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Men's participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC): comparative perspectives from Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China

Yuwei Xu ^a, Michele Schweisfurth ^b and Barbara Read ^b

^aSchool of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK; ^bSchool of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

At the global level, prominent narratives about improving the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) promote the recruitment of men into the profession. However, comparing across different policy and practice settings demonstrates contrasting expressions and experiences of how men contribute to ECEC. This article presents findings from a study in Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China. The study explored how male and female practitioners and children talk about gender and how gendered relationships and roles are 'performed' in practice settings. In the two contexts, national/regional policy aims to raise the number of men working in ECEC, but in both cases and in different ways the inclusion of men in ECEC reinforces cultural gender norms as much as interrupting them. This research points to the need for comparative research to include observation data and practitioners' and children's views to enhance understanding of how global discourses of ECEC are enacted in different contexts.

KEYWORDS

Gender; men in childcare; child-practitioner interactions; early childhood education and care (ECEC); comparative perspectives

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*

CONTACT Yuwei Xu  yuwei.xu@nottingham.ac.uk  School of Education, University of Nottingham, C89 Dearing Building, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

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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.

Men's participation in ECEC in Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China

Two under-researched localities regarding men's participation in ECEC were chosen in this study, namely Scotland and China.¹ Both countries have between 2 and 4% of male practitioners/kindergarten teachers (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2021; OECD 2021; Scottish Social Services Council 2021; Warin, Wilkinson, and Greaves 2021). However, as described above, the global discourse of men's participation in ECEC manifests different constructions of gender in Scottish and Chinese societies, shaped by politically and culturally contextualised dominant discourses (Connell 2007). Those discourses, as we explain below, are embedded in the local urban ECEC settings in Edinburgh and Tianjin (Alexander 2000; Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009).

As the capital city of Scotland, Edinburgh runs a specific organisation called 'Men in Childcare' that trains men to become early years practitioners. Most of these practitioners are found working in early years centres in multiply deprived areas. An explanation of this by managers and staff members from those centres is that families in those areas often experience social problems such as domestic violence, and drug/alcohol abuse (Xu 2018; Skafida, Morrison, and Devaney 2021). Young children from those families may have experienced male figures who are violent, or fathers who are absent. Male practitioners are therefore expected to provide alternative (and positive) male role models who are safe, respectful, and caring (Xu 2020a; Tembo 2021). In alignment with the national *Gender Action Plan*, men's participation in ECEC in Edinburgh is intended to challenge traditional gender stereotypes of men.

Tianjin is an economically advantaged Chinese city. In recent years some more developed Chinese provinces/cities on the east coast have launched policies to encourage male participation in ECEC (Xu and Waniganayake 2018; Xu 2020a). Although Tianjin is not one of them so far, the importance of men's roles in ECEC has been widely publicised here – reflecting nation-wide expectations that male kindergarten teachers could save boys from a 'crisis of masculinity' (Xu 2018; Yang and McNair 2019; Xu and Gong 2021). An increasing number of men are found working in Tianjin kindergartens, particularly as physical education (PE) teachers. This specific role is justified by traditional gender constructions of men being better at sports and rough and tumble play than women (Xin 2021). Men thus are expected to bring into Tianjin kindergartens the practice of braveness and toughness, characteristics culturally constructed as masculine and therefore essential for boys' development (Li 2021).

The global discourse of men's participation in ECEC as promoted by OECD (2019b) and international scholarship (Rohrmann 2020) has obviously been interpreted in different and contrasting ways in local political and socio-cultural contexts of Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China. But how are these political and social-cultural interpretations enacted in ECEC settings in the two cities (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010)? Focusing on practitioners' and children's gender(ed) 'performances' (Butler 2004) in their interactions, often shaped by adult-child power relationships and hegemonic masculinity in both Scottish and Chinese cultures (Foucault 1982; Butler 1990; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Xu et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2022), this paper examines how expectations of men's participation in ECEC are enacted through practitioner-child interactions in selected ECEC settings in Edinburgh and Tianjin, when both men and women work with young children.

Methods

Ethnographically informed participant observations were conducted as part of the research² drawn on for this paper. The first author (hereinafter referred to as ‘the researcher’) conducted the fieldwork research, immersing himself into the daily life of each ECEC classroom for approximately one week (O’Reilly 2012). Whilst not long enough to be claimed as traditionally ethnographic (Ibid), the study reflects characteristics of iconic ethnographic studies in comparative ECEC (Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009) and emerging new research (Tobin 2022; Hayashi 2022) by paying attention to gendered activities and interactions in different cultural settings and asking the ‘cultural insiders’ (i.e. practitioners and children) to reflect on and explain their interpretations of those activities and interactions. A loose protocol was followed, focusing on the whole of a typical day in ECEC settings and capturing all possible interactions between the practitioners and children. In addition to written descriptions of observed behaviours and incidents, explanations were sought from practitioners and children (if they were willing to engage and illustrate) to better contextualise and complement the observational data. The researcher also wrote a daily fieldwork diary to summarise overall impressions and reflections, which were used as a contextual supplement in the data analysis. Identifying as a man, the researcher’s gendered participation in the classroom activities and particularly in interactions with children was reflected upon during fieldwork, as is discussed elsewhere (see Xu 2019). The interactions suggested gendered aspects relevant to the study, and being treated by the children as one of the staff members in their ECEC life enabled these to be studied relatively naturally.

Sampling and participants

A total of twelve ECEC classrooms were observed, including seven from ECEC settings in Edinburgh and five from Tianjin. Whilst the two cities are in general economically developed, the twelve ECEC settings represent a diversity of socio-economic environments within them. Practitioners’ and children’s gender subjectivities are inevitably also shaped by other facets of identity and positioning such as socio-economic background and ‘race’/ethnicity, although sufficiently clear indications of intersectional patterns in the data did not occur to be able to support a focused analysis of this.

The selection of full-day ECEC settings, and of the classroom within each setting, was primarily dependent on whether they employed a male practitioner. The low prevalence of male practitioners in both cities meant that choices were limited. As the majority of qualifying settings also had only a single male practitioner, their classroom thus automatically became the selected class. Despite this limitation, the 12 classrooms cover various types of settings in terms of children’s age group, location, public/private, and the role of the male practitioner. In an ECEC classroom in Edinburgh, there are normally 4–5 practitioners. In our study, only the male practitioner and one female practitioner were observed, with a focus on their interactions with children. In a classroom in Tianjin, there are usually three staff members, including a lead teacher, an assistant teacher, and a ‘care’ teacher. As the care teacher takes the main responsibilities of housekeeping, they were not observed – except in one classroom where the only male staff member was the care teacher. [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) provide details of participating classrooms by city. Any

Table 1. Characteristics of participant classrooms in Edinburgh (ED).

Setting		ED1	ED2	ED3	ED4	ED5	ED6	ED7
Type		Early Years Centres	Early Years Centres	Private Nursery	Early Years Centres	Early Years Centres	Private Nursery	Primary School Nursery Class
Location		South	East	South	East	North	South	North
Class level		Preschool	Preschool	Preschool	Toddler	Toddler	Preschool	Preschool
Children	<i>No.</i>	18 ⁴	Around 20	Around 25	14/17 ⁵	5–10	Around 20	20–30
	<i>Age</i>	3–5 yrs, more 3s	2.5–5 yrs, more 3s	3–5 yrs, more 5s	1.5–3 yrs, more 2s	1.5–3 yrs, more 2s	3–5 yrs	3–5 yrs
	<i>Boy/Girl</i>	9/9	10/10	Roughly half/half	9/5; 11/6	Roughly half/half	Roughly half/half	Roughly half/half
	<i>Ethnicity</i>	Scottish	Scottish	Mixed cultures	Mostly Scottish	Mixed cultures	Mixed cultures	Mixed cultures
Position	<i>MP</i> ⁶	Scottish Early Years Officer		Nursery Practitioner	Early Years Practitioner	Early Years Officer	Deputy Manager	Early Years Practitioner
	<i>WP</i>					Nursery Practitioner	Practitioner	Early Years Officer
Age	<i>MP</i>	46	58	33	29	48	38	45
	<i>WP</i>	Nearly 50	45	28	28	28	25	46
Working Experience	<i>MP</i>	9 yrs	12 yrs	1.5 yrs	3 yrs	13 yrs	10 yrs	4 yrs
	<i>WP</i>	25 yrs	27 yrs	1.5 yrs	7 yrs	5 yrs	1 yr	23 yrs
Qualifications	<i>MP</i>	Higher National Certificate (HNC)		BSc Physics	BA; HNC	HNC	SVQ Level 3	HNC
	<i>WP</i>	Early Education and Childcare		SVQ Level 3	BSc; HNC	BA; HNC	HNC	HNC
(Self-identified) Ethnicity	<i>MP</i>	British	White British	British	White Scottish	White British	White Scottish	White Scottish
	<i>WP</i>	Scottish	Scottish	White Scottish	Scottish	Scottish	White Scottish	White Scottish

Table 2. Characteristics of participant classrooms in Tianjin (TJ).

Setting		TJ1	TJ2	TJ3	TJ4	TJ5
Type		Public	Public	Private	Public	Public
Location		North Suburban	North City	Southwest City	North Suburban	Southwest City
Class level		Upper-level		Middle-level	Upper-level	Lower-level
Children	<i>No.</i>	28	33	15	27	35
	<i>Age</i>	5–6 yrs		4–5 yrs	5–6 yrs	3–4 yrs
	<i>Boy/Girl</i>	11/17	18/15	8/7	17/10	17/18
	<i>Ethnicity</i>	All Chinese (including minority Chinese ⁷)				
Position	<i>MP</i>	Assistant Practitioner		'Care' practitioner ⁸	Leading Practitioner	Assistant Practitioner
	<i>WP</i>	Leading Practitioner		Leading Practitioner	Assistant Practitioner	Leading Practitioner
Age	<i>MP</i>	25	23	20	27	20
	<i>WP</i>	Early 30s	47	27	26	Late 40s
Working Experience	<i>MP</i>	3 yrs	3 yrs	2–3 yrs	2 yrs	3 yrs
	<i>WP</i>	4 yrs	26 yrs	4 yrs	1.5 yrs	28 yrs
Qualifications	<i>MP</i>	Bed		HD	Bachelor in Management	HD
	<i>WP</i>	Master in Sports	Bed			
Ethnicity		<i>All are Chinese</i>				

information that makes the settings and participant practitioners/children identifiable has been removed. The observations were all conducted with the explicit informed consent of centre managers/headteachers, all staff members in the classrooms, and all children's parents.

Data analysis

Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), a range of themes were identified, emerging from the coding of the observational notes. These included both frequently observed aspects of daily classroom life, and what were identified as 'significant incidents' – enabling an exploration of how practitioners and children 'perform' gender and practice power in their daily interactions in different settings in Edinburgh and Tianjin. Particular attention was given to understanding and interpreting how the performance of gender and power in those settings reflect culturally contextualised interpretations of men's participation in ECEC. Practitioner-child interactions were grouped into several themes in the original study (Xu 2018), including those suggesting obviously gendered, gender-subtle, and non-gendered interactions. In this paper, only themes that indicate gender and power relations between practitioners and children are presented, such as using gender as a disciplinary form of power in classroom organisation, explicit behaviour management, and 'informing/snitching' – which we will now go on to discuss in depth.

Gender as a disciplinary form of power in ECEC classrooms

Classroom organisation

Gender was observed to be a frequent category used by Chinese practitioners in Tianjin, underpinned by particular classifications and distributions of power in daily activities. Children were often separated by gender category in order to take part in different activities (e.g. Chinese martial arts for boys and dancing for girls), or to take turns to do the same activity. There were even pink and blue lines on the floors in some classrooms, showing the international reach of a nevertheless socially and temporally specific symbolic association with femininity and masculinity respectively (Francis 2006). Other symbols referred to culturally specific gendered representations of expected presentation of self, for example utilising the cartoon image of a child with a braid (to indicate a girl) and a cartoon image of a child with short hair (to indicate a boy). In these ways children were explicitly disciplined to categorise themselves and place themselves in certain spatial configurations (e.g. where to stand when they were ordered to 'line up') – and children were disciplined to expect these practices to occur at certain temporal junctures (for example lining up acted as a regulatory practice conducted at the beginning and end of lessons). The explicit genderedness of these disciplinary practices, as well as the explicit authority of the teacher underpinned by Confucian value of *Li*³ (courteousness) (Yim, Lee, and Ebbeck 2011), were emphasised by the expected placement of the teacher within these practices. When there was a male practitioner working in the room, they would always lead the line of boys, with female colleague(s) leading the line of girls. The binary construction of gender, therefore, was explicitly emphasised further by the

presence of teachers who identified as/were categorised as men working alongside those identifying as/categorised as women in Tianjin ECEC classrooms.

Occasionally, some Chinese boys or girls were observed to be grouped into their perceived opposite gender, due to uneven numbers of boys and girls in the classroom. One practitioner from Tianjin indicated that it is usually boys of less height that are put into the girls' group, suggesting an intersection between masculinity and physical size. This temporary re-classificatory technique – a perceived 'feminisation' of the child's body – could be negatively sanctioned by peers. A Tianjin boy was laughed at by another boy when the former was put in the girls' group, clearly demonstrating the power of normalising judgements of what is expected/possible for bodies that 'should' be male and the exclusionary power of laughter/ridicule for those who are positioned as 'not quite' male enough, even in temporary circumstances. Some practitioners reported that both boys and girls may resist joining a different gender group but have to accept the arrangement once the practitioner's authority is emphasised. Chinese practitioners did not seem to regard such arrangements as problematic, as they thought '*the children won't understand the [gender] distinction at this age*'. Considering that children seemed to be well aware of the gender divide (Xu 2020b), it is a possible avenue for future research as to how children's gender subjectivities may be negotiated under such circumstances.

By contrast, gender as a disciplinary form of power – in terms of classification and distribution – was less obvious in Edinburgh ECEC settings. Some Scottish practitioners further mentioned that they intentionally challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender diversity and equality through daily activities, reflecting enactments of political drives in the country to promote gender diversity in education. For example, one female practitioner said that they paid particular attention to ensuring that children are exposed to all kinds of toys in the classroom, and boys and girls are 'free' to choose whatever toys they like to play with. Indeed, it was observed on many occasions that Edinburgh boys played with toys that are socially considered more appropriate for girls, such as baby trolleys and/or wearing dresses in the role play area – incidents hardly seen in Tianjin kindergartens.

Nevertheless, explicit gendered classification and distribution of power were not absent in Edinburgh classrooms and were sometimes observed in grouping, although the practitioners explained that they only randomly used gender, among other categories, as a way of separating children into smaller groups (other categories may include for example, colours of children's coats). In a nursery class that is attached to a primary school (ED7), children were required to address their practitioners as 'Mr' or 'Mrs' mirroring the way the addressing of teachers is usually conducted in primary classes. Practitioners from other nurseries or centres were also sometimes heard to call boys and girls 'Mr XXX' and 'Mrs XXX'. These practices not only explicitly emphasise and legitimise the construction of gender binaries, but also explicitly legitimise heteronormativity – an instance of the disciplinary power of the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990). A traditional and developmental discourse that implies implicit adult authority is evident here, despite Scottish policies that advocate children's rights, citizenship, and democracy (Xu et al. 2020).

The influence of discourses of binary gender division was observed in children's gender performances and interactions, with children themselves reproducing and extending the influence of these discourses through similar classificatory and spatial distributional

techniques of power witnessed in classrooms. For example, a boy in Tianjin allowed the researcher to sit with him when doing the research activities, indicating that he only allowed the researcher to sit there because they are 'both boys'. Another Tianjin girl would not allow boys to touch her hair, as they are 'the different gender'. In the Edinburgh nursery class mentioned above (ED7), it was observed one afternoon when children were sitting on the floor waiting to be picked up, that a boy asked another boy to sit by him: 'Can you come over here? This is a boy thing and that is a girl thing'.

Both practitioners and children seemingly reproduce these gendered disciplinary techniques in organising their activities and interactions with others in ECEC classrooms. These gendered practices of classroom organisation are entwined with the gender-stereotypical responsibilities that male and female practitioners more often perform (and are expected to perform) in the ECEC workforce, such as women taking up more 'caring' roles, men engaging more in physical activities and labour work, leading gendered subjects (science, geography and computer by male practitioners; dancing and music by female practitioners), and in many cases, men not being involved in nappy changing/toileting. These gendered responsibilities are well documented in the literature (e.g. Storli and Sandseter 2017; Xu and Waniganayake 2018; Warin 2019; Sullivan et al. 2020; Xu 2020a) and were substantially observed in our research – particularly in Tianjin kindergartens.

Behaviour management

In addition to classroom organisation, practitioners utilised gendered techniques of power in their interactions with children in behaviour management practices. This aspect of practitioner-child interactions revealed the fluidity of power dynamics in the interactions between male and female practitioners, and between practitioners and children in the different cultural contexts.

The researcher's observations in the different classrooms and cultural contexts conducted for this research, found that there are shared ways regarding how practitioners enact behaviour management. These practices were usually on a continuum between what Read (2008) has previously described as disciplinarian practices and liberal approaches. Disciplinary practices emphasise a practitioner/teacher's explicit authority over children – a Bernsteinian form of 'visible pedagogy' (Bernstein 1975) and a Confucian educational philosophy of respecting teachers (Yim, Lee, and Ebbeck 2011). Liberal approaches that seemingly allow greater agency or choice on the part of the child are a form of 'invisible pedagogy' (Bernstein 1975). Such approaches are often connected with practices of child-centred or learner-centred education (Schweisfurth 2013; Power et al. 2019). In relation to behaviour management, child/learner-centred practices can involve aspects that Read (2008) describes as pseudo-adultification, a process

whereby the teacher speaks and responds to the pupil as if the latter were actually an adult of (almost) equal agency and power as the teacher, and through this communication builds up an 'expectation' of the pupil that he/she will behave in an 'adult' manner – with the notion of 'adulthood' here being a form of 'good citizen' that is respectful towards others, kind, tolerant, sensible, and respectful of the teacher's ultimate (but 'played down') authority. (Read 2008, 613)

A common example of this behaviour management strategy from our findings in both Tianjin and Edinburgh was practitioners being observed to 'threaten' misbehaving children with being taken to a lower-level class if they perform badly. Children would regard it as embarrassing if they were taken to be with their younger brothers and sisters, therefore not 'adults'.

Contrary to popular discourses that see more overt disciplinarian practices as masculinised, which underlie calls to recruit more male ECEC (and primary) practitioners to act as a 'firm hand' to underperforming boys, Read's 2008 study findings in England indicated that there were no gender differences in relation to whether primary teachers (in this instance) drew on more disciplinarian or liberal constructions of behaviour management. This finding was also borne out in the data from the study reported in this paper. In the Tianjin kindergartens, there was a tendency for the more experienced women practitioners to be those who explicitly 'performed' behaviour management practices more often. Contrary to popular discourses concerning gender and behaviour management for young children, children in these kindergartens tended to listen to these women practitioners more than to the men practitioners and challenged the former less. When the more experienced women practitioners were present, children were observed to be noticeably less boisterous and better behaved than when only a man practitioner was with them. During the researcher's stay in Tianjin kindergartens, he often experienced a boisterous class led only by the man practitioner, who either seemingly became accustomed to/lost awareness of the boisterousness or failed to calm the children down even with shouting.

According to participant practitioners' own explanations, a number of factors account for such differences. First, experienced women practitioners from older generations usually seemed to adopt an overtly authoritarian style [reflecting Confucian values of *Li*, but also an approach usually discursively constructed as masculine (Read 2008)] in making sure children obey rules and principles (such as no chatting during meals or teaching sessions). On the other hand, some less experienced (men) and younger generations of practitioners were more tolerant with chaos and noise. Second, the women practitioners may have spent a longer time with the children, and the children, therefore, knew very well what was not considered acceptable or legitimate behaviour through their long-term experiences with the women practitioners; in Foucauldian terms (Foucault 1982, 1985) they were both subject to a direct authoritative style almost akin to sovereign power, as well as more diffuse disciplinary manifestations of that power that manifested in self-regulatory behaviour, where pupils often did not need to be explicitly told what was or was not acceptable. However, with the relative newcomers (usually a man practitioner), children liked to challenge and 'test' their bottom lines (Xu 2018), demonstrating that for children individual teachers were not considered – or accepted as – simplistic representations of the power enacted by the institution.

It could be argued therefore that children's greater acceptance of the authority of women practitioners in these instances is a challenge to dominant discourses linking authority, and disciplinarian presentations of authority, with masculinity in both the UK (see above) and in Chinese culture, where the father is expected to be the main disciplinarian in a family (Chan 2011). However, it is important to note that being more experienced is usually associated with more responsibility in a team in Chinese

culture (and is also culturally connected with hegemonic masculinity and power from a Confucianist perspective of seniority). The women practitioners thus felt that they needed to look after the class more than the men practitioners. With all those factors in play, a binarised teaching team that includes a relatively ‘tougher’ woman practitioner and a ‘softer’ man practitioner is formed and established in many Tianjin kindergartens. It would be necessary to also observe Chinese classes that have only women practitioners to explore these dynamics in a differently gendered setting. Some of our participant women practitioners who had experiences working with other women colleagues, took an individualised perspective, emphasising that the development of such a dynamic depended on individual personalities. However, as we have seen there are many ways in which socially located constructions of self and others are at play, leading to gendered power relations that still construct masculinised dynamics as hegemonic (e.g. being ‘experienced’), but that transcend the attributed gender of the physical body.

Although there were fewer instances of censoring behaviour in Edinburgh classrooms – possibly due to smaller class size and the younger age groupings (see Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009) – in other ways behaviour management practices were similar across the regional contexts, being notably and explicitly performative and situational. All practitioners were observed to be ‘switching’ between different modes and levels of ‘tougher’ or ‘softer’ styles under various circumstances, even if many practitioners reported that they were reluctant to do so. For example, a male practitioner (Mr Hu) from Tianjin consistently pointed out that he did not like to be tough and disciplinary but had to follow institutional regulations regarding children’s good manners. Mr Hu was observed to laugh at himself at the same time as blaming the children in a serious tone for being too boisterous during a festival rehearsal. These instances possibly reflect a form of conscious ‘role distance’ (Goffman 1956) on the part of the teacher in the presence of an adult researcher – a wish not to be presented as synonymous with the institutional power of the kindergarten – and a possible instance of resistance or challenge to dominant masculinised conceptions of the male practitioner. In any case, these instances added to the evidence that practitioners in this research were strategically performing behaviour management in dynamic ways that moved beyond simplistic essentialised conceptions of the male disciplinarian.

Gender and informing/‘snitching’

Children are aware of the disciplinary practice of power in practitioner-child interactions and often aim to initiate such practices of power through informing on their peers (reporting other children’s misbehaviour to practitioners). Matching the frequency of instances of behaviour management practices as initiated by practitioners, children were observed to inform – or ‘snitch’ – to the practitioners about other children’s misbehaviours and their conflicts with each other more often in Tianjin kindergartens than in Edinburgh settings. This highlights the relationality of power in practitioner-child interactions and the agency of children within this. In Edinburgh, informing was only observed to be frequent in one private nursery (ED3), where behaviour management practices were also more pervasive in comparison with other Scottish settings. As explained earlier, this might be attributed to the large class size and the children’s age.

But the ways in which practitioners responded to snitching were no different cross-culturally, with similar strategies being utilised. For example, practitioners usually tried to allow children opportunities to explain what happened from their perspective (especially if it was a conflict between two children) and encouraged the children to resolve the problems on their own. A liberal pedagogical approach that aims at developing children's interpersonal skills and independent problem-solving skills was shared in both cultures. Children showed no strong pattern in terms of which practitioner to snitch to, either; although it was likely that those who are regarded as having more authority (as described above, usually the more experienced and lead practitioners) may be preferred. Often it seemed just an opportunistic choice depending on which practitioner was around.

Two Tianjin men practitioners, Mr Niu and Mr Hu, who presented strong hegemonically masculine subjectivities in the interviews (Xu 2020a), were observed to adopt gendered practices in response to instances of snitching. A girl came to Mr Niu and told him that she was bullied by a boy. He took this very seriously and immediately asked the boy to stand up and apologise formally, without even asking what had happened and also saying: 'How could boys bully girls!' Mr Niu then also emphasised this to the whole class: 'Boys, I kept saying this. Boys should NOT bully girls. Boys have to be gentlemen'. Reflecting his own highly masculinised gender subjectivity (Xu 2018), Mr Niu is intentionally utilising a normalising judgement in order to influence perceptions as to what is appropriate or expected behaviour for boys (to be the chivalrous 'gentleman') and girls (to be passive until 'rescued' by a boy-snitch and/or the teacher). And of course, this normalising judgement also reinforces the very notion of binary gender difference per se, and the authority of the 'knowing' practitioner in relation to the 'disciple' students. This multi-layered technique of power, and its related power to exclude as well as normalise, was also observed in Mr Hu's interactions with his class – this time implying that snitching itself was 'unmasculine'. When a boy informed on another child to him, he responded: 'you are a boy and you are snitching, again?! I feel (shame for you) ...'. Mr Hu's response was consistent with his observed different treatment to boys and girls – he described in an interview that he wanted his boys to be 'tougher' and more resilient to social stresses when they grew up (Xu 2020a).

Discussion

The observations in the 12 ECEC classrooms in Tianjin and Edinburgh show that gender is unavoidably salient in the daily interactions of practitioners and children, as is the pervasiveness of gender as a technology of power in the Foucauldian sense. This finding confirms existing understanding of gender in Western ECEC contexts (e.g. Callahan and Nicholas 2019; Delfin 2020) and extends it to the context of China. In Tianjin settings, essentialised and dichotomous gender categorisation and differences are articulated through the Confucian value of *Li* that emphasises teachers' (adults') authority and children's obedience to rules and standardised behaviours, manifesting explicit forms of gendered disciplinary power premised on adult/teacher authority, seniority, and surveillance of socially acceptable behaviours by both adults and children themselves.

Although such explicitly gendered performances were not evident among Edinburgh practitioners and were even sometimes challenged, there existed subtle and 'blinded' (Warin 2019) gender performativity that conforms to the powerful discourse of

(gender) binarism (Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020). A liberal discourse of child-centredness is manifested in Scottish ECEC that allows and supports children's democratic explorations of gender-diverse performances. Meanwhile, the regime of child developmentalism (Xu et al. 2020) is implicitly affecting practitioners' views on and interactions with children; for example, when managing children's behaviours in ways that subordinate childhood to adulthood. Both the child-centred and developmental discourses are also manifested in Chinese ECEC, when Tianjin practitioners were observed to adopt similar behaviour management strategies to their Edinburgh colleagues. However, the former does not seem to subvert any explicit adult authority in that context and the latter further reinforces binarism.

Children were also found to consider themselves as gendered individual subjects in both societies (Butler 1990, 2004). They actively performed gender in accordance with normalised conceptions as to what is possible or desirable for those classified as boys or girls (Xu 2020b), and utilised the power of dominant gender discourses to extend normalising judgements in the act of policing others (e.g. by setting up clear rules around gender, laughing at boys who were grouped into the girl-group). Through practitioner-child interactions, the power of dominant gender discourses is reproduced through using gender as a category to normalise particular aspects of children's (and adult practitioners') performances in ECEC classrooms. Further, some practices by children, such as snitching, served to reinforce the overall authority of the practitioner in the classroom; even though children were sometimes observed to test and challenge their subordinate status in practitioner-child interactions.

The findings we have outlined also demonstrate that the power embedded in dominant gender discourses is not fixed to a particular gender among adult practitioners in practitioner-child interactions. Whilst in general the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) tends to favour those classified as men and subordinates those classified as women, in the context of practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings, hegemonic masculinity is a fluid and relational performance enacted by practitioners' working experiences and leadership roles and is not necessarily practiced by male practitioners. Many practitioners in Tianjin who identified as women, as well as some in Edinburgh, were observed to perform in hegemonically masculinised ways in behaviour management practices. In particular, as male practitioners tend to be less experienced young men in Chinese kindergartens (Xu 2018), they are positioned in a less powerful position when working in ECEC classrooms together with more experienced women leaders – legitimated by Confucian values of *Li* that respect seniority. Such power relations significantly shape practitioner-child interactions, in that children come to also differentiate practitioners in terms of localised conceptions of authority that are not necessarily fixed to a particular gendered body.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the interpretation and enactment of a global discourse that calls for men's participation in ECEC. Using observational data – a form of data underutilised in this field of study on men in ECEC – we compared how practitioners' and children's gender performances in ECEC classrooms in Edinburgh, Scotland and Tianjin, China

are dynamic and influenced by socially dominant gender discourses in the respective cultural contexts. Gender is utilised as a pervasive discourse to normalise particular aspects of children's (and adult practitioners') performances in ECEC classrooms, reproducing the power of (similar and different) dominant gender discourses in Chinese and Scottish societies. Meanwhile, a global discourse of gender binarism (Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020) powerfully shapes practitioner-child interactions in both cities, through disciplinary techniques of power. The explicitness of both the employment of gender binarism and overt expressions of practitioner authority were more common in Tianjin, although the pervasiveness of gendered techniques of power were common in both contexts.

Through comparing the two contexts that have contrasting political and socio-cultural constructions of gender and men in ECEC, our paper problematises the decontextualised approach (Urban 2022) to encouraging men's participation in ECEC found in OECD (2019b)'s *Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care* report. The report proposes men's participation in ECEC as a major measure to improve the quality of ECEC, assuming men will contribute to gender equality and diversity in the workforce. Findings in this paper, however, demonstrate an alternative interpretation in China that expects men to reinforce hegemonic constructions of gender in the form of appreciating masculinity and 'correcting' the 'feminized' ECEC workforce (Xu and Waniganayake 2018).

More importantly, our findings from two contexts suggest that the rhetoric of increasing men's numbers does not necessarily translate into improved gender equality and diversity in ECEC practice, as expected in the OCED report (2019b). Men's participation in ECEC does not disrupt globally and locally gendered discourses in Scotland and China, but rather renders them more salient especially in the cases of ECEC settings in Tianjin. We argue that, instead of investigating whether practitioners of different genders interact with children differently in ECEC environments, it is imperative to understand how the intersection of gender and power shape practitioner-child interactions – how, through practising power, gendered norms and stereotypes arguably constrain the diversity of potential opportunities and experiences for children in ECEC. The embodied gender of practitioners is one aspect of the power dynamics in ECEC classrooms, but not all.

As both gender and power are relational in the ways they are embedded in practitioner-child interactions, and they may manifest differently in different cultural and policy settings (Connell 2007), we propose a hybrid of gender-sensitive, interactive, and culturally contextualised approaches to promoting gender diversity and challenging gender norms (Warin 2019; Andrä 2020; Josephidou 2020; Xu 2021). Practitioners need training on raising awareness and understanding of how dominant gender discourses shape pedagogy and practice in global and local contexts of ECEC, on working together with children as agents of change to identify areas for gender-inclusive interactions, and on exploring strategies of challenging gender stereotypes that respond to and embrace cultural discourses of gender in their local settings. Such approaches may facilitate practitioner knowledge and reflexivity in relation to gender as a disciplinary form of power, and further facilitate ways in which dominant gender discourses can be subverted, challenged and changed in ECEC and in different social contexts. Because few national ECEC curriculum guidelines across the world (including China and Scotland) have provided any instructions on promoting gender diversity (Xu

et al. 2020) and relevant training is not included in pre-service or in-services teacher training programmes (Culhane and Bazeley 2019), this paper has important practical implications in these areas.

Lastly, this paper points to the need for comparative research to include observation data and practitioners' and children's views to enhance understanding of how global discourses of ECEC are enacted in different cultural, political, and institutional contexts. Building on reflections from important ethnographic studies in the field such as Tobin (2022) and Hayashi (2022) – which endorse the representation of diverse interpretations and enactments of ECEC theory and practice within and across nations – our paper particularly emphasises the importance of children's interpretations and enactments. Although research that actively engages with young children as co-researchers and co-producers of knowledge is growing (Wall and Robinson 2022; Urbina-Garcia et al. 2022), more such research is needed with a comparative lens and including children from underrepresented backgrounds within and among countries.

Notes

1. The original study (Xu 2018) also included Hong Kong, but for the purposes of this article we focus on the contrasting cases of Tianjin, China and Edinburgh, Scotland.
2. Other methods used in the wider research project include interviews with practitioners and pictorial conversations with children (Xu 2020a; Xu 2020b).
3. Education for Chinese children entails significant cultivation of *Li* from early childhood (Yim, Lee, and Ebbeck 2011). *Li* emphasizes teachers' (adults') authority and children's obedience to rules and standardised behaviours.
4. Children's numbers may vary from day to day in all types of settings in Scotland; and some children only attend half day, morning or afternoon.
5. This centre had separate groups for mornings and afternoons.
6. 'MP' is short for 'Man Practitioner' & 'WP' stands for 'Woman Practitioner'.
7. There are 56 ethnicities in China and the dominant are Han Chinese; others are all regarded as 'minorities'. As Tianjin is not a 'minority-living' area, the few minorities who live here are usually very 'Hanized' and none of the minority-related cultures were necessarily relevant to the current study.
8. A 'care' practitioner in a Mainland Chinese kindergarten is someone whose main responsibilities include housekeeping, cleaning, serving meals, and so on - things that are regarded as more 'caring' than 'educational'.

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Notes on contributors

Yuwei Xu is Assistant Professor in Education and Teacher Development at the School of Education, University of Nottingham. His research centres around the sociology of education, gender, and childhood; and he has researched topics such as gender and men in ECEC, child agency, child-centred diversity and quality ECEC, and women in STEM.

Michele Schweisfurth is Professor of Comparative and International Education at the University of Glasgow. Her research interests include learner-centred pedagogy as a travelling policy.

Barbara Read is a sociologist of education, and currently Reader in Gender and Social Inequalities at the School of Education, University of Glasgow. Her research interests include HE students and the 'social world' of the university; academics, academic cultures and precarity/casualisation of academic staff: and issues of gender and STEM.

Ethical guidelines

This research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association and the Scottish Educational Research Association, alongside those of the University of Glasgow (where the research was based during the data collection phase). Ethical approvals were gained from the ethics committees of the University of Glasgow and the City of Edinburgh Council.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Yuwei Xu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4210-9963>

Michele Schweisfurth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5511-4134>

Barbara Read  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8125-8550>

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