

(Un)doing gender in the nursery

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Early childhood education is a female dominated field. More than 95 % of the trained early childhood educators in most European countries are women. The position of men in this field is often contested. In a profession that is perceived as predominantly feminine, men engage in specific strategies in order to construct a masculine gender identity. However, neither masculinity nor femininity are monolithic concepts. Focusing on the performativity of gender, the project examines how gender is done and undone in the day-to-day practices in the nursery. How is gender made relevant in the organizational context of the nursery?

Results spatial analysis: gendered spatial arrangements

In a first step, the spatial analysis identified the occurrence of defined areas for certain activities and play. Among the three most frequently installed areas are two which are highly gendered in the play opportunities they suggest. The home corners only contain play requisites for home-making such as a cooker, table, ironing board and vacuum cleaner as well as a cot for child care. The construction areas mostly centre on a carpet with streets and houses and contain cars, trains and building blocks. If the nursery has a dolls' house for playing with little figures, the dolls' house would be placed without any spatial connection to the area of cars, trains or towns. Even the 'cosy corners' – an area which was found in all sample nurseries – contain genderisms of femininity such as veils and curtains. Drawing on the spatial analysis, we discuss with practitioners ways in which materials and spatial arrangements could allow for more varied and transformed gender roles.



Methods

The empirical research project is situated in German speaking Switzerland and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (www.nfp60.ch). The multi-method research design comprises 20 interviews with nursery managers and photographic documentation of 20 nurseries for spatial analysis. From this sample, 10 nurseries with male educators were selected for narrative interviews with a male and a female educator. The interviews covered the men's 'entry stories' into the profession and into their current nursery, aspects of organizational change as well as day-to-day working practices and beliefs on gender in early childhood education. From these nurseries, four were sampled for ethnographic (video)observations (figure 1).

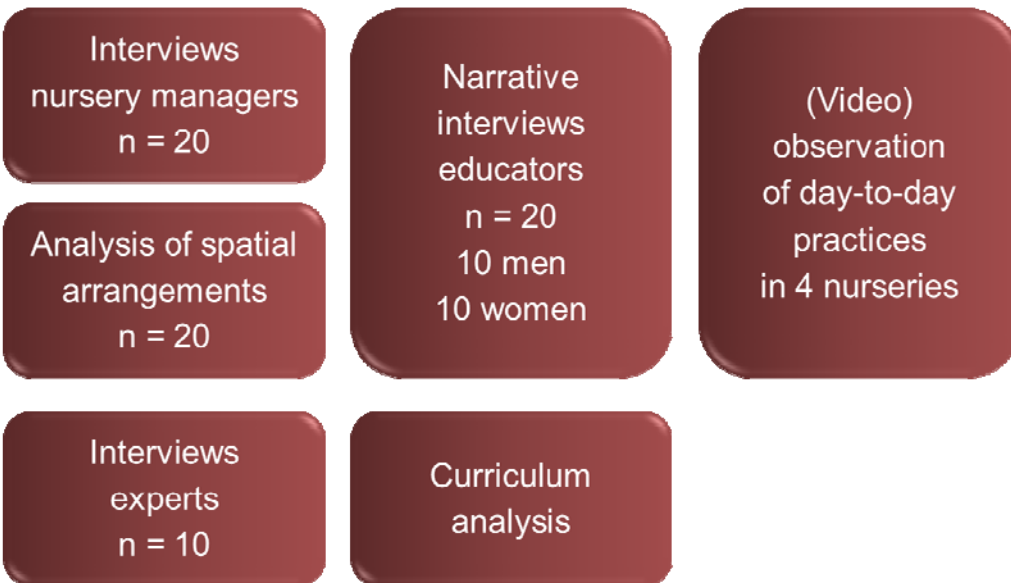


Figure 1: research design

Results interview analysis: men working in the nursery

Our interviews reveal how men are positioned (and position themselves) both as the Other and as the Same. Gender is done as well as undone in these manoeuvring acts between difference and sameness. Difference is created by emphasising the men's activities such as rough and tumble play and football. Three different accounts of organizational innovation initiated by male nursery educators came out in the interviews: (i) a room for physical exercise, jumping and being noisy; (ii) an outdoor forest group, (iii) a woodworking studio. All three innovations can be understood as challenging the gendered organization of the nursery; at the same time they introduce activities to children which are traditionally seen as masculine.

Gender is also undone in these interviews. Nursery managers particularly emphasize the importance of the equality of all team members. Women and men have to perform under the same rules and standards. Men emphasize that they want to be able to perform the same tasks to be acknowledged as fully trusted professionals.

