

Xu, Yuwei (2018).

The gender-diverse practitioners in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Paper presented on the 28th EECERA Annual Conference, 29.8.2018, Budapest, Hungary.

Abstract

This presentation will discuss how male and female ECEC practitioners' diverse gender subjectivities shape their pedagogical practices, from a cross-cultural perspective. Popular discourses that are used to justify men's participation in ECEC usually expect men to fulfil roles that are complementary to those of women's (Warin, 2017). However, the three research contexts of Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China in this study have suggested different discourses of encouraging men to work in ECEC, pointing to the rethinking of whether men would challenge traditional gender structures, or would reinforce them. Taking a poststructuralist approach to gender, this presentation will illustrate the discursiveness of how a variety of gender discourses shape practitioners' gender subjectivities. 17 male and 17 female practitioners from Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin were interviewed and their daily practices were observed. Informed consent was gained and participants' personal information was replaced with pseudonyms. This research discerns that men could both reproduce traditional gender structures and challenge them. And so could women practitioners. Many participants would construct their gender subjectivities in accordance with the wider gender discourses. Meanwhile, both Scottish and Chinese teachers, men and women, revealed their various gender subjectivities within gender. This presentation argues that the widely-endorsed agenda to promote gender diversity in ECEC does not rely merely on including men in the sector. If traditional gender structures are to be challenged in ECEC, practitioners are expected to be open-minded, non-gender-stereotypical, and respectful of gender diversity and even gender flexible in their interactions with children.

Keywords

gender diversity, gender subjectivities, ECEC, practitioners, gender discourses

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The gender-diverse practitioners in ECEC

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This presentation will include ...

- A brief introduction to the research project & samples
- Summaries of global and local discourses that shape men's participation in ECEC
- Report on findings of how practitioners reflected upon their gender subjectivities
- Conclusions & reflections



Research project

- A cross-cultural analysis of gender and practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/30595/>
- **17 ECEC settings (classrooms), 34 practitioners, around 1 week in each settings**
- **Edinburgh:** 4 early years centres, 1 primary school nursery class, & 2 private nurseries (*1 male practitioner, 2 or more female practitioners*)
- **Hong Kong:** 5 local kindergartens spreading the city (*1 male teacher and 1 female teacher*)
- **Tianjin:** 4 public kindergartens, 1 private kindergarten (*1 lead teacher, 1 assistant teacher, & 1 'care' teacher*)



Popular discourses justifying men's participation in ECEC

- **Expecting men to fulfil roles that are complementary to those of women's, including:**
 1. to establish a gender-balanced workforce;
 2. to add to the diversity of ECEC pedagogy (assuming that men and women may teach differently);
 3. to provide boys with male role models.

(Skelton, 2003; Francis, 2008; Francis et al., 2008; Brownhill, 2015; Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Peeters et al., 2015; Warin, 2017)



Chinese (Mainland & HK) discourses:

- **Mainland China**

1. Men can teach boys to be men;
2. Men can 're-gender' the 'missing masculinity' among boys;



- **Mainland China and Hong Kong**

1. Men regarded as having strengths in physical education, which would benefit children's physical health and wellbeing.

Scottish discourse(s):

- Aiming to demonstrate that men can be different within their gender
- Expecting the male practitioners to show children men can be caring, respectful and nice, different from those violent and tough men that children may come across in their early family life (see <http://www.meninchildcare.co.uk/>).



Rethinking of men's values to ECEC

- Whether men would challenge traditional gender structures, or would reinforce them?



The gender-diverse practitioners

- Practitioners would construct their gender subjectivities in accordance with the wider social/gender discourses
- *A lot [of] single parents, single mothers, who see a man that's been respectful of them, positive with them, having built good relationships with them..... And also it's nice to hear the feedback from the parents, about it's nice to have a male role model because the child talks about me when they go home from nursery, they are really nice and really showing that I'm doing a good job here.*

(Kyle, Male, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

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- *I am more strict and disciplinary, and Mr Cheung is looser. It's just like how children interact with their parents at home - one will be strict and one will be loose. Usually it's the father who is strict. So in our case, it's nothing to do with gender, but it's more down to experience. If he lacks experiences in disciplining, he might overdo it. Or if he does not know how to express his requirements to the child, it will be problematic. That's why I become the one who is strict.*

(Mrs Woo, Female, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten)



The gender-diverse practitioners

- **Both Scottish and Chinese practitioners, men and women, revealed their various gender subjectivities within gender.**
- *The way a male teacher behaves in the kindergarten will provide children with masculine influences. I think this is the most important thing to have men working in kindergartens. Because it [the kindergarten] has always been a predominantly female environment, children [boys] are gradually becoming feminised.*

(Mr Tang, Male, Kuaile youeryuan, Tianjin)



- *Men and women are different, so they offer different things to the children. For instance, I suppose, I do like to adopt a bit of a [...] disciplinary role. I purposefully make sure the children are receiving the guidance, direction, and limitations that they need. So when I see the child perhaps behaving in a way that I see will not serve them in the future, I think I, obviously all nursery workers have that responsibility for the child to do the right thing. But for me it's very deep within me, I can't let it go. Not in a bad way, I told you, in a good way. [...] The males and females always have had different roles.*

(Philip, Male, Little Stars Nursery, Edinburgh)

- *We've got a staff team here of 23 or 24, and there are a lot of different styles. I suppose you want to take everyone's own ideas and everyone's approach into account, take on the ideas and implement them even it's not your thought in the room. You work together, and sometimes you work in someone else's style for part of the job. [...]*

(Sean, Male, Guild Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)



- *I can play a very 'feminine' character in the classroom if needed under certain scenarios, I don't mind. I can do that, and have no problem with it. I am a teacher after all, and I need to do as much as I can to cater for my teaching activities. I can't say that I won't do it because it's embarrassing.*

(Mr Chiu, Male, Yau Oi Kindergarten, Hong Kong)



Summaries

- Gender subjectivities are also not necessarily confined to individuals' social gender identity and are rarely binary.
- Instead, individual practitioners discursively construct their gender subjectivities to reflect both cultural patterns and individual experiences.



How could men contribute to promotion of gender diversity in ECEC?

- Gender awareness;
- Reflections on gendered patterns that both men and women practitioners may manifest as results of their own gendered experiences in a particular culture;
- Practitioners to openly confront discussions with children on topics around gender;
- Practitioners are expected to perform their gender situationally, catering for children's needs and meeting the job responsibilities (Skelton, 2009 & 2012);
- The gender-flexible practitioners (Warin, 2017);



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If traditional gender structures are to be challenged in ECEC, it is those practitioners who are open-minded, non-gender-stereotypical, respectful of gender diversity and even gender flexible, that are preferred and welcomed (Skelton, 2009 & 2012; Warin & Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017).



Thank you!
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