

Challenging gender stereotypes through gender-sensitive practices in early years education and care (EYEC)

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Gender stereotypes prevailingly perpetuate in parents' and practitioners' interactions with young children in the early years. Whilst the majority of practitioners recognize the harm gender stereotypes cause to children, many have received limited training on challenging gender stereotypes either during their initial training or in their continuous professional development (The Fawcett Society, 2020). This article draws on my recent research to support early years practitioners and teachers in understanding and challenging gender stereotypes from cross-cultural perspectives (Xu, 2020a, 2020b). Here I consider why and how gender matters in early years education and care (EYEC); and examine gender-sensitive practices in EYEC.

Why and how gender matters in EYEC

On a global level, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) four and five are targeted at 'ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all' and 'ensuring children's full and effective participation at all levels of life, regardless of their gender' (United Nations, 2015). In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) seeks to provide equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported (Department for Education, 2017). However, there is no mention in the EYFS of how gender relates to children's inclusion. The non-statutory guidance of Development Matters (2020) more explicitly points to gender-related expectations in the EYFS. For babies, toddlers and young children, they will be learning to: "Notice and ask questions about differences, such as skin colour, types of hair, **gender**, special needs and disabilities, and so on." This means that practitioners should "be open to what children say about differences and answer their questions straightforwardly. Help children develop positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion" and "have resources which include materials which confront gender stereotypes."

The lack of sensitivity to gender stereotypes in national EYEC policy documents is found in many countries (Xu et al., 2020). At the same time, EYEC remains an internationally gendered workforce where women outnumber men. In most countries including the UK, around two per cent of staff members in EYEC are men (OECD, 2020). This phenomenon itself is due to gender stereotypes and gendered social expectations that women are 'naturally' carers for young children. The lack of men has resulted in worries about 'feminisation' in EYEC, with men expected to work in EYEC to provide boys with male role models that support their development and academic achievement in ways suitable to boys. A widely held assumption in the UK is that boys' underachievement in reading and writing is due to the different ways they learn - which are not supported by a 'feminised' staff team with few or no men. In China, men are expected to work in kindergartens so that they can teach boys to be 'men' (Xu, 2020a). The lack of men working in EYEC and the call for men to join the EYEC workforce are underpinned by gender stereotypes that regard men and women as essentially different, bringing different characteristics to their interactions with young children. Whilst men are to be hugely welcomed to work in EYEC and challenge gender stereotypes that childcare is

'women's work', we need to be mindful of the potential reproduction of hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes which can arise when men's participation in EYEC is premised upon their different contributions to the sector (Xu, 2018).

Indeed, to challenge gender stereotypes in EYEC, it is important for practitioners to become aware that their gender subjectivities (how individuals understand and interpret gender) are NOT necessarily confined to individuals' social gender identity of men or women. Individual practitioners discursively construct their gender subjectivities to reflect both cultural patterns and individual experiences. In the past years, my colleagues and I have interviewed more than 100 male and female EYEC practitioners from many countries including China, Scotland, England, Australia, Sweden, Germany (Xu and Waniganayake, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2020; Xu, 2020a; Brody et al., 2021), to explore how they understood the way gender impacts their work with young children. Many practitioners, both men and women, believed that gender differences exist. For example, Philip (pseudonym) a male practitioner from Scotland stated that:

Men and women are different, so they offer different things to the children. For instance, I suppose, I do like to adopt a bit of a [...] disciplinary role. I purposefully make sure the children are receiving the guidance, direction, and limitations that they need. So when I see the child perhaps behaving in a way that I see will not serve them in the future, I think I, obviously all nursery workers have that responsibility for the child to do the right thing. But for me it's very deep within me, I can't let it go. Not in a bad way, I told you, in a good way. [...] The males and females always have had different roles.

Although pointing out that she tended to be more disciplinary, a female kindergarten teacher Mrs Woo, reflects a typical division of gendered roles in Chinese society:

I am stricter and more disciplinary, and Mr Cheung is looser. It's just like how children interact with their parents at home - one will be strict and one will be loose. Usually it's the father who is strict. So in our case, it's nothing to do with gender, but it's more down to experience. If he lacks experiences in disciplining, he might overdo it. [...] That's why I become the one who is strict.

Mr Hu, a male kindergarten teacher from Mainland China revealed how his gendered expectations shaped his different interactions with boys and girls:

I would treat boys and girls differently. For girls, I think they are more sensitive, and have stronger self-esteem. [Therefore, I will be careful in the way I speak to them.] But I wish girls to be less strong and more delicate, girls should have girls' traits. [...] Girls will depend on men in the future, so it will not do good to her if she is too strong. [...] And I think I should influence girls in this regard. [...] For boys, if they make any mistakes, I will not let them go and will definitely blame them hard. There are many suicides among boys now in primary or secondary schools, after their teachers censured them. I would rather give them hard time now, to make them stronger and more resilient. Men

suffered more pressures in our society, and I want my boys to be strong enough to cope with those pressures.

Those gendered subjectivities were common to practitioners in many countries, demonstrating how gender stereotypes are reproduced in early years settings. However, some practitioners expressed non-gender-stereotypical views and talked about how they challenged gender stereotypes. Kyle, a Scottish practitioner challenged the gendered conceptualisation of male role models in EYEC:

I try to be a positive male role model for the children, I have to show them that they can find me, be confident, feel safe around me because some of these children maybe come from a violent background if there has been a male present. [...] So it's nice for the children to grow up with another male role model, realizing that not everybody is the same. [...] It will benefit them when they grow up, rather than having a male as a negative experience. I want to be a positive experience for the child, respect male and female.

For him, a male role model is not one that brings boys stereotypically 'male' influences on how they behave - as is the case for male kindergarten teachers from China frequently cited as their unique contribution to EYEC. Recognizing that male and female practitioners hold diverse understandings of gender, I argue that promoting gender diversity in ECEC would need practitioners to reflect on their own gendered subjectivities that influence their pedagogies and practices in working with young children.

Practitioners also need to acknowledge young children as active gender 'players', who agentically construct their gender subjectivities in response to the social world surrounding them; who may reproduce and/or challenge gender stereotypes and norms in early years settings. My research with 280 2-6 year-old children from Scotland, Mainland China and Hong Kong (Xu, 2020b) shows that children actively reproduce gender stereotypes. For example, in Hong Kong I observed a boy who sat on a pink chair. Immediately all other boys laughed at him and told him to stand up, because 'boys should not sit on pink chairs, they are for girls'. Similarly in a Scottish nursery, when children were sitting on the floor waiting to be picked up, a boy asked another boy to sit near him: 'Can you come over here? This [where the boy sat] is a boy thing and that [where the girls sat] is a girl thing'. Through such peer interactions, young children reinforce gender norms and normalise their own behaviours as boys or girls in ways they perceive are expected by the societies they live in.

Whilst having their own gendered behaviours and subjectivities, children also respond to practitioners' gendered interactions. My research highlights that, practitioners' gender becomes salient in children's eyes when practitioners hold gender-stereotypical views and interact with children according to gender stereotypes. The words of a boy and a girl in Mr Hu's class, illustrate how they interacted with Mr Hu in ways that echo his strongly gendered subjectivities:

I like Mr Hu most. He is not as fierce as other teachers [.....] Miss He is more fierce and she often tells us off. (Girl, age 6)

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. [...]
(Boy, age 6)

Gender-sensitive practices in EYEC

As practitioners and children hold diverse and dynamic views of gender and may reproduce gender stereotypes through their interactions in early years settings, I propose that practitioners need training in gender-sensitive practices which includes:

1. developing awareness and understanding about ways in which gender matters in EYEC, including understanding that practitioners bring gendered subjectivities into their pedagogies and practices. They need to understand too, that children actively 'play' with gender and construct their gendered selves, and that there are power dynamics and relationships in gendered interactions between children and practitioners;
2. reflection on gendered practices and how to sensitively challenge gender stereotypes. This includes allowing children more freedom and agency as they construct and explore their gender subjectivities, and adopting an interactive approach to engage children in open discussions around gender and in subverting gendered norms.

Gender-sensitive practices can be adopted in all aspects of EYEC curriculum, as can be seen in the following examples from practitioners in England, Sweden, Germany, and China:

1. Environment - England:

Jess noticed that children's coat pegs in the cloakroom area are segregated into boys and girls and the nursery children have male and female icons on their registration name cards. She did not regard this as an issue until children queried whether a boy with longer hair is hanging his coat in the correct place - the children presumed he is a girl. Reflecting on this situation, Jess planned to redesign the cloakroom and name cards to remove gender segregation. The coat pegs will be alphabetical regardless of gender with Reception children on one side of the cloakroom and Nursery children on the other. The name cards will also have the male and female icons removed and replaced with non-stereotypical icons.

2. Language - Sweden:

One morning in Christian's room, a parent brought their child and stayed to interact with other children. The parent pointed to a girl's sweater and said with a light voice: 'What a niiiice sweater you have with cherries.' The parent then turned to a boy, lowered the voice and said: 'What coooooool letters you have.' Christian noticed the different tones and terminology used by the parent, where the boy is spoken to with a deeper tone and that he has a 'cool' sweater, and the girl gets a lighter tone and has a 'nice' sweater. Christian reflected that at the setting they try not to compliment the children according to what they look like or wear, but rather for what they do. Staff also ask if the clothes are comfortable rather than note features of colour or images on them. Christian decided to talk to parents about how they talk at the preschool and why it was important in terms of gender-sensitivity.

3. Organisation - Germany:

When organizing to move the pallets from one side of the garden to the other, Tim's colleague shouted: 'I need a few strong boys.' The children all wanted to help, but girls were hesitant to approach. Tim also shouted: 'Hey, why can only the boys help?' The colleague laughed and said: 'No, clearly no, everyone can help, there are also strong girls.' Tim realised how deeply anchored certain stereotypical statements are, even with reflective teachers; and how often gendered social norms shape us in everyday life. Such organisation stereotypically narrows roles of children to certain "strengths and weaknesses". Tim saw the need to discuss gender with children in everyday (pedagogical) life.

4. Planning - China:

Pan planned an activity with two roles: the bulldozers that destroy the blocks and the architects who help to build. Children are divided into two groups and take up one of the two roles respectively. Pan expected that boys like to damage things and girls like to help others. However, both girls and boys wanted to play to be the bulldozers. Pan had to allow children to take turns to play both roles and persuaded children to try being the builder. Pan reflected that the activity could be differently designed if he let go of his own (unconscious) gender stereotypes.

It seems that looking at practices across different contexts helps to promote reflections on taken-for-granted practices in practitioners' own settings. In particular, we need a cross-cultural approach to EYEC pedagogy that challenges gender stereotypes by:

1. Raising awareness of how dominant gender discourses shape EYEC values and practices in local cultures;
2. Informing about gender-sensitive practices and the possible consequences, as alternative to gender-masked practices;
3. Encouraging rethinking of pedagogical values and the implications for wider social justice and equity;
4. Facilitating mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations and prepare children as global citizens.

We owe it to young children to adopt gender sensitive practices which allows them wider opportunity or experience and roles, thus opening up possibilities for wider learning and development.

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