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Done with Gender: Reinforcing and Reproducing Gender Stereotypes and Positions in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades, gender issues have received much attention in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. Gender equality and gender-sensitive education are explicitly mentioned as goals in the national ECEC curriculum. According to the national core curriculum, the staff should be aware of gender issues, actively promote a gender-sensitive environment, and actively strive to treat children equally and equitably. The aim of this study was to investigate how ECEC staff understand and implement gender-sensitive education. It was part of a large multi-sited ethnographic study conducted in ECEC centres. Participatory observations were made of the interactions between staff and children, and among the children, for one month in 18 ECEC centres. In addition, 74 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ECEC staff. The findings indicate that, despite occasionally questioning the status quo, the staff continued to reinforce and reproduce stereotypical gender divisions, for example by dividing children into girl-pairs and boy-pairs during daily activities. By not intervening when children exclude each other from play, the staff are communicating that excluding someone based on gender identification is acceptable.

Keywords: *gender-sensitive education, ECEC, gendered play and colours*

Introduction

Early childhood is a critical period for the development of gender identity (Carrasco Rueda et al., 2023; Hjelmér, 2020), and thus it is important to support children's exploration and development of their gender identity in ECEC. Nevertheless, in recent decades, we have witnessed a growing awareness of how early childhood education and society at large are still gendered, i.e. expectations are different for boys and girls. Therefore, as documented in research (Dolk, 2013; Eidevald & Lenz Taguchi, 2011; Odenbring, 2010) and Finnish policy documents (National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025) ECEC staff need to reflect on their views of gender. They need to be aware of how certain activities and attitudes produce or maintain gender-related inequalities and discrimination. Issues such as gender bias, equity, inclusive practices, play and interaction, curriculum, and material resources must be addressed, and teachers should be trained and made aware of gender in ECEC.

The Nordic countries have been pioneers in establishing gender equality goals in policy (Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021). However, these countries differ in terms of when and how gender equality issues have been introduced in ECEC. In Sweden, early childhood education became the first phase of the educational system in 1998, with notions aimed at counteracting discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or religion (Edström, 2014). A similar shift occurred in Finland much later. It was not until 2016 that gender diversity was included in the ECEC curriculum, and diversity work by the ECEC staff from an educational point of view was emphasised (EDUFI, 2016; cf. Mansikka & Lundqvist, 2019).

The aim of this study is to investigate the views of ECEC staff on gender, and their perceptions of gender-related activities and positions in ECEC. Our research question is how the staff understand and implement a gender-sensitive approach according to the national core curriculum for ECEC. In this article, we first describe how the topic of gender is presented in the national core curricula for ECEC (2018, 2022) and other ECEC policy documents (EDUFI, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025) in Finland. This is followed by the theoretical framework and previous research on gender aspects in ECEC relevant to this study. We then describe the data collection and analysis, and present and discuss the findings. Although our study confirms many of the gendered play and interaction patterns found in previous research, there are also new gendered norms established by the children. Our study also contributes to the research on gender-sensitive and norm-critical ECEC by pointing out some movement towards a deeper gender-sensitive awareness among both staff and children, and opportunities for further improvements.

Background

The national core curriculum currently in force lay down the framework for the Finnish ECEC, and local ECEC plans are based on the curriculum. The purpose of the core curriculum introduced in 2016 was to guide the provision and implementation of ECEC, while promoting high quality and equity (EDUFI, 2016). With the ECEC legislation such as the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), the revisions of the national core curricula from both 2018 and 2022 then continued this work. The revisions highlight the fundamental purpose of ECEC to foster the democratic values of Finnish society, including equity, equality and diversity. The national core curricula emphasise the importance of creating an operational culture focusing on equity and equality. Thus, according to the curricula, diversity and gender are reflected in the language and actions of the staff, and they also understand the importance of observing, discussing and documenting issues related to gender (EDUFI, 2022). The gender equality mission of ECEC is also supported by the fact that discrimination based on gender, gender identity and expression of gender is prohibited by law in Finland (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 609/1986). Since the revision of the Equality Act in 2014, educational institutions other than ECEC were obliged to produce operational gender equality plans (5a §). Since June 1, 2023, this has also applied to ECEC (EDUFI, 2025).

In the Finnish national core curricula for ECEC (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) gender sensitivity is one of the guiding concepts of gender equality work. In the curricula, gender sensitivity is defined as an attitude, which makes "*the personnel encourage the children to make choices without gender-related role models, or any other stereotypical positions or presumptions related to other personal characteristics*" (EDUFI, 2018, p. 32; 2022, p. 29). Furthermore, the curricula state that the staff should identify factors that contribute to inequalities among children and address them with sensitivity and consistency (EDUFI, 2018, 2022). However, as is often the case in similar documents, expressions are broad and lack examples of how to implement them in daily activities (cf. Axelsson, 2023). As with the mandatory equality plans, the power of the curricular document may weaken in practice (see Rantala & Heikkilä, 2022).

Therefore, to support the staff in relation to the gender equality mission within ECEC, more detailed guidelines on how gender equality in Finland could be implemented in practice have been developed (EDUFI, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025). The aim of gender sensitivity is to ensure that all children are given opportunities to try various games and participate in diverse activities while also being able to develop their skills, and choose their area of interest freely (EDUFI, 2024b, Sections: "Reflect on" and "Concrete tips"). Furthermore, the staff should promote choices in organised activities, the learning

environment and materials, as well as in children's play and interactions that reject stereotypical gender positions. Also, ECEC staff should intervene in situations and aspects that do not promote the children's self-selected, gender-related choices regarding, for example, toys and play activities (EDUFI, 2018, p. 41, 2022, 2024b, 2024c).

The guidelines supporting gender equality work also points out that the staff should be mindful of colour-coding of toys and spaces (EDUFI, 2024b). It suggests that ECEC staff "*should ponder what words to use instead of boys and girls and think about* [authors' translation]" how they talk. For example, staff "*should examine whether they connect gender to specific toys, play, colours and behavioural pattern*s [authors' translation]". They should also take the opportunity to talk about gender if the children initiate such a discussion, and address and intervene in stereotypical or offensive remarks, such as "*pink is a girls' colour*" (EDUFI, 2024c, "Reflect on" section). They should introduce children to new ways of thinking about these issues (EDUFI, 2024c). Children have the same rights, opportunities, and responsibilities to participate in ECEC activities as everyone else, regardless of their gender (EDUFI, 2024a, Sections "Equality" and "Equity").

Gender-sensitive education in Finnish ECEC promotes an inclusive learning environment that challenges traditional gender positions, in line with the national core curricula and other guidelines (EDUFI, 2018, 2022, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025). That is, children are viewed as unique individuals and not through the lens of gender and promotes equality, with the aim of ensuring that all children have equal participation and opportunities. Furthermore, the national core curricula for ECEC and its supplementary guidelines place high demands on ECEC staff to work in a gender-sensitive way. Interestingly, the practical suggestions are closely related to norm-critical education (see Björkman & Bromseth, 2019; Bromseth & Darj, 2009), a central concept in this study that has been influential in the Nordic countries.

Theoretical framework

In the Nordic context, a common assumption is that achieving gender equality in society requires a focused effort, beginning in ECEC (cf. Alasaari & Katainen, 2016; Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020; Heikkilä, 2020, 2023). There are many concepts related to gender equality work in education: gender sensitivity, gender awareness, gender pedagogy, equity work, queer or norm-critical pedagogy, or feminist and post-human pedagogy (cf. Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021). Our framework in this study has been influenced by norm-critical education (Björkman et al., 2021; Bromseth, 2019; Bromseth & Darj, 2009), and

approaches gender equality work through the concept of gender-sensitivity (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2017).

Norm-critical pedagogy has been described as a branch of critical pedagogy, which has been influenced by the power analysis of the Frankfurt school, Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, and queer and poststructuralist theory (Langmann, 2019). It has significantly influenced educational policymaking, particularly in Sweden (Axelsson, 2023), but as shown in the policy documents used in this study, in Finland as well. As a concept, norm-critical education has both dimensions of activism and an academic school of thought, including a double movement: balancing democratic values with the challenge of restrictive societal norms (Axelsson, 2023; Langmann, 2019). Therefore, it has usually been based explicitly on a view of subject positions as fluid and unstable. However, in practice, these positions often become stabilised (cf. Björkman et al., 2021; Heikkilä, 2020).

A norm-critical approach also views early childhood education institutions as arenas in which norms, including heteronormativity, are constructed and maintained (Bromseth, 2019). This includes the construction of gender identities, making it an arena where gender equality policy is made and negotiated (cf. Eidevald, 2009; Eidevald & Lenz Taguchi, 2011). From this follows that gender is a social structure that is affected by the deep-sited cultural structures and layers in society. Without critical reflection on gender norms in ECEC, children who deviate from certain norms might become marginalised.

However, norm-critical education has been criticised for being too normative. It is therefore important to be aware of the limits and diverse contexts (Langmann, 2019) and not to see it as a universal tool for every educational context. In this study, we focused on norms and categorisations related to gender, i.e. the borderwork (see Odenbring, 2010), reflected in the sayings and doings of ECEC staff.

In gender-sensitive education, assumptions about children's interests or personalities based on gender are not made but rather, are challenged and deconstructed (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2020). Studies indicate that gender-sensitive education promotes equality, social justice (Forde, 2012) and gender diversity (e.g. Barodia, 2015). Still, as Ylitapio-Mäntylä (2012) highlights, gender sensitive is often confused with being gender-neutral; furthermore, there may be a misunderstanding that equity is achieved through a gender-neutral approach. However, gender-neutral approaches may contribute to inequalities, which is why gender should be made visible in everyday practices in ECEC (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2012). Nevertheless, gendered practices often persist in daily activities and interactions and frequently go unnoticed, highlighting the importance of ECEC teachers

reflecting on and being aware of them (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2020), in line with the national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022).

In the context of early childhood education institutions, which are multi-contextual in terms of communication, gender equality can be established, challenged, or reproduced in every communicative event. Gender negotiations occur constantly through multi-dimensional social positioning, which can sometimes be contradictory from a gender perspective.

Previous research

Research has revealed a gap between the objectives of education policy and practical everyday work (cf. Heikkilä, 2020; Rantala & Heikkilä, 2022). Although a systemic change towards a more gender-responsive approach, that actively addresses gender inequalities, is needed, much of the equality work in ECEC is temporary, occasional, and project driven. Developing structures for continuous work that would promote equality issues among children and adults in ECEC centres is thus challenging (see Heikkilä, 2023).

Some studies have examined how teachers conceive gender equality and their own position in working towards it. Edström's (2014) study in Swedish preschools revealed several discourses and tensions related to gender equality: This is in line with Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi's (2011) distinction between two strategies that guide ECEC teachers' discourse on gender equality. One strategy is that to combat gender stereotypes, we need to strive for gender neutrality, creating gender-neutral spaces. This could be interpreted as giving up sex/gender as a category altogether. The other strategy is to work with gender in a compensatory manner. This means that when our surroundings are gendered in many ways, gender equality work creates more space for both groups. We see the concept of gender neutrality as somewhat problematic in our research context. When policy documents in Finland emphasise gender sensitivity, their goal is not gender-neutral education. To be silent about gender, as gender neutrality implies, would require gender equality to have been achieved. Otherwise, it will only maintain existing inequalities (see Itäkare & Eskelinen, 2020). Gender neutrality therefore implies ignoring the deeper social and cultural understanding of what gender is to human individuals.

Even though the approach to gender research is increasingly focusing on an expansive understanding of gender, several studies have indicated that ECEC continues to face challenges in this area (c.f. Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Chapman, 2022). A study by Chapman (2022) revealed that several teachers viewed children as too innocent to

discuss their gender identities suggesting that this discourse in ECEC is barking up the wrong tree. Gender equality in early childhood is seen as politically fraught and controversial, and pushing these issues to the forefront is seen as 'having an agenda'. On the other hand, other discourses support and expand gender diversity and gender identities in the ECEC context. Examples of these are collaborative practices with families and colleagues concerning gender and planning for gender expansion in their programmes or the inclusion of non-stereotyped materials in daily activities (Chapman, 2022). Research in Finnish ECEC has also pointed out how the material environment in ECEC can influence gendered play among children (Paju, 2013), and how gendered power is constructed in children's play (Huuki, 2016).

However, several studies have shown that gender equality work should go beyond planned activities for children. A study by Valkonen and Furu (2023) on social and cultural sustainability in ECEC found that the staff did not actively promote gender equality and did not involve children in promoting gender. According to them, children can play with whomever they want and there are no boy or girl colours. This highlights the need to examine practices in ECEC, as assumptions about children's choices in play may not foster gender equality. Siippainen's (2018) ethnographic study from a Finnish context revealed 3–5-year-olds' preference for same-gender play groups. Similar findings have been reported by Chapman (2015), particularly regarding the emergence of gender positions in free play. Additionally, Chapman (2015) highlights that teachers' attitudes to gender affect the choices that children make during free play, a point further supported by MacNaughton (2006). Hjelmér (2020) points out that free play provides valuable opportunities to address challenges between promoting gender equality and teacher guidance, particularly when activities are pedagogically well-planned. Donner et al. (2022) observed several patterns of exclusion in free play among children. Interestingly, both girls and boys accepted other children in their everyday play, but the most visible pattern was same-gender preference. Siippainen (2018) found that the practice of gendering seems to be common among children aged 3–5, as the children monitored gender boundaries. Their study also indicated that both staff and children, through social control, guarded these boundaries with potential repercussions for behaviour they considered boundary-crossing.

Methods

This article is part of a larger multi-sited, short-term ethnographic study of ECEC centres in Finland. The overall research project focused on how children exclude or include other children based on gender, ethnicity, social class, language and dis/abilities and further on

perception of ECEC staff about inclusion and exclusion among the children. However, the focus in this article is only on the staff's perceptions of gender positions in ECEC to allow for a more detailed analysis of this topic. Eighteen ECEC centres participated, some being in urban areas, others in small towns or rural areas in southern Finland. The language of the centres was Swedish, but in many of them, a large proportion of the children were Finnish-speaking or bilingual Swedish Finnish. All centres had children from a variety of social class backgrounds, but the centres' financial resources varied only marginally, due to stable public funding.

We followed the ethical guidelines set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). Research permission was obtained from the municipalities and ECEC leaders[1]. The leaders and staff consented to participate, and the children's guardians gave their consent for their children's participation. The children were continuously asked for their consent when being observed, for example, about a particular play situation (see Köngäs & Määttä, 2021). All ECEC centres, participants, and data were anonymised, and the centres were given pseudonyms in the findings section. The pseudonyms for the ECEC centres are the following randomly assigned names of asteroids and stars: Alkes, Ara, Atlas, Cassiopeia, Gemini, Hydra, Lerna, Lyra, Orion, Pegasus, Polaris, Ran, Solaris, Taika, Ursa, and Vega.

Three researchers conducted interviews and participant observations of daily activities for one month in each centre in 2022. They conducted participant observations of the centres' daily activities for 1177 hours over 246 days, but due to the COVID-pandemic, the number of days and hours in each centre varied between eight and 24 days and 16 to 96 hours. Daily activities included organised and free play, outdoor and indoor play, meals, and daily gatherings. Observations varied between mornings and afternoons. Field notes were written by the researchers about activities and interactions between children and teachers. Most of the children observed were four to five years of age. The researchers interviewed 53 teachers, 11 leaders, and ten other staff members. The 74 interviews were conducted individually, on site or over Zoom, during working hours. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, and varied from about half an hour to over one and a half hours. Their length mostly varied due to the staff's lack of time. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data sets analysed include both the observational and interview data, since gender emerged as an issue in both. The interviews and field notes were coded using Atlas.ti and

[1] In Finland, the term 'leader' is used to describe the highest position in an ECEC centre, which is comparable to the role of a principal in school.

analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach (2022). An abductive approach was taken in both the coding and the analysis, meaning that norm-critical theory, previous research, as well as the ECEC policies and aspects identified in the data influenced how we created the codes and conducted the analysis. The codes used in the analysis of both the interviews and observations were *gender, gender diversity, gender inclusion* and *gender exclusion*. Based on these major codes, we then created the themes *Gendered play* and *How staff talk about gender*. After the coding was completed, the major theme *Gendered play* was further divided into two sub-themes: *Who plays with whom?* and *Gendered colours, toys and play behaviour*. Both the major themes and the sub-themes encapsulated the patterns and topics identified through all the codes, as well as answered the research question. The themes, and the chosen examples for the themes, from both the observations and interviews, show how the staff understand and interpret the concept of gender sensitive ECEC.

Findings

In the findings, we focus primarily on challenges in teachers' understandings of a gender-sensitive ECEC and its implementation. For data excerpts from interviews, we use centre pseudonyms and the corresponding staff role. For excerpts from observations, we use centre pseudonyms and the term "observations".

Gendered play: discrepancies between sayings and doings

As a result of the analysis, we created the theme *gendered play*, and in this theme, we discuss two sub-themes based on topics frequently mentioned by teachers and leaders in the interviews. The first subtheme, *gendered play*, focuses on the discrepancy between what teachers said and what we observed about who plays together. The second subtheme explores the complexities and differences in how teachers describe *gendered toys and colours*, as well as *gender stereotypes and identifications* during play.

Who plays with whom?

Mixed-gender groups playing together (which they did in several of the centres: e.g. Alkes, Lerna, Orion, and Polaris), for some staff members was an example of a gender-sensitive approach. At another centre, one teacher provided an example of girls and boys engaging in joint play:

> *They also have friends across gender boundaries, well, across genders. Many of them play together, especially when they play home. Then there are a few girls and a few boys.*

> *They pretend that they are playing and eating pizza. That's the kind of play they do across genders* (Solaris, teacher).

Even though the teacher emphasised that boys and girls play together, she also used the term gender boundaries and that children play across these boundaries. One teacher in the ECEC centre Polaris explained they had a gender-sensitive approach in that they saw no difference between genders. The observations in Polaris confirmed that girls and boys often played together. Nevertheless, they also indicated that the children sometimes used the expression "*only boys*" to regulate who could join ongoing play. Interestingly, groups of girls were also observed as saying "*only boys*" can join our play. An example of this was when a girl and a child who neither identified as a girl or a boy (here called non-binary child) but was addressed as a boy by the staff, wanted to join the ongoing play. Both the girl and the non-binary child were then excluded because the girls in the playgroup did not see the non-binary child as a boy, even though the staff addressed this child as a boy. Here, the staff missed an opportunity to encourage both girls and boys to join an activity they considered not related to their own gender.

Even within the same ECEC centre, the views on gender and play varied among the staff. One teacher said it did not matter if a girl joined a group of boys playing:

> *I've never heard of a situation in which you put a girl and a boy to play together, and someone says no, I can't play with her because she's a girl. I've never heard that. It's definitely something [boys and girls playing together] I think is progressing.* (Ursa, teacher)

The observations from this centre confirmed that girls and boys played together. Still, another teacher at the same centre reported that the children chose playmates according to gender: *"Girls tend to lean towards girls and boys towards boys"* (Ursa, teacher).

Additionally, gender division was evident in teachers pairing girls and boys together. In some cases, for example in Ursa and Vega, the girls firmly said they did not want to play with each other. A teacher at Vega mentioned how girls say, "*I can't play with boys*" and "*I don't like boys*". In one case, this teacher had encouraged a girl to play with boys, which she then did. The teacher said that it was more often girls who did not want to play with boys than vice versa. In Ursa, a teacher also mentioned that some girls refused to play with boys or to even sit next to them. However, in other centres (Hydra, Solaris), several teachers mentioned that it was mostly boys who said that they did not want to play with girls, perhaps not in the same way as the girls had refused to play with boys, but by making rules that only boys can dig in the sandpit or only boys can enter the playhouse (Solaris, observations). In Hydra, one boy had strong ideas about girls and boys, and convinced his friends to exclude the girls they otherwise played with (observation). This also excluded

the child who did not identify as either of the binary genders, as the children did not let them in either.

Thus, as the examples indicate, it seemed common for some boys to prefer not to play with girls, and for some girls to prefer not to play with boys. Even though the staff claimed that boys and girls played together, they were able to name the specific girls and boys who had played together, in one case two years ago. Thus, girls and boys did not often voluntarily play together. However, several teachers (e.g. Ran, Lyra, Ursa, Alkes, Taika) reported that it happened more often in outdoor play, and more often among children aged younger than five. The staff sometimes felt helpless, because even if they did not divide girls and boys into separate groups, the children did so themselves, as the examples above show. As a remedy, many centres (e.g. Ursa, Ara) reported having a "*friends lottery*" for dividing children into structured activities, randomly assigning children and thereby avoiding same-gender groups. Hence, play patterns are more complex than teachers perceive them. It is not an either-or situation where girls and boys play together or not. They sometimes do and sometimes refuse to do so by inventing rules for excluding boys or girls or those identifying as neither.

Gendered Colours, Toys and Play Behaviour

The staff often mentioned that children perceived colours to be gender related, i.e. "boy colours" and "girl colours", but that they pointed out to the children that they could wear any colour they liked. In one centre (Lyra) the staff said that there were no gender-specific colours, but when they handed out balls during an activity, they gave the two boys blue and green balls, and the three girls red, pink, and yellow balls. A third boy received an orange ball. He was not happy about this and asked for a blue one.

During the interviews, the staff gave several examples of when children showed gender-related conceptions regarding colours. A teacher (Solaris) gave an example of a girl saying, "*you can't wear blue because it's a boy colour*". A similar example was when a boy was wearing a pink garment, someone told him that he was wearing a girl colour (Ran, teacher). Boys used the conceptions to accept or exclude other boys in play, for example they should not choose red or pink pens, fuse beads (Solaris, observations) or spades in the sandpit (Hydra, observations). The staff pointed out that they thought children could play with any kind of toy and encouraged them to do so.

> *Preventive work, yes. Well, it's probably about setting an example, saying that everyone is accepted. And we are not into boys not being allowed to play with dolls, precisely the opposite. In the play stations, they get to try everything. And in hindsight, after so many years, everyone, both boys and girls, probably play with all toys, from cars to Ninjago and dolls and ponies.* (Gemini, teacher)

Often children's play centred on themed activity stations, and the staff said that the girls liked playing in the home corner as well as with dolls and ponies and the boys preferred Lego, cars and dinosaurs. At one centre (Polaris) a teacher commented that "*girls and boys play with different things even though the staff don't want them to*", but the staff seemed to feel that they could not intervene. They also perceived that they had a gender-sensitive approach because the boys could wear dresses or something pink and use nail polish. The staff pointed out that many times they were pleased that boys could now wear a dress with no problems, although there were examples in our data of boys being excluded by other children if they were wearing a dress (Polaris, Alkes).

In other cases, when a boy did not dress according to the gender stereotypes, the other children questioned him about whether he was a boy or a girl. In Polaris, gender positions were traditional and exemplified by a boy refusing to wear a gold-coloured piece of fabric when he acted as the king in a play. Interestingly, all the staff comments about challenging gender stereotypes were related to boys. The teachers made no comments about girls wearing blue or green, or climbing trees like boys, even though they often pointed out that girls liked to play in the "home corner" and sometimes with Barbie dolls and ponies. The teachers did not approve of mixing toys from different areas, with the exception that cars could sleep in the doll house. If, for example, a boy wanted to play with the Barbie bus when the girls played with the Barbie dolls, the staff did not encourage the children to play together but instead suggested the boys play with other cars. The overall focus was very much on the boys, and some members of the staff reflected that maybe they had more play stations that interested boys. Hence, in terms of colours, dress and toys there was some gender awareness, but mostly regarding boys.

The observations revealed that boys had much more leeway in what was considered to be appropriate behaviour. For example, during a gym session, the focus was on the girls following the instructions for the moves and only girls were reprimanded if they did not follow them (Solaris). In the Atlas centre, the staff explicitly claimed to work against gender stereotypes, while at the same time they reinforced stereotypes by threatening misbehaving boys with having to sit with girls. Hence, sitting with a girl was used as a punishment. At times, the researcher wondered if the girls had internalised that they were used as tools for calming the boys. During an observation, two boys were asked not to swing next to each other because they were misbehaving, and a girl, on her own initiative, stepped in and took the middle swing without being asked to do so (Solaris).

Even though girls sometimes stood up for themselves, they were also willing to compromise. At times, girls were observed protesting when boys got to do things out of turn, as at Lyra, when it was being decided who could go to the big room to play. One girl

said, "*last time it was the boys, now it's the girls' turn*". A boy contradicted them, and a discussion followed about who had been in the room the last time. When the staff asked the children if it had to be only boys or only girls or if it could be mixed, the children, including the protesting girls, agreed on mixed groups.

The staff described how the children sometimes opened their eyes, such as when a boy wanted to play the traditionally female role of Lucia (a Nordic celebration in December) instead of a star boy, which is traditionally the role of boys in the Lucia procession. The other children pointed out that boys cannot be Lucia or handmaidens. As is often the case in the busy daily work of the centres, the staff fail to notice opportunities to guide the children to think outside traditional gender positions and behaviours.

Staff Talk about Gender

In analysing the interviews, we noticed a discrepancy between how staff talked about what should be done regarding gender according to the policy documents and what was done in practice. The staff talk revealed in many ways how they thought about and acted in relation to gender. Most members of the staff stated in the interviews that gender equity and equality were important, but many also said it was difficult to do everything in a gender-neutral way, even though the policy documents did not require gender neutrality. Gender neutrality was also often mentioned in discussions about gender-sensitive ECEC pedagogy. One teacher (Polaris) summed up the gender-neutral approach when she stated that teachers in ECEC need to accept things as they are, that it is not a teacher's job to encourage anything related to gender. According to the leader from the same centre, "*[y]ou would think everything is okay regarding gender. The staff have worked a lot on gender issues, so they don't need to work on it any further*".

The discrepancy in how staff perceived gender positions was evident in how staff discussed gender. Instead of saying that they used a gender sensitive approach, some interviewees said they used a gender-neutral approach, which meant not using the terms boys and girls. However, in practice, they still did so by, for example, calling "*all the boys to lunch*" first. In the Gemini centre, they had recently had in-service training on gender and claimed to know what they were not supposed to do, and that they placed both boys and girls in all play stations. Nevertheless, later they divided the children into boys and girls and called on them as boys and girls, which indicates how difficult it is to change and implement a policy. In some centres, the terms boys and girls were constantly used (e.g. Vega). One centre had an activity in which first those who felt like boys could participate and then those who felt like girls, in an attempt to include children who did not fit the stereotypical image of a girl or a boy. However, this attempt still forced the children into

a binary view, even though they could choose the category themselves. Both the staff and the children often had a binary view of gender, and children who did not fit the girl–boy classification were often on the margins of play.

The staff's conceptions of stereotypical gender positions were also evident in their gender-related talk among themselves and in how they described their actions in their daily activities. One leader (from the Cassiopeia ECEC centre) mentioned that the staff generally help boys much more than girls when the children were getting dressed for outdoor play, for example. In a somewhat negative way, the staff pointed out that they had some girls who were quite assertive and said that they did not want boys to join their play. A teacher in Taika described the situation: "*We had some girls who were extrovert, not authoritarian, but they were strong-willed. They wanted to rule and decide in play and were clear that boys were not allowed to participate*". In no instance did the staff consider the boys to be assertive, even though they said that they did not want to play with girls. In other words, the girls were seen as diverging from the girl stereotype, while the same action reinforced the gender stereotype for boys.

After pointing out that the Vega centre had gender-neutral dolls, one teacher claimed that they "*have had no problems in that a child feels like the opposite sex, in that way*". Even though the teacher made a point of them having gender-neutral dolls, having children not identifying with their ascribed gender position was framed as a problem. The teacher continued that some boys had laughingly teased some girls, saying that they had a penis. The girls protested and told the teacher, who reported having said that the boys were just teasing. The teacher thereby ignored the fact that the girls did not like having their gender identification questioned by the boys' teasing. No similar teasing of boys was mentioned in the interviews, even though boys identifying as boys were at times questioned by girls (and boys) if they wore a dress.

As mentioned above, the staff talked about children playing across what they labelled gender boundaries. One teacher (Vega) described boys and girls as always crossing gender boundaries when they played together because there were only two boys in the entire centre. In a way, the staff were creating boundaries in their own thinking and talking, even though no boundaries seemed to exist between boys and girls in this case. In Solaris and Vega, the staff reported a boundary between girls and boys: "*We have a fairly even distribution of boys and girls. They also have friends across gender boundaries, or across genders. Several of them play together, especially when they pretend to play home"* (Solaris). In their thinking, as also often in society at large, boys and girls not playing together was clearly the norm.

The leader at Cassiopeia described a conversation with a teacher which exemplifies how the staff reproduce gender norms and gender stereotypes through their talk, as well as how difficult it is for staff to agree on a common approach:

> *Someone came to work and said, "What's happened here? The year can't start like this." I asked, "Why not?" "Well, James can't have a pink basket". I discussed this matter with her, and she was very hurt. She said, "I think girls should play with Barbie dolls and boys should play with cars. When I choose activities and talk to the boys, I ask them if they want to play with Lego or cars today." And when she talked to the girls, "Do you want to be in the kitchen today or play with Barbies?"*

However, some members of the staff were also aware that what they say and how they express themselves regarding gender is important. One teacher (Ursa) said: "*We shouldn't tell only boys that they should eat to become big and strong but also tell girls that they can become big and strong*". Similar situations were observed during mealtimes in other centres (e.g. Hydra). One teacher (Solaris) explained that she had become more aware of what pronoun she uses and instead uses the children's names, because at the ECEC centre, they rarely talked about gender and instead used "children", because one family preferred a gender-neutral pronoun. The teacher continued by saying:

> *Of course, if the children talk about boys and girls, we also talk in those terms and may use "he" and "she". At first, it was very difficult to use the word them, but now I use it quite often. I also tend to use [children's] names a lot and just talk about "all the children".*

The findings also contained positive examples of how the staff acknowledged their need for more knowledge on gender-sensitive education and interaction with children. One leader (Pegasus) said that the staff needed a common approach because they were not prepared to handle tricky situations related to gender, such as when a girl sometimes said she had a penis, that she was a boy and wanted to use her male name. The leader pointed out that it gave the staff cause "*to reflect on how we talk with the children. Do we say "boys" or "girls" or instead use their names*". Similar observations were made in Gemini, where the staff agreed that "*you're never really done, learning to express yourself differently is a process, and you learn from your mistakes*". These examples indicate that some of the staff actively reflected on how they communicated with the children.

Discussion

This study examined ECEC staff's understandings and implementation of a gender-sensitive approach and their own positions in ECEC. The findings were presented according to the themes of gendered play and how staff talk about gender. They show that

both staff and children mostly have a binary view of gender, and that children who do not fit the traditional girl–boy classification are often marginalised in play. In line with the findings of Donner et al. (2022), through the voices of the staff and as noted during the observations of the children, this study revealed that many girls state that they do not want to play with boys and vice versa. The children also had clear views on which toy and play areas were for boys and which were for girls. Unfortunately, teachers reinforce these divisions by pairing children into same-gender pairs during activities and meals, as also discussed in Chapman (2015). By not intervening when girls and boys exclude each other from play, teachers are confirming that excluding someone based on gender identification is acceptable.

Donner et al. (2022) highlight children's tendency to choose playmates of the same gender and the teacher's role in reducing children's exclusion strategies based on gender. Only occasionally did the staff in this study challenge the girls' or boys' perceptions and desires regarding what they considered to be gender appropriate. Despite the occasional questioning of the prevailing gender norms, the staff reinforced and reproduced stereotypical gender divisions. In this study, many staff members expressed the view that boys and girls have different interests, as if these interests were inborn, and did not question their own positions in expanding the children's interest, as recommended in the ECEC guidelines (EDUFI, 2022, EDUFI, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025). Previous studies have documented how children's choice of play activities is significantly influenced by the existing norms and available options in ECEC (Hjelmér, 2020). Likewise, in this study the play areas in most of the participating ECEC centres were divided into and described by staff as areas of boys' interests like cars, Lego and dinosaurs, and girls' interests, such as home corner, café, dolls, and ponies. At times, the staff said that their centre had fewer play stations for stereotypical girl interests.

Despite an overall gendered perspective of daily activities, there was some movement away from gender-stereotypical thinking and behaviour, like awareness of gender-sensitive pronouns, towards more gender-sensitive and norm-critical ECEC, aiming to meet the recommendations outlined in the national core curricula (EDUFI, 2018, 2022). Even so, many examples indicated that stereotypical gender positions are still common among staff and children, and that staff seemed more concerned with boys adhering to traditional gender positions. These findings are in line with those of previous studies (cf. Chapman, 2015; Valkonen & Furu, 2023). The understanding of gender-sensitive education and the examples provided by many of the staff during the interviews, focused only on boys, such as boys being allowed to wear nail polish and dresses. As Ylitapio-Mäntylä (2020) points out non-stereotypical gender behaviour, particularly regarding boys, is still not normalised in ECEC despite teacher in-service training, curricular changes

and societal changes, such as the use of gender-neutral pronouns. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that when a girl and a boy chose to play together, this was often labelled as the children "*crossing boundaries*". Stereotypical gender positions could also be identified, in that sitting next to a girl was used as punishment for boys who misbehaved.

The staff emphasised that they did not group or label children as boys or girls. Despite their good intentions, in a sense, the ECEC staff contributed to constructing gender boundaries and reproducing gender-stereotypical behaviour, which is in line with previous research findings (c.f. Eidevald, 2009; Eidevald & Lenz Taguchi, 2011; Heikkilä, 2020). Presumably, this was partly due to their lack of reflection on their actions and inactions in terms of gender-related activities, positions and behaviour. Often, there was little congruence between what the staff claimed they did, and what they did in practice.

The findings indicated that ECEC staff seem to have misunderstood what policies mean by gender-sensitive education. Many members of the staff interpreted the policies as allowing children complete freedom to play as they wish, without adult interference. Not all of them were aware that, according to ECEC policies, they are expected to encourage and support children to engage in non-stereotypical gender behaviour, to ensure that every child feels secure and accepted in their gender identification, and to intervene when children are excluded based on their gender.

Teacher training plays a crucial role in promoting gender-sensitive education among future ECEC teachers and should make them acknowledge and aware of any possible stereotypical gender views they may have (cf. Kreitz-Sandberg, 2016). For student teachers to grasp both gender-sensitive education theory and practice, this topic should receive attention during the practice periods of teacher education. Furthermore, teacher educators need to be knowledgeable about research on gender in the early years. Naturally, to achieve a whole-school approach in an ECEC centre that enables a true gender-sensitive learning environment, it is essential that all the staff receive gender-sensitive education. Moreover, to accomplish a permanent change in ECEC, continuous in-service training should be offered. This should include learning to notice when to intervene in the exclusion of children based on gender, how to construct play areas that interest more than one group, how to encourage children to try out new play areas and new ways of playing and learning, and how to talk to children in a manner that does not reinforce stereotypical gender positions or behaviour.

The constant shortage of staff may be one reason ECEC centres have not (yet) fully internalised the policy guidelines for gender-sensitive education. Continuous staff turnover results in gender being an issue that constantly needs to be emphasised, and much responsibility is placed on the staff members who have adopted a gender-sensitive

approach. They need to be aware that new staff and substitute teachers might not be familiar with gender-sensitive practices and are perhaps expected to ensure that new staff act according to the ECEC centre's equality plan. However, gender-sensitive education should be considered among all the staff to be basic practice in ECEC, because equity, equality and diversity are the underlying values in the national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022). Therefore, all staff need to be aware of how they (perhaps) contribute to reinforcing and reproducing gender-stereotypical behaviour.

In our data, many views and examples of gender sensitivity were expressed. This reveals that there is still work to be done in gender-sensitive education. The findings indicate that staff do not actively engage in promoting gender sensitivity in play. Indeed, a member of the staff occasionally intervened to prevent an undesirable situation or asked a group of children to include another child, but except for occasional comments on colour, the staff never took the initiative to discuss gender sensitivity in children's play with the children. Toys and books are an integral part of children's play and the learning environment (Dickinson et al., 2012; Lone & Kour, 2024). However, aside from comments on which toys different gender groups prefer to play with (according to the staff), the teachers showed limited self-reflection on how books and toys can contribute to reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and behaviour.

This study revealed the staff's frequent lack of intervention in situations and use of language from which children would have benefitted, and which they would have been entitled to receive – a gender-sensitive education empowering their gender identity as recommended in the ECEC guidelines. Interestingly, the staff commented that they had discussed gender issues extensively over recent years and felt that they were "*done with gender*" as the leader of one ECEC centre (Polaris) implied during their interview. Surprisingly, the leaders often expressed uncertainty about their staff's actions related to gender issues in the daily activities of the ECEC centre. A few leaders said that they had not discussed gender recently with their staff because they had previously had extensive discussions and considered the topic resolved. However, at other centres, the staff expressed concerns about not knowing enough about gender-sensitive education and how to talk about gender with the children. There was little or no mention of a common approach (current or past) to implementing a gender-sensitive curriculum.

The slow changes in the operational culture, and the leaders' primarily administrative role, with limited insight into daily activities, may have an impact on the rather slow development of gender-sensitive education that is in line with the national core curriculum and other ECEC guidelines. That is, an ECEC environment in which gender-stereotypical behaviour is not reinforced or reproduced. Based on this study, as shown in

the sub-themes 'who plays with whom' and 'gendered play', we conclude that children often act in traditional gendered play patterns and that ECEC teachers at times struggle with understanding gender-sensitive approaches, often confusing them with gender-neutrality, thus assuming they should provide children with unrestricted freedom in play rather than actively encouraging inclusive and diverse interactions. Hence, by allowing exclusion based on gender identity, staff unintentionally reproduce gender stereotypes and reinforce restrictive norms rather than challenge them. They seldom intervene and take a norm-critical perspective, despite ECEC policy documents encouraging a gender-sensitive education.

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