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Coles, Laetitia; Dayan, Yael; Reich-Shapiro, Mindi & Li, Minyi (2023). **A cross-national collaborative project methodology aimed at understanding children's perspectives of their male and female teachers in early learning settings.** Paper presented on the 31th EECERA Annual Conference, Estoril/Portugal, 1.9.2023.

We present the data collection and analysis methodologies for nine case studies investigating young children's perspectives of educators in ECEC within services across nine countries spanning the global north and south. Limiting assumptions about children's abilities contravene United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989, Article 12). Young children are meaning-makers (Clark & Statham 2005), thus, our research centers children's perspectives (Dayan, 2008) on gender, which is essential as traditional gendered divisions are observed among educators (Brownhill, et al., 2014). We adopt a cross-cultural framework and examine multi-level contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that shape ECEC, recognizing that gender is a form of culture; it is dynamic, context-specific, and subject to change (Bray & Koo, 2004). A qualitative research paradigm underpins our Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) to capture unique "languages of children" (Clark, 2011: p. 13). Diverse and flexible data collection activities generated rich conversations with children, and contextualising information from educators and parents. Data collection activities depended upon setting-appropriateness and local ethical requirements. We followed EECERA's Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al. 2015). Children were reminded they could withdraw assent at any time, and nonverbal signs of withdrawal were identified. We overcame the challenges of a cross-national project through diverse data collection activities and a collaborative research culture, to gain a comprehensive understanding of young children's complex and dynamic experiences and perspectives. Policy and practice should prioritize children's perspectives in decision-making processes for their education and care, creating inclusive environments that respect gender diversity.

### **Keywords**

*cross-cultural collaboration, children's perspectives of educators, gender, mosaic approach, children's perspectives of gender*

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# A cross-national collaborative project methodology: Understanding children's perspectives of their male and female teachers in early learning settings

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# Acknowledgment of Country

The University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which this chapter was written – the Jaggera and Turrbal people.

We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

This land has always been a space for teaching, learning, research and collaboration tens of thousands of years before it was established as a university campus, and continues today.

We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

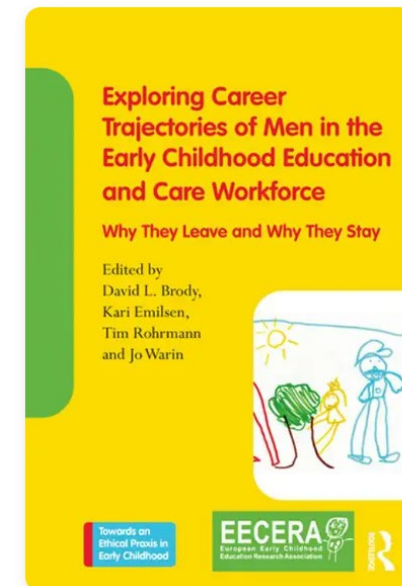


# Cross-national collaborative project



- 23 researchers from nine countries across the Global North and South:
  - Australia, Brazil, China, England, Israel, Norway, South Africa, Türkiye, and the USA

- This project builds upon an earlier cross-national collaboration (Brody et al., 2020)
- Brings together additional researchers and countries, with the aim of advancing intellectual and analytic rigor within the field.



# Research Questions

- What are young children's perspectives of their teachers who identify as men and women?
  - How do the children's perspectives differ according to the gender of their teachers?
- How are the immediate and broader socio-cultural contexts that surround early childhood settings reflected in young children's perspectives on gender?



# Key goal of the book

To investigate children's perspectives of their teachers in ECEC through a gender lens

- Four key dimensions of children's experiences and perspectives
  1. **Examined** children's awareness of their teachers' and caregivers' gender and gendered behaviors
  2. **Analyzed** how children's gender constructions informed their relationships with their teachers and caregivers in ECEC
  3. **Gained** rich insight into how children understood and interpreted concepts of care as illustrated through teacher behaviors, and the extent to which these concepts of care were gendered.
  4. **Developed** a deeper understanding of the extent to which children resisted, or conversely constructed, gendered discourses, roles, and norms.

# The importance of children's perspectives

- Young children possess a nuanced and complex understanding of their own lives and the contexts in which they are situated
- Limiting assumptions about children - in direct contravention and opposition to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

...all children who are “capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” and that “the views of the child [should be] given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations 1989, Article 12).
- Sociological perspective of childhood = innate capability of children as experts of their own lives (Clark 2017; Clark and Statham 2005; Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. 2010) and competent communicators of their own views (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011).
- **Not** research on or about children, but research conducted **with** children as co-researchers and active participants in the research process.

# Children's research and gender

It is essential to understand children's views on gender and their perceptions of their educators' gender in ECEC settings:

- Children are primarily cared for by women
- When men are present, traditional gendered divisions of play, care, and labor often observed among educators (Brownhill, et al., 2014).

Children's experiences form the basis of gender identity formation.

Shaped by various factors, including parents, peers, media (Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Livingstone, et al., 2018), and racism (Osher, et al., 2020).





# Case study methodology

Presented as country case studies:

Research method that aims to provide an in-depth understanding of a single social phenomenon (Orum, Feagin, and Sjoberg 2020).

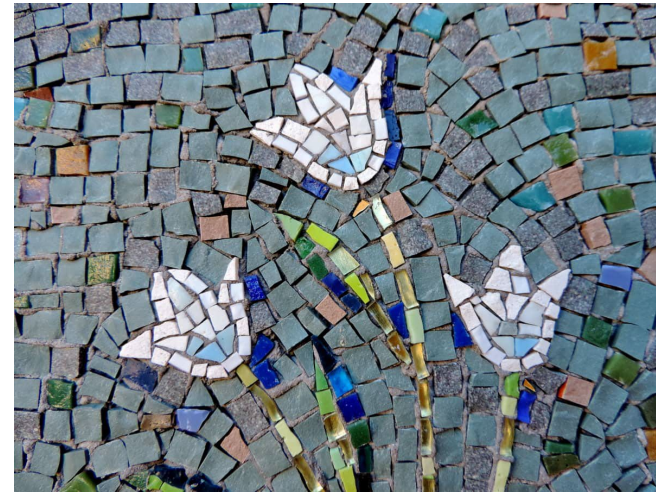
Cross-cultural *collaboration*, rather than a cross-cultural *comparison*



# Mosaic approach

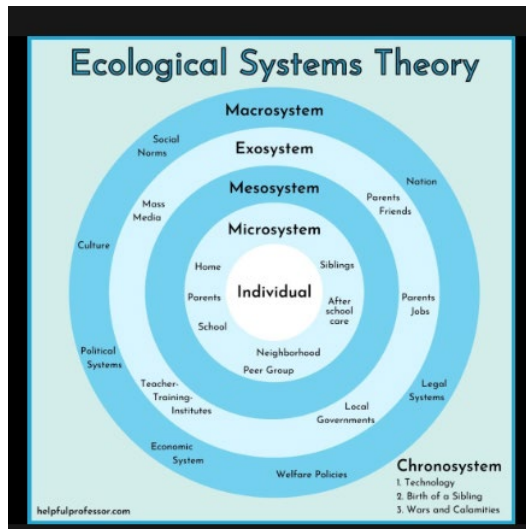
Developed by Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2011)

Aims to collaboratively seek meaning and understanding of a particular phenomenon by using various methods of data collection to capture the "different 'voices' or languages of children" (Clark, 2011, p. 13).



The Mosaic approach draws upon two key methodological influences:

1. A pedagogical framework developed by Loris Malaguzzi
2. Data collection activities emerged from working in international development contexts, wherein literature and language were initial barriers to meaning making and understanding (Clark & Statham 2005).



# Mosaic approach inspiration

Inspired by the Mosaic approach to hear the multiple languages of children, we respect the multiple languages of research and of researchers in:

- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Write up & presentation of each country chapter

# Sampling and participants

## Site composition

1 male and 1 female co-educator  
*Some variation*

## Selection of child participants

3-5 years  
*With parental consent and child assent*

## Selection of adult participants

2 teachers & director  
Parents

# Data collection methodologies

| Data collection with children |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Interviewing                  | Y |
| Storytelling                  | Y |
| Taking photos                 |   |
| Drawing                       | Y |
| Tours (walking interviews)    |   |
| Map making                    | Y |
| Video                         | Y |
| Role play                     |   |

| Contextualising information from:  |
|--|
| Interviews with educators and centre director(s)   |
| Interviews/surveys with parents  |
| Observations of the classroom over several days  |
| Cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic profile of the suburb, neighbourhood, district, or borough in which each ECEC setting was situated in order to understand the cultural contexts that inform children's perspectives of gender |

## Flexibility & Autonomy



# An international, cross-cultural, collaborative project

As a cross-cultural collaborative project, we acknowledged the need for:

- Reflexivity
- Egalitarianism
- Communication
- Collegiality
- Avoiding ethnocentric assumptions
- Recognised the problems with centering voices from the Global North and marginalizing other contexts and understandings within the research community (Orum and colleagues 2020)
- Three of the nine countries represent perspectives of the Global South.



# How to collaborate?

- **Foster researcher autonomy** throughout the life of the project
- **Take a critical and reflexive approach** to research practices and methodologies
- **Collaborate with researchers** in each country research group during project development, including:
  - Project conceptualisation: goals and questions, study settings, and population.
  - Data collection methodologies: Defining a case study project design and research methodology, data collection methodologies and tools, and data analysis methodologies. This enabled flexibility to adapt data collection and choose from a 'menu'
  - Case study analysis and presentation: Country researcher groups were able to formulate an appropriate case study for their setting = flexibility to choose data analysis and case study methodology.
  - Peer review of completed case studies by teams from different countries.
- **Regularly met via Zoom**
- **Situate across the northern and southern hemisphere** with a time zone span of up to 16 hours
- **Make meetings 'value-added'** - provided a forum for researchers to reflexively learn, discuss, present, share ideas, and collaboratively determine the next steps

# Data analysis and researcher reflexivity



Researcher reflexivity is an essential aspect of collaborative qualitative research, involving self-awareness and critical reflection of the researcher's role throughout the entire research process (Finlay, 2002; Finlay & Gough, 2008).



Each researcher is not an objective observer of children's experiences, but an active participant in the research process, who brings their own:  
perspectives,  
experiences, and  
biases.



In the context of this project, reflexivity involved questioning our own assumptions, values, positionality, and power dynamics that exist between adult researchers and research participants, *particularly children*

# Ethical process

Some countries drew upon a “parent” ethical application – Nottingham university

Other countries managed their own ethics

Also considered

- Child agency (parental consent, child *assent*) – agency in methodology *and* a need to consider child agency in findings
- Child “voice”
- What if the educators do not like what we find?

# Key emerging finding

Children view their educators in terms of what they *do rather than* in terms of their gender.

However,

What educators *do* may be more or less gendered depending on the setting, culture, etc.

## CULTURE MATTERS

Norway & Australia – Gender in the policy frameworks



# Key considerations / Overcoming challenges

- Talk with each other
- Ask open questions, ask more questions, and ask more questions again – language, culture, policy frameworks change perspectives and research lenses
- Some questions in surveys no appropriate in all contexts; be open to changing questions to be more context-specific
- Translating from other languages into English can be tricky – some things lost in translation
- So much data!!