

Promoting equity and gender equality in ECEC: Reflections from a pilot project

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes a pilot project, *Plats för fler! Mini* (“Room for More! Mini”), that supported service providers in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to further gender equality and equity through structured plans and everyday practices. The Finnish education system has been based on values such as equity and equality for decades. However, looking at the everyday praxis of ECEC and previous research, these values remain mostly abstract objectives. In this paper, we present the project and discuss its benefits and areas of improvement. The project consisted of two parts: 1) continuing education in the form of online training sessions and 2) an online material bank. The theoretical framework for both parts was norm-critical pedagogy, which also forms the theoretical framework for this paper. We present how this theoretical framework can be implemented in ECEC and continuing education. This paper discusses promoting gender equality and equity as well as a practical application of equality and non-discrimination plans within ECEC. It offers insights to ECEC personnel, researchers, and continuing education providers.

Keywords: *ECEC, equality planning, gender equality, non-discrimination*

Introduction

In Finland, and also increasingly in many other countries, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is acknowledged as a vital area where equity and gender equality¹ should be actively fostered. However, recent research has highlighted the systems of inequality, restrictive norms, and stereotypes that persist in ECEC environments, especially regarding gender and intersecting power dynamics (Alasaari & Katainen, 2016; Front,

¹ In this paper, we use the terms equity and gender equality to cover various aspects and characteristics – such as gender, race, and ability. Therefore, our approach is an intersectional one. We see our positions as shaped by overlapping layers of both privilege and discrimination.

2019; Loukola, 2023; Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu, 2020). Previous research shows that educators often unintentionally view children and interact with them through a gendered lens, which can restrict the children's possibilities to explore and experience different things or hinder their abilities to develop various skills and interests (Siippainen, 2018; Virkki, 2015). Additionally, previous research reveals the presence of racism and whiteness in ECEC settings in Finland (Front, 2019; Hummelstedt et al., 2021; Loukola, 2023; Rastas, 2009).

Many educators in ECEC do not possess the necessary tools and framework to critically examine their practices and challenge normative structures in their everyday work (Loukola, 2023). The importance of further training in equity and gender equality for ECEC staff has been emphasised in the field. Recent legislative updates in Finland stress the importance of implementing practices promoting equity and gender equality in ECEC.

In response to these challenges, we launched a project called *Plats för fler! Mini* ("Room for More! Mini") to support the professional development of ECEC staff with a focus on equity and gender equality. The project consisted of two training programs and an online material bank. The project was a collaboration between Ekvalita Ltd. and Åbo Akademi University, and it was funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education.

In this paper, we discuss the project's initiatives to implement inclusive practices in ECEC from the perspective of the educators and material creators involved in the project. We apply a larger framework of norm-critical pedagogy to explore the potential impacts and effectiveness. We will also present the outcomes: how the project brought meaningful changes in ECEC that adhere to legal standards and promote equity and gender equality.

Background

In this section, we will present previous research relevant to the project and our experiences in the field. In addition, we will look at current legislation and curricula that set obligations for ECEC service providers. Lastly, we will discuss our theoretical framework: norm-critical pedagogy.

Previous research and experiences from the field

Previous research shows that inequality, restrictive norms, stereotypes, and power structures are present in ECEC. Gendered practices emerge in how personnel interact with children, interpret their interests and behaviour, and organise physical spaces such as play areas (Alasaari & Katainen, 2016; Berry & Wilkins, 2017; Browne, 2004; Chapman,

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2016; Siippainen, 2018; Tayler & Price, 2016; Virkki, 2015; Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2010). Additionally other power structures and inequalities, such as racism and whiteness, are prevalent in ECEC (Front, 2019; Hummelstedt et al., 2021; Loukola, 2023; Rastas, 2009; Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu, 2020). These issues manifest in everyday practices like exclusion and name-calling, as well as prejudices and assumptions based on ethnicity and skin colour (Front, 2019; Loukola, 2023).

Structural work on equality and non-discrimination is crucial for achieving a more socially sustainable ECEC (Aminkeng Atabong, 2021; Dolk, 2013; Shutts et al., 2017). However, ECEC personnel often lack the ability to challenge harmful and restrictive stereotypes and practices, and struggle with critical self-reflection, sometimes denying reproducing norms like whiteness and heteronormativity (Chapman, 2016; Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020; Loukola, 2023).

We have met several ECEC personnel and other staff members within the field of education and constantly heard feedback about the need for more initiatives, training and materials aimed at ECEC. Based on this field knowledge and our experiences as DEI (diversity, equality, and inclusion) experts and educators, there seems to be a gap in gender equality and equity work in ECEC, particularly in Swedish. Some resources exist, such as the *Tasa-arvo kasvatuksessa* portal (www.tasa-arvokasvatuksessa.fi) owned by the Council for Gender Equality (Tane) and available in both Finnish and Swedish, and the Finnish Women's Association's (Unioni) project *Tasa-arvoinen varhaiskasvatus* (www.tasa-arvoinenvarhaiskasvatus.fi), which is only in Finnish.

To fill this gap, *Plats för fler! Mini* ("Room for More! Mini") was launched in 2021. At the time, there was little or no guidance in Finland for ECEC staff on creating gender equality and non-discrimination plans, and few practical or norm-critical tools for daily practice.

Legislation and Curricula

The Finnish education system has been based on values such as equity and gender equality for decades. It is a widely accepted principle in Finland that all children must have an equal right to education and be treated fairly regardless of their gender, ethnicity, disabilities, or other characteristics.

ECEC in Finland is governed by the Act on Early Childhood Education, which mandates that the objectives of ECEC include promoting equality and non-discrimination as well as supporting the children to understand and respect each individual's linguistic, cultural, and religious background. (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018.)

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Education providers in Finland are required by the Non-Discrimination Act and the Act on Equality between Men and Women to promote gender equality and non-discrimination. The requirement was extended to ECEC on the 1st of June 2023. This means that all organisers and service providers in ECEC must evaluate if and how equality and non-discrimination are actualised in their activities. They are also required to create a plan for gender equality and non-discrimination which must include necessary measures to promote equality and non-discrimination. According to the law, these measures should be effective, expedient, and proportionate. (Non-Discrimination Act, 2014; Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986.)

Prior to 1 January 2025, the obligation to draw up a plan for non-discrimination applied to each individual ECEC unit. However, due to a legislative change, the obligation now applies to the organiser of ECEC and to ECEC service providers (such as the city or municipality), meaning that the act no longer requires a separate plan for each individual ECEC unit. However, a plan for gender equality must still be drawn up for each unit. Therefore, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman recommends that the plan for non-discrimination also be drawn up as part of the same process for each unit (Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu n.d.). The plans must be created in cooperation with the employees, and the children and their guardians must also be heard in the process of creating or updating the plan (Non-Discrimination Act, 2014; Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986). However, there is a great risk that the above-mentioned legal requirements remain mostly abstract objectives.

ECEC in Finland is also governed by the National core curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022), which functions as a national norm. ECEC providers prepare the local curricula based on the National core curriculum for ECEC. The underlying values in the national core curriculum for ECEC are as the following (EDUFI, 2022).

- Intrinsic value of childhood
- Growth as a human being
- Rights of the child
- Equity, equality, and diversity
- Diversity of families
- Healthy and sustainable way of living.

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Even though the underlying values are clearly stated in the National core curriculum, research findings indicate that the path to achieving equality and equity in ECEC remains unclear (Chapman, 2016; Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020; Loukola, 2023). Therefore, there is a pressing need for more concrete and specific guidance for the planning, execution, and assessment of gender-sensitive teaching practices in ECEC (Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020).

Theoretical Framework – Norm-critical pedagogy

A central approach for the project has been norm-critical pedagogy, which we understand both as a theory and a method. Norm-critical pedagogy, drawing on Freire (1972), analyses how pedagogical practices, shaped by and embedded in power and social dynamics, can either reinforce or challenge structural inequalities in education. Norm-critical pedagogy has its roots in two critical views on education and social sustainability: 1) critical feminist pedagogy and 2) post-structuralist intersectional and queer theoretical perspectives on power, knowledge, and subjectivity (Bromseth, 2019; Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2013). Both have been central in forming the project, guiding us to understand and challenge complex and overlapping power structures within ECEC. However, our understanding is not limited to norm-critical traditions, which mainly focuses on linguistic features; it is expanded with a post-humanist view of subjectivity that recognizes the corporeal aspects of subjectivity, following Braidotti (2022).

For our project, we focused on two fundamental aspects of norm-critical pedagogy. First, norm-critical pedagogy emphasises the crucial role of language and discourse, where a key strategy is to examine how language normalises and marginalises (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2013; Laskar & Alm, 2017, as cited in Bromseth, 2019, p. 49). This can appear in educational context when certain identities are ignored, or when some are presented as "normal" and others as "abnormal". To broaden this perspective, we included linguistic aspects, actions, and practical considerations. For example, in ECEC, this might be visible in the predominance of books featuring heterosexual families, with other family constellations rarely represented.

The second focus was the self-critical teacher. This involves critical reflection on how societal power structures shape educators and their knowledge (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2013; Kumashiro, 2000). As "products of society", we have adopted stereotypes and preconceived notions about how things are or should be, which becomes apparent in our actions and behaviours (Bromseth, 2019). ECEC staff must critically examine their role, pedagogy, and the impact of their actions (Bromseth, 2019).

Like any theory and method, we are aware that norm-critical pedagogy has its limitations. For instance, the strong focus on linguistics ignores the material aspects (see for instance

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Åkesson, 2019; Langmann & Månsson, 2016), which is why, as mentioned above, we incorporated a post-humanist acknowledgement of corporeality. We address these limitations briefly in the section of *Pedagogical Methods*.

Acknowledging norm-critical traditions, we want to reflect on our roles within this project as educators and material creators as well as authors of this article. Our perspectives and positions have influenced the project's content, implementation, and conclusions. As white, queer cis women with higher education and a geopolitical location in the Global North, we acknowledge our privilege within global inequalities. This privilege may lead us to overlook some relevant aspects of teaching and writing about equity and gender equality. However, our academic background in pedagogy and gender studies, our experience as DEI experts and activists as well as our minority status (queer), equips us to engage in critical and nuanced reflection. The reflections presented here are situated interpretations for which we take full accountability. We do not claim objectivity or neutrality and recognise the subjectivity of our standpoint.

The project *Plats för fler! Mini*

In this section, we will present the project, which was launched to fill in some of the gaps we have identified while working in DEI and education in Finland. We will also reflect on different elements of the training and material bank. Lastly, we will comment on the continuity and sustainability of the project.

Presentation of the project

The project *Plats för fler! Mini* ("Room for More! Mini") was aimed at Swedish-speaking ECEC personnel. The project's overall objective was to provide opportunities for professional development for ECEC personnel in questions related to equity and gender equality. The project was a collaboration between Ekvalita Ltd. and Åbo Akademi University, and it was implemented in 2022–2023. The project received funding from the Finnish National Agency for Education.

The project consisted of two distinct training programs, or trails: Trail 1 was called *From Talk to Plan* (Från prat till plan), and Trail 2 was called *Equity in Everyday ECEC Practices* (Jämlikhet i dagisvardagen). The two trails had different target audiences: Trail 1 was aimed at ECEC managers, team leaders, and others who are in charge of creating the equality and non-discrimination plans, whereas Trail 2 was directed to ECEC personnel who work directly with the children, such as ECEC teachers and caretakers.

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Both trails consisted of five one-hour online lectures that provided strategies and tools to incorporate principles of equity and gender equality into ECEC. The sessions also provided a platform for the participants to engage in critical discussions, share experiences, and develop actionable plans that could be integrated into their curricula. Each session in both trails included lectures by the course teacher, interactive moments with the help of online tools, and group discussions.

The objective of Trail 1 was to support participants in understanding what an equality and non-discrimination plan is and give them practical tools for creating a concrete plan that helps them promote equity and gender equality in a systematic way.

The themes for the lectures were as follows:

- 1) Introduction to the topic: Why do we need a plan and how do we create one?
- 2) Analysing the current situation from a DEI point of view
- 3) Objectives and concrete actions in the plan
- 4) Implementing the plan: timetable, responsibilities, and evaluation
- 5) Continuity and sustainability in the planning process

The second training program, Trail 2, aimed to enable participants to gain more knowledge and understanding of equity and gender equality and to provide practical tools and methods for implementing these in their everyday work. Trail 2 also focused on supporting participants in recognising and challenging norms and restrictive practices in ECEC settings. The contents were designed so that they were directly relevant to the daily work of ECEC personnel.

The themes for the lectures were as follows:

- 1) Introduction to equality work in ECEC
- 2) Interaction and communication
- 3) Physical environment and materials
- 4) Books, songs, and games
- 5) Conclusion and summary

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The themes for both trails were chosen based on current literature and research, laws, and policies, as well as our prior experiences as teacher educators and understanding of ECEC. The contents were designed to ensure that even participants with minimal prior experience in the topics could easily understand the information and its relevance to their work. Due to the time constraint of one-hour meetings, the topics did not receive the in-depth attention they would have deserved. While more extensive training would have been ideal, our aim was to lay the groundwork for exploring and applying the concepts.

In addition to the training programs, a comprehensive online material bank was produced within the project. The contents of each trail were modified and adapted to suit the material bank. The structure of the material bank mostly follows the online lectures. Contents include informative texts, videos featuring ECEC experts and personnel, exercises, practical methods, reflection questions, and links for further reading. The material bank is open to everyone on Thinglink². The language of the material bank is Swedish. When the contents of the material bank were finalised, we organised an online launching event to promote and spread the word about the new resource.

Reflections from the online trainings

Communication and participation

For both trails, marketing and communication about the training were conducted through newsletters and social media. The project featured an inviting visual design, and several social media posts, including marketing videos, were published before the training started.

In terms of participation, there were interested participants for both trails, but a clear difference emerged between them. For both trails, the plan was to offer one-hour webinars at two different time slots: one during lunch hours and one in the afternoon. However, in Trail 2, the afternoon group did not gather enough participants, so the training was held only during lunch hours. The number of participants was lower than expected, possibly due to factors, such as ineffective communication, perceived irrelevance of the content, or difficulties in combining the training with daily work. ECEC personnel are often overworked, dealing with challenges like colleagues' sick leaves and multitasking with young children. Trail 1 was met with considerable interest. Two groups were formed, and they met online on different days of the week and in different time slots.

² The material bank is available here: <https://www.thinglink.com/card/1783126099484476069>

The interest was likely influenced by the then recent updates in legislation concerning equality and non-discrimination plans.

Although it is hard to identify the reasons behind the low number of participants for Trail 2, we believe that working conditions must improve to make professional development more accessible by e.g. allowing staff to participate in training during work hours, providing resources for substitute staff, and making sure leaders actively promote training. Highlighting the importance of equality work in daily discussions is also crucial.

Additionally, training organisers, like us, should critically evaluate the communication methods used. This includes considering where, when, and how we communicate and the content of our communication materials. The marketing language may not be accessible or engaging enough for the target audience. Our experience shows that those participating in such training often have prior knowledge of the topics. The challenge is to reach out to personnel who are not yet familiar with these themes. In the future, we aim to improve our ways of communication and consider exploring alternative approaches, such as face-to-face training or offering sessions at different time slots.

Timetable, workload and measuring learning outcomes

For both trails, the lectures were held about three weeks apart, which allowed time for reflection and processing of the information, adhering to the traditions of norm-critical pedagogy (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2013). We believe that learning continues between sessions and not just during active participation. The interval between lectures enabled participants to analyse their daily work through the perspectives provided during the lectures and to experiment with methods presented in the sessions.

The lectures were conducted online, which offers both advantages and disadvantages. The online format allows for nationwide accessibility and lowers attendance barriers. Participants were not required to keep their cameras on, accommodating multitasking such as monitoring children. For Trail 1, participants did not report the need to multitask and were able to focus fully on the lecture. This is most likely, because the participants were mostly team leaders with more freedom to plan and organise their tasks than those working directly with the children. For Trail 2, it was more common that the participants had to take care of other tasks while simultaneously participating in the lecture. Not having the cameras on also allowed the participants to stay anonymous, which might have been suitable for some people. Research indicates online training can be less stressful than face-to-face (Åkesson et al., 2022), which might have been the case for our online training.

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However, online lectures come with challenges. The lack of face-to-face contact made it challenging for us, the lecturers, to understand the group dynamics and create a sense of belonging. In addition, the participants may find long screen time exhausting and tiring, and being in the spotlight during discussions can be uncomfortable. If the project had had more resources, we could have organised at least one face-to-face meeting, which would have allowed for a deeper exploration of themes and fostered a stronger sense of belonging.

For Trail 1, there were some small assignments between the lectures. For example, the second session focused on analysing the current situation at the ECEC unit from an equality and non-discrimination point of view and presented several tools for the process. Before the following session, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the different tools and pick the ones that best suit their ECEC unit. The assignments were scalable so that the participants could choose how much time and effort they were able and willing to put on them. The assignments were optional. There were no examinations or tests to assess learning outcomes in Trail 1.

Trail 2 had no additional tasks or assignments outside of the lectures, nor were there any examinations or tests to assess learning outcomes. This decision was made because ECEC personnel are heavily burdened, and we did not want to add to their workload. Instead, our goal was to inspire and motivate participants to adapt their new knowledge and skills in their daily work and engage in discussions with their colleagues. We believed that participants would reflect on the topics regardless of the lack of formal assignments. For this purpose, reflection questions were provided at the end of each webinar. At the webinars, we also offered tips and method suggestions, allowing participants to experiment with new methods and approaches between sessions.

Since we did not have formal assessments, measuring the impact of the training sessions and the learning outcomes was challenging. However, we gathered feedback from participants after the course where the participants reflected on their learning experiences. According to the feedback, the participants gained new insights and practical advice on working with gender equality, diversity, and non-discrimination.

In retrospect, we could have carried out a comprehensive online survey to measure the learning outcomes to a larger extent. However, this project has supported our approach for future continuing education designs, and we have already incorporated surveys with similar statements to better capture learning outcomes.

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Pedagogical methods

Norm-critical pedagogy was an overarching approach for the training, incorporating a combination of pedagogical methods, consisting of lectures, interactive digital tools, group discussions, and reflections. This blended approach was intentional; optimal learning conditions are created when both theoretical and experiential methods are combined (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2013).

To support active and reflective learning, we placed strong emphasis on interactive engagement. Our aim was to create a dynamic and interactive group environment where everyone felt respected and valued, which is essential for learning (hooks, 1994). Interactive elements included online surveys, group discussions, and use of the chat function. These elements allowed participants to share thoughts and ideas. While we would have liked to reserve more time for interactivity, our goal of keeping the lectures concise meant that we had to be mindful of time limitations.

Another crucial standpoint for us was to work with critical self-reflection. An example of a method where interactive tools and self-reflection are combined is the Teflon test. The test is a well-known norm-critical pedagogy tool that helps individuals understand their position in society, consisting of multiple privileges and oppressions impacting their actions and pedagogical practices. An adjusted and further developed version of the test was conducted in Trail 2. The goal of the exercise was to spark a "wake-up call" and encourage participants to reflect on how their own experiences of oppression and privilege influence their actions. As Kumashiro (2000, p. 44) notes, learning about oppression can lead to a "*paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning*", which was our intention. Although some participants may have found the test uncomfortable, especially those with privileged positions, we acknowledged these feelings and discussed the results with the group. Since we consider critical self-reflection as crucial, we chose to implement the test even though it might lead to discomfort. Critical self-reflection was continued throughout the training on trail 2, with the Teflon test starting this process.

To further foster critical reflection and collaborative learning we avoided presenting ourselves, the educators, as objective authorities. Instead, we openly acknowledged that our perspectives and interpretations are subjective and situated. In retrospect, we could have emphasised this standpoint more strongly, especially given that the Finnish school system is heavily influenced by Western traditional ideas that often consider knowledge as objective and the teacher as its messenger. This can make it challenging for some participants to adapt to feminist perspectives that question the objectivity and conventional understandings of knowledge and authority.

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In addition, we embraced the learning process as ongoing and imperfect, recognising that there is no definitive "finish line" in equality and equity work. To illustrate these principles, we shared our experiences working with these issues, including moments where we could have done things differently. We hope this encouraged the participants to start the gender equality and equity work, as many are often hesitant to start due to fear of making mistakes or causing harm. We stressed that mistakes are inevitable and should be seen as opportunities for growth. As Bromseth and Sörensdotter (2013, p. 26) state, "*A central part of knowledge development is learning from one's mistakes*". We believe that our openness also helped build trust within the group and made the topics more relatable and memorable.

Gender equality and equity topics can be complex and emotionally charged, as they often are connected to our personal beliefs and values. Therefore, we encouraged to address the topics with sensitivity and empathy. In the first meeting, we introduced principles for a safer space, offering guidance on group interaction while acknowledging the sensitive nature of the discussions. When problematic expressions occurred and the safer space was challenged, we responded pedagogically—addressing the issue, not the individual. We explained why the action was problematic and offered alternative solutions for the future. By doing this, we did not only respect our safer space principles but also demonstrated how to act in similar situations. Flexibility was a key element during the training, enabling us to adapt to emerging discussions and support meaningful dialogue, even if it meant adjusting our original plans.

In retrospect, we recognize areas for improvement, particularly in building a safe group atmosphere. Although we adopted the principles for a safer space, they were not co-created with the group, which may have reduced participants' motivation to follow them. Instead of presenting the principles from "above", they could have been developed collaboratively. We will take these reflections forward and will prioritise group building to a greater extent in future trainings.

Lastly, we address the limitations of norm-critical pedagogy and digital methods in this project, with a focus on corporeality. Rooted in the linguistic turn, norm-critical pedagogy risks neglecting the embodied subject and reinforcing binaries like matter/discourse, portraying both participants and lecturers as "bodiless" (Åkesson, 2019; hooks, 1994; Langmann & Månsson, 2016). Digital formats can further distance learning from embodied presence (Brabazon, 2002). Despite these limitations, we applied norm-critical pedagogy for its strengths in fostering (un)learning about gender equality and equity and chose the online format for its accessibility across Finland. Our understanding of subjectivity draws on post humanist thought, emphasising material, embodied, and

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affective dimensions (Braidotti, 2022). To engage with corporeality to some extent, we included lived experiences and reflected on material aspects of ECEC, such as rooms, toys, and activities, recognising the physical alongside the discursive.

Reflections online material bank

Before we moved forward with the development of the material bank, we wanted to ensure that the target group would be positive towards it. Therefore, we informed the participants about our plan to create an online material bank and asked whether they had any preferences regarding its formats. The participants did not express any specific wishes about the formats but expressed excitement about the initiative, which motivated us to execute our plans to create the material bank.

Regarding the videos in the material bank, our goal was to create content with new insights compared to what is currently available. We included some videos from a previous training project, *Plats för fler* ("Room for More!") in the material bank, but also created new videos specifically for this project. The new videos feature ECEC experts and one ECEC leader. We also intended to interview ECEC personnel working directly with children, but because of time and resource constraints, we could not complete those interviews. Despite this, we hope that the material remains motivating and inspiring for its users.

The material bank was launched at an open online meeting that attracted around 20 participants. The launch was successful, and many have visited the resource since then. However, the Thinglink platform does not provide visitor data, so it remains unclear how frequently the material is visited. To ensure the ongoing utilization of the material bank, we continuously promote it through social media platforms, newsletters, and flyers at physical events. We also promote it when we lecture ECEC personnel on other occasions.

Continuity and sustainability of the project

It is well-known that projects like ours often face challenges in terms of continuity. Despite our training providing valuable information, practical tools, and advice, it is uncertain whether participants will implement their learnings after the project concludes. Kumashiro (2000) highlights that awareness alone does not guarantee action and implementation. To achieve more sustainable equality work, projects should be longer and more comprehensive. However, due to limited financing, most projects receive only one or two years of support.

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In the context of Trail 1, we understood during the project that ECEC service providers could greatly benefit from more external assistance during the planning process. While this project and its training sessions offered an introduction to the plan and the planning process, the actual writing of the plan is up to the service providers themselves.

For Trail 2, it was essential that the participants understood the relevance of the topics to their everyday work tasks. We used plenty of examples from ECEC environments and emphasised the critical roles of routines, the physical environment, equipment such as toys and books, and free and guided playtime. Our aim was to help participants anchor their new knowledge in concrete practices. This way, we hoped to increase the continuity of the work that started during our project.

Sustainability is another essential element that is sometimes difficult to achieve during a short-term project like ours. Sustainability is also related to continuity. Often, the responsibility for all work with equity and gender equality in ECEC lies on just one or two enthusiastic persons, which is not sustainable in the long run. It also does not allow for a more extensive process; one person can only do so much, and if others are unwilling to do their part, the results will remain limited.

While ECEC managers and team leaders were the primary target audience for Trail 1, there is also a need to create engagement among other staff members who play crucial roles in fostering an inclusive environment. Even in the legislation, it is mentioned that a plan created only by leadership does not meet the requirements set for the plan. Therefore, in Trail 1, we constantly emphasised that several different people, preferably everyone in the staff, must be responsible for the different concrete actions in the plan. Shared responsibility is easy to skip or forget, so each action should be anchored to one person's job description, to a working group or a process. This is a more sustainable way to organise the work, and it also makes the plans much more effective, making it possible to take bigger steps towards equity and gender equality.

For Trail 2, since the training course was not mandatory, we knew that the participants were motivated to learn and implement new strategies. This is why we focused on providing practical tools for ECEC personnel. In addition, we encouraged the participants to adapt the tools and methods to suit their unique needs and contexts. This approach encouraged participants to take ownership of the work instead of following instructions from above, also contributing to a more sustainable approach.

When it comes to continuity and sustainability, the primary goal with the material bank was indeed to make sure that the project would have a more long-lasting impact. Today, the material bank is easily accessible and available free of charge for anyone to use,

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making the resources available to anyone interested in these topics. This contributes to ensuring that the efforts made during the project serve a long-term purpose and were not only used momentarily during the lectures.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have presented and critically discussed a project called *Plats för Fler! - Mini* ("Room for More! Mini"). The project offered continuing education and an online material bank to support gender equality and equity in ECEC. Our key conclusions include a positive reception of continuing education and material bank as well as a remaining need for knowledge on gender equality and equity among ECEC personnel. Despite identifying some areas of improvement, such as ensuring continuity and sustainability, the project was overall successful and filled a significant need in the field. To conclude, similar initiatives and projects should be implemented in the future.

Regarding further research and efforts on themes of gender equality and equity within ECEC, research is needed to evaluate how such continuing education is implemented in everyday practice and its long-term effects. Another area lacking research is how equality and equity plans are put into action and their impact on the daily aspects of ECEC.

Previous research shows that achieving gender equality and equity in ECEC is still a distant goal. While many ECEC professionals are committed to promoting gender equality and equity, our reflections highlight a continued need for action and knowledge in this area. We propose structural priorities and actions to further promote gender equality and equity within ECEC. First, questions of equality and equity must be integrated into the everyday structures of ECEC institutions, rather than relying on individual personnel. Another way to support this work is by establishing networks and organising follow-up meetings for personnel engaged in these topics. Based on our experience, many feel isolated in their efforts.

Second, sufficient resources and prioritisation are needed on a political and decision-making level, which are currently lacking. Since we conducted the training (2023–2024), political decisions have been made aiming to deprioritise equity and gender equality within ECEC. The requirement for ECEC institutions to maintain equality and equity plans is proposed to be eliminated, and financial support for continuing education of ECEC and educational personnel, previously funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education, has been discontinued for 2025. We consider these changes troubling and would like to

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urge decision-makers to deepen their understanding of existing inequalities in Finnish society that persist also within ECEC and adjust their policies accordingly.

We hope this article inspires further efforts, prioritisations, and collaborations to promote equality and equity in ECEC, as well as further research on these major topics. Together, we can create a more inclusive ECEC – *Plats för Fler* (“Room for More”)!

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