

21st

EECERA annual conference

Education from birth : research, practices
and educational policy.

Geneva, Switzerland, 14th -17th September 2011

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Gender differences in adult-child-interactions in pre-school

Presentation on the 21st EECERA annual conference, 15.9.2011, Geneva/Switzerland

Abstract

In the last decades, research has left it in no doubt that men and women interact different with boys and girls. With new paradigms and research settings attachment theory research could show that women tend to emphasize the attachment needs of children, while explorative behavior and interest in challenges are more supported by men. These differences gain more importance when it comes to questions of behavior problems and underachievement of boys in school. In public discourse, the lack of men in elementary and primary education is seen as a major reason of boys' problems. Nevertheless, most research on gender differences in early childhood has focused on family relationships. Until today there has been nearly no empirical research in ECE that could support the view that male teachers are different from their female colleagues, and that this difference makes them important for children, especially for boys.

This paper presents first results of an ongoing research project on gender differences in interactional behavior of male and female pre-school teachers. The theoretical frame of the research combines gender theory with a systemic approach to early childhood development. With a qualitative design, the research project focuses on the behavior of male and female professionals in early childhood education. The research analyses interactions of "tandems" of a male and a female teachers in two experimental settings, using videography. In the first setting one adult interacts with an individual child, whereas in the other setting both male and female teacher work with a group of children.

The design was developed from an experimental setting used in attachment theory research. Interventions of male and female teachers are rated and compared to each other. In addition, questionnaires and interviews are conducted with the teachers. Also, the children's perspective is taken into account by interviewing them about how they perceive their teachers and what differences they notice between them. The male/female tandems are compared with interactions of female/female tandems in the same experimental design.

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The research aims at developing interaction profiles of male-female teacher “tandems”. Following results from attachment theory research, it is expected that men’s interactions with children include more stimulation and challenging interactions than those of their female colleagues. On the other hand, the comparison of mixed tandems with only female tandems can show that differences between men and women are not “natural”, but are probably results of social arrangements between individuals that can be found in gender homogenous settings as well.

As the research showed, it was a quite difficult task to develop a gender sensitive rating system for the videographed situations. In the presentation, excerpts from videographs will be shown to discuss the problems of rating interactive behavior properly, avoiding the use of gender stereotypes for a description of the behavior of male and female professionals.

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