

Andrä, Markus; Eidevald, Christian & Xu, Yuwei (2021). **A cross-cultural toolbox for self-reflection of gender issues for ECEC practitioners.** Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Online, 9.9.2021.

Abstract

This paper presents initial findings from an ongoing project that engages practitioners from China, England, Germany, and Sweden in developing a continuing professional development (CPD) training module on gender-sensitive pedagogies and practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Gender binary and gender hegemony are found to be pervasive in shaping practitioners' gender subjectivities (Nentwich et al., 2013; Xu, 2019), which influence practices and pedagogies (Andrä, 2019; Josephidou, 2019). Informed by Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014), this study takes a cross-cultural approach to: 1) Raise awareness of how dominant gender discourses shape ECEC values and practices in local cultures; 2) Inform about gender-sensitive practices; 3) Encourage rethinking of pedagogical values and the implications for wider social justice; and 4) Facilitate mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations. The project is informed by action research and engages practitioners to reflect on their practices (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2007). Data are from focus group discussions and reflective journals. This project obtained ethical approval from UCL Institute of Education's Ethics Committee. Ethical guidelines included: informed consent from participants; confidentiality and anonymity for all outputs; and voluntary participation. Practitioners' reflections on gender and its influence in ECEC seem to vary from across and within cultures. Gender essentialist views perpetuate among many participants. A cross-culturally reflective approach has encouraged critical reflections on challenging gender stereotypes in practitioners' practices. This project directly engages ECEC practitioners through collaborations on developing an online CPD module and learning community. We aim at promoting gender-sensitive practices and policies internationally.

Keywords

cross-cultural, reflectivity, gender-sensitive, teacher training, action research

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Cross-cultural Reflexivity and Gender-Sensitive Teacher Training in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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A project funded by British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE)



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Project Aims/Plans

- to engage practitioners from different countries (China, Sweden, and Germany) in a continuing professional development (CPD) training module on gender-sensitive pedagogies and practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC).
 - One-day Workshop with focus group discussions in each country
 - Reflective journal (one month) & follow-up interview (one hour)
 - Online training module & community

Gender-sensitive practice in Early Childhood Education

- Become aware and understand how gender matters in ECEC
 - Practitioners bring gendered subjectivities into their pedagogies and practices
 - Children actively 'play' with gender and construct their (gendered) selves
 - The power dynamics and relationships in gendered interactions

Gender-sensitive practice in Early Childhood Education

- Reflect on (gendered) practices and sensitively challenge gender stereotypes
 - Allow children more freedom and agency in constructing/exploring their gender subjectivities
 - An interactive approach to engage children in open discussions around gender and in subverting gendered norms

(Xu, 2021)

Methodology

- The project is methodologically informed by action research and will engage practitioners in reflections on their own practices in ECEC
- Data are from focus group discussions and reflective journals.
- For data analysis we use thematic analysis.

(Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006)

(Preliminary) Results

- a) Contextualizing gender-sensitive practice in early childhood education and care: How do teachers/educators understand gender/sex in early childhood education?
- b) Promoting gender-sensitive practice in early childhood education and care: Which areas relate to gender-sensitive practices, such as organization, environment, language, etc.?

(Preliminary) Results: China

- Treat boys and girls differently, based on their sex-related differences.
- Sex education: Gender is mixed with sex and knowing the bodily differences and privacy of sexual parts is a growing but challenging practice to embed in ECEC contexts in China.
- Teachers with overseas study experiences are more likely to mention the need of challenging gender stereotypes in kindergartens.

(Preliminary) Results: China

- Reflections on gender stereotypes emerged after our workshops:
 - *„The difficulty was that I designed the game with the boys‘ and girls‘ assumed gender preferences, only to discover that there were no differences between the boys‘ and girls‘ gender preferences in this activity.“*
 - *„It is necessary for the teacher to guide the child to choose another way other than kissing to express his or her feelings when he or she likes his or her friends.“*

(Preliminary) Results: Sweden

- Children need to be “protected” from stereotype gender norms in the society:
 - Several of the participants describe that they are careful not to divide the children into groups of girls and boys
 - Several of the participants have filmed themselves and in analyzes become aware of differences they have made between girls and boys
 - By not addressing the children as a girl or a boy, but based on their name, and removing what is gendered in society, several of the participants describe that they try give all children the opportunity to develop into the best possible version of themselves

(Preliminary) Results: Sweden

- A question that was repeated, without reaching a common conclusion, is whether children should be treated gender-neutral, or whether gender should be challenged (by starting from the gender categories in a way that challenges gender norms).
- Several of the participants expressed that the gender of the teacher should not play a role in how the work as a professional educator is carried out, but several of them describe that it does matter.

(Preliminary) Results: Germany

- The practitioners argue strongly in favor of diversity: *“So, we basically see children diversely. And gender is one of the aspects. So, then comes age, then comes social background, then comes the special needs for children, and then of course, um, language...”*
- This interest in diversity in their pedagogical practice can go along with binary or even essentialist ideas: *“...but I notice, uh, over the years a difference between the boys and the girls handling it...”*

(Preliminary) Results: Germany

- With the logical pattern of male and female energy it is even possible to continue constructing binary and essentialist ideas while detaching them from the physical body: *"...I always call it the male energy, because I found women do it as well..."*
- Some of the participants criticize how thinking about gender instantly creates a binary perspective.: *"...as soon as you take that word [gender], your view is limited, even though you have spoken loudly about diversity before."*
- Maybe as a rationale to contextualize this unsolvable contradiction, the practitioners describe a timescale and see themselves as part of a societal process: *"...in 20 years, 30 years, 40 years we will be away from it, we will have a much more fundamental image of human beings..."*

(Preliminary) Results: Germany

- The reflections in the journals refer clearly to equality, balance and social justice: *“The educators noticed this while singing [The lyrics of a song describe mathematics implicitly as a male field.]. They discussed with the children, that this song line is not fair to some and agreed, to look for another way to put it.”*
- Interestingly, as well as in the group discussions even here are ideas about different needs. Gender-sensitivity is seen as a quest for equality, but most of the participants can not let go the idea of a binary gender structure: *“...my hypothesis: The same activities meet different needs of girls and boys .”*

Summing up

- Interpretations of gender-sensitive practice vary from countries in our study:
 - China: Gender is mixed with sex. Boys and girls are treated differently, based on assumed sex-related differences.
 - Sweden: Gender sensitivity is supposed to protect Children from a stereotypical gender order in the society.
 - Germany: The practitioners argue strongly in favor of diversity but find a way to follow very binary and essentialist rationales as well.

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