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Xu, Yuwei; Read, Barbara & Schweißfurth, Michele (2022). **Gender and disciplinary power in child-practitioner interactions in early childhood education and care (ECEC): A comparative study of Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin.** Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Glasgow/Scotland, 24.8.2022.

This study analyses how male and female staff and children in ECEC settings in Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin construct and navigate gendered power relations. We analyze how practitioners and children perpetuate gender stereotypes/norms through their interactions. The paper draws on the underutilized observational data to inform debates on whether men should work in ECEC (Rohrman & Brody, 2015; Xu, 2020). We employ Connell's southern theory (Connell, 2007) to explain subtle and dynamic manifestations of gender as disciplinary power, shaped by dominant cultural discourses. Our conceptions of gender are informed by Foucault (1982; 1985), Butler (1990; 2004), and Confucianism (Yim et al., 2011). Taking a qualitative and interpretative approach, 17 ECEC classrooms were observed for one week each. All classrooms had a male and at least one female practitioner working on a regular basis with young children. The research gained ethical approvals from two universities in Scotland and China, and from Edinburgh City Council. Informed consent was gained from managers, practitioners, children, and parents. Findings reveal that gender is utilised as a pervasive technology of power to normalise children's (and adult practitioners') performances in ECEC classrooms, reproducing the power of dominant gender discourses in Chinese and Scottish societies. Men's participation in ECEC embeds no disruption to those gendered discourses, but rather rendering them more salient especially in Chinese ECEC. We propose a hybrid of gender-sensitive, interactive, and culturally contextualised approaches to promoting gender diversity and challenging gender norms, beyond simply calling for more men to work in ECEC.

Keywords

Gender, disciplinary power, child-practitioner interactions, early childhood education and care, men in ECEC

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**Gender and disciplinary
power in child-practitioner
interactions in early childhood
education and care (ECEC):**

**A comparative study of Mainland China, Hong
Kong, and Scotland**

Yuwei Xu,
Michele Schweisfurth,
& Barbara Read



Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 & 5: Quality Education & Gender Equality

- Children's participation at all levels of their life
- Young children, regardless of their gender, should be enabled to participate in all activities and aspects of ECEC life (OECD, 2019a)
- Gender stereotypes and gendered norms that prescribe what children can do need to be challenged (Culhane & Bazeley, 2019)



ECEC as a highly gender imbalanced workforce

- Lack of men and other groups of practitioners
- Diversity in ECEC (Warin, 2019; Rohrmann, 2020)
- OECD (2019) report *Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care*
 - '[t]o promote quality and improve the supply of potential workers, countries should engage in stronger efforts to bring men into ECEC' (p.5).



Gender Action Plan (2016)

- Tackling gender imbalance and inequality in educational institutions
- £50,000 [Men in Early Years Challenge Fund](#)
- [Men in Childcare](#)
 - Deprivation and gender-based violence in some Scottish areas
 - Challenging gender stereotypes about male role models and men's roles (Xu, 2018)





The Chinese contexts

Erasure of gender non-conformity at political levels

- The ‘feminisation’ of boys
 - Male kindergarten teachers to ‘rescue’ boys and their masculinity
- Free teacher training for men in ECEC
- Hong Kong: male PE teachers and children’s physical health
- A positivist approach to gender essentialism and differences

China proposes teaching masculinity to boys as state is alarmed by changing gender roles

Boys in China traditionally are expected to be strong leaders, get good grades and excel at sports. But the gender balance in China is changing.



— The rising economic status of women has upended traditional ideas of masculinity in China. Anson Chan / For NBC News





The project

A cross-cultural analysis of gender and practitioner-child interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (Xu, 2018)

- 17 ECEC settings in Edinburgh, Tianjin, & Hong Kong
- 34 practitioners/kindergarten teachers (17 males & 17 females)
- 280 children aged 2-6 years old
- Interviews, picture-based conversations, observations



Underpinning arguments

ECEC practitioners' gender subjectivities shape their pedagogies and practices working with young children

- Xu, Y. (2020). Gender-diverse practitioners in early years education and care (EYEC): a cross-cultural study of Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 40(1), 109-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2019.1683816>

Children actively and agentially construct their gender subjectivities in response to the social world surrounding them.

- Xu, Y. (2020). Does the gender of a practitioner matter in early childhood education and care (ECEC)? Perspectives from Scottish and Chinese young children. *Children & Society*, 34(5), 354-370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12371>



This presentation

Gender performativity and power relations in child-practitioner interactions in ECEC

- How do practitioners and children perform their gender subjectivities in practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings?
- How are their gender performances shaped by power relationships in different cultural contexts?

Together with Dr Barbara Read and Prof. Michele Schweisfurth, University of Glasgow



Theorising gender and disciplinary power

- **Disciplinary power** (Foucault, 1980; 1982 & 1985)
 - Influencing how individuals think, feel and behave
 - “...it [has a] capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (1980, p.39).
 - ‘Techniques of power’: surveillance, classifying and ranking of individuals, ‘normalisation’ of certain appropriate ways of being and doing

- **Gender as both a product of techniques power and a form of disciplinary power itself** (Butler, 2004)
 - Disciplinary techniques of sorting and classification (e.g. birth certificate)
 - Gender as disciplinary power - the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990)
 - Subtle and dynamic manifestations in different cultural and policy settings (Connell, 2007)



Power relations in ECEC

In ECEC contexts, both practitioners and children are subject to the power and influence of dominant gendered discourses that infuse the ways they consider themselves to be an individual in the world - as a 'subject' (Foucault, 1980) - and also influence the way they and others view the authority and status of individual subjects in relation to each other (MacNaughton, 2006).

- Individual agency to draw on the power of socially dominant discourses that position others as subordinate in instances of interaction (Foucault, 1982) - or perhaps explicitly or implicitly challenge such discourses by 'slippages' in expected performances (Butler, 1993).
- Imbalanced power distribution (Francis, 2006): hierarchies between men and women, hegemonic and non-hegemonic gender performances, and adults and children



Power relations in ECEC

Developmentalism versus neoliberal child-centredness in Western contexts (Xu et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021)

- Children as beings and becomings
- Children's rights and citizenship
- Democracy

Confucianism in China: *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (courteousness), *Xiao* (filial piety), and *Zhi* (wisdom) (Yim et al., 2011)

- Adult authority expressed through *Xiao*
- Socialisation of rules and standard behaviours (*Li*)
- Family responsibilities as defined by gendered roles (*Xiao*)



Gender as a disciplinary form of power in ECEC classrooms

Classroom organizations - the overt disciplinary power that manifests genderness in China





- Gendered classification
- Temporary re-classification associated with masculinity and physical size
- Explicit adult authority
- Children's active engagement in utilising gender as disciplinary power

Scotland

- The unresolved tensions between traditional and contemporary political discourses
- Implicit adult authority



Behaviour management

- Disciplinary practices (emphasizing a practitioner's explicit authority over children - a Bernsteinian form of 'visible pedagogy' and a Confucian educational philosophy)
- Liberal approaches, that seemingly allow greater agency or choice on the part of the child - a form of 'invisible pedagogy' (Bernstein, 1975).
 - Child-centred or learner-centred education
 - *As opposed to teacher-led education underpinned by Confucianism*



- **Subverting gendered roles in behaviour management (China)**
 - The more experienced Chinese female kindergarten teachers as discipliners
 - Confucianist 'seniority'
 - Child agency

- **The fluidity of gender and disciplinary power (Scotland)**
 - Fewer instances of censoring behaviour in Scottish classrooms (possibly due to smaller class size and the younger age groupings, see Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009)
 - Performative and situational
 - Reluctance - again, unresolved tensions
 - *Similar resistance or challenge to dominant masculinised conceptions of men observed in a Chinese male kindergarten teacher*



Gender and 'informing/snitching'

- Children are aware of the disciplinary practice of power in practitioner-child interactions and often aim to initiate such practices of power through informing on their peers (reporting other children's misbehaviour to practitioners).
 - Child agency
 - Relationality of power in practitioner-child interactions
 - Liberal pedagogical approaches by practitioners - child-centred, aiming at developing children's interpersonal skills and independent problem-solving skills



- **Normalising gender roles in Chinese classrooms**
 - A ‘normalising judgement’ in order to influence perceptions as to what is appropriate or expected behaviour for boys (to be the chivalrous ‘gentleman’) and girls (to be passive until ‘rescued’ by a boy-snitch and/or the teacher).
 - Confucian kindness to the ‘vulnerable’

- **Snitching itself as ‘unmasculine’ in China**
 - “you are a boy and you are snitching, again?! I feel (shame for you)...” (Mr Hu, Tianjin)
 - The authority of the ‘knowing’ practitioner in relation to the ‘disciple’ students.



Discussion I

Performing gender and disciplinary power in Confucian and neoliberal contexts

- Gender as a technology of power in Foucauldian sense;
- Dominant gender discourses reproduced by both practitioners and children through interactions of utilizing disciplinary power (explicitly or subtly)
- Manifested in Chinese ECEC classrooms drawing on Confucian norms (**with some exported – developmentalism, gentlemen, child-centredness**)
- Tensions between dominant gender discourses and neoliberal discourses in Scottish contexts



Discussion II

Binarism of gender and childhood underpinned by developmentalism, Enlightenment and Confucianism

- The global dominance of developmentalism
- Dichotomous thinking from Enlightenment thought that shapes contemporary intelligibility in the modern west (Derrida, 1979; Midgley, 1998; Miescher, Mitchell, & Shibusawa, 2015)
- The dichotomy of gender (*yin & yang*) in Confucianism (Shen & D'Ambrosio, n.d.)
- *Xiao* & seniority



Discussion III

Power embedded in dominant gender discourses is not fixed to a particular gender among adult-practitioners

- The power of dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and male superiority in Confucian cultures generally tend to favour those classified as men and subordinate those classified as women
- In ECEC contexts of practitioner-child interactions, hegemonic masculinity is a fluid and relational performance enacted by practitioners' working experiences and leadership roles and is not necessarily practiced by male practitioners



Conclusion

- ❖ Foucauldian, Butlerian and Confucian conceptions of gender as a form of disciplinary power
- ❖ Shared dominant discourses with similar or different manifestations in the Scottish and Chinese contexts
 - ❖ Developmentalism
 - ❖ Child-centredness
 - ❖ Neoliberalism
 - ❖ Binarism
- ❖ A hybrid of gender-sensitive, interactive, and culturally-reflective approaches to promoting gender diversity and challenging gender norms



Notes

The findings presented here are published into a journal article with a new key argument on **challenging the decontextualized approach to men's participation in ECEC by international and national policies:**

- Xu, Y., Schweisfurth, M., & Read, B. (2022). Men's participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC): comparative perspectives from Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China. *Comparative Education*, 58(3), 345-363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2022.2062950>



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**Any comments or
questions?**



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Thank you!

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