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Abstract

This study examines how institutional mechanisms, pedagogical practices, and teacher-student interactions contribute to gender stereotyping in early childhood education in urban China. This research builds upon previous studies examining gender stereotyping in early childhood settings (Chen, 2017; Li et al., 2012), particularly studies highlighting institutional reinforcement of gendered expectations in educational contexts (Xu et al., 2018). While research on gender in Chinese ECE remains limited, this study extends work by Hu (2015) and Qian et al. (2016) that identified traditional gender role expectations in educational materials and teacher-student interactions in Chinese kindergartens. The study is grounded in theories of gender as a social construct, recognizing its fluidity and intersectionality (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 1995; Lorber, 1994). It applies Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963) to analyze gendered behavior acquisition and Connell's (2009) gender order theory to contextualize institutional influences. This interpretive-constructivist study employs a qualitative case study approach. Data collection included 12-week non-participant observations using event sampling techniques and semistructured interviews with 19 teachers in an urban Chinese kindergarten. Analysis combined Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) to examine macro-level patterns and micro-level linguistic features. The study adheres to EECERA (2024) and University of Bristol ethical codes, with parental consent and child-friendly assent procedures. Findings indicate gender segregation in routines, differentiated teaching, and gendered language use contribute to stereotype persistence. Teachers' training, genderinclusive pedagogies, and institutional reforms to mitigate gender bias in ECE and foster equitable learning environments.

Keywords

urban China, gender stereotypes, early childhood education, social learning theory, gender and sexuality

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Gender stereotyping in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Urban area of China

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Chinese Context

- **Traditional values:** Confucian philosophy of yin-yang complementarity between genders, intersect with contemporary equality aspirations
- **One-child policy impact:** Created 'little emperors' and 'little princesses,' concentrating family investment while maintaining gendered expectations
- **Multigenerational caregiving:** Grandparents' traditional gender expectations
- **Rapid social change:** Potential conflict between modern equality ideals and cultural preservation
- **Educational context:** Play-based learning policies in gender-traditional society

Literature Key Points

- **Gender construction theory:** Gender as **socially constructed** through daily practices
- **Early childhood critical period:** Foundation years for **gender identity** formation
- **Institutional role:** Kindergartens as **powerful sites** of gender socialization
- **Teacher influence:** Educators' **unconscious biases** shape children's experiences
- **Cultural specificity:** Western gender research may not apply to **Chinese contexts**
- **Research gap:** **Limited studies** on Chinese kindergarten gender practices

Research Rationale

- **Empirical gap:** This research **fill the gap** in comprehensive research on gender practices in Chinese kindergartens
- **Cultural necessity:** Understanding gender within **Chinese philosophical frameworks**
- **Policy relevance:** It aims to inform **gender-inclusive** educational development
- **Critical timing:** Rapid **social change** creates unique research opportunity
- **International significance:** Contributing comparative insights to global early childhood education

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How do chinese teachers interpret and implement **play-based learning policies** in relation to **gender**?
- **RQ2:** What patterns emerge in the **types of play** encouraged for **different genders**, and how do **teachers communicate** these expectations in China?
- **RQ3:** How do **teaching materials** and classroom activities reflect gender distinctions?
- **RQ4:** What **gender-related factors** influence **children's play behaviours** and their **development**?
- **RQ5:** To what extent does **gender stereotyping persist** in Chinese early childhood education?
- **RQ6:** What opportunities exist for developing more **gender-inclusive** teaching practices?

Methodology

- **Data Collection:**

Semi-structure interview (29 hours): Interviewed **19 kindergarten** workers, including **4 school leaders, 3 male educators** (one Canadian male teacher, one male leader) and **13 female teachers**.

Non-participant observation (150 hours): I conducted **irregular observations** for **12 weeks** at a large kindergarten in urban China.

- **Data Analysis:** Reflexive Thematic Analysis + Critical Discourse Analysis
- **Data Language:** Data collected in Chinese, analyzed preserving cultural nuances

Ethical considerations

- The research adheres to the ethical standards set by the EECERA and the University of Bristol.
- Ethical application reference number: 15707
- Parental consent was obtained for observations, and a system of sign cards was used to ensure that children could opt out at any time, maintaining their comfort and autonomy.

Key Findings

Six Key Themes Emerged:

1. Institutional Mechanisms of Gender Construction
2. Gendered Teaching Practices and Interactions
3. Embodied Gender in Early Childhood Education
4. Gender Role Development in Play Contexts
5. Cultural and Institutional Influences on Gender Practices
6. Contradictions and Negotiations in Gender Approaches

1. Institutional Mechanisms of Gender Construction

- **Systemic Gender Segregation**

- Formal organizational structures: Groups are typically divided into **boys' groups** and **girls' groups**(OW1D3)
- Spatial arrangements: When changing clothes, boys changed **outside** the classroom while girls changed **inside** (OW3D1)
- Activity organization along gender lines: "Boys wash hands and go to the toilet first **while girls wait.**" (OW6D3).

- **Gendered Policy Implementation**

- Safety supervision: **Higher risk thresholds** were tolerated for boys "When boys were on the slide, teachers would say '**Go for it!**' but with girls, they would offer physical help and say: '**Be careful, slow down**'" (OW4D1).
- Behavioral management: "...female teachers were **stern with boys**, using **louder voices**, while **remaining gentler with girls**" (OW1D3).
- Emotional regulation expectations: "When boys cried, teachers would say '**It's okay, be brave.**' When girls cried, teachers would say '**It's okay, don't be afraid**'" (OW9D1).

- **Differential Resource Allocation**

- Material resources: **Blue** schoolbags for boys, **red** for girls.
- Educational opportunity distribution: During the **math** review session, the teacher called on boys to answer questions **more than twice** as often as girls (OW1D2).
- Linguistic resources: Positioned boys and girls via binary adjectives "**naughty/quiet, active/calm, brave/gentle**"

2. Gendered Teaching Practices and Interactions

- **Communication Patterns and Language Use**

- Instructional language: To girls: "Let me see if you're keeping up?" To boys: "Write quickly!"(OW9D3)
- Emotional vocabulary: When children cried, boys often heard **"Get up,"** whereas girls were met with **physical soothing**: "I will go over and pat and rub her." (FT7).
- Grammatical features: Boys as active agents, girls as states of being

- **Assessment and Evaluation Practices**

- Performance expectations: Girls' **capabilities questioned** even when competent. Teacher: 'Did you fold it **yourself?**' Girl: 'Yes.' Teacher responded: 'Praise you'" (OW1D5). (**Emphasizing behaviour and effort**)
- Feedback delivery: Boys praised for ability, girls for effort and behavior
- Recognition practices: "You're a **clever** boy"(OW9D3) vs. "Your **behavior** is always good"(OW10D2)

- **Behavioral Management Strategies**

- Disciplinary variations: Different approaches to identical behaviors
- Activity management: Reinforcing **gender boundaries** during play
- Rhetorical strategies: In interviews, teachers sometimes **naturalized differences** by **invoking developmental narratives**.

3. Embodied Gender in Early Childhood Education

- **Physical Capabilities and Expectations**

- Activity guidance: Stricter requirements for boys' **movements and speed**
- Risk assessment: Different safety thresholds - girls was called away. "to avoid being stepped on"(OW7D2)
- Developmental narratives: "Boys have more **stamina**" beliefs

- **Body Control and Boundaries**

- Physical contact patterns: Teachers pinch boys' cheeks, **maintain distance** with girls(OW8D1)
- Privacy and autonomy: Different approaches during toileting assistance
- Discourse around Physical Appearance: The teacher said to a girl: 'If you fall and hurt your face, you won't be **pretty** anymore'" (OW4D2).

- **Appearance and Presentation Standards**

- Appearance-related comments: **Beauty** focus for girls, **strength** for boys
- Dress code implementation: "Parents think little girls should be **beautiful** sometimes, so they **would wear dresses**, especially in the summer. " (FT8).
- Aesthetic values: **Educational materials** frequently depicted highly gendered representations that **reinforced traditional roles and appearances**

4. Gender Role Development in Play Contexts

- **Play Choices and Identity Formation**

- Activity preferences: Boys create "**racetracks**" girls focus on "**aesthetic appeal**"
- Teachers' responses to gender-atypical play: Negotiating **parental expectations**
- Material selection: Gender flexibility when choice provided

- **Peer Interactions in Play**

- Group formation patterns: Boys reach **across girls** to talk to other boys
- Communication style variations: Girls ask **permission**, boys **take directly**
- Conflict management: Girls **rely on teacher** intervention, boys use **direct confrontation**

- **Teacher Mediation in Play**

- Intervention strategies: **Maintaining boundaries** when girls join boys' play
- Facilitation approaches: **Autonomy** for boys, **collaborative support** for girls
- Play-based learning implementation: Different expectations for outcomes. "I think boys usually perform a little better than girls in sports activities" (MT2)

5. Cultural and Institutional Influences on Gender Practices

- **Traditional Gender Role Expectations**

- Confucian values: "Crystallization of **cultural wisdom**, embodying yin-yang complementarity"(FT1)
- Parental influence: **Override** teachers' professional judgment
- Family structure: **Multigenerational caregiving** reinforces traditional expectations

- **Institutional Constraints and Professional Development**

- Teachers' training gaps: When asked about training programs addressing gender stereotypes, one female headmaster responded: "Almost nothing" (FH2).
- Male teacher challenges: Parental resistance and institutional barriers "I remember the parents of a girl who put their child in a class and saw that it was a **male teacher** and immediately asked to **change the class**. "(MH1)
- Safety concerns: Gendered protection considerations "Some parents tell me they don't want their daughter to be close to boys" (FH1).

- **Social Change and Emerging Resistance**

- **One-child policy** impact: "Little emperors" and "little princesses"
- Generational differences: Traditional vs. modern gender attitudes
- Children's resistance: **Gender non-conforming behaviours** surfaced, and institutions responded with varying degrees of flexibility.

6. Contradictions and Negotiations in Gender Approaches

- **Contradictions Between Stated Values and Enacted Practices**

- Egalitarian discourse vs. differentiated practice: "I didn't treat boys and girls separately"(FT3) + observed differences
- Domain-specific differentiation: Physical activities show strongest gender patterns
- Varying awareness levels: Some teachers self-reflective, others unaware

- **Strategic Navigation of Competing Gender Expectations**

- Contextual compartmentalization: Flexibility in free play, traditional roles in performances
- Professional distancing: Personal beliefs vs. professional responsibilities
- "Gender experimental zones": Spaces for boundary crossing. "We have set up some **free activity times** where children can **choose activities** according to their interests, without gender restrictions. During this time, we saw many choices that **break conventions**."(FT3)

- **Power Relations in Gender Construction**

- Institutional authority: Teachers maintain boundaries through **physical redirection**
- Peer enforcement: Children question **gender non-conforming behaviors**
- Parental authority: Parents exercised **strong educational authority** over classroom decisions.

Formative Conclusions

- **Main Finding:**

Gender works as a basic organizing system in Chinese kindergartens through:

- Daily classroom practices that seem neutral but create differences
- Teacher interactions that treat boys and girls differently
- Traditional Chinese values that support these differences

- **Key Gaps:**

- Teachers say they treat children equally, but their actions show differences
- No training exists to help teachers recognize these patterns
- Current policies ignore how gender actually works in classrooms

- **Practical significance:**

- Professional development must include gender awareness training
- Policies need practical guidance, not just general statements
- Chinese cultural context requires specific approaches, not Western models

- **Futher Research Developmet:**

- Building a complete theory for Chinese early childhood education
- Creating training programs that work within Chinese culture
- Developing practical tools for more inclusive teaching

Thank You!

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