

Critically Consider the Role of Gender in Early Childhood Education

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doi:10.56397/RAE.2023.01.07

Abstract

This study examines the concept of gender, the factors that influence children's perceptions of gender and the reasons for the imbalance between the number of male and female kindergarten teachers. The study found that Children's understanding of gender can be influenced by the behaviour of parents and teachers and by cues from the media. The low salary and low social status of preschool teachers, as well as the constraints of traditional social attitudes, are factors that may lead to a much lower number of male kindergarten teachers than female teachers. Parents and teachers need to remove the influence of gender stereotypes and create a relaxed and positive environment for children to develop their gender awareness. There is a need for the government and educational institutions to improve the salaries and conditions of male and female teachers and to attract more male teachers to the ECE profession, which will help break down gender stereotypes of children.

Keywords: the role of gender, early childhood education, teachers

1. Introduction

The cognition of gender role is essential to human growth because it will profoundly affect the development of individual socialisation, the integrity of personality and mental health (Chapman, 2021; He, 2019; Wu, 2017). Controversy has always existed among theorists regarding this concept, and various definitions have been given to the term 'gender' (Tayler & Price, 2019; Wingrave, 2018). Therefore, this essay will explore the definition of gender. Additionally, it has been observed that children's gender cognition occurs during early childhood. However, compared with other stages of education, the role of gender has received little attention. Therefore, it is crucial to delve deeper into other factors that may affect the role of gender in children, including parents, teachers, classmates and the media.

A common global phenomenon is the disparity in the proportion of male and female teachers in early childhood education (Warin, 2014; Wu, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the factors that influence this phenomenon and explore the significance of increasing the number of male teachers. In addition, gender equality in early childhood education can also be developed by investigating the similarities and differences of male and female teachers regarding their teaching methods, working conditions, attitudes and promotion opportunities. Furthermore, the thesis aims to better inform individuals regarding gender equality, increase the number of male teachers and promote the harmonious and equal development of male and female teachers in the field of early childhood education.

2. The Concept of Gender

The concept of gender is complicated and controversial (Tayler and Price, 2019; Wingrave, 2018). Theorists have explained this concept by using their own interpretations (MacNaughton, 2006; Martin, 2011). For example, biologists believe that gender is related to a person's innate reproductive sex organs, meaning that the biological difference between men and women lies in their ability to reproduce (Wingrave, 2018). Moreover, this biological difference can also impact men and women's different social roles and responsibilities (Tayler & Price, 2019). As a result, some literature suggests that people's gender perception and performance are closely related to their

sexuality (LeMay Sheffield, 2004; MacNaughton, 2006). However, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) clarify that gender and sex are not the same. The concept of gender emphasises ‘the relationships between women’s and men’s behaviour, and also social ideas of what is “womanly” and “manly” (Svaleryd, 2002, cited in Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005, p. 297). From a social constructivist point of view, social identity is created through the combination of social relations and the historical context of the time (Archer, 2003; Tayler and Price, 2019). Therefore, how an individual perceives gender is directly linked to ethnic, racial, class and other aspects (Wingrave, 2018). Furthermore, some social constructivists acknowledge that gender plays an important role in how individuals interact with each other based on the physical differences presented by the body (Paechter, 2006). For example, people’s expectations and relationships can rely on biological differences (MacNaughton, 2006).

This essay will use the social constructivist definition of gender to analyse the gender roles of children and staff in the field of preschool education.

3. The Role of Gender in Children

When children learn and understand the world, they will develop their own thoughts and awareness regarding gender by observing and imitating people’s attitudes and behaviour (Brown, 2007; Kane, 2013). Many researchers have different ideas about the age at which children form their understanding of gender. For example, Leinbach and Fagot (1993) argue that by the time children reach one year old, they start to form an awareness of gender patterns and are able to recognise the gender of an individual and stereotypes in their surrounding environment. Bussey and Bandura (1999) argue that children develop their gender identity as early as the age of two. In addition, several studies have shown that by the time children reach the age of six to eight, they will have formed a moderately fixed opinion of the concept of gender (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Halim & Lindner, 2013). Therefore, even though there might be some disagreement among researchers about when children develop gender identity, they agree that early childhood is an important time for them to acquire cognition regarding this concept (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Halim & Lindner, 2013; Tayler & Price, 2019).

Hence, two main factors that can influence the concept of gender for children are their family and preschool environment (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; MacNaughton, 2006; Wingrave, 2018). Children develop gender stereotypes based on the actions and expectations of their parents, teachers, and classmates (Halim & Lindner, 2013; Martin, 2011). First of all, due to the lack of formal training regarding gender education, some parents and early childhood educators understand gender based on their own childhood experiences (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006; Wingrave, 2018). While interacting with children, these ideas are passed on to children either consciously or unconsciously (Lynch, 2015). A prime example is the colour of items provided to children by their parents, where blue-coloured objects will be given to boys and pink to girls (Tayler & Price, 2019).

However, some researchers point out that parents’ and teachers’ actions, to some extent, rob children of their choices and contribute to gender stereotypes (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Tayler & Price, 2019). For example, based on the colour assignment mentioned above, children may believe that boys can only like blue and not pink and the same applies to girls, who may think that they can only like pink. As soon as the boy or girl chooses pink or blue, there might be a concern that they are betraying their gender and becoming different (Tayler & Price, 2019). Therefore, children will act according to a particular gender stereotype when identifying with it (Eckert & McConnell, 2013; Tobin et al., 2010). Such behaviour can affect children’s choices, skills and relationships (Halim & Lindner, 2013). Many researchers advocate that any particular culture should not bind children, and there should be a realisation from parents and teachers that children have the right to make their own choices (Halim & Lindner, 2013; Tayler & Price, 2019; Wingrave, 2018). In addition, parents and teachers should demonstrate an inclusive attitude and provide children with equal opportunities and experiences when making choices (Wingrave, 2018).

On the other hand, some studies have discovered that children tend to play in same-sex groups in preschool (Martin, 2011; Tayler & Price, 2019). While playing, they will identify themselves as only male or female to fit in with the group and not risk being ostracised by their peers, even though such behaviour may limit their right to choose the type of play (Martin, 2011).

In addition, a large body of literature suggests that explicit or implicit and intentional or unintentional cues from the media also enable children to learn about social expectations of gender differences (Eckert & McConnell, 2013; Wingrave, 2018). Children’s TV programs concentrate on social consciousness, values, and beliefs and contain gender awareness and expectation (Dai, 2016; MacNaughton, 2000; Wu, 2017). The media is also used as a means for children to understand the social, cultural and historical process (Sun et al., 2019). Therefore, cartoons’ distinctive traits may be learned and imitated by children as specific gender role models. This may affect how children perceive gender and impact the development of the children’s gender awareness (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010). For example, Chu and McIntyre’s (1995) study shows that among the 277 cartoon characters in Hong Kong Children’s TV, male to female ratio is 2:1. Male cartoons are portrayed as more

aggressive, strong characters, whereas female cartoons are mostly just beautiful and weak. The portrayal of the cartoon characters gives the impression that females are weaker than males (Gao & Cheng, 2012; Sheldon, 2004). Some researchers suggest that parents and teachers' efforts can support young children when it comes to selecting TV programs to choose the ones that are free of gender stereotypes and provide guidance when needed to minimise gender stereotyping in mass media (Dai, 2016; Wu, 2017). In addition, some studies have indicated that in certain countries, such as China, relevant policies have been introduced so that there are fewer films and TV shows with gender stereotypes (Gao & Cheng, 2012; Sun et al., 2019).

4. The Role of Gender in Staffing

The big gap in the numbers of male and female teachers in preschools is still a crucial issue, even in countries as diverse as the UK, Sweden and China (Warin, 2014; Wu, 2017). Early childhood education is being described as the most feminine of all (Drudy, 2008; Skelton, 2002). For example, until the 1970s, Sweden allowed only women to become preschool teachers (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). A series of policies were introduced to encourage men to enter the field of early childhood education, and this led to a sharp rise in the proportion of male preschool teachers in Sweden between 2003 and 2009 from 6% to 18% (Skolverket, 2011; Warin, 2014). However, even though the numbers of male teachers have increased, female educators in early childhood classes still surpass the male ones in numbers. At the same time, this situation appears to be more severe in the UK (Brownhill & Oates, 2017). Brownhill's (2011) research found that male employment in preschool education experienced a decline in the UK from the 1980s until the 2000s, and in 2008 male teachers represented only 2% of the preschool workforce (Brownhill, 2011; Nutbrown 2012). Although the British government considers this matter crucial and has included it in the agenda of education policy (Gove, 2010), the results are not satisfactory (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Warin, 2014). A similar phenomenon is also observed in countries like China and Indonesia (Adriany & Warin, 2014; Wu, 2017). Therefore, Drudy (2008) and Warin (2014) suggest that this pattern may be a common global phenomenon.

4.1 The Importance of Enhancing the Balance in the Number of Male and Female Teachers

It is necessary to adjust the balance in the number of male and female teachers in early childhood education (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). First, some studies have indicated that when the number of male teachers is increased, this can have a greater influence on boys, and make up for the lack of female teachers (Jones, 2008; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Jones (2008) and Skelton (2002) indicate that there is a possibility that male teachers can take on the partial role of a father figure and positively impact children who come from families where fathers are absent. Additionally, several researchers, policymakers and experts in education suggest that male teachers in early education can promote an interest in learning regarding boys and improve their academic performance (Burn, 2002; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Nevertheless, many studies have shown inconclusive data to support this claim (Brownhill, 2011; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011). Furthermore, certain studies have suggested that academic achievement is not related to a teacher's gender, but their ability to provide good lessons and develop interpersonal relationships with students (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007).

However, Adriany and Warin (2014) state that even though male teachers might not contribute to the academic performance of boys, they may be able to instigate a change in the traditional cultural division of gender roles to demonstrate that men and women can equally share childcare and education. The research of Ashcraft and Sevier (2006) supports this point, as they argue that the presence of male teachers in early education can encourage boys to value childcare by seeing men as nurturing and caring while breaking down children's traditional gender constraints on career settings. Therefore, it is meaningful to explore the factors that contribute to the large difference in numbers between male and female teachers in early childhood.

4.2 The Factors that Influence this Phenomenon

The low salary and low social status of preschool teachers as well as the limitation of traditional social concepts are some of the factors that may contribute to the different numbers of male and female teachers in early childhood.

4.2.1 The Low Salary and Low Social Status of Preschool Teachers

A strong link between low pay and low social status is shown by many studies in conjunction with the reluctance of men to enter the preschool workforce (Brody, 2014; Ceng & Luo, 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011).

On the one hand, there are not many incentives provided by early childhood education to male teachers, as their salary is low and there are few welfare benefits, thereby they are less prone to choose this profession (Peeters, 2013; Wingrave, 2018). Hence, Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill (2011) indicated that the sexualisation of the workforce in early education might be influenced by keeping teachers' wages low. On the other hand, the low social status and lack of respect of preschool teachers are other contributing factors regarding men's choice of becoming preschool teachers (Brandes et al., 2015; Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Colley, 2006).

In addition, Brownhill and Oates (2017) interviewed some male teachers and discovered that even though their salary is £1000 less than teachers of other stages of education, they have the same workload as them. Therefore, based on this fact, male teachers might feel undervalued and underpaid compared to teachers at other stages of education. Moreover, Dai's (2016) research also supports the claim regarding the workload, long working hours and low salary. Consequently, a lot of men may not choose to become preschool teachers because of the excessive labour and low income.

However, women have faced the same issues as men regarding low salary and status, which may have prevented them from entering early childhood education (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Hu et al., 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Lv, 2019). Even though it has been mentioned in previous literature, the issue regarding male teachers has been granted more attention (Xu, 2020). Therefore, the fact that more focus is given to male teachers showcases the predicament of female preschool teachers (Warin, 2014; Yu & Yu, 2010), but also reflects the phenomenon of gender inequality in the field of preschool education (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Oates, 2011). The root cause of the low salary and low social status of preschool teachers is that 'nurseries and preschools have historically been constructed as an extension of the home rather than as democratic children's spaces where communities engage in dialogue' (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011, p. 2). After all, in patriarchal societies, a mother's role is to take care of the children in the home without considering money (Miller & Cable, 2008; Xu, 2020). The term 'patriarchy' implies that women are lower than men regarding power and status (Callahan & Lucy, 2019). In addition, early childhood education has been gradually marketised and commercialised, as administrators try to increase profits by reducing teachers' salaries (Roberts-Holmes, 2009; Warin, 2014). More importantly, some people hold that the work of preschool teachers does not require high professional and technical skills, so they do not deserve high social status and high salary (Lv, 2019). Thus, all of the factors mentioned above, in conjunction with preschool teachers' low income and low social status, bind women to childcare, low status and low salary and also prevent men from considering a profession teaching in a preschool.

4.2.2 The Limitations of Traditional Social Concepts

Traditional and social constraints can be considered essential factors that can negatively impact the number of male teachers in the preschool field and lead to the excessive number of female teachers (Brandes et al., 2015; Brody, 2014; Ceng & Luo, 2020). First of all, the traditional gender stereotype may inhibit the opportunity for some men to become preschool teachers as they may not directly conform to the expected image of someone working in the early childhood field (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Ceng & Luo, 2020). The findings of Brownhill and Oates (2017) and Sargent (2001) found that most parents prefer for their children to be in contact with athletic, strong and authoritative men as opposed to artistic, educated and emotionally expressive ones. These studies show that parents have a vivid image regarding the personality and appearance of male teachers, thereby limiting the possibility for any diversified development. However, there was less demand from parents for the image of female teachers than male teachers, which may be related to the reason that traditional gender stereotypes associate child care with women (Hu et al., 2020; Lv, 2019).

In addition to the restrictions imposed by parents, schools and colleagues, there is additional pressure and limitations regarding male and female teachers because of their gender (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Hu et al., 2020; Lv, 2019). For example, in their interviews with male teachers, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) and Brownhill and Oates (2017) learned that schools and female teachers would require male teachers to carry heavy objects and conduct activities that are stereotypical of their gender, such as being asked to repair things, organise outdoor games for children and other physically demanding activities. Moreover, the school and colleagues expect male teachers to use attributes, such as their authoritative male figure to suppress the behaviour of boys in school, which also increases the emotional burden of male teachers (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Xu, 2020). Similarly, female teachers are excluded from teaching outdoor sports and given other responsibilities, such as playing with dolls and teaching children cheerleading exercises (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Hu et al., 2020). These behaviours and comments put male and female teachers in a stressful and restrictive working environment, thus discouraging them from working.

Furthermore, some social attitudes increase men's resistance and fear to enter the preschool field (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Warin, 2014) and limit their teaching ability and interpersonal relationships with children (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Sun et al., 2019). Some literature indicates that many people may regard male teachers as homosexuals or paedophiles, which is also a factor that deters men from entering the field of preschool education to avoid perceiving themselves as such individuals (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Rolfe, 2005). The research of Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill (2011) supports this point and indicates that young male teachers are especially concerned with being labelled by others. As a result, it is logical why men might avoid pursuing a career in preschool teaching (Warin, 2014). More importantly, these concerns may restrict male teachers in schools as they are trusted less compared to female teachers (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Harris & Barnes, 2009). For example, some fathers may look at male

teachers with vigilance and suspicion when their daughters go to school, which causes male teachers to feel like they are not trusted (Brownhill & Oates, 2017). In addition, some male teachers avoid direct physical contact with children or staying alone with them in the classroom (Brody, 2014). These experiences bring inconvenience regarding the work of male teachers (Brownhill & Oates, 2017). However, studies have shown that these restrictions on male teachers can effectively protect children from abuse (Lv, 2019; Qian et al., 2016). Therefore, parents support them (Qian et al., 2016). In fact, the abuse of children by their teachers does not depend on the educator's gender. Some researchers have shown that some female teachers are also capable of abusing and physically punishing children, while male teachers can also treat children with love and care (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Sun et al., 2019). Therefore, this shows that some parents' cognition of teachers' gender is limited, and it is unfair and disrespectful to some teachers.

4.3 Male and Female Teachers

Whether male and female teachers have different teaching methods and attitudes and working conditions has long been a hot topic in preschool education (Brandes et al., 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Therefore, these two aspects will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

4.3.1 Teaching Methods and Attitudes

Some studies have shown that male and female teachers differ markedly in their teaching methods and attitudes towards children's play (Brandes et al., 2015; Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). For example, in their research, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) found that male teachers partake in games played by children, which does not apply for female teachers. Through interviews with preschool teachers, Xu and Waniganayake (2018) discovered that male and female teachers have different perspectives regarding children's games. Male teachers believe that participation in children's games is convenient for them to provide help to the children during the game and enables them to better understand and observe children (Qian et al., 2016; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). On the other hand, female teachers consider that their participation in games may make children feel constrained and might not play in a relaxed state (Lv, 2019). Therefore, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) claimed that male teachers are more concerned with what they can do with children and how they can do it. On the other hand, female teachers are more concerned with establishing a good interpersonal relationship with children (Lv, 2019; Qian et al., 2016).

However, some researchers have found that male and female teachers do not have different teaching styles or attitudes toward children playing because of their gender (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Hu et al., 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011). Qian et al. (2016) pointed out that female teachers can also participate when children play and provide them with guidance when needed.

In addition, some findings suggest that male teachers are better when playing physical games, such as kicking a football and rolling, while female teachers have a preference for playing with dolls (Brandes et al., 2015; Having, 2000). Brandes et al. (2015) suggested that teachers' own childhood experiences can influence this issue. Male teachers have the experience of playing physical games as a child, while female teachers lack the experience and do not choose for children to play these kinds of games (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Moreover, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) suggested that male teachers will more likely take additional risks if needed, whereas female teachers mostly show attributes linked to caring and nurturing.

Nevertheless, many literature sources indicate the influence of gender stereotypes in male and female teachers (Brandes et al., 2015; Tang, 2018; Yelland, 2002). Some male teachers say that they will choose an activity, such as playing football, mainly because they are expected to by female colleagues, schools, and parents, rather than by their wishes (Brandes et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2020). In addition, other studies have suggested that female teachers can also be engaged in physical activities in preschool (Lv, 2019). Hence, this issue shows that gender role stereotypes are still influencing the teaching styles of male and female teachers, however, both genders are eager to break through the gender mould.

4.3.2 Working Conditions and Promotion Opportunities

Some researchers report that male teachers are more likely to be promoted compared to their female counterparts in preschool education (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Warin, 2014). For example, Dai (2016) and Warin (2014) noted that men are given priority when competing with women for a preschool position. Schools worry about women missing work because of pregnancy or due to caring for families and children (Dai, 2016). Therefore, Liu (2017) and Qian et al. (2016) added that women will be more eligible for promotion only when they work harder. Furthermore, Lv's (2019) research shows that some men earn more than women for the same early childhood education positions. In addition, Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill (2011) found in their research that men will more likely become managers than teachers due to the male stereotype. Even though some countries have introduced related policies to curb such gender discrimination in schools, the situation still exists and is getting worse (Xu, 2020).

Such gender profiling negatively affects male teachers, as they prefer to continue teaching rather than undergo training for higher positions. If they refuse to move up the career ladder, they may be considered unmotivated since they are not conforming to gender stereotypes (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011). Similarly, this phenomenon can also lead to female teachers' dissatisfaction, as they believe that male teachers interfered with their promotion opportunities and better-paid jobs (Dai, 2016; Xu, 2020). Therefore, some female teachers will exclude and isolate male teachers. For example, they may deliberately not include them in decision-making processes during team meetings (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Warin, 2014). Hence, it can be concluded that such gender inequality may create a toxic working environment, which is not conducive to the harmonious coexistence of male and female teachers and interferes with the development of preschools.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, gender roles in the field of preschool education can negatively affect children and staff alike. When children are between two and six years old, they will gradually form cognition regarding gender by observing and collecting information from their immediate environments, such as their families, school, and the media. As a result, they decide what is acceptable or not from the words and actions of those around them. However, even though children may miss out on multiple experiences, they may avoid doing things that do not adhere to gender roles to meet particular expectations. Therefore, parents and teachers need to establish a clear idea of what gender equality is through their daily interactions with children and respect their right to choose. There is a considerable gap in the number of male and female kindergarten teachers, so it is necessary to increase the number of male teachers. This is essential for breaking down children's gender stereotypes. In addition, it is common for male teachers to receive more incentives and promotions in schools compared with female teachers because of their gender. Governments and educational institutions still need to continue improving the salaries and conditions of male and female teachers and establishing a gender-equal working environment.

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