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Eidevald, Christian; Xu, Yuwei; Lehner-Mear, Rachel & Andrae, Markus (2023). **Contextualising gender-sensitive pedagogy and practice in early childhood education (ECE): Perspectives from China, England, Germany, and Sweden.** Paper presented on the 31th EECERA Annual Conference, Estoril/Portugal, 31.8.2023.

### **Abstract**

This paper concerns Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), Target 4.a to 'build and upgrade education facilities that are 'gender sensitive'. It problematizes the lack of definition on 'gender sensitive' education in this important international policy and in literature. Many studies have recommended gender-sensitive pedagogy in disrupting gender stereotypes in ECE (e.g., Rohrmann, 2021), but few have discussed in detail what it means and how it is practiced in different socio-cultural and policy contexts. This study is informed by action research and engaged practitioners from China, the UK, Sweden, and Germany in reflections on their own practices in ECE (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2007). We aim to: promote reflexive practice in exploration of gender-sensitive approaches to ECE; experiment actions facilitating gender-sensitivity; identify challenges and support; and develop cross-cultural reflexivity by looking beyond reflection to a broadly globalised and multicultural context (Hayes, 2014).

Participant practitioners (N=40) took part in a one-day workshop (separately in each country) and contributed to group discussions on how gender matters in ECE. They then took individual reflective journals for a month to document how they interpreted and practiced gender-sensitive pedagogy at work. Ethical approvals were gained from all countries through the researchers' institutions. EECERA Ethical Code is consistently followed. The findings reveal culturally relevant interpretations and practices of gender-sensitive education across the four countries, challenging the universal approach to gender-sensitive education by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. A culturally-sensitive framework for gender-sensitive ECE is therefore proposed in addressing knowledge gap in the decontextualized SDG 4.

### **Keywords**

sustainable development goal , gender-sensitive pedagogy, cross-cultural reflexivity , early childhood education, reflective practice

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- *Contextualising gender-sensitive pedagogy and practice in early childhood education and care (ECEC)*

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# Starting point for the study

- The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to build a better world for people and our planet by 2030
  - Adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015
- Focus on:
  - Global quality education: Goal 4
  - Global gender equality: Goal 5



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# Sustainable Development (Goal 4)

## *Quality Education*

- Target 4.a:

"Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender **sensitive** and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all."



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# Sustainable Development (Goal 5)

*Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls*

- Target 5.5:

“Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.”

**ALL CHILDREN** (“Young people have a role to play as engaged global citizens in ensuring global gender equality”)



# Structure of the study

1. What is gender-sensitive pedagogy?

2. Why gender-sensitive pedagogy?

3. How: focus on gender-sensitive pedagogy in global contexts?



# 1. What is gender-sensitive Pedagogy in ECEC

- Its about 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
- We therefor need to 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

## 2. Why gender-sensitive? 1(3)

### **The practitioners are gender-diverse**

- Gender subjectivities are 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
- Promoting gender diversity in ECE would need practitioners to reflect on their own gendered subjectivities that instruct their pedagogies and practices in working with young children



## 2. Why gender-sensitive? 2(3)

### **We can see children as gender 'players'**

- Children (even as young as aged 2-6) are active gender 'players', who agentically construct their gender subjectivities in response to the social world; who may reproduce and/or challenge gender stereotypes/norms in ECE settings

## 2. Why gender-sensitive? 3(3)

### **We can understand gender as a form of disciplinary power in ECE**

- Power can be regarded as embedded in dominant gender discourses. It's not fixed to a particular gender among adult-practitioners (or children)
- We use a hybrid of gender-sensitive, interactive, and culturally-reflective approaches to promoting gender diversity and challenging gender norms

# 3. How: Gender-sensitive pedagogy in ECE?

## **Develop a cross-cultural reflexivity and gender-sensitive teacher training in ECE**

- We have engaged practitioners from Sweden, China, UK, and Germany in a continuing professional development training module on gender-sensitive pedagogies and practices in ECEC
- One-day Workshop with focus group discussions in each country
- Reflective journals (one month)
- **Online training module & community**

# Findings (China)

## **Treat boys and girls differently, based on their sex-related differences**

- Sex(uality) education: gender is mixed with sex and knowing the bodily *differences* and privacy of sexual parts is a growing, but challenging, practice
- Teachers with overseas study experiences are more likely to mention the need of challenging gender stereotypes in ECE

# Findings (Germany) 1(2)

**The most popular term was "gender-conscious pedagogy", with the meaning of consciousness (somehow close to sensitivity)**

- Gender competency is described as the major capability for the professionals. Three essential dimensions:
  1. Systematic observation and reflection of the interactions of children and own behavior
  2. Practical participation of the children
  3. Professional dialogue among the pedagogues

# Findings (Germany) 2(2)

## **Diversity-sensitive – but with implications of gender binary/essentialism**

- Reflections clearly refer to equality, balance and social justice
- Gender-sensitivity is seen as a quest for equality, but gender binary perspectives still implied:
  - “...as soon as you take that word [gender], your view is limited, even though you have spoken loudly about diversity before.”
  - “...my hypothesis: The same activities meet different needs of girls and boys .”

# Findings (Sweden) 1(2)

- From “Compensatory pedagogy” to “Gender neutral pedagogy”:
  - careful not to divide the children into groups of girls and boys
  - Videoing the practices and analyzing how they may have differed girls and boys
  - Striving to give all children the opportunity to develop into the best possible version of themselves (without being hindered by stereotypical gendered norms)
- → To: Challenging gender norms in society?

# Findings (Sweden) 2(2)

## **Children need to be ‘protected’ from stereotypical gender norms in the society:**

- *Gender sensitivity* is *not* mentioned in Sweden's curriculum for ECEC. Nor has the term been frequently used in gender research
  - The concept may be helpful, but in that case, it may need to be anchored in research and theory, to not be differently interpreted (as with “compensatory pedagogy”, and “gender neutral pedagogy”)



# Diskussion

- Different interpretations of gender-sensitive pedagogy across (and sometimes within) countries
  - Do we need a common definition, or is it a strength that the concept can be interpreted culturally?
- How do we 'build and upgrade education facilities that are ... *gender sensitive*?
  - Beyond universal conceptualization and enactment?
- The findings reveal culturally relevant interpretations and practices of *gender-sensitive* education across the countries, challenging the universal approach to gender-sensitive education by *Sustainable Development, Goal 4*.
  - Do we need a culturally-sensitive framework for gender-sensitive ECEC?
  - Do we need culturally/contextually-sensitive teacher agency?

# Related publications

- Xu, Y. (2020a). 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>
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