old behind (Barad, 2014). As such, I have not returned to the initial research study and different parts of data and diffractive analyses to look at it either from a distance or from an outside, nor look at it "as it was". Instead, I have iteratively engaged myself and parts of its data and analyses in new entanglements and encounters (without leaving the old behind). Making re-turnings means to mutually both exploring and producing temporal entanglements and phenomena (e.g. Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). No "things", places or children (i.e. boys, girls) pre-exist in certain ways before the analysis and cannot be examined by me as a researcher "as they are/were". Instead, they emerge in

Diffraction and diffractive readings

Making re-turnings is part of Barad's (2007, 2014) diffractive methodology and involves reading different insights (concepts, materials, parts of data, etc.) diffractively, through one another, to see what new directions and becomings will emerge as these "collide", overlap and entangle (Barad, 2003, 2007).

Diffraction is an optical phenomenon that emerges as waves of some sort (water, light, sound) encounter each other or an obstacle, which makes the waves bend, spread out, and overlap. As the waves collide, new directions and becomings are created, without leaving the old ones behind. Barad (2014), who builds on Donna Haraway's (1997) use of diffraction as a metaphor for understanding change and difference, uses the phenomenon of diffraction as a way to describe and conduct analytical work within research. To Barad, diffraction is considered a material-discursive phenomenon that occurs within and through the entanglements of all agents and procedures (i.e. data, equipment, theoretical concepts, the researcher etc) within a specific research apparatus.

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certain ways due to what entanglements and encounters that are created through each diffractive reading.

Re-turning with Ahmed, and...

Since Ahmed's thoughts on orientations play a crucial role in the re-turnings, I will introduce these below. However, due to the earlier analyses being re-turned were conducted together with concepts and thoughts from Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism (see Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020) and since making re-turnings implies creating new encounters without leaving the old behind (Barad, 2014), traces of agential realism, as well as other feminist, queer and postcolonial scholars that Ahmed and Barad build on, such as for example Judith Butler, are also (implicitly) embedded in the re-turnings. Specifically, Barad's (2007) thoughts of nonhumans (i.e. matter, discourse) as agential, as well as gender as performative (e.g. Butler, 1993; Barad, 2003).

Orientations matter – and shape how matter matters

While Barad (2007) states that matter matters (by being part-taking in the creation and materialization of phenomena such as discourses, gender and knowledge construction), Ahmed states that orientations matter and shape *how matter matters*.

According to Ahmed (2010), orientations matter in both senses of the word matter. They matter as in being significant and important. They also matter since being oriented in a certain way is how certain objects or matter come to matter to me/to a person (Ahmed, 2010).

Ahmed (2010, p. 235) further explains that bodies do things while things also do bodies, through being oriented toward each other; "*Orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do*". This means that we take shape by what comes near.

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Ahmed and Barad as part of..

The chapter "Orientations matter" (Ahmed, 2010), used in this paper, is part of the book "New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics". Even though this book has gathered scholars engaged in what the editors call "a critical materialism", Ahmed resists to call her contribution a "new" materialism since her work draws on Marxism and builds on earlier feminist engagements with phenomenology undertaken during the period of "the cultural turn" and as such combines historical materialism with a materialism of the body.

Barad's theory of agential realism is on the other hand commonly framed as a new materialist theory, developed through diffractive readings of physics, posthumanist and feminist queer theory (Barad, 2007; Murris & Bozalek, 2019).

In earlier work, Ahmed has (2008) criticized new materialist scholars, such as Barad, who she thought has given matter an "ontological priority" over discourse and that the only thing that seem to matter to Barad is "matter" (Ahmed, 2008). A view that I don't share due to Barad's emphasis on matter and discourse as entangled and phenomena as material-discursive (Barad, 2007).

Furthermore, orientations make certain things or objects near to certain bodies and other things or objects as out of our perception. With objects Ahmed refers to both physical things as well as thoughts, feelings, aspirations and so on. However, even though both bodies and objects take shape in the moment by being oriented towards each other, they also take shape from other times or moments. Ahmed (2010) states that orientations (like the choices we make) are always shaped by earlier orientations. What is reachable to me/to a person – for example what objects – is determined by orientations I, or other persons, have already taken. Thus, the conditions under which a person – for example a child in a preschool – finds herself, are enmeshed with the sedimentation of earlier work or actions made by generations (Ahmed, 2010). The same goes for the objects that I/a person face. This is explained by Ahmed in terms of objects taking shape “...*through social action, through the activity of a whole succession of generations...*” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 241). Still, Ahmed points out, when we look at or face different objects, their historicity is easily forgotten as objects are apprehended as simply given (Ahmed, 2010).

Ahmed further explains that orientations can be seen as repetitions and that these repetitions never can be seen as neutral. We do certain repeated actions, oriented towards certain objects, in search for identity and who we seek to be. In this way bodies materialize together with objects as an effect of certain orientations. Ahmed writes that “*spaces too are oriented in the sense that certain bodies are “in place” in this or that place*” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 235). And, that places take shape by presuming certain bodies as given.

Of special importance for this paper is the way that Ahmed (2010) connects orientations with gendering. She highlights that gender differences can be understood as differences in orientations and that repeated orientations affect how gender is constructed and naturalized “*as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces*” (p. 250). Repeated orientations leading bodies in some directions and doings rather than other making it seem “*as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns*” (p. 251). Yet, even though orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize, Ahmed (2010) explains that orientations or spaces are never totally closed. It is possible to orientate differently or to claim spaces even by bodies that do not usually inhabit them.

Three “overall re-turnings”

Re-turning the earlier study has meant that I have iteratively engaged myself, parts of its data and analyses, as well as Ahmed (2010), in new entanglements and encounters (without leaving the old behind). Practically, this has meant that I have engaged with

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pieces of different text sequences (field notes, shorter utterances from the children, sections of Ahmed's thoughts on orientations, as well as sections from the earlier study), photographs and other pictures. By placing these in different combinations, I have been able to read them together – or through one another – to explore what further insights of how gendering processes are created and re-created within ECE that could emerge as these “collided”, overlapped or entangled in different ways (Barad, 2007). Throughout the analyses, the aim of the paper infused the work. To enable accountability, figures are added under each over all re-turning to visualise some of the encounters that the re-turnings were made with. To enable the readability of this paper, I present the analyses below as divided into three overall re-turnings, named *Re-turn: Certain bodies as given – iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room*, *Re-turn: Beyond the horizon and out of reach – choosing time with the activity-wall, as well as Re-turn: Shaping what we “do do” – shaping what we can do – (un)iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room*. These names point at what ended up as a point of departure and focus of each overall re-turning. However, each of these consists of a series of diffractions based on many turns, and were not conducted in a linear manner, but rather back and forth, here and there, all the “steps” bleeding through one another (Barad, 2018, also see Günther-Hanssen et al., 2021). For transparency, I created an overview of the focus, as well as the data and theoretical thoughts and concepts that came to matter in each “overall re-turning”, as well as how ethical considerations have been part of all of them, see table 1 further below.

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Data and field study

The data of the study being re-turned, was constructed during the latter half of 2010s in a Swedish preschool in a group of 25 five-year-old children and three teachers. 11 of the children were referred to as girls and 14 as boys, by themselves, their peers and teachers. Hence, I am referring to the children in line with this (both in this paper and in the earlier study). However, I don't find the categories girl and boy as pre-given. Instead, gender is explored in line with Ahmed (2010), Barad (2003) and Butler (1993).

During the field study, participant observations (video recordings, field notes) was made during five months. The focus was the children's explorations of emergent science (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) and gendering as mutual processes co-created together with the preschool environment (matter, discourse).

The study being re-turned adhered to the Swedish Research Council's principles for research ethics (Swedish Research Council, 2011, 2017, 2024) and was approved by the regional board for research ethics. Before signing consent forms, teachers and guardians were informed about the study's aim, data (collection and management) and that they could withdraw their/their child's consent any time. The children's consent was dealt with on a moment-to-moment basis with careful responsiveness to the children's (non)verbal expressions/signals (e.g. Dockett et al., 2009). For more thorough descriptions of the children's consent, field study and its research ethics, see Günther-Hanssen (2020a).

TABLE 1 Overview, “overall” re-turnings

<i>FOCUS</i>	<i>DATA/EARLIER ANALYSES</i>	<i>AHMED'S THOUGHTS ON ORIENTATIONS</i>	<i>TRACES OF..</i>	<i>ETHICS AS INTERTWINED WITH ALL PARTS</i>
<p>Re-turn: Certain bodies as given – iterative doings with the drawing table and construction room</p> <p>How and why did the children iteratively end up at the drawing table and construction room?</p>	<p>Earlier analyses of daily doings of emergent science and gendering (Günther-Hanssen, Danielsson & Andersson, 2020).</p> <p>Photos and children’s utterances from the drawing table and construction room.</p> <p>Descriptions of the preschool’s activity-choosing system and fictitious replica of the activity-wall.</p>	<p>Ahmed (2010), e.g. Orientations shape bodies and spaces. World takes shape by presuming certain bodies/ doings.</p>	<p>Gender is created and made intelligible through iterative daily doings (in line with or against gender norms) (Butler, 1993).</p> <p>Nonhumans (e.g. matter, discourse) agential and part-taking in the creation and materialization of phenomena, such as gender (Barad, 2007).</p>	<p>In line with Barad (2007), ethics is seen as intertwined with the entire research process. As a researcher I have an ethical responsibility in relation to ethical guidelines, how I act in the field, for how the data and diffractive analyses are presented, as well as for how different diffractive readings create and materialize the explored phenomena.</p> <p>In all diffractive readings; descriptions of the preschool are purposefully vague and photographs edited to ensure confidentiality of the locale and persons. All names are pseudonyms.</p> <p>(For ethics during the field study of the research being re-turned, see p. 8)</p>
<p>Re-turn: Beyond the horizon and out of reach – choosing time with the activity-wall</p> <p>How and why did the children iteratively end up at the drawing table and construction room?</p>	<p>Field notes: choosing time by the activity-wall, the 18th of April, latter half of 2010s, as well as the 19th of April, latter half of 2010s.</p>	<p>Ahmed (2010), e.g. Objects out of perception. Bodies as in/out of place. Sedimentation. Gender as if a property.</p>		
<p>Re-turn: Shaping what we “do do” – shaping what we can do – (un)iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room</p> <p>How and together with what did the children orient within these places?</p> <p>How can different orientations (human and nonhuman) matter for gendered choices, relations and learning opportunities that children are part of within ECE?</p>	<p>Description and earlier analysis of construction and spinning Beyblades from Günther-Hanssen, Danielsson & Andersson (2020).</p> <p>Field note from a rare situation in the construction room the 29th of March, latter half of 2010s.</p> <p>Photos and daily utterances made by the children in the construction room.</p>	<p>Ahmed (2010), e.g. If gender shapes what we do do, then it shapes what we can do.</p> <p>Actions having certain objects (physical, ideal) in view.</p> <p>Orientations shape how things come to be significant/ objects for a person.</p>		

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Re-turn: Certain bodies as given – iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room

I begin with re-turning (to) the drawing table and construction room and the mutual processes of doing gender and doing science that took place together with these places (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020).



FIGURE 1 Daily doings and daily utterances at the drawing table and the construction room

I do this together with the question: How and why did the children iteratively end up at these two places?

When bringing Ahmed (2010) into the re-turning, the children's iterative "choices" of these two places (choosing the places and choosing what to do), come to the fore as not foremost a result of the children's "own choices" or as expressions of pre-existing will or intention – but by these two places presuming "certain bodies" and "certain doings".

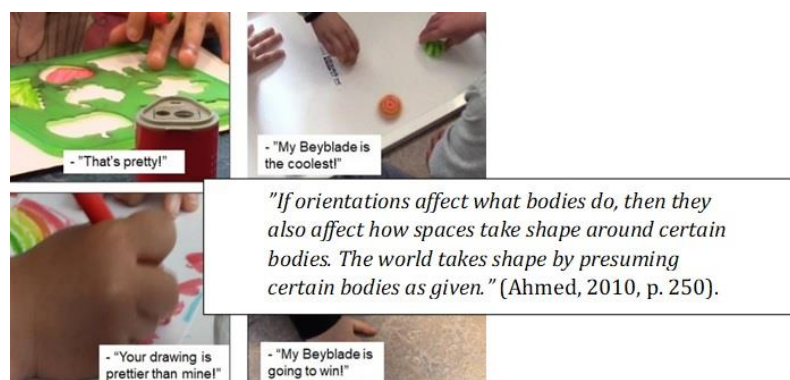


FIGURE 2 Encounter of Ahmed (2010) and the daily doings and utterances at the drawing table and the construction room

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By the children iteratively coming back, the two places mutually took shape around and with the children, as places where preferably children “assigned a certain gender” should be. Hence, through these orientations, the categories of boy and girl got actualized and “called for”, appearing as something pre-given that one as a child “should” orient and make choices together with.

The drawing table and the construction room were part of an indoor environment that was divided into a number of activity-areas that the children were meant to choose from. Every day in the morning, the teachers gathered the children to have circle time. Then, the children were asked to make their own choices of where to be and what to do until lunch. This choosing-practise was conducted together with something called the “the activity-wall” (which was placed in one of the bigger rooms). Each child got a picture of themselves and was asked to put it on a vacant spot below the picture of the place or activity where they wanted to be. Each of the 10 places or activities represented on the activity-wall had a fixed number of vacant spots, which meant that they could get full and no more children could place their picture under that activity for the moment.

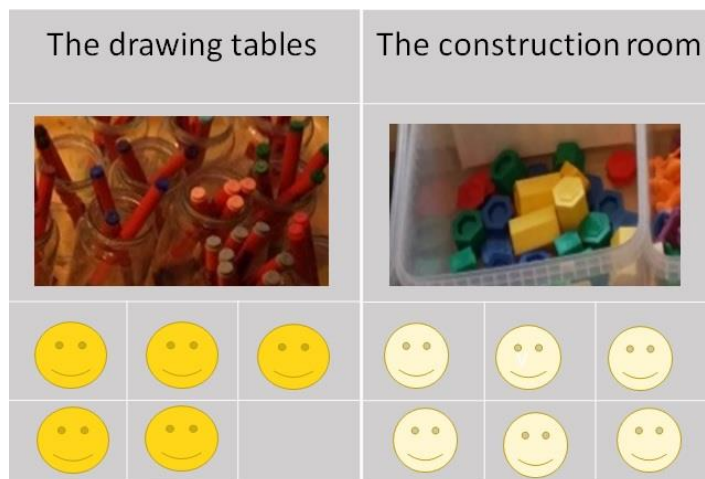


FIGURE 3. Fictitious replica of parts of the activity-wall to demonstrate its design. The drawing table and the construction room were commonly full of children and their charts on the activity-wall was therefore full of children’s photographs (here represented by smileys)

As the children was supposed to make their choice, they were most of the time facing photographs of the other children’s faces. Usually there were many “girl-faces” placed (or presumed) on the spot for the drawing tables and many “boy-faces” placed (or presumed) on the spots for the construction room.

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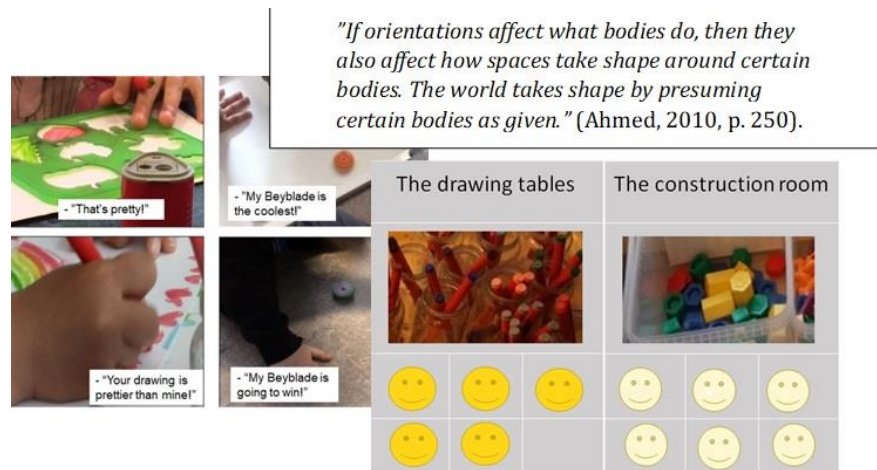


FIGURE 4. Encounter of Ahmed (2010), the daily doings and utterances at the drawing table and the construction room and replica of the activity-wall full of children's photographs

When also adding the replica of the activity-wall to this-re-turning, the daily orientations, doings and utterances at the drawing table and construction room, appear as also co-created by the specific design and parts of the activity-wall. Through this diffractive reading, it appears that, as the children were asked to make their "own" choices together with the activity-wall, they did not only have to try to consider what place or activity they wanted to choose. Mutually, they were encouraged by the pictures of the places presuming certain bodies and the photographs sorted into groups of girls and boys, to consider what place and/or group they would sort themselves into or against.

Next, I will stay with the activity-wall and continue re-turning the choosing time.

Re-turn: Beyond the horizon and out of reach – choosing time with the activity-wall

As I continue my re-turnings, I keep the same question with me: How and why did the children iteratively end up at these two places?

Two children who started in the group during the field study and as such weren't familiar with the activity-wall, at first didn't place their pictures at the activity-wall in the same way as the other children. However, in the field notes, there are signs of these children pretty soon correcting their "choosing" to suit the other children's.

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The newest and youngest girl in the group is standing by the activity wall, hesitating. Another girl comes to make her choice and says without hesitation: "The drawing tables!" The newest girl then repeats and says in the same way and tone: "The drawing tables!" and puts her picture next to the other girl's.

FIGURE 5 Field note, choosing time by the activity-wall, the 19th of April, latter half of 2010s

When reading this fieldnote through Ahmed's (2010) thoughts on orientations, the children can be understood to have oriented towards where their bodies must have "been most in place" – or where they thought that their bodies *should* be or feel most in place – following the other children's gendered choices as well as the photographs at the activity-wall and the categories boys and girls.

The newest and youngest girl in the group is standing by the activity wall, hesitating. Another girl comes to make her choice and says without hesitation: "The drawing tables!" The newest girl then repeats and says in the same way and tone: "The drawing tables!" and puts her picture next to the other girl's.

"To say spaces are oriented around certain bodies is to show how some bodies will be more "in place" than others" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 235).

FIGURE 6 Reading Ahmed through the field note, choosing time by the activity-wall, the 19th of April, latter half of 2010s

Among the field notes there were also a few situations where a child tried to put their picture in a different place than usual, as in the one below:

A boy who usually chooses the construction room puts his picture on the chart for the play-room and says: "This is my favorite room!" He starts to play, or makes a try to build with the big pillows placed in this room. Another child who spends time in this room more often immediately says: "No, we already have an idea of what we are going to do." The two children talk back and forth, and after just a minute or two, the boy who usually doesn't choose to be in this room gives in. He puts his picture on the construction room and leaves the play-room.

FIGURE 7 Field note, choosing time by the activity-wall, the 18th of April, latter half of 2010s

When reading this fieldnote through Ahmed (2010) and the other fieldnote in figure 6 above, it comes to the fore that to actually be or feel "in place" might mean hard work

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since it meant you needed to break (into) daily doings and relations (who were playing together, where and what). Of course, it would have been possible to do things in other ways in the playroom, since orientations can be determining but are not constraining (Ahmed, 2010). However, breaking iterative doings can be difficult, as shown in the field notes. When adding more parts of Ahmed's thoughts on orientations to this diffractive reading, to be or feel in place appears as anything but individual traits or achievements:

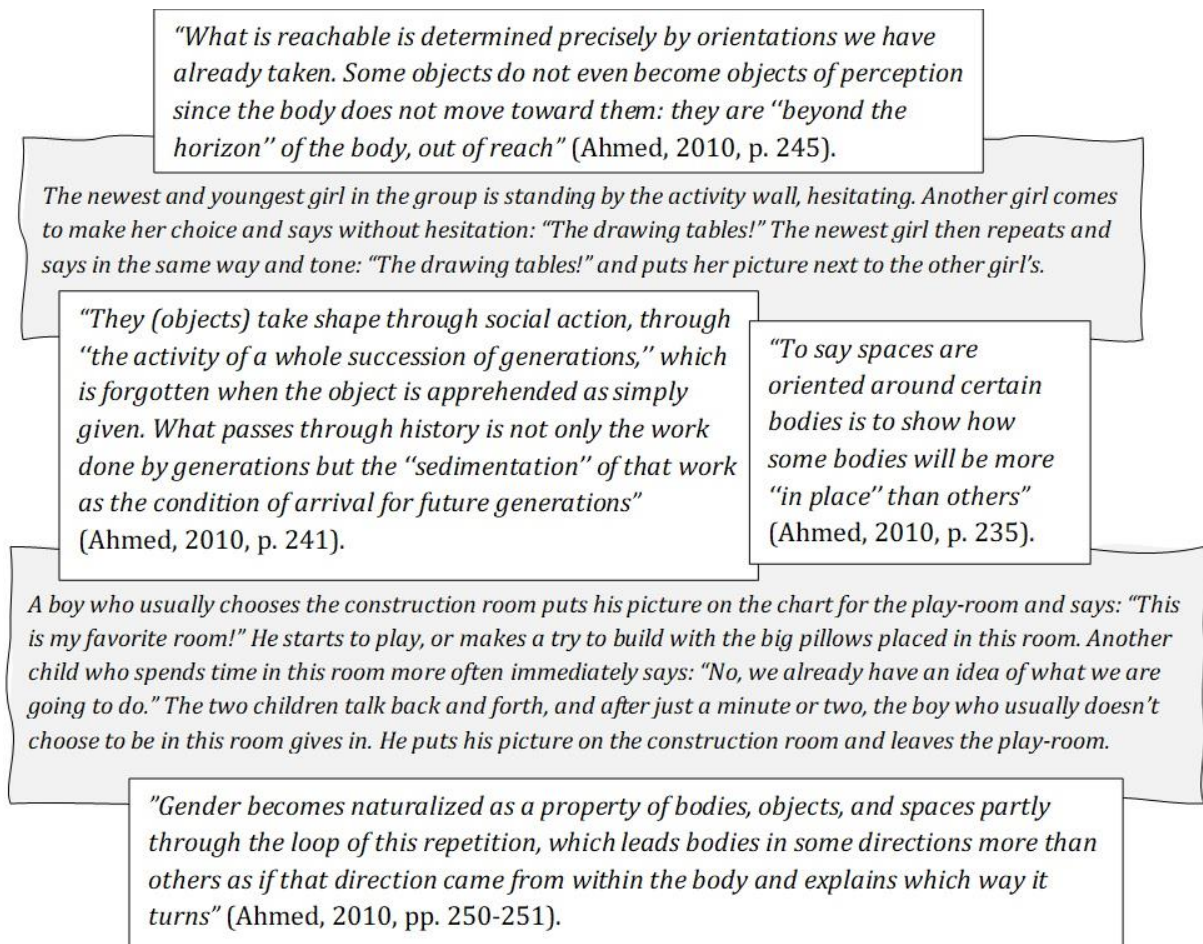


FIGURE 8 Reading Ahmed (2010) through the field notes, choosing time by the activity-wall, the 19th of April, latter half of 2010s, and the 18th of April, latter half of 2010s

Through this diffractive reading, it comes to the fore that present and earlier orientations already taken, both by the children in this group as well as probably children before them, were both co-created by, as well as co-creating the choosing time described in these field notes. It also appears that, as the newest child, who referred to herself as a girl, were correcting the placement of her picture in line with the older child's (who she knew also

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referred to herself as a girl), other bodies, objects, doings and beings in other places than the drawing table – for example different kinds of construction materials, bodies referred to as boys and competing with Beyblades – risk to become more and more “*beyond the horizon*” and/or out of perception and “*out of reach*” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 245) to her body. Just as these had already become for the children that daily oriented towards, the drawing table. In the same time, different kinds of drawing materials, bodies referred to as girls, making own drawings and complementing other’s, became reachable and “objects for her”. Through this, it also comes to the fore that the preschool environment and the 10 places or activities that the children were asked to choose from, had “sedimented” in certain ways through the daily repeated “choices” and doings that had included different children over time. Through this diffractive reading, it furthermore gets possible to think that the gendering processes that were going on together with the activity choosing system after a while got such “naturalized” that there was a risk that an image got created among both children and teachers, that the reason why the children referring to themselves (and being referred to by others) as girls, repeatedly put their pictures at the drawing table was not due to (a doing of) gender but due to drawing being a “property” or interest “naturally” existing within their (girls’) bodies, explaining why they turned to the drawing table. And that different places within preschools, like drawing tables, materialize as “naturally” being places for certain children.

The child in the other field note, who was referred to as a boy, by himself and others, tried to move towards the bodies, objects, doings and beings in the play room. However, through this diffractive reading it comes to the fore that the sedimentations and materializations of this room, of which he seemed to not (yet) being part of, made this room seem out of reach. The play room appears as already being repeatedly oriented around certain bodies, human and nonhuman (e.g. the other child and the big pillows), who in turn already were repeatedly orienting towards certain doings (“*No, we already have an idea of what we are going to do.*”). In spite of this, the boy’s utterance regarding the play room being his favourite room, makes this place, and the bodies, objects, doings and beings in it, appear as not (yet) out of his perception. However, due to the repeated orientations and sedimentations of the play room, as well as the repeated orientations toward the construction room of which he usually was part, the construction room appear as easier to “choose”. His daily presence in the construction room, constructing and competing with Beyblades, thus risk to appear as a “property” or interest that “naturally” exist within his body, at first to his peers and teachers daily seeing him “choosing” this room – and perhaps over time to himself. Through this reading, it appears that the materialization and sedimentation of the construction room as a room for “boy-bodies”, risk to make this child think of this place as simply given to him, even though it is not his favourite place to be.

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In the last overall re-turning I continue re-turning (to) the iterative doings at the drawing table and the construction room.

Re-turn: Shaping what we “do do” – shaping what we can do – (un-)iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room

As I keep on re-turning (to) the iterative doings with the drawing table and the construction room, I bring these two questions with me: How and together with what did the children orient within these places? How can different orientations (human and nonhuman) matter for gendered choices, relations and learning opportunities that children are part of within ECE? In Günther-Hanssen et al. (2020), the description below can be found concerning the daily doings/“Beyblading” in the construction room:

“The boys spent much time constructing their Beyblades. After building one, they tested its spinning ability, rebuilt it, and tested it again. In this sense playing with the Beyblades included scientific methods such as problem-solving, trying new ideas, improving the design, and so on. When, for example, the boys tried to put extra pieces on their Beyblades and then had to figure out its balance” “As the Beyblades were rotating, the boys experienced the colours of their Beyblades differently. The effect of this was that during construction, not only the shape, balance, and strength of the materials was of importance, but also the colours of the plus-plus pieces. The phenomena of optics made the boys spend much time on choosing and sorting colours in different combinations on their Beyblades”.

FIGURE 9 Description of construction and spinning of Beyblades (Günther-Hanssen, Danielsson & Andersson, 2020, p. 619)

When reading this through Ahmed (2010), as well as the daily utterances in the construction room, it appears that through the daily orientations that these children (referred to as boys by themselves and others), daily became part of, they got engaged in certain human and nonhuman relations affecting what they did do and could do.

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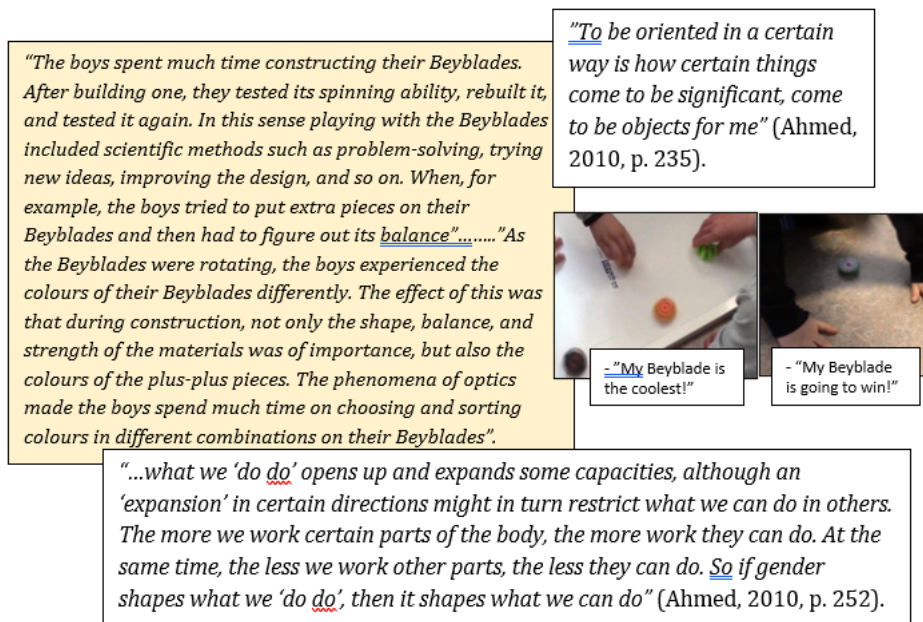


FIGURE 10 Reading Description of construction and spinning of Beyblades (Günther-Hanssen, Danielsson & Andersson, 2020, p. 619), through Ahmed (2010) and the daily utterances in the construction room

By repeatedly being oriented (by themselves and this space) towards what could be the “coolest and best-spinning Beyblade”, they over and over again practised constructing and spinning their Beyblades. From this reading, it appears that, through the work that these children, repeatedly did with certain parts of their bodies (e.g. arms, hands, fingers, eyes) in this room, various scientific aspects and phenomena related to science, mathematics and technology (building and re-building, problem solving, design, shape, colours, balance, strength, sorting, rotation and optical phenomena) could emerge as “objects” for them. For a boy (or any child) to win a Beyblade competition, he needed to get the right grip around his Beyblade with his fingers and then quickly and with the right amount of force, twist his fingers in a certain way so that his Beyblade would take off in a balanced, fast and long spin. If his grip was too hard, the Beyblade risked to break. If it was too loose, the spin would be unbalanced and short. Hence it appears that, what these children repeatedly did do in this room, made them expand certain capacities (their fine motor skills and the coordination needed to being able to spin a Beyblade for a long time) that in turn enabled certain learning opportunities (hands on experiences of phenomena related to science, technology and mathematics) and certain (masculine coded) identities – while other capacities and as such other learning opportunities and identities can be understood as mutually being restricted. The same then goes for the children (referred to as girls by themselves and others) at the drawing table. By repeatedly being oriented (by themselves and this space) towards making “pretty things” to give to each other or a

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family member, they over and over again practiced drawing and cutting out certain motives, shapes and patterns. Through this, they got to expand certain knowledge, bodily capacities and identities (related to science, technology, literacy, visual arts, mathematics etc.), such as knowing the order of the colours in a rainbow and of the letters in a name/word, as well as the fine motor skills needed to cut out difficult details with scissors or writing. In the same time, other capacities and as such other learning opportunities and identities can be understood as mutually being restricted (such as constructing and rotating Beyblades). When adding a field note of a rare situation when there were only four of these girls, and no boys, in the construction room, as well as further descriptions of Ahmed (2010) to this diffractive reading, the ways that different orientations (human and nonhuman) can matter for children's gendered choices, relations and learning opportunities within ECE appears even more.

In the afternoon, as all the boys left the construction room, two girls, Lena and Sofie, are building 2-dimensional cell phones. Lena says that she can't build and wants help from Sofie. I (researcher) get curious and ask the girls: "Do you build Beyblades to?" Lena answers: "No, we can't do that", while Sofie says: "I can!" Elsa is entering the room asking: "Have you destroyed my Beyblade?" I turn to her and ask: "Did you build it today?" "No", she says. "Robert built it for me, I can't do it". Sofie shows her how to build one. Then Emma comes in. Lena manages to build a Beyblade and says excitedly: I can, I can! Then Emma makes clear that (sounding very determined): "I can build Beyblades, but I won't do it!"

"...what we 'do do' opens up and expands some capacities, although an 'expansion' in certain directions might in turn restrict what we can do in others. The more we work certain parts of the body, the more work they can do. At the same time, the less we work other parts, the less they can do. So if gender shapes what we 'do do', then it shapes what we can do" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 252).



"Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain "objects" in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 247).

FIGURE 11 Reading the field note from the rare situation in the construction room the 29th of March, latter half of 2010s, the daily doings and daily utterances in the construction room and Ahmed (2010) through one another

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Two of the girls in the field note, Lena and Elsa, (and probably more of the other girls and some of the boys never entering this room) didn't know how to construct Beyblades. However, the two other girls, Sofie and Emma, did know, even though they too usually daily got to orient towards and with the drawing table. When reading this through Ahmed, it appears that Sofie and Emma at some point must have been directed towards constructing Beyblades, perhaps during earlier orientations taking place before my field work started. Yet, through this reading it still appears as Sofie and Emma were not used to spend a lot of time in the construction room. In the fieldnote, Lena learned how to construct a Beyblade during this rare occasion by Sofie showing her, which indicates that the skill to construct a Beyblade can be learned quite quickly. Furthermore, through this reading, it also appears that, "just" knowing how to *construct* a Beyblade, didn't seem enough for a child to being able to join the "whole Beyblading" and as such the learning opportunities and human and nonhuman relations connected with it. Instead, it appears that, to being able to join, it seemed crucial that one as a child had or gained the right skills to compete, that is the skills to spin ones Beyblade (for a long time). As well as to know how to speak in the right way ("my Beyblade is the coolest") and to being able to identify with this. When reading Emma's determined statement in the field note, that she knew how to build a Beyblade, but that she was not going to do it, through Ahmed's thoughts on actions being made with both physical and ideal objects in view, it appears that, even if Emma knew how to construct a Beyblade as such, she didn't want to – or felt that she could – take part in the whole "Beyblading". Instead, the daily orientations that she usually was part of with the drawing table (and as such the learning opportunities and human and nonhuman relations connected with it), directed her towards other (gendered) ideal objects to identify with.

This reading thus shows that, even if a number of children manage to "choose" and enter a certain place or activity, this doesn't mean that the same "things", persons or learning objects will be oriented towards and "come near" to all these children. What becomes significant and/or "becomes objects" for different children (physical and ideal), also differ *within* each place or space. Through this reading, Ahmed's (2010, p. 252) statement, "*if gender shapes what we 'do do', then it shapes what we can do*" thus appears as referring to a broad view of what "can do" means; gender/orientations shape what practical capacities and skills that different children get the opportunity to expand, but also what social relations (with which children) and how (e.g. connecting through competing and/or by making things to each other). They also shape what learning opportunities and "learning objects" that come near to individual children and how. Furthermore, gender shapes what we/different children feel like they *want, should* and are *able* to do. That is, what is appropriate or even possible at all for a child to "choose" to do or engage in (e.g. what play, relations, learning events, identities). After this rare event in the construction room,

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described in the field note above, I seldom saw children referring to themselves as girls, in the construction room again.

Concluding discussion

By re-turning the earlier study together with Ahmed's (2010) thoughts on orientations, it was possible to create a multifaceted understanding of what is often referred to as children's "own" choices within child-centred pedagogies, that takes both gender norms, social relations, embodiment, historicity/time, materials and places, learning opportunities, as well as children's development of capacities and skills into account. In this way, the paper adds to the existing body of research on gendering in relation to so called child-centred education and specifically contributes important insights (but no fixed solutions) for practice (teachers and researchers) to consider when developing approaches, materials and strategies to support children's "own" choices and influence.

Through the diffractive readings, the children iteratively placing their pictures at the drawing table and the construction room, come to the fore as not foremost a result of the children's "own choices" – but by these two places, as well as the materials and structure of the activity choosing system, presuming "certain bodies" and "certain doings/choices". This goes in line with earlier research, stating that rooms and zones in ECE can give gendered signals to children (Børve & Børve; 2017), but contributes further by highlighting how places and materials "come to give gendered signals" to children – that is, how both the places, materials and children got gendered through certain (human and nonhuman) orientations. The diffractive readings showed that, by the children iteratively coming back, the two places mutually took shape around and with the children, as places where preferably children "assigned a certain gender" should be. Mutually, the categories of boy and girl got actualized and "called for", appearing as if something pre-given that one as a child "should" orient and make "choices" together with. This highlights how gendered categories don't pre-exist as such, but how these become as agents affecting both children and places in preschools (also see for example Günther-Hanssen et al., 2021; Hellman et al., 2014). In the same way, the certain doings and relations (constructing and competing with Beyblades together with children being referred to as boys, or drawing hearts, cakes and rainbows with children being referred to as girls) could appear as properties or interests that seemed to "naturally" exist in the children's bodies. This contributes further insights concerning how and why children keep on making gendered "choices" and develop gendered interests, also in relation to what has been shown in earlier contemporary research (e.g. Fleer, 2021; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2023).

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As stated above, earlier research has also shown that it is common that children negotiate if and how other children can join their play, and that children can feel that they need to take a stand from certain activities and objects due to gender (e.g. Adriany, 2019; Hellman, 2010). To these results, the diffractive readings contribute further by also making historicity to come to the fore. Through the analysis it came to the fore how both present and earlier orientations, including both the children present in the data, as well as probably children before them, co-created the sedimentation of the preschool environment into presuming certain bodies as given, as well as which places, doings and peers that appeared as “simply given” or “simply inappropriate” to different children. Even though this didn’t always align with what a child actually wanted to do, as in the case of the boy trying to play in his favourite room (the play room), but had to give in and “choose” the construction room instead.

Since the analysis in the earlier study being re-turned (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020) was made together with Barad’s (2007) theory of agential realism, it already showed how the drawing table and its materials, as well as the construction room and its materials, co-created the children’s gendered explorations of emergent science. By including Ahmed (2010) in the diffractive readings of this paper, further contributions are made concerning how different orientations co-created if and how certain objects (materials, things, ideal objects/ideas and learning objects) could come in or out of perception and/or reach to different children’s bodies in the first place, as well as how these became objects or not for individual children. Furthermore, since Ahmed explicitly highlights the connection between gendered orientations and the skills that bodies get to develop, making the returnings with Ahmed also adds contributions in relation to understanding what practical and social capacities and skills that different children got the opportunity to expand and how. The diffractive readings showed that, due to the daily repeated gendered orientations, certain capacities, skills and identities materialized in the children’s bodies. What became significant and/or objects for individual children (physical and ideal), differed between the different places, but also *within* each place. Even though some of the girls that entered the construction room could construct Beyblades, they didn’t have the skills to – or felt like they wanted or were able to – take part in “the whole Beyblading”.

Finally, in this paper situations not clearly guided by teachers were in focus. In the earlier study being re-turned, a focus on the teachers’ approaches towards the children and/or gender, or the teachers’ (gendered) interactions with the children were overall not included in the data, nor a topic in the consent form that the teachers signed before the data production started. As such, the teachers have not been an explicit focus in this paper either. In other studies, findings have both shown how teachers’ gender aware engagement can help children to gain a broader repertoire of what to play and choose

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(Hjelmér, 2020), but also that teachers' commonly (unconsciously) gender children and influence their choices, participation and learning opportunities (e.g. Adriany, 2019; Andersson, 2012; Bhana, 2009; Fleer, 2021) and as such development of skills and capacities in narrowing ways. For sure, children and places are not the only ones who repeatedly orient within ECE. So do teachers – and researchers. Therefore, I encourage future studies to explore Ahmed's (2010) thoughts on orientations also in relation to how teachers' orientations matter, both when it comes to supporting (and restricting) children's "own" choices and influence, and when it comes to strengthening and traversing gender norms in ECE overall, as well as in relation to how gendering processes in ECE are being highlighted, re-produced, traversed and/or foreseen by how (we) researchers' orient.

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