



Gender diversity - a booklet for ECE professionals

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Gender diversity - a booklet for ECE professionals

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Sukupuolen moninaisuus - Esite varhaiskasvattajille

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Tämän opinnäytetyön on kirjoittanut kaksi Laurea Ammattikorkeakoulun sosionomiopiskelijaa. Opinnäytetyön päämääränä oli tuottaa esite sukupuolen moninaisuudesta varhaiskasvatuksessa toimiville ammattilaisille. Tarkoituksena oli myös syventää kirjoittajien omaa tietämystä sukupuolen moninaisuudesta ja sukupuolisensitiivisyydestä. Opinnäytetyöprosessin avulla kirjoittajat halusivat laajentaa omaa ja kohderyhmänsä tietämystä ja taitoja miten toimia sukupuolisensitiivisesti, sekä auttaa tulemaan tietoiseksi sukupuolittuneesta kielenkäytöstä ja sukupuolittuneista käytännöistä niin työelämässä, kuin henkilökohtaisessa elämässäänkin.

Olemalla lähdekriittinen, kirjoittajat keräsivät teoriatietoa sukupuolen moninaisuudesta ja sukupuolisensitiivisyydestä, ja siitä kuinka nämä näyttäytyvät varhaiskasvatuksessa Suomessa. Tämä toimi teoreettisena runkona opinnäytetyölle, ja siihen lisättiin esimerkkejä, joilla edistää sukupuolisensitiivisten käytöntöjen lisäämistä varhaiskasvatustyössä.

Opinnäytetyö toteutettiin toiminnallisena opinnäytetyönä, joka koostui kirjoitetusta raportista, sekä tuotetusta esitteestä. Toiminnallinen osuus opinnäytetyötä oli sähköisessä muodossa tehty englanninkielinen esite, jonka kohderyhmänä oli varhaiskasvatuksen piirissä työskentelevät ammattilaiset. Alkuperäisen suunnitelman mukaan esitettä piti jakaa suuremmalle kohderyhmälle, mutta aikataulullisten seikkojen vuoksi esite jaettiin vain pienelle ryhmälle. Esite valittiin toteutustavaksi, koska sähköinen esite on helppo jakaa sähköisesti, mutta sen voi myös tulostaa, ja jakaa fyysisesti paperiversiona. Esite sisälsi sukupuolen moninaisuuteen liittyviä tärkeitä termejä, kysymyksiä, joilla pohtia omaa käytöstään liittyen sukupuolen moninaisuuteen, sukupuolittuneeseen kielenkäyttöön, sekä sukupuolisensitiivisiin käytäntöihin. Lopuksi esiteltiin myös esimerkkejä, joilla ottaa huomioon ja edistää sukupuolisensitiivisiä käytäntöjä varhaiskasvatuksessa. Esitteessä oli myös loppulausekkeena kerrottu, että se on tehty osana opinnäytetyötä, ja tekstin yhteydessä oli QR-koodi mahdollisia palautteita varten. QR-koodi ohjasi lukijan palautelomakkeelle, jossa oli viisi kysymystä. Kolmessa pyydettiin arvioimaan esitteen eri osia asteikolla 1-5, yhdessä pyydettiin vastaamaan kyllä/ei/ehkä kysymykseen suosittelisiko esitettä kollegalleen, ja viimeiseen kysymykseen sai kirjoittaa vapaata tekstiä. Palaute kerättiin lähinnä kirjoittajia itseä varten, ja se käsiteltiin lyhyesti opinnäytetyössä esitteen tuottamisen yhteydessä.

Saadun palautteen perusteella esitteen voi arvoida olleen onnistunut. Joitain kieliopillisia virheitä oli, ja ne korjattiin esitteen mahdollista tulevaisuuden käyttöä varten. Esitteen kääntäminen suomeksi nähtiin myös mahdollisesti tarpeellisena tulevaisuuden käyttöä ja jakamista ajatellen. Kirjoittajien omasta näkökulmasta katsoen opinnäytetyöprosessin voidaan katsoa edistäneen heidän ammatillisuuttaan, sekä tietotaitoa sukupuolen moninaisuudesta ja sukupuolisensitiivisistä käytännöistä. Kumpikin opinnäytetyön kirjoittajista on todennut kiinnittävänsä enemmän huomiota käyttääkseen sukupuolineutraalimpaa ja sukupuolisensitiivisempää kieltä sekä työelämässä, että henkilökohtaisessa elämässään.

Asiasanat: varhaiskasvatus, sukupuolen moninaisuus, sukupuolisensitiivisyys

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Gender diversity - a booklet for ECE professionals

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This is a Bachelor's thesis written by two students studying social services in Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The purpose of this thesis was to produce a booklet of gender diversity, and it was aimed for professionals working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). One of the aims was also to deepen the writers' knowledge of gender diversity and gender sensitivity. Through this thesis process, the writers wanted to expand the target groups and their own knowledge and skills of behaving gender sensitively and of becoming more aware of the gender-biased language and practices they might use both in their work and personal life.

Utilizing source criticism, the writers collected background information on gender diversity and gender sensitivity, and how these are presented or implemented in the Early Childhood and Care in Finland. This became the theoretical framework for the thesis, and it was compiled with practical examples to be used in ECEC in order to be more gender-sensitive.

The thesis was completed as a functional thesis, consisting of a written report and a booklet. The functional part of this thesis was implemented by producing an electric form booklet aimed at professionals working in ECEC. The booklet, written in English, was chosen as it was considered the best way to reach the target group and for its multiple ways to be used and distributed forward (electric or printed form). The booklet consisted of important terms related to gender diversity, questions to ponder the reader's own behavior regarding gender diversity and gender-sensitive practices, and finally, some examples to be used in order to implement more gender sensitivity in the reader's work with children. The booklet included a statement that it was done as a part of the writers' Bachelor's thesis, and a QR code was added for gathering voluntary feedback. The feedback gotten was shortly presented as a part of the process of producing a booklet, but it was not a relevant part of this thesis.

Through a small amount of feedback, the booklet was evaluated mainly as useful. Some grammatical errors could be found in the product, but these were corrected for the possible future use of the booklet. Translating the booklet into Finnish could be seen as relevant. In a conclusion for expanding the writers' own knowledge of gender diversity and gender-sensitive practices and therefore promoting their professionalism, the process can be seen as successful. Both writers have noted a significant change in using more gender-neutral or gender-sensitive terms and practices in both their work and their personal life.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, gender diversity, gender sensitivity

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1 Introduction

The structure of our world is in many ways gender-based. The traditional, heteronormative two sex- ideology can be seen in our language, in expectations in relationships, in societal level, toilets, online stores' departments of "men's" and "women's" clothes. Even though the idea of the third or the other sex has made its way to some societies, it is still a long way for the two sex- ideology to be replaced with it. The attitudes and concepts of the light pink girls and light blue boys are deep in our society, and this is why we need to work with adults to broaden their concepts and knowledge of gender and sex, in order to create more accepting atmosphere for children to grow in, and for them to get support they need in exploring their gender. Gender identity starts to develop already in the early years of age and will continue to develop sometimes throughout one's life. Children may find it natural to play with whatever toys they feel like, but they can also feel pressured to play with certain toys related to their assumed gender. It is highly important that the professionals working with children are aware enough of these matters, and gender sensitivity should be implemented regularly in their practices. This is why we chose to do our thesis focusing on bringing the knowledge and inspiring discussion to the professionals working in the field of early childhood education and care. We feel that there is a need for basic and low threshold knowledge of gender diversity, and of how to be gender-sensitive with children.

The form of our thesis is functional and development-oriented. In this thesis report we will explain the background of the functional thesis, and present the aims and goals of our thesis process. Our thesis works around the topic of gender diversity and gender sensitivity, and the basis of our functional thesis starts with clarifying some relevant terms related to gender. We will also cover the subject of gender development, which is considered relevant for the subject of our thesis and is important to be taken into account when talking about developing and implementing gender-sensitive practices.

Whilst going into more depth into early childhood education and care and the practices and implementations of gender sensitivity in ECEC, the importance of play is one of our main themes as well. We will use credible sources and also our own experience and expertise from the social field. We will also be presenting examples of how to promote and implement gender-sensitive practices into daily work with children.

As the functional part of our thesis, we produced a booklet on gender diversity, aimed to be used by educators in the field of ECEC. The booklet covers the key concepts of this topic, and also provides simple examples of implementing and promoting gender diversity and gender sensitivity in day cares and in early childhood education and care. We will go through the

process of producing the booklet, explaining step by step our challenges, choices made on the way and also our thoughts of the process. We want the readers to be comfortable with gender.

Lastly, we will reflect on the ethics and reliability of our thesis, and also ponder the usage of the booklet now and in the future. Our overall thoughts of the thesis process will be shared in the last chapter as well.

2 Functional thesis

Our thesis was implemented as a functional thesis. A functional thesis (or development-oriented thesis) has a focus in instructing or organizing activities. (Vilkka & Airaksinen 2003). Regardless of the subject of the thesis, the ultimate aim of a functional thesis is to produce a concrete product. The development-based thesis can be implemented for example with a poster, event, portfolio or a guidebook that are aimed to be used in professional practices, such as, in our case, in early childhood and care. When producing a functional thesis, one should always use visual and communicational aspect as a way of making sure the aims and goals of the thesis are made seen in the final, overall look. (Vilkka & Airaksinen 2003).

When starting to do a functional thesis, the writers have to contemplate and consider the time management, financial and mental resources, and also recognise and acknowledge their level of knowledge and expertise, and their capabilities. (Vilkka & Airaksinen 2003). This is an important part of our thesis process, as there are two writers in this thesis. Luckily, we were able to be honest of our situations and feelings, and at the end of the day we were on the same page of how we were going to go forward with the process, and what type of hopes and aims we had for the end result and for the grade of the thesis.

Our developmental goal is a product. The method used in making of a booklet is Canva, which was chosen for its diverse range of qualities. Both writers of this thesis are also familiar with using Canva, which was seen as a benefit. Canva is a versatile platform that allows users to make and edit different social media posts and it includes publishing materials. Canva turned out to be a good choice as a method of producing the booklet, and we learned some new aspects of it on the way as well.

The theoretical framework used in our thesis consisted of diverse range of sources, both in English and in Finnish. The Finnish sources are translated to English by the writers of the thesis. Sources chosen to be used in our thesis had to meet at least one of these preconditions:

- publisher had to be a credited professional of the field
- Material is commonly used and given credit to in our society (i.e laws or National Curriculum of ECEC)

- The publishing organization is widely accepted and acknowledged for their work on gender diversity (i.e SETA)
- the material used had to also be available free of charge.

Our thesis language was chosen to be English, as we are studying in English. The language of the booklet was also seriously considered but was finally chosen to be English as well. We hope by the thesis and booklet being in English, a wider audience can access the information.

3 Terms of Gender Diversity

In this chapter, we open some important terms related to our topic, that are used later in our thesis. According to Rossi (2010), gender and sexuality are changing through time and space, and accordingly, so are the terms related to them changing along. The related terms are shaped by multidimensional politics, cultures, and times. It is important to use correct terms and expressions when talking about things related to gender and sexual orientation, but nevertheless, it is equally important to spare in mind that these terms are never thoroughly simple and explicit. As mentioned above, the vocabulary is evolving and changing throughout time, and the explanations of these terms may vary according to author and context, and they may not reflect the experience or opinion one has of their gender or sexual orientation. (Karvinen 2021; Gender spectrum, no date). These terms have often been used in our society through confrontation, for instance, it is common to use the phrase “opposite sexes” (male vs female), or when talking about sexual orientation, straight vs gay is often used as a pair, as if there were no other options, or as if they were mutually exclusive. (Rossi 2010). The following explanations and sources for the terms have been chosen by the authors of this thesis according to our best knowledge. We will be using these terms in our thesis according to the meanings stated below.

The term “sex “ is usually used when referring to a person's biological gender assigned at birth, usually either male or female according to their genitals. (Rossi, 2010)

Gender or gender identity is a broader concept consisting of a person's own views, feelings, and thoughts about their gender. It is a person's inner gender. (Mielenterveystalo no date; Rossi 2010). Gender identity can correspond to or differ from the sex assigned at birth. Different aspects affect on person's gender identity. These can be **social gender** (how a person presents their gender in the society and how their society sees and tries to shape the gender), **cultural gender** (how their culture shapes and presents genders), physiological, psychological, and genetic factors, and hormones. (Rossi 2010; Gender Spectrum, no date)

Gender binary is a concept that recognizes only two sexes, male and female, often seen as opposite of each other (Ristkari, Suni & Tyni 2018)

Non- binary term used of people whose gender identity and gender expression do not fit in the binary male-female categories (Holma, Järvenpää & Tervonen 2017)

CIS-gender person who feels aligned with the gender assigned to them at birth (Holma et al. 2017).

Transgender a person whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth (Mielenterveystalo no date)

Intersex term is used when a person's bodily features, hormones or anatomic do not explicitly indicate to a certain sex, or is a combination of male and female characteristics (Ristkari et al. 2018)

Genderless is a person who does not have a gender identity or the lack of it is their gender identity (Holma et al. 2017)

Gender fluid refers to a gender that is ongoing and fluid, and can change (Holma et al. 2017)

The third gender is an umbrella concept to establish the existence of more than two genders. It does not imply that there are three genders but works as a concept to acknowledge the gender minorities. (Sukupuolenosaamiskeskus 2021)

Gender expression is how a person expresses their gender (Holma et al. 2017), it is our "public gender"- how a person presents their gender, and how societies, cultures, and families perceive it (Genderspectrum, no date)

Gender stereotype or gender role defines or expects certain gender to possess a certain role, characteristics, behaviour, and looks according to their sex (Genderspectrum, no date)

Gender sensitivity encountering and accepting everyone as an individual regardless of their sex or gender, not letting expectations or prejudices affect it, and respecting everyone's gender identity and gender expression. Taking into account gender, the norms related to and affecting it on an individual and societal level. The term is especially used in early childhood and care. (Sukupuolenosaamiskeskus 2021)

Gender conflict or gender dysphoria is feeling anxiety and/ or conflict when the gender assigned to a person at birth is conflicted with their gender identity and/or gender expression (Holma et al. 2017)

Gender diversity: an umbrella concept that takes into account of all the different gender identities and expressions, both majorities and minorities. (Karvinen 2021).

LGBT/LGBTQIA+ abbreviation of the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, inter-sex, asexual. The term is generally used to describe gender and sexual orientation minorities. The +-sign, in the end, indicates that there are more expressions than those in question (Holma et al. 2017; Karvinen 2021)

4 Gender and the development of gender identity

Gender is a factor in how we understand ourselves and act in the world. It links with our personal, social and cultural beliefs and practices, thus gender is a lifelong part of our world. (Scarlet 2020)

4.1 Sex and Gender

Firstly, we want to clarify more on the terms sex and gender, as in this essay we do not use them as synonyms. The term 'sex' in the English language is nowadays mostly used to describe the biological sex assigned at birth (usually male, female, or "third" or "other"), but it can also be used as a synonym for gender, and it can also mean sex as physical activity. (Rossi 2010). Sex is usually determined by a person's anatomy, physiological features, or in other words, the biological facts: hormones, gonads, chromosomes the physical traits of a human being. (Giordano 2012). One perspective against this classification is to emphasize the fact that determining biological gender is not as straightforward as this practice implies, and therefore talking about two or three sexes is highly misleading. (Ristkari et al. 2018). Nevertheless, in this thesis, the term 'sex' is used to describe a person's biological sex, as this is the most common interpretation of the term.

The word gender has originally been borrowed from medical and psychiatric use, and it was brought to the general discussion to distinguish and elucidate the biological and reproducing factors (sex) from the social gender. (Rossi 2010). Gender or more specifically gender identity is shaped by many aspects (as mentioned in the previous chapter), for instance psychological, physiological, hormonal, societal, and cultural factors. On the other hand, the word gender is also a juridical term for determining and classifying people in our society, therefore the context of the word used is also relevant to determining the meaning in question. (Ristkari et al. 2018). Juridically, for example, in Finnish social security numbers the term gender (sukupuoli in Finnish) always refers to either male or female, as they are the only recognized genders in the social security number system. (The Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare 2021). Gender in the common language is a wide concept, and it is sometimes understood differently and wrongly from the original meaning of the word. This is why understanding the context is

crucial and separating the usage of the word from the context is not recommended. In this thesis, the term 'gender' is used for describing the person's psychological gender or gender identity.

4.2 Gender development theories

Gender and gender identity are widely researched and argued topics. In the 21st century, there are millions of arguments about how gender or gender identity is developed. For instance, some religions preach that there are only two genders and that these are aligned with the person's biological sex. According to Puolimatka (2021), the Christian standpoint is in harmony with the (two traditional) biological sexes, man and a woman, and other ideologies related to gender or the actual gender studies only confuse youth and make them think they can and should alter their gender. This point of view is argued against, for instance, by Rossi, who states that the current gender studies have a mutual understanding and an acceptance of gender being a fluid and changing concept, that is shaped by time and place. Rossi (2021) also points out that gender and sexual orientation are shaped by complex and variable policies and cultural and societal norms that are in constant transition throughout time. According to The Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), gender at the individual level is self-determination of gender, which translates to a person's own perception and definition of their gender. This is considered the most recommended way of understanding and defining one's gender. (SETA 2021).

Gender development has had many different interpretations, theories, and myths throughout human history. In some cultures, determining sex or gender by biological features is not common at all, and being non-binary or socially genderless is rather a rule than an exception to the rule, opposite as we in the western world have been thought to believe. For instance, in Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso, gender is seen as an energy rather than a physical feature. Fluid or changing genders are common, for instance, in Nueri cultures in Africa, as well as in some cultures in Siberia. (Ristkari et al. 2018). Interpretations and words to describe gender have been seen changing as long as spoken language has existed. For example, the idea of Middle Age gender classification based on "cosmic order" defining clear roles for men and women might feel amusing to us, it is also possible that in a few hundred years time our binary concept of gender might feel amusing to people living at that time. (Ristkari et al. 2018).

As we try to use the theories known and recognized in our current time, one perspective of gender development is to divide it into three umbrella categories:

- biological model
- social model
- biosocial model

Giardani (2012) explains that biological models' key statement is that gender identity is mainly determined by biological factors. According to the biological model, men and women have biological and sexual differences, and these correspond to differences in attitudes, behaviour, and abilities. One viewpoint to this is that biologically determined behaviors and attitudes cannot be modified by societal or cultural aspects. The biological model is also known as the essential model, where people in their very essence differ due to biological attributes. (Giardani 2012)

The social model's core idea is that gender identity appeals to the influence of society and is, therefore, a construct of society. That is why the social model is also known as the constructionist model. The social model usually recognizes at least two sexes, but among constructionists, the opinions on this may vary. ((Giardani 2012). One key concept of the social model is that a society modifies and determines the gender roles as we know them, and this process starts already before the child is even born. (Giardani 2012; Ojala 2010).

Biosocial model recognizes two elements in gender development: both biological forces and social norms affect gender development. Biosocial model sees gender development as an interplay with biological and societal factors, as well as individual interpretations, wishes and needs. (Giardani 2012).

4.3 Gender identity development

When talking about gender, it is important to keep in mind that everyone has a right to self-determination. One is allowed to determine their gender, to not determine their gender, or to change between these determinations at any point in their life. (SETA, no date; Mielenterveystalo, no date).

The social construction of gender identity can be seen to be starting prenatally. When a child is still inside the mother's uterus, the sex can be predicted by modern medical experts. Even if the parents were not to know the sex of their child beforehand, they may have a certain idea or a wish for it. According to this idea, parents may start to affect the baby with gender-related roles before it is even born. These ways of altering the gender may include furnishing the room, buying certain toys or choosing the name for the baby. (Ojala 2010). Therefore, children start to see heteronormative models of the two traditional genders (male and female) already right after birth. Certain colors and clothes depict a certain gender; bed sheets, stuffed animals, and toys are often made for boys or girls. Pink, purple, dresses, skirts, lace, and princesses are considered girly, whereas boys' clothes can be found to have blue, green, brown, trucks, trains, planes, etc. Giardano (2012) states that already during infancy, children have substantial knowledge of gender stereotypes, and this plays an important role in understanding their own gender. The age-oriented perspective suggests that children begin to develop their gender identity at an early age of 2-4years, but when a child

starts to experience their gender varies individually. (Ojala, 2010; Sukupuolensaamiskeskus, no date). At first at the age of 2-4 children start to realize not everyone is the same, that some children pee standing up and some sitting down. They may see that they have different genitals and wear different types of clothes. At this age, children see gender as something that can change and may not be permanent, and they may think that by changing their clothes they may change their gender. (Ojala 2010; Brennan 2021). It is normal for a child to explore their gender, play dress-up or try acting according to a certain gender role. Imitating different genders and temporarily hoping to identify to another gender is part of gender exploring. This is usually not a sign of gender dysphoria. (Brennan 2021). Around the age of five, children begin to possess a more stable idea of their gender but may still think that by altering their physical traits, they can alter their gender. By around the age of seven children have usually created a stable and constant idea of their gender and this will usually stick with them throughout their life. (Ojala 2010; Giardino 2012). People who suffer from gender dysphoria have usually had symptoms already by the age of seven. (Brennan 2021). According to Finnish Doctors Union, teenagers going through puberty often try out different gender roles. In puberty, the physical, psychological, and social changes create pressure, and it can be seen as normal that a teenager goes through different phases or experiments while exploring their gender. (Finnish Doctor's union 2021).

However, gender and gender development can also be seen as something that is changing throughout one's life, and it is not uncommon to ponder their gender identity at any point of one's life, or to get a life-altering realization about one's gender even in adulthood. (Holma et al. 2017). Sometimes feeling "different" may be the only indicator one has of their gender not fitting in the gender-binary model, until becoming aware of the information, terms, and concepts of different genders. There is no "right" time to become aware of one's gender or possible gender dysphoria, everyone has their own life experiences, expectations, responsibilities, and hopes, and everything a person goes through may affect when this revelation of gender occurs to them. (Mielenterveystalo no date). The amount of information, expanding vocabulary of gender-related terms are reasons why people living in the 21st century have more possibilities to understand themselves and others and this helps them to build their gender identity.

5 Early Childhood Education and Care

The definition of Early Childhood Education and Care according to the Act on ECEC (540/2018), section 2, "Early childhood education and care refers to a systematic and goal-oriented entity that consists of upbringing, education, and care, with a special emphasis on pedagogy." At the moment, all the daycares in Finland function on the basis of the ECEC act

and the National Core Curriculum which was renewed in 2018. Based on those, municipalities and daycares draft their own, more specific, curriculum. Being able to draft a more specific curriculum allows the municipalities or daycares to add their values and pedagogy to it. In pedagogy educators plan goal-orientated activities that are professionally managed and implemented to support the children's development, well-being, and learning. Pedagogy should be present even during routine work, for example, mealtime time, getting dressed to go out, and free play time. Every group can also create its own curriculum adding its specific requirements for pedagogy. This lets the educators review and edit the curriculum yearly to their specific needs. (Ahonen, 2018)

ECEC promotes the democratic values of the Finnish society, such as equity, equality and diversity. When working with children in early childhood education it is key to have an open, respectful and equal encounter and thus ensure the goals of the child's education and care. It is equally important to get to know to each child and take their individual development into account. (National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018) This is also supported by the act of aims in ECEC (540/2018) 3§ "to provide all children with equal opportunities for ECEC, promote parity and gender quality [...]." The groups in ECEC are based on children's age and any special support they might need. The size of the group is decided by the amount of educators in the group. The educators include the group teacher and childminders. Some groups may have a group aid, but they are not responsible for the education of the children in the group. Even though the person in charge of planning the group pedagogy and children's individual education plan is the teacher, many groups work together and therefore everyone has equal rights to influence the group. (National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018)

Educators in the field of ECEC recognize the importance of welcoming the children to the daycare, as well as their guardians. Every child needs to be seen and heard no matter their identity or background. All of the above is also stated in the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2018) "The personnel is responsible for creating an atmosphere that respects diversity." The personnel is also prohibited from discrimination by the Non-discrimination Act, section 8: No one may be discriminated against, on the basis of age, origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion [...], family relationships, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics. This is also supported through the Act of ECEC (540/2018) 20§, which states that the opinion and wishes of children should be taken into account as appropriate for each child's age and stage of development.

Working as an ECEC educator, the cooperation between the guardians and staff is important. Educators want to make sure the guardians feel safe to leave their children at the daycare and that educators are supporting their education and wellbeing. The educators compile an individual plan for each child's early education. Educators in Finland would refer to it as

'vasu' in and it stands for 'varhaiskasvatuksen suunnitelma'. The individual plan is based on the National Core Curriculum and also their local curriculum. To compile a functioning education plan, the ECEC teacher meets with the guardians to discuss the learning goals for the child for the following year, which is drafted by observing and interacting with the child. The plan must include the child's strengths and any support they might need. The plan could include goals that are mainly about development and wellbeing. Along with those, also participation and self-expression are important to be documented. The aim of having a plan is to support the child and their guardians in planning, implementing, and developing the child's education and care and grants the personnel to get to know the child individually. (National Core Curriculum for ECEC, 2018).

Educators also design their environment to develop and strengthen equity and equality, which can help promote the well-being of every child. ECEC environment gives the same support and resources to all its group's children, meaning equality. Whereas the term equity would mean giving a child specific support to reach the same goal. Educators has to know how to see the difference and give the support each child needs. An example of equality would be children sharing toys and educators giving each child equal opportunities. A child's individual plan would be equity because it focuses on their individual growth and development.'

5.1 Importance of Play

Play is an important aspect for children in their early years as it supports them to learn to become their own person and help develop their social and cognitive skills which is also enhanced during play (Hughes 2010). Play is part of holistic learning and problem solving through participation in different activities. Participation also teaches children interaction with their peers and adults in their environment. A well-planned and high-quality play environment allows children to be naturally interested in their space and gives them safety for learning. (Karila, 2013). For children in early childhood, play is everywhere and comes naturally, thus learning opportunities are everywhere. Play cannot be forced, otherwise, it loses something of its essential quality. (Virkki 2015). This is supported by Vygotsky who describes play as being the leading source of development (Smith 2011). A child's play, especially during their early childhood, has no rules or limitations (Piaget 1990). Educators at daycares should be observing and interpreting children's play, as it shows the children's preferences and development as a person. An educator in ECEC has to acknowledge that playing is not just about the child's imagination, but also involves the educators's active role in the environment. Educator can observe the play and how it affects children's learning, thinking, and interests. (Koivula & Siipiainen 2017) Whilst it is encouraged that educators should be involved

in playing with children, it is best to let children initiate the play, and instead they should support the play building it and with the theme of the play.

The environment where children play is important to plan to be open and inclusive, without prejudice, also allowing children to dictate the use of the space. By observing how children use their space can tell if it's inviting or safe for the children. (Lindqvist 1998).

Children being able to use the space and toys together allows them to build interest in new activities and their peers. Toys are important play material for children's intellectual development. According to Vygotsky (1978) as mentioned by Hughes (2010), "the value of play materials is that they help children separate themselves from concrete reality and distinguish between actual objects and what they are intended to represent."

Play materials can be divided in different categories depending on their functions which is found to correlate to children's growth. Micro- and macro such as cars, dolls or props for dramatic play, can enhance and influence on children's memory. Structured Construction toys would be blocks or Legos, toys that retain their structure and they can contribute to children's verbal, quantitative and perceptual development. Then there is also fluid construction which can be used to create an unspecified product, i.e. paint or clay, contribute to child's perceptual performance. (Hughes 2010) We can notice that using play materials, no matter what kind, contributes to their learning development, especially in memory development. As important memory development is for children, they also allow them to use the toys fluidly and find new meaning to them, going back to Vygotsky's meaning.

Many daycares have space dedicated to specific toys and plays, i.e. having a room for care play. Toys that can be moved, i.e. cars, blocks and animal toys can be found in different rooms. Free play time allows children to plan their own play with their peers which gives them the feeling of control, but the space is planned by the teachers.

Free play time and guided play should be both just as natural. A teacher can guide the narrative of the play through being involved in it as long as they are not dominating the narrative.

Play materials for role playing should be available in each space. These can be a room dedicated to care play or having costumes and props available. Teachers and other personnel can encourage children to try new games using the play materials available, even by starting a narrative for the play.

6 Gender sensitivity in ECEC

Cambridge dictionary states the meaning of sensitivity to having or showing awareness and understanding of other people's feelings and needs. It is being aware and attentive to the

differences between people (Ylitapio-Mäntylä 2012). Gender sensitivity is encountering people and accepting them as themselves and not by their assumed gender (Setlementtiliitto 2018).

From learning the basis of ECEC we can now explore how gender normative and sensitivity is perceived and implemented in the field. Gender sensitivity is not mentioned in the National curriculum as itself but can be connected to equality in education and care. This allows the educators and their team to create and implement a diverse and neutral education and environment in their curriculum or plan. It is important to integrate gender diversity in day care daily practice, no matter if there is a child in the group that might identify other than the gender norm, or not. This can help the children to understand prejudices, being open and avoid challenges and bullying within peers. Thus educators are teaching openness and sensitivity towards gender to the next generation. (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2012)

Kautto (2020) in her thesis explained how educators aren't aware enough on gender sensitivity in ECEC and the reason behind it was the educators attitude which were inconspicuous. Kuusinen and Niemi (2018) noticed that educators are aware and strive to be sensitive with genders in their work. Both prove the importance for educators being aware when it comes to children's gender and having a sensitive attitude, but not everyone has the knowledge or practice to apply it in their work. In a gender sensitive education (or environment) the educator must notice the practices they provide and take notice of the children that are marginalized by gender (Ylitapio-Mäntylä 2012). This correlates to how important is to have adults who understand gender diversity and are anti-bias toward gender in their practice, especially for those children who will not fall into these traditional categories of boys and girls. Having safe, understanding, and trustworthy educators, in ECE and later in school, help children to feel seen and understood (Kuusinen & Niemi 2018). They also feel free to be themselves and to safely explore all the thoughts and feelings that may come with gender issues. The feeling of being accepted as they are, provides confidence and happiness and increases healthy growth of self-esteem. A child who feels accepted is likely to accept others as they are as well.

The reality when working with children is to be aware of the language one uses, as children imitate what adults do and speak. It is important for the adults to have a positive language and attitude towards being gender sensitive in their everyday practice, as it is through them that the children learn and form their own values and knowledge.

As previously mentioned, play is important for children development and educators are there to help guide it. Play materials are already separated by gender in the shops and is supported through adults in children's lives. There are rhymes and plays that are thought to be aimed more towards girls, such as playing home or crafting, which boys wouldn't want to be

involved with. Boys play is thought to be more active and fiercer. Boys can be allowed to jump around whereas girls are expected to do something calmer. These situations are how children learn about the division between gender. (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2012) Toys and play are a great start for educators to establish a gender sensitive environment for children, starting already from toddler age. This can be done just by reducing the separation of play and toys into gender and educators encouraging children to be involved and try new play.

Using gender in a negative way, discriminating between genders, or using another gender to their advantage is sexism and can be seen in the early ages of childhood if the educators themselves produce a sexist environment (Scarlet 2020). This is why the educators should take initiative to have a wider sense of gender terms, evaluate and not label children into their assigned genders (aka. girl/boy) groups too much, and instead focus more on children's individual characteristics and persona, so they can reach their full potential. For the educators to be able to work more sensitively towards gender, they need to be able to reflect on their own work and educate themselves on the terms they use, as pedagogically there is not much guidance.

Do educators tend to help certain children more in getting dressed, are certain gendered children asked to tidy up more specifically than others? Example of these situations are found on Gender Equality in ECE - project site (2015), which main objective is to increase awareness of the idea and practices of gender sensitivity and gender equality in the Finnish-speaking Early Childhood Education field (Tasa-arvokasvatuksessa 2015). Through our next chapter on examples we share ways to encourage and establish a more gender sensitive practice and environment for children and educators.

7 Examples on gender sensitivity in ECEC

As our idea for the thesis is to also show educators in the field how they can include and be gender sensitive in their work, we will explain here some theory behind the examples chosen. Situations can and will arise throughout the working day for educators where they can acknowledge their use of genders. From getting ready to go outdoors, tidying up and different play ideas. Some are aimed for the personnel team to ponder and practice upon, and some are aimed to be possible to do with children, i.e play ideas.

Gender Equality in ECEC (2015) project has compiled a list for educator to be more gender sensitive. In the booklet we have added some new questions that weren't included in Gender Equality in ECEC (2015) list. The list of questions is compiled to help an educator review their working attitude with gender diversity and if they have been sensitive towards gender actively or not. The questions are meant to awaken educator's perspective and they can review them also with their team. These questions are hopefully wide range enough for anyone to

reflect upon and be able to provoke discussion withing themselves and their team. If educators realise that tasks and other activities are divided mainly by gender, or children choose play that is gender divided, could be a sign to the educators to create an environment that is more gender sensitive.

Another task for the educator team is to reflect on the story book and nursery rhymes they use. Stories and rhymes are often used throughout the day for educators. Many of the rhymes are “old-fashioned” and can contain gender stereotypes. Through this task they can observe and write down gender normative (feminine and masculine) characteristics they might find or recognize in the book and rhymes, if any. Also collect feelings, emotions, colors and clothing that can be categorized in gender stereotypes. After this task they can work on finding more gender sensitive books and nursery rhymes. Reading and storytelling are important for children’s learning and curiosity. It promotes brain development and imagination, develops language and emotions, and strengthens relationships. Helps children understand strong emotion and life events, along with learning about the world and culture. (Raising Children Network 2022).

Roleplaying, aka symbolic play, for children in early childhood is relevant as they learn about themselves, their peers and gain confidence whilst imitating real-life situations and social relations. These games help in their cognitive learning as the child is liberating themselves from the constraints of the situation, meaning separating or substituting an object from it’s original meaning, thus creating an imaginary situation (Smith 2011).

Play materials for role playing should be available in their dedicated space. This can be a room dedicated to role play or having costumes and props available. These materials can also be hidden away and brought out for use at the request of children, or at another appropriate moment. Educators can encourage children to try new games using the play materials available, even by starting a narrative for the play.

By creating a multi-sensory room which can be achieved by working with the children and getting their input. The room can be dedicated to the theme and includes many assortments of stimulation, for example lighting, smell, toys etc. Main point for the room is for it to be accessible to the children it was designed for. An idea regarding our theme of gender sensitivity multi-sensory room could circus, where children get to try out different circus artist roles, as they aren’t generally gender assigned.

One way to encourage the sensitivity of genders is to allow children to choose their name tag picture, which varies and can depend on the theme of the day care or group. It can vary pictures of animals, colours, cartoon characters (i.e Moomin) or plants. These pictures are used for children to find their locker or lunch seat easily, and by choosing their own name-tag picture they get a sense of belonging and cared for. This can also be extended to talking with

children that there aren't only "girl and boy" toys, they are for everyone to play with. (Kuusinen J. & Niemi P. 2018)

8 Making our end product - Booklet

Producing a booklet as an end product of our thesis was chosen quite early in our thesis planning process. Firstly, our plan was to execute our thesis in co-operation with daycare in Vantaa. Due to our tight schedule this plan had to be changed. We decided to go through with our plan of the booklet, but only to distribute it to our professional networks. We knew the booklet is only a tiny packet of information. The idea when planning it was not to cover the whole subject, but merely to focus on the main aspects of it, and to raise the reader's own willingness to explore and study the topic themselves. Bringing the topic to the table, raising questions, and discussion were seen as goals of the booklet.

We ended up with the idea of an electric form booklet as we wanted to bring knowledge with a very low-threshold and palpable way, and to be able to easily distribute it. Choosing the target group of the booklet was a process of many steps, and the plan kept changing on the way. The initial plan was to produce a booklet suitable for both professionals and children's guardians. Because we had to keep our topic compact enough, the target group was narrowed to being only Early Childhood Education and Care educators. The language chosen for the booklet was also a process, as at the beginning of the thesis journey we thought about making the booklet available both in Finnish and English. We chose to do it in English as it can also be distributed to educators who have their ECEC training outside of Finland, where gender sensitivity is not acknowledged as strongly. Also, our professional networks include English speaking professionals. As subjects gender sensitivity, gender diversity and gender expression are very wide, the terms have many layers in them, and it may be difficult to understand and thoroughly acknowledge them. Therefore, our goals for the booklet were to narrow down the terms explained, use simple language in general when writing the descriptions, and stick to the key terms and key points. We decided to focus on gender sensitivity and how to include and promote it in the Early Childhood Education field. We wanted to bring out easy, everyday tips and examples of how to implement gender sensitivity into the daily routines and plays the educators guide in the day care world.

Choosing the title for our booklet also took us quite many discussions to be decided. We contemplated from the simple few word choices to the two-sentence-long paragraphs. We chose to go with the most simple option: Gender Diversity in ECEC for educators. This was

maybe not as exciting or intriguing, but the reader will understand the basic idea right from the start.

Planning the booklet took a lot of time and research, and it was not easy to choose the terms and examples to add to the final product. When choosing the terms and examples for the booklet we consulted our professional networks. We both do have our own first-hand experience in working in early childhood education, but we did not want to rely only on our own opinions.

We wanted the booklet's layout to be neutral enough, and we had to consider the colors, prints, and pictures quite a lot. After all the booklet is a visual representation of our idea. Even choosing the basic layout where to start the process was not as easy as we imagined. We wanted the layout to be interesting enough, but still neutral enough. And also, the layout had to be available for free. Choosing the fonts was also quite challenging, as they would have to be bold enough to clearly stand out from the background, or we would have to put the texts in boxes.

We took a lot of time to think about how to make the booklet to look interesting enough to read, and how to be precise and use short enough descriptions but still thorough enough to make the idea known.

Lastly, we wanted to add a QR code and link for getting feedback from readers of the booklet. We decided to use the QR code because it is a modern way of directing users to a web page and is also easily accessible to anyone who uses a smart phone. We added the link as not everyone is familiar using the QR code and if they are reading the booklet on a screen, the link is a one-click option. The QR code and link in our booklet directs the user to an online feedback questionnaire, which is made by using Google Forms. The feedback questionnaire has simple questions with pre-considered answer boxes, and one open answer question. Our questionnaire included the following:

- How is the overall look of the booklet (on a scale 1-5)
- Was the information given sufficient enough (on a scale 1-5)
- How useful did you find the examples given (ona scale 1-5)
- Would you forward this booklet to a colleague? (Yes, Maybe, No)
- Any other feedback

The scale for the first questions was 1-5 (where 1 is the worst and 5 is the best grade). We wanted to provide an easy way to answer these questions, and also to get the answers in a form that could be transformed into a scale. We wanted to know how likely our booklet would be forwarded to others in the field of ECEC and at the end to provide an open question for any other feedback readers might have. The aim for getting feedback was for more personal reasons than for actual research purposes.

For distributing the booklet via email, we also planned a greeting for the recipient, in which we explained the following:

- What the subject of the booklet is
- For whom was it created for
- Who we, the creators of the booklet are
- That we wish to get feedback
- That the booklet is allowed to be distributed to third parties

8.1 Feedback

We were late in sending our booklet to our peers and thus, did not get as many responses as we were hoping for, thus we were not able to do a comprehensive comparison between the feedbacks.

The overall look of the booklet was considered successful (rated 4) and the amount of information was nearly sufficient enough (rated nearly 4). The questions and practical examples were rated between 3 and 4. When asked if they would forward the booklet to a colleague, the answers were spread equally between yes and maybe. In the open question for any other feedback, one of the positive answers we got was “It was well written and presented clearly” and one of the negative “There were some mistakes, and some structure choices in sentences were a little odd”. We did not proofread the booklet thoroughly enough and were able to notice the grammatical errors in our text after getting the feedback. Overall we are pleased with the feedback we got.

9 Ethics and moral questions

Early childhood education is a branch of the social field, where the professionals' goal is the care and well-being of their clientele, in this case, the children and family. Ethically professionals cannot involve their beliefs and values in their work, they have to respect their

clients' individuality and promote confidence. In writing our thesis and planning our booklet, we tried to thoroughly research which terms were on the date, and which were considered old-fashioned, and only used the ones we made sure are appropriate to use in 2022. Our goal was not to not correct anyone, but to raise questions and discussion on a topic that has arisen and has become more relevant. We also addressed to the users of the booklet that the topic is sensitive and must be dealt with carefully and with integrity. The examples used are age-appropriate and they are clearly stated in the booklet. We also explained why and for whom we have aimed it towards. We added that we are bachelor students, who have collected information to their best abilities, thus being honest to our readers. We stressed that the feedback collected would be anonymous. Feedback would be shared in our thesis, but we would make sure it would not contain any information which could be identified to any particular person.

We also familiarized ourselves with ARENE's (The Rectors' Conference of Finnish UAS) material of writing a responsible thesis (2019). We tried to use these steps offered as our guideline for our writing process.

One thing to acknowledge is to understand that some of our source material is written in Finnish and was translated by ourselves. Therefore, there is a possibility of an error in translation. By avoiding errors, we did thorough co-operation with translating the sources, using electric translators, and asking each other for confirmation. Both of us do speak fluent English as a second language.

10 Conclusions & thoughts

One wish for our thesis was to educate ourselves more on the field of gender, gender identity and gender sensitivity, and therefore become more reliable as writers of this topic. The functional part, the booklet, was seen as a relevant end-product to our thesis process, and distributing it was obviously considered essential. Being able to share knowledge and raise discussion were our goals as well, and worked as our guideline for planning the booklet.

Terms related to gender were found to be quite challenging, and the list of different terms was discovered to be longer than expected. Even though we considered ourselves being quite aware of the terms and meanings behind them, we still got to deepen our knowledge the topic. On the other hand, there are no explicit explanations for the terms that would be accepted and used by everyone, and thus our findings and feelings are not surprising. Gender development theories and aspects affecting to it are still on constant dispute within the researchers and professionals, and diving into the theories seemed to be an endless road. Eventually we had to make choices to narrow it down a bit, as this is a topic that could go on and on forever.

We had an idea of how we wanted our booklet to look like; simple and easy to follow. We knew the background colors and text we choose should be neutral and non-gender biased. We feel like we succeeded in this and are happy with the choices we made. Choosing enough, but not too much, necessary terms and examples was more challenging than we thought. The booklet itself can also be seen quite successful and to have reached its goal, even though the amount of feedback was small, and therefore could not be seen as a very trustworthy take. Overall it did what it was designed for, raised discussion and thoughts on this matter. Due to our tight schedule with the distribution, unfortunately our reached target group was relatively small. With earlier distribution, we could have reached a bigger group of people, and gotten the topic out more. For the future use of the booklet we had to make some editions to it after the feedback, as there were some grammar flaws. This could be seen as a clear mistake on our side, as we did not proofread it many times enough. On the other hand of course, we are not native English speakers. Also, for the possible future use of the booklet, it can be seen as relevant to translate it also in Finnish in order to reach a bigger target group. For us writers, it would be interesting to see if educators were able to implement the examples given in the booklet, and if they had any effect on the children.

Getting the thesis done was a long process for us, because of unexpected circumstances in both our lives. Studying in the Laurea University of Applied Sciences has taught us to listen to our mind and body, and to calculate our own strengths and capabilities as students and as professionals. Looking back we do realize that much more could have been done to better our self-discipline and with better time management. As a process, the thesis has taught us a lot about finding information, contemplating which are credible sources and overall got us back into writing reports and academic text. Time management skills, or maybe in our case lack of them, has proven to be something we still need to work on in ourselves. Finally, we have had a long journey working on our thesis and are satisfied with our work.

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11 Appendices

Appendix 1: Gender Diversity for ECEC - booklet 30

Liite 1: Gender Diversity for ECEC educators - booklet

Gender Diversity for ECEC educators

Gender sensitivity acting in a way that treat everyone as an individual regardless of their sex or gender, not letting expectations or prejudices affect to it, and respecting everyone's view of their own gender. Acknowledging genders but sensitively and respectfully treats everyone as an individual

The term "**sex**" is used when referring to a persons biological gender assigned at birth, usually either male or female according to their genitals

Gender or gender identity is a broad concept consisting of persons own views, feelings and thoughts about their gender. Gender identity can correspond or differ from the sex assigned at birth. Different aspects effect on person's gender identity. These can be social gender (how a person presents their gender in the society and how their society sees and tries to shape the gender), cultural gender (how their culture shapes and presents genders), physiological, psychological and genetic factors and hormones.

Gender diversity: an umbrella concept that takes into account of all the different gender identities and expressions, both minorities and majorities. Gender diversity often includes also different sexual orientations.

Non- binary terms is used for describing gender identities that are not exclusively feminine or masculine. These terms are widly used in the society.

Gender binary and heteronormative terms are a concept that recognizes only two opposite sexes, male and female. Society widely uses these terms as genders

Examples for educators

Check list for educators

This task is for educators to review their own perspective in their work. Task can be done alone or with your team. Think of an example moments that has happened or can arise.

- How do I interpret different feelings of children, is it gender based: sadness, anger, joy, and fear? Do I equally recognize the feelings of all children?
- Do I suggest activities based on child's gender?
- Can all children play with any toys? How do I know this?
- What kind of role models do I present to the children?
- Which one of the parents do I primarily call when the child is ill?
- Am I ready to acknowledge and listen to children's wishes and opinions?
- Am I ready to support children to express themselves how they want?
- Do I present similarities and differences in rules and practices between girls and boys?
- Do I treat children in a biased way, am I including or excluding or excluding ?
- Plan responses on gender questions from children.

Actively Listening

Actively listening is a method commonly encouraged to educators. Active listening can be done by involving oneself in the children's play, as long as educators aren't changing the narrative of the play. This allows educators to learn about children and their view of the world around them.



Story books and nursery rhymes

With your team (or children) go through story books and/or rhymes in your group and write down any notes on any gender normative aspects you recognize. . Table below for example.

	Feminine	Masculine
Main character		
Clothing, colors		
Feelings, emotions		



Multi-sensory room

By creating a multi-sensory room which can be achieved by working with the children and getting their input. The room can be dedicated to the theme and includes many assortments of stimulation, for example lighting, smell, toys etc. Main point for the room is for it to be accessible to the children it was designed for. An idea regarding our theme neutral to all genders for a multi-sensory room could be circus, where children get to try out different circus artist roles, as they aren't generally gender assigned.



Role playing

Allows children to explore outside constructed reality, so very important for children in early childhood. Educators should have a space and materials available to children which allow them to role play. These can be costumes (example princess dresses, superhero costumes, doctors coat) and materials.

Educators can challenge children's imaginations with suggesting roles they aren't used to



Toys

With children go through ideas how to group the toys. By color, texture, sound, location. Distribute toys in boxes/baskets as agreed with children (i.e blue toys together).

Can be changed monthly or bi-monthly.

Visual representation

Together look at all the colours found in the nature. For example, educator can take pictures of the sky in different colours (blue, grey, pink, black). Colours of the plants in different seasons.

Educators can have a age-appropriate discussion with children about the colours in the nature and if they represent gender or not.

Have pictures in your space of people in an occupation that is gendered to a specific gender, but represented by another.

Example: A female fireman, male nurse etc.

Discuss with children about the pictures and think of the other worlds some occupations have changed their titles (i.e flight attendant)



We made this booklet as a part of our bachelor thesis and would appreciate feedback on this booklet. <https://forms.gle/b6LyNDuj98F3vnxdA>

