

Editorial - Beyond gender binaries: pedagogies and practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Yuwei Xu, University College London, UK; Jo Warin, Lancaster University, UK; & Martin Robb, Open University, UK

This special issue brings together a group of articles exploring the possibilities for gender transformation that exist within early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in an international context. It includes contributions from a variety of Global-North and -South countries, such as Australia, China, England, Germany, Israel, Norway, and South Africa. The authors share the optimistic belief that ECEC offers a rich site for practitioners/teachers to challenge gender stereotypes and to interrogate the gender binary that perpetuates a gender essentialist discourse in the care and education of young children. Inspired by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and particularly by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 ('*Ensure inclusive and quality education for all*') & 5 ('*Achieve gender equality*') (United Nations, 2015), this special issue aims to inform pedagogies and practices that will promote gender diversity and equality in ECEC - ultimately providing all children with enriched experiences in their early life and supporting all children to achieve their full potential.

Our special issue particularly provides insights into the internationally well-rehearsed debates on whether men's participation in children's education and care could contribute to an enriched ECEC environment for children (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018; Warin, 2019; McGrath et al., 2019), in a context of continuing gender imbalance in recruitment to ECEC work (Warin, 2018). In the OECD's (2019) *Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care* report, it is mentioned that '[t]o promote quality and improve the supply of potential workers, countries should engage in stronger efforts to bring men into ECEC' (OECD, 2019, p.5). According to this report, men working in ECEC can potentially improve process quality and child development and learning. In particular, this may influence children's attitudes towards gender roles. Recognising that men can be significant contributors to quality ECEC, this special issue argues that practitioners' multiple gender subjectivities and identities go beyond the gender binary of being men or women. The diversity of practitioners' genders plays a significant role in influencing their pedagogical values and practices that contribute to children's dynamic experiences in ECEC. The papers in this special issue suggest that practitioner versatility is a guiding principle for child-led practices. An ECEC child-centred ethic requires a flexible practitioner who can switch from cuddles and quietness to boisterous physical play. A restricted gender identity can inhibit ECEC practitioners from using the flexible range of skills that is needed for work with young children.

This special issue contributes to several research gaps in academic literature. Firstly, it raises an emerging theoretical approach that goes beyond gender binaries in understanding men's and women's roles in ECEC pedagogies and practices. The authors question the underlying (theoretical) rationales of gender balance and binary thinking in calling for more men to work in ECEC sectors and proposes gender sensitive and flexible pedagogies and practices with implications for pre-service and in-service practitioner training in different parts of the world. Secondly, it offers cross-cultural perspectives to the variety of gender discourses in both minority and majority worlds. Through cross-country comparisons within and across papers, the need to challenge heteronormativity and gender essentialism in ECEC and in our societies becomes pressing on a global scale. Thirdly, this special issue includes a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies for exploring gender issues in ECEC, which are currently lacking in the existing literature (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). The articles complement each other by offering interpretations from both practitioners and parents, and analyses of interactions and materials used in daily ECEC practices. Adding to these, the authors represented in this special issue come from a mix of interdisciplinary backgrounds including early childhood education and care, primary education, social work, gender studies, and teacher education, both practice- and research-based.

A key focus of this special issue is on practitioners' gender, investigating their gender identities and subjectivities in relation to the influences on practitioner-child interactions. Additionally, we access the perspectives of children and parents - via practitioners' accounts about children's

views and their experiences of children's talk about their gender identities, through analyses of how child-practitioner interactions are relevant to gender, or by directly accessing parents' views on gendered practices in ECEC. Whilst we use the term ECEC as our joint identification of the research field in this special issue, each paper has chosen to adopt terms that can be specific to the respective research contexts and ECEC systems.

To start with, Article 1 provides a thorough review of international studies on gender balance and men in ECEC. It serves to fully inform our audiences about the global and local contexts of why there are few men working in the ECEC workforce, as well as why more men are encouraged into the sector. In this article, Tim Rohrmann introduces recent statistics about the proportions of men working in ECEC and discusses some strategies for a gender-mixed workforce in several countries, including for example, Germany, Norway, UK, and China. He then lists the various theories that underpin arguments around men's contributions to and roles in ECEC, supported by empirical research that he reviewed. Rohrmann argues that there are contradictory assumptions about the 'nature' of men and women, their role in children's gendered development, and the relevance of ECEC for gender equality in general. As such, he questions whether the inclusion of men in ECEC is the pathway to gender equality and diversity, or paradoxically results in a rollback to gender stereotypes. Rohrmann concludes that gender-conscious reflections and gender-sensitive pedagogies are needed in gender-mixed teams in ECEC institutions, recommendations which are made by several articles in this special issue (see Markus Andrae, Jo Josephidou, Jo Warin & Deborah Price, Kathy Cloughessy, and Yuwei Xu).

The next three articles further explain how men's experiences working in ECEC are shaped by socio-cultural discourses in countries such as Israel, Norway, England, and South Africa, which link to their gender subjectivities and practices. Drawing on a 5-year longitudinal study, David L. Brody and Haggith Gor Ziv depict three men's career decisions in ECEC. Coming from the different contexts of England, Norway, and Israel, these three men reported their hybrid forms of agency in coping with their career choices and trajectories in ECEC - a gender-normed female profession in all three countries. They adopted both 'male' and 'female' styles in responding to gendered expectations of their work, proving agency to be non-binary and unique to each man. In Article 3, Thomas Anthony Cousins discusses the 'glass escalator' phenomenon when men take up posts in professions that largely employ women - in this case, primary school teachers. Although the article focuses on primary education contexts, the issue reflects similar discourses that shape the ECEC sectors in England (Skelton, 2012). In a case study with teachers from an English primary school, Cousins finds that the wider social discourse about needing more male teachers is underpinned by assumptions that male teachers can provide boys with male role models. Such a discourse reflects public concerns about boys' academic underachievement in the English context and is found to benefit men's promotions in the workplace. However, participants also reported a contradictory perspective that emphasizes collegiality and personal relationships as important characteristics in promotion. This article alerts readers to the possible inequalities resulting from men's participation in traditionally female occupations (such as primary education and ECEC). In Article 4 Shaaista Moosa and Deevia Bhana point out that early years teaching and caring is regarded as a 'woman's job' in South Africa, due to essentialist views that portray men as unsuitable for care work. The authors disrupt such normalisation and argue that men can be caring in flexible and equitable conceptualisations of masculinity. In a (sometimes) violent South African landscape, men's participation in care has significant implications for challenging hegemonic masculinity and improving social relations amongst men, women and children.

Articles 5-8 examine how the above-mentioned gender discourses influence practitioners' daily practices and interactions with children. Jayne Osgood and Sid Mohandas, in their article about the 'male Montessorian' in England, analyse the (re)production of gender in everyday Montessorian practices, spaces, and materials. Using feminist new materialist theory, they propose that sensitive interactions with Montessorian materials could open up opportunities for reconfiguring gender in ECEC pedagogies and practices. Similarly, in his analyses of practitioner-child interactions in Germany, Markus Andrae finds that male ECEC workers bring gender diversity to staff choices of materials and themes in ECEC pedagogy. As this

diversity is closely connected to men's gender specific biographical experiences, Andrae problematizes the conceptualisation of 'balance' in a diverse ECEC workforce. He argues that whilst male and female practitioners bring their own biographical inclinations to their work, reflexivity and sensitivity are important for them to understand how they can offer diverse opportunities for children's learning and development. Jo Josephidou supports the importance of practitioners' gender sensitivity, through her findings that practitioners' perceptions of their gendered approaches to play in ECEC are shaped by different, contrasting discourses in the English context. Gender 'neutral' interpretations of their professional practices and gendered constructions of play pedagogy by male and female practitioners co-exist. Josephidou therefore proposes that gender sensitivity training would benefit practitioners' critical engagement with gender in their pedagogies. Practitioners' gender subjectivities are diverse and not necessarily confined to their social gender identity, as Yuwei Xu finds in his study of 34 male and female practitioners in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Through cross-cultural comparisons, Xu suggests that individual practitioners discursively construct their gender subjectivities to reflect both cultural patterns and individual experiences - which then shape their gendered or non-gendered interactions with children. In agreement with other authors' proposals for gender sensitive teacher training, Xu further points to the benefits of cross-cultural reflexivity in promoting gender sensitivity among ECEC practitioners.

Nonconforming sexual and gender identities are also a key dimension of practitioners' gender sensitivity in ECEC. In Article 9, Kathy Cloughessy discusses lesbian parents' experiences of using ECEC services in Australia. According to those parents' reflections, they actively seek to challenge gender heteronormativity in ECEC settings and a key strategy is to engage educators in the co-constructions of transgender knowledge. Consequently, Cloughessy signposts the importance of educators' role in challenging heteronormativity, acting as agents of change. Following on this, Jo Warin and Deborah Price draw on their respective research and professional training trajectories in England to exemplify how to promote transgender awareness among early years practitioners. Their article argues that the presence of more men in ECEC can act as a catalyst for developing a gender flexible pedagogy - which supports greater gender sensitivity and benefits young children's experiences and wellbeing in ECEC settings. Warin and Price's paper nicely links the issues of men's participation and transgender values and rights in ECEC. Both areas offer significant venues for challenging gender stereotypes and promoting gender diversity in ECEC, separately or jointly.

The ten papers in this special issue offer recommendations for the training of gender sensitive ECEC practitioners, as well as for reconsidering the rationale for policies in countries such as England and China which call for more male practitioners - gender roles need to be *transformed* rather than *retrenching* male and female complementary roles based on a traditional gendered division of labour.

References:

- McGrath, K. F., Moosa, S., Bergen, P. V., and Bhana, D. 2019. "The Plight of the Male Teacher: An Interdisciplinary and Multileveled Theoretical Framework for Researching a Shortage of Male Teachers." *The Journal of Men's Studies*. Online first. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826519873860>
- OECD. 2019. "Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care." OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/64562be6-en>
- Rohrman, T., and D. Brody. 2015. "Questioning Methodologies in Research on Men in ECEC." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 23 (3): 405–416. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2015.1043814.
- Rohrman, T., and K. Emilsen. 2015. "Editorial." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 23 (3): 295–301. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2015.1043804.

Skelton, C. 2012. "Men Teachers and the "feminised" Primary School: A Review of the Literature." *Educational Review* 64 (1): 1–19. doi:10.1080/00131911.2011.616634.

United Nations. 2015. "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)." Accessed 14 December 2019, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>.

Warin, J. 2018. *Men in Early Childhood Education and Care: Gender Balance and Flexibility*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Warin, J. 2019. "Conceptualising the Value of Male Practitioners in Early Childhood Education and Care: Gender Balance or Gender Flexibility." *Gender and Education* 31 (3): 293–308. doi:10.1080/09540253.2017.1380172.

Xu, Y., and M. Waniganayake. 2018. "An Exploratory Study of Gender and Male Teachers in Early Childhood Education and Care Centres in China." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 48 (4): 518–534. doi:10.1080/03057925.2017.1318355.