

Editorial: Research on gender and gender equality in ECE

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Introduction

In recent decades, gender has become a central focus in early childhood education (ECE), reflecting broader societal commitments to equality. For example, Finland has recognized gendered practices into account in ECE since the 1970s, when the first official statements on the importance of gendered practices in ECE pedagogical activities occurred (Vehviläinen, 1974). However, in this special issue it is visible that both more practical work as well as research-based knowledge on gender equality is needed. Even in the Nordic countries, which have been regarded as models of gender equality, it is not self-evident that gender equality is proceeding in society and education. Nowadays critical feminist research is perhaps needed more than ever, since anti-gender movements has both grown and emerged as a transnational phenomenon with conservative and far-right actors who seek to contest gender equality and undermine the rights of sexual and gender (Butler, 2024; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

This special issue contributes to this research body needed by examining gender equality issues from the perspective of ECE. This special issue contains peer-reviewed articles on relevant topics on gender equality in ECE as well as one non-peer reviewed writing that bring important perspectives to practical work on gender equality and non-discrimination issues in early childhood education. This special issue provides a valuable insight of gender equality and gender perspectives in early childhood education in different countries. All the included articles illustrate that gender and gender equality is

not a fixed attribute but rather a socially constructed and relational phenomenon, continuously negotiated by children and adults. Achieving gender-sensitive education requires more than formal directives. It demands reflective, context-aware practices and ongoing professional support that can respond to cultural norms and the broader theoretical tensions inherent in gender equality work.

New knowledge in this special issue on gender and gender equality in ECE

The Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986/609) requires Early Childhood Education (ECE) to create operational equality plans in Finland. In their research, Mervi Eskelinen, Susanna Itäkare, and Maiju Paananen, explore the gender equality representations which have been built on the Finnish Government's proposal in connection with the amendment of the Equality Act. In their research, they analysed the various stakeholder and expert opinions that were given on the government's proposal. As a result of the analysis, four different problem representations were identified 1) the planning obligation is an ineffective means of promoting gender equality, 2) the implementation of the planning obligation is contingent on available resources, 3) the primary barrier to promoting gender equality is a lack of staff competence, not a lack of planning obligation, and 4) promoting the planning obligation destabilizes the binary gender order. Their research confirms that gender equality is not an accomplished social state, but a dynamic and historically constructed phenomenon. Therefore, research related to gender equality and non-discrimination in different sectors of education from early childhood education to higher education is still needed.

Monica Londen, Gunilla Holm, Jan-Erik Mansikka, Maria Saloranta, and Alexandra Nordström's article illustrate how translating gender equality and gender-sensitive education principles into everyday Finnish ECE practice remains a significant challenge. Through an extensive multi-sited ethnographic approach, including participatory observations in 18 ECE centres and 74 interviews with staff, the authors uncover a tension between policy ideals and practice. Despite moments of reflection, staff often reproduce stereotypical gender divisions, for instance, by grouping children into same-gender pairs or failing to intervene when gender-based exclusion occurs. These findings highlight a subtle but powerful message communicated to children: that gendered behaviours and exclusions are permissible. Their study underscores the persistent gap between aspirational policy and classroom reality, reminding us that achieving genuine gender-sensitive education requires more than formal directives: it demands critical reflection,

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active strategies, and ongoing professional development. For researchers and practitioners alike, these insights prompt urgent questions about how ECE settings can move from passive awareness to proactive promotion of gender equity.

Megan Rådesjö offers a critical examination of the gender equality mandate's theoretical complexities, exploring how it has been constructed and contested across multiple legal and curricular texts, including five versions (from 1998 and onwards) of the Swedish national curriculum, the Education Act, the Discrimination Act, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Using a Bacchi-inspired critical policy analysis framed through diffraction, Rådesjö demonstrates that the gender equality mandate functions as a "*floating signifier*", its meaning shaped by a range of feminist problem constructions over time and space. Depending on the theoretical lens applied, the mandate can be interpreted in terms of binary gender inequalities, socially constructed differences between subject positions, heteronormative limitations, or intersectional inequities. Crucially, these constructions can contradict or undermine one another, leaving some identities and forms of inequality largely unaddressed. This study illuminates the interpretive tensions that Swedish preschool teachers face, showing that the mandate's ambiguity both challenges and enables practice. By foregrounding the contested nature of gender equality as a policy concept, the article calls attention to the need for ongoing professional reflection, dialogue, and theoretically informed support for teachers seeking to navigate these complexities in everyday pedagogical work.

The gender equality situation in Sweden has also been examined in Mia Heikkilä's article. She conducted a literature review on research related to gender and gender equality in Swedish early childhood education and care (ECEC) during 2002–2022. Her study aims to analyze how research on gender and gender equality in Swedish preschools and ECEC has developed over the past few decades. The article focuses on studies that are relevant to preschool practice. It discusses how research results could support the development of a more gender-equal preschool in accordance with the Swedish national preschool curriculum but also wider in education. The studies reviewed in this article demonstrate that gender remains a salient category in preschool, with several investigations illustrating how both children and staff actively negotiate gender expressions in diverse ways. The analysis indicates that gender equality initiatives in preschools have often been implemented as short-term projects. Furthermore, the study indicates that staff attitudes and practices are pivotal for advancing gender equality work, underscoring the importance of professional training and reflective practice in the field.

In Brazil, the absence of formal guidance leaves children's constructions of gender heavily influenced by adult interactions and the organization of pedagogical spaces, which is seen

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in Ricardo Goncalves's and Sandro Vinicius Sales dos Santos's article. They discuss how gender is constructed by four-year-old children in Brazilian early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Unlike some contexts where gender equality is explicitly integrated into national curricula, Brazil presents a more complex landscape, marked by the absence of guidance on gender in the national ECEC curriculum and the influence of rising conservative movements. Using a mosaic approach that combined observations and interviews with children, teachers, and other adults in and around the classroom, the study demonstrates how children's perceptions of gender are shaped by both the organisation of pedagogical work and the roles taken by teachers. Importantly, the findings reveal that while stereotypical gender assumptions are often reproduced in daily interactions, they can also be challenged – particularly when teachers consciously engage with children's play and relationships. By linking theory, policy, and practice, this study underscores the crucial role of educational policies and ongoing professional development in supporting teachers to foster more inclusive and flexible understandings of gender. It provides a timely reminder that children's constructions of gender are not fixed but are continuously shaped by the adults and spaces around them, offering both challenges and opportunities for transformative educational practice.

Gender equality from a slightly different perspective has been studied by Susanna Itäkare and Jaana Pesonen when they have analysed children's literature. In their article, they analyse two children's books called *Koira nimeltään Kissa* ("A Dog Called Cat") and *Ensilumi* ("The First Snow") through the lens of queer theory. They analyse picture books from the perspective of power relations utilizing queer theory problematizing concept of gender. In this article, the authors highlight that queer theories provide a framework for critically examining norms and enable see the inequality structures of educational practices. A queer reading of literature is well-suited to early childhood and pre-primary education, offering a practical tool for applying queer pedagogy into the everyday practices of education and training. Like this research shows queer theory and pedagogy – which generates knowledge by critically examining inequalities, such as adult/child and teacher/student – could be applied more extensively in ECE teacher education as well in ECE pedagogy.

Child-oriented pedagogy and children's choices in preschool activities is the subject of Anna Günther-Hanssen's article. In her study, she applies feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's thoughts of the re-turnings orientations. The aim of her research is to further knowledge on gendering in ECE by exploring what children's choices are and how and why they choose specific spaces and materials. Also, she focuses on how different orientations (human and nonhuman) affect gendered choices, relations and learning opportunities in everyday practices in ECE. The research reveals that adopting a re-turnings orientation

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promotes an understanding of children's choices. This approach reveals and considers gender norms, social relations, embodiment, temporality, material and spatial contexts, learning opportunities, and the development of children's capacities and skills. The article offers practical insights for educators to consider when designing approaches, resources, and pedagogy that enhance children's agency in diverse choice-making practices in ECE.

In Eerika Ströömí's and Laura Hagström's review a practical perspective is strongly featured when the review presents gender equality projects related to early childhood education. The review brings an important practical dimension to this special issue. It presents a practical development project, *Plats för fler! Mini* ("Room for More! Mini"). The project sought to operationalize gender equality in Finnish ECEC through concrete plans, resources, and everyday pedagogical practices according to the Finnish national curriculum and legislation. While Finland has long articulated values of gender equality and equity in its education system, previous research and everyday ECEC praxis show that these commitments remain largely abstract for teachers in ECEC. This project addressed that gap through two key components: continuing education via online training and a digital material bank, both grounded in norm-critical gender-aware pedagogy. By demonstrating how this theoretical framework can be translated into practice, the review offers a timely example of how gender equality and anti-discrimination work can move beyond policy rhetoric toward actionable strategies within ECEC settings. Importantly, the discussion does not only highlight successes but also identifies areas for improvement, signaling the need for sustained professional development and structured support for practitioners. As such, the review contributes both a methodological pathway and a pedagogical toolkit, positioning itself as a valuable resource for ECEC personnel, researchers, and providers of continuing education who seek to embed gender equity in everyday practice.

Concluding remarks

When collecting all articles together it is possible to claim that across the different nations included in the studies, a clear pattern emerges in which gender in early childhood education is shaped by a dynamic interplay of policy, pedagogy, and social context. In Finland, despite explicit curriculum mandates, teachers still reproduce stereotypical gender divisions in everyday practice, and in Brazil, the absence of formal guidance leaves children's constructions of gender heavily influenced by adult interactions and the organization of pedagogical spaces. In Sweden, the gender equality mandate in policy is revealed as a contested and theoretically complex one, with teachers struggling to interpret its implications in ways that address inequalities meaningfully.

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In early childhood education, practical gender equality can be achieved through a gender-sensitive, child-centered pedagogy. This approach involves designing the learning environment to be gender-sensitive, including toys, playgrounds, and learning materials. All in all, the notions on gender and gender equality brought up in this special issue contribute to the ongoing development of knowledge of gender and gender equality in ECE and raises its importance in children's lives.

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