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Exploring Perceptions on Gender in Early Years among Kindergarten Teachers

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The objective of this Bachelor's thesis was to explore the perceptions that kindergarten teachers hold around the topic of gender in early childhood. Gender development begins in the early years of the child and the kindergarten is a highly influential setting where this process takes place. In Finland, the early childhood education regulations demand staff working on this field to be gender sensitive.

As for methods, data collection and data analysis were performed qualitatively. Data collection was done using interview. As for data analysis, thematic analysis was conducted using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Participants (N=5) were five kindergarten teachers working in the municipalities of Helsinki and Espoo (Finland).

The results showed that gender was defined in both essentialist and non-essentialist ways. In relation to gender development, social constructionist ways of understanding this phenomenon prevailed. Participants' responses also reported differences in the ways gender in the child is approached by different kindergarten members of staff. Furthermore, participants claimed providing non-differential treatment to genders. Moreover, impacts that gender development may have on the child's life later on were acknowledged. Results also showed that most interviewees perceived that their academic background in early childhood education did not provide them with enough qualification on the topic of gender. Finally, interest and initiative in relation to continuing learning seems to exist among respondents. This thesis is a qualitative study and therefore these findings are not universal.

The results lead to the conclusion that the topic of gender in the early years is perceived among participants, at times, in biological terms and, at times, as a social construct. Such situation seems to indicate the existence of different starting points for each professional when it comes to addressing gender-related issues in the child. Training on this topic for early childhood education students and professionals could be further developed.

Keywords	gender, gender sensitivity, early childhood education

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli selvittää varhaiskasvatustyön ammattilaisten käsityksiä liittyen sukupuoleen ja sukupuolen kehittymiseen varhaislapsuudessa. Sukupuolen kehitys alkaa ihmisen ensimmäisinä vuosina ja päiväkoti on erittäin vaikutusvaltainen paikka tämän prosessin suhteen. Suomessa varhaiskasvatuslaki vaatii varhaiskasvatuksessa työskenteleviä henkilöitä toimimaan työssään sukupuolisensitiivisesti.

Metodologian osalta opinnäytetyössä käytettiin kvalitatiivista menetelmää sekä tiedon keräämisen että sen analysoinnin osalta. Datan keruu suoritettiin käyttämällä menetelmänä haastattelua. Data analysoitiin temaattisesti käyttäen yhdistelmää deduktiivisesta ja induktiivisesta lähestymistavasta. Haastateltavat 5 henkilöä olivat lastentarhanopettajia Helsingin ja Espoon alueilta Suomesta.

Opinnäytetyön tulokset osoittavat, että sukupuoli määriteltiin haastateltavien keskuudessa niin essentialistiseen kuin sosiaalisen rakentumisen näkökulmaan nojaten. Sukupuolen kehittymisen ymmärtämiseen liittyen sosiaalinen rakentuminen oli vallitsevampi tapa ymmärtää ilmiötä. Osallistujien vastauksissa kerrottiin myös eroista tavoissa, joilla päiväkodin henkilökunnan eri jäsenet lähestyvät lasta. Lisäksi, osallistujat itse väittivät kohtelevansa lapsia yhdenvertaisesti riippumatta sukupuolesta. Opinnäytetyössä tiedostettiin ja tuotiin esille myös sukupuolen kehittymisen vaikutukset lapsen myöhempään elämään. Tulokset osoittivat, että useimmat haastateltavat tunsivat varhaiskasvatukseen liittyvän koulutustaustansa riittämättömäksi sukupuoleen ja sen kehittymiseen liittyvissä asioissa. Vastaajien keskuudessa vaikuttaa olevan kiinnostusta jatkaa aiheeseen liittyvää oppimista. Tämä opinnäytetyö on laadullinen tutkimus ja sen löydökset eivät siten ole universaaleja.

Johtopäätös tulosten perusteella on, että sukupuoli lapsen varhaisten vuosien aikana käsitetään haastateltavien keskuudessa ajoittain biologisin termein ja ajoittain sosiaalisen rakentumisen kautta. Tämä tilanne ilmentää alalla vallitsevia erilaisia lähtökohtia, mitä tulee eri ammattilaisten valmiuksiin käsitellä sukupuoleen liittyviä asioita lapsessa ja tämän kehityksessä. Varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaisten ja alan opiskelijoiden koulutusta aiheen suhteen voitaisiin opinnäytetyön perusteella kehittää edelleen.

| Avainsanat | sukupuoli, sukupuolisensitiivisyys, varhaiskasvatus |

Contents

1 Introduction

"Through others, we become ourselves."
Lev Vygotsky (1934) [1987]

Over the last decades, there has been increasing preoccupation and research on the topic of gender and a wide range and diversity of contemporary work exploring the links between gender and education (Skelton & Francis & Smulyan 2006: 1-2).

In Finland, early childhood education regulations demand staff working on this field to be gender sensitive (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017). However, different authors and studies (See Alasaari & Katainen 2016: 31; Härkönen & Lappalainen & Nummenmaa & Ylitapio-Mäntylä & Lehtonen 2011: 82) seem to indicate the existence of challenges in relation to gender sensitivity among kindergarten professionals and thus challenges in accomplishing the previously mentioned legal requirement. Reported cases of apparent differential treatment according to gender and perpetuation of encounters that promote gender stereotypes in early childhood education, a certain lack of knowledge and/or interest regarding gender sensitivity among some early childhood education members of staff, lack of systematic practices to promote gender equality in early childhood settings, shortage of proper training and education among members of staff constitute some of the main concerns in relation to achieving gender sensitive education. This situation reveals areas of improvement when it comes to performing and fulfilling an aspect that is legally expected from the early childhood education staff in Finland: gender sensitivity. Such is the context in which the need to explore this topic emerged.

On the previously-mentioned grounds, the current situation calls for the need to explore the perceptions that kindergarten teachers hold around the topic of gender in early childhood at the moment. By doing this, this thesis aims to bring the topic to a more current and updated state within the Finnish context.

The results and findings of this thesis can be potentially utilized by authorities and organisations in charge of promoting gender sensitive education as a tool to achieve better understanding of the present-day situation and to also devise new ways (or improve the already existing ones) of working on the challenges around the topic. In other words, the findings of this thesis may potentially indicate relevant lines of work regarding areas in

which further training for kindergarten educators may be necessary to be developed. As Alasaari and Katainen (2016: 31) state, in order for gender equality to be realized in Finnish early childhood education, gender equality has to be supported structurally through education and planning.

As Rebello Britto (2017: 9) claims, the first years of life are the most critical for a child's future. Early childhood plays a determining role in terms of growth and development, influencing the child's current and future wellbeing. The opportunities, care and services provided to young children will affect their chances to develop their full potential, having on impact on the rest of their lives. The process of gender development begins in early childhood and the kindergarten is one highly influential setting where this process takes place. This is why it is key to explore in a critical fashion how gender is being addressed in early childhood education. Based on the theories explored in the present thesis, the theoretical standpoint utilized for this study is based on the feminist view of gender, as in that gender is socially constructed and, as such, gender will be shaped while interacting with others.

Not using a gender sensitive approach can lead to consequences that may affect an individual's life negatively in different ways. For instance, the World Health Organization (Gender n.d.) – according to which gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men – points out that when individuals or groups do not "fit" established gender norms that they have been taught, they frequently face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion, which can at the same time affect health adversely. Besides, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2016a: 15), inequalities related to gender can be analysed in terms of access to different kinds of resources (such as knowledge-education, work, money, power, mobility, health, well-being, security, time) and in the exercise of fundamental rights (civil, social and political rights). For example, gender differences and inequality are considered to be a central feature of social exclusion and poverty (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016b: 3). Therefore, the topic of gender can affect a person's wellbeing in different levels and lacking a gender sensitive approach can lead to negative effects.

This thesis includes an initial literature review, which provides a background understanding on the topic and current aspects related to it and serves as the foundation for the

research question. The target group of this work are kindergarten teachers (N = 5) working in the Finnish municipalities of Helsinki and Espoo. Data collection was done using interview. As for data analysis, thematic analysis was conducted using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. This study is a qualitative research, thus the findings hereby provided are not universal.

The working life partner for this thesis is the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project, whose task is to promote gender sensitivity in early childhood education in Finland.

2   The "Gender equality in kindergarten" project

The "Gender equality in kindergarten" project (in Finnish, its name is "Tasa-arvoinen päiväkoti -hanke") operates under The Feminist Association Unioni (in Finnish, Naisasialiitto Unioni), which is an antiracist and feminist association. The task of the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project is to promote gender sensitivity in early childhood education by delivering free-of-charge trainings on this topic to staff working in the field of early childhood education in Finland. At the moment, their training is offered online and nationwide. (Alasaari 2018a.)

Not aligned with any political or religious views, the project is influenced by research stating that children have different rights, responsibilities and opportunities in early childhood education regarding gender. The ideological standpoint of the project is feminist and norm critical, which means that the project views strict gender norms and stereotypes as harmful for everyone (girls, boys, others) and, thus, it highlights the importance of deconstructing them. (Alasaari 2018a.)

As Alasaari (2018a) states, the roots of the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project are based on activities developed by volunteers (such as educational professionals from different fields and parents), aimed at improving gender equality in early childhood education. For this purpose, the project has worked on researching equality in kindergartens, educating early childhood education staff and influencing political processes.

The "Gender equality in kindergarten" project is currently funded by the Finnish National Agency of Education (in Finnish, Opetushallitus) and operative during 2018-2019, period

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during which online courses about gender sensitive education for early childhood education staff have been organized (Alasaari 2018a).

Having the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project as a partner is essential as a starting point for this thesis, acting as a source of information and consultation regarding the topic, through its website and through the various different contacts held with Nea Alasaari, manager of the project. Furthermore, the project constitutes a well-established platform for channelling the results of the current study into an already existing operational setting that may benefit from these results and may find them relevant for the development of future educational plans and developments of the project.

3 Gender, gender development and considerations in the Finnish context

In this section, an initial exploration of how gender is understood by different schools of thought is presented, followed by a definition of related key concepts. Next, the gender development process and the role that the social context in general and that kindergartens in particular play in the child's gender formation is discussed. Furthermore, influences and impacts that gender development has on the later adult life of the child are explored. Finally, issues related specifically to the Finnish context – legal aspects and academic qualifications about gender in the early years currently provided to professionals qualified as kindergarten teachers – are discussed.

3.1 Gender

3.1.1 Different conceptualizations of gender

It is of particular importance to consider different perspectives about gender, which reflect a particular ideological standpoint and, as a consequence, imply certain assumptions and approaches associated to the topic of gender.

Following Beckett and Taylor (2016: 99), until recent times, dominant thinking about the topic assumed that differences between genders and variations in their respective ways of behaving were mainly the result of "nature". The statement that boys/men and girls/women are simply born differently was relatively strong and widespread some decades ago. However, there has been growing research pointing out that a great number

or even (as some theorists would argue) most of the "masculine" and "feminine" features are not the result of nature, but of nurture.

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' carry different meanings to different theorists and sketching out some history around the terms can provide an understanding of the major different ideologies when it comes to discussing gender. Historically, two major broad schools of thought can be identified when conceptualizing gender: the biological essentialist approach (also referred to simply as "essentialism" or "biological determinism") and the feminist approach. (Mikkola 2007.)

According to Hines (2018: 20-21), essentialism is a school of thought claiming that gender differences derive from innate disparities in the biological make-up of men and women. The biological essentialist perspective proposes that women and men possess different chromosomal and hormonal variations that impact their social roles respectively: hence – they argue – the core essence of masculinity and femininity. As a consequence, at the heart of biological essentialism lies the idea that certain qualities (for instance, intelligence, creativity, masculinity, femininity, propensity to aggression, among others) are innate and natural traits, rather than a product of circumstances, context and upbringing: males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally (Chandler & Munday 2011: 33). Viewing "sex and gender" as an equation, as coextensive, human females are women and human males are men (Mikkola 2007).

If essentialism is taken as an ideological starting point, differences between the genders are seen as "natural" and the derived inequalities between them as inevitable. As Boaler and Sengupta-Irving (2006: 218) state, laying down distinctions between masculine and feminine has, at times, served to propagate theories of inferiority and inequality, hiding how context and practice actually create gender inequality. Considering previous theorization on the topic, Gaunt (2006: 524) states that biological essentialism basically rationalizes and legitimizes gender polarization and male dominance by viewing and presenting them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the women's and men's intrinsic biological natures. This view is often times internalized by individuals and, thus, favours a social construction of "women's and men's" identities that conform to such views.

On the other hand, following Mikkola (2007), feminism has historically disagreed with and challenged essentialism and has proposed a distinction of the "sex" and "gender"

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concepts: "sex" refers to human females and males based on biological features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features), while "gender" denotes women and men based on social factors (social role, position, behaviour or identity). The distinction between sex and gender also enables them to be separable categories under which, for instance, a sexed male can yet be gendered a woman, or vice versa. By making this distinction, the feminist school of thought has aimed to counter the essentialist view that "biology is destiny". In order to challenge biological determinism, feminists have stated that behavioural and psychological differences stem from social – rather than biological – causes. In this sense, Simone de Beauvoir (1972: 273, 25) famously claimed that "one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman", and that "the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature". Traits commonly linked to "being a woman" and "being a man" – feminists argue – are not caused by anatomy or chromosomes. Rather, they are culturally learned. (Mikkola 2007.)

All in all, feminist arguments against biological essentialism propose that gender differences derive from cultural practices and social expectations, which is nowadays widely referred to as "gender is socially constructed". This means that genders and gendered traits (for example, being nurturing and caring, being ambitious) are the product of social practices. (Mikkola 2007.)

Following Rodino (1997), in their conception of gender as being directly linked to "biological" sex, essentialists view gender in binary terms. In several Western societies, gender polarization is often accompanied by androcentrism, a system in which "male" is presented as the neutral standard and "female" as the deviant other. Rodino combines different authors' previous research to reflect about gender polarization and states it is utilised to rationalize oppression. Those individuals who do not fall neatly into the male or female categories face different consequences, such as ostracism, discrimination, and repression. Besides, those who do fall neatly into the female category may face a similar fate, since they are seen as inferior in comparison to men. In an androcentric system, those who constitute an "other" to heterosexual, masculine men face oppression. Therefore, reproducing the binary gender system is functional to and maintains - rather than weakens - patriarchy. (Rodino 1997.)

In sum, essentialism suggests that gender differences are genetic and ahistorical and that society can be seen through the "lenses" of gender polarization: genitalia is fate and gender can only be conceived in binary terms. This way, biological essentialism helps reproduce patriarchy by rationalizing the domination and control of women. (Rodino 1997.) On the other hand, Rodino (1997) points out that using a feminist approach and conceiving gender as a construction contributes to demystifying and dislocating the binary gender system and the naturalization of patriarchy.

3.1.2   Key concepts: sex, gender and gender sensitivity

After laying down the initial discussion around the topic of gender, some key concepts will be defined below. The definitions hereby presented have been extracted from the glossary provided on the website of the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project (Glossary n.d.). As it has been stated before, both the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project and the writer of the present thesis use a feminist ideological approach.

> Sex is biological in nature and refers to an individual's internal and external genitalia, the amount of chromosomes they have as well as their hormonal levels. (Glossary n.d.)

> Gender, on the other hand, is always socially constructed. It is a term that refers to the cultural and social conceptions that have traditionally been associated with masculinity and femininity in a society. These conceptions are concretely mirrored in the way men's and women's gender roles have traditionally been seen. Gender roles change in time and are culture-specific as demonstrated by the improvements in women's rights in the 20th century, for instance. Cultural habits allow different things for different people. For instance, in some cultures with rigid gender roles, it is common for male friends to be affectionate with each other, hold hands, and kiss goodbye. (Glossary n.d.)

From a feminist point of view, gender is not simply a role. Instead, gender constitutes a complex and dynamic set of ideas, feelings and actions regarding what it means to be a man or a woman in a certain time, place and culture (MacNaughton 2006:134).

> Gender sensitivity refers to the recognition of the ways in which assumptions, prejudice, or perceptions associated with different genders in a given cultural and social context are visible in everyday activities and ways of speech. Gender sensitive educators understand the nature of gender roles as concepts that are changing and changeable in time. They also acknowledge the effects of stereotypical depictions of gender both on a societal and an individual level. This means, for instance, questioning everyday generalizations of gender such as "all girls like playing princess". A gender sensitive educator understands that a child's personality is always more than the sex they were assigned at birth. (Glossary n.d.)

3.2   Gender development

3.2.1   The social construction of gender

Following Davis (2010: 323), educational thinking about how we learn has been strongly influenced over the last decades by the concept of construction. Thus, contemporary views have moved away from the Skinnerian idea that knowledge can be "inserted into the learner's mind" and have come to join constructivist views that learners construct their knowledge.

After moving forward from the initial debate of "transmission" and "construction", in a deeper level of analysis and already within the constructivist field, it is relevant to point out that several contemporary constructivist theorists put special emphasis on the role of the social world. A somewhat individualist element characterizes those constructivists who draw on the Piagetian tradition, whereas constructivists following the Vygotskian view are more inclined to place great emphasis on the social world and reject the idea that the learner is alone when constructing knowledge. (Davis 2010: 323.) In his soci-ocultural view of human development, Vygotsky suggests that the child's development always occurs as the result of collective actions, which are located in society. During his interactions and activities with others, the infant acquires new skills and knowledge. Besides, from a Vygotskian point of view, language constitutes a key tool for the child's internalization or appropriation of culture, since it encodes culture and it enables the child to participate in it. (Corsaro 2015: 13.)

The view that gender is socially constructed is intimately associated with what is known as "gender socialisation": females and males become women and men respectively through a process whereby they acquire feminine and masculine traits and learn feminine and masculine behaviour respectively. Masculinity and femininity are seen, not as products of nature, rather - and quite the opposite - as products of nurture and of how individuals are brought up. It is a construction process and the mechanism of this construction is social learning. Following this viewpoint, gender differences have predominately cultural – rather than biological – bases, which emerge from the differential treatment provided by the social context. (Mikkola 2007.)

As Mikkola (2007) points out considering previous research, it must be observed that gendered behaviour often comes to reinforce women's subordination so that women are

socialised into subordinate social roles: they are socialized to become somewhat passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men. However, given the fact that these roles are simply learned, it is in our possibilities to create more equal societies by deconstructing, challenging and thinking critically about gender roles and what is being taught to children since early age. The kindergarten is, naturally, a setting of major influence on gender socialization.

As it is next presented, several studies indicate intimate links between influences from the social context and the way the gender-related processes and conceptions are shaped in the child.

Freeman's (2007: 357) research constitutes an example of how young children socially construct understandings of gender during the early years of life, how they gender-stereotype toys by the age of three years old and how they are able to predict their parents' opinions about gender-typical and cross-gender play. Freeman's study involved 3- and 5-year-old children and asked them to identify different toys (such as skateboards, tea sets, motorcycles, dolls, gowns) as "girl toys" and "boy toys". It also asked them to make predictions regarding their parents' reactions to their choices of gender-specific toys. Besides, these children's parents were surveyed in order to explore their preferences about gender-specific toys and behaviours. Although in their answers many of these parents claimed to reject common gender stereotypes, the study showed that their children predicted that parents would consistently apply these stereotypes, affecting their approval or disapproval of children's choices to play with gender stereotyped or cross-gender toys, which acts as reinforcement. This way, the children constructed stereotypical definitions of which toys each sex should play with. The children believed that cross-gender choices would be less well received with their parents, although the parents claimed to be largely gender-neutral. According to Freeman's findings, this study illustrates that these children believed that their parents showed high support to their play with gender-typical toys but were less accepting of cross-gender choices. The study showed a clear mismatch between parents' self-described beliefs and children's perceptions of the messages they had received about genderized play. (Freeman 2007: 362-363.)

In a similar fashion, Turja and colleagues (Turja & Endepohls-Ulpe & Chatoney 2009: 362) point out that the development of gender-typed attitudes and behaviours begins to be shaped at a very early age, on the one hand, seemingly as a consequence of positive

reinforcement of gender common behaviour and punishment of gender inappropriate behaviour given by significant others (such as parents, educators, peers). However, on the other hand, attitudes also seem to develop in a certain direction as a consequence of the child's own cognitive activity. Once the child has built a concept of self as male or female, they will scan their environment for information about which things, materials, activities, tools may be considered to be male or female and will be thus eager to behave in a gender-appropriate way. (Turja et al. 2009: 362.)

In terms of developmental stage and age, Turja and colleagues (2009: 362) claim that young children start to develop gender role stereotypes at the early age of two and that by the age of two or three children start to show preferences for certain toys which are considered to be allocated for their own gender. Freeman (2007: 358) brings different researcher's views together and also states that children construct their understandings of gender at an early age. When infants are about 24 months old, they start to define themselves as ''girls'' or ''boys''. Besides, by the age of five, children can already have rigid definitions regarding how girls and boys should behave.

In a similar fashion, MacNaughton (2006: 128) states that data obtained by previous research shows that under two years of age and in the absence of external cultural gender markers (e.g. certain type of haircut or clothing), it is extremely difficult to distinguish between boys and girls, but that around the age of three years old, most children display gender differences in terms of their behaviours, preferences and desires and that after the age of three years old, most children will increasingly exhibit gender-stereotypically constructed ways of being: they will think, react, and play in typically gender-stereotyped ways.

Furthermore, Bornstein and colleagues (Bornstein & Mortimer & Lutfey & Bradley 2010: 32) analyse the parent-child transaction and point out how parents socialize their children's gendered beliefs and ways of behaving and are in charge of arranging and organising the children's participation in activities and environments inside and outside the family.

It is also important to remember that socialization is not only influenced by key actors in children's lives (such as parents and educators), but also powerfully moderated by other forces that affect the infants' context in a structural way, such as social class, culture, and time (Bornstein et al. 2010: 28).

All things considered, Francis (2006: 11) states that it is irrefutable that gender behaviour is to some extent socially constructed, since gendered behaviour and those assigned as appropriate to one gender or another vary among different cultures and historic times.

3.2.2   Kindergartens as a key social arena for gender construction

Not only at the child's household and family circle, but also at the kindergarten, adults can often unconsciously treat female and male children differently. Carlson and Meyer (2014: 1) refer to the significant role played by educational institutions in the normalization of gender differences by disciplining, regulating and producing of differences in certain ways that are intelligible within the hegemonic culture.

Cultural gender markers and products are assigned and provided to children in gender-based ways: children are often dressed in gender stereotypical clothes and colours (blue for boys, pink for girls, more loose and movement-friendly clothes for boys, dresses and tighter and more movement-limiting clothes for girls). Furthermore, adults tend to reinforce certain 'appropriate' behaviours and allocate gender stereotypical toys and games differently: even today girls are discouraged from playing "rough" games and are more likely than boys to be given dolls, cooking toys, make-up and beauty tools to play with, while boys are told not to 'cry like a baby' and are more likely to be given construction tools, guns, superhero and explorer toys.

Mikkola (2007) notes that children are not only strongly influenced by their caregivers, but also by the materials and messages that are made available around them, such as books, songs, advertisements, TV programmes, movies, etc. It is commonplace to see such cultural products spread all around kindergarten: for instance, children's books portraying males and females in stereotypical ways. Males are presented as explorers, adventurers, heroes and leaders, and females, as carers, helpers, followers. Such are socialising influences that convey messages about how females and males should be and behave and what is expected from them, shaping individuals into "feminine" and "masculine" since early age. Also Turja (2016: 205) states that speech, actions, multiple forms of messages sent constantly to children by books, films, among others, affect the development of children's identity by showing what is normal, desirable or permitted in the case of being a girls and in the case of being a boy. There have been efforts from certain publishers to have an alternative approach by making their characters gender-neutral or

genderless creatures (e.g. Teletubbies), but they constitute a relatively small share of the cultural production aimed at children (Mikkola 2007).

It is of particular importance to observe how the child's internalization of gender stereotypical behaviour can take place already within the phase of the early years. As MacNaughton (2006: 130) states, some feminists (feminist post-structuralists) claim that traditional ways of being feminine or masculine are more powerful than those which challenge traditions, because they are more pleasurable. Therefore, to ask a child to change from being sexist to being non-sexist constitutes a highly demanding emotional request, since it means that the child will have to give up ways that are pleasurable. For example, if a four-year old girl who has learnt to like playing with dolls is asked to start enjoying playing with trucks, it is simply bewildering to her, because she has learnt to perceive playing with dolls as pleasurable and playing with trucks as not pleasurable. From a feminist post-structuralist view, pleasures result from the connections between power and discourses and the most powerful gender discourse in young children's lives are those that define what the normal ways to "be a girl" or "to be a boy" are. Children internalize these discourses because they find pleasure in "being normal" for their specific time, place and culture. (MacNaughton 2006: 131.) This is why early intervention in kindergarten is crucial.

To summarize, all these above-mentioned phenomena take place, not only at the children's family level, but also at early childhood education settings, where children tend to spend most of the day. Hence, the present thesis is based on the idea that the kindergarten is a key social arena during childhood and - as such - constitutes a highly influential setting where the process of construction of gender occurs. This influence has been pointed out by previous research. Thus, kindergartens have a major responsibility and impact on the development of gender in the child.

3.2.3   Gender development and its impact on the child's later adult life

Promotion of self-esteem and self-concepts go hand in hand with self-discovery, self-expression and self-fulfilment (Martin & Martin 2010: 95). Therefore, child's gender exploration carries the potential of facilitating positive experiences in relation to the development of the child's self.

According to Teräs (2005: 59), gender socialization will not only shape and give direction to the individual's abilities and interests, but it can even have the power of preventing them from emerging in the first place. In a similar fashion, Ylitapio-Mäntylä (2012: 23) argues that the gender stereotyped ways of thinking learned in early childhood affect the individual choices from hobbies to education and work life later - in youth and adulthood. Also the Finnish National Board of Education points out that segregation regarding educational choices as well as professional and career plans starts being moulded already in early childhood education (Jääskeläinen & Hautakorpi & Onwen-Huma & Niittymäki & Pirttijärvi & Lempinen & Kajander 2015: 10).

In line with Teräs (2005: 59) and in a more structural way of analysing the influence of gender in the infants' later adult life, gender socialization will not only tell children how to relate to their environment and their culture, but also to themselves, since it will shape the deep fundamental basis for the individual's perceptions in terms of who they are and how they present themselves.

Consequently, according to Härkönen and colleagues (Härkönen & Lappalainen & Nummenmaa & Ylitapio-Mäntylä & Lehtonen 2011: 82), special attention should be put into the area of early childhood education, since the identity and perceptions of young children regarding people, life, the world, language and ways of being and thinking start to be built since a very early stage of life. Here it can again be seen how early childhood education is a very significant arena in terms of construction and reconstruction of gender.

As Corsaro (2015: 23-27) points out, children do not simply develop on an individual level, as individuals, but their development also affects and influences peer cultures collectively, thus they have an impact on the wider society or culture and potentially change can take place across generations. This is how children have proved to constitute influential actors, they are actively contributing to production and change in society while producing their own child cultures and while participating in the adults' culture simultaneously. Hence, children can be seen as not only producers of meaning within their own peer cultures but also in the adult world. This way, Corsaro reminds us that children and their childhoods are strongly influenced by the societies and cultures where they belong, but that, in turn, also the society and culture of which the child is a member are also shaped by processes of change throughout history. Societal change is facilitated by such

historic inter-generational changes. Today's children are tomorrow's adults and thus current children's experiences will affect their lives as the adults of tomorrow's society.

3.3   Considerations in the Finnish context

In this section, a consideration of issues related specifically to the Finnish context – legal aspects and academic qualifications about gender in the early years currently provided to professionals qualified as kindergarten teachers – is presented.

3.3.1   Legal considerations in Finland

A large number of children under school age spend a significant part of their time at early childhood education services: in Finland, there were altogether 243,946 children in early childhood education in 2016, which represents approximately 68.1% of the population aged 1-6 years. It must be taken into account that there are large differences among the age groups in terms of the children's participation levels in early childhood education: children under the age of 1 represented 0.7% of participation in day care, one-year-olds 28% and two-year-olds 54%. (Säkkinen & Kuoppala 2017: 1-2.) As such, the early childhood education services in Finland are organized and provided on certain regulatory grounds that often refer to gender-related aspects, which must be taken into consideration.

The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016 (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017) lays down the values and principles related to the topic of gender and identity in early childhood education in Finland. According to it, children have the right to express themselves, their opinions and thoughts, and have the right to build their views of themselves and their identity. Moreover, the early childhood education system promotes the democratic values of the Finnish society - such as equity, equality and diversity – and, in that context, children must be provided with the opportunity to make choices independently of aspects such as gender, origin, cultural background, among others. In this sense, members of staff are responsible for creating an atmosphere that respects diversity. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017: 22.)

Furthermore, the following passage shows how the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care refers to gender sensitivity specifically:

> The way in which attitudes related to such aspects as language, ethnicity, worldview, disability, gender and its diversity manifest themselves in people's talk, gestures, actions, and operating methods should be also considered. Models of interaction and language use as well as ways to act according to stereotypical presumptions are passed on to the children. Early childhood education and care is gender sensitive. The personnel encourage the children to make choices without gender-related role models or any other stereotypical roles or presumptions related to other personal characteristics. The personnel recognise features that lead into inequality in encounters between the children and intervene in them with tact and consistency. Positive and encouraging interaction supports the development of the children's identity and self-esteem. (2017: 32.)

As Alasaari and Katainen (2016: 31) state, in Finland, equality in terms of treatment – both for children and adults – is guaranteed by the Finnish legislation and gender-based discrimination is prohibited. However, despite equality being mentioned in the above-mentioned guidelines and given the fact that promoting it is one of the key goals of early childhood education and care in Finland, there seems not to be a clear understanding on how to promote equality in a goal-oriented and systematic way. Besides, without a concrete plan to promote equality, equality work often remains undone. Therefore, this is an area that calls for development. (Alasaari & Katainen 2016: 31.)

3.3.2   Academic qualifications on the topic of gender among kindergarten teachers

While working in cooperation with the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project, some concerns related to the educational background and qualification of staff members working at kindergartens emerged. Nea Alasaari – manager of the project – has stated that:

> In our project we have met professionals and students on our lectures, online courses and also in early childhood education events. Most of them tell us that they have not got any information about gender sensitive education from their workplaces or studies. Few students have told us that they have heard the term during their studies and few knew that they'll touch on this topic on some course that will be coming up later on their studies.
> For us it seems that there is not a uniform studies about gender sensitivity when studying early childhood education. Getting knowledge about gender sensitivity is depending on single teachers and their information on this topic. We have been lecturing on several (mainly in Helsinki metropolitan area) schools but only sporadically when we really should have a course or a lecture that would be held every autumn for every class for example. (Alasaari 2018b.)

Alasaari and Katainen (2016: 19) claim that early childhood education lacks homogeneous education and that the basic studies in the field do not include a common general curriculum dealing with gender, diversity and gender equality. There is a need to promote training on gender sensitive education further.

Therefore, based on the above-mentioned accounts, it seems that there might exist – at least, to some extent – room for improvement when it comes to the academic preparation received by kindergarten teachers in terms of understanding gender in the young child in depth.

4   Relevance and need for the present research

Based on the previously presented studies and theories, it can be said that gender and identity start being shaped since very early years, producing long-lasting effects in the life of the child as a teenager and adult later on.

The problem in relation to gender and early childhood education is that several concerning situations have been pointed out by different studies regarding the way the kindergarten staff approaches children in terms of gender. For example, recent studies have revealed how pedagogues treat children differently according to their gender (Edström 2014: 544). Moreover, Beckett and Taylor (2016: 100) point out how toys, tools, materials and activities tend to be even be color-coded in our culture, in order to guide children to the "right" activities according to their gender, which is likely to shape certain behavioural patterns in the child. Such situation constitutes a commonplace scene in almost any kindergarten. Furthermore, not only is there differential treatment and gender stereotyping displayed by educators, but also – following Härkönen and colleagues (2011: 82) – several educators simply do not even show interest in issues related to gender and equality. All in all, studies have identified problematic situations that seem to imply an insufficient competence about gender and how it develops in the child among the staff in early childhood education settings.

Hence the need for exploring the current perceptions of early childhood education professionals on the topic. By doing this, it may be possible to have a better understanding of what the current situation is. This can then serve as a starting point for any future endeavours aimed at improving it. Efforts, resources and funds must be utilized in a sensible way, based on updated data. A current, up-to-date and local insight on this topic is needed in order to move forward into the path of designing realistic and efficient solutions to approach the previously-mentioned challenges. This way, the author of this thesis aims to bring the research on this topic to a more up-to-date status and offer a local

perspective to the discussion of gender and early childhood education. By shedding some light on this topic, this study aims to make a contribution to the development of the profession of early childhood educators.

The need for paying attention to the topic of gender in the child is not only a matter of pedagogical responsibility: gender is a legally relevant aspect that early childhood workers – as law-abiding professionals – must observe and consider in their everyday work (as mentioned in section 3.3.1 – Legal considerations in Finland).

Härkönen and colleagues (2011: 82) claim that not everyone is able to see or do not want to see issues related to gender and equality and that it should even be stated straightforwardly that there are teachers who want to maintain and even "exacerbate" the currently existing problems linked to gender and inequality. They even pose the question openly: Is it not possible in any way to obligate teachers to act in accordance with the laws and specifications of the curricula that promote gender equality and otherwise relate to this theme? Furthermore, they also suggest that similar studies should be carried out. (Härkönen et al. 2011: 82.)

The findings of this study will be shared with the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project. This would benefit, firstly the project and the staff trained by the project, by making them aware of the information provided by the results of this thesis, which is intimately linked to the nature of the work of the project. Secondly, this may benefit the children in early childhood education settings, promoting the empowerment of the child. As it was mentioned in the Introduction section, lack of gender sensitivity can lead to negative consequences in a person's life. Therefore, in a more ample way, the findings of this thesis may contribute – at least, on some level – to preventing potential risk behaviour, mental health challenges, substance abuse, social exclusion and discrimination later on in the adolescence and adulthood of the child. This way, developments on this topic can bring about benefits in a broader societal context. The ultimate goal is to contribute to promoting further understanding of gender, respect for diversity and equality, which constitutes a fundamental right that not only children are entitled to, but that must also be guaranteed for all individuals in society. As Bornstein and colleagues (2010: 27) claim:

> The stability of human society and all that it entails depend on the current generation socializing the next generation to embrace it, maintain it, promote it, and modify it. Socialization is, therefore, a natural, vital, and central part to lifelong human development. Throughout their short lives, human beings are in the constant business of

acquiring different aspects of society, of perfecting, maintaining, or passing them along. We are always learning or teaching. (Bornstein et al 2010: 27.)

5   The research setting

5.1   The research approach

The interest in this thesis is to gain understanding of the participants' perceptions on the topic of gender in early childhood and, in light of this purpose, the approach utilized for this research is qualitative. This study is carried out from a social constructivist viewpoint. Hence, gender is considered to be socially constructed, opposing biologic determinism, which – if taken as a starting point – naturalizes the differences between the genders and the derived inequality (Boaler & Sengupta-Irving 2006: 218). As it has been stated before, it is irrefutable that gender behaviour is to some extent socially constructed, since gendered behaviour and behaviours assigned as appropriate to one gender or another vary among cultures and historic times (Francis 2006: 11).

5.2   The research question

The research question of the present thesis is: what kind of perceptions do kindergarten teachers have regarding gender in the early years of the child? As will be further explained in the following section, data collection was carried out through interviews to five kindergarten teachers (N=5) in which six interview questions were asked, namely:

1. How would you define gender?
2. How do you think gender starts to develop in the child?
3. How do you think the social context may be related to the child's gender development?
4. How do you think the kindergarten may be related to the child's gender development?
5. How do you think gender development in the child may have an impact later on the child's adult life?
6. How do you think your early childhood education educational background has qualified you in terms of knowledge about gender in the early years of the child?

The current relevance of exploring the perceptions held by kindergarten teachers around the topic of gender in general and of asking these six questions in particular was discussed and agreed upon with Nea Alasaari, manager of the "Gender Equality in Kindergarten" project (Alasaari, 2018c).

5.3   The research design

The units of analysis studied in the present thesis are perceptions regarding gender in the early years among individuals who work in the position of kindergarten teacher at kindergartens.

The sample consists of five participants (N = 5). The sample was formed by individuals unknown to the author of this thesis, with whom no prior contact had been established before arranging respondents' participation in the interviews. The participants were selected on the grounds of working currently in the position of "kindergarten teacher" in kindergartens located either in Helsinki or in Espoo. Collection of participants was done by spreading information about the recruitment of voluntary participants to take part as interviewees in the present bachelor's thesis. As for the educational background of the participants, three of them have studied a bachelor's degree in social services, early childhood education qualification; one, a bachelor's degree in education, early childhood education; and one, a postgraduate certificate in education (Appendix 1 includes further information regarding the participants).

In reference to the data collection method, the present research was conducted through collection of qualitative data and the method used was semi-structured interview.

As for the data analysis method, qualitative data analysis was performed using a thematic analysis approach. Qualitative data analysis was conducted deductively (some codes derived from the theoretical framework) and inductively (some codes emerged from participants' responses).

5.4   Data collection

As mentioned before, data collection for this study was qualitative and the method used was semi-structured interview (Given 2008: 811). Interviews were individual and face-to-

face at locations agreed upon with the participants (locations were to be free from interruptions and provide a context that enables the interviewee to speak openly and freely).

The reason for choosing interview as the data gathering method in this study is linked to the fact that – as Patton (2002: 341) states – the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in someone's mind and to access the perspective of the interviewee. Since the aim of this thesis is to explore perceptions, interviewing appeared to be a suitable method. In the semi-structured interview, the interviewer asks participants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in cases of research questions where the concepts and relationships among them appear as relatively well understood. (Given 2008: 811.)

Before the interview, the following issues were considered: what questions to ask (the questions derived from the theory presented and discussed in the literature review section), how to word the questions, how to sequence the questions and how long the interview may take.

5.5   Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was performed using a thematic analysis approach. By using thematic analysis, data can be segmented, categorized and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set. This way, thematic analysis facilitates the search for patterns throughout the data. (Given 2008: 868.)

First, in order to achieve intimate knowledge of the data obtained, full transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were produced. In order to protect confidentiality, initials have been assigned to each respondent (P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5, in which P stands for "participant"). Both the interviewing and transcribing processes were carried out by the author of this thesis.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted deductively (some of the established codes were derived from the theoretical framework) and inductively (some codes emerged from participants' responses), using a thematic analysis approach. Initially, predefined theory-driven codes were established and applied when analysing the transcriptions of the interviews. Furthermore, other meaning units arose during this process and data-driven codes were developed. This combination of deductive theory-driven and inductive data-

driven approaches was useful for integrating issues of theoretical importance explored so far in this thesis, while also allowing for relevant meaning units emerging from the data.

All in all, theory-driven and data-driven units were coded, connected and organized into different themes and quantified. Units that had been assigned the same code were quantified by counting them throughout the whole data. Connecting the codes and creating the themes was done keeping in mind the research question and issues of theoretical importance explored in the theoretical framework of this thesis in order to provide a meaningful structure for the analysis (Robson 2011: 483).

Following Robson (2011: 474), coding involves identifying one or more passages of text or other data that exemplifies the same theoretical or descriptive idea. Usually, several passages are identified and then they are associated with a code, which is a name for that idea. After coding, codes are grouped into themes. A theme captures something of importance or interest in connection to the research question. (Robson 2011: 474.)

The process of data coding and identification of themes constituted an iterative and reflective process, in which reading and re-reading the data thoroughly several times was necessary, as well as making modifications along the coding and themes creation processes.

In this analysis, two codebooks (tables including the code names and their explanation) were developed. Table 1 presents the codebook of the theory-driven codes, which were developed before the data analysis, based on the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Table 1. List of theory-driven codes (Codes developed a priori).

Code name	Explanation of the code
Essentialist view of gender	Gender is defined based on biological grounds; gender is defined in binary terms ("men-women", "boys-girls").
Non-essentialist view of gender	Gender is not defined based on biological grounds; gender is understood in non-binary terms.
Essentialist view of gender development	Gender is considered to develop based on biological grounds, gender is predefined biologically.
Influence from the social context on gender development	The social context is considered to influence the child's gender development. (This code excludes explicit mentions of kindergarten staff. Explicit mentions of kindergarten staff are clustered in the code "Influence from kindergarten staff on gender development".)
Influence from cultural products on gender development	Books, toys, games, music, songs, films, shows on TV and on internet and other cultural products are considered to influence the child's gender development.
Influence from kindergarten staff on gender development	Kindergarten staff are considered to influence the child's gender development.
Impacts	Child's gender development is considered to have impacts on the child's later adult life.

The data analysis process was initially guided by the predefined codes. Later, inductive codes were assigned to segments of data that described a new relevant unit observed. The theory-driven code "Impacts" – which had been developed a priori – was discarded and replaced by the following three data-driven codes, given their more in-depth level of detail expressed in the participants' responses: 1) Impacts on self-identity and behaviour, 2) Impacts on emotional life and 3) Impacts on opportunities/activities pursued.

Table 2 shows the data-driven codes.

Table 2: List of data-driven codes.

Code name	Explanation of the code
Different approaches regarding gender among kindergarten staff members	Gender in the child is considered to be viewed and addressed in different ways among different kindergarten members of staff.
Claims about own non-differential treatments to genders	Participant claims to provide no gender-based treatment to children; same way of addressing children regardless their gender.
Impacts on self, identity and behaviour	Child's gender development is considered to have impacts later in life on issues related to the individual's self, identity and behaviour.
Impacts on emotional life	Child's gender development is considered to have impacts later in life on issues related to the individual's emotions and feelings.
Impacts on opportunities/activities pursued	Child's gender development is considered to have impacts later in life in terms of what kind of choices of hobbies, career paths and other activities and opportunities will be pursued by the individual.
Qualifications about gender from the early childhood educational backgrounds seen as insufficient.	Participant perceives that the level of qualification obtained regarding the topic of gender from the participant's early childhood educational background was low.
Interest/initiative related to learning further	Participant refers to own interest and own initiative in relation to continuing learning and acquiring deeper knowledge.

The next task was to sort the different codes into themes and to put together all the relevant coded data extracts within the themes identified. The research question and issues of theoretical importance were used to create the themes, which was key in order to provide meaningfulness to the process (Robson 2011: 483). Therefore, the process of connecting the codes and establishing themes across the five sets of data was done by clustering under headings that directly related to the main topics that were explored during the interviews. This way, four themes emerged, namely: 1) Perceptions related to definition of gender, 2) Perceptions related to how gender develops in the child, 3) Perceptions related to how the child's gender development has an impact later on the child's adult life and 4) Perceptions related to own qualifications about the topic of gender in early childhood.

6 Results

In this section, the results obtained are presented.

Table 3. Themes, quantifications and example quotations.

Theme 1: Perceptions related to definition of gender	Meaning units	Example quotations from the data ("P" stands for "Participant")
Essentialist view of gender	7	*We have boys and girls and man and women in this world.* (P1)
Non-essentialist view of gender	7	*There is a lot of combinations and sort of different kinds of aste in the genders.* (Author's note: "aste" in Finnish language means "degree") (P5)
Theme 2: Perceptions related to how gender develops in the child		
Essentialist view of gender development	5	*The first thing is that they notice themselves, that they have different kind of things and they notice the differences between them. May be when we are trying to practice using potties and stuff, it comes, like, natural there that they are looking each other and they notice the difference between boys and girls. (P1)*
Influence from cultural products on gender development	7	*Nowadays, like, you can see in books and in commercials and programmes, like, different kind of girly stuff or boy way to play and, like, dress up. I think those are affecting a lot. (*P1)
Influence from kindergarten staff	11	*Be careful on what you (as kindergarten staff member) convey, because your stereotypes will show.* (P2)
Different approaches regarding gender among kindergarten staff members	6	*I have seen it with teachers being shocked because a boy was playing in the Barbie house… and like "oh, he's playing in the Barbie house!...". "Yes! And he's being funful, and he's doing great in his role play, in his language, in his… his playing with his peers, its everything, so… pass the gender barrier that boys don't play with this and girls don't play with the duplos!". But…. I think the new teachers are a little be more aware of this, so they are a little bit more open, but we still have a lot of the old generation, that is not even conscious they are doing it.* (P2)

Claims about own non-dif-ferential treatment to gen-ders	9	*I think we (participant and participant's colleges) take them (the children) all like equals and they are same level.* (P1)
Theme 3: Perceptions re-lated to how child's gen-der development has an impact later on the child's adult life		
Impacts on self, identity and behaviour	5	*You need to be accepted when you are a kid as you are, and if you are not, then it has a huge impact later on, on your self-esteem and, and who you are, what do you want….who do you, who you want to be. Yeah. It has a huge impact as…later on for kids.* (P5)
Impacts on emotional life	9	*They'll feel a lot more happier about themselves.* (P3)
Impacts on opportuni-ties/activities pursued	2	*They might feel like they've missed opportunities, they might feel like they've… not had the chance to express themselves fully and might be some regrets that they didn't do things* (P3)
Theme 4: Perceptions re-lated to own qualifica-tions about the topic of gender in early childhood		
Qualifications about gender from the early childhood educational background seen as insufficient.	10	*We didn't, we didn't, uh…If you mean my studies, we didn't talk about this kind of stuff at all. Not even a single word.* (P5)
Interest/initiative related to learning further	8	*I'm constantly willing to go to training, uh, you know and I'm really happy that I'm in a workplace that allows me to go to training, but then also on my own free time I love to read about early childhood education.* (P4)

Across data from the different participants, the results of this study show that essentialist views and non-essentialist views were used in equal amounts in participants' mentions around the concept of gender.

Furthermore, a recurrent use of the "boys-girls" dichotomy gender was identified and gender was defined in binary terms repeatedly across data.

> P1: In the day care, there's both girls and boys.

> P3: I think, it's difficult not to use the term "boys" and "girls".

In relation to gender development in the child, the influence of the social context, cultural products and from kindergarten staff on the child's gender development were mentioned extensively across all sets of data. Essentialist views of gender development were mentioned in a low number.

> P3: If you think about the child themselves, it's impossible for them to, to discover gender without being influenced by the things around them.

> P5: The people who, who are with, who live with the kid, they affect it a lot. What kinds of things do they allow certain gender of the child to do. And, and, it has a huge impact, the environment you live.

The influence of different kinds of cultural products on gender development was also mentioned repeatedly.

> P1: Nowadays, like, you can see in books and in commercials and programmes, like, different kind of girly stuff or boy way to play and, like, dress up. I think those are affecting a lot.

Furthermore, results show that kindergarten settings were referred to as having an influence on the child's gender development.

> P3: (On how the kindergarten may be related to the child's gender development) I think this is obviously dependant on the setting…but…and depends on the adults on the setting.

Moreover, results show that perceived differences – and even conflicting approaches at times – in terms of how gender in the child is approached among different kindergarten staff members emerged as a repeatedly mentioned issue.

> P4: I've also had…it was a bizarre moment, definitely, but…I had another, another teacher coming to me like "Oh! This boy is waring nail polish! and he's wearing a clip in his hair and…!" and, like, it was right in front of the child and it's so damaging to a child's identity…that, like… it was a young little boy who… he was just wanting to be just like his sister and he wanted and…I'm like "Well, great! All the better for", you

know, it's like, I totally topped my hat off to the parents for allowing him paint his fingernails, to wear a clip, because he wanted to big like his big sister, I mean, she was, she is, after all his role model, right?! And that's fine! Like, they can explore the different areas! So, it was, I was like just like "shhh shhh shhh, be quiet, don't say anything in front of him, please!"

Also frequent references were made by participants regarding their claimed own non-differential treatment to genders.

P1: We (participant refers to own work team at participant's workplace) don't give "how you should do things, how you should think about things if you are boy or girl". They are all on same level, all are a child for us, so…no differences in our behaving.

Impacts on the child's gender development were referred to by participants by mentioning different kinds of concrete forms of effects, which were related to impacts on the child's self, identity and behaviour; impacts on the child's emotional life and impacts on the child's opportunities and activities pursued later in life.

P2: "You should toughen up", you know, "Come on, you are a boy! Stop crying!" how many times do I hear "you are a big, boy stop crying!" This makes me "oh, don't do it!" because this child then feels it's not okay to express his feeling and it's not okay to do this this and this and in adult life you might actually develop… have a child that is not in tune with his feelings, and you may have a child that is very introvert and that's suffering from inside when actually…because you he has been told from such an early age that boys don't cry.

Results also showed that participants repeatedly referred to the academic qualifications received about gender from their early childhood educational background as insufficient. When asked about how their early childhood educational background had qualified them in terms of knowledge about gender in the early years of the child", responses like the following ones were reported:

P2: I don't see it has, I don't think we have. (…) We need to be aware of it, so I wish there was more, for sure.

P1: If I'm honest, like, it's quite little what we talk about like really…about genders.

Moreover, interest and initiative in continuing learning were reported.

P5: Later on I have studied myself reading about the articles about gender things in the early years, but I didn't get any information from my, from my actual studies about it… Yeah, so, it's, it's based on my own activity to get more information about it.

P2: I think that in the kindergarten it's really a question of training and I wish we had more trainings into this, being more gender sensitive (…) I think it just like were a little seed, and I wish it would have much more time to grow, as much as it was with drama or visual expression. (…) I think that in that sense whatever I learn from sexual uh… education on children or gender, it is more because I am interested in it and so I've read about it.

7   Conclusion

The research question of the present thesis is: what kind of perceptions do kindergarten teachers have regarding gender in the early years of the child?

Based on the results hereby obtained, participants' perceptions around the topic of gender present a hybrid of essentialist and non-essentialist elements. The kindergarten teachers who were interviewed view it, at times, as defined on biological grounds, and at times, as a construct that is strongly influenced by the child's context. Therefore, it was found that essentialist and non-essentialist elements coexist in the participants' perceptions.

Taking into consideration the repeated use of the "boys-girls" dichotomy among responses, the binary conception of gender appears to be strongly rooted in participants' way of thinking when explaining issues related to gender, even among those whose claims include, at times, non-essentialist notions. Even in those cases when interviewees challenged biological determinist views, such essentialist binary dichotomy appeared in their responses. According to these findings, the binary conception of gender seems to be widely naturalized and internalised among the participants.

In the specific case of perceptions around gender development in the child, although some essentialist remarks were made, views that gender is socially constructed prevail. Findings indicated that the participants' views are predominately based on social constructivist views and that participants perceive the process of gender development being

highly influenced and shaped from the outside. These results support Francis's (2006: 11) claims that it is irrefutable that gender behaviour is to some extent socially constructed, since gendered behaviour and those behaviours assigned as appropriate to one gender or another vary among different cultures and historic times. Not only people around the child, but also tools, materials, books, stories, music and other cultural products are considered to have a high influence on this process. The results previously mentioned also support Mikkola's (2007) work stating that children are strongly influenced not only by their caregivers, but also by the materials and messages that are made available around them. Besides, these results can also be linked to Turja's (2016: 205) claims, which point out that multiple forms of messages are sent constantly to children (for instance, by books and films) affecting the development of the child's identity by showing what is normal, desirable or permitted in the case of being a girl or a boy. Moreover, participants also perceive that the kindergarten influences the child's gender development. These findings are in line with Carlson and Meyer's (2014: 1) statements, which refers to the significant role played by educational institutions in the normalization of gender differences.

Moreover, participants perceive that there are differences – and even conflicting approaches at times – in terms of how gender in the child is approached among different kindergarten staff members. Examples of how interviewees have disagreed with a colleague at their workplace in this respect were provided. Such examples included disagreement regarding gender stereotyping attitudes. In relation to this, it must be mentioned that the age of the respondents may have played a role in these views. Participants' age varied between the ranges of 25-30 years old and 35-40 years old. As the glossary (Glossary n.d.) provided by the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project states, the term "gender sensitivity" refers to recognising how assumptions, prejudices and perceptions linked to different genders are visible in everyday activities and speech. Being a gender sensitive pedagogue implies acknowledging the effects of stereotypical depictions of gender and questioning commonplace generalisations, for instance, regarding "what girls and boys should play with" respectively. According to the participants' claims and taking into consideration the previously-mentioned definition offered by the "Gender equality in kindergarten" project, there seem to be members of staff at kindergartens who lack a gender sensitive approach.

Furthermore, participants perceive that gender development has an impact on the child's life later on. Interviewees perceive the existence of different forms of effects that gender

development may have on the child's life later on, such as impacts on how to be, how to behave, self-image, emotional life, opportunities, activities pursued in life. This is in line with Teräs' (2005:59) claims regarding how gender socialization not only influences the individual's abilities and interests and interactions with the environment, but also shapes the fundamental basis for the person's perceptions in terms of who they are and how they present themselves. This way, gender socialization shapes the way in which individuals relate to themselves. In a similar fashion, Ylitapio-Mäntylä (2012: 23) states that ways of thinking learned in early childhood affect choices regarding hobbies, education and work life. Also the Finnish National Board of Education points out that segregation regarding educational choices as well as professional and career plans starts being moulded already in early childhood education (Jääskeläinen & Hautakorpi & Onwen-Huma & Niittymäki & Pirttijärvi & Lempinen & Kajander 2015: 10).

Besides, results seemed to confirm the concerns raised previously in this thesis regarding a certain lack of academic qualifications regarding the topic of gender in the child among kindergarten teachers. Most participants reported perceiving that their educational background regarding early childhood education did not provide them with a high level of knowledge on this topic. These results support Alasaari and Katainen's (2016: 19) claims stating that early childhood education lacks homogeneous education and that the basic studies in the field do not include a common general curriculum addressing gender, diversity and gender equality.

Härkönen and colleagues (2011: 82) argue that several educators simply do not even show interest in issues related to gender and equality. As far as the scope of this study (it must be taken into consideration that the sample of this study consisted of only five participants), findings showed – contrary to Härkönen and colleagues' claims – that interviewees expressed interest in learning more about gender and about other topics related to early childhood.

8 Discussion

The goal of this thesis was to provide current updated information about the perceptions that kindergarten teachers hold around the topic of gender in the early years. Such information can potentially be used by organisations and authorities to plan possible developmental work needed in this area.

By collecting and analysing data qualitatively, it was possible to explore and get to know different aspects regarding the above-mentioned perceptions and answer the research question of this thesis ("what kind of perceptions do kindergarten teachers have regarding gender in the early years of the child?").

Ethical issues were considered in the present thesis in order to maintain and preserve the integrity of the research. As Israel and Hay (2006: 5) state, this concept refers to the researcher sustaining integrity even when the researcher is not being observed and there may be scope for him to conduct himself in improper ways (for example, by fabricating quotations). Behaving ethically has been a central value throughout this thesis.

Furthermore, as Patton (2002: 405) mentions, interviews are interventions and, as such, they affect the people involved. A good interview leaves a certain impact both on the interviewee and on the interviewer: it can lay open different kinds of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The interview in itself is a reflective situation for those being interviewed and leaves them knowing something about themselves that they did not know or were not fully aware of prior to the interview. This reflective experience may be change-inducing. (Patton 2002: 405.)

Moreover, it is also relevant to point out that informed consent and confidentiality were considered as key issues in this study. Before the interviews, participants were provided with information about the purpose of the interviews in question, what the collection of data was for and who would handle the information. Consent for recording the interviews was requested in advance in each case and all respondents consented to it. Moreover, interviewees were informed that their identities would be kept confidential and that their real names would not be linked to their responses, preventing them from being identifiable and guaranteeing confidentiality.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it must be mentioned that the data gathered and analysed for this thesis could have been larger had the time frame been different. It would have been beneficial to involve a greater number of participants. Moreover, this study is a qualitative research, thus the findings hereby provided are not universal.

Further research could focus on how gender is addressed in the current curricula of educational institutions from which kindergarten teachers attain their qualifications in Finland, as this thesis lacks such an in-depth exploration of this aspect.

Furthermore, the perceptions on gender in early years could be explored using a different point of view. Instead of analysing the topic from the kindergarten teachers' perspective, it could be studied from the children's point of view. This could also be an area for further study.

Additionally, the power of language on human mental representations and understanding of concepts was considered and reflected upon when analysing the results, since the interviewees' language-related factors may have influenced their responses in a certain direction. Two of the five participants' mother tongue is Finnish, language in which – unlike in the English language – the concepts of "sex" and "gender" are referred to with one same word ("sukupuoli"). This situation may favour the development of an essentialist view of how to approach the topic of gender, since the mother tongue of these interviewees dictates that "sex" and "gender" are both denoted by the same word. Therefore, further studies could explore how this linguistic particularity might have an influence in shaping views around the topic of gender among individuals whose mother tongue is Finnish.

Reflecting from a professional development perspective, it must be considered that, at the moment, training related to gender sensitive education exists in Finland at a small scale organized by the third sector. Currently existing projects that promote gender sensitivity in early childhood education are, for example, the projects "Gender equality in kindergarten" and "Folkhälsans", which provide training in Finnish and Swedish languages respectively. Having said this, it must be pointed out that no training is offered in English. Therefore, the foreign members of kindergarten staff who work at international day care settings and who do not speak neither Finnish nor Swedish fluently are left with no chances of developing their skills on this topic.

Based on the findings of the present thesis, both the need for providing more qualifications on the topic of gender in the early years, as well as eagerness among respondents to continue learning, were identified. Interviewees claimed interest in learning more and seeking new information, which indicates a positive attitude that could be capitalized as an opportunity for developing further professional skills. Therefore, based on the findings

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of this thesis, expanding the training opportunities related to this topic appears as relevant and – based on the responses of the participants of this study – such educational offer may encounter a well-receiving audience.

All in all, findings from the present thesis indicate that the way gender in the early years is perceived among participants combines biological determinist and social constructivist views. Such scenario suggests the existence of different starting points for each professional when it comes to addressing gender-related issues in the child. Providing further training could provide a greater level of shared understanding and qualifications in relation to this topic among early childhood education professionals and, thus, avoid leaving issues related to the child's development subject to free interpretation of each pedagogue. In this way, further training could potentially contribute to higher level of consistency and professionalism in kindergarten services.

Early childhood education regulations in Finland require staff in this field to perform their pedagogical work in a certain way in relation to gender, whereas professionals on the field have claimed in this study not having received enough academic qualifications on the topic. Based on the findings of this thesis, there seems to exist a gap in this sense, which leads one to think that the ways in which kindergartens are influencing children's gender development currently may offer room for improvement. Training on this topic for kindergarten teaching students and professionals could be further developed, in order to achieve higher levels of gender sensitive early childhood education in Finland. The present thesis aims to constitute a tool for professional reflection and development in such direction.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.   Participants' profile.

Participant	Age range	Education	Country of education	Years of experience as kindergarten teacher	Municipality of employment
P1	25-30	Bachelor's degree in social services, early childhood education qualification.	Finland	5.5	Helsinki
P2	35-40	Bachelor's degree in social services, early childhood education qualification.	Finland	9	Espoo
P3	30-35	Postgraduate certificate in education.	England	1	Helsinki
P4	30-35	Bachelor's degree in social services, early childhood education qualification.	Finland	5	Espoo
P5	35-40	Bachelor's degree in education, early childhood education.	Finland	5	Helsinki