

Men's participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC): Comparative perspectives from Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China ^[1]

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Excerpts from introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5 on achieving quality education and gender equality emphasise children's participation at all levels of life (United Nations 2015). In early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, this translates to the position that young children, regardless of their gender, should be enabled to participate in all activities and aspects of ECEC life (OECD 2019a). Gender stereotypes and gendered norms that prescribe what children can do therefore need to be challenged (Culhane and Bazeley 2019). Adding a layer of complexity to analyses of gender in ECEC, this sector is often highlighted as a highly gender imbalanced workforce. The lack of men and other groups of practitioners beyond the binary categories of men and women is believed by many scholars to be detrimental to a diverse ECEC environment (Warin 2019; Rohrmann 2020; Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020). The OECD (2019b) report, *Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care*, particularly mentions that '[t]o promote quality and improve the supply of potential workers, countries should engage in stronger efforts to bring men into ECEC' (5). It is against this complex backdrop that this paper explores how the global discourse of calling for men into ECEC is enacted in different contexts.

At the global level, prominent narratives about men's participation in ECEC argue for embracing gender equality and diversity, challenging essentialist assumptions about men's and women's different contributions to ECEC (McGrath et al. 2020; Rohrmann 2020; Mohandas 2022). Most scholarship supporting this argument is underpinned by empirical studies conducted in European or North American contexts (Rohrmann and Emilsen 2015; Warin 2019; Rohrmann 2020) – where policy drives to challenge gender stereotypes in ECEC and the wider society are prevalent and equality and diversity has been written into ECEC curriculums for young children (Culhane and Bazeley 2019; Xu et al. 2020). For example, in 2016, Scotland launched its Gender Action Plan (Scottish Funding Council 2016) to tackle gender imbalance and inequality in education, aimed at promoting gender diversity at all levels of education including the early learning and childcare (ELC) sectors. Measures have been taken to attract men to work in ELC, so as to challenge gender stereotypes of men being less caring and to provide children with gender-diverse experiences in their early life (Xu 2020a).

Emerging research from beyond Northern or Western settings, however, suggests that in alternative political and socio-cultural contexts different logics may prevail. In such cases, encouraging more men into ECEC may in fact reproduce gendered norms and essentialism. In China, male kindergarten teachers are often expected by the public to act as male role models, to provide an exemplar of socially accepted 'ways of doing' masculinity for boys to emulate from an early age (Yang and McNair 2019). This expectation is framed by a political context, in which the Chinese central government is actively trying to discourage males who are seen as 'feminised' in the People's Republic of China, especially public-facing figures such as actors/singers and social media influencers (Zhang 2021). More specifically, to address the so-believed 'feminisation' of boys that is seen to be linked to the gender imbalance in the ECEC workforce, some Chinese provinces have put in place policies that endorse men's enrolment on ECEC courses by offering them free tuition (not equally free to women) (Xu and Waniganayake 2018).

The contrasting narratives about why men should work in ECEC are often related to male and female practitioners' self-reported subjectivities and experiences (Rohrmann and Brody 2015; Xu 2020a). There are limited empirical studies exploring how the global and local discourses of men and ECEC are enacted in practice settings through stakeholders' (i.e. practitioners and children) gender(ed) performances (Butler 2004). This paper thus contributes to the literature by adopting a comparative approach to understand how context shapes gender subjectivities and how these are played out in observable practice. It draws on observational data to add a different angle to the understanding of how practitioners (male and female) and children construct and navigate particular gendered relations in ECEC settings, and in doing so perpetuate or challenge, gender stereotypes/norms, through their interactions with each other.

Region: Europe ^[4]

Tags: male early childhood educators ^[5]

gender equity ^[6]

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