

# **Does the gender of a practitioner matter in early childhood education and care (ECEC)? Perspectives from Scottish and Chinese young children**

Yuwei Xu

*Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK*

20 Bedford Way, Bloomsbury, London WC1H 0AL

[yuwei.xu@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:yuwei.xu@ucl.ac.uk); +44(0)7794437929

Dr Yuwei Xu is a research fellow in early years education at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL). Prior to this, he worked as a lecturer in children and family studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK from 2016-2019. His research centres around the sociology of education, gender, and childhood; and he has researched about topics such as gender balance and men in ECEC, child agency, child-centred diversity and quality ECEC, and women in STEM.

# **Does the gender of a practitioner matter? Perspectives from Scottish and Chinese young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC)**

This paper responds to concerns over the assumed ‘feminisation’ of ECEC and adds children’s perspectives to debates on whether more men should work in ECEC. Pictorial conversations were conducted with 280 children aged 2-6 years old from the cities of Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin. Findings show that although children sometimes related practitioners to their gendered experiences in and outside ECEC, children’s gender subjectivities are dynamic and are linked to their short-term and long-term, fluid and stable, and interactive relationships with practitioners. This paper argues that practitioners need to openly discuss gender with children in ECEC practices and pedagogies.

Keywords: children’s perspectives; child agency; gender; ECEC; practitioners

## **Introduction**

Concerns over the lack of men in and the assumed ‘feminisation’ of early childhood education and care (ECEC) have been discussed across the globe since the 1970s (Milgram and Sciarra, 1974; Rohrmann, 2019). Yet, until today, whether ECEC is feminised and whether men contribute differently to ECEC are still subject to debates and scrutiny (Xu and Waniganayke, 2018; Rohrmann, 2019; Warin, 2019). Many studies have explored men’s and women’s roles in ECEC, predominantly from practitioners’ (particularly male practitioners’) perspectives (Rohrmann and Brody, 2015; Xu, 2018; Rohrmann, 2019). Nevertheless, young children’s opinions are rarely investigated in terms of how they see and interact with their male and female practitioners in daily ECEC activities. Children’s perspectives are important in promoting quality ECEC (Murray, 2019). Therefore, this paper responds to the research gap and provides children’s insights into whether the gender of a practitioner matters in ECEC. The paper employs a poststructuralist theoretical positioning seeing children as

active and agentic ‘performers’ in the constructions of gender dynamics in ECEC. Findings presented are derived from a project that used interviews with practitioners, pictorial conversations with children, and observations in ECEC settings to study about the relevance of gender in child-practitioner interactions (Xu, 2018). This paper mainly draws upon data from pictorial conversations with children.

### **Children as active and agentic ‘performers’ of gender**

Underpinning the concerns over young children’s development when there is a lack of men working in ECEC are developmental psychology and sex-role socialisation theories that attach universal, fixed and essentialist characteristics to boys’ and girls’ perceived biological sex (Blaise, 2005; Connell and Pearse, 2015). Those theories view children as passive receivers of innate, gendered traits from adults, failing to recognise children as active participants in their own life and in constructions of gender subjectivities (Blaise, 2005; Kelly-Ware, 2016). ECEC pedagogies and practices as framed by sex-role socialisation and developmental psychology theories are thus criticized for narrowing children’s possibilities in achieving their full potential (Estola, 2011) and inhibiting children’s participation at all levels of life. The theories imply inequalities between the dichotomously constructed categories of boys and girls, and children are socialized into traditionally gendered roles organized around social hierarchies. The dichotomous thinking of gender further marginalizes children who do not fit in with the expected categories of boys and girls (Sauntson, 2012), especially in an emerging context of transgender awareness in ECEC settings (Warin and Price, 2019).

Instead of passively developing gendered behaviours and characteristics, children actively and agentially construct their gender subjectivities in response to the social world surrounding them (Crivello, Vu & Vennam, 2014). In ECEC environments,

children 'play' with gender for pleasure and fun, constructing their gender subjectivities within and beyond the constraints of dominant gender discourses (Estola, 2011; Sauntson, 2012; Kelly-Ware, 2016; Meland and Kaltvedt, 2019). Some studies (Blaise, 2005; Jacobson, 2011; Kelly-Ware, 2016) have provided empirical examples suggesting that girls enjoy playing with dolls and conducting activities shaped by dominant gender discourses (like looking after babies, washing, etc.), as well as that boys are excited about sports and other traditionally masculine activities - because children know that these behaviours could gain them recognition from their peers and adults. There are also instances where both girls and boys are having fun playing across gender borders, negotiating and challenging dominant gender discourses (Thorne, 1993; Estola, 2011). Boys may join the girls in playing in the house corner and even play a role of caring and girls might be found doing rough and tumble play as is often expected from boys.

Children's play with gender is reflected in the forms of gender performances (Butler, 2004), by repeating, embodying and challenging gender norms through language and actions (Blaise, 2005). Children's gender performativity is situational (Sauntson, 2012; Connell and Pearse, 2015) and could include 'doing' and 'undoing' gender as a social structure (Butler, 2004). Research shows that in most cases children do gender and organize their daily activities upon dominant gender norms (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004; Blaise, 2005; Sauntson, 2012). For example, Thorne (1993) and Browne (2004) noticed that boys and girls largely play in separate groups with stereotypically gendered activities. Browne (2004) further pointed out that the gender separations reflected little about parental or explicit peer group pressure, but rather were attributed more to children's different interests as boys or girls. It can be interpreted here that children are doing gender through their own agency or 'will', although this will is often unavoidably constructed in alliance with dominant gender discourses.

Sometimes children also do gender in non-traditional ways. We may hear about boys and girls being labelled as 'sissies' and 'tomboys' among peer cultures (Paechter, 2010). Such labels are usually associated with children who display characteristics and behaviours of their opposite gender being excluded from their same-sex peer groups, getting teased at and/or bullied by children of both sexes, and receiving forms of concern from the adult world (Sauntson, 2012). To what extent children might be impacted by those labels is subject to their individual agency that is constructed through personal experiences. For instance, Paechter (2010) found out in her study that girls tended to construct the tomboy and the 'girly-girl' as oppositional identities. Albeit the oppositional constructions limit those girls' gender flexibilities, they were still regarded as able to switch between tomboy and girly-girl identities situationally.

However, in general children often suffer as a result of performances of gender deviance (Browne, 2004). This is because the power of hegemonic masculinity and other dominant gender discourses would usually exclude and 'punish' individuals who do gender beyond their constraints. Nevertheless, such powerfulness sometimes could also be taken advantage of by children who want to do gender at their own willingness. For example, Thorne (1993) described a boy who is popular among boys because of his strong masculine character as revealed in sports and others, and who may occasionally join the girls in doing something that would be considered as girly. But his border-crossing does not seem to be found problematic and is even admired by other boys for being 'funny'. By lending his power gained from his masculine gender performance to the freedom of crossing gender boundaries, the boy enjoyed doing gender for pleasure and fun. Hence indeed, doing gender can be both pleasurable and unpleasant (Boldt, 2011). Children are aware of this and can actively and agentically respond to it under a variety of circumstances.

## **Children's participation in gender cultures**

Children as active and agentic performers of gender manifest, navigate, reproduce, negotiate and challenge the power of dominant gender discourses in a variety of complicated ways. Their performances are situational within their specific schools, families, and societies and they perform gender relationally in their interactions and relations with others. Studies (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004; Kelly-Ware, 2016) have found that children normally construct their gender subjectivities in relation to their peers in school life. Boys and girls divide themselves into oppositional groups that share different interests and play separately, and they gain their respective senses of being a boy/girl by referring to their same-gender peers and by distancing themselves from the opposite gender (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004; Boldt, 2011). Such gendered relationships form the often separate and rivalrous peer cultures of boys and girls, and children from the opposite gender are usually excluded from each culture (Boldt, 2011). In some situations, boys' and girls' cultures may overlap and boundaries-crossing may take place among children. Through 'fighting' and negotiations, children shape and reshape gender cultures in their school life (Blaise, 2005).

Children's interactions and relationships with their teachers and other significant adults are also important venues where gender cultures develop. In educational settings where dominant cultural discourses are reflected, reinforced and perhaps also challenged and subverted (Tobin et al., 2009), teachers/practitioners play an important role in shaping children's constructions of gender subjectivities and relations. Research suggests that teachers/practitioners have gendered expectations from boys and girls and interact with children in gendered ways (Strasser and Koeppel, 2011; Xu, 2019). For example, practitioners may assign classroom duties according to children's gender, praise girls according to their appearance and praise boys for their ability, and promote 'learned helplessness' in girls while challenge boys to be independent (Strasser and

Koepfel, 2011). Whilst those gendered interactions by teachers/practitioners are deemed to be narrowing children's possibilities in achieving their full potential (Estola, 2011), there are few studies that investigate how children respond to such interactions as agentic gender performers. Even less is research that studies about children's interactions with practitioners of different gender in ECEC. Children are active participants in the gender cultures that situate them, thus how they contribute to the gender dynamics in ECEC should be explored, particularly from their own perspectives. The gender cultures that situate children can be variable in different countries, meanwhile global discourses of gender binary thinking and gender heteronormativity are noted in ECEC internationally (Xu, 2019). Therefore, this paper also seeks to capture culturally-specific discourses that influence and constrain children's constructions of gender subjectivities in ECEC.

In the coming sections of this paper, how children from Scotland and China viewed the roles of their practitioners in ECEC are discussed through investigating children's constructions of gender subjectivities in the two countries. Two research questions are addressed:

1. How do children perceive gender with regards to their daily experiences in and outside ECEC?
2. To what extent are practitioners' gender relevant in children's constructions of gender subjectivities?

## **Methodology**

Adopting poststructuralist interpretivism that seeks to empower children through giving them 'voices' and acknowledges the fluidity and multiplicity of children's and researchers' interpretations (O'Connor, 2001), the research questions above are answered in this paper by findings from pictorial conversations with children. Three

pictures were produced for the children's review, representing three types of adult behaviours that were common (or at least may happen) in ECEC settings and were culturally regarded as 'female-oriented', 'male-oriented', or 'gender-neutral' respectively (see *Appendices*). The first picture involves a person carrying a child in his/her arms, the second is about someone kicking a ball, and lastly there is an adult reading a book (stories) in the third picture. All three persons were represented by (what the researcher intended to be) gender-ambiguous figures for the children to interpret. The author is aware that using those pictures may imply gender-biased selections of adult behaviours and figures. Nevertheless, they were open to children's interpretations in the study, which reflects poststructuralist interpretivism that theorizes this paper. For each picture, the children were primarily asked about what they saw, who they saw, and why; further conversations were encouraged according to the children's responses. Issues of gender were probed and the pictures were discussed with particular references to the children's practitioners so that they were able to comment about their practitioners' gender.

Conversations with the children lasted up to 10 minutes and were recorded with their own (by allowing children to press the start button on the recorder) and parents' consent and permission. The study was approved by the University of Glasgow's ethics committee and other ethical considerations were followed such as anonymizing children's names and other identifiable information and revisiting children's consent during the conversations (strategies including observing children's reactions and asking direct questions were used [Xu, 2018]). The researcher was aware of potential power relations between himself (as an adult and possibly a practitioner in children's eyes) and the children, and that children may not be fully informed of the research due to their limited language articulation and understanding (although endeavours were made to

explain the research to children, see Xu [2018] for details). Therefore, this paper acknowledges that ethics may be compromised in certain ways when doing research with young children (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012). Nevertheless, the efforts in this study to allow children's flexibilities and react to children's non-verbal language throughout the research process were able to minimize such compromises.

### ***Sampling and participants***

280 children aged 2-6 years old were recruited from 17 ECEC settings in the cities of Edinburgh (Scotland), Hong Kong, and Tianjin (Mainland China) (see *Table 1 [Table one near here]*). Both Scotland and China (including the Mainland and Hong Kong) are under-researched contexts in the research area of gender and men's participation in ECEC, whereas policies to increase the number of male practitioners are in place in the two countries (Xu, 2018). With about 4% of men working in its childcare services, Scotland want more men in childcare to challenge public perceptions of men being less caring and to provide children with gender-diverse experiences in their early life (SFC, 2016; Xu, 2018). In China, around 2% of kindergarten teachers are male (Xu, 2018). Chinese societies worry that boys are increasingly feminised and expect male teachers to teach boys about being men (Xu and Waniganayake, 2018). It is in those different gender discourses in Scotland and China that this paper is situated.

ECEC settings that employed male practitioners were selected using snowball sampling. The settings represented a variety of geographic and socio-economic spreads of the cities albeit non-purposefully. Within each setting, a classroom that had at least one male and one female practitioner working with young children was chosen with their consent. The practitioners' positions, ages, and other backgrounds were various and contributed to the dynamics of child-practitioner interactions (Xu, 2018). The 280

children were thus from those classrooms, subject to their own and parents' consent. Among those children, 148 were boys and 132 were girls respectively. The number of children recruited from Edinburgh was lower than from the other two cities, reflecting the higher staff-children ratio in Scottish classrooms. Whilst the majority of children in all three cities were aged 4-6 (who were able to engage in rich dialogues with the researcher), some children aged 2-3 years old from Edinburgh were included due to limited number of settings with male practitioners. Those children's responses were limited in words but suggested influence of their key workers on child-practitioner relationships (see findings). No other age differences were noticeable regarding how 4-6 years olds construct their gender subjectivities in this study.

### ***Data Analysis***

All recorded conversations with children were transcribed and then analysed in their original languages (English, Cantonese, and Mandarin). The author's familiarity with the three languages and his own previous experiences as an early years practitioner made it possible to reduce the cross-language impact on this research to a minimum (Twinn, 1997). Excel spreadsheets were used to organize and manage the data. Systematic data analysis was carried out using a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development strategies (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Key patterns and interesting points were identified and both representative and worth-noting quotes were highlighted and used to exemplify findings. Links were also made at the data analysis stage between children's views, practitioners' relevant reflections, and observational findings (Xu, 2018), in order to exemplify contradictions, consistencies, and/or complementary explanations of practitioner-child interactions. Cross-cultural comparisons and analyses were conducted throughout, noting different or similar discourses that impact on children's constructions of gender subjectivities in

Scotland and China (Hong Kong and Mainland).

### **Gendered bodies in children's eyes**

Children's responses to the baby-holding picture revealed strong connections between gendered bodies and behaviours in children's eyes. Little difference was observed between Scottish and Chinese children. As can be seen from Table 2 [Table 2 near here], the majority of children (191 out of 280, 68.2%) tended to associate baby-holding behaviours with their mothers in the first instance, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The children's justifications for making this immediate connection suggested a hard-to-challenge bond between women's social roles as child carers and their reproductive body functions. Many children claimed that, because 'mothers give birth to babies/babies come from mummy's tummy', mothers usually 'look after babies, hold them, and breastfeed them'. Although some added that dads will also hold babies, there is a strong pattern that women's roles as primary child carers were rarely challenged according to those children's experiences. Further, some children reported the same quote that 'dad is busy at work and mom stays at home looking after me', revealing that the gendered structure of men as main 'breadwinners' and women as 'domestic homemakers' are still evident in both Chinese and Scottish societies.

For those children who indicated that it is a man/father holding a baby in the picture (20% on average and no substantial differences between settings), they also tended to categorize by gender their images of fathers' (men's) and mothers' (women's) bodies in their descriptions. It is a father in the picture because fathers were mostly described as 'tall', 'having short or no hair', 'wearing trousers', or 'physically stronger to carry a baby'. Correspondingly, it is not a mother in the picture because mothers 'have long hairs', 'wear skirts', or 'wear high heels'. Those stereotypical images of gendered bodies, as well as the above-mentioned divisions of gendered roles, seemed to

be largely derived from the children's own experiences in the wider social community especially at the family home; as many based their answers on what happened in real life. Although such influences were significantly evident throughout this research and point to the necessity of challenging children's gender stereotypes beyond the educational settings (Francis, 2010), this paper mainly focuses on whether challenging children's gender stereotypes is possible through their interactions with practitioners.

Since almost all children initially indicated that it is either a mother or a father holding a baby in the picture presented, a more specific question of 'which of your practitioners do you think will hold a baby' was added. With a total of 119 children (42.5%) giving the names of their male practitioners and another 128 children (45.7%) answering other female practitioners, it appeared possible that practitioners can challenge children's stereotypes of women as the only child carers - considering that children did not distinguish their male and female practitioners in childcare roles as much as they did with mothers and fathers. However, in Hong Kong and Tianjin, boys mentioned their male practitioners more often than girls did, and girls were more likely to suggest that female practitioners hold babies (see Table 2). A cultural difference is thus indicative here in that Chinese children tend to relate more to practitioners of their same gender than Scottish children would.

When looking into the conversations with children, however, more dynamic pictures were presented. The gender-stereotypical distinctions between men and women remained significant in all three cultures. Children were aware of the gender of different practitioners and always linked men and women practitioners to their fathers and mothers respectively. Male practitioners were therefore less likely to hold a baby because 'they are men', 'they cannot give birth to babies', and 'they are like fathers'; or were similarly portrayed as 'tall', 'physically strong', 'having short/no hair' and/or

‘wearing trousers’ as were fathers. Likewise, women practitioners were ‘like mothers’, ‘can give birth to babies’, and thus are more likely to hold babies. Women practitioners were deemed to have long hair, wear skirts, and are kind to children like mothers.

Nevertheless, there was evidence that practitioners’ gender may sometimes be transcended by their professional roles in children’s eyes. Either a man or a woman practitioner can hold a baby because ‘they are teachers’, ‘they look after us’, and ‘children love them’. Even though such statements were relatively rare, it is suggestive that traditional gender stereotypes of women as primary carers can be challenged among children by having men working in ECEC settings. Below are conversations that the researcher had with a boy in Tianjin, suggesting possibilities of such challenges:

Boy: It’s a mom holding a baby.

Researcher: Why?

Boy: Because fathers are not as good [as mothers].

Researcher: What if this is one of the teachers in your classroom?

Boy: It’s a man teacher then.

Researcher: Why is that?

Boy: Because I think men teachers should possess some masculinity.

Researcher: And why is he holding a baby then?

Boy: Cause he is not as bad as dad.

Researcher: So you think this is Mr Han [pseudonym]?

Boy: Nope, I think it’s you. Mr Han do look after us and can be caring, but he is a bit [tough] to us, he has some masculinity in the kindergarten.

Researcher: So you do not think I have masculinity?

Boy: I think you also have.

Researcher: Then why do you think it is me holding a baby?

Boy: I think it’s either you or Mr Han.

Researcher: And you thought it was a mother earlier. Why do you say it’s a man now?

Boy: Well, I don't know whether it's a man or a woman.

Researcher: Maybe both men and women hold babies?

Boy: Yes!

(A boy from Xuxi *youeryuan* [kindergarten, pseudonym], age 6, Tianjin)

By openly discussing the questions, the above boy started to doubt whether a man or a woman holds babies - perhaps one example of gender-sensitive pedagogy and practice (Warin, 2019) in ECEC settings. It is also worth noting that this boy sometimes provided contradictory statements that a male practitioner who 'possess[es] some masculinity' can as well be 'caring' (a characteristic that is traditionally attached to 'femininity'), challenging the traditionally separated concepts of masculinity and femininity. Specifically, it also seemed that when children have had experiences of their men practitioners holding babies, they are more likely to shift traditional images of women being primary carers. Mr Hu from Xiwang *youeryuan* in Tianjin is a father himself and often mentioned his child to the pupils in his class - who then frequently mentioned this as a reason for why they thought it is a man practitioner holding a baby in the picture.

Children may also occasionally provide answers that cross gender boundaries or go beyond gender, or they may play with gender. Here are a few examples:

Boy: It should be a woman teacher [holding a baby]. Because she is not as violent as a man.

Researcher: Could women be violent?

Boy: She must be a '*nv han zi*' [a masculine female] then.

(A boy from Xuxi *youeryuan*, age 5, Tianjin)

Girl: It's mom holding a baby. [...]

Researcher: Which teacher then?

Girl: You.

Researcher: But you said it looks like a mom.

Girl: (Laughing) And your voice sounds like mom, your voice is funny.

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, age 4, Tianjin)

Those two children reflected a view that men and women could possess traits of their opposite gender. Whereas some others would ‘de-gender’ (Martino and Rezai Rashti, 2012) their teachers (practitioners):

Neither Mr Hu or Miss He will hold a baby. They are teachers in the upper-level class and [only teachers in the lower-level classes hold babies].

(A girl from Xiwang *youeryuan*, age 6, Tianjin)

Miss Tai will not hold babies. She has to teach and is too busy to look after babies.

(A boy from Kuaile *youeryuan*, age 4, Tianjin)

Researcher: Do you think I can carry a baby?

Boy: No.

Researcher: Why not?

Boy: Because you are too thin.

Researcher: Do you think Phillip [male practitioner] can carry a baby?

Boy: Yeah. [...] He has strong muscles.

Researcher: How about Connie and other teachers [female practitioners]?

Boy: Yes. They also have strong muscles.

(A boy from Little Stars Nursery, age 5, Edinburgh)

Practitioners’ work responsibilities and appearance were listed above as two factors that override gender in children’s answers.

Girl: I think it’s a mother holding a baby. [...] Because she seems to be wearing high heels.

Researcher: How do you know she is wearing high heels?

Girl: I just do.

Researcher: What if this is one of the teachers?

Girl: It's either you or Mr Niu. [...] Because I think it looks like a boy. [...]

Researcher: But you just said it looks like a mother as she wears high heels?

Girl: Yes. I can change all the time.

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, age 4, Tianjin)

Girl: It's Mr XX [the researcher] carrying Mr Cheung [the man teacher].

Researcher: Really?

Girl: (Laughing) Ha, I'm joking. I know it's a mother holding a baby.

(A girl from Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, age 4, Hong Kong)

Here gender is regarded as a flexible category that children used situationally to make fun, and children do not necessarily think they have to have one 'fixed' answer/viewpoint to questions.

### **'Girls don't play football'? Gender stereotypes amongst young children**

The second picture showing someone kicking a ball received overwhelmingly gendered feedback from boys and girls in Chinese kindergartens (Tianjin and Hong Kong), as can be seen from Table 3 [*Table 3 near here*]:

Children frequently pointed out that boys play football and girls do not, because they normally see boys/men playing football on the playground, on TV, or in the kindergartens. Selected quotes demonstrated that Chinese children live in a strongly gendered community:

My mom usually takes me to shopping centre and my dad plays football.

Footballers are always men, I've never seen female footballers.

Every time mom prepares us dinner and I play football with dad and uncle.

Boys often do sports. Girls only care about dressing [...].

Boys do sports a lot. Girls are girls and boys are boys. Girls often do housework. Boys need to work, they don't need to do housework. [Who told you these?] Myself.

(Children from kindergartens in Tianjin, age 4-6)

Girls don't kick balls. Girls prefer dancing or singing.

My dad does exercise every day. [How about your mom?] She just watches dad.

I always see boys play football on TV, rarely girls.

Girls don't kick balls because they don't want to get wet. It's dirty.

(Children from kindergartens in Hong Kong, age 4-6)

Those experiences were commonly reported by Chinese children in this research, conforming to traditional gender stereotypes in Chinese societies. Such gender stereotypes are further reinforced in Chinese kindergartens (the percentages of boys and girls who said that it is a male practitioner kicking a ball are as high as from 66.1% to 80.4%), especially in contexts that male practitioners are widely expected to do more physical activities with children and to promote children's health. According to children's feedback, men practitioners in both Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens are always PE teachers or those who lead physical activities like running, playing football, reproducing gendered images of men and women.

In contrast, the above described gendered patterns were less evident among children from Edinburgh (although the numbers of children make it hard to make any strong statements about how generalizable this might be of wider social patterns). There

still tended to be more children declaring that men/boys are more likely to kick balls than women/girls and a few mentioned reasons such as:

[Girls] are not allowed to play football, cause mummy said no. [...] Connie [the female practitioner] is a lady, she is not allowed.

(A girl from Little Stars Nursery, age 5)

Boys play football better than girls. [...] Sometimes I play with my dad in the park. Sometimes they [girls] do [play football]. If they keep doing that, boys will laugh at her.

(A boy and a girl from Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, age 4 & 5)

However, the majority of boys and girls agreed that both men and women kick balls/play football. There was also little indication that children in Edinburgh would think their male practitioners play ball more than female ones (16.1% boys and 45.8% girls said it is a male practitioner, and 25.8% boys and 20.8% girls said it is a female practitioner). Some clues can be identified regarding why children in Edinburgh were less gender-stereotypical in describing picture 2 - compared to their peers in Tianjin and Hong Kong. First, as Edinburgh runs a key worker system in their ECEC settings, children might often name their key workers when indicating which practitioner is in the pictures. This suggests that child-practitioner relationships in Edinburgh may be affected by the key worker system from the children's end, whereas gender may be less important to them - as some participant practitioners assumed, because the children are so familiar with their key worker, this will then override any other influence to choose an answer purely on gender. Second, some practitioners in Edinburgh mentioned that they would intentionally challenge gender stereotypes through their interactions with children, for example by presenting both boys and girls with toys that are traditionally regarded as either boys' toys (ball, cars, guns, etc.) or girls' toys (dolls, trolleys, etc.) (Lynch, 2015). Considering that many children talked about their experiences of kicking

balls with both male and female practitioners, it can be assumed that practitioners' awareness of challenging gender stereotypes might have impacted on children's reflections in Edinburgh. By looking at those differences between children's perceptions of playing ball in Edinburgh and the Chinese cities, it thus implies that practitioners' non-gender stereotypical behaviours will have the potential of opening up children's images of gender.

There was occasional evidence that children would base their opinions beyond gender in picture 2, too. For instance, a boy from Kuaile *youeryuan* in Tianjin reported that his female teacher (practitioner), Miss Tai, knows how to play football because she practiced. Nevertheless, the boy doubted that his male teacher (practitioner), Mr Tang can play football - for the reason that Mr Tang is "too fat". Though not necessarily related to gender, bodily difference is again used by children to connect with practitioners' behaviours. Another boy from Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin made his judgement according to the practitioners' work responsibilities. He claimed that Mrs Ge, the 'care' practitioner who is always busy with housing responsibilities in the classroom, is too busy to play football; whilst Mr Han and Mrs Hua might possibly play football with the children, due to their roles as teaching staff members that spend most of their time with children.

Children also revealed their agency in engaging with gendered discourses. When asked whether they like playing football themselves, there were boys and girls from all three cities indicating that they are interested. Equally, both boys and girls sometimes suggested that they dislike playing football. Even though some girls said that girls do not play football, they like playing football themselves. This Tianjin girl below gave an example of how she is challenging gender stereotypes that boys are physically stronger and play football more than girls:

Girl: Boys play football more because they are physically stronger.

Researcher: Do you like playing football?

Girl: Yes. I like it.

Researcher: Do you think you are physically strong?

Girl: I think so. I can kick somebody away with only one kicking.

Researcher: But you are a girl.

Girl: But I do exercises. I will go jogging tonight. [...]

(A girl from Xuxi *youeryuan*, age 5, Tianjin)

The emerging evidence of children's agency in reacting to wider social structures suggests that children can be potential challengers to dominant gender discourses.

### **'I like play because it's fun.' When practitioners' gender matters less**

Children's conversations on the last picture of someone reading a story book confirmed that reading a book is culturally regarded as a slightly less gendered behaviour in both societies. Children have had experiences of both their male and female practitioners reading stories to them, and there was little pattern that they would prefer practitioners of a particular gender. In some cases children may prefer one of his/her practitioners because that practitioner reads stories more often, or because he/she has a better relationship with the practitioner for various reasons that have little to do with gender (such as that the practitioner is less harsh on him/her, that the practitioner does not ask them to do homework, or that the practitioner is funny or is soft). Some gendered aspects picked up from the conversations are also noteworthy. To illustrate, some children from Tianjin and Hong Kong claimed that girls read books more than boys, because boys are tough and boisterous. This reflected a Chinese expectation that girls should be quiet and stay indoors (reading books, for example) and boys are allowed to go outside and be energetic. Though not evident from this current study, such an

expectation is also reflected in some Scottish practitioners' perceptions of gender (Wingrave, 2018). Another boy from Tianjin said that:

It's a girl reading a book. Boys do not read, because boys develop later than girls. It must be a girl, girls are smarter. Boys tend to think about things that are irrelevant [to study].

(A boy from Xiwang *youeryuan*, age 6, Tianjin)

His words pointed to internalization of another traditional understanding of children in China that boys are usually delayed in their development comparing to girls, thus are less 'mature' and hardly follow adults' orders (such as to study hard). Again, Scottish practitioners in Wingrave's (2018) study revealed a similar construction of gender subjectivity, pointing to a potential source where children might pick up those discourses. Some Chinese girls/boys further mentioned that they prefer a female/male practitioner to read them stories because 'we are both girls/boys', 'we are alike'. This suggests that some children might relate to practitioners of the same gender more in terms of their daily interactions.

In addition to the three pictures, children were further asked about their favourite activities with each of their practitioners. Generally speaking, children like to do all kinds of activities with their practitioners, ranging from playing games, reading, writing, paper cutting, housekeeping, drawing, dancing, chatting to many others. Gender seems to matter less in deciding which activities to do with a particular practitioner, as long as those activities are regarded as fun and enjoyable by different children. The vast majority of children from all three cities love all of their practitioners and like to have fun with the practitioners. Sometimes children's favourite activities with male and female practitioners can be constructed in gendered ways by the children, mainly because the practitioners initiated those gendered activities. For example, children from Tianjin and Hong Kong may enjoy doing sports with male practitioners, because male

practitioners are PE teachers and often do sports with them. Correspondingly, their favourite activities with female practitioners can be dancing, because female practitioners always dance with them. A girl from Edinburgh likes her male practitioner Philip, to lift her up high above his head, which is also gender stereotypical (lifting and big movements are commonly observed interactions between male practitioners and the children in this study [Xu, 2018]). Such stereotypes were merely minimally evident though, when having fun and enjoying time with their practitioner ‘friends’ are deemed to be the most important by the children - mirroring what Hutchings and others (2008) found in their study with primary school children that being nice, kind, smart and funny are characteristics that children like and want to emulate in their teachers of both genders.

Specifically, there were also some dynamics in children’s relationships with their practitioners. A Tianjin boy (age 4) from *Kuaile youeryuan* said that his relationships with the practitioners are situational:

Sometimes I will be close friend with Mr Tang, sometimes I will prefer Miss Tai. It’s all changeable and can be either teacher.

Children’s ‘instability’ in their preferences to practitioners was also acknowledged by some practitioners interviewed, who pointed out that ‘when children say he/she likes a practitioner, it doesn’t mean he/she does not like other practitioners. Maybe the answers will be different when you ask them the next minute’ (Xu, 2018). Some other Tianjin boys and girls, further provided their unique attributes to their relationships with the practitioners:

I like both Mrs Nie and Mrs Qi [the ‘care’ practitioner]. But Mr Niu... sometimes he wouldn’t allow me to leave food in my plate, so I am a bit not liking him now. I like Mrs Qi best because every time she allows me to leave a little. I can be too full occasionally, and can’t take any more [...]

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, age 4, Tianjin)

I like Mr Hu most. He is not as fierce as other teachers [.....] Miss He is more fierce and she often tells us off.

(A girl from Xiwang *youeryuan*, age 6, Tianjin)

I don't like Mr Hu, so I don't do ANYTHING with him. [Why?] I am feeling vengeful to him. [...] Because he is often angry with me, because I do not listen to him. [You can tell him not to be angry, and promise that you will listen?] No, I will never surrender. I am very grumpy. [I don't think you are grumpy.] I am the grumpiest one in our kindergarten. [...]

(A boy from Xiwang *youeryuan*, age 6, Tianjin)

All those children's stories can suggest that practitioner-child relationships in kindergartens are dynamically constructed and performed through interaction. The different attitudes to Mr Hu above match with Mr Hu's own interpretations (Xu, 2019) that he would treat girls and boys differently and is harsher on boys. Consequently, children respond interactively to practitioners' gendered attitudes.

## **Discussion**

This paper discerns that children's constructions of gender subjectivities are enormously diverse and discursive. Mirroring the wider social structures of gender, children in this research have demonstrated that they picked up the gender binary thinking of men's and women's stereotypical differences even in their early childhood. In children's eyes, women's and men's social roles are closely bonded with their gendered bodies. Children tend to understand that childcare is women's job in Scottish and Chinese societies. Such imprints of gender embodiment are significantly affected by children's social experiences of gender in the wider social society, especially in their family life

with parents (Cunningham, 2001; Sumsion, 2005). The different extent of gender stereotyping as reflected by Scottish and Chinese children proves that dominant gender discourses in each culture largely shape individuals' gender subjectivities starting from a very early stage. Chinese children were more likely to reflect stereotypical gender subjectivities, because Chinese culture embeds gender structures that, from a Scottish perspective, may seem more traditional.

Simultaneously, children also demonstrated their emerging agency in resisting and subverting established gender structures (Blaise, 2005). In this research, both Scottish and Chinese children have revealed gender-flexible ideas either about the roles and characteristics of adult practitioners, or in terms of their own interests. Although in general believing in the binary differences between boys and girls as part of their gender subjectivities, some children suggested that such differences can be subverted; for example, through exercises girls can become as physically strong as boys. Gender essentialisation as a dominant discourse across cultures, seemed to be challenged by children in the light of attempting to cross gender boundaries and/or to flexibly utilize gender as a tool for fun (Estola, 2011). No children, however, mentioned images of gender beyond the male and female categorizing in this research.

Most importantly, children's 'de-gendering' (Martino and Rezai Rashti, 2012; Warin, 2019) of practitioners that emerged in this research pointed to the necessity of looking beyond practitioners' gender to cater for children's education and care. In children's eyes, practitioners were regarded as significant educators, supporters, playmates and occasionally, disciplinarians. The gender of a practitioner appeared to matter less when children emphasized that they wanted the practitioners to teach them knowledge, to support them in activities and daily life, and to have fun with them in all kinds of play activities (Hutchings et al., 2008). Although minimal genderedness was

revealed in children's preferences to practitioners of different gender for certain activities (such as men practitioners for sports and women practitioners for dancing), this research tended to attribute those preferences to the gendered ways in which practitioners organized those activities - rather than because children differ their practitioners by gender. Children will like all their practitioners based upon the relationships they have established through long-term interactions in their everyday life and may 'dislike' a particular practitioner when he or she is deemed by the children to have failed to meet their needs. According to findings from this research, children's reactions to practitioners are by all means relational and interactional, dependent on variable factors including but not limited to gender.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, children's views as expressed in this paper suggest that holding babies, kicking balls and reading books are still culturally regarded as either more or less gendered behaviours associated with men and women separately. More importantly, such gendered portrayals are found to be reproduced socially and cross-generationally from as young as in the early years. It is assumed that children's experiences with their wider societies outside the ECEC settings, especially with their primary carer/parents, may have had vital impacts on children's perceptions of gender. Therefore, further research is needed to explore gender and its impacts on parenting in different cultural contexts. Within the ECEC settings, practitioners (both men and women) may have the opportunity to challenge children's established gender perceptions through gender reflective and sensitive practices; whereas gender-blind or gender stereotypical practices are found to be reproducing traditional gender structures.

This paper also suggests that children actively respond to dominant gender discourses and sometimes challenge gender stereotypes in different situations. In ECEC

pedagogies and practices, practitioners need to allow children more freedom and agency in constructing/exploring their gender subjectivities. When children challenge gender stereotypes in their interactions with practitioners, it probably might influence practitioners' gender subjectivities and performances as well. Consequently, through practitioner-child interactions, ECEC manifests strong potential in transforming gender norms and challenging gender stereotypes.

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Table 1. No. of children participating in the pictorial activity

<b>City</b>	<b>No. of Boys</b>	<b>No. of Girls</b>	<b>Overall</b>
Edinburgh	31	24	55
Hong Kong	56	52	108
Tianjin	61	56	117
			<b>Total: 280</b>

Table 2. Who is holding a baby?

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>		<b>Hong Kong</b>		<b>Tianjin</b>		<b>Overall</b> (n = 280)
	<b>% of Boys</b> (n = 31)	<b>% of Girls</b> (n = 24)	<b>% of Boys</b> (n = 56)	<b>% of Girls</b> (n = 52)	<b>% of Boys</b> (n = 61)	<b>% of Girls</b> (n = 56)	
Mother	54.8%	66.7%	60.7%	76.9%	62.3%	82.1%	68.2%
Father	22.6%	12.5%	32.1%	17.3%	24.6%	7.1%	20%
Others	19.4%	25%	5.4%	N/A	11.5%	3.6%	8.6%
Male practitioner	38.7%	37.5%	48.2%	28.8%	60.7%	33.9%	42.5%
Female practitioner	25.8%	33.3%	39.3%	59.6%	39.3%	62.5%	45.7%

Table 3. Who is kicking a ball?

Answer	Edinburgh		Hong Kong		Tianjin		Overall
	% of Boys (n = 31)	% of Girls (n = 24)	% of Boys (n = 56)	% of Girls (n = 52)	% of Boys (n = 61)	% of Girls (n = 56)	(n = 280)
Man ( <i>Dads, brothers, or male athletes</i> )	45.2%	37.5%	53.6%	55.8%	70.5%	69.6%	58.6%
Woman ( <i>mothers or sisters</i> )	19.4%	25%	8.9%	5.8%	3.3%	7.1%	9.3%
Male practitioner	16.1%	45.8%	66.1%	69.2%	77%	80.4%	64.6%
Female practitioner	25.8%	20.8%	25%	11.5%	8.2%	12.5%	16.1%
Other	12.9%	12.5%	5.4%	11.5%	9.8%	5.4%	8.9%

