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Gender balance in ECEC: why is there so little progress?

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Social attitudes about male participation in the upbringing of children have changed considerably over the past few decades. Men are now seen as important for children’s development and learning. Research from many countries worldwide shows that in early childhood care and education (ECEC), male workers are welcomed by female colleagues and parents. In the last two decades there have been initiatives for more men in ECEC in several European countries. Nevertheless the proportion of male workers ECEC remains low worldwide. This article questions the persisting gender imbalance in ECEC and analyzes ambivalences regarding more men in the field. Based on recent gender theory, efforts and limits of strategies for more male students and workers in ECEC in Belgium, Norway and Germany are discussed. It is concluded that deeply held gendered attitudes and practices in the field of care and educational work with young children have to be put into question. More space in ECEC for embodied subjectivities is needed to overcome essentialist conceptions of differences between body and mind, women and men.

Keywords: gender; gender balance; men in ECEC; corporeality; diversity

Introduction

Social attitudes towards male participation in the upbringing of children have changed in the past decades. The importance of fathers for the development of young children is widely accepted (Lamb 1975, 2004; Le Camus 2000). At the same time, ECEC remains a female dominated field of work. The proportion of male workers remains low in most European countries. Only in Norway, Denmark and recently Turkey, more than 5% of the early years work force is male; in most countries, it is between 1% and 3% or even below (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010; OECD 2014).

The care and education of young children has always been considered ‘women’s work’ (Cameron 2001; Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999). But, over the past decade calls for more men in education have increased the context of the so-called ‘boys crisis’. Although empirical evidence of any relationship between teacher gender and educational outcomes of boys is sparse (Carrington, Tymms, and Merrell 2005), this call for male teachers is often extended to early childhood education (e.g. Hurrelmann and Schultz 2012). Furthermore, a better gender balance in early childhood education

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and care (ECEC) is seen as a means for gender equality in society in general (Farquhar 2008; Icken 2012; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2008).

In the last two decades, there have been initiatives to attract more male ECEC workers in several European countries. Norway and Germany have invested in extensive projects and programs to increase the number of male students and workers in ECEC. Despite these efforts, the proportion of male ECEC workers remains low compared to the goal of 20% that was put forward by the European Commission Network on Childcare nearly 20 years ago (European Network 1996).

Figure 1 presents timelines of the proportion of male ECEC workers from four countries discussed in this article. As definitions of ‘ECEC’ and ‘ECEC worker’ differ substantially between and even within countries, these tables do not aim to compare proportions of male workers between countries. Instead, they show similar developments over time: a more or less slight increase of male participation in ECEC.

This increase is even higher if absolute numbers are taken into account. In Germany, in 2014 there were more than 25,000 male workers in ‘Kitas’, around three times as many as in 1998 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, own calculations). In Norway, the number of male pedagogical workers tripled as well from 2210 in year 2000 to 6716 in 2013 (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2014, own calculations). In Flanders, the number of men employed in childcare rose from 193 in 2002 to 875 in 2010 (Peeters 2003) In Turkey the increase was even more impressive: from 694 male Early childhood teachers in 2003/2004 to 3.387 in 2013/2014. But because of the general growth of the ECEC sector in many countries, even an impressive increase

![Graph of Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1.** Timelines of proportions of male workers in selected European countries. Flanders: men employed in childcare sector (0 to 3 and out-of-school care) (Peeters 2003, 2013). Germany: Workers in “Kitas” (ECEC centers) incl. leaders and (few) administration, and also after-school care (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, own calculations). Norway: Leaders, pedagogical leaders and assistants in kindergartens (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2014, own calculations). Turkey: Early childhood teachers (National Education Statistics 2014, 14, cf Sak, Sak, and Yerlikaya 2015, in this issue). Note: Kitas (Kindertageseinrichtungen) in Germany provide mostly early childhood education and care, sometimes combined with after-school care.
in the numbers of male workers did not lead to a substantial increase of the proportion of male workers in the field.

As surveys in several countries have shown, men are welcomed by parents, female colleagues, and ECEC providers (Aigner and Rohrmann 2012; Cremers, Krabel, and Calmbach 2010; Daycare Trust 2003; Emilsen 2012; Lysklett and Emilsen 2007; Peeters 2003). Measures promoting men’s participation in ECEC are widely appreciated also in the media.

Despite the still low proportions of male workers, this openness can be interpreted as a cultural shift toward gender equality in the field of care and education in general. On the other hand, there is still a ‘general distrust’ – skepticism and negative assumptions – against men working with young children. The fear of pedophilia has hampered the aim of developing a diverse, gender-balanced work force (Farquhar et al. 2006; Peeters 2013; Petersen 2014). In this introductory article we will analyze different and often ambivalent views regarding more men in the ECEC field. By building on recent gender theory we try to find new perspectives on how to change the gender balance in ECEC.

Measures and projects for more men in ECEC – huge aims and poor results?

In some countries, long-term projects have been set up to increase the participation of men in ECEC settings. The authors of this study have been engaged in some of these projects in Norway, Belgium and Germany, and support the aim of increasing the proportion of male workers towards a more gender-balanced ECEC work force. At the same time, since the effects of these campaigns and actions have been somewhat disappointing, they critically reflect on these strategies and the assumptions they are based upon, and argue for more innovative views.

Norway: long-term measures for more men in ECEC

Compared to other countries, Norway has succeeded in recruiting more men to ECEC centers. In a 20-year period, there has been a significant increase in the amount of male ECEC workers (Baagoe Nielsen 2010; Emilsen 2012). Several actions were undertaken to increase the number of men in ECEC centers. Funds for recruitment purposes were assigned. Since 2001, four Governmental Action Plans for Gender Equality included measures for recruitment of men. These action plans had binding obligations and actions. Networks for Men in Kindergartens (MIB) were established in a number of municipalities and regions. These networks have first and foremost been meeting places for men working in ECEC centers in order to retain men in the field. Moreover, it is expected that they play an active part in recruitment actions, as male ECEC workers are seen as best promoters for more men.

The discourse in Norway about the importance of more men in ECEC can be put in three categories of argument: (1) There is a consensus about the importance of men taking part in young children’s lives; (2) The goal of gender equality is enshrined in Norwegian laws, regulations and curricula. In this context, ECEC is seen as an important contributor to the goal of an egalitarian society; and (3) In order to give young children a stimulating and pedagogical environment it is important to provide gender balance in ECEC. Young children should experience diversity, both in play and learning. Gender differences in interactions with children can provide a rewarding diversity among the staff.
In spite of these positive attitudes and measures towards male participation in ECEC, the proportion of trained male professionals is still below 10%. In many regions, male ECEC workers are still a small minority. Moreover, there is no significant research that explains why Norway has succeeded to employ more men, or why male workers are relevant in care for the youngest children (Emilsen 2012; Kunnskapsdepartementet 2010; Opheim et al. 2014).

**Flemish community of Belgium: gender and professionalism**

In 2001 within the Flemish Community of Belgium a proposal for a project, ‘Men in Childcare,’ was accepted by to the European Social Fund with broad partner support, including the Flemish governmental organizations for employment and childcare and various childcare organizations. In the framework of this project a media campaign was launched to motivate more men to take a job in the childcare sector. As a part of the project research was set up to get more information about the number of men working in Flemish childcare, and the profile of men working in childcare and students in initial childcare training. An analysis of interviews gave insights into the profile of male childcare workers and students (Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2008).

Further studies within this ‘Gender and Professionalism’ research exposed gender bias within the ‘Childcare’ training curriculum and pointed out the role careers advice centers played in relation to the maintenance of gender segregation in childcare work (Peeters 2012). The Flemish employment office also systematically keeps track of the data that maps the number of men who train for professions in working with young children. The Flemish employment office followed up the recommendations of the ‘Gender and Professionalism in ECEC’ research and directed men who were previously active in child and youth work but who were dissatisfied with their current jobs (‘career changers’) to the opportunities offered by adult education training courses for working with young children.

The studies that were supported by a media campaign, and moreover, were managed by a broad group of stakeholders, have had a clear impact on the sector. The noticeable increase of the number and also the proportion of men employed in the sector (see Figure 1) is a success even if it is a far cry from what the European Commission Network on Childcare had hoped for in 1996. The results of Flanders can be attributed to the large amount of support that was created by the project ‘Men in Childcare.’ By involving important governmental organizations for childcare and vocational guidance in the project, minor sustainable changes could be implemented.

**Germany: a huge campaign for more men**

In Germany, interest in the issue has been increasing since 2005, when first regional measures for more men in social work and education were implemented, and some regional studies were published. From 2008 on, the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs initiated and funded several projects. Starting with a nationwide research (Cremers, Krabel, and Calmbach 2012), a national coordination office was installed in 2010. One year later the model program ‘MORE men in Kitas’ was initiated, financed with €13.5 million by the European Social Fund (Icken 2012; Rohrmann 2014a). In this program, 16 regional model projects developed various methods and projects, including vocational orientation in schools, practical projects in ECEC settings, in-house training and conferences on gender sensitive education, working
groups for male workers (Emilsen and Rohrmann 2013), PR campaigns and international conferences. The national projects included several publications, covering a wide range of issues (Cremers et al. 2012) as well as materials for practical measures and initiatives in all related fields (Koordinationsstelle “Maenner in Kitas” 2013/2014).

The results of all these projects were quite positive compared to related fields. While the proportion of male workers in primary schools and in social work is decreasing (Rose and May 2014; Rohrmann 2012a), in the growing field of ECEC the trend towards more male workers continued with nearly 5% men in 2014 (see Figure 1). This development is especially apparent in initial training in vocational schools, where the proportion of male students is now around 20% (Koordinationsstelle “Maenner in Kitas” 2014).

There has been an increase in male workers mostly in urban regions with already high proportion of men in ECEC. But, in many other regions of Germany men are still rare in ECEC centers. Moreover, few ongoing measures were established by providers after the funded project ended in 2013. All in all, in Germany the proportion of male workers still remains far from the goal of 20%.

Turkey: no measures, huge results?
The discussed developments in the three countries can be compared to a country in which there has been nearly no public debate on gender balance: Turkey. As Sak (2015) reports in this issue, the number of male workers has increased substantially over the last decade – without any governmental actions. This can be interpreted in the context of a developing country, where the growth of the ECEC sector is part of a process of fast modernization. It is relevant that preschool teachers are academically trained, are well paid and have good career options. Nevertheless, international comparison has made clear that good wages are not the only or even main reason for low male participation in ECEC, as the proportion of men in ECEC is low also in countries like France and Belgium where preschool teachers are paid well (Peeters 2013).

It could be concluded that neither governmental action nor better wages alone will succeed in a substantial rise in male participation in ECEC. Although the programs in Norway, Belgium, and Germany have shown many positive results, they often only seem to scratch the surface of deeply held gendered beliefs and practices. ECEC and childcare in particular remains as one of the most gender segregated occupational fields. To understand this, it is necessary to open up new approaches or ways of looking at gender issues in ECEC.

New perspectives from recent gender theories
The history of childcare
The historical development of ECEC, at least in the Western hemisphere, is connected to the traditional gender order and the position of women in society (Hard and Jónsdóttir 2013; Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012; Van Laere et al., 2014). ECEC builds on two traditions: care and education. A conceptual and practical division between care and education was and is still common in many European countries (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). Carers were traditionally recruited from women of the lower classes and their profession was based on and legitimated by stereotypical
constructions of the ideal mother (Van Laere et al. 2014). Simultaneously, kindergartens for older children were developed to offer pre-primary educational activities and cared for children’s moral well-being and preparation for primary school (Oberhuemer et al. 2010). The education of young children was seen as an acceptable form of female employment because it gave women the opportunity to have a social life and a job outside the home, while still conforming to the traditional conception that women naturally take care of children (Forrester 2005). The psychological theories of attachment after World War II reinforced the ‘good mother’ as the ideal childcare worker (Burman 1994; Canella 1997). Professionalism in childcare was modeled after the symbolic personification of a ‘loving mother’ (Peeters 2008).

In the 1970s the second-wave feminist movement argued for more engagement of fathers in the upbringing of young children and thus opened the way for more male participation in care and education. But at the same time, feminist women were in search of common characteristics and political aims for all women, for common projects that unified women as a group. This led to essentialist views on what women and what males ‘are’, and some feminists claimed that caring work was essentially feminine (Noddings 1984). This reinforced the old idea that women are ‘naturally’ better equipped for caring for young children (Peeters et al. 2014). Moreover, childcare centers were important for the feminist movement in relation to their labor market claims (De Smet et al. 1978; Farquhar et al. 2006). Childcare was not only important because it gave women the possibility to work outside the home, but it also represented an important labor market in itself, formed and developed by women.

The ‘gender regime’ of ECEC

The described development of care and education for the youngest as a ‘feminine field’ resulted in a persisting ‘gender regime’ of ECEC institutions which tends to keep men out. With the term ‘gender regime’ Connell describes specific ‘configurations of practice’: gendered arrangements of work, social and emotional relations within institutions (Connell 2009, 72). Masculinity is – as is femininity – ‘institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character and personality’ (Connell 2000, 29). This means that the issue of men in ECEC is not only a matter of gender of individuals, but a matter of gendered structures in institutions.

The gender regime of ECEC centers can be characterized by a dominance of women, rather flat hierarchies, a strong need for harmony, and ambivalent attitudes towards male colleagues. The dominance of women characterizes the whole field of ECEC, including leadership. As Fuchs-Rechlin states for Germany: ‘Although the proportion of men in leading positions is above average, they are exceptional also in this field of work’ (Fuchs-Rechlin 2012, 6, translation T.R.). This is as well true for higher qualified positions in the field, e.g. consultants (Fuchs and Schilling 2006). Although administrative structures in ECEC show many differences worldwide, in many countries teams are often characterized by a tendency to minimalize the differences in qualification levels between the staff, and the role of leading positions is de-emphasized. Research on leadership in ECEC shows that the importance of management in ECEC often is denied because female workers associate leadership with ‘male’ dominance and control (Hard and Jonsdottir 2013).

In summary, ECEC centers can be characterized as a ‘female field’, not only regarding the gendered socialization of female workers, but also apparent in team culture, interior design, materials, educational activities, and reactions of workers on the
behavior of girls and boys (Friis 2006; Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2008). Rohrmann and Thoma (1998) aptly called kindergartens ‘women’s gardens’. Wohlgemuth speaks of an ‘Air of Care’ as a set of signals including behaviors, speech and communication patterns, practical guidelines, and interior designs of care institutions. These are ‘not per se ‘female’, but characterized by women’s sheer dominance in numbers in ECEC professions’ (Wohlgemuth in this issue; see also Wohlgemuth 2012, 391).

Within the gender system of kindergartens men appear to be ‘different’ and ‘strange’. This perceived ‘otherness’ is connected to idealization of men as well as to resistance against their participation in the lives of young children (Murray 1997; Rohrmann 2014b). This can be understood in the context of traditional gender hierarchy and polar conceptions of male and female gender characters. At a first glance, the ‘otherness’ of men is seen as an enrichment and supplement to the basic work of women in ECEC contexts. As ‘male’ qualities are deemed socially more valuable than ‘female’ qualities, this can lead to idealization of male workers even when they lack experience and training. At the same time it raises suspicions when a man ‘lowers’ himself to work with young children. As it doesn’t seem feasible for men to be interested for this kind of work, other motives are presumed – last not least a pedophile/pedosexual interest. As Petersen (2014) puts it: men are divided into ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’. While some aspects of this ambiguity can be understood as a result of traditional gender hierarchies, it is also relevant to reflect upon recent changes in the social function of ECEC, as a background of gendered notions of professionalism.

From care to education? Academization and gender

In recent decades, ECEC policies have substantially shifted from a context of care to education. Under the influence of neuroscience (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) and economic science (Barnett and Masse 2007; Heckman 2006) the early years are now considered as the best preparation for academic achievements in later years as well as for a thriving labor market. In this perspective education can be connected with more ‘masculine’ conceptualizations of education and teacher professionalism (Dillabough 1999; Forrester 2005). Some scholars argue that this development may lead to a schoolification of the early years, whereas less attention is given to the caring and the emotional nurturing dimension of ECEC (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Van Laere et al. 2014).

For Van Laere et al. (2014) it is striking that these results of the academization process match what scholars consider as important steps to attract more in men in ECEC: the renewed higher social esteem has led in many countries to higher qualifications as well as better salaries. One could argue that the new, more ‘masculine’ notions of education and teacher professionalism could be seen as an opportunity to challenge a ‘mother-like’ conceptualization of education and care, and thus make the field more attractive to men.

‘Remarkably, this hypothesis seems to be incorrect for the time being. ECEC remains an almost entirely female workforce’ (Van Laere et al. 2014, 6). A higher degree of professionalism and better salaries do not automatically lead to an increase of the number of men working in ECEC, as Cameron (2006) and Peeters (2007) concluded before. Research on gender and academization in Germany has shown that the proportion of male students in newly introduced university bachelor courses is not higher than in traditional vocational schools for ECEC workers (Keil, Pasternack,
and Thielemann 2013; Rohrmann 2012b). Rohrmann (2012b) argues that an academic degree in ECEC can be seen as a possibility for good educated young women to link intellectual achievement with a traditional conception of ‘natural’ femininity.

Van Laere et al. (2014) also note that despite the introduction of a more rational, masculine understanding of education in the context of ‘schoolification’ of the early years, caring jobs did not disappear in ECEC. The Core research project in 15 EU member states (Van Laere et al. 2012) has demonstrated how in ECEC centers caring activities are executed by low-qualified auxiliary staff, whereas teachers are in charge of the educative activities. The results indicate that in many countries there is a divide between highly qualified and better paid women, who are responsible for the ‘mind’, and lower-qualified women with a more invisible position, who are responsible for the ‘body’ (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012).

Body, mind and corporeality

By further analyzing this mind-body dualism Van Laere et al. (2014) aim to discover a more in-depth understanding why the ECEC culture remains female. In third-wave feminism, definitions of care are placed within broader social and political concerns rather than within an essentialist, individual-gendered psychology (Cockburn 2010). From a third-wave feminist perspective an ethics and politics of care implies an embodied ethics (Shildrick 1997), that is breaking down the modernist myth of the rational (or becoming-rational) subject. Recent approaches challenge the Cartesian concept of a dualism of mind and body, as the mind is always ‘embodied’ or based in corporal relations; the body is always social, and in-process rather than natural (Braidotti 2006). Van Laere et al. (2014) point out that the division in ECEC between ‘body’ and ‘mind’ and the subsequent denial of the body creates a technical, distant professional. But it is impossible to work with young children without a commitment that could be described as ‘passionate’ (Moyle 2001, 81). This leads us to rethink the concepts of care/body and education/mind in ECEC services, which is materialized in staff profiles and practices (Van Laere et al. 2012), and enables us to draw on a diversity of embodied experiences of both men and women in the ECEC workforce.

The concept of corporeality can create new perspectives as a pedagogical concept and an interpretation of professionalism. The Danish concept of ‘kropslighed’, for example, refers to how one senses the body, and includes a strong element of experiencing the world through your body in ECEC practices (Jensen 2011). This is very evident in the field of physical activity play. Especially rough and tumble play as an often ‘neglected aspect of play’ (Pellegrini and Smith 1998) is not only fun for those who engage in it, but also important for the development of motor skills as well as for social competences (Hauser 2013; Storli 2012). This form of play is not only much more prevalent among boys (Hauser 2013; Reed 2005; Storli and Moser 2014), but also a common activity between children and men – fathers as well as male ECEC workers (Aigner and Rohrmann, 2012, 272–275). Physical activity play is perceived as an alternative for the more ‘feminine’ kind of physical contacts that are less accepted when done by men, like caressing or embracing.

Corporeality is also strongly linked to activities during outdoor play. In Norway, the strong focus on bodily experiences in nature and outdoor play is one of the crucial factors to explain why the proportion of male workers is higher than anywhere else in Europe. According not only to men, but also to women working in outdoor kindergartens, the opportunity to stay outdoors gives them more freedom to work with
children in their own ways, freeing themselves from traditional ‘feminine’ notions of caring in a mother’s home (Emilsen and Koch 2010). The described gender differences are connected to a more relaxed attitude of many men towards risk-taking behavior, apparent both in physical activity play and outdoor activities (Sandseter 2014). Nevertheless it has to be emphasized that although there is strong evidence for links between outdoor play, physical activities and gender, we are not arguing for highlighting ‘natural’, essentialist distinctions between men and women. Instead, the perspective of embodied experience shows that the dichotomy between ‘masculine’ mind and ‘feminine’ body does not exist in reality.

Conclusion: towards a new understanding of gender, care and education

Measures for more men in ECEC have brought some good results. In this context, programs and publications on ‘more men’ show a lot of similarities across countries and make clear that it is important to address the issue from a variety of perspectives. Gender-sensitive vocational orientation and career advice can open up the field of care and education for boys and young men (Cremers et al. 2012). Campaigns can play an important role for bringing more men to ECEC, if a wide range of institutions and organizations is included and actively involved during longer periods of time (Peeters 2012). Networks and support groups for male workers can be relevant to retain men in the field (Emilsen and Rohrmann 2013). Governmental support, both financially and legally, is substantial, as the examples of Norway and Germany show.

Although such measures are important, they are not sufficient for a substantial change of the gender imbalance in ECEC. From recent gender theory we learn that in order to make working in ECEC attractive for both men and women, we need to change the ‘gender regime’ of services for young children: we have to question gendered (‘female’) arrangements of work, social and emotional relations within institutions (team culture), premises, materials and educational activities, and last but not least gendered reactions of workers on the behavior of girls and boys. Changes are also essential in vocational training, including screening of didactical materials for gender-neutrality in order to avoid ‘gender bias’ as much as possible (Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2008). It becomes clear how important it is to create a male-friendly culture in training institutions and workplaces. The presence of male colleagues and active involvement of fathers in childcare settings are essential conditions for creating a gender-sensitive construction of professionalism. The considerations on the current process of professionalization in ECEC have made clear that academization alone will neither attract more men, nor lead to a gender-neutral profession. Instead of trying to ‘neutralize’ gender in ECEC training and practice, it is necessary to develop a gender-conscious understanding of professionalism that goes beyond traditional gendered notions. To achieve this, new perspectives on the concept of care are needed.

Such a shift toward new interpretations of ECEC can draw on experiences in the Nordic countries, where the culture in ECEC contains much space for embodied subjectivities, avoiding essentialist differences between men and women and between body and mind. This ‘corporeality’ approach opens up new perspectives in ECEC practices by experiencing the world through the ‘body’ and makes work in ECEC more attractive for men and women. ECEC has to evolve towards recognizing the centrality of body work and emotions in ECEC systems. This will lead to new understandings of the body, of emotions and mind, and create opportunities for both staff and children to
transform and reconfigure diverse aspects of their embodied subjectivities. It can be concluded that we need sophisticated strategies not only for ‘more men’, but for a transformation process that puts into question established gender-regimes in ECEC centers as well as deep-held beliefs about men and women in society. In this sense, gender balance in early childhood can open up perspectives for gender dialogues and a shared responsibility for the future of our societies.

Notes
1. Different definitions result in remarkable different data. In Germany, the proportion of qualified workers in centers for 0- to 6-year-old children is around one percent lower than the data presented in the table, as the proportion of men is above average among interns, and also in after school care. In Norway, for many years governmental statistics highlighted the overall number of male employees in kindergartens, although many of them were ‘helpers’ without any pedagogical tasks. When it was decided to focus on pedagogical workers, it came out that the proportion of males was about 2% lower (see Rohrmann and Brody, this issue).
2. A training course/workshop for the whole staff in a center

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