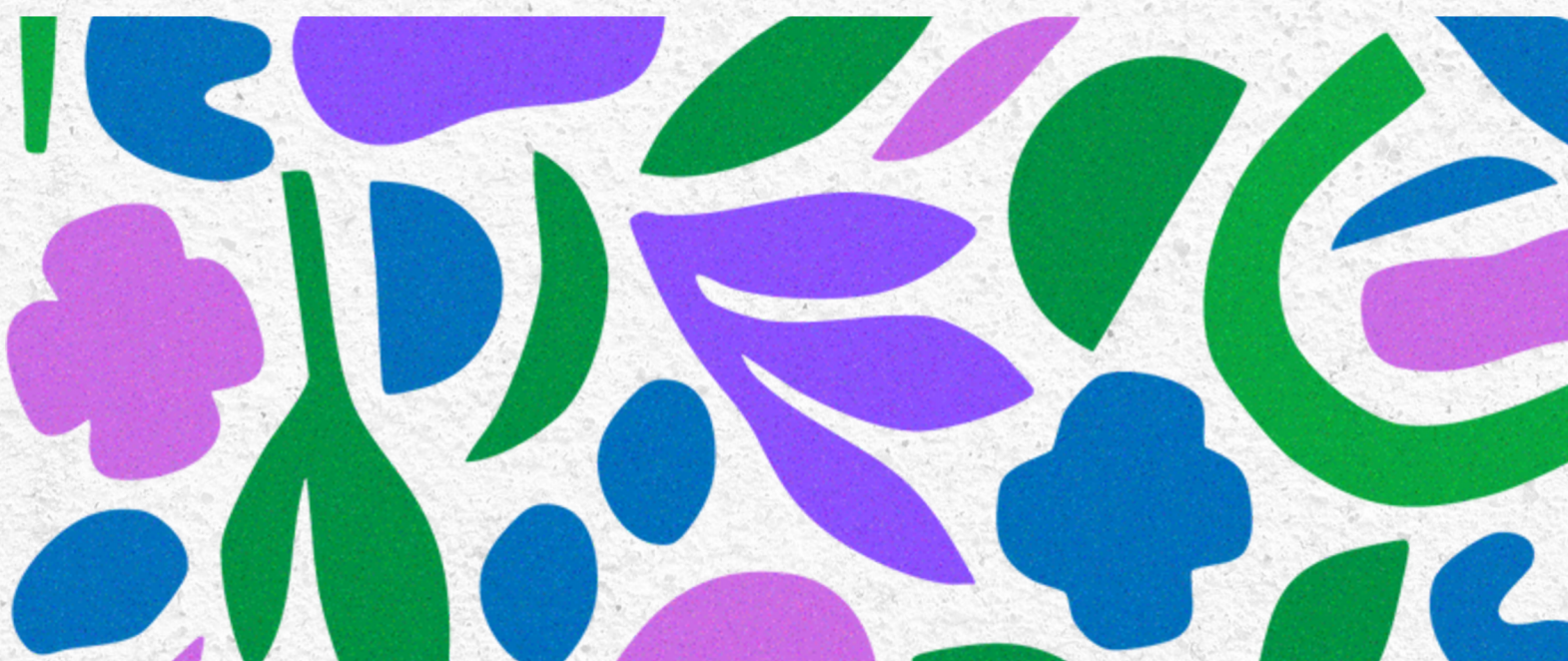


EXPLORING GENDER DYNAMICS IN FOREST SCHOOL KINDERGARTENS

Andreia Esteves



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INTRODUCTION

As research on the field of sociology highlights, schools are key spaces for secondary children's socialisation. It is at school that children discover what is deemed "appropriate", embed universal values, and start learning societal norms. Indeed, alongside their immediate family context and culture at large, schools are spaces that have the potential to decode or reinforce differentiated gender roles and stereotypes from an early age. (Gecas).

Moreover, despite there still being limited research on the subject, the potential of Forest School pedagogies as propellants of gender-equity in their offering of alternative traditionally constricted worldviews and challenging of dominant gender norms is becoming increasingly recognised among scholars. (Hine).

Thus, to begin to explore the interaction of gender and education in nature-based settings, this study considered the following research question: *How do gender dynamics manifest themselves in children's play and interactions in outdoor kindergarten environments using the Forest School pedagogy?*

"Teach the children. We don't matter so much, but the children do. (...) Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit." -Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays*

This report shows the results conducted under REGEN - RE-imagining Gender in Education in Nature: an Erasmus + project proposing an innovative research approach between gender studies and outdoor education that relied on the collaboration of three forest schools (located in Belgium, Italy, and Spain) and QUEST, an independent European network focused on children's rights in education (based in Belgium).

The study was conducted using the following research methods: a literature review looking at previous findings on the topic within the national contexts of Belgium, Italy, and Spain; field observations in the three kindergarten forest schools part of the REGEN project; recorded interviews to educators working at said schools; and, lastly the publishing of an online survey open to any educators working in nature-based education projects in and outside Europe (kindergarten, primary, or otherwise).

In addressing the main research question, this study offers a brief overview of Forest School pedagogy and gender-based education in Europe, exploring the challenges and possibilities of promoting gender equity in outdoor-based early education.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Research objectives and questions

The leading purpose of this research is to contribute to a broader understanding of how gender dynamics play out in nature-based education kindergartens (children aged 2-6), having the three forest schools directly involved in the REGEN project as primary case studies.

Other research objectives include:

- providing a broader understanding of what the forest school pedagogy is, its origins and developments;
- supporting educators in identifying gender-related barriers and inequalities in their work.

The main study objective was formulated in the following research question:

How do gender dynamics manifest themselves in children's play and interactions in outdoor kindergarten environments using forest school pedagogy?

Further research questions include:

- Which characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) do children associate with gender?
- How do gender identity matters emerge in the language used by children?
- When is gender identity used in social dynamics (e.g. inclusion/exclusion, estrangement)?
- Do contradictions emerge between family/cultural contexts and the different team's inputs?

2.2 Research methodology

POSITIONALITY

It's our belief that acknowledging a researcher's biases and their inevitable limited view on a particular research topic, can lead to greater transparency about the preconditions said research builds on. As scholar Donna Haraway highlights in "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", all knowledge is "situated" – i.e. shaped by the social and historical context of the knower. Neutrality, as a goal, is therefore unachievable, for knowledge always comes from somewhere (Haraway).

In this context—and in the spirit of full transparency—prior to the start of this study, all researchers involved in the REGEN project were invited to reflect on their personal motivations with the guidance of the following questions:

- How do my own identity, experiences, and biases influence how I observe and interpret gender dynamics?
- What theoretical frameworks and cultural assumptions am I bringing to this study of gender in forest schools?
- How might my role and interaction with participants shape the dynamics I observe?
- How can I ensure that my findings promote inclusivity and challenge gender stereotypes?

Taking into consideration the lens through which the phenomenon of gender dynamics in forest schools was analysed, the head researcher—Andreia Esteves—has tried to highlight the scope and limitations of the study at hand and the deeply personal connection each researcher holds to the topic, showing how these may inform the data presented.

APPROACH

For the purpose of this research, a socio-constructivist approach was deemed appropriate.

Considerations include the fact that:

1. The research has relied heavily on qualitative data methods (interviews and field observations), despite also having collected quantitative and numerical data through online surveys.
2. The research aimed to explore a vastly complex socio-cultural phenomena, i.e. the relationship between nature and culture in the forest, gathering contextual data about educators' and children's lived experiences and perspectives.

In a nutshell, "this approach involves active participation and collaboration between the researcher and participants, aiming to co-construct meaning rather than seeking objective, detached truth." (Bergold and Thomas).

Moreover, as a learning methodology, social constructivism "emphasizes student involvement, discussion, and knowledge exchange", all principles that echo with those of Forest School pedagogies. (Saleem, Kausar and Deebea).

Finally, a feminist standpoint approach was also carefully considered throughout the research process, as this theory is "informed by an acceptance of the way in which different experiences, needs and interests give rise to different practices, and different ways of thinking about and interacting with the world (...)." (Bowell).

TOOLS

The research approach was based on four main research methods detailed below:

- Field observations
- Literature review
- Interviews
- Surveys

Field observations

For this research project, we wanted to question the research process by proposing a different approach where theory is generated directly from the data (**grounding theory research**), allowing the educators-researchers' own perspectives and experiences to emerge without being constrained by pre-existing literature or hypotheses. To collect qualitative data from the field, participant observation was used.

This research method relies on researchers being actively engaged in the environment or community they are studying, while also observing and recording behaviours, interactions, and practices.

To better collect the data, each REGEN partner focused on a specific category of observation. The division took into consideration the expertise of each member of the consortium and was made as follows:

INTERACTION WITH THE (OUTDOOR) LEARNING SPACE

(Lead: KWEEBUS, Belgium)

Focus Areas:

- Mapping how children use the outdoor space
- Interaction with different natural and learning elements

Guiding Questions:

- Which areas of the outdoor space are used most frequently by boys, girls, or mixed groups? Are there "gendered" zones?
- How do children interact with natural elements (eg.: climbing trees, collecting items)? Do these interactions reflect patterns associated with gender?
- Are there specific learning or play elements that appeal differently to boys and girls? If so, why?
- How does the design/layout of the space encourage or inhibit inclusive gender interactions?

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, DYNAMICS, AND ACTIVITY ENGAGEMENT

(Lead: EDUNAT, Spain)

Focus Areas:

- How social interactions and play reflect gender stereotypes
- Inclusion/exclusion patterns and gender-specific preferences

Guiding Questions:

- What leadership roles, if any, do boys or girls take during group activities? Are these roles gendered?
- How are conflicts resolved, and do boys and girls use different strategies or narratives?
- Which activities or games are most popular among boys, girls, or mixed groups? Are preferences influenced by gender norms?
- How do inclusion/exclusion patterns emerge during play? Are any activities or groups more gender-segregated?
- Are there physical characteristics (eg.: strength, agility) being associated with gender during interactions?

VERBAL/BODY LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

(Lead: Educare Nel Bosco Pecorile, Italy)

Focus Areas:

- How gender identity themes emerge in children's language and non-verbal communication

Guiding Questions:

- What phrases or comments do children use that reflect gender stereotypes or inclusivity? (eg.: "Only girls do that" or "Boys are better at...")?
- How do children express themselves through body language during play? Are there gendered patterns?
- Do children's narratives or role-play scenarios include gendered characters or roles? How do they assign roles?
- How do children respond when challenged about their gendered assumptions in speech or play?

ROLE OF EDUCATORS AND ADULTS *(Lead: QUEST, Belgium)***Focus Areas:**

- How educators/adults influence gender narratives through their actions, language, and values.

Guiding Questions:

- How do educators encourage or discourage specific behaviours or roles for boys and girls? Are their responses gendered?
- Are there differences in how feedback or encouragement is provided based on gender? (eg.: praising boys for physical achievements and girls for creativity).
- What language do educators use when addressing the group or individuals? Does it reinforce or challenge gender norms?
- Are there visible biases in how educators structure activities or mediate conflicts?
- How do educators themselves reflect on gender stereotypes in their practice?

Literature review

The second step in the research has been the evaluation of the available literature on gender dynamics in forest schools with the objective of systematising, collecting and synthesising previous research on the topic, and confronting it with our observations. Though the literature is still scarce on the field, particularly in respect to the countries that are part of the consortium (Belgium, Italy, and Spain), quantitative and qualitative data has been broadly collected in different languages focusing on gender roles and stereotypes in education in nature, integrating findings and perspectives from research studies in different European regions.

Interviews

In order to better learn the role educators can play in the shaping of gender dynamics in their specific work contexts, in-person interviews were conducted and recorded during field observations. The participants included main researchers from the three schools involved in the project, as well as other educators employed at these schools. This participation tool was deemed relevant as it allowed for a better understanding of the challenges faced by teachers and how they may differ depending on the country-specific context.

Surveys

An online survey was conducted to collect data from educators working in nature-based education in and outside of Europe. The survey was available in the four main languages of the countries participating in the REGEN project (English, French, Italian, and Spanish) and received a total of 58 answers. The goal was to grasp a broader understanding of which tools, resources, experiences, and challenges educators face when it comes to navigating gender dynamics in schools using forest pedagogy. An overview of each language survey analysis is provided in chapter four.



03 WHAT IS GENDER?

"Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'." –Judith Butler, Gender Trouble



WHAT IS GENDER?

When examining gender in the context of nature-based education, it is essential to recognise it as a social and cultural construct rather than a fixed biological category. Moreover, taking into account the present research has relied heavily on field observations, alongside other qualitative methods, the researchers involved in the REGEN project, found it essential to dedicate a chapter of this study to define what we talk about when we talk about gender. This brief overview encompasses key definitions, how gender can manifest itself in school settings, and a contextualisation of modern-day anti-gender campaigns.

The Genderbread Person v4 by its pronounced **METROsexual** 2017

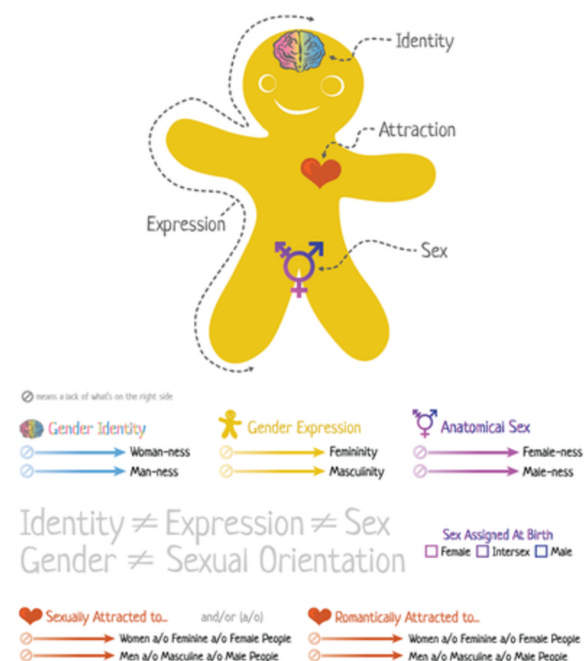


Fig. 1: The Genderbread Person

GENDER: A POCKET-SIZE GUIDE

According to the WHO (World Health Organization), gender refers to:

“the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other.”

As a social construct, gender does not exist in a vacuum, i.e. it is a phenomenon that intersects with other social markers such as gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, ethnicity, and social economic status, among others.

Despite interacting with it, gender differs from one's sex characteristics as it is not binary, i.e. it doesn't exist in mutually exclusive either/or categories, but rather in a continuum. The following glossary terms compiled by the organisation ILGA-Europe provide a concise and clear explanation of these key notions. A visual representation can also be found in figure 1 above.

Gender

refers to a social construct which places cultural and social expectations on individuals based on their assigned sex.

Gender expression

refers to people's manifestation of their gender identity to others, by for instance, dress, speech and mannerisms. People's gender expression may or may not match their gender identity/identities, or the gender they were assigned at birth.

Gender identity

refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

Some people's gender identity falls outside the gender binary, and related norms.

Sex

the classification of a person as male or female. Sex is assigned at birth and written on a birth certificate, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy and on a binary vision of sex which excludes intersex people.

A person's sex, however, is actually a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics.

Sexual orientation

refers to each person's capacity for profound affection, emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.

GENDER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In early childhood education, gender roles can shape how children engage with their surroundings, access different types of play, and interact with their peers and educators. However, these roles are fluid and subject to change, making it crucial to critically analyse how they are reinforced or challenged within different educational settings.

As Maynard points out, forest school practitioners “often navigate complex power hierarchies that intersect with deeply embedded gender norms.” (Maynard via Garden). As further explored in chapter 4 of this study, despite not being confined to a traditional school environment, children in forest schools may still exhibit gendered behaviours that stem from their home context, either by reinforcing or subverting traditional gender roles.



Additionally, current literature supports that gender can manifest itself even in environments perceived as neutral, for, “the meaning of gender as a category is made psychologically salient to children through cues”, such as colour-coded toys, clothes, language, etc. (Bigler and Liben via Garden).

Having said that, Garden and Downes are among the scholars who see forest schools in particular as a “liminal space, where traditional and progressive gender roles coexist and are continuously renegotiated”: a reality which can open up the possibility for challenging gender binaries and fostering a more inclusive learning environment. (Garden and Downes).

ANTI-GENDER CAMPAIGNS

Though anti-gender campaigns are not a recent phenomenon, these non-democratic movements seem to have gained resurgence and visibility in the past decade, namely in the field of education and its intersection with children’s rights.

As a report published in 2024 by the ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles) reveals: “these campaigns began in Europe in the mid-2000s, intensified over the course of the following decade and still continue to this day.” (Paternotte et al.).

Furthermore, Paternotte et al. highlight that targets of anti-gender campaigns in Europe include children’s rights and child protection with common demands being framed around a “resistance to gender and sexuality education programmes in favour of greater parental control over educational programmes.” (Paternotte et al.).

The "anti EVRAS movement", which emerged in 2023, after the program for relational, affective, and sexual education was made compulsory in primary and secondary schools in the Wallonia region of Belgium, is an example of backlash that inserts itself in this new wave of anti-gender campaigns instrumentalizing child protection to promote anti-democratic discourse.

04

WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL PEDAGOGY?



WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL PEDAGOGY?

04

4.1 Forest as a symbol

For Little Red Riding Hood is the path to her grandmother's house. Snow White finds refuge (and the Seven Dwarves' cottage) there, and Hansel and Gretel get abandoned by their parents in this very place. In fairy tales, the forest is, as Maria Tatar describes it, "sublime and dangerous, full of mystery, magic, terror, and monstrosity; an enchanted place where anything can happen." (Tatar via Campbell).

If, in folktale tradition, the forest often represents a place of possibility, when it comes to the natural spaces that surround us, what does that possibility entail? Wonder? Danger? Both? Who gets to enjoy and benefit from spending time in nature? And who feels truly free, safe, and at peace wandering alone in the woods? Some would argue, it is certainly not women.



Fig. 2 Sainsbury's ad

Indeed, it can be said that concerns around women and girls' safety in outdoor spaces are not unfounded and backed by robust data. In 2023, the supermarket-chain Sainsbury was heavily criticized over a clothes ad that featured a woman wearing a wrap dress. The copy read: "For walks in the park or strolls after dark." Critiques raised online pointed to the apparent lack of acknowledgement around women's safety. As a 2021 report conducted in the UK reveals: four out of five women have felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or other open space, compared to two out of five men.

Additionally, a 2018 Swedish study shows that girls feel ten times more insecure in public spaces than boys. Another study, conducted in Belgium, also revealed that boys spend time outdoors more than twice as often as girls.

Finally, a review of studies looking at the effects of a forest school environment on the mental wellbeing, resilience, and nature connectedness of young people, demonstrates a gender differential: "with male participants showing significant improvements compared to female participants." (Roberts).

4.2 Nature-based education: the origins

Nature-based education as we know it has its origins in Germany in the mid-1800s. The idea of schools in the "open air" later spread throughout Europe and North America with the concept beginning to be established in Sweden, Denmark, and other European countries in the 1950s. (Harper).

In the 1980s Forest School as a pedagogical practice became an element of the Danish Early Years curriculum (Swarbrick, Eastwood, and Tutton). Following a visit to Denmark in the 1990s, a group of educators from Bridgewater College developed the concept in the UK (Slade et al.) and forest school pedagogy has become increasingly popular across the country ever since.

Though there have been plenty of definitions of outdoor education throughout the years, in general terms, the concept refers to a type of education "in, about, and for the out-of-doors." (Ford) in which some form of inquiry-based learning occurs, stimulating a child's sense of curiosity and wonder.

In addition, this type of education is often deemed attractive for offering children an opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem, as well as other important competences like environmental stewardship and active citizenship, through hands-on learning. Aspects that may be overlooked when a rigid curriculum is set, as it happens in conventional teaching settings. (Johnston).

Finally, as Vidal points out: “programs in learning about the outdoors occur at all levels in the educational system, although they are most frequently found in kindergarten or elementary schools.” which are precisely the age target this study covers.

4.3 Nature-based education: non-western perspectives

Although the present study was carried out in Europe, it felt relevant to dedicate a section of this chapter to recognising non-western perspectives in outdoor education, as these can offer deeper understandings to what is otherwise a limited view of the topic.

Indeed, scholars, such as Newbery, argue that forest schools remain socially and culturally constructed western forms of education and should therefore be restructured in order to include the history of Indigenous peoples and acknowledge the legacy of colonialism.

Concerning key differences, they start in language. Whereas in Western education the terms kindergarten and Forest School are commonly used, Indigenous perspectives to this model of education tend to prefer the term land. Johnston declares that the word land implies “our direct and sustained connection with the earth”, meaning that “even when we are at home or in school or at work, we are on the land.” (Johnston)

Moreover, in contrast to western education perspectives, indigenous approaches to outdoor education tend to favour a holistic model, in which the connection of the people to the natural environment, i.e. to the land: “exists beyond the concrete connection to place” (Hansen). It is a worldview that recognises every living being has a spirit and is interconnected.

As Indigenous writer Ailton Krenak claims, the planet is not a resource to be exploited, but rather a living, vibrant, sacred being — where each element has its value, role, and dignity. Whilst this understanding of the Earth as a living organism represents a part of indigenous people's culture and wisdom, for the rest of humanity it only came with scientific investigation. (Oliveira).

Finally, Krenak suggests that our future on Earth is actually ancestral, arguing that a better future can be found by looking back at the ancestral wisdom and knowledge of indigenous communities:

“Indigenous children are not taught, but guided. They do not learn to be winners, because for some to win, others must lose. They learn to share the place where they live and what they have to eat. They have the example of a life in which the individual counts less than the collective. This is the indigenous mystery, a legacy that passes from generation to generation. What our children learn from an early age is to put their hearts in tune with the rhythm of the earth.”

05

DISCOVERIES FROM THE GROUND: GENDER DYNAMICS IN FOREST SCHOOL KINDERGARTENS



DISCOVERIES FROM THE GROUND: GENDER DYNAMICS IN FOREST SCHOOL KINDERGARTENS

5.1 Results from field observations

This chapter will present the main findings collected from the field concerning gender dynamics in the three forest schools that took part in the REGEN project. Results are based on the notes researchers took during their in-person observations in the partner schools: EDUNAT in Spain, Educare Nel Bosco Pecorile (CANALESCUOLA) in Italy, and KWEEBUS in Belgium. As lead researchers, QUEST members also participated in the field observations.

The findings take into consideration the observational categories each organisation was leading during the research as well as themes observed with countries listed by order of visit (Spain in November 2024, Italy in December 2024, and Belgium in February 2025).

In addition, with the utmost respect towards the educational team of each school, the researchers acknowledge that these observations are limited to the topic of investigation i.e. gender dynamics in nature education. Any general comments on the pedagogical actions carried out by the teams involved were therefore avoided.

Finally, it is relevant to highlight that the researchers did not take part in the observation of their own school environments. This explains why often only two schools, and QUEST are cited in each country review, rather than the four partners in total.

SPAIN



CLOTHING



Most of the educators observing during the week seem to be very aware of gendered-clothes and notice when boys or girls either conform or disrupt their usage. Notes that mention this pattern include the following descriptions:

- The lunch boxes are mostly gendered;
- The clothes too, for some kids;
- A boy wearing a light pink jumper;
- A boy brings pink tulle to a girl who is lying down outside;
- A boy wears a red cape, a girl wears a pink raincoat;
- A boy with a pink wristwatch.

PLAY

Types of play identified include: role play, imaginative play, exploratory play, locomotor play, object play. In terms of division by gender some educators observed the following dynamics:

- Mixed group games (preparing the crib for bedtime, rope games, tree games);
- Girl-only group games (hiding under the blanket and walking around the base camp like this);
- Games in male-only groups (archery);
- One of the educators notes that “males and females are rather ‘separated’ in their games.

Other observations that highlight gender differences and stereotypes include the following:

- The little girls are held in arms more often;
- The girls are doing a calm activity (passive role) with ribbons with two female educators accompanying them;
- The boys kick the chicken run fence (active role);
- At one point, all the boys were gathered around Gabi (educator) and his tools, while all the girls were making dolls out of pieces of wood.



There is, however, an interesting example of contrast between two girls in terms of this passivity/activity binary:

One of the girls seems to be quiet by nature. In the morning she stays close to one of the educators eating her food, holding her leopard toy. She gives Patricia (another educator) her full attention when she is telling a story. She observes other people playing but she doesn't engage in the play herself. Keeps eating.

By contrast, another one of the girls tends to mostly play with the boys and she seems to be the only girl doing that.

At least, it is more noticeable to me (observer). She joins the boys for a picnic in the morning. She is wearing pink from head to toe and a jumper with hearts. Other observations of language with gendered-connotation during play:

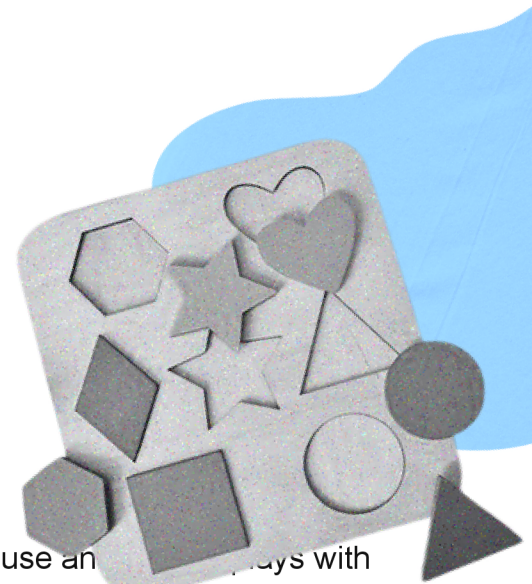
- One of the girls sings I'm a barbie girl, in a barbie world;
- One of the boys says, while playing: *Yo soy más peligroso que tu porque yo soy el papá* (I am more dangerous than you, because am the dad).

GAMES

Examples of behaviour read with a gendered-lens during playing activities and games include the following:

The doll house

- Factual description of events: There is a wooden playing house and a boy plays with it throughout the whole morning. The figurines inside the house seem to be neutral, no characteristics that could distinguish female and male toys; later in the day a boy starts playing in the house and mentions that he is building a family. In the little playhouse, the kids tend to put the toys on the house's balcony (aka the place that is not fully interior, but outside). What does home mean when you are always in nature?
- What is striking: It surprises me that it's a boy that is playing with the doll house.
- Questions it raises: Is there privacy in a nature school context? Do children want to hide?



Treasure hunt

- Factual description of events: Today there's a present for everyone after the kids get involved in a treasure hunt. Every child gets a book in identical wrapping paper.
- What is striking: The birthday celebration that originated this doesn't seem to be about the birthday boy only, but rather about every kid as they all got a present. It also seems to be about the collective effort they did together hunting for the treasure.
- Questions it raises: Are books a gender-neutral gift?

INTERACTION WITH EDUCATORS



Educators seem to agree on the fact that there is a serene atmosphere. There is no coercion, but rather active listening and attuness to the children's needs. The language of the educators is attentive, nonviolent, kind, empathetic, gentle. Low level of conflict overall. Striking examples of this interaction include the following:

The little duck

- Factual description of events: A little girl sits on one of the educators lap. She talks with another kid, searching for the correct word to convey her message. All the while this educator has a little duck inside her coat. A few minutes later a little girl goes to her arms and she explains the activity they are doing.
- What is striking: How glued the girl is to the educator (Does she miss her parents/caregivers?). How nurturing and patient the educator is (but not belittling, doesn't make a baby voice).

ITALY



CLOTHES



- A little boy has pink gloves. At the meeting, Annalisa (one of the educators working at the school), explained that she puts him the pink gloves because he has forgotten his own gloves. He said it was for girls, but Annalisa explained to him that it wasn't, so he put them on;
- They are all dressed without gender-specific colour codes (they wear a variety of colours — blues, greens, pinks, florals — without any obvious gender-based colour pattern).

PLAY

- Two girls go inside the tent and one of them tells the story of the book she is holding to the other one (she is not reading, but explaining as she flicks through the pages);
- A boy asks one of the girls if she wants to play with him. Doesn't force her, just asks;
- The two boys stay a lot outside to play in a snowball fight;
- The two girls stay more inside next to the fire;
- The girls serve the snacks;
- They play 'house' and assign roles regardless of their gender;
- 4 girls are seen playing together for a long time. A boy is observing them from far for a long moment but at any moment he takes part of the play. Then he left to play alone;
- 2 boys left for a long moment to build a bridge;
- Andreia (one of the observers from QUEST), made a snowman, which attracted the attention of two boys. They build him further and afterwards destroy him which they seem to enjoy very much: one of the boys starts by destroying, the other one reacts very surprised, but then starts to laugh and destroys it too.



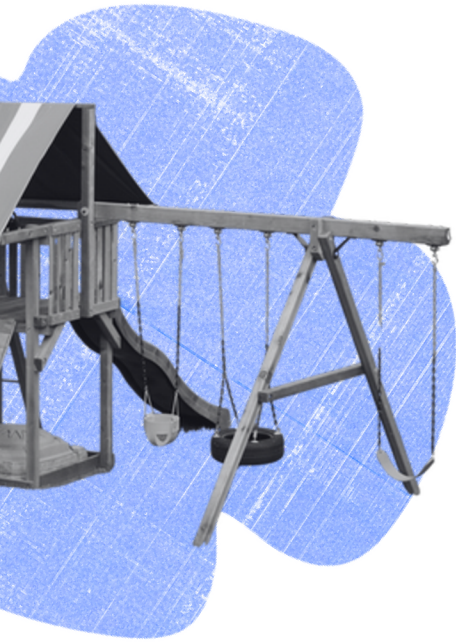
- The group splits in two for a long period of time, one educator with every group. 4 girls stay close to where we (observers) put our bags, and they discover that the shrubs of the wild rose make for a very nice trampoline. They start acting like they are singing with a microphone and putting on a show.

INTERACTION WITH EDUCATORS

- On an observation day where there are only 4 children present (2 boys and 2 girls), it was possible to observe that the girls stay close to the educators during the morning song, sitting on their lap whilst the boys stay together playing in a more aggressive way (throwing snowballs with one of them asking the rest of the group for the song to be sung louder);
- Caretaker role of one of the girls: a boy gets in trouble and she is the one accompanying him to the educators;
- A girl asks one of the educators what's more important: brain or heart and then goes on a lengthy explanation about how the brain is more important because it protects you.

BELGIUM





SPACE

- Kindergarten and primary have lunch in distinct places/areas;
- Educators eat alongside the kids;
- The school has two spaces, one for early childhood and one for primary, with an outdoor space in a small forest at the back of the school director's house;
- There is an area with wooden play equipment, logs, and materials for free play;
- There is a little kitchen outside with a frying pan – throughout the morning no one goes near it to play.

PLAY

- The girl who was alone before approaches the boy who is by the tree – this scene reminds me (observer) of men listening and women talking stereotypes;
- Throughout the afternoon girls approach the kitchen individually, one of them uses the frying pan, then washes and plays “family”: “*bébé le repas est prête*” (baby, the meal is ready), she says;
- One of the girls grabs the hand of one of the boys telling him they have to see the baby;
- One of the older boys picks a branch and pretends it's a gun and that he is shooting;
- This girl seems to be both the gatherer and the provider (picks the food and prepares it);
- At the top of the slide, one of the girls says: *le château, le roi et la reine!* (the castle, the king and the queen!);
- 2 boys fight and 2 girls observe them.



GAMES

- The games are sensorimotor (running, climbing, gaining height, riding bikes, sliding, manipulating sticks and hitting them against tree trunks);
- Symbolic play appears in the playing kitchen area, where they talk and engage in “pretend” games with the food they prepare. They gather various materials from the ground — leaves, sticks, plants — to “cook”;
- There are more relaxed moments, such as when one girl lies on a log, another sits on a different log, takes a stick, makes various movements with it, and starts singing;
- Elsewhere in the forest, a ball game begins — it seems to be football — played by boys, but it does not last long;
- A new game begins where they use their voices to make a long, continuous sound. We (observers) wonder what it is. After a few seconds, we realize it’s a “wolf” game — the wolf howls and runs after other children to catch them.
- A group begins preparing the “fire” area. The girls collect sticks for the fire, while the boys are on the slide.
- Some children play and explore different ways of using a rope.



Discussions

This section explored how children’s dynamics may manifest in forest schools’ kindergartens. The observations were made throughout three different visits to each of the project partner’s schools and lasted for a week in each base camp (three weeks in total).

Firstly, it is important to mention that more material was collected in the first school, Edunat, compared to the other two.

This may come down to a few factors: One, the main languages used by the children in this school were English and Spanish, which all the observers participating in that visit could understand. Two, the weather plays an important role in making the observers comfortable in staying outside the whole day, following the children and taking notes. Whilst in Mallorca, Spain, the weather was still warm, in Italy, for instance, observers were greeted with snow.

Nevertheless, as one of the educators of the project highlights, “there is a universal language of playful communication that we can identify”, meaning that, even if some of the observers were unfamiliar with the languages spoken by the kids in the other two schools (Italian and French, respectively), that didn’t stop the investigation or data collection from happening.

Secondly, though, due to the study’s small scale, findings may only be considered illustrative, some conclusions can still be drawn from the observations made in the three different schools.

Indeed, when it comes to children’s gender-stereotyped behaviour in free play, despite some educators present mentioning a lack of differentiation, when kids are grouped playing together—boys with boys, girls with girls—there seems to occur that boys engage in more violent, physically and spatially dominant play and girls in more risk-averse, domestic-themed play.

Moreover, when gender-conforming roles emerge, they are mainly played out in the language used by the kids with some children reinforcing a binary of weakness/strength between girls and boys. In terms of expression through clothing, It was very clear how observers were attuned to girls wearing pink and when boys wore it, it was considered something worthy of note.

Additionally, as a conversation with one of the educators at Kweebus school reveals, non gender-conforming forms of self-expression can still be read as confusing with kids sometimes rejecting them without questioning. As this educator states: “one of the boys uses hair clips in his hair and has long hair and everyone treats him as “she” instead of “he” – “rien à faire pour qu’ils acceptent” (there is nothing to be done for them—the kids—to accept it).

Lastly, it is key to refer that these in-person observations occurred during the span of a week for each school, meaning that other either less or more pronounced gender dynamics, could’ve emerged were there a longer period of field research.

5.2 Results from interviews

In this section, we will look at a selection of interviews conducted by QUEST to educators from EDUNAT and Educare Nel Bosco Pecorile respectively. Interviewees were asked to expand on their pedagogical approach concerning gender dynamics in their work context and encouraged to provide examples of gender stereotypes or barriers they may have encountered in their practice. The major underpinnings of each interview are detailed below.

PATRICIA AND GABRIEL'S INTERVIEW (EDUNAT)

When asked about encountering gender stereotypes in the language used by the children, Patricia states: "last year it was the first time I heard a comment (like that) from a kid from Italy. A boy during one of our courses said to another child, 'You can't play with that, because that is not for girls.'" This incident stood out precisely because it was so rare. The educators reported that they did not typically find issues with gender stereotypes in their own forest school, nor in their observations of the other partner schools, a fact that led them to muse that "maybe we're doing something right." Observations by the Belgian and Italian teams during research visits to the Mallorca forest school confirmed this, and attribute this dynamic to some of their foundational principles : a pedagogy based on respectful accompaniment, low adult-to-child ratios, supportive families, the inherently democratic nature of learning outdoors, and "the incredible opportunities that Mother Nature provides". Ultimately, they see it not as an innovation, but as a return to a more natural mode of being. As Patricia reflects, "We are not inventing anything, we are returning to nature."



What's more, Patricia and Gabriel mention: "if you go to a recess of any regular school in Mallorca and nearby towns, the outdoor space is mostly paved cement and there are designated areas for football." This observation is starkly confirmed by a review of satellite imagery from public and private schools across the region, which reveals playgrounds dominated by printed football lines, often occupying over 80% of the available space. The researchers explain how this infrastructure reinforces a specific social dynamic: football becomes a macho-dominated game, rarely including girls or boys with different interests.

This stands in direct contrast to the forest school environments in Italy, Belgium, and Spain, where the "installations" are nature itself — inclusive, less gender-stereotyped, and open to diverse forms of play.

According to Gabriel, there is also a nuance of prejudice that surpasses gender when it comes to football in schools, and that intersects with other factors. Children may exclude someone else from playing — boy or girl — based on perceived skill, or height, for instance: *tu no juegas porque no juegas bien, tu no juegas porque es más pequeño, etc.*

This urban space configuration is not, however, a reality unique to Mallorca. Indeed, researchers Honorata Grzesikowska and Ewelina Jaskulska have looked at how boys and girls occupy schoolyard spaces, and their findings are quite telling.



In a report published in 2024, Grzesikowska and Jaskulska consider how—at least in a traditional school setting—the school ground represents a space of greater freedom from adult control and an organised classroom structure, claiming that "it is in this space that stereotypical social and cultural gender roles can be clearly seen being imposed. Here, children encounter both acceptance and exclusion for the first time, with the assessment of their appearance and physical fitness." (Grzesikowska and Jaskulska).

After conducting a series of observations of children's paths in a primary school in Krakow, the researchers found that "the boys' movement patterns (figure 4) involve intense, concentrated movement on the pitch" whereas "the girls' movement map (figure 5) has a different character. It shows the peripheral activity of the students." (Grzesikowska and Jaskulska).

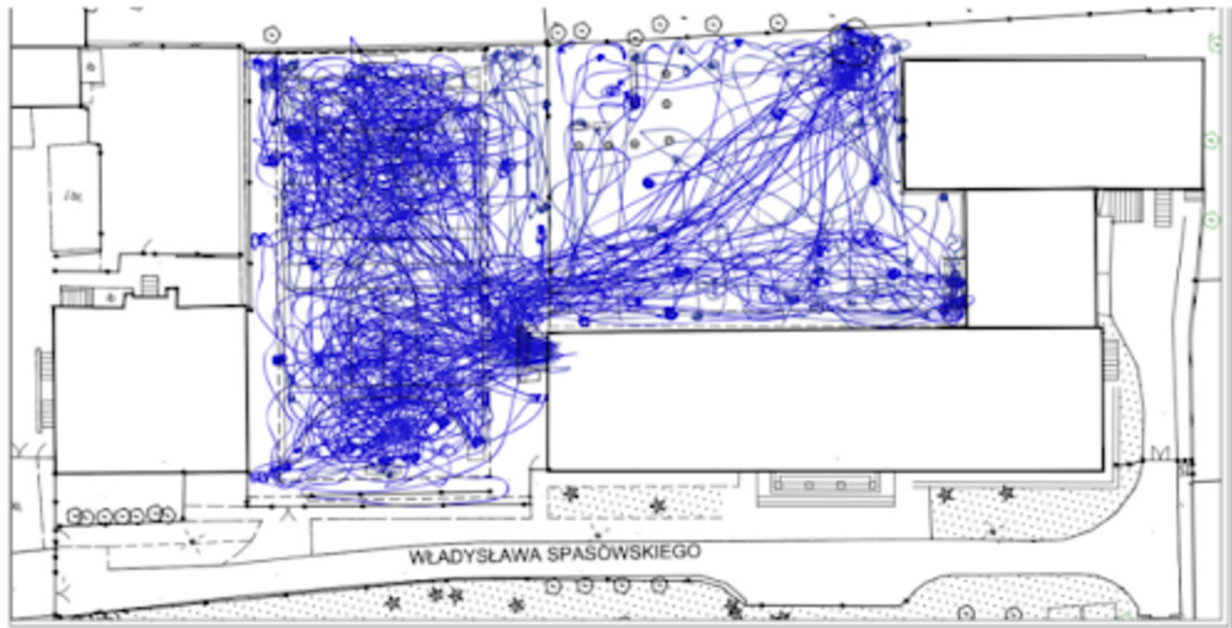


Fig. 4 Map of boys' movement in the school area

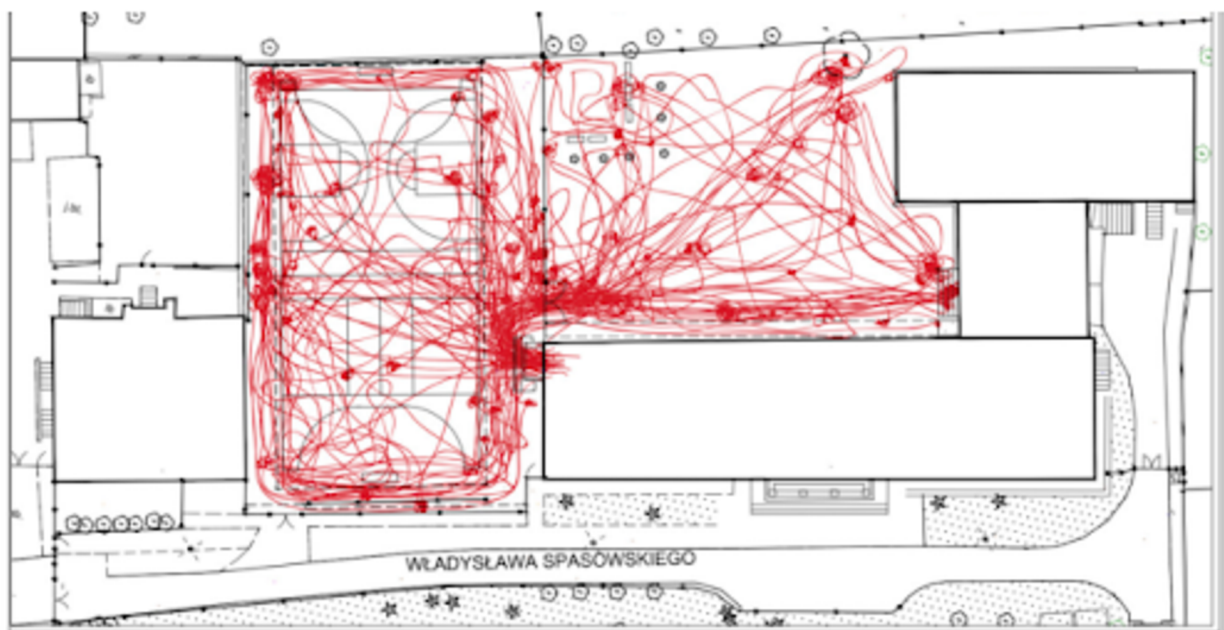


Fig. 5 Map of girls' movement in the school area

Based on the observations and surveys conducted, Grzesikowska and Jaskulska infer that the fact that girls are practically absent in the pitch area of the schoolyard may mean that “despite the desire to use this part of the school space, for some reason girls do not feel “welcome” there or the sports activity they would like to perform does not fit the framework of a classic football or basketball pitch.”

In another study carried out over a year in two schools located in Catalunya, Spain, the same researchers found a similar pattern. Here, as in Krakow, “boys (mostly athletic boys) use the field while all others (girls and boys who are not interested in sports) are excluded.” (Subramanian and Rice).

On the topic of gender stereotypes in their own school setting, Gabriel adds that the environment of a school is not gender-proof. “There are girls who come to the school dressed with tutus, as princesses, and/or with high heels and they walk to the woods in them, not caring if they get ripped, or destroyed. There are t-shirts, and tupperwares from Paw Patrol, Frozen, unicorns, others with a tractor. These things come here and what we try to do is give it the importance that is needed which for us is little.”

Additionally, when kids show up to the school dressed as a character and ask us what we think of their costume, we ask the kid in question, if they are happy and if they feel pretty and comfortable in what they are wearing. It is a matter of returning the responsibility back to the child: *y saber se a el/ella está contenta por lo que es y con lo que tiene por ella, no porque el adulto o alguien de fuera lo determinó*. Both Patricia and Gabriel emphasize: “we don’t want to feed these types of (gendered) behaviours, because society takes care of that by itself”.

They add, nonetheless, that the boys search more for Gabi to construct things and for Patricia in terms of emotional regulation. Despite being aware of this dynamic, the educators confirm that “we try to keep in mind the skills of each person on the team for the tasks (we do not assign based on gender)”. Examples: for emotional conflict resolution – Patricia is the go-to person. Whether for artistic tasks, another educator working at EDUNAT would be the adequate person. *Nos complementamos, pero no es porque queremos imponer nada, sale normal*.

In terms of play: “we do not force anyone to do any specific tasks, for example cooking. We don’t address the question to a specific person/group, we put the materials on the table and if we see there are not many kids, we say something like: *alguien quiere hacer una tarta? Y nadie esta obligado, es libre*. We also try not to neglect any specific group.”

In short, there seems to be a constant review of behaviour, language, posture, and attachment on the educators' side with considerations around cultural nuances and background, as well as the teaching of consent being listed by the interviewees as a priority in their daily work.

FRANCESCO'S INTERVIEW (EDUCARE NEL BOSCO PECORILE)

Francesco has a background teaching kids and teens with disabilities and learning challenges. When being interviewed he stressed the benefits he sees in forest school pedagogy, namely in the socialization of children, and self-directed learning: "The pedagogy of the forest school makes sense to me. The kids learn by doing, with experience, they learn a different way to interact with other kids, instead of being closed off in four walls. I think walls are a problem, because they contain children. When they are contained the kids do not express themselves."

In addition, when asked about examples of gender dynamics at play in the school he is currently working at, Francesco answered the following: "I noticed a lot of differences when compared to my previous experience in traditional schools, because here the kids (pause) here it is difficult to identify what are the games of girls and the games of boys. The beautiful thing is that we can observe and intervene without surveilling them. Here I feel very free and relaxed to observe and listen (when compared to regular schools, public schools in particular, which is the context I know)."

Finally, he concluded that when a stereotype strikes us as violent, "there is a certain impulse to intervene, of course. However, what I notice is mainly cultural. I think it is the cultural context that will slowly change, I am sure."



FRANCESCA AND ANNALISA'S INTERVIEW (EDUCARE NEL BOSCO PECORILE)

Francesca and Annalisa's interviews were recorded separately. However, the main findings are discussed here together, considering the overlapping patterns found in their answers. Following up what Francesco mentioned in his interview, Francesca was adamant about how, in her view, domestic roles are persistent in Italian culture. She elaborates:

"In the games the children play, I've noticed the appearance of more traditional roles. The females being more domestic, or of care and they say things, such as the mom works at the home and the kids and the dad works outside. When I ask them, doesn't the mom work too? They say things such as, yes, she does but in "house things" (implying that it is different because it happens inside the house)."

Moreover, Annalisa builds on this idea, stating that the "boys don't cry" mentality is still present in Italian culture: "We believe that kids should be able to express themselves regardless of their gender. I have noticed that, for example, among boys, the pressure to not outwardly express emotions such as sadness is very present."

Furthermore, she highlights the role forest school pedagogies can play in children's socialization and emotional

regulation, affirming that those who have this experience as children: "know how to relate with another person in a healthy, adjusted way and that I think has a major impact on society."

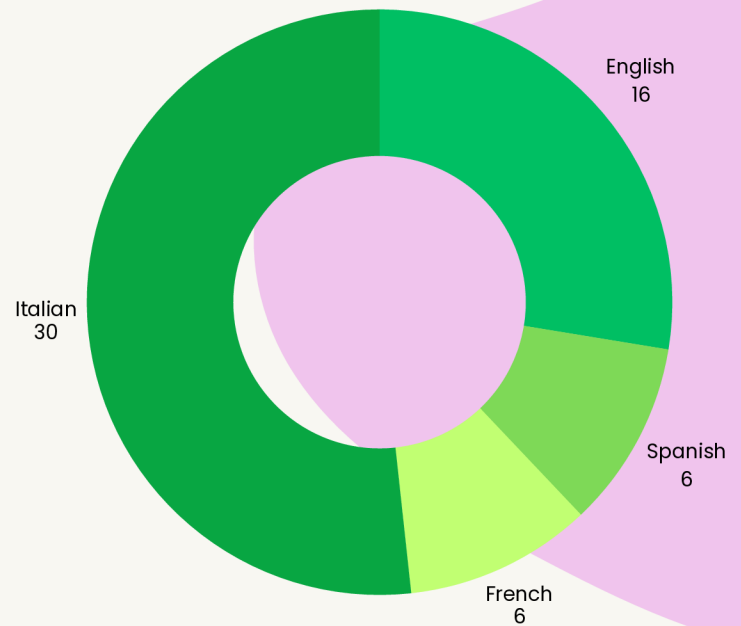
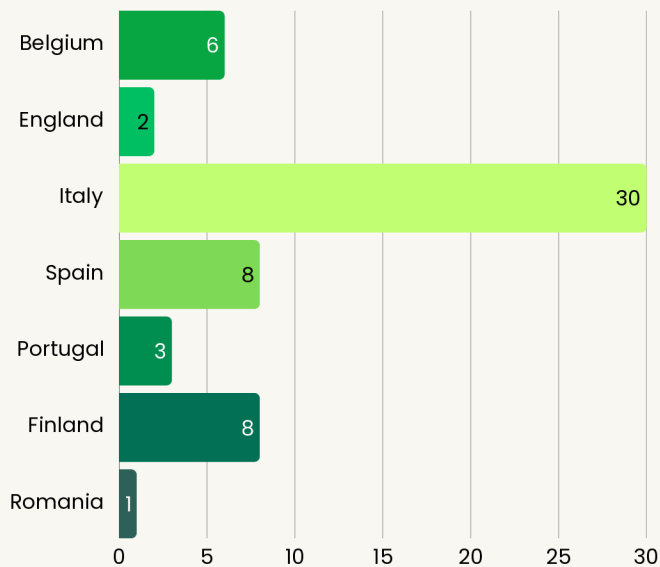
To sum it up, it is noticeable that, for the interviewees, the particular national context in Italy is one that heavily influences traditional gender roles. This raises the question of how the interactions observed by the educators would change, would non-traditional family models be present in the school fabric, such as queer families, adoptive families, and/or communal or polyamorous families, for example.



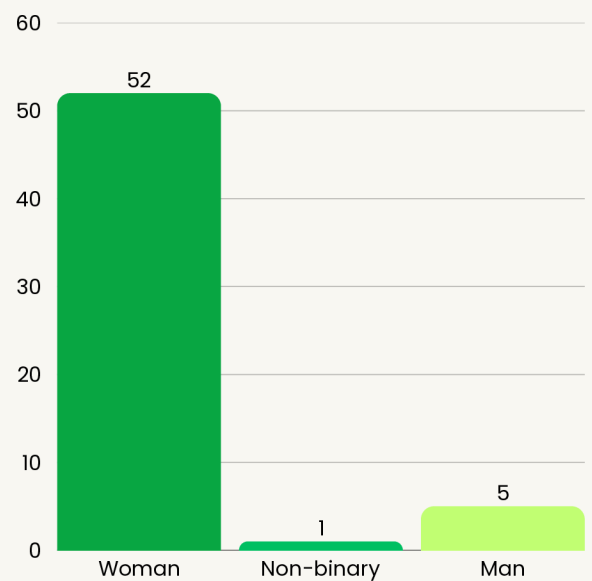
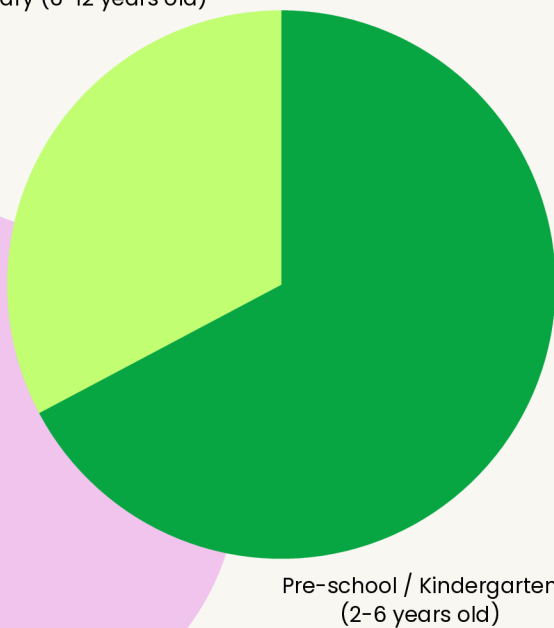
4.3 Results from surveys

GENERAL OVERVIEW

TOTAL: 58

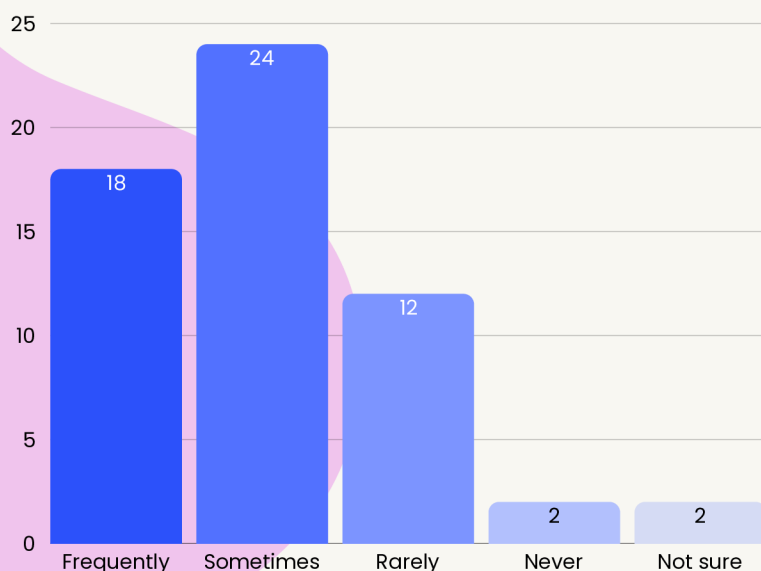


Primary (6-12 years old)



DATA ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

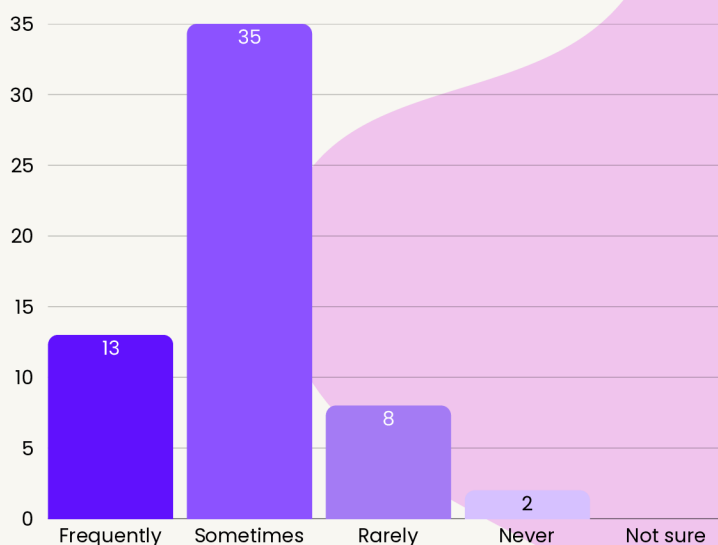
Have you ever looked at your group with a gender "lens"? Have you ever thought about it?



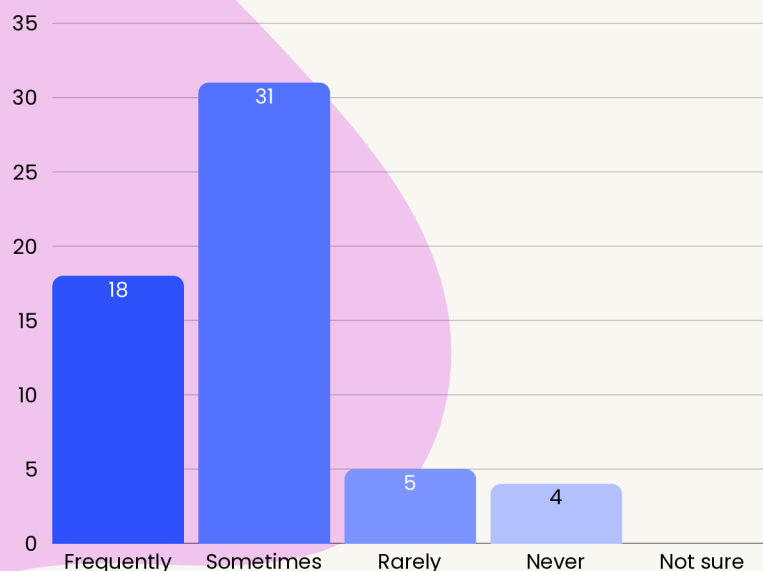
The majority of educators report having considered gender when observing group dynamics in their work contexts in forest schools.

How often do you notice gender-based patterns in how children engage with activities (eg., risk-taking, tool use, nurturing play, free and spontaneous play)?

In terms of activity engagement, around 35 of the educators have noticed gender-based patterns with a somewhat inconsistent frequency, with 15 answering it's something they have frequently observed.



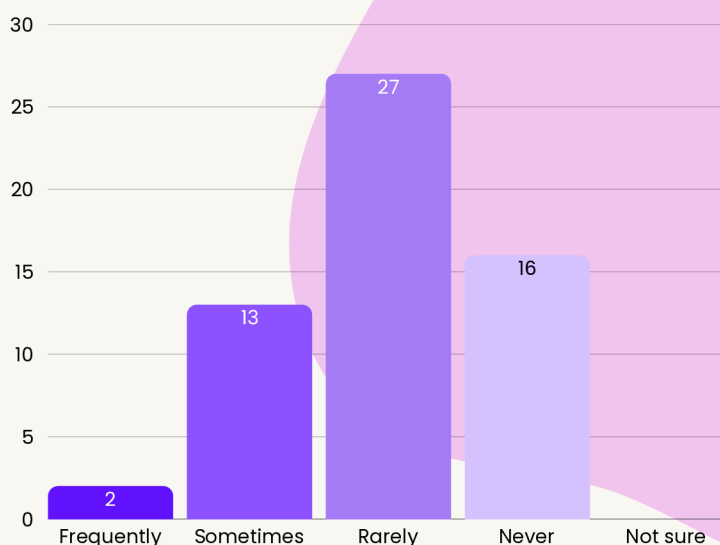
In your experience, do children tend to form play groups based on gender?



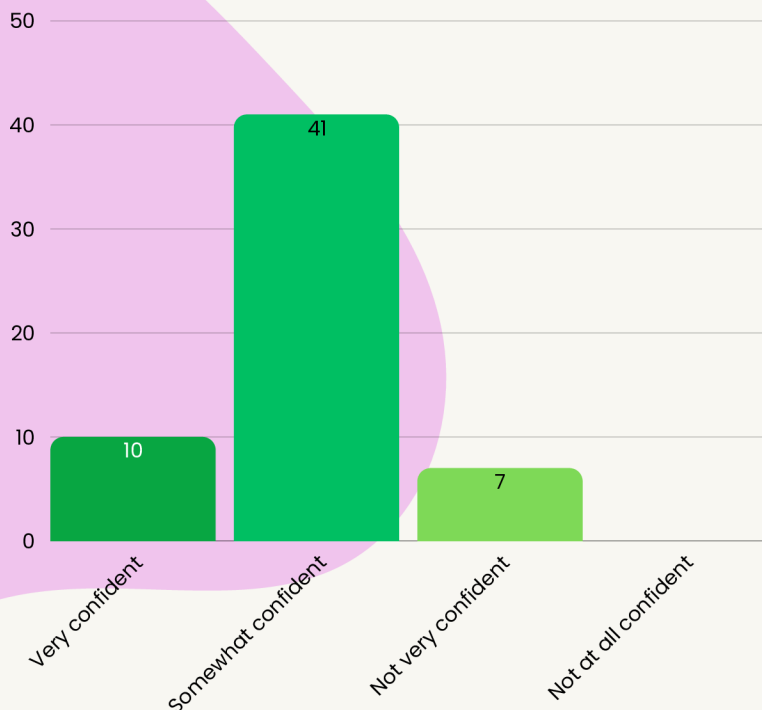
More than half of the educators surveyed state the children sometimes tend to form play groups based on gender, with the next larger number of responses, reporting it is something frequently experienced.

Have you observed children policing each other's behavior based on gender expectations? (e.g., "girls can't climb that high", "boys don't play house / with dolls")

In contrast to previous answers, almost half of the educators surveyed state having rarely noticed children policing each other's behaviours through comments based on gender roles and expectations with the second largest group, around 15 people, affirming never having experienced this type of situation.



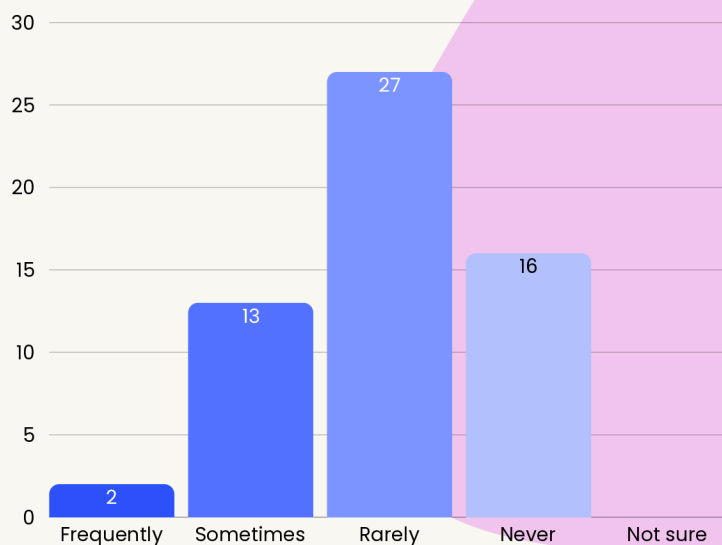
Do you feel confident identifying gender stereotypes or biases in children's play or interactions?



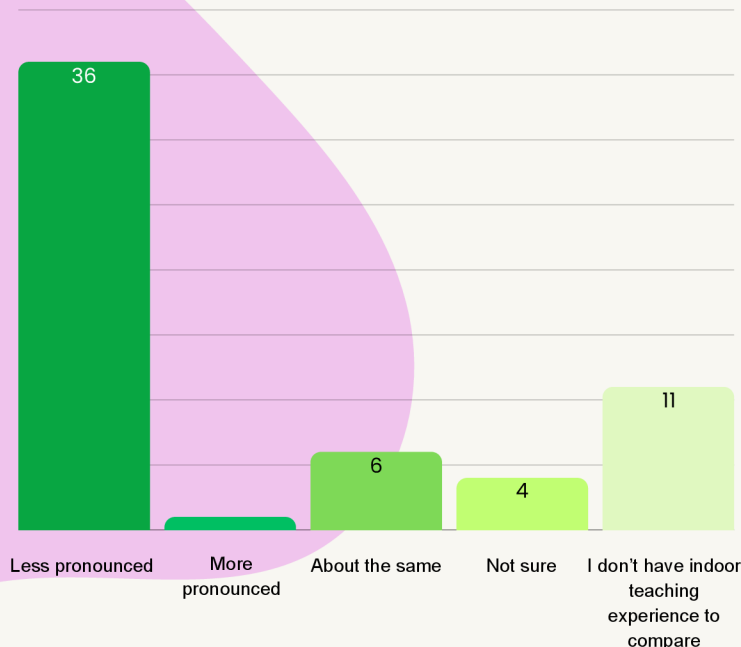
Over 40 educators report feeling somewhat confident identifying gender stereotypes in children's interactions.

How often do you actively intervene when you notice gendered behavior that might limit a child's play or participation?

Most educators either always or often intervene when noticing gendered behaviour playing out and limiting a child's free play, or participation in activities carried out at the school.



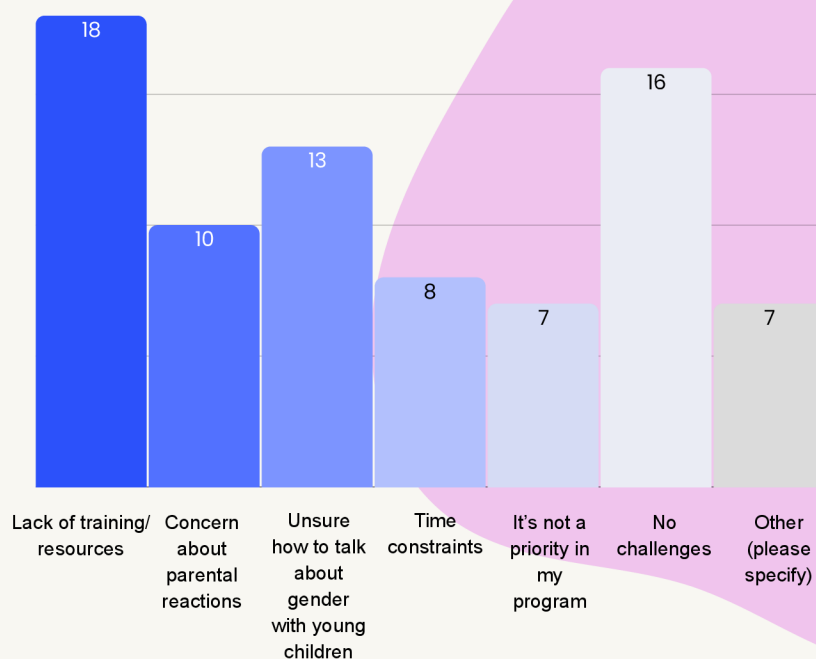
Do you feel confident identifying gender stereotypes or biases in children's play or interactions?



There seems to be a general consensus among forest school educators around gender stereotypes being less pronounced in outdoor learning when compared to other school contexts. However, it's important to highlight that around 10 out of the 58 educators surveyed don't have indoor teaching experience to compare.

How often do you actively intervene when you notice gendered behavior that might limit a child's play or participation?

Between 15 and 20 of the educators surveyed state lack of training and resources as a challenge to address gender dynamics in their teaching settings, followed by a feeling of being unsure of how to talk about gender with younger children, and a concern about parental reactions. Over 15 educators report facing no challenges in the matter.



Besides the multiple-choice required questions mentioned above, the form included two optional open-ended questions. Below are detailed the main findings and tendencies spotted throughout the answers provided by the educators.

Optional question 1: Can you share an example of a time you successfully addressed or navigated a gender dynamic in your group?

When describing examples of how they navigated gender dynamics in a group setting, educators elaborated on stereotypes encountered in the language shared by the children, namely concerning physical abilities and differences in activity engagement (i.e. games for girls/boys, inclusion/exclusion binaries in role playing).

One answer, from the Italian survey reads:

“They (the children) often talked about physical characteristics, such as short hair, which “is for boys”. They found it interesting when we started giving examples of girls, children or women we know who have short hair, and they concluded with “ah yes, that’s true”. It was more difficult when we talked about colours such as pink or clothes in general, but it was nice to emphasise to them that colours are just colours and do not determine who is male and who is female. But these are difficult concepts to dismantle.”

Another answer from the same survey builds on this stereotype concerning long/short hair:

“I remember when someone called a boy with long hair a girl, it was he who told others that he was a boy. We talked about different hairstyles, what it meant for them to be male or female or...”

In terms of gender performativity, it is interesting to see how ingrained some rigid notions concerning attire seem to be present, with educators revealing having heard children in their schools making comments on certain clothing items belonging to only a specific group:

"We were chatting about clothes and a boy said that only girls wear skirts, and I thought, do you think only girls wear skirts? He said, yes, I'm a boy and I don't wear them. Don't you like them? He said no, they're for girls, only girls wear them. Before I could ask another question, a girl (usually very quiet) intervened and said: I'm a girl and I don't wear skirts, I don't like them, they disgust me. He remained silent, thinking. I asked him to explain his thoughts, and he told me that not all girls like skirts. I added that not all boys necessarily like only trousers."

It is, however, important to highlight cultural dimensions and intersectional nuances when analysing these answers. As Sara Salih mentions: "one's gender is performatively constituted in the same way that one's choice of clothes is curtailed, perhaps even predetermined, by the society, context, economy, etc. within which one is situated." (Salih)

Additionally, educators refer back to instances where stereotypes around physical abilities were present: "As for strength, one child once said (in response to a boys versus girls challenge), 'Well, we'll win because boys are stronger.'" Another answer reads: "Touch football game. The boys wanted to play with boys of the same age because they considered themselves stronger and faster and therefore didn't want to play with girls or younger children."

In relation to interventional approaches, the methods mostly present for navigating these gender dynamics seem to be curious inquiring and the use of examples to open children to alternative realities and worldviews. One educator states: "I approached him and asked" why he thought that, another mentions that "With examples and discussion, we were able to reach a conclusion."

Optional question 2: What kind of support or resources would help you feel more confident in promoting gender equity in your outdoor education practice?

Mostly, educators who answered this question highlighted the need for appropriate resources in the form of training and media material, such as books, as well as peer2peer interchanges:

"I would like to train and reflect on this topic together with other educators, exchanging experiences and points of view, materials, food for thought, strategies to use with families, and perhaps dedicated pedagogical supervision courses where we can observe and then reflect on what we have seen."

"Resources for identifying gender dynamics when they occur (what they are, how to tell if they are gender-related, etc.) and knowing how to deal with them in the moment (talking about them openly, as a group or individually, role-playing, etc.)."

Interestingly, an educator from Finland comments on how conducting the work in a non-gendered language may smoothen the process of promoting gender equity in nature-based educational settings:

"In the Finnish language, we don't have gender related pronouns for she/he or his/her...we only have one pronoun "hän" for all the genders – that helps a lot with gender neutrality! It also allows for the gender division in speech to never be limited to just two genders. "Hän" is suitable for all genders, and it doesn't define gender at all."

Discussion

In short, the answers from both multiple choice and open-ended questions tend to reflect an eagerness on the educators' part to develop specific resources in the shape of training opportunities, or courses dedicated solely to the topic of gender dynamics in nature-based education, thus suggesting there may still be not enough literature on the field across the countries examined.

Yet, Finland appears to be an exception to this, with two answers from educators based in the country revealing their confidence on navigating gender dynamics stems from appropriate training on the topic.

Lastly, the commitment to dismantling potentially harmful gender stereotypes is apparent, considering the number of educators confirming they intervene when observing gender roles playing out and inhibiting a child's participation in free play, or engagement with other kids in the group.



06 CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

As part of the Erasmus+ project REGEN - RE-imagining Gender in Education in Nature, this study looked at how gender dynamics play out in nature-based education kindergartens (main target being children aged 2-6), with three forest schools located in Spain, Italy, and Belgium as primary case studies.

Through the initial literature review conducted, it was found that the research dedicated to analyse children's gender dynamics in kindergartens using the forest school pedagogy is still limited within the national-specific context of Spain, Italy, and Belgium. This can perhaps be explained by the predominance of the English-language in the world of academic research, and also by the popularity of forest school pedagogies in the UK and northern European countries, considering how this pedagogical approach is intrinsically linked to these geographical areas in its origins and early developments.

A preliminary research regarding the interplay of gender in early childhood education also revealed recent resurgences in backlash concerning gender-based education and how these are part of a longer tradition of weaponizing children's rights in order to withhold democratic values and push adult-centred priorities that may favour control or restriction over true inclusion.

Furthermore, recurring themes emerged across the results of in-person observations, interviews, and surveys conducted during the study, such as the persistence of gendered stereotypes in the language used by the children with educators interviewed highlighting how much these attitudes stem from the kids' home-context and the constant vigilance that needs to be put in place to prevent these behaviours from hindering their fulfillment and education.

Additionally, educators surveyed highlight the need to develop and use resources concerning gender in nature-education in the form of training and media materials to better equip them in their daily work with the children. Importance was also given to the interchange of best practices among educators across different regions, so as to avoid the possibility of isolation when it comes to national-specific Forest School practices.

Despite growing efforts to promote gender equity in early childhood education, this study highlighted how much of the gender stereotyping observed is deeply rooted in the gender roles children see being performed outside of their school context, which raises the question of how gender-proof can a school actually be in changing these deep-seated automatic associations and whether that is the children's primary caretaker's role or that of the Forest School educators.

Naturally, this study has its limitations. By focusing only on three European-based forest schools, and answers from online surveys and a small number of interviews, some valuable perspectives may have been excluded, particularly those from non-western realities. Future research (REGEN 2!) will extend this investigation by conducting comparative analyses across different regions (Morocco) or age groups (6-12) to investigate further how more or less pronounced gender dynamics manifest in nature-based schools operating in these contexts.

In conclusion, this research revealed how children at forest school kindergartens can engage in a range of behaviours that both affirm and disrupt traditional gender norms. Despite the great potential of outdoor-based education as a space of freedom of expression and exploration, specific training and resources are always welcome so as to support educators in identifying gender-related barriers and inequalities in their work. To address this need, we have also created [practical guidelines for educators working in similar contexts](#).

In addition, the interchange of practices and knowledge should not remain limited to a specific geographical region, but rather encompass perspectives from differing national contexts. Thus supporting the dismantlement of oppressive gender binaries, and progressing towards an educational future in which the land is a place where every child feels free, safe, and accepted for who they are.

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08 APPENDIX



For the curious, here below are some examples of filled-in narrative sheets, one of the methodologies we designed for the project in collaboration with education researcher Selima Negro. Their purpose is to provide a medium for the field observations in our school settings, which can then be catalogued and analysed. It is also an immersive overview of what our work is, different in many ways due to the environments we are in. Originally in Italian

The Piggybook

Educator: Francesca and Annalisa | Date: February 3, 2025

Research questions of the week (selection of general research questions)

- **How are traditional roles perceived by boys and girls?**

We read a picture book together. It tells about a family consisting of the mother, the father and two sons. The mother does all the housework, cooking and then goes to work. The dad works and then comes home and waits for dinner. The children go to school and then come home and wait for dinner. One day, on returning home, they discover that their mother has gone away and left a note: 'you are pigs'. The three realise that they have to start fending for themselves: they cook themselves horrible lunches and dinners, leaving

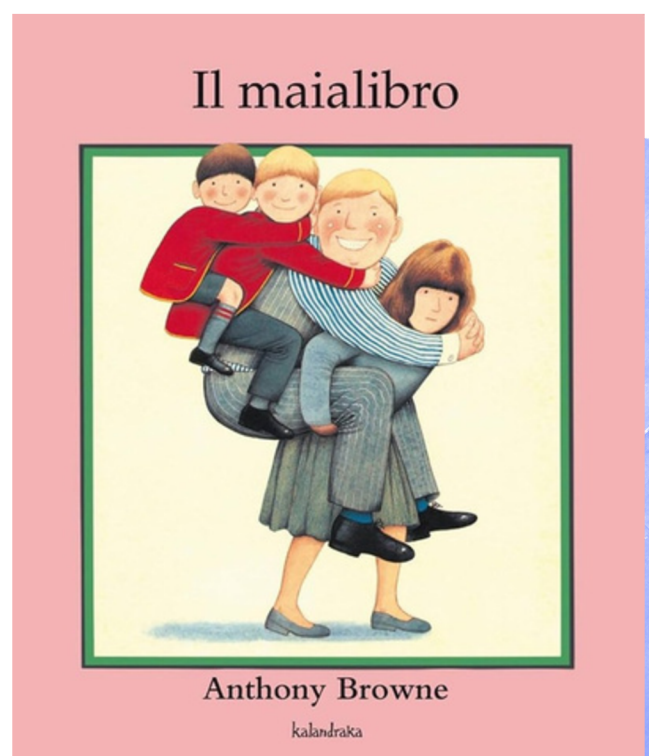
an incredible mess and dirt. They become so enraged that they take on the appearance of pigs. After days in that increasingly undignified state, the mother returns home. The three prostrate themselves at her feet and beg her never to leave them again. From that moment on, things change and everyone shares equally in the household chores.

After the reading, we ask some questions without commenting on the answers:

- **Why does mama leave?**

Cecilia: because maybe they never help her and make her do everything.

Penny: and then because every time they came back they told her 'make us dinner,



make us breakfast, make us everything! And then afterwards she got tired.

C: She was like a slave

Samuel: She was a servant, they never prepared anything and so she couldn't do anything. Instead if you give everyone a hand in the house...But I never give a hand in the house. I just watch cartoons.

Renée: She gets tired of her children always saying 'Mummy when is breakfast ready? Mummy when is dinner ready?'

Matilde: and daddy says that too

- **And in your opinion, how is mum's choice to leave?**

C: good!

Enea: bad!

Me: you Enea don't agree that mummy went away. Why?

E: because then they had to make breakfast by themselves and it sucked, they had to make dinner and it sucked

- **Why does mommy come back?**

C: because maybe... she's a little homesick?

S: or she says 'if my people have learned their lesson, come home. And they have learned it.'

But where did mum live when she left?

Me: don't we know where she went, do you think?

All: to America! To the hotel! In Portugal! In Pecorile!

Teacher Anna: and what did she do when she was away?

C: on holiday!

A: at the fair!

- **Now that we have read the story, what do you think this cover means?**

C: That the mummy does everything, because the mummy lifts the daddy and the daddy lifts the children.

M: Poor thing! Because the mummy has to carry the daddy who is very heavy

P: daddy should carry mummy

- **And the expression of the mum's face how is it?**

S: sad, instead the ones above happy

A: if I were the mum I would say 'let's do all the things together so we have some fun'

E: things together suck

P: together sometimes

R: I would say all the time

What struck me (awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

I am particularly struck (but not surprised) by how the females (Penny, Cecilia, Matilde and Renée) empathise with the mother's situation. Among the males there is either a total absence of empathy for the mother (Enea, who on the contrary empathises with the males at home) or a detached realisation of the situation, but without emotional transport (Samuele).

What questions it raises for me (elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

To what extent are we able, within our projects, to raise awareness of the injustices that the female gender still suffers today?

The other mother does police work

Educator: Francesca | Date: October 28, 2024



Research Questions

- How do issues of gender identity emerge in the language used by children?

Observation 1 (factual description of events)

Children (Joseph, Elijah, Aeneas) play thieves. Then with Matilde and Renée they play family, where the two girls are the dogs and J. is the dad. At first J. wants to exclude Elia and play alone with the girls. Then she accepts him as a police colleague, but J. also wants to be M. and R. Elijah says he is the daddy, but then corrects himself and asks if there can be two mummies. J. agrees. Elia then says she is 'the other mum who had police work'. Enea plays the baby of the family.

The game is mostly between J. and the girls, while Aeneas and Elijah remain for a long time observing the mommy-dog dynamics. What struck me
(awareness of why I observed this episode, identification of salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

What struck me (awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

It strikes me that Elijah puts himself forward as 'other mum' instead of dad; that Joseph accepts this possibility without hesitation. It also strikes me how Elijah perceives himself in this game in a multiplicity of roles: a mother (of two dogs) and someone who works in the police.

I observed this because when you play 'family' you usually discover a lot of things with a closer look. In this case what I notice is the breadth of possibilities one is given

What questions it raises for me (elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

- What jobs does this child feel he/she can do?
- Questions related to the possibilities of acting and being in our lives

Not only Paw Patrol

Educator: Francesca | Date January 23, 2025

General observation of a playing episode for later analysis and the dynamics that took place there.

All the boys and girls in the school are in a circle in the tipi around the fire. They discuss which game to start. They all* agree to play Paw Patrol, except for Matte. Matte starts crying saying that he wants to play Paw Patrol, because he doesn't like the PP game.

Elijah: 'then don't play!'

Joseph: 'if you don't like it don't play with us'

Matte goes very frustrated because he would like to play, but not that game.

Cecilia intervenes:

'We can mix the two games!' She then pauses, in which I observe that she is thinking about how to flesh out her idea. She then continues:

'We can play Acchiapparella but doing PP!'

Instantly Matte stops crying and his eyes light up. They all come out and start playing Acchiapparella, but calling each other 'Chase', 'Marshall', 'Skye' etc.

Matte says:

'You can be whoever you want, don't worry!'. They all play together.

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

I am struck by Cecilia's empathy towards Matte, her realisation of how important it is for him to be in the game at that moment.

I am struck by her creativity in finding a solution to a situation that seemed like it was bound to displease someone. I am also struck by his charisma in carrying his idea successfully and to the applause of all and sundry.

Finally, I am struck by (and softened by) how Matte wants to emphasise that everyone else, even if he doesn't, can 'be

who they want to be', reassuring them that the solution they have found suits them.



What questions it raises for me (elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

Are girls more empathic than boys?

Are they so for 'natural/physiological' or cultural reasons?

Should I positively reinforce Cecilia for finding a creative and empathic solution?

Males with eyelashes, females with coffins

Educator: Francesca | Date October 28, 2024

Research Questions

- **What are the characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) that children associate with gender?**
- **What elements are brought by children from the context/cultural background of the families into the project?**

A conversation begins in the Circle about how one distinguishes between males and females in some animal species. I ask, 'But in humans, how can you tell if one is a male or a female?':

Cecilia: by the beard, by the hair

Me: Because from the hair

C: Because females have long hair

Penelope: Females can also have short hair. And also bald

C: someone with longer eyelashes is a female, instead if you see him a bit more with short eyelashes he is a male

I: Do you agree friends? If the eyelashes are short it's a boy if they are long it's a girl?

Lisa: no

each other Anna: try to measure the eyelashes of your friends and see



TC: Matte has them a bit long. Samu you have them a bit even and squashed, Lisa you too. Mamma mia Penny if you have them squashed!

Me: so Ceci from the observation you're making it doesn't seem true what you were saying before

C: Joseph has long ones!

Samuel: they can be long in males, long in females, short in males... like that!

C: do you know that some males have long hair? Did you know that I met a man at the bar who has hair down to here

Me: and do you also know some females with short hair?

All: Mati!

C: also your mum Lisa and grandma Giuli!

L: also my grandmother

Me: so the hair doesn't tell us if one is a boy or a girl

L: Maybe it's the face. I saw someone in a bar who looked like a boy and who looked like a girl. Since he had the hood on it was impossible to tell if he was a boy or a girl.

Me: If maybe you had become a friend of hers you could have perhaps asked her 'do you feel like a boy, a girl or maybe neither?'

L: It doesn't seem nice to me

Me: Doesn't it feel good to ask a question like that?

...

Me: How do you, for example, feel?

Lisa, Cecilia say they feel like boys today. Penny a female.

Me: because what characteristics do males have?

L: They have beards and sometimes they are stronger

P: I saw a lady at the Conad with a little beard. She was a female

L: a woman with a beard???? P: It's impossible!

I: yes, it is possible

L: I wouldn't want to be a woman with a beard. I wouldn't like it.

What struck me (awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

It struck me that boys and girls start with an idea that comes from a stereotype of how females are presented in films and cartoons (especially): with long eyelashes and long hair. And yet, in their conversations, stimulated by a few questions, they dismantle those stereotypes themselves they realise that they do not correspond to the reality they experience every day.

What questions it raises for me (elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

What are the right questions to ask so as not to 'nag' children and girls and spoil the research?

Diverse leadership: bull and light

Educator: Francesca | Date November 6, 2024

General research questions

- What are the characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) that children associate with gender?
- How do themes about gender identity emerge in the language used by children?
- When is gender identity used in social dynamics?
- What elements are brought by children from the families' contexts/cultural backgrounds into the project?
- How children use space in the forest, allowing for visualization of whether specific areas are gendered?
- How children response to nature-based challenges and physical interactions with nature?

Large group game in the Grove. Initially Penny, who seems to be running the game divides the males from the females. Lisa, however, says she wants to go play with the males. There is considerable energy of movement and loud voices among the males as they throw sticks and snatch branches from trees. P. says it is okay if they go play with the branches, but that she is then "the master." The males yell and growl. Samu and Elijah loudly shout their names "Bull!", "Volcano!"



Samu lifts big logs and moves them, throws them. With an angry expression (in the game) he says "It sucks this barn! It's ugly!" He repeats this several times, in a loud, growling voice. P. says that at some point, when she says "No more Vulcan!" they will have to stop doing those things. Samu continues in his tearing off branches and loudly announcing that he wants to destroy the barn. No one is afraid of him and everyone continues with his game. "Raging bull destroys the barn!!! Angry bull!!!" Even when P. says "enough," he doesn't stop. Elia imitates Samu with the same tone of voice and the same name "Bull" or "Volcano." Screaming and croaking S. says "Bull adjusted on my voice!" His character then gets behind the wheel of a car, but still in the same manner and saying "I destroy the car!destroy cables." P. tries to reintroduce his idea of stopping the yelling when she says enough is enough, S. doesn't go for it and continues in his game of "screamer and destroyer." Elijah, who carefully watches everything S. does, asks P. if he can change his name and says he wants a "boy's" name. He asks S. what his name is and says that "he is also called Vulcan." S. continues. "A bolted car inside the barn!!!!".

When P. calls "everybody out of the barn," they all* (even S.) come out of the grove and rush into the open field. S. guides all* to climb up the chute, intimating (always yelling) to be careful because "cacti hurt." The females seclude themselves for a moment on P.'s instruction to remember their names in the game: "Taiga" (Lisa), "Cloud"(Cecilia), "Unicorn"(Matilda), "Leaf Cloud"(Renée), "Mozzarella"(Joseph). They all then go up the slide. S. yells something and P. says "S., do you play?" and then turning to the others, "But why does S. do the orders he?" Then P. says "indeed, I don't want to be a mistress, I want to be a unicorn" [like the others, ed.] "rather a collared lizard. And my name was Light."

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance to me + potential biases)

I seem to pick up on a dual attempt at leadership in this excerpt. Both children* involved (Penny and Samu) want to somehow direct the fortunes of the game and both have followers ready to listen to them.

While Samu puts forth an energy of "force," both physical and with his gestures and his shouting voice, Penelope tries to convince the others to do what she wants by "taking the lead." She self-appoints herself "the mistress" of these animals (which in the course of the game change from horses to unicorns to lizards), and the girls willingly accept her leadership. On Samu's side, especially Elia emulates him in gestures, in the way he speaks, even in the name he gives himself.

I am struck by S.'s "evidence of masculinity" : his commitment to feeling credible in the eyes of others and to his own in these shoes he does not normally wear. I am struck by the careful way in which this character is constructed: in his movements, his voice, his vocabulary. I am struck by the intensity and also the length of the rehearsal, almost never faltering or stepping out of character. I therefore also denote an ability to concentrate and a strong intrinsic motivation toward the experiment.

Penelope, on the other hand, experiences her persuasive skills here: it is a softer but firm leadership, taking the initiative and "organizing" the game. I think at some point she wants a little more quiet and that S.'s yelling somehow disturbs her, so she tries to establish a rule for him to stop at some point. She is unsuccessful, so she changes strategy and moves all the boys and girls out of the grove. It seems to me that here she deploys a very interesting set of strategies and some creativity.

It strikes me how she scoffs when she notices that S. "gives the orders instead."

What questions does it raise for me

(elaboration of specific research questions to reinvigorate the observation)

- What characteristics do male and female leaders have in this group?
- How do educators react to one rather than the other?
- Are leaderships with traditionally male or female characterizations used by children of both genders within the group?

Dads work outside and mums work inside

Educator: Francesca | Date November 13, 2024

Research Questions

What are the characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) that children associate with gender?

How do issues of gender identity emerge in the language used by children?

When is gender identity used in social dynamics (e.g. inclusion/exclusion, distancing)?

What elements are brought by children from the families' context/cultural background into the project?



Me: Earlier I heard you say that this game was 'forbidden to boys'. Why?

Cecilia: because they are fairies and males want to be something else

me: and if a male wants to enter the game and be a fairy can he?

C: it has to be a male though, a male fairy.

Me: and if a male wanted to enter the game and be a female fairy could he?

C: no, because they are forbidden

me: but they are forbidden because in your opinion they are not suitable to play this game?

Lisa: yes: feeding the plants, cleaning the house, they are not male things

C: those are too girly things, aren't they Lisa?

L: yes, being a fairy

I: so you don't know any males who take care of the garden and clean the house like you are doing?

C: no, not at all

Me: your dads never clean the house?

C: mine don't

L: not even mine

C: only my mum. Because my daddy's at work

L: mine is also at work: really always, there's never a day he's home, not even on his birthday

C: my daddy also works at the weekend

I: and the mothers don't work?

L: mums work at the computer

C: my mum is a clerk

I: so both mums and dads work

L: the dads work outside and the mums inside

C: yes, but my mum doesn't work when she's on holiday, my dad does

I: so both mums and dads work, but only the mums do the housework?

C: yes

L: yes

L: we young people our job is to study, we need to study a lot

I: so both young males and females study, no differences?

L: yes, of course

C: but males don't play fairies so much. So that's why we don't invite them: we're not so convinced... Males are not allowed

L: except males who want to be dogs or dog-fairies

I: so this is a female game. Are there also male games?

L: yes: the knight, the policeman and that stuff

me: aren't there any female cops or female knights?

L: knight very difficult. The policewomen might be easy, but they are still male games

C: males don't usually invite them (the females)

L: so we do the same thing with them

I: and what are the characteristics of boys' games?

L: that you fight and females don't fight

C: the characteristics of the females have to be a bit nicer.

ME: Like what?

C: getting dressed up and cleaning the house. Doing female things.

Me: but I have also seen you who are female and feel female play the game of Fighting

L: yes, but they throw cow shit at us and we don't

Me: but the game of wrestling, you do that too?

L: it's nice

Me: so the wrestling game is for boys, for girls, for both of us

C and L: by both of us

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

I am struck by the clichés they carry, especially about gender roles. In particular the disconnect between these narratives and the dynamics of the game actually acted out (which never involve these stereotypes).

What questions it raises for me

(elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch observation)

- X brings up gender stereotypes. If stimulated* with specific questions, does it challenge them?

Capa e Capo, Pocahontas and Ninja

Educator: Francesca | Date March 4, 2025

Research questions of the week (selection of general research questions)

- What are the characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) that children associate with gender?
- How do issues of gender identity emerge in the language used by children?
- When is gender identity used in social dynamics (e.g. inclusion/exclusion, distancing)?
- What elements are brought by children from the families' context/cultural background into the project?



Matteo, Penelope, Cecilia and Lisa climbed the oak tree under the mud slides.

M: Everyone is afraid of something. Except my sister. She's 11, sorry guys....

C: NO! It's not because she's 11, years don't count.

I change the subject, planning the game about to begin.

C: OK Matte, say some male characters: knight, archer, swordsman, ninja turtle or Ninja. One of these five.

P: I like females

M: knight

C: Lisa for the females there is: Ariel, Frozen, Anna, Pochaontas (very good, the wild warrior), Flora

L: which one is the most powerful?

C: so... the most powerful is...

Pochaontas: she summons all the animals and... FUCK IF THEY ATTACK!

With every song the animals attack.

Pochaontas also has the magic of climbing trees by herself with a liana.

She is the strongest.

L: then Pochaontas

C: OK! I, as team leader, am the Dragon Princess.

L: actually I would like to be the leader

C: eh... but I decided the game... You want to be the ex-chief? And you Matte can be the ex-boss too

L: I want to be the boss afterwards

C: ok, then you're the boss

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identifying salient elements that are new or have particular significance for me)

Three things strike me:

1. Cecilia uses the word 'capo' to address herself. Lisa, on the other hand, uses 'capa'. After Lisa uses the word declined into the feminine, Cecilia also starts using it.

This aspect, knowing C. well and being aware of her marked linguistic intelligence, makes me think that, after hearing the feminine declension of the word, she is more inclined to use it, probably (this is my hypothesis) considering it more appropriate to refer to herself.

2. C. proposes a series of 'male' characters and a series of 'female' characters to join the game. And she proposes to the males exclusively some characters and to the females exclusively others.

I have the impression that it is the 5/6 year olds, i.e. the older children, who make these strict distinctions, whereas it does not seem to me to be an automatism for the younger children.

3. finally, I am struck by the kind of leadership Cecilia proposes: it is clear that she is the one running things or at least coordinating them. However, she is willing, albeit at a later stage, to leave her position to someone else, or at least she states so.

What questions it raises for me
(elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch observation)

5/6 year olds actually make differences that younger children ignore?

Boys VS. Girls fight

Educator: Francesca | Date October 22, 2024

Research questions of the week (selection of general research questions)

- **What are the characteristics (physical, expressive, personal) that children associate with gender?**



Penny 'runs' a game. She first divides a m. 'team' from a f. 'team' (Samuel and Matthew vs. Cecilia and Lisa). At the words. 'So, first practice number one....LOTTA!'. The females throw themselves at the males, who at first don't move, but then the two teams start fighting in pairs (Matte vs Ceci and Samu vs Lisa). After a while, Penny interrupts the fight and asks the males to come with her, while the females 'can play a little' on their own. The females then continue 'training'.

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identification of salient elements that are new or of particular significance to me)

Teams are formed by a girl on the basis of gender. Neither females nor males have any hesitation in participating in the game and on the contrary are amused and intrigued. The wrestling game does not seem to have any gender connotations for them. The teams are also balanced in terms of coordination and there are no significant gaps in terms of physical strength.

What questions it raises for me

(elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

- Are there games in this group of children that have a clearly gendered connotation and are therefore exclusionary towards the other gender? What are they?

Boys' games, girls' games

Educator: Francesca | Date October 7, 2024

Research questions of the week (selection of general research questions)

- **What elements are brought by children from the context/cultural background of the families into the project?**

Conversation in the Initial Circle.

The topic is 'boys' games and girls' games'. Renée feels sorry because Elijah said that 'girls' games are ugly'. Dolls and dolls are mentioned. I then ask if they are girls' games. Cecilia takes the floor and says that 'all toys can be either girly or boyish. Even if they look too girly or too boyish. Like my cousin Dami plays Little Mermaids in the pool with me: he plays the same with me. I play Dinosaurs with Dami when I'm at his house: because he doesn't have girly games. Games are a bit of girls' and boys', they are a bit mixed. Animals are not only boys' games, they are also girls' games. And dolls are not only girl's toys, but also boy's toys. And then the boy or girl decides whether they want to play with the object that has the boy or girl child'.

Penny says that she saw a cartoon where 'a boy got an egg with dolls in it and the girl got an egg with boy stuff'.

Matte says he doesn't like dolls 'the fat ones'.

What struck me

(awareness of why I observed this episode, identification of salient elements that are new or of particular significance to me)

It strikes me, in Cecilia's reasoning, that although both boys and girls can play whatever they want, the distinction between 'boys' and girls' games' is not broken. She notes the complete freedom to play one and the other without distinction of gender, but still matches each gender with its own games: for females the Little Mermaid game and for males the Dinosaur game, in this case. It also strikes me when he says that all games can be either m. or f. EVEN IF THEY SEEM TOO M. OR TOO F. The use of the adjective 'too much' intrigues me.

What questions it raises for me

(elaboration of specific research questions to relaunch the observation)

Does Cecilia make personal reflections generated by the synthesis of contexts inside and outside school?

Are my questions generative and well posed or do they suggest something to my interlocutors?

RE-imagining Gender in Education in Nature



REGEN

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