

## **Chapter 4 Researching men's career trajectories in ECEC: A cross-cultural inter-researcher approach**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

As discussed in previous chapters, men's participation in ECEC has attracted international debates around whether more men are needed to work in the field (Warin, 2019; Rohrmann, 2020). On the one hand, we challenge arguments restricting men's contributions to ECEC as 'different' and 'complementary' to the work of women and we seek to disrupt essentialist conceptions of gender that perpetuate (Warin; Xu, 2018). On the other hand, we agree that men (together with women and others) who contribute to gender-mixed teams promote gender diversity and equality in ECEC and the wider society (Rohrmann). In the global context of the shortage of men working in ECEC (see Chapter 3), the current cross-cultural study explores strategies that will attract and retain men. Our study addresses two questions:

- Why do some men drop out from working in ECEC in the 12 researched countries while others persist?
- How does gender inform and shape men's career decisions in ECEC?

As an interdisciplinary research team, we investigated the career trajectories of men in and out of ECEC in cross-cultural collaboration. Developing and sustaining such collaboration is a challenging process. Examples for collaborative cross-cultural research in the field of ECEC are scarce, and few studies 'actually illustrate methodological details and challenges faced by early childhood researchers' (Akpovo, Moran, & Brookshire, 2018, p. 19). In this chapter, we focus on descriptions and analyses of our methodological approaches, including research methods, sampling and participants, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Subsequently, we reflect upon the challenge of balancing analytic rigour with an inclusive collaborative approach across this unusually large research team. Drawing on the concept of researcher reflexivity, we examine and ‘compare’ the intersections between the researchers’ self-positionings and reflections from the researched participants in a global discourse on men’s scarcity in ECEC. We conclude by arguing that the methodological approaches employed in this study can inform potential approaches to a ‘globalised’ agenda in attracting and retaining more men in ECEC.

## **4.2 Methodological framework**

Informed by the theoretical positionings of this study that situate individuals’ experiences in the dynamic interactions of gender discourses at micro, meso, and macro levels (see Chapter 2), we adopted an interpretivist approach to understand men’s career trajectories and decisions from their own perspectives, which are also interpreted and reported by the researchers. We acknowledge the fluidity and multiplicity of interpretations from both the researchers and the researched (O’Connor, 2001). Therefore, the interpretivist subjectivities of the participants and researchers in this study are regarded as culturally and socially constructed, shaped, and constrained by different contexts and purposes (Xu, 2018). We have already depicted relevant cultural and societal contexts in the researched countries in Chapter 3. We are aware that ‘the participants’ interpretations were constructed in the specific contexts during the research process, subject to possible changes if for example, conducted at a different time, by a different researcher, or in a different environment’ (Xu, p.75). We further reflect on how the researchers’ own personal identities and subjectivities, professional career trajectories, and positions within the cultural and socio-political contexts of their own countries, influence the data collection and analysis (*see Section 4.3*). On the whole, our interpretivist approach aimed to produce insights about the co-constructed nature of the research process in this study.

A qualitative, narrative approach was adopted in response to interpretivism, for the purpose of cultural understandings, perceptions, and constructions of men's subjective positionings in ECEC (Berg & Lune, 2012). There is a further comparative dimension when researchers from 12 countries collaborate to gain reflexive insights into similarities and differences between national contexts. Rohrman and Brody (2015) point out that cross-cultural understandings of gender issues in ECEC are promising in addressing intellectual gaps, and Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014) suggest that comparative study provides alternative and/or various practices and possibilities of an education phenomenon - which, in this context, is retaining men in ECEC. However, as we only conducted 3 case studies in each country, we are aware that they are not 'representative' of the cultures or the issues of gender imbalance in ECEC. Our intention is to understand how those men situate themselves in the wider social and cultural context regarding their career trajectories in ECEC, with the aim of shedding light on why men drop out working in ECEC globally, as well as understanding how men can be encouraged and supported when working in ECEC.

Mutua and Swadener (2018) problematize the dominance of English language and of Western academy in educational research and call for creative ways of using cross-cultural collaboration. We are aware that there is a potential 'dominance' of Western discourses among our 12 researched countries/contexts, with only two countries located in the Global South (China and South Africa). Whilst the balance of those who are native English-speakers and those for whom English is not their first language are roughly even within the team, the use of English as our universal working language also implies such dominance. We acknowledge that our interpretations may be limited by this dominance (Andrew, Corr, Lent, O'Brien, Osgood, & Boyd, 2018), and our claims of being an 'international' study are compromised. However, we

endeavoured to complement the limitation through our culturally-sensitive and reflexive approaches.

#### *4.2.1 Research methods*

A three-part data collection protocol including narrative interview, semi-structured interview, and a graphic storyline procedure was followed to achieve our aims. The *narrative interview* documents the man's understanding of his career, as he chose to tell it. This allows participants to combine their life stories with socio-historical contexts and to express changes in their beliefs and values that motivate and justify their career decisions (Muylaert, Sarubbi Jr., Gallo, Neto, & Reis, 2014). The *semi-structured interview* allows researchers to ask for clarifications, explanations, and elaborations on aspects of the narrative that were unclear (Traha & Yu, 2015). It also involves a flexible protocol for researchers to ask the interviewees about their work experiences in ECEC, including aspects like work conditions, relationships with colleagues and children, training and support, and understandings of gender. The interview questions were adapted by each researcher according to participants' profiles. Finally, the participants drew a *storyline* to represent critical moments in their career path, on horizontal and vertical axes (Brody & Hadar, 2017). On the horizontal axis participants indicated self-evaluations of significant experiences and events in their professional development. The vertical axis highlighted positive and negative emotional feelings when participants lived through their career trajectories, with higher points representing positive events. Critical moments in the career path are noted at nodes, where the line might change direction. The storyline complements the narratives and interviews as we gain a thorough picture of those men's journeys (Rounsevell & Metzger, 2010). Figure 4.1 is a sample storyline by a German participant who dropped out of the ECEC workforce. His career trajectory in ECEC is represented by a nonlinear pathway with several ups and downs.

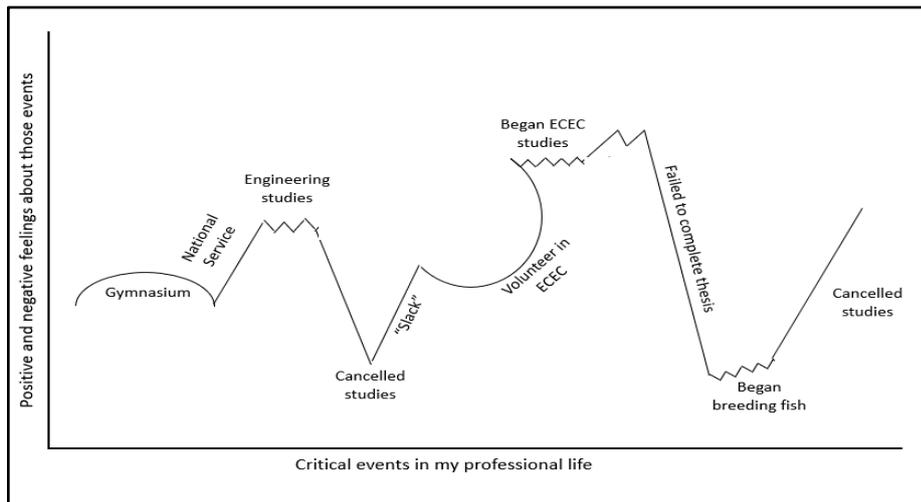


Figure 4.1 Example storyline (Andreas, Germany, dropout from qualification studies)

#### 4.2.2 Sampling and participants

Using these three tools, we collected data from three participants in each country: a *persister* - a man who chose to remain working in ECEC for at least five years, and two *dropouts* from the profession: one from qualification studies and one from the workplace (see Chapter 1 for a detailed explanation of these terms). Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through the researchers' networks in the 12 countries. In total, there are 37 participants: 13 persisters and 24 dropouts. Table 4.1 summarizes the participants' demographic profiles. The group of participants represents broad diversity of age, ethnicity, educational background, and working experiences across countries. The majority of our participants work/ed in private or public ECEC institutions, with a few exceptions who dropped out from their studies and never entered the field. At the time of the interviews, occupations of the dropouts ranged from house painting, drum teacher, hardware store clerk, restaurant manager, truck driver, fish breeder, to musician, bartender, broadcaster, and carpenter. Although not listed in Table 4.1, some of those occupations are discussed in the ensuing chapters where relevant.

Table 4.1 Participants' demographic information

Country	Participant	Age	Category <sup>1</sup>	Ethnicity/Race	Years of working experiences/studies in ECEC
Australia	Andrew	31	DW1	White	1
	Josh	49	DW3	White	2
	Herbert	25	P	White	5
	Anakin	42	DW3	White	13
China	Yu	23	DW1	Chinese	< 1
	Jun	42	DQMA	Chinese	0
	Liang	34	P	Chinese	> 10
England	Ollie	34	DW2	White	12
	Alex	n/a	P	White	5
Germany	Bernd	32	DW3	Native German/White	3
	Andreas	29	DQBA	Native German/White	1
	Matthias	38	P	Native German/White	7
Iceland	Kevin	39	DQBA	White	6
	Paul	50	DQBA	White	5
	Albert	42	P	White	18
Ireland	Ross	27	DW4	White Irish	4
	Patrick	36	DQ	White Irish	4
	Dylan	31	P	White Irish	8
Israel	Assaf	44	DW1	Iraqi origins	6
	Tzvika	65	DW4	White American	22
	Amos	47	P	Ashkenazi origins	12
Norway	Nils	38	DW3	White	8
	Norbert	45	P	White	19
	Nicolai	26	DQBA	White	0
South Africa	Senzo	28	DQBA	Black African	6 months
	Thabo	25	DW3	Black African	4 years study <sup>2</sup>
	Riaan	29	P	South African Indian	5
Sweden	Tom	37	DW1	Swedish/Chilian origin	10
	Sven	28	DQBA	Swedish/White	0
	Anders	n/a	P	Swedish/White	38
Turkey	Mehmet	42	P	White	19
	Orhan	38	DW3	White	14
	Cem	42	DW3	White	8
	Ali	30	DQ	White	0
USA	Joel	23	DQ	Black/Haitian-American	3
	Marcos	47	P	Latinix/Puerto Rican	10
	Ted	30	P	White/Anglo American	8

<sup>1</sup> The following categories are used: *DQ* course: dropout of paraprofessional course; *DQBA*: dropout during or after BA or B.Ed program; *DQMA*: dropout during or after MA or M.Ed program; *DW1*: dropout from work as assistant with no qualifications; *DW2*: dropout from work as an assistant or teacher after basic course; *DW3*: dropout from work as a teacher or leader after BA or B.Ed; *DW4*: dropout from work as a teacher or leader after MA or M.Ed; *P*: persister.

<sup>2</sup> completed four year degree in ECEC and began working in grade 7

#### *4.2.3 Data collection & analysis*

The data was collected from the 12 countries by 17 researchers (Table 4.2) either in a shared capacity (if there is more than one researcher in that country) or individually (if he/she is the only one from his/her country). All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' permissions. Where data was collected in a language other than English, it was translated/checked by either the researchers or professional services. We believe that the researchers' familiarity with their mother tongues and their professional and academic experiences in ECEC contributed to the reduction of the cross-language impact on this research (Twinn, 1997). Rigorous attention was paid to capture cultural sensitivity in the languages used. To illustrate, specific notes and explanations were given to words and sentences that are deemed to be context-specific and may possibly impact on the analysis and presentation of findings (Xu, 2018).

The data produced was analysed using a distinctive cross-cultural inter-researcher approach, following four stages:

*Stage 1:* Researchers were organized in groups of two or three and mixed by country to develop initial coding lists forming 6 researcher groups (Table 4.2). A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development was used to identify key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) from data in both the researchers' own country and the paired-up country.

*Stage 2:* An agreed coding list from each group was forwarded to a coding committee with representatives from each group. The committee worked to synthesize all coding lists into one, which was sent to all team members for review.

*Stage 3:* A final coding list was produced after discussions and negotiations among all team members. This process involved particularly difficult ‘letting go’ of codes with the amount of cross-cultural data and the number of international researchers involved.

*Stage 4:* Researchers used the agreed coding list to analyse their data. ATLAS.ti software was used to conduct the analysis and to manage the large amount of data.

Table 4.2 List of researchers by sub-groups

Subgroup	Researcher	Country	Gender	Discipline	Professional Background	English as First Language
1	Karen Thorpe	Australia	F	Developmental and Educational Psychology, Education	Deputy Director (Research), The Institute for Social Science Research	Yes
	Victoria Sullivan			Politics, Philosophy, Developmental and Educational Psychology	PhD Candidate	
	Jo Warin	UK		Sociology and Psychology of Education, Gender Studies	Reader in Gender and Social Relations in a School of Education	
2	Yuwei Xu	China	M	Sociology of Gender and Early Childhood Education and care	University Researcher in Early Childhood Education and Care	No
	Thordis Thordardottir	Iceland	F	Early Childhood Education and Education Studies	Associate Professor Education Studies	
3	Markus Andrea	Germany	M	Social Work Sciences, Early Childhood Education, Gender Studies	Professor for Social Work Sciences at a University of Applied Sciences	No
	Tim Rohrmann			Psychology and Educational Sciences	Professor of Early Childhood Education and Care	
	İkbal Tuba Şahin Sak	Turkey	F	Early Childhood Education	Associate Professor in ECE	
	Ramazan Sak		M	Early Childhood Education	Associate Professor in ECE, Head of ECE Department	
4	Joanne McHale	Ireland	F	Early Childhood Education and Care	Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Care, TU Dublin	Yes
	Christian Eidevald	Sweden	M	ECEC	Associate Professor in ECEC, Director of Development for ECEC in municipality	No
5	Deevia Bhana	South Africa	F	Gender and Education	Research Chair and Professor	Yes

	David Brody	Israel	M	Early Childhood Education	Former ECEC Department Chair, Academic Dean	Yes
	Yarden Kedar			Developmental Psychology, ECE	Head of ECE Department	No
6	Jean Plaisir	USA	M	Teacher Education	Professor ECE	Yes
	Birgitte Ljunggren	Norway	F	Sociology and Gender Studies	Associate Professor of Social Science	No
	Kari Emilsen			Early Childhood Education	Professor of Social Science	

Most of the researchers were experienced in qualitative analysis but we also adopted a checklist of guidance points based on Huberman and Miles (1994). This final data analysis stage was also accompanied by a co-constructed researcher check (CCRC) process through which interpretations of data and productions of codes were ‘validated’, adding to the trustworthiness of our findings. A CCRC report was produced from each CCRC group and the implications of the process will be discussed in *Section 4.3* of this chapter.

Cross-cultural comparisons and analyses were conducted throughout the coding and analysis processes, noting different or similar discourses that shape men’s career trajectories in ECEC. The comparisons and analyses are particularly guided by theories of gender, in order to understand how gender discourses at micro, meso, and macro levels influence different men’s experiences. Through the cross-cultural inter-researcher approach of data analysis, we confidently argue that our study achieves a high level of cultural sensitivity when reporting findings from the 12 countries.

#### 4.2.4 Ethical considerations

Our study follows universal ethical standards with references to the [EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers](#) (2015). The study gained its primary ethical approval from The Efrata College of Education, Jerusalem, Israel, where our principal investigator is based. Additional ethical approval policies were followed in other collaborative countries. Additional

ethical approval letters were granted by the UK and South African affiliated institutions. Informed consent was gained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality is assured throughout the research. All participants' names are anonymised and replaced by pseudonyms, and all identifying features such as name of city and institution are suppressed in both the data manuscripts and all publications.

Having provided an overall picture of our cross-cultural inter-researcher approach to investigating men's career trajectories in ECEC, the following section offers an in-depth discussion and reflections on our large international collaboration and the role of subjectivity for cross-cultural research on gender issues in ECEC.

### **4.3 Researcher reflexivity**

A reflective approach to the research process is widely accepted in qualitative research. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) discussed the role of researcher bias in gender balance research. This is especially relevant in an international research project, regarding the wide diversity of legal frameworks, societal conditions, and individual attitudes related to gender issues. Although our research focused on the topic of male ECEC workers and dropouts, it was at the same time a fascinating opportunity to examine collaboration of men and women researchers with a variety of cultural backgrounds and different approaches to 'gender'. Our reflections were conducted at three levels, including individual (through reflective journals), small-group (through CCRC), and whole-project-team (through team meetings).

#### *4.3.1 Reflective journals*

Personal narratives facilitate introspection and make researchers' reflexivity visible in the research process. We used individual reflexive journals for documenting personal reflections.

Each researcher created a personal document that included impressions, thoughts, and reflections at each stage of the project: data collection, transcription/translation, data analysis, and especially teamwork. The journals captured issues arising in the course of the project, including critical thoughts and feelings regarding work with colleagues. Researchers then selected sections of their journals for analysis, with anonymity assured. Sometimes confiding personal notes to another member of the research team was challenging. As one researcher put it: 'Maybe I'm feeling a little out of my comfort zone and exposed! I actually enjoyed doing the reflection, but I'm struggling to let it go and hand it over!' This quote indicates the importance of building trust among members of the team.

The reflections clearly show the relevance of cultural and institutional diversity between countries. One researcher notes the problem of understanding data from so many countries by stating: 'It is difficult to analyse the material as a whole'. The reflective journals also noted the relevance of different languages in the research project. Non English-speaking researchers indicated frustration that English speakers were spared the difficult process of translating their interviews. However, even English-speaking colleagues struggled with local dialects, and foreign colleagues found it difficult to understand 'English slang words' which were not translated.

Some of the reflections highlight the personal involvement of researchers when working together on gender issues:

While discussing ideas for the final chapter, suddenly two of our colleagues start to talk about their own childhood experiences with playful ECEC teachers who impressed them. As gender is so much connected to ourselves as men and

women, personal experiences come in when we are talking about research results, methodologies, writing.

Researchers also report being touched by the stories of their interviewees: ‘When I transcribed and translated the interviews, I realized how vulnerable you are as a man in pre-school, in some situations’. On the other hand, socio-economic developments in ECEC became more prominent for some researchers, which was unrelated to personal engagement in such debates. As the analysis of contributions shows, many researchers were very conscious of how their personal attitudes and experiences and their position in the group might contribute to ‘contamination’ or ‘co-construction’ of their data. Subsequently, written individual reflections were important stepping stones for further reflections on relevant issues both in small groups and in the whole team.

#### *4.3.2 CCRC: process, rationale, and outcomes*

The term ‘co-constructed researcher check’, quite a mouthful and referred to by its acronym CCRC, was devised to provide an extra dimension of validation and trustworthiness for our interpretations of the data and production of codes. The ‘co-constructed’ element of this term is significant because it underlines our collaborative relationship as a team and also affirms our methodological ontological approach as interpretive researchers. This was not a process of checking for ‘inter-rater reliability’, a concept that is familiar in positivist research where it suggests the possibility of a neatly bounded and finite outcome. On the contrary it provided an accurate representation of the messy process of a *negotiated interpretation*. The end result provided a richer and more ‘adequate’ interpretation (Fay, 1996) of the data than one produced by a sole researcher. We articulate the purpose of the CCRC as follows:

We are interested in uncovering and identifying different perspectives on the data. The strength of our collaborative process lies in gaining understanding of co-researchers' perspectives. We are interested in bringing to the fore differences in interpretation in the coding process among researchers because this helps us to identify our own biases and blind spots. By revealing those factors that limit our understandings, we can become more creative and open to see and appreciate others' perspectives.

Each researcher identified approximately 25% of a transcript for the CCRC process. The CCRC teams were the same as those used for developing the initial coding, and we again used ATLAS.ti software and the same set of coding themes. We viewed the selected chunk of the transcript 'blind' to the allocation of codes produced by our CCRC partners. For example, within the Australian/UK CCRC team (Sullivan, Thorpe, & Warin) the Australian partners (Sullivan and Thorpe) coded a chunk of the transcript from the Alex, a UK participant. Meanwhile the UK partner (Warin) coded a chunk of transcript from the interview with Anakin, an Australian participant. Our respective coding work was then swapped and discussed in an online meeting resulting in completion of the team CCRC report form below:

Table 4.3: Co-constructed researcher check (CCRC) report form

Differences/similarities in interpretation - types of differences/similarities	Improved/enriched interpretations	Give 1 or 2 examples

Whilst CCRC reports noted some inevitable differences in coding behaviours such as variation in the size of excerpts selected for a code, our discussions focused on the all-important business of variation in interpretation revealed by the allocation of different coding themes. Interestingly and surprisingly, teams noted more consistency in coding choices than they were expecting. This may mean that our teamwork on code definitions had developed a solid shared understanding. Coding consistency proved to be quite strong at the main level of each code although there was greater variation for sub-codes. For example, in the Irish/Swedish team both coders used C4 ‘Workplace Environment: Institutional Culture’ for the following excerpt from Swedish participant Tom:

It was tough to watch. It hurt, because they were such good people. They were my idols. It was the same with the salary; they were treated so poorly. But even though they were underpaid and treated poorly by the decision makers in society, they were still so happy. They were strong and did incredibly good work.

However, the Swedish partner (Eidevald) used the sub code C6 ‘work compensation’ and the Irish partner (McHale) assigned C5 ‘distribution of work’. Following negotiation this team believed that the Swedish partner’s richer understanding of the Swedish context gave greater reliability to his selection of the sub-code. Indeed, there was recognition in many of the teams that the interviewer had a more adequate and informed insight into contextual influences on the data compared with the partial knowledge of the coding partner and that their interpretation might therefore be considered more trustworthy. In some teams however, the fresh ‘outsider’ insights of the coding partner brought about a richer understanding as the partners reached a synthesis of their interpretation. For example, in the Israel/South Africa team (Brody and Bhana) one party allocated the code ‘self-reflection’ whilst the other used ‘professional development’

for the same excerpt from Rian's (persister, S. Africa) interview. Following a re-reading and discussion Bhana believed she had missed the 'self-reflection' aspect and Brody recognised a greater emphasis on external support than he had originally noticed. So, the consequent co-constructed understanding of the relevant excerpt was a fuller, and more adequate one. Elsewhere the process produced a recognition that cultural and political contexts influenced a disparity in interpretations. For example, in the Norwegian/American team (Emilsen, Lundgren, & Plaisir) the researchers developed an awareness of different cultural understandings and policies about 'safeguarding' children. A similar debate about the relative values of insider and outsider knowledge of national contexts can be found in Andrew et al. (2018). A by-product of the CCRC was that each researcher enhanced their awareness of their own biases and subjectivities and gained insights into the wider cultural and political influences within their national ECEC context.

Clearly this form of checking could have been developed further. Team membership could have been swapped around, and further comparisons of coding, with a greater number of extracts, could have been undertaken. Indeed, we became aware of endless possibilities that might enrich our own learning and improve the adequacy of interpretations but we had to draw a line in the sand after discussion of our CCRC reports.

#### *4.3.3 Team meetings*

The third level of reflections took place in meetings of the whole research team. Annual workshops during an international conference and regular online meetings, provided space for mutual exchange and discussions for issues brought up in individual reflections and small group exchanges. Notes were taken during meetings and workshops to ensure that the research process remained transparent for all team members. As personal reflections revealed, online

meetings were more difficult for non-native English speaking colleagues because of language difficulties, thus it was crucial to convene face-to-face meetings where it was easier to talk together. In the course of the project, meetings not only deepened our mutual understanding of project issues, but also led to closer personal and professional relations. Akpovo et al. (2018) discuss that ‘culturally relevant, non-normative, and fluid cross-cultural research findings, in addition to rigorous methodology, also require rigorous emotional and intellectual commitments from the research teams’ (p. 2). Supporting this statement, we show how intense cross-cultural collaboration can open up broader perspectives on the relevance of gender for processes of professionalization in ECEC.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

It is difficult to conclude a presentation of our methodology since our aim has been to clarify what we actually did to make this complex collaboration work. However, we first conclude that our interpretivist, cross-cultural methodologies could inform potential approaches to a ‘globalised’ agenda in attracting and retaining more men into ECEC, keeping in mind the limitations of a by-and-large ‘Western-dominated’ discourse within the research team. This aim is achieved through understanding how men’s career trajectories in and out of ECEC are shaped by gendered discourses in various countries, as interpreted by participant men themselves and the researchers who are ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of the contexts concerned. Although we have chosen to focus on men in ECEC for the study, the issues discussed are reflective of some wider issues discourses perpetuated in the sector (such as educator dropout, gendered professionalism, and low social status of ECEC). In addition, we end with two insights about our methodological process that we believe will be helpful to other researchers in the world of ECEC and indeed well beyond to other areas of the social sciences.

Firstly, we hope that our description inspires others to undertake collaborative research on a large scale and broad scope and offers some replicable ideas about how this may be achieved. Secondly, we see researcher collaboration across national boundaries as a radical enterprise that is challenging to conventional ways of undertaking research within the academe. Our shared commitment to the project has been surprising given that we had no funding, the outcomes would not significantly 'count' towards promotion, and the work had to be undertaken alongside our pressing and pressurised 'day jobs' as full-time academics. Perhaps it was the emotional experience of contributing to a shared version of a gender-balanced ECEC workforce that created an extraordinary level of commitment to this innovative project.

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